

IMPROBABLE REALISM:  
COINCIDENCE AS REALIST TECHNIQUE FROM FIELDING TO HARDY

A Dissertation  
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Cornell University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

by  
Adam Joseph Grener  
May 2011

© 2011 Adam Joseph Grener

IMPROBABLE REALISM:  
COINCIDENCE AS REALIST TECHNIQUE FROM FIELDING TO HARDY

Adam Joseph Grener, Ph.D.

Cornell University 2011

*Improbable Realism* theorizes the relationship between literary realism and probability, arguing that improbable events such as coincidence frequently facilitate the representational aims of the realist project in the nineteenth century. Uniting historicist and formalist approaches to the novel, this dissertation examines how four important authors in the realist canon—Fielding, Scott, Dickens, and Hardy—harness coincidence as a narrative mechanism in their representation of particular social milieus. As statistically unlikely encounters that defy the reader’s expectations of the everyday, coincidences have long been regarded by critics as antagonistic to realism. This critical disdain for coincidence, however, is unwarranted because it too readily applies Aristotelian aesthetic principles to narratives that work in fundamentally different ways from those Aristotle analyzes. Aristotle’s exclusion of improbable events from well-constructed plots is grounded in his philosophical idea that accidental events are beyond knowledge, yet in modernity such events became important sites for the production of knowledge about life in the world. This importance is illustrated in the way that many early novels in the eighteenth century use coincidental events to think through problems of agency. *Improbable Realism* demonstrates that coincidence became an important narrative device for nineteenth-century authors because improbable encounters generate opportunities for novels to represent complex relationships between the social base and individual agency.

Chapter One uses Fielding's *Tom Jones* as a test case for examining the historical and theoretical issues surrounding coincidence, arguing that the narrator's rhetorical framing of coincidental events marks an important contribution to the emergence of the realist mode. Through readings of "The Two Drovers," *Redgauntlet*, and *The Bride of Lammermoor*, Chapter Two demonstrates that Scott frequently harnessed the competing interpretations that coincidences elicit in his representation of historical particularity. Chapter Three considers Dickens's treatment of coincidence, arguing that it enables him in *Martin Chuzzlewit* to represent and historicize selfishness as a product of the increasingly mediated nature of Victorian social relations. Chapter Four analyzes the importance of coincidence to the form of Hardy's novels, linking its function to Hardy's historicist habit of mind through readings of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *The Return of the Native*.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Adam Joseph Grener was born in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1981. He attended Vanderbilt University on the Barbara and Frederick R. Suits Honor Scholarship, pursuing a major in English and a minor in Religious Studies. His interest in British literature led him to spend his junior year studying at Trinity College Dublin. Returning to Vanderbilt in 2003, Adam participated in the Honors Program in English, where he wrote a thesis on boredom in modernity and met a very un-boring person: Meredith Gray, whom he married in 2008. Adam graduated *summa cum laude* from Vanderbilt in 2004 and entered the doctoral program in English at Cornell University in the fall of 2005, earning his M.A. in 2008 and his Ph.D. in 2011.

*for my family*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Attempting to identify and acknowledge all of the debts one has contracted while writing a dissertation has the potential to fill as many pages as the dissertation itself. My family, however, deserves a conspicuous place on such a list, regardless of its length. My parents, Barb and Darwin, and my older brother, Nick, have supported me in uncountable ways for as long as I can remember. They not only taught me to value the pursuit of knowledge, but encouraged me to follow wherever that may lead. A product of the longest of those pursuits, this dissertation is dedicated to them.

The members of my special committee—Jim Adams, Harry Shaw, and Laura Brown—have all been incredibly supportive of this project from its inception. They each provided timely feedback on drafts throughout the process, challenging me to improve the clarity and rigor of my thinking and writing. In addition to being exemplary advisors, they have also been excellent models of the kind of scholar and teacher I strive to be. I would especially like to thank Jim, the chair of my committee, for not allowing geographical distance to interfere with his support for this project. Although we were only able to meet in person three times during the two years it took to write this dissertation, I never once felt the absence of his support. This is surely much more a testament to his care and dedication than it is to the marvels of modern communication.

Fellow graduate students—both at Cornell and elsewhere—provided a supportive community as I worked on this project. I would like to thank the members of a dissertation writing group, funded by The Society for the Humanities, for reading and commenting on portions of the project. Ben Glaser deserves my special thanks for carefully reading significant portions of this dissertation. I would also like to thank the members of the Hegel Reading Group at Cornell, as well as the members of the

Marx Reading Group in the Department of Philosophy at Vanderbilt, who provided a much needed source of camaraderie while I was working on this project in Nashville.

I would like to thank the students I have had the pleasure to teach at Cornell for frequently reminding me why I decided to do this in the first place. Special thanks go to the students in the “Narratives of Return” seminar I taught in 2009-10. They not only indulged me by patiently reading *The Return of the Native*, but also taught me much about Hardy in the process. The reading of *The Return of the Native* that concludes this dissertation would not exist if it were not for the discussions I had with them.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Meredith Gray, for being an invaluable friend, companion, and resource. This certainly would not have been possible without her patience, sacrifices, and humor.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	iii
DEDICATION .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
INTRODUCTION	
From Probable Realism to Improbable Realism .....	1
CHAPTER ONE	
Playing with Probability: “Accidents” and the Intrusive Narrator of <i>Tom Jones</i> .....	37
CHAPTER TWO	
Improbability and the Representation of the Past: Reading Coincidence in Sir Walter Scott.....	71
CHAPTER THREE	
Improbability and the Reform of the Present: Coincidence and the Representation of Selfishness in <i>Martin Chuzzlewit</i> .....	110
CHAPTER FOUR	
Improbability and the Historicist Habit of Mind: Coincidence and the Form of Hardy’s Novels .....	140
CONCLUSION	
Implications of Improbable Realism .....	181
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	187

## INTRODUCTION

### From Probable Realism to Improbable Realism

“And the classic method [of plotting]—oh, it was rigged! By dismal coincidence, Mr. Jones has to be produced in the stage-coach at the same time with Mr. Smith, so that something very nasty and entertaining might happen.”

– Sinclair Lewis, “Manhattan at Last!”

“Rather than requiring our experiences with texts to squeeze into the spaces already carved out by our conceptual tools, we adjust those tools or invent new ones to account for those experiences.”

– James Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction*<sup>1</sup>

Varied as they may be, critical accounts of literary realism tend to share a disdain for coincidence. Sinclair Lewis’s identification of coincidence with a “rigged” plot has been reinforced by critics who have classified coincidence as being at odds with the reader’s everyday experience and consequently antagonistic to realism. Coincidences, critics have argued, “[suggest] the manipulated sequences of literature rather than the ordinary processes of life,” or “lead to the expulsion of the reader from her imaginary position in the narrative world,” or “stretch [the reader’s] willingness to

---

<sup>1</sup> *Saturday Review* (5 December 1925), reprinted in *John Dos Passos: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Barry Maine (New York: Routledge, 1988), pg. 70; *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative* (Columbus: The Ohio State Univ. Press, 2007), pg. 87.

suspend disbelief.”<sup>2</sup> As statistically unlikely events that defy the reader’s presumed expectations of the “realistic,” coincidences disclose the artificiality of fiction and thus seemingly undermine realism. Indeed, coincidence becomes a central ground for articulating definitions of realism, as one common view of realism defines it primarily in terms of the exclusion of the coincidental.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, however, critics continue to acknowledge the structural utility of coincidence within realist narratives, recognizing in part its inescapable presence in so many realist novels. As a leading commentator on the realist novel has remarked, “Realism is programmatically antagonistic to chance, but [...] almost must inevitably use chance to resolve its narrative problems.”<sup>4</sup> What has resulted is a view of coincidence as necessary but somehow antagonistic to the workings of realist narrative: it is “the foreign [object] a writer must make indigenous to the story.”<sup>5</sup>

This dissertation argues that this critical impasse reveals a deficiency in our conceptual tools for thinking about realism and, more specifically, the function of

---

<sup>2</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2001), pg. 253; Hilary Dannenberg, *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2008), pg. 23; Marie-Laure Ryan, “Cheap Plot Tricks, Plot Holes, and Narrative Design,” *Narrative* 17.1 (2009): 58.

<sup>3</sup> For example, in *Narrative as Virtual Reality* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001), Marie-Laure Ryan provides four primary interpretations of literary realism, one of which is the “probabilistic, Aristotelian interpretation”: “for most readers this requirement means that the textual world does not transgress physical and logical laws, that it respects some basic conceptions of psychological and material causality, and that the plot does not overly rely on events of low probability, such as extraordinary coincidences” (157).

<sup>4</sup> George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pgs. 19-20. Levine continues, “Chance encounters seem like intrusions from another mode when they occur in realistic narratives.”

<sup>5</sup> Walter McDonald, “Coincidence in the Novel: A Necessary Technique,” *College English* 29.5 (1968): 374. Brian Richardson calls this problematic the “paradox of chance in fictional narrative”: “[chance’s] absence indicates a specious causalism that fabricates an unusual chain of appropriate causes and predictable effects; its presence, however, always reveals authorial intervention, since chance in literature is never a chance occurrence” [*Unlikely Stories: Causality and the Nature of Modern Narrative* (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1997), pg. 18].

coincidence within realism. More importantly, this dissertation addresses this impasse by demonstrating that coincidence is frequently a productive instrument for realism, rather than a problem. I argue that coincidence, an improbable conjunction in time and space of independent narrative arcs, enables the realist novel to represent relationships that could not be grasped if realism were narrowly defined as verisimilitude or a mere “reflection” of the world. This argument entails adjusting several interrelated conceptual tools we have for thinking about realism, including what distinguishes realism as a literary mode, the relationship between the narrative world and the real world, and how to understand the effects produced by improbable events within narrative fiction.

The short version of my argument runs as follows: critics—especially those who have been troubled by coincidence—tend to think of realism as a mode defined by its ability to mirror the real world or produce an “illusion of reality,” a definition that causes the realist text to be confined to “the probable.” Because improbable or statistically unlikely events do not fit into this conceptual space, they seem to reveal the insufficiency of the narrative world to reflect the real world. Therefore, coincidence (in this view) undermines realism by disrupting the illusion of reality or revealing the shaping hand of the author. However, if we think of realism as characterized by its capacity to represent and historicize features of particular social milieus, then the relationship between the narrative world and the real world is not limited to one of simple or mere reflection. “Reflection” or “immersion” theories of realism are based on Jamesian principles which—influential as they were for twentieth-century narrative aesthetics—inhibit critical understanding of how the nineteenth-century novel engages its reader. The historicizing impulse of the nineteenth-century realist novel often foregrounds inherent differences between the world represented in the novel and the “everyday reality” of the reader, thus

problematizing any universalizing presumption of “the probable.” Consequently, improbable events are no longer excluded *a priori*, and the important question becomes what kind of representational opportunities coincidence makes possible, rather than whether coincidence is itself “realistic” or “probable.” Indeed, I shall demonstrate that coincidence actually facilitates realism’s capacity to represent particular milieus, especially in their bearing on human freedom and agency, because these aspects of reality cannot be simply or adequately “reflected” in the literary text. They require departures from the probable in order to be represented, and coincidence becomes one such historically codified mechanism of improbability.

The primary focus of this project is how four important authors in the realist tradition—Fielding, Scott, Dickens, and Hardy—harness coincidence as a realist technique. Critics have failed to appreciate the importance of coincidence in these authors, who utilize it in various forms and for distinctive ends. Each of these authors, in fact, occupies a vexed position in the realist canon, in part because his method of plotting and representation has been read as deficient in comparison to a major contemporary: Richardson, Austen, Eliot, and James, respectively. By analyzing how each of these authors makes coincidence a productive instrument for realism, this dissertation rethinks many aspects of critical reflection on the realist novel. My intention is not to develop or outline a theory of literary realism and then apply it to particular texts, but rather to show that attention to the function of coincidence within particular texts must serve as the foundation for such broader theorizations of realism. At the same time, however, such attention to particular texts cannot be performed without first dealing with certain theoretical issues. We will be blind to the representational opportunities coincidence makes possible as long as we retain certain misconceptions about the relationship between realism and probability.

The remainder of this introduction clears this conceptual space and then provides an overview of the importance of coincidence for the four authors I will examine in the subsequent chapters. In the first section, I discuss existing critical accounts of coincidence, highlighting the way in which each adheres to an understanding of what I shall be calling “probable realism.” Probable realism is the (often implicit) critical understanding that realism is by definition “probable” and thus necessitates the exclusion of improbable events such as coincidence. I shall argue, however, that this strict identification of realism with the probable relies upon, yet fundamentally differs from, the Aristotelian conceptualization of plot, and is in this respect theoretically problematic. While this first section identifies theoretical problems with the basic premises of probable realism, the second section demonstrates that the paradigm is historically inaccurate. Probable realism asserts that unlikely or accidental events inherently detract from the representation of life in the world, but the important and unstable status of accidental events in eighteenth-century thought demonstrates that in modernity such events became an important site for the production of knowledge. A brief consideration of a range of early novels illustrates that, far from being excluded, accidental or improbable events were foundational to the narrative form of the emerging realist novel. This Introduction concludes with a brief discussion and summary of the chapters which follow, in which I more fully elaborate the ways in which coincidence functions as a realist technique in the nineteenth century.

### I. Probable Realism: Understanding the Critical Paradigm

Aristotle’s *Poetics* remains a necessary point of departure for any discussion of probability within literature. Although Aristotle’s discussion of tragedy may seem peripheral to realism in the novel, the *Poetics* has greatly influenced critical reflection

on plot in realist narrative. A brief discussion of Aristotle's ideas can help clarify some of the terms in play and also provide a framework in which to evaluate the theoretical foundations of probable realism. The relevant sections of the *Poetics* are Chapters 7-10, where Aristotle discusses the arrangement of incidents, which he deems the most important element of tragedy. Here Aristotle says repeatedly that the events of tragedy should be arranged according to "the laws of probability or necessity" (9:50-1).<sup>6</sup> Aristotle's aesthetic principle—that tragedy should present events in accordance with the laws of probability (*eikos*) or necessity and exclude chance (*tūche*)—follows from his understanding of the generic status of tragedy in relation to history. While history is confined to the realm of the particular (what has happened), tragedy deals with the universal (what happens according to probability and necessity); thus, it is capable of producing unique effects and a type of knowledge different from that of history. In order to do so, however, it must present events and organize its parts in accordance with probability and necessity. The relation of events is governed by probability and not confined to strict necessity because tragedy deals with human affairs and actions. For Aristotle, "necessary relations are mostly restricted to nonhuman affairs, whereas social relations are mostly governed by probability."<sup>7</sup> While the necessary and the probable are thus different, they are nevertheless of the same class and opposed to what happens by chance. Within Aristotle's philosophical system, chance or accidental events are not the objects of science since they are unpredictable and hence "in the strict sense 'unknowable.'"<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> All quotations of the *Poetics* are from O.B. Hardison, Jr., *Aristotle's Poetics: A Translation and Commentary for Students of Literature*, trans. Leon Golden (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968).

<sup>7</sup> Hardison, pg. 152.

<sup>8</sup> Dorothea Frede, "Necessity, Chance, and 'What Happens for the Most Part' in Aristotle's *Poetics*," in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), pg. 204. Frede's essay is exceptionally lucid on these matters and informs much of my discussion here.

Chance, therefore, “should not play any prominent role in tragic development, since there is nothing to be known about—or learned from—such occurrences.”<sup>9</sup> If tragedy is to attain its proper ends and be “not an imitation of men, *per se*, but of human action and life and happiness and misery” (*Poetics* 6:48-9), then it must adhere to the laws of probability.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, “it is the possibility of depicting events undisturbed by accidents that establishes the superiority of tragedy over history and makes it an important philosophical enterprise, because it can depict the universal, i.e. what is not distorted by the incalculable vicissitudes of everyday life.”<sup>11</sup> By the “probable” or “likely,” then, Aristotle seems to mean something like “true to life,” a verisimilitude producing knowledge of men and actions in the world.

What Aristotle means by the probable or likely is distinct from the modern mathematized theory of probability, which emerged around 1660 through the work of Pascal and Leibniz, among others. The modern understanding of probability arose in part from an epistemological shift whereby the concept of evidence moved “away from the evidence of written authority—the evidence, in effect, of books—toward the

---

<sup>9</sup> Frede, pg. 204. Of course, Aristotle does allow for chance events in some limited capacity. For example, in Chapter 9 Aristotle cites the example of the statue of Mityos in Argos falling on the man who murdered Mityos. This event produces astonishment and heightens the effects of the action because the events occur “unexpectedly, yet because of one another” (9:58-9). In other words, there is no direct causal relation between the murder of the Mityos and the collapse of his statue on his murderer, but the two events imply some sort of causal connection—i.e., poetic justice or fate. Chance, therefore, seems acceptable if it produces astonishment while implying some sort of necessity. Indeed, Aristotle remarks that events such as the statue of Mityos are “not without meaning” (9:67). This, then, seems to confirm his basic framework: although the collapse of the statue does not follow necessarily or probably from the murder of Mityos, its collapse implies necessity of some kind. Most critics working within the Aristotelian framework retain this caveat. My concern, of course, is to not to identify when chance or coincidence is acceptable and when inadmissible, but rather to identify and describe the effects of such events.

<sup>10</sup> This, of course, applies not only to events themselves, but to character and action as well. These issues will return in the next chapter, as they are a central feature of Fielding’s discussions of probability in *Tom Jones*.

<sup>11</sup> Frede, pg. 205.

evidence of the world itself—the evidence, as it were, of things.”<sup>12</sup> The result was what the intellectual historian Ian Hacking has dubbed “the taming of chance.” Whereas for Aristotle the chance or accidental was strictly beyond knowledge, a statistically-based notion of probability enabled such events to enter the realm of knowledge. The “law of large numbers” allowed seemingly random or unpredictable events to become knowable. For example, given a large population, we cannot know or predict which specific men will become murderers, but statistics enables us to anticipate or predict how many will become murderers, and even to isolate variables which increase the likelihood of a man becoming a murderer. The relationship between Aristotle’s conception of *the probable as verisimilar* and the modern conception of *the probable as statistically likely* is vexed and a matter of heated scholarly debate. On one hand, Hacking, following Foucault, has argued that the modern conception of the probable is radically new—it represents an epistemic shift, rendering the two notions fundamentally incommensurable. On the other hand, the literary critics Robert Newsom and Douglas Patey have challenged this claim. They argue that there are continuities between these two conceptions and that Aristotle’s notion of the probable can be reconciled with the modern mathematized theory of probability.<sup>13</sup>

It is not my goal to resolve this debate, though it will become clear that when modern critics discuss probability, they reference Aristotle without acknowledging the

---

<sup>12</sup> Robert Newsom, *A Likely Story: Probability and Play in Fiction* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1988), pg. 38.

<sup>13</sup> For the Foucault-Hacking thesis, see Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction, and Statistical Inference* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975) and *The Taming of Chance* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), as well as Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970). For Newsom’s critique of this thesis, see Newsom, pgs. 35-54. For a succinct summary of the debate, including Patey’s objections to the “Foucault-Hacking hypothesis,” see Appendix A of his *Probability and Literary Form: Philosophic Theory and Literary Practice in the Augustan Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), pgs. 266-73.

historical complexity of probability as a concept. In fact, it is often quite unclear what critics mean when they discuss the probable, as the two notions of the probable tend to blend together or become interchangeable in discussions of literary probability: literature that is “true to life” is the statistically likely, or rather it is “true to life” because statistically likely. The relevant point is that critics align realism with the probable, which, following Aristotle, implies an explicit exclusion of chance or coincidence, despite the fact that they have abandoned the philosophic framework that informs Aristotle’s insistence on probability. In what follows, I examine four accounts of coincidence grounded in the notion of “probable realism”—one by an influential theorist of realism (Ian Watt), two by contemporary narratologists (Marie-Laure Ryan and Hilary Dannenberg), and one by a critic who explores the theoretical problem of fictional probability (Robert Newsom).<sup>14</sup> Although the methodologies and aims of these critics differ widely, each critic implicitly or explicitly identifies realism with some notion of the probable. After showing how the equation of “realistic” with

---

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that coincidence in the realist novel has also been accounted for in terms of what Thomas Vargish calls the “providential aesthetic.” Put simply, the providential aesthetic maintains that most authors before George Eliot believed in a providential ordering of the world and consequently asserts that the form of their fiction cannot be read in isolation from that belief. “In the providential aesthetic,” Vargish writes, “coincidence is not necessarily a failure in realism or (as is sometimes implied) a cheap way out of difficulties in plot and structure... [Instead,] coincidence characteristically refers the reader to causes and patterns beyond the immediate or empirical range of what we perceive as probable in physical nature” (i.e., it refers the reader to providence) [*The Providential Aesthetic in Victorian Fiction* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1985), pg. 9]. Even Hardy is accommodated within this system: even though Hardy did not believe in providence, he is still writing within the form of the providential aesthetic, so his use of coincidence refers the reader to the absence of providence rather than its presence. The providential reading of coincidence certainly provides insight into the structure of the Victorian novel generally and the structure of certain texts more particularly—it is hard to imagine reading coincidence in *Jane Eyre* or *Villette* in a manner other than providentially. However, it also reduces the question of coincidence to a matter of a particular author’s beliefs. I do not engage more thoroughly with this view here because it differs on a fundamental level from the concerns of this project: it reads phenomena in a text as manifestations of an author’s beliefs, thus implicitly rejecting “realism” in any meaningful sense. However, the claim that coincidence is simply a manifestation of authorial ideology will be a recurring problem throughout this dissertation. In addition to Vargish, for accounts of the providential reading of coincidence see John Reed, *Victorian Conventions* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1975), pgs. 126-41, and David Goldknopf, “Coincidence in the Victorian Novel: The Trajectory of a Narrative-Device,” *College English* 31.1 (1969): 41-50.

what is probable prompts each of these critics to create a strict opposition or antagonism between realism and coincidence, I will then identify the flaws within the two fundamental premises of probable realism. These premises are, first, that realism entails a correspondence between the real world and the narrative world that coincidence inherently breaches, and, second, that this correspondence was a historical development necessitating the exclusion of coincidence from the novel at a certain historical moment.

I begin with Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) because even though Watt's theories have been subject to much criticism and revision, in many ways we have not moved beyond his view of coincidence. Watt's understanding of "formal realism" as the defining feature of the novel continues to shape critical preconceptions about the place of improbable events within the realist novel. In distinguishing the novel from previous literary forms, Watt not only emphasizes the specificity of time and place, but argues that "The novel's plot is also distinguished from most previous fiction by its use of past experience as the cause of present action; a causal connection operating through time replaces the reliance of earlier narratives on disguises and coincidences, and this tends to give the novel a much more cohesive structure."<sup>15</sup> This statement appears straightforward enough, but an inherent tension between "causal connection" and "cohesive structure" emerges in Watt's discussion of Fielding, an author whom Watt clearly sees as having ceded some of the "realist" ground gained by Defoe and Richardson. In his discussion of *Tom Jones*—a novel that I will examine in great detail in Chapter One—Watt writes,

Fielding valued such devices [coincidences] because they made it possible to weave the whole narrative into a very neat and entertaining formal

---

<sup>15</sup> Watt, pg. 22.

structure; but although such apposite juxtapositions of persons and events do not violate verisimilitude so obviously as the supernatural interventions that are common in Homer or Virgil, it is surely evident that they nevertheless tend to compromise the narrative's general air of literal authenticity by suggesting the manipulated sequences of literature rather than the ordinary processes of life.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, if what distinguishes the novel from prior literary forms is a “cohesive structure” created through causal sequence, *Tom Jones* certainly succeeds insofar as it has a “very neat and entertaining formal structure,” but its realist status is jeopardized because it achieves this structure through coincidences that “compromise” the “general air of literal authenticity.” Of particular importance here is the distinction—“surely evident” to Watt—between “the manipulated sequences of literature” and “the ordinary processes of life.” For Watt, coincidences are not as troublesome as “supernatural interventions,” but they are still problematic because they compromise realist narrative's “authenticity.”

Watt's statement illustrates a slight yet significant shift in connotation from Aristotle, to whom his focus on causal connections and his disdain for supernatural interventions owe a clear debt. In Watt's account, as in much reflection on coincidence, the modern, statistical notion of the probable becomes superimposed on the Aristotelian notion of the probable. Whereas for Aristotle the probable or verisimilar meant “likely” in the sense of accessing the universal, for Watt the probable or verisimilar means “likely” in the more statistical sense of “ordinary” or “literally authentic” to life as it is lived in its everyday particularity. The peculiarity of Watt's reliance upon Aristotelian principles is only heightened by the fact that his

---

<sup>16</sup> Watt, pg. 253.

understanding of the realist novel is much closer to the Aristotelian genre of history than it is to tragedy. Nevertheless, this perhaps explains why the problem for critics of realism becomes coincidence rather than simply chance events. If chance is what is categorically opposed to the Aristotelian notion of the probable, then coincidence, as a subset of chance, becomes opposed to the more modern sense of the probable because it is statistically improbable, hence suggesting the “manipulated” rather than the “ordinary.”

Echoes of Watt can clearly be heard in Marie-Laure Ryan’s recent categorization of coincidence as a “cheap plot trick.” Ryan defines a “cheap plot trick” as “an event that is poorly prepared, that looks forced, that seems to be borrowed ready-made from a bag of tricks and whose function for the plot as a whole is too obvious.”<sup>17</sup> In outlining an Aristotelian, prescriptive account of narrative, Ryan is interested in the conventions that govern the production of narratives in general and the complications that subsequently arise in an author’s attempt to navigate those conventions within a particular work. Ryan conceives of plot as occurring on two levels: there is the plotting of characters, who are attempting to pursue and fulfill their goals in accordance with their character, and then there is the plotting of the author, who is attempting to convey values and beliefs through the interaction and destiny of those characters. Ryan sees narrative devices like coincidence as a response to conflicts that emerge when the goals of the author are at odds with the goals of characters: “the author needs to make the characters take particular actions to produce a certain effect on the reader, such as intense surprise, curiosity, or emotional involvement; but acting toward this situation defies narrative logic, because [it] is not in the best interest of the characters, or not in line with their personality” (56). This

---

<sup>17</sup> “Cheap Plot Tricks, Plot Holes, and Narrative Design,” pg. 57; further references appear in the text.

conflict, which seems to be a common but not necessary consequence of narrative conventions, often generates “aesthetically deficient” solutions. Authors, according to Ryan, either resort to “hackneyed devices” like coincidence (“cheap plot tricks”), or simply ignore the problem and create “plot holes.” In other words, ideally this conflict between levels of plot might be resolved either through “actions that are probable within the circumstances set up by the plot” or through authorial bravura (“brilliant plot twists”) (57). More often than not, however, authors turn to devices that facilitate the larger goals of the narrative “at the expense of verisimilitude” (59). They sacrifice the probability of plot in order to preserve probability of character.

As a basic heuristic, Ryan’s concept of “cheap plot trick” certainly has critical purchase: it accords with our experience as readers of “hackneyed” means that authors use to resolve narrative problems. Applied as a narratological concept, however, it creates a categorical opposition between coincidence and realism: “The more realist a genre, i.e. the closer its world to our model of everyday reality, the less tolerant readers will be to the use of plot twists that stretch their willingness to suspend disbelief” (71). Like Watt, then, Ryan’s understanding of realism entails a movement toward the depiction of “everyday reality” or “ordinary processes.” And because coincidences are improbable or unlikely, they threaten this correspondence between the world of the narrative and everyday reality.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Ryan’s work is one place where the continuing influence of Jamesian aesthetics (as articulated by James and Percy Lubbock) on contemporary criticism is especially apparent. Ryan’s discussion of plot and narrative development reads very much like an influential narrative manual written in 1923 by Thomas Uzzell called *Narrative Technique: A Practical Course in Literary Psychology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934). Uzzell’s manual, which aims to provide literary training for aspiring authors, is clearly influenced by Jamesian principles. In it, he provides an entire section—in an appendix on “Beginner’s Mistakes”—devoted to coincidence that discusses when it is allowable and when inadmissible. Interestingly, Uzzell even discusses how events which may have actually happened in life are not the proper stuff of fiction if they are not simultaneously probable, concluding, “*Probable*, a story or novel [...] must be if it aspires to acceptance by the critical” (485, emphasis in original). As we will see in Chapter One, this class of possible but improbable events is the very class that Fielding in *Tom Jones* discusses as those which are disbelieved by readers lacking proper historical faith.

While Ryan and Watt both characterize coincidence as a failure of narrative technique, another recent study presents it as a constructive device that has the potential to contribute to realism. In her book-length study *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction* (2008), Hilary Dannenberg chides “the literary analyst who treats fictional coincidence as a hackneyed device” and attempts to recuperate coincidence. She argues that the cognitive effects of recognition generated by coincidental encounters contribute to the aims of realism.<sup>19</sup> Drawing on the recent turn in narrative theory toward the cognitive sciences, Dannenberg understands narrative to be the process of the reader’s cognitive immersion in the narrative world: “realist texts [...] attempt to camouflage the ultimate, extradiegetic causal level of the author [...] by constructing a narrative world with its own intradiegetic connective systems.” If this process of construction is successful or “convincing,” then “the reader is encouraged to believe in the internal logic and autonomy of the narrative world and thus that it is a ‘re-creation’ as opposed to a fictional ‘creation’” (25). Dannenberg identifies coincidence in the modern novel as an inheritance from earlier narrative forms, but one that has been integrated with increasing adeptness through the “naturalization” of coincidence using causal explanation, in line with the aesthetic dictates of realism. The central feature of coincidence and the coincidence plot is the moment of recognition, whereby characters (and in turn the reader) become aware of connections (usually of kinship) between characters in a manner accompanied by surprise and suspense. For Dannenberg, the recognition generated by coincidence is a form of Aristotelian *anagnorisis* that encourages narrative immersion, especially if the effects of recognition are amplified through the adept temporal orchestration of surprise and suspense.

---

<sup>19</sup> Dannenberg, pg. 93; further references appear in the text.

Dannenberg's theorization of coincidence is a sophisticated attempt to treat it as more than a "hackneyed device" used to resolve formal problems. However, her understanding of coincidence is nevertheless shaped by her view of realism as narrative immersion. In her account, even though realism has found ways of accommodating coincidence, ultimately it is still realism's "other." As in Ryan, the main issue becomes whether a particular text handles coincidence well or poorly: "if the text's justification of the implausibilities of the coincidence plot is sloppy, the effect is similar to metafiction without the thrill. Both metafiction and mismanaged realism can thus lead to the expulsion of the reader from her imaginary position in the narrative world" (23).<sup>20</sup> In the end, Dannenberg's understanding of realism can accommodate the effects of coincidence, but since that understanding amounts to the narrative world's correspondence to the real world, coincidence itself becomes opposed to realism, threatening to undermine it if not properly occluded.

A fourth and final critical account of coincidence can be gleaned from Robert Newsom's detailed exploration of fictional probability in *A Likely Story: Probability and Play in Fiction* (1988). Newsom is not primarily concerned with coincidence, nor does he provide an explicit theorization or definition of realism. But his study of probability within fiction is important because he provides a more sophisticated account of the effects of improbable events on a reader's experience of a text. As the most theoretically rigorous example of probable realism, his model requires more

---

<sup>20</sup> The way Dannenberg links "mismanaged realism" to metafiction indicates the degree to which coincidence is assumed to disclose the fictionality of fiction. In other words, the fact that twentieth-century experimental fiction so frequently deploys coincidence to explore the nature and meaning of fiction illustrates that coincidence has been a site where authors as well as critics have interrogated the validity of realism. While Dannenberg's historical account of coincidence sees a coherent (or at least discernible) line of development from the seventeenth century to the present, one significant drawback of this method is that it causes more recent developments and phenomena to influence the interpretation of earlier ones. The fact that works in the past half-century have used coincidence to explore the nature of fiction and question the truth-value of narratives does not necessarily mean that the device is inherently problematic in the nineteenth-century novel; however, a "narrative of development" like Dannenberg's can very easily become teleological and generate this conclusion.

space to elaborate. The conceptual terminology of the critics I have been discussing becomes extremely fuzzy when they attempt to describe how coincidence disrupts the correspondence between the narrative world and real world. For Watt, coincidences suggest “manipulated sequences” rather than “ordinary processes,” while for Dannenberg they reveal the fictional world to be a “creation” rather than “re-creation.” At what point does the “ordinary” appear to be “manipulated,” the “creation” reveal itself as “re-creation”? Coincidence by its very nature is slippery. Within our modern understanding of probability, the difference between the probable and improbable is a difference not of kind but of degree. Rather than providing an explicit description of how coincidences threaten realism, these critics seem to rely on a universalizing appeal to readers’ experience: these moments just don’t *feel* right. Newsom’s account provides a more precise vocabulary for describing how improbabilities like coincidence constitute a failure of realism.

Newsom begins his discussion of fictional probability by thinking about such commonplace statements as “The plot of *Oliver Twist* is too full of coincidences to be probable.”<sup>21</sup> Newsom’s contribution to the understanding of fictional probability is to point out that such statements are “logically not only unnecessary, but nonsensical” (9). The nonsensical nature of this statement is a consequence of what he defines as “the antinomy of fictional probability.” The antinomy of fictional probability follows from the fact that judgments of probability can only be made about things that are uncertain (such as the probability of throwing a three on the next roll of a dice). However, events within literature are not uncertain, but rather “facts” in the narrative presented to the reader: the coincidences within *Oliver Twist* are neither probable nor

---

<sup>21</sup> *A Likely Story*, pg. 4; further references appear in the text. This is only one of several “probabilistic” statements Newsom frequently calls upon, most of which are statements about characters rather than events, such as the behavior of Kurtz or Lovelace being probable. The statement about the coincidences of *Oliver Twist* is obviously convenient for my purposes.

improbable; they simply happen. At the same time, however, from the perspective of the real world these events are not “facts” since they are clearly fictional.<sup>22</sup> The result, then:

Either I enter the fictional world, so to speak, and accept the pretense of the fiction, accept the “facts” of the plot as they are presented to me, or I remain in the real world, so to speak, and recognize the “facts” of the novel as plainly fictional—that is, “false.” In either case, there ought to be no question of ascribing degrees of probability to the novel’s plot, for from the standpoint of the world of fiction the events it describes do not put us in doubt because they are certainly true, while from the standpoint of the real world they do not put us in doubt because they are certainly false. (9)

Newsom’s incisive articulation of the antinomy of fictional probability seems to reveal a logical oddity, even an incoherency in statements of fictional probability from Aristotle to the present.

For Newsom, however, simply identifying this logical inconsistency is not sufficient. Not only has literary criticism from Aristotle onwards made statements about probability, but these statements also make sense on some very basic level. To say that *Oliver Twist* is too full of coincidences to be probable is the type of judgment we encounter in the classroom and also one that critics would accept as conveying a certain truth about the text. Indeed, the critics I have discussed illustrate the degree to which statements about probability continue to have critical purchase. Newsom’s project, therefore, becomes understanding the necessary conditions for making such

---

<sup>22</sup> Of course, Newsom’s argument about the antinomy of fictional probability is predicated upon his belief that the Aristotelian notion of probability is consistent with the mathematized theory of probability. If one believes that Aristotle’s notion of the probability and the probability that anticipates the next throw of the dice are radically different concepts, then Newsom’s whole theoretical edifice collapses. Again, my goal here is not to affirm or refute this claim, but rather to present his account in order to identify the fundamental presuppositions about coincidence that inform his account.

statements. In other words, what relationship must obtain between the real world and the narrative world in order for statements of probability to be meaningful despite their logical incoherency? Newsom argues that questions of probability are meaningful because the reader, in reading fiction, necessarily splits herself between the “real world” and the “world of the fiction,” or rather, inhabits both worlds simultaneously without consciously recognizing the split: “in imaginatively entertaining [fictions] we necessarily split ourselves between real and fictional worlds. Such a split [...] is invisible to the game of entertaining fictions, for to recognize the split is to end the game” (10). If, in other words, fictional probability is incoherent from the perspective of the real world and the narrative world taken separately, then it must arise from a specific type of interaction between the two worlds that involves suspending the explicit ontological difference between them.

Newsom’s account of what occurs when a reader engages with a fictional text differs from Dannenberg’s cognitive account of narrative, which in employing terms like “immersion” implies that the reader is either “in” the fictional world or not. Realism, for Newsom, is an interaction between the narrative world and the real world, rather than the replacement of one by the other.<sup>23</sup> In order to substantiate his model, Newsom traces the concept of probability from Aristotle to the present and engages philosophical literature on the status of fictions. While the specifics of his argument are beyond the scope of this discussion, his critique of the philosopher Kendall Walton is important for my purposes. In a series of articles on the nature of

---

<sup>23</sup> Newsom’s understanding of “probable fiction” (or realism) as an interaction between the narrative world and the real world is a more satisfying model than the cognitive immersion account of narrative: it accounts for the rhetorical dimension of narrative that entails an interaction or communication between reader and text. The cognitive immersion account of narrative is problematic on a basic level. What reader—and especially what critic—ever loses sight of “the ultimate, extradiegetical causal level of the author”? If, as I am reading, I am always at least vaguely aware that what I am reading is a “creation” rather than a “re-creation,” does that prevent me from experiencing the text’s intended effects? Put differently, what reader of James ever forgets that they are engaged with something highly artificial?

fiction, Walton develops a theory of fiction which maintains that fictions “are unambiguously and fundamentally different from the assertions made about the real world” (116). He denies fictions “any kind of truth like the truth that we know about the real world” (124). It is easy to see why rejecting these claims is essential to developing a robust concept of literary realism, for if we erect an impassible barrier between the real world and the fictional world, then we must categorically deny fiction the ability to communicate anything “true” about the world.<sup>24</sup> Newsom refutes Walton’s claims by elaborating a model of the interaction between reader and text that centers on the operation of “belief.” Every individual has beliefs about the real world, beliefs ranging from matters of scientific certainty to more abstract and probabilistic beliefs about human nature or behavior. These beliefs, Newsom argues, “have an obvious relevance to our absorbed reader’s experience of the tale: they at once constitute a background against which the tale is read and constitute a field of belief that may itself be altered by a reading of a tale” (145). Opposed to the reader’s body of beliefs is a set of beliefs embodied by the literary text as an object. We may disagree or argue about what beliefs inhere in a particular text—indeed, this is often what we do as critics—but these beliefs are nevertheless objective features of a text. In playing the “game of fiction,” as Newsom calls it, the reader pretends that

---

<sup>24</sup> Brian Richardson critiques Newsom’s study, arguing that “One not only can make probabilistic statements concerning fictional events; in some cases, the fiction demands the one do so.” Richardson also asserts that “Newsom’s position depends on a near total separation between fictional worlds and the real world.” Richardson’s critique appears to be a misreading of Newsom. As I read Newsom, his point is that we have to recognize that the narrative world has a different ontological status than the real world, yet we must also account for the fact that those worlds *do* interact on some level and that we *do* make statements of probability about fictional worlds. Richardson, though, is correct in pointing out that Newsom fails to distinguish between texts which purport to adhere to some basic probabilistic premises (such as *Oliver Twist*) and those that do not (such as *Gulliver’s Travels*). I think the impetus of Richardson’s critique (and hence his misreading of Newsom) stems from his own interest in twentieth-century texts that consciously play with or subvert probability. From my perspective, I think we have to assume that in discussing fictional probability Newsom is implicitly referring to “realist” texts, meaning those that make a basic claim to reality. If we do not make this assumption, then his model quickly encounters significant problems. For Richardson’s critique, see *Unlikely Stories*, pgs. 50-51.

something fictional is real, and precisely by doing so “there is opened up the possibility of my ascribing probability to it” (144). Pretending—that is to say, entering the fictional world as if it were real—creates an interaction between the two fields of belief, an interaction which defines “a field of play, an area of uncertainty.” This interaction is a “movement in and out of the game of make-believe,” a movement during which “the boundaries between the real and the fictitious break down,” resulting in the potential revision of the reader’s beliefs about the real world (153).

Although we seem far from coincidence here, we are now in a position to see what happens within Newsom’s model when a reader makes judgments about events of low probability like coincidence. While the beliefs embodied within the fiction have a potential to revise beliefs about the real world, these two sets of beliefs are always in tension. Indeed, questions about probability only make sense from “the standpoint in which we actively are moving in and out of the game of make-believe” (155) insofar as “To speak of probabilities in regard to fictions means that in one sense we already grant *some* reality to the fiction even as that reality is being questioned” (156, emphasis in original). Questions about probability emerge, then, through interrelation between two bodies of evidence: the theoretically infinite evidence of the real world which we use to make judgments through probabilistic thinking, and the finite evidence of the text. When we say that something within a fiction is probable, we are granting it the same status as evidence or knowledge we have about the real world. Doing so, therefore, grants the fictional text the capacity to communicate knowledge about the real world. At the same time, judgments of improbability sever the communicative link between the fictional world and the real world: “to say a fictional being’s actions”—or, events in the plot, such as coincidence—“are improbable is to assert that one is moving out of the game of pretend, away from make-believe” (161). While this seems very close to Dannenberg’s talk of the

reader's expulsion from the narrative world, its consequences within Newsom's model are more explicit. It is not, as Dannenberg would have it, a question of being immersed in the narrative world or not. Rather, it is a question of whether or not the fiction can communicate information about reality to the reader, whether it can convey "truths" of any sort. Thus, when the reader states, "The plot of *Oliver Twist* is too full of coincidences to be probable," she not only moves out of the "game" of "make-believe," but more importantly asserts that the fiction is unable to convey knowledge about reality.

Of the four critics discussed, then, Newsom most explicitly aligns realism with the probable. Indeed, the two terms are synonymous for him: fiction which is "true" to reality or conveys knowledge about reality *is by definition* probable fiction. Moreover, Newsom's model exhibits the clearest debt to Aristotle, as his discussion of fictional probability seems to be a reworking or rearticulation of Aristotle's discussion of well-constructed tragic plots. Ultimately, however, all of these critics are working within an Aristotelian framework and share Aristotle's basic claim: literature that is "true to life" adheres to probability by eschewing chance or the improbable. The first premise of probable realism, then, is that accidental or coincidental events hinder the aesthetic aim of realism, which entails some idea of the correspondence between the real world and narrative world. To be sure, what is "true to life" or realistic means something different to each of these critics. What is more important, however, is that in each case their notion of the probable differs from Aristotle's conception of the probable as verisimilar. Recall that for Aristotle, tragedy is an imitation of action (*mimesis*) that produces knowledge of men and events by adhering to probability. Its ability to be "true to life" is a product of its ability to depict the universal and transcend "the incalculable vicissitudes of everyday life." The exclusion of chance is a matter of not simply aesthetic, but philosophic importance for Aristotle. For Watt

and Ryan, however, being “true to life” or realistic is the ability to represent the “ordinary” (perhaps even the “everyday”) or to proceed “naturally” through the occlusion of the manipulating hand of the author. For Dannenberg it is the ability of the narrative world to replicate and consequently replace the real world. Therefore, even though these critics abandon the philosophic stakes of Aristotle’s account by adopting a different notion of probability, they all retain the principle that chance or coincidence by its very nature inhibits the aims of literature that attempts to be “true to life.”

The second, less explicit premise of probable realism involves a historical claim. Each of these critics relies on a basic understanding of literary history that sees realism as a gradual movement toward this correspondence between worlds resulting in the exclusion (or occlusion) of coincidence. This historical dimension is absent from Newsom’s account, though the texts he references in discussing fictional probability—*Clarissa*, *Oliver Twist*, *Heart of Darkness*—imply such a historical trajectory. For Watt, the emergence of the novel form in the eighteenth century is this moment of exclusion: the development of “formal realism” entails, among other things, the exclusion of coincidence. In contrast, Ryan and Dannenberg both rely on evolutionary frameworks—the claim that “our tolerance toward extraordinary coincidence has grown lower through the ages, as the demand for realism has grown higher” (“Cheap Plot Tricks” 58), or the claim that coincidence has been increasingly naturalized through causal explanation. In his study of causality in narrative, Brian Richardson categorizes “the four basic types of probability that govern fictional worlds”: supernatural causation, naturalistic causation, chance, and metafictional systems of causation.<sup>25</sup> The predominance of a particular type of probability at a

---

<sup>25</sup> *Unlikely Stories*, pg. 15; further references occur in the text.

particular moment certainly has a historical dimension. “It is no coincidence,” Richardson remarks, “that the role of chance becomes prominent in fiction at the same time that theories of probability begin to emerge” (14). This insight leads to the construction of a basic narrative of development. Richardson explains this development as such:

In the eighteenth century, the balance [between forms of probability] shifted from the extraordinary to more diurnal notions of probability. [...] Romantic authors loosened the connection between events to include interstices for the mysterious and the fortuitious. [...] The rise of nineteenth-century realism led to the suppression of providential teleology and the marginalization of chance. [...] By contrast, many twentieth-century works assert the objectivity of chance and the arbitrariness of human destinies. (40-2)

Most critics, especially those I’ve discussed, would agree with this “rough outline” (42). The problem is not with this basic narrative, as Richardson’s “rough” account taken as such conveys some basic, if abstract, truth about literary history.<sup>26</sup> The problem arises, however, when this abstract narrative comes into contact with individual works. Richardson, for example, goes on to say that in nineteenth-century realism “divine intervention and fortunate coincidences are equally excluded so that the extensive effects of social and biological forces can be shown in all their complexity and self-sufficiency” (41). What conclusions does this statement force us to make when we are confronted by “fortunate coincidences” in a novel by Dickens? Do we conclude that the novel is not “realism”? Or that it is not able to show the

---

<sup>26</sup> These narratives resemble Northrop Frye’s theory of modes, in which he identifies the five classes of fictions (myth, romance, high mimetic, low mimetic, and ironic) and suggests that “European fiction, during the last fifteen centuries, has steadily moved its center of gravity down the list.” See *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), pgs. 31-67.

effect of social forces in their self-sufficiency? Although all of these critics are quick to eschew teleological readings and allow for historical complexity and deviation, they all nevertheless rely on the premise that coincidence becomes “excluded” at a certain moment in the development of the novel.

## II. Moving Beyond Probable Realism: Accidents and the Eighteenth-Century Novel

In providing an overview of probable realism and identifying its basic premises, I have also hinted at some theoretical objections to the prevalent notion that realism is by its very nature “probable.” On one hand, the critical prejudice against coincidence seems unjustified since it clearly draws on Aristotle’s aesthetic principles but abandons the philosophic grounding of those principles. Aristotle’s exclusion of chance from plot was an aesthetic principle grounded in a philosophic system: critics seem to have retained the aesthetic principle while jettisoning the system. On the other hand, aligning realism with the probable requires us to tell a certain type of story about the development of the novel and how coincidence becomes excluded. Although we might swallow this story on a very general level, it inhibits our understanding when we are confronted with individual texts and their coincidences. More importantly, if we are interested in the specific ways in which particular realist texts operate, then this story can only get in our way.

While these objections alone seem sufficient to indicate the necessity of rethinking the relationship between realism and probability, further reason involves the understanding of coincidences and accidents in the age in which the novel emerged. Whereas for Aristotle accidental events were categorically opposed to knowledge, recent work in the field of intellectual history has shown that accidents occupied an important place in the cultural and intellectual climate of eighteenth-century continental thought. In a history that traces the concept of “accident” from

Aristotle's categorical distinction between "accident" and "substance" to the present day, Ross Hamilton identifies an emerging connection between accidental events and accidental qualities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Whereas the central category for Aristotle and Aquinas was substance, accident not only replaced substance as the central category in modernity, but accidental events gained increasing significance as sites of self-definition and transformation. Hamilton links the emergence of print culture in the eighteenth century to this expanding importance of accidents. "One of the stated functions of the new journalism was to help readers understand human behavior," and print culture offered people the opportunity to "read and reflect on stories in which characters were hit by the shock of experience": "By following the narrative implications of mishaps or coincidences under the guidance of the author, people became more conscious of self-determining acts."<sup>27</sup>

Michael Witmore has also emphasized this emerging link between accidents, narrative, and self-determination. Although Witmore is primarily concerned with the relationship between accidents and knowledge in early modern England, his study provides an essential insight into the potential range of meanings the term can encompass in later periods as well. Witmore argues that the "curious status" of accidents in the early modern period arises from their two primary features. The first feature is their "categorical instability," or the way they "straddle important ontological divisions"—the fact that accidents have begun to enter the realm of the knowable.<sup>28</sup> The second feature of accidents is their "rhetoricity": accidents require a narrative framework in order to be recognized as accidents. This narrative framework, in turn, shapes the meaning to be drawn from such events; as Witmore observes,

---

<sup>27</sup> *Accident: A Philosophical and Literary History* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008), pg. 135.

<sup>28</sup> *Culture of Accidents: Unexpected Knowledges in Early Modern England* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2001), pg. 5.

Accidents thus do not happen in a cultural void, but result when certain narrative conventions (what we usually describe as plot) come into contact with communal beliefs about what is likely, valuable or purposive. This is tantamount to saying that the accident is a narrative artifact, one that draws its power to astonish from presumptions about what is usually the case and, more important, assumptions about the value of certain outcomes or events.<sup>29</sup>

Accidents, in other words, stage a conflict between expectations of “the probable” and the experience of “the real.” It is the very slipperiness of probability that enables accidents to potentially revise an individual’s or even a culture’s understanding of the real and the probable.

Rather than being resistant to knowledge, then, accidents in modernity increasingly became sites for the production of knowledge. This explains their importance to modern narrative forms such as the novel. In Aristotle’s conception of tragedy, all the accidents must be “stripped away,” so that “we can learn, and enjoy, to see, what sense we can make of events that are not the products of chance, but are a matter of the individual’s own decisions, not in spite but *because* they have, as human beings, only limited knowledge and limited power over their own circumstances.”<sup>30</sup> Whereas for Aristotle tragedy draws its power from its capacity to explore self-determination by transcending contingent circumstances, the increasing recognition in modernity of the significance of those contingent circumstances on self-determination requires the reintegration of accidents into narrative fiction. Put simply, self-determination can no longer be divorced from contingency. Moreover, the link

---

<sup>29</sup> Witmore, pg. 11.

<sup>30</sup> Frede, pg. 215, emphasis in original.

between accidents and narrative helps explain the particular importance of coincidence to the emerging novel. Coincidences are a special subset of accidents that enrich narrative coherence. As will become more clear in my reading of *Tom Jones* in Chapter One, if accidents disrupt the course of events in a manner which elicits our narrative capacities to make sense of the world, then coincidences lend themselves to the formation of patterns and converging narrative arcs characteristic of the novel form.<sup>31</sup>

The opening chapter of Fielding's *Amelia* (1751) demonstrates and even thematizes this importance of accidents to the causal and descriptive features of the emerging novel:

The various accidents which befel [*sic*] a very worthy couple after their uniting in the state of matrimony will be the subject of the following history. The distresses which they waded through were some of them so exquisite, and the incidents which produced these so extraordinary, that they seemed to require not only the utmost malice, but the utmost intervention, which superstition hath ever attributed to Fortune: though whether any such being interfered in the case, or, indeed, whether there be any such being in the universe, is a matter which I by no means presume to determine in the affirmative. To speak a bold truth, I am, after much mature deliberation, inclined to suspect that the public voice hath, in all ages, done much injustice to Fortune, and hath convicted her of many facts in which she had not the least concern. I question whether we may not, by natural means, account for the success of knaves, the calamities of fools,

---

<sup>31</sup> Hilary Dannenberg's identification of the centrality of "convergence plots" in the history of narrative fiction is an especially strong part of her study. See *Coincidence and Counterfactuality*, pgs. 89-108 and 141-80.

with all the miseries in which men of sense sometimes involve themselves, by quitting the directions of Prudence, and following the blind guidance of a predominant passion; in short for all the ordinary phenomena which are imputed to Fortune; whom, perhaps, men accuse with no less absurdity in life, than a bad player complains of ill luck at the game of chess.

But if men are sometimes guilty of laying improper blame on this imaginary being, they are altogether as apt to make her amends by ascribing to her honours which she as little deserves. To retrieve the ill consequences of a foolish conduct, and by struggling manfully with distress to subdue it, is one of the noblest efforts of wisdom and virtue. Whoever, therefore, calls such a man fortunate, is guilty of no less impropriety in speech than he would be who should call the statuary or the poet fortunate who carved a Venus or who writ an Iliad.

Life may as properly be called an art as any other; and the great incidents in it are no more to be considered as mere accidents than the several members of a fine statue or a noble poem. The critics in all these are not content with seeing anything to be great without knowing why and how it came to be so. By examining carefully the several gradations which conduce to bring every model to perfection, we learn truly to know that science in which the model is formed: as histories of this kind, therefore, may properly be called models of HUMAN LIFE, so, by observing minutely the several incidents which tend to the catastrophe or completion of the whole, and the minute causes whence those incidents are produced, we shall best be instructed in this most useful of all arts, which I call the ART of LIFE.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> *Amelia*, 2 vols. (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1962), pgs. 3-4.

The transformation of Aristotelian principles here is striking. While plot in this passage, as in the *Poetics*, is understood to be a complete action providing instruction in the “art of life,” accidents are presented as integral rather than antagonistic to this process. It is “by observing minutely the several incidents which tend to the catastrophe or completion of the whole, and the minute causes whence those incidents are produced” that this instruction is produced. This passage, in fact, enacts this transformation in the status of accidents. The narrator begins by identifying his work as a history which relates the events and accidents that “befel” a couple upon their marriage. These “accidents” are initially positioned as external to the individuals, as events which befall or *happen to* them, implying contingency.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, many of these incidents are “so extraordinary” that accounting for them “seem[s] to require” the attribution of them to the intervention of Fortune. However, the narrator discredits this interpretation, having concluded “after much mature deliberation” that we can account “by natural means” for events that at first seem to defy our sense of justice. This assertion causes these “extraordinary” incidents to suddenly become “ordinary phenomena.” Fortune is relegated to the status of an “imaginary being,” and in the process “Fortune”—a force that shapes an individual’s life—becomes “fortunate”—a state of being that follows causally from one’s actions.

This passage, then, shows how accidents become integral to the early novel’s exploration of self-determination. It also shows how accidents are closely related to two other defining features of the emerging novel. First, its reliance on empiricist discourse, which situates authority in the individual observer.<sup>34</sup> It is the narrator’s

---

<sup>33</sup> According to the *OED*, the most frequent modern use of “befall” is “To fall out in the course of events, to happen, occur,” taking an indirect object. The quotations provided describe “heavy accidents,” “mischief,” “deplorable misfortune,” and “disaster” befalling individuals or the human race. See *OED*, s.v. “befall, v.” 4b.

<sup>34</sup> In addition to Watt and Michael McKeon’s *The Origins of the English Novel 1600-1740* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), see Everett Zimmerman’s *The Boundaries of Fiction*

capacity to “examine” and “observe” that enables him to provide an alternative account of the incidents which the “public voice” automatically attributes to Fortune. And second, its emphasis on causal connection between events (as identified by Watt). This is not simply limited to the question of efficient causes, but also involves a more general turn toward an understanding of the social and historical contexts of events.<sup>35</sup> For the narrator of *Amelia*, the explanatory shift from Fortune to “natural means” entails an understanding of the way in which “passions” and “conduct” contribute to the “success” and “miseries” of individuals. All of this focus on accidents, moreover, depends on the inherent ambiguity between the improbable and probable—the fact that what at first appears “extraordinary” might ultimately be the product of “ordinary phenomena.”

This passage from *Amelia* is only one instance of a broader phenomenon, as unexpected events and calculations of the probable are an important element of many early novels. Accidents, in fact, become an important site for tracing continuities between what are otherwise vastly different fictional techniques in the eighteenth century. While stranded on the island, Robinson Crusoe not only uses probabilistic reasoning after the shipwreck to infer the existence of God, but at other points in his narrative he also occupies himself with systematic observation and more empirical matters of cause and effect.<sup>36</sup> Before the seemingly miraculous appearance of the

---

(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) for an account of how, in the early eighteenth century, the novel “mediates between figural and empiricist discourses, those founded on the biblical master narrative and those connecting themselves to the new ideology of systematic observation” (pg. 4).

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of how Fielding’s works—and, in particular, *Tom Jones*—reflect an emerging consciousness of the historical and social contexts of character, see George Drake, “Historical Space in the ‘History of’: Between Public and Private in *Tom Jones*,” *ELH* 66.3 (1999): 707-737, and Ruth Mack, *Literary Historicity* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2009), pgs. 59-87.

<sup>36</sup> For accounts of Crusoe’s use of probabilistic thinking, see Hamilton, pgs. 133-144 and Paul Alkon, “The Odds Against Friday: Defoe, Bayes, and Inverse Probability” [in *Probability, Time, and Space in Eighteenth-Century Literature*, ed. Paula Backscheider (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1979), pgs. 29-62].

corn, Crusoe “had hitherto acted upon no religious Foundation at all, indeed [he] had very few Notions of Religion in [his] Head, or had entertain’d any Sense of any Thing that had befallen [him], otherwise than as a Chance.”<sup>37</sup> Although Crusoe initially believes “that God had miraculously caus’d this Grain to grow without any Help of Seed sown,” after “peering in every Corner, and under every Rock,” he remembers having “shook a Bag of Chickens Meat out in that Place.” “Discovering that all this was nothing but what was common” causes his “Wonder” to cease, though he still manages to believe it a “Work of Providence... that 10 or 12 Grains of Corn should remain unspoil’d, (when the Rats had destroy’d all the rest,) as if it had been drop from Heaven.” As is the case with *Amelia*, these and other unforeseen events in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)—the footprint on the beach, the encounter with the old he-goat in the cave, the appearance of Friday, and even his rescue from the island itself—are significant in relation to narrative form. Similarly, in *Tristram Shandy* (1767) not only is chance a structuring principle of the narration, but the novel also thematizes the issue in the “chapter of chances” (Book 4, Chapter 9). Here Walter not only exclaims, “what a long chapter of chances do the events of the world lay open to us,” but also ruminates on the effect of accident on Tristram’s life: “Take pen and ink in hand, and calculate it fairly, brother Toby, [...] and it will turn out a million to one, that of all the parts of the body, the edge of the forceps should have the ill luck just to fall upon and break down that one part [Tristram’s nose], which should break down the fortunes of our house with it.”<sup>38</sup> Throughout the eighteenth century, accidental or seemingly improbable events are important because occurrences that unsettle or realign notions

---

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Michael Shinagel (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), pg. 58.

<sup>38</sup> Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1980), pgs. 202-3. Toby, of course, counters with this keen insight: “It might have been worse [...] –Suppose the hip had presented [...] as Dr. Slop foreboded.”

of the probable enable these novels to present a rich picture of reality. This brief survey, then, demonstrates that the two basic premises of probable realism—that accidental or coincidental events inherently obstruct the attempt to represent life in the world and that the emergence of realism entailed the exclusion of such events from narrative—are not simply theoretically problematic, but more importantly historically inaccurate.

### III. Improbable Realism: A Summary of the Argument

Having shown that the simplistic identification of realism with the probable is problematic, this dissertation now turns to a consideration of the different ways in which improbability is harnessed for realist ends. Chapter One revisits these theoretical and historical issues in the context of a single text: Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749). The series of coincidences that structure the plot is the one of the constitutive features of the novel, yet a feature simultaneously the most troublesome for critics. Although the novel describes a range of incidents from mishaps to unexpected convergences as "accidents," there has yet to be a systematic account of the particular role of "accidents" in the novel. This is a consequence, in large part, of critics' assumption that the improbable nature of these events is intended to direct the reader either to the intervention of Providence on Tom's behalf or to Fielding's clever handling of the comic form. These readings, I shall argue, not only fail to recognize the broader importance of accidents to the eighteenth-century imagination, but also overlook the intrusive narrator's own extended discussions of probability. Concentrating on an analysis of the relationship between these discussions and the narrative's improbable events, Chapter One demonstrates *Tom Jones*'s rhetorical investment in having the reader perceive accidents *as accidents*—that is to say, as highly contingent events that defy our expectations of the probable (rather than as

manifestations of the hand of providence or the hand of the author). The status of accidents in Fielding's novel is in turn essential to understanding its form: the novel compels us to view the happiness Tom achieves at the novel's close as a product of contingent events, rather than the product of generic or providential necessity. Although the novel's resolution fulfills the expectations generated by its comic form, it does so in a manner that directs the reader to the structures of the world in which Tom lives. Therefore, even though the events of *Tom Jones* are highly improbable, these improbabilities contribute to the novel's realism because they direct the reader to the contingencies of life in the world.

If *Tom Jones* demonstrates the importance of improbable events to the emergence of the realist novel in the eighteenth century, then Sir Walter Scott's novels illustrate how coincidences contributed to the historicizing capacity of realism. Chapter Two examines how Scott uses coincidence in order to put his reader into contact with the past. The chapter begins, however, with a consideration of Georg Lukács's theorization of realism, which, unlike the critical models discussed here in the introduction, allocates a role for chance events. Although Lukács's discussion of chance reflects an important modification of Aristotle's understanding of plot, it nevertheless fails to appreciate the full potential of coincidence for realism. Whereas Lukács argues that chance events are "sublated" by their adequate integration into plot, I shall argue that Scott's historical novels utilize the very chanciness of improbable events in the service of historical representation. Focused on *Redgauntlet* (1824) and *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819), Chapter Two demonstrates how Scott uses improbable encounters in order to juxtapose the competing interpretations they elicit against a rich historical background. In *Redgauntlet*, for example, the chance encounter that brings Darsie Latimer into contact with his uncle Hugh facilitates the novel's effort to represent Jacobite ideology and the disappearance of the social

structures that sustained it. Just as Chapter One demonstrates that coincidence is not inherently a signpost of authorial ideology, Chapter Two reveals that coincidence enabled Scott to put his reader into contact with history.

Chapter Three turns to a consideration of Dickens's use of coincidence, elaborating on the unique representational opportunities coincidence makes possible for the realist novel. Dickens's use of coincidence has been regarded as either a manifestation of his providential ideology or as a by-product of the contingencies of serial production—that is to say, as a mechanism at odds with the social realism of his novels. This chapter, however, demonstrates that coincidences in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4) enable Dickens to represent and historicize selfishness as a product of the increasingly mediated nature of social relations in the Victorian milieu. I argue that coincidence in the novel can be read as a response to what Frederic Jameson has called “problems of figuration” in the realist novel's representation of capitalist space—the inability to represent individual experience and the social conditions that structure experience. *Martin Chuzzlewit* represents selfishness as a response to a subjective experience of social isolation and self-sufficiency, an isolation that is produced and simultaneously undermined by intricate webs of social connection that are illegible to the individual. Coincidence is particularly suited to capturing this curious blend of connection and disconnection because it juxtaposes the ostensible self-containment of characters with the webs of social and narrative connection that challenge selfishness. By emphasizing the primacy of these connections, *Martin Chuzzlewit* not only represents the social conditions which produce selfishness, but also attempts to rebuke selfishness by altering the readers' perspective on the social order. While Dickens drew on coincidence early in his career as a means of generating narrative structure, my reading suggests that by *Martin Chuzzlewit* he understood that coincidence could be harnessed for realist ends. This chapter, therefore, not only recuperates a novel that

has been read as structurally problematic, but in doing so demonstrates that Dickens's use of coincidence can help us to link his increasing emphasis on the larger design of his novels with his development as a mature social realist.

The fourth and final chapter of the dissertation builds on the insights of the previous chapters in order to identify the importance of coincidence to the form of Hardy's novels. Of all the authors I consider, Hardy is the one whose use of chance and coincidence has received the most critical attention. Yet—perhaps not surprisingly—he is also the author whose use of coincidence has been read most consistently as a direct manifestation of his ideology. Critics have consistently read chance in Hardy as manifestation of his pessimism or agnosticism. This stems not only from the shortsighted critical view of coincidence I have discussed here, but also from emphasis on Darwin's influence on Hardy's habit of mind. Chapter Four, in contrast, argues that Hardy's use of coincidence is best read in relation to his historicist habit of mind—that is to say, Hardy's deep interest in how particular social formations shape human agency. The chapter argues that the particular importance Hardy attached to the concept of relics embodies this aspect of his thought. Relics in Hardy juxtapose the past and present in a manner that illuminates the unique features of both. In Hardy's novels, coincidences frequently involve encounters with relics, and these encounters draw our attention to particular social forces such as class which attenuate the freedom of his protagonists. The chapter centers on a detailed reading of *The Return of the Native*, which examines how the novel's intricate and coincidence-filled narrative structure works in conjunction with other formal features such as free indirect discourse in order to cultivate a historicist perspective in the reader. This final chapter, then, draws on the insights developed throughout the dissertation, demonstrating how a reconsideration of the role of coincidence in the realist novel can

fundamentally alter some of our most deep-seated critical assumptions about realism and its practitioners.

A brief conclusion follows the final chapter, in which I draw together the various threads that run through the individual chapters and address the broader questions explored here in the Introduction. The Conclusion considers some of the critical and methodological implications that attend my theorization of literary realism as improbable.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Playing With Probability:

#### “Accidents” and the Intrusive Narrator of *Tom Jones*

The survey of existing critical treatments of narrative coincidence in the Introduction suggested that the ongoing critical disdain toward coincidence in realist narratives is unwarranted on both theoretical and historical grounds. The idea that accidental or unlikely events inhibit the aesthetic aims of realism is clearly predicated upon Aristotle’s exclusion of accidental events from well-constructed plots. However, when modern critics claim that “the improbable violates verisimilitude,” they mean something categorically different from what Aristotle means when he says that “the improbable violates verisimilitude.” Whereas Aristotle’s conception of verisimilitude was philosophically grounded and invoked the universal, modern critics tend to mean something like an “illusion of reality” involving rich particularity. Perhaps more importantly, whereas accidental events were categorically opposed to knowledge for Aristotle, as a result of cultural and intellectual transformations such events became an important site for the production of knowledge in modernity. A brief glance at a range of eighteenth-century novels revealed that, far from being excluded, accidental events that challenge the division between the probable and the improbable were of central importance to narrative form in the eighteenth century.

This chapter examines in detail the role of coincidence in Henry Fielding’s *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* in order both to further substantiate and specify these claims, as well as to demonstrate how coincidence functions as an instrument of emerging realist technique in the eighteenth century. *Tom Jones* is an important text for such an examination; accidents and coincidences are at once a central feature of its

notoriously well-constructed plot, but also one of the primary reasons the novel occupies such a vexed status in the history of the novel. As J. Paul Hunter has argued, *Tom Jones* is the “first self-conscious example” of this “new species” of writing in the middle of the eighteenth century, positioning it as “a test case of just what the new realism consists in.”<sup>39</sup> Whereas accidents are interpretively significant events that occasionally impinge upon Robinson Crusoe’s quotidian existence on the island, they are the preoccupation of *Tom Jones*. The word appears at least eighty-five times in the text and is used to describe a variety of events. These range from the “odd Accident”<sup>40</sup> that befalls Squire Allworthy in which he finds Tom in his bed, to the more coincidental events that bring about the union of Tom and Sophia. These include, for instance, the “accident... of a very extraordinary kind” (769) whereby Allworthy catches sight of the £500 lost by Tom and stolen by George Seagrim, initiating the sudden reversal of Allworthy’s opinion of Tom. As seen in the Introduction, these coincidences have unsettled critics such as Ian Watt because they fly in the face of basic notions of realism by suggesting “the manipulated sequences of literature” rather than “the ordinary processes of life.” However, many critics overlook the fact that *Tom Jones* explicitly thematizes the problem of probability: the novel not only presents the reader with accidents and coincidences, but explores the

---

<sup>39</sup> *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), pg. 31. Hunter succinctly identifies the problematic status of improbable events in criticism of the early novel, and Fielding in particular: “The critical reluctance to examine the strange and surprising aspects of novels stems, in part, from insecurities among students of eighteenth-century fiction and, among students of the novel more generally, from anxieties about ‘realism.’ Realism is a relative matter, but in discussions of the novel, the term has tended to become normative, so that novels tend to be judged qualitatively on the degree or amount of realism to be found in each, as if more is better. [...] In this normative context, it is no wonder that instances in novels of the supernatural or para-natural, the miraculous or the magical, the inexplicable or the uncertain, the improbable or the coincidental—varieties all of the strange and surprising—tend to be seen as flaws, or explained away, or overlooked” (32).

<sup>40</sup> *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*, ed. R.P.C. Mutter (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), pg. 27. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

question of how such events ought to be read. Indeed, although countless critics of the novel have commented on its events being “probable” or “improbable,” “fortuitous” or “providential,” there has yet to be a rigorous account of the role of “accident” in the text. This inattention, which reflects a broader critical discomfort with improbable events, is mysterious precisely because of the particularly important and complex status of accidents in the eighteenth century. Therefore, reexamining the relationship between coincidence and realism in *Tom Jones* through closer attention to the novel’s negotiation of accidents has important consequences. It enables us both to rethink specific trajectories of the historical development of the novel and also to better understand the particular formal means by which that literary form represents life in the world.

The central argument of this chapter is that coincidences in *Tom Jones* illuminate aspects of lived reality and ultimately point the reader toward the contingencies of the world. Far from detracting from or disrupting the novel’s realism, they are in fact the site at which to best understand how *Tom Jones* contributes to the development of realism. The first section of this chapter examines the way in which critics have dealt with the unlikely chain of events that brings about the marriage of Tom and Sophia at the novel’s end. Faced with a seeming contradiction between the novel’s claim to historicity and its very unlikely sequence of events, critics have been guided by their preconceptions about the relationship between realism and coincidence rather than by the novel’s explicit engagement with this problem. Relying on an understanding of realism as probable, critics tend to focus on the larger structure generated by the novel’s accidents, ignoring or downplaying the contingency of individual coincidences. In doing so, they read accidents as pointing the reader either to the *hand of providence* or the *hand of the author*, attributing accidents either to (Fielding’s belief in) providential intervention or to Fielding’s deft

use of an inherited comic form. Both interpretations, I shall argue, require forfeiting the novel's claim to historicity.

The second section of the chapter provides an alternative reading of the novel's coincidences divested of preconceptions that require coincidence to be explained away. My reading focuses on how the intrusive narrator shapes the presentation of events in order to have the reader see accidents *as accidents*, that is, as events which defy expectations or systems of explanation. Far from pointing us to supernatural frameworks of determination, the rhetorical structure of the novel pries accidents loose from such frameworks in order to show how they can be markers of human freedom and responsibility. While the novel promotes a basic Christian ideal of goodness, it shows that such an ideal is not a guarantee of human happiness. Even though the novel has a comic form, it complicates that comic form precisely through those accidents which turn us toward the contingencies of the world. The chapter concludes with a third and final section that, in addition to identifying why coincidences rather than accidents become particularly important for the emerging novel, also explores some of the theoretical and historical implications of this reading of *Tom Jones* for broader considerations of realism.

### I. Interpretations of the Improbable in *Tom Jones*

One particularly knotty problem for critics of *Tom Jones* has been the ostensible contradiction between the novel's presentation of its events as "history" and the events of the narrative themselves, which seem highly improbable. Not only does the novel's title present the narrative as a history, but the narrator repeatedly asserts that his narrative is a "kind of history" (59) containing a truth categorically distinct "from those idle romances which are filled with monsters, the productions, not of nature, but of distempered brains" (119). While the narrator's claim that the novel is a

“history” is clearly not a claim that these events really happened, it does assert that the narrative offers a kind of “truth” about human nature or about life in the world. At the same time, however, this claim appears to be at odds with a chain of events that seem decidedly unhistorical. Put differently, the unrealistic complications of the plot seems to belie J. Paul Hunter’s claim that the novel is a “self-conscious example” of “the new realism.”

In their emphasis on the cumulative chain of events in the novel, rather than individual events themselves, critics clearly demonstrate the influence of the modern mathematical notion of probability on theorizations of realism. As seen in the Introduction, Ian Watt concedes that the novel’s events “do not violate verisimilitude so obviously as the supernatural interventions that are common in Homer or Virgil,” but he still asserts that “it is surely evident that they nevertheless tend to compromise the narrative’s general air of literal authenticity.”<sup>41</sup> Watt, of course, was not the first to be unsettled by the unlikely events through which the novel’s resolution is brought about. In 1821, Richard Whately criticized *Tom Jones* on the grounds that its “circumstances are such as it is incalculably improbable should ever exist: several of the events, taken singly, are much against the chances of probability; but the combination of the whole in a connected series, is next to impossible.”<sup>42</sup> None of the novel’s events—the convergence of all of the characters at Upton, Black George’s discovery of Tom’s lost pocketbook containing £500, Allworthy’s fortuitous recognition of the same lost banknotes, etc.—are in themselves impossible, unlikely as they may be. However, taken together, these events seem “next to impossible.” The logic behind this line of thinking is that the cumulative total of possible but *unlikely*

---

<sup>41</sup> Watt, pg. 253.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in Robert Wess, “The Probable and the Marvelous in *Tom Jones*” [*Modern Philology* 68.1 (1970): 32].

events somehow equates to an *impossible* series of events, which in turn undermines the novel's realism.<sup>43</sup>

Having concluded that the novel presents a highly improbable, if not impossible chain of events, critics then assume that our interpretations of the novel should be guided by what we perceive as Fielding's intention behind creating such a structure. In other words, since these improbable events seem to contradict the novel's explicit claim to historicity, then they must be there as signposts. Such interpretations tend to fall into two broad categories. Some critics read the novel's coincidences as a sign of *the hand of providence*, arguing that they demonstrate Fielding's belief in a providence that intervenes to ensure justice is served in the world. Martin Battestin, for example, suggests that the world of the novel "is a universe not only full and various, but regular, created by a just and benevolent Deity whose genial Providence governs all contingencies, comprehends every catastrophe, from the bursting of a world to the fall of a sparrow."<sup>44</sup> Providential interpretations rely on contemporary theological debates about the role of providence in the world and often cite Fielding's 1752 tract, *Examples of the Interposition of Providence in the Detection and Punishment of Murder*, as proof of Fielding's belief in an intervening providence.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> The logic here is clearly mathematical. By way of analogy, the odds of throwing a six on two consecutive throws of a die is 1-and-36—surely possible but still unlikely. However, the odds of rolling a six 100 times consecutively is 1-and-6<sup>100</sup> (or 1-and-6.533 × 10<sup>77</sup>), which approaches zero probability. Critics, I am suggesting, employ this same logic when interpreting the growing chain of the novel's coincidences or improbabilities. Aubrey Williams demonstrates a similar logic in a comment on the plot of *Joseph Andrews*: "When one considers the geography involved (the space between Somerset and London), and the fact that the encounters take place off the main road, once in complete darkness, and also the nice and exact requirements of timing, then the probabilities of such conjunctions are most unlikely, indeed incalculable and practically unthinkable" ["Interpositions of Providence and the Design of Fielding's Novels," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 70 (1971): 272].

<sup>44</sup> *The Providence of Wit* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pg. 141.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Rosengarten provides a more nuanced articulation of this position in *Henry Fielding and the Narration of Providence* (New York: Palgrave, 2000). He suggests that Fielding's novels explore "the degree to which experience supports the idea of a directly interposing providence" (17). Whereas Battestin emphasizes Fielding's belief in "the world as a fully realized theater of divine providence," Rosengarten argues that Fielding's novels "demonstrate both a confident belief in the divine creation

While providential interpretations take the novel's claim to historicity seriously and emphasize the role of providence in the world, other critics read coincidences as a sign of *the hand of the author*. For instance, Leopold Damrosch, Jr. believes that such claims to historicity are facetious and are thus intended to reveal the shaping activity of the author: "When Defoe asserts providential pattern we may protest that we see his hand behind the arras [...] But Fielding openly admits that his hand is behind the arras, and offers the great structure of *Tom Jones* as an analogue of God's structure, not as a literal instance of it."<sup>46</sup> While this interpretation also relies on Fielding's Christian beliefs, it emphasizes the novel's comic form and its reliance on the conventions of prior narrative forms, such as those of romance. The novel's coincidences, in other words, do not point the reader toward divine justice, but rather to Fielding's artistry in deploying narrative conventions.

Both of these interpretations neglect how much rhetorical energy the narrator expends in directly challenging the attribution of the narrative's events to *the hand of providence* or *the hand of the author*. For now, however, my objective is to identify the assumptions that have guided interpretations of *Tom Jones* and the critical and

---

and the final judgment, and an uncertainty about what claims might be made for providence within those framing events of divine activity" (8, 17). Rosengarten's study is particularly helpful in orienting Fielding's novels in the context of the deism controversy. At stake in arguments about natural and revealed religion was the status of providence, or God's active involvement in the world. Beginning with the theological triad of creation-providence-eschatology, Rosengarten demonstrates how providence became absorbed into either creation or eschatology in response to concerns over free will. For Rosengarten, the keystone of Fielding's fiction is what he calls Fielding's "principled diffidence," that is, a principled belief in the Christian worldview accompanied by a diffidence regarding our ability to claim God's active involvement in the world. I find Rosengarten's study extremely convincing in many respects, and my interpretation of *Tom Jones* can certainly be reconciled with his understanding of Fielding's "principled diffidence." However, my most fundamental disagreement with Rosengarten is on the question of how we arrive at certain conclusions about the novel. He begins with an understanding of Fielding's beliefs and then shows how the novel accords with that position, whereas I am concerned with demonstrating how our interpretation of the novel's events must be informed by the narrator's examination and presentation of those events.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Zimmerman, fn. 2, page 137. Zimmerman provides a brief summary of the various positions regarding the novel's coincidences.

methodological consequences which attend these assumptions. First, these interpretations operate on the assumption, which in the Introduction I called the tenet of probable realism, that unlikely or improbable events inherently detract from the representation of life in the world. In the case of *Tom Jones*, this entails reading coincidences as an indication of authorial ideology. Critics assume that the novel's coincidences tell us more about Fielding's beliefs than about the world he represents.

Second, these interpretations assume a simple or at least unproblematic relationship between textual phenomena and authorial belief. Reading coincidences in the novel as providential intervention amounts to the statement: *Because Fielding believed X, he created a novel with the structure Y, or Because Fielding's novel has the structure Y, we can conclude that it demonstrates his belief X.* One important consequence of this assumption is that it reduces the extreme complexity of the novel's plot to the exemplification of some basic principle or statement, something along the lines of "good intentions are rewarded by providence."<sup>47</sup> Aubrey Williams's article, "Interpositions of Providence and the Design of Fielding's Novels," clearly exemplifies the reductionist nature of this move. Williams spends numerous pages summarizing the complicated plots of Fielding's novels in order to support his conclusion: "How could Fielding more vividly represent in fictive terms [the conviction of Rev. Isaac Barrow... ] that the hand of God's Providence could be best

---

<sup>47</sup> A notable exception is Sheldon Sacks's important study, *Fiction and the Shape of Belief* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), which delineates the complicated and nuanced process of moving from textual phenomena to authorial belief. In Sacks's terms, the problem with the simple providential interpretation of *Tom Jones* is that it mistakenly reads the text as an apologue rather than as represented action (i.e., a novel). My reading follows Sacks's reading of Fielding's ethical position, as deduced from *Tom Jones*—namely, that happiness is neither the product of fortuitous circumstances nor of complete chance. In other words, we cannot infer that providence, in Fielding's view, always intervenes for the deserving, but, at the same time, happiness has some correlation to individual behavior and is not the product of mere chance. Ultimately, though, my concern is widely different from Sacks's. His book is concerned with the methodological (and theoretical) problem of deducing authorial beliefs from textual phenomena. My concern, however, is to provide an accurate account of the rhetorical effects of those textual phenomena and how those effects should be understood in relation to the development of literary realism.

discerned when ‘that which in itself is not ordinary, nor could well be expected, doth fall out happily, in the nick of an exigency, for the relief of innocence, the encouragement of goodness, the support of a good cause, the furtherance of any good purpose?’”<sup>48</sup> In other words, the convoluted and detailed circumstances of the plot become secondary to the abstract proposition they are seen to support or exemplify.

Third and finally, these interpretations assume that confident discriminations can be made between the probable and the improbable, the ordinary and extraordinary. Williams’s statement presupposes that that which is extraordinary (and consequently a manifestation of providential activity) can be confidently discerned from the everyday, just as Ian Watt’s reading of *Tom Jones* assumes a discernible distinction between “the manipulated sequences of literature” and “the ordinary processes of life.” As I suggested in the Introduction, however, such confident discrimination on the part of critics overlooks the fact that accidents straddled these epistemological boundaries in the eighteenth century. The meaning or significance of accidents was far from obvious, as the novel form developed in part as a way of giving meaning to and exploring the implications of such events.

## II. Credible Yet Suppressed Narration: The Presentation of Accidents in *Tom Jones*

The tension between the narrator’s claim that his narrative is a kind of history distinct from romance and the narrative itself, which appears to be decidedly the stuff of romance, has thus been an interpretive crux of *Tom Jones*. Critics have downplayed the novel’s claim to historicity and have offered interpretations of Fielding’s purpose behind presenting us with such an improbable chain of events. These interpretations, however, require taking a step back from individual events in

---

<sup>48</sup> Williams, pg. 275

the novel and instead reflecting on the cumulative chain of events. I want to argue that this goes against the grain of the narrative—indeed, the narrator engages in extended discussions of probability and often turns our attention to individual events themselves. To perhaps oversimplify matters, when confronted with the question, “How should we interpret improbable events in *Tom Jones*?” critics have overlooked the novel’s own discussions of probability or causation and have elected instead to search for answers in contemporary theological arguments, or in speculations about Fielding’s beliefs, or in modern notions of realism derived from Fielding’s successors.

In what follows, I provide an analysis of how the novel negotiates improbable events, offering an account of the function of coincidence in the texture of the reader’s experience of the novel. This reading entails focusing both on the local effects of coincidences (rather than their cumulative force) and on the particular manner in which the narrator frames accidental events. I begin with an analysis of the narrator’s discussion of the marvelous, in which he establishes criteria by which his “new species” of writing can maintain its credibility in the face of events that defy our sense of the probable. Analyzing moments in the text that potentially violate the bounds of probability shows how the narrator establishes credibility by asserting his authority over the presentation of events but at the same time by demarcating the limits of his knowledge. This, in turn, will lead to a consideration of the retrospective element of the narration, where I will suggest that the narrator’s practice of withholding information by presenting incidents without indicating the end to which they ultimately lead foregrounds the highly contingent nature of these events.

Understanding the narrator’s presentation of accidents through *credible yet suppressed narration* reveals how he pries accidents loose from supernatural frameworks of

determination in order to present accidents as accidents.<sup>49</sup> Accidents thus impinge upon the reader's experience of the novel by disrupting expectations or conclusions generated not only by romance conventions but by providential history as well. While these expectations reemerge, subsequent accidents continue to disrupt, suggesting that the rhetorical effects of accidents are best understood iteratively rather than cumulatively. This links the narrator's commentary and the texture of the reading experience to the form of the novel, which represents a world in which the alignment of merit and fortune is not guaranteed, but rather subject to the contingencies and complexities of the social world.

The most extended discussion of probability in *Tom Jones* comes in the introductory chapter of Book VIII, which the narrator identifies as "much the longest of all of our introductory Chapters" (*Tom Jones* 323). Here, the narrator addresses the status of the marvelous in the type of writing in which he is engaged, a discussion which leads to conclusions about the relationship between probability and historical credibility. Prior to this point, the narrator repeatedly has distinguished his work from romance, a form of writing in which the invention of the author removes the story from the province of fact. However, an extended discussion of the marvelous becomes necessary at this point because the narrative is coming upon "matters of a

---

<sup>49</sup> I borrow the term *suppressed narration* from James Phelan, who defines it as narration that "omits significant information that the narrative itself otherwise indicates is relevant to the character, situation, or event being reported on, thereby creating either a gap in the text that cannot be filled or a discrepancy between what is reported in one place and not reported in another" [*Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2005), pg. 138]. While Phelan is primarily concerned with readerly evaluation of characters, the term is suited to the effect I am trying to analyze in *Tom Jones* because it describes the way in which information is withheld from readers, thereby shaping their interpretation of narrated events. Phelan, for example, distinguishes *suppressed narration* from *restricted narration*, in which the narrator's communicative function is limited but supplemented by communications made by the implied author. In other words, in *restricted narration* the narrator creates gaps, but the reader can confidently fill them in; those gaps remain in *suppressed narration*. My point is that even though the narrator of *Tom Jones* has knowledge of how the accidents in the novel create a sequence that brings about a determinate end, he narrates them in such a way that withholds that sequence from the reader.

more strange and surprising kind than any which have hitherto occurred.” The narrator argues that a necessity for setting “bounds” arises because readers “run into very different extremes” when confronted with the marvelous. On one hand, some readers are “ready to allow, that the same thing which is impossible may yet be probable”—meaning that they are ready to believe mistakenly in events which defy natural laws. On the other hand, other readers “have so little historic or poetic faith, that they believe nothing to be either possible or probable, the like to which hath not occurred to their own observation”—meaning that they only find credible that which they have experienced personally. The narrator’s treatment of the marvelous and literary probability thus foregrounds the important yet problematic nature of readerly expectations and beliefs.

In a discussion which invokes yet clearly plays with the terms of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the narrator identifies the criteria of *possibility*, *probability*, and *conservation of character* as means by which writing can maintain its historical credibility. His discussion, however, also identifies why the two extremes of readerly reaction are mistaken, thus making the chapter as much about how readers ought to read as about how writers ought to write. By *possibility*, the narrator means “not exceed[ing] the capacity of the agent we describe” (325). The need to correlate action with agent led ancient authors to introduce into their fictions “ancient heathen deities” who were able to perform actions of which humans are incapable (323). Such supernatural agents, however, are off limits to the modern writer, as are “ghosts,” “elves,” “fairies, and other such mummery” (324). Because mankind is “the highest subject (unless on very extraordinary occasions indeed) which presents itself to the pen of our historian,” all actions depicted in a novel must be those capable of being performed by humans (325). Although the narrator here attempts to establish a determinate criterion, his qualification—“unless on very extraordinary occasions indeed”—destabilizes the

boundaries set upon the subject matter of the historian. A clear guideline becomes fuzzy, open to interpretation or modification.

The subsequent discussion of *probability* not only increases this ambiguity, but also marks the narrator's most relevant departure from Aristotelian aesthetic principles. While it is the opinion of Aristotle or "some wise man"<sup>50</sup> that "it is no excuse for a poet who relates what is incredible, that the thing related is really a matter of fact," it is "impracticable" to extend this dictum to the historian, because the historian "is obliged to record matters as he find them; though they may be of so extraordinary a nature as will require no small degree of historical faith to swallow them." The historian must record matters as he finds them, even if they be incredible or astonishing. Indeed, if these facts "constitute the essential parts of [the story], the historian is not only justifiable in recording [them] as they really happened; but indeed [it] would be unpardonable, should he omit or alter them." Therefore, by "confinin[ing] himself to what really happened, [...] he will sometimes fall into the marvellous, but never into the incredible": "He will often raise the wonder and surprise of his reader, but never that incredulous hatred mentioned by Horace" (325-6). Although this seems to locate authority in the reader (insofar as the reader's "incredulous hatred" becomes a sign that the writer has "desert[ed] probability" and become "a writer of romance"), this authority is immediately qualified. The narrator notes that historians of public life have an advantage over those such as himself who "confine ourselves to scenes of private life." Because historians of private life deal with "private characters" and explore "the most retired recesses," they have "no publick notoriety, no concurrent

---

<sup>50</sup> The failure of the narrator's memory here is one of many ironies that prevent this chapter from being considered as a straightforward essay on aesthetics. However, the narrator's spurious gestures toward authority do not make the discussion of the probable mere jest, as they contribute to the overall effect of the chapter, which is to demonstrate the discrepancy between the reader's expectations of "the probable" and "what really happens." Reading the whole chapter as merely ironic overlooks the specific work that the passage is performing.

testimony, no records to support and corroborate what we deliver.” The private historian must reconcile the facts of private history as he finds them with the reader’s conception of the probable or real, which may not be able to accommodate such facts. This means that the author must take special care to remain within the limits of probability. The narrator provides two examples of men he knew—one of extraordinary vice and one of extraordinary virtue—and says that even though such men existed, the sheer fact of their existence is “not sufficient to justify us [in writing about them], while we are writing to thousands who never heard of the person, nor of anything like him” (327). While the discussion of the man of extraordinary virtue is an elaborate compliment by Fielding to his patron, it contributes to this larger exploration of probability. Whereas the reader is previously posited as the ultimate arbiter of a story’s status, the self-limitations imposed by the historian disarm the reader’s “incredulous hatred” because the historian has already subjected his material to the marvelous/incredible test. The historian of private life is obliged to relate facts as he finds them, but only if those facts can be seen as “marvelous” and not “incredible.” This distinction is indefinite, if not empty. As with the discussion of *possibility*, then, the discussion of *probability* gestures toward defining determinate criteria only to undermine such criteria.

The final criterion, *conservation of character*, dictates that “the actions should be such as may not only be within the compass of human agency, and which human agents may probably be supposed to do; but they should be likely for the very actors and characters themselves to have performed: for what may be only wonderful and surprising in one man, may become improbable, or indeed impossible, when related of another” (328). This simply means that any “monstrous change and incongruity” in a character must be accounted for. The conclusion reached by the narrator is that, as long as he adheres to these restrictions, the writer may “deal as much in the wonderful

as he pleases.” Indeed, “the more he can surprise the reader, if he thus keeps within the rules of credibility, the more he will engage his attention, and the more he will charm him” (328-9). Therefore, staying within the bounds of probability does not entail confining the narrative to “trite, common, or vulgar” incidents “such as happen in every street, or in every house, or which may be met with in the home articles of a newspaper” (329). Nor does it inhibit the historian “from shewing many persons and things, which may possibly have never fallen within the knowledge of great part of his readers.” Rather than establishing explicit criteria regarding the marvelous, this discussion simply creates a pact between writer and reader, for by observing these rules, the writer becomes “intitled to some faith from his reader, who is indeed guilty of critical infidelity if he disbelieves him.”

This chapter has several important implications for how we interpret and evaluate the events of the novel. Not only is “the possibility of providential activity [...] coyly left open”<sup>51</sup> in the discussion of possibility, but, as Robert Wess argues, these rules are “all prescriptions about agents involved in events, not about relations between events.”<sup>52</sup> Most importantly, however, these rules deprive the reader of his capacity to evaluate events because comparison to past experience, the absence of public record, and subjective response are all insufficient grounds for challenging the historical integrity of the narrative. In other words, the readerly responses “I have never seen something like this before,” “The likes of this have never been recorded in the public annals,” and “Surely these events are most extraordinary” are all insufficient for judging events improbable. The marvelous thus becomes admissible in historical writing provided that the author retains his credibility. This chapter

---

<sup>51</sup> Rosengarten, pg. 78.

<sup>52</sup> Wess, pg. 34.

highlights the highly unstable boundaries of probability. Indeed, the narrator's discussion is an important instance of the complex status of accidents in the period. Far from being clear-cut, the boundary between the probable and improbable is fluid, with improbable events often causing a direct confrontation between the reader's understanding or expectations of the world and experience of the world itself.

With this understanding of the indeterminate status of the probable, we can better appreciate how the narrator maintains his credibility by commenting, sometimes extensively, on events or incidents which threaten to violate the criteria discussed above. The manner in which the narrator handles such incidents through local assertions and denials of certainty demonstrates how the issue of probability is negotiated in the novel. The criterion of possibility is maintained by showing how seemingly miraculous events can be explained through natural means. For instance, after Mr. Western arrives at Upton, Sophia flees and stops a man on the road to inquire about the road to London. At this point, the narrator intrudes with this parody of epic style:

Reader, I am not superstitious, nor any great believer in modern miracles. I do not, therefore, deliver the following as a certain truth; for, indeed, I can scarce credit it myself: but the fidelity of an historian obliges me to relate what hath been confidently asserted. The horse, then, on which the guide rode, is reported to have been so charmed by Sophia's voice, that he made a full stop, and exprest an unwillingness to proceed any further.

Perhaps, however, the fact may be true, and less miraculous than it hath been represented; since the natural cause seems adequate to the effect: for as the guide at that moment desisted from a constant application of his armed right heel, (for, like Hudibras, he wore but one spur) it is more than

possible, that this omission alone might occasion the beast to stop, especially as this was very frequent with him at other times. (456-7)

While this funny passage reiterates Sophia's charm and beauty, it also shows the narrator staging a conflict between "private history" and "public record," a conflict which operates to acclimatize the reader to a certain way of viewing the world. The historian is obliged to relate the superstitious, "reported" account of the event, but then immediately demystifies it by providing a causal explanation that stays within the bounds of possibility. This dual presentation of events raises certain questions about the narrator's strategy. It seems strange that, possessed of a natural explanation of an event, the narrator would even bother to entertain the possibility of a superstitious one. However, this rhetorical strategy also establishes the fact that a certain chain of events—such as the sound of Sophia's voice, immediately followed by the horse coming to a "full stop"—might elicit multiple causal interpretations, some of which entertain the miraculous (e.g., Sophia's voice *causes* the horse to stop) and some of which are more probable (e.g., Sophia's voice *causes* the man to remove his spur from the horse, which in turn *causes* the horse to stop).

This dual presentation of events is also the narrator's primary strategy for dealing with the conservation of character. Throughout the novel, the reader is presented with events and actions that seem inconsistent with their understanding of how certain characters ought to behave in particular situations. Why, for example, does Allworthy repeatedly make judgments that challenge our understanding of him as wise and judicious? The narrator takes great pains to explain the differences between the way circumstances are perceived by the reader and the way they are perceived by characters embroiled in them. While narrating the events that lead to Thwackum and Square overseeing the education of Tom and Blifil, the narrator remarks:

Thwackum, at his first arrival, was extremely agreeable to Allworthy; and indeed he perfectly answered the character which had been given of him. Upon longer acquaintance, however, and more intimate conversation, this worthy man saw infirmities in the tutor, which he could have wished him to have been without; tho' as these seemed greatly over-balanced by his good qualities, they did not incline Mr Allworthy to part with him; nor would they indeed have justified such a proceeding: for the reader is greatly mistaken, if he conceives that Thwackum appeared to Mr Allworthy in the same light as he doth to him in this history; and he is as much deceived, if he imagines, that the most intimate acquaintance which he himself could have had with that divine, would have informed him of those things which we, from our inspiration, are enabled to open and discover. Of readers who from such conceits as these, condemn the wisdom or penetration of Mr Allworthy, I shall not scruple to say, that they make a very bad and ungrateful use of that knowledge which we have communicated to them. (106)

And, again, after Allworthy dismisses Tom, the narrator tells the reader that he “must be very weak, if, when he considers the light in which Jones then appeared to Mr Allworthy, he should blame the rigour of his sentence” (253). These apparent inconsistencies in character are eradicated by making explicit this dual presentation of events: our perception of Thwackum or Tom at a particular moment is different than Allworthy's, allowing us to understand the rationale behind Allworthy's decisions but also the limitations on the perspective which was the foundation of those decisions.

This strategy not only contributes to the conservation of character, but also participates in the larger exploration of deception in the novel. Again and again it is shown that what looks like virtue may in fact just be a disguise and that what looks

like vice might in fact be a product of the manner in which particular events and circumstances are presented to the viewer. While the position of the narrator, and consequently the position of the reader “behind the scenes,” provides a perspective that grants us more precise knowledge about actions and events, this is still a particular perspective and thus subject to certain limitations: it provides *better* knowledge but not *complete* knowledge (265). There are numerous places where the narrator indicates particular limitations on his knowledge, and these limitations become the place where the issues of probability and conservation of character intersect, ultimately shaping how we read coincidence in the novel.

Let us consider two places in the text where the narrator relates events while claiming ignorance of causality. The first occurs in VII.xv, following Tom’s argument with ensign Northerton, which leaves Tom on the brink of death and Northerton taken into custody. Finding that Northerton has escaped, the lieutenant of the regiment arrests the sentinel who was guarding the ensign, suspecting him of abetting the escape. In order to explain these events, the narrator informs the reader that it was not the sentinel, but the landlady who helped Northerton escape. Charmed by Northerton’s appearance and moved to compassion, the landlady devises a plan that enables Northerton to obtain his freedom:

But lest our readers, of a different complexion, should take this occasion of too hastily condemning all compassion as a folly, and pernicious to society, we think proper to mention another particular, which might possibly have some little share in this action. The ensign happened to be at this time possessed of the sum of fifty pounds, which did indeed belong to the whole company [...] This money, however, he thought proper to deposite [*sic*] in my landlady’s hand, possibly by way of bail or security that he would hereafter appear and answer to the charge against him; but

whatever were the conditions, certain it is, that she had the money, and the ensign his liberty.

The reader may, perhaps, expect, from the compassionate temper of this good woman, that when she saw the poor centinel taken prisoner for a fact of which she knew him innocent, she should immediately have interposed in his behalf; but whether it was that she had already exhausted all her compassion in the above-mentioned instance, or that the features of this fellow, tho' not very different from those of the ensign, could not raise it, I will not determine; but far from being an advocate for the present prisoner, she urged his guilt to his officer, declaring with uplifted eyes and hands, that she would not have had any concern in the escape of a murderer for all the world. (320)

The second passage occurs in V.v when Tom, having fallen deeply in love with Sophia, visits Molly in an attempt to convince her of “the fatal consequences which must attend their amour” (182). Molly begins to berate Tom for trying to desert her after ruining her, but “an accident put a stop to her tongue, before it had run out half its career,” as the rug serving as a door to her closet falls, revealing Square:

Now, whether Molly in the agonies of her rage, pushed this rug with her feet; or, Jones might touch it; or whether the pin or nail gave way of its own accord, I am not certain; but as Molly pronounced those last words, which are recorded above, the wicked rug got loose from its fastning, and discovered everything hid behind it; where among other female utensils appeared—(with shame I write it, and with sorrow will it be read)—the philosopher Square, in a posture (for the place would not near admit his standing upright) as ridiculous as can possibly be conceived. (183)

While both of these passages are suffused with irony, the effect in each case is slightly different. In the first passage, the narrator's disavowal of knowledge about causality is clearly ironic. Although the narrator withholds judgment about the causal relationship between two facts—"that she had the money, and the ensign his liberty"—the reader is called upon to see it as a bribe, a determination that subsequently explains the landlady's refusal to help the sentinel. On one hand, the sentinel does not possess the money necessary to excite the compassion of the landlady, and, on the other hand, asserting the innocence of the sentinel would involve implicating herself in Northerton's escape. Thus, while the narrator "will not determine" the cause of the landlady's behavior, he presents information in such a way that enables the reader to confidently determine causality: she helps Northerton not because she is moved by misguided compassion, but simply because he bribes her, thus explaining why she refuses to help the sentinel. The situation is different in the second passage, where the narrator's assertion of "I am not certain" must be taken more seriously, as it is impossible for the reader to infer what caused the rug to fall at that particular moment. While it seems irrelevant whether Molly pushed the rug, or whether Tom touched it, or whether "the pin or nail gave way of its own accord," the incident is so fortuitous that its cause seems important to how we interpret it: the nail giving way of its own accord at that precise moment certainly seems more incredible than Molly simply stepping on the rug. An exact material cause would demystify the event in the same way that the removal of the guide's spurs from the horse's flank helps explain the potentially miraculous event above. The surprise elicited by the appearance of a man in Molly's closet is compounded by the fact that it presents Square in a situation that "may seem so inconsistent with that character, which he hath, doubtless, maintain'd hitherto" (183). The narrator, however, takes this opportunity to say that this inconsistency is "rather imaginary than real," as Square, like all philosophers, is

“composed of flesh and blood” and therefore just as susceptible to the appetites of the flesh as anyone else. The humor that arises from the deflation of Square’s purported stature not only “conserves” his character, but it also tempers the wonder and potential incredulity aroused by the fortuitous “accident” of the rug’s fall.

As Wayne Booth suggests, Fielding’s novel relies on “‘training’ the reader to draw up short, to move back and forth from ironic to straight readings.”<sup>53</sup> These passages not only “train” readers to distinguish ironic from straight readings, but also train them to interpret events or actions that potentially defy their expectations or sense of probability. As the chapter on the marvelous demonstrates, authors in this “new province of writing” cannot maintain their “historic integrity” simply by following determinate criteria: because the reader’s past experience, their immediate subjective responses, nor public record can be used to determine when a work has abandoned truth by leaving the realm of history and entering that of romance, the credibility of the historian inheres in a pact established between the writer and reader. What I am suggesting, then, is that the narrator’s rhetorical framing of improbable events trains the reader to deal with events that might threaten that credibility. The narrator thus keeps his work within the very unstable boundaries of probability by constantly reminding us of the indeterminate nature of those boundaries. Actions or incidents that at first might seem “incredible” or impossible become simply “marvelous” when the narrator frequently—but not always—explains them through “natural means.”

While the full implications of this training might not be felt in local passages, its importance becomes clear as the novel draws toward its conclusion and the reader is confronted by a series of events that seriously push the already tenuous bounds of

---

<sup>53</sup> *The Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), pg. 185.

probability. In the introductory chapter to Book XVII, the narrator remarks that “it is more than probable” that Sophia will end up married to Blifil or some lord, and that, given the current circumstances in which Jones finds himself, “we almost despair of bringing him to any good” (729). The narrator then “faithfully promise[s]” that “notwithstanding any affection” we may have for Tom, “we will lend him none of that supernatural assistance with which we are entrusted, upon condition that we use it only on very important occasions,” concluding, “If he doth not therefore find some natural means of fairly extricating himself from all his distressing, we will do no violence to the truth and dignity of history for his sake” (729-30). A similar passage occurs in XVIII.iii after the narrator tells of the seemingly improbable change that has occurred in Allworthy’s attitude toward Tom:

Revolutions of this kind, it is true, do frequently occur in histories and dramatic writers, for no other reason than because the history or play draws to a conclusion, and are justified by the authority of authors; yet though we insist upon as much authority as any author whatever, we shall use this power very sparingly, and never but when we are driven to it by necessity, which we do not at present foresee will happen in this work. (772)

He then goes on to relate the circumstances which led to this “revolution”: the coincidental reappearance of the £500, Square’s death-bed confession (which counteracts the pernicious stories of Tom’s behavior circulated by Blifil), and the full exposure of Blifil’s dishonesty. While the narrator’s assertion of the ability to lend his characters “supernatural assistance” seems to undermine his ostensibly sincere adherence to the “dignity of history,” such a strategy can be read as an attempt to disarm the incredulity which the improbable events are likely to elicit in the reader. Since the mere absence of monsters, ghosts and elves is not enough to differentiate a

history from romance, such rhetorical maneuvers become the only means to distinguish a “history” from the creations of “distempered brains.”

If, as I am suggesting, we take seriously the narrator’s—and by extension, the implied author’s—claims that the events of the narrative are not “mere invention” and have a claim toward truth, we must nevertheless make sense of the manner in which the narrator controls the presentation of those events. The narrator, of course, frequently reveals his shaping presence, such as in II.i, where in “*Shewing what Kind of History this is,*” the narrator distinguishes his work from a newspaper, “which consists of just the same number of words, whether there be any news in it or not” (59). What makes this history different from a newspaper, among other things, is its retrospective element, which enables the narrator to relate events with knowledge of the end to which they ultimately lead and allows him both to exclude irrelevant passages of time and to locate seemingly trivial events that are in fact critical to that end. Thus, in X.i, the narrator warns the reader to “not too hastily condemn any of the incidents in this our history, as impertinent and foreign to our main design,” simultaneously dismissing those critics who “presume to find fault with any of its parts, without knowing the manner in which the whole is connected” (425). The narration, then, is suppressed insofar as the narrator overtly acknowledges the action is a “design” and “whole,” but refuses to disclose the ultimate nature of that design.<sup>54</sup> This suppression involves withholding information not only in local instances, but also in more important and sustained cases, such as withholding the essential information regarding the circumstances of Tom’s birth and the existence of Bridget’s confession.

---

<sup>54</sup> J.F. Smith suggests that the narrator is involved “in an extended act of narrative deception,” and he links the narrator’s practices and habits to those of Bridget [*An Inquiry into Narrative Deception and Its Uses in Fielding’s Tom Jones* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1993), pg. ix]. The connotations of calling the narrator’s withholding of information “deception” are clearly inconsistent with the function of the narrator as I understand it.

Although the disclosure of this information would obviously “ruin the game,” its suppression clearly seems at odds with the narrator’s attempt to establish and maintain his credibility.

Understanding the nature of the narrator’s credible yet suppressed narration illuminates the particular manner in which accidents are presented to the reader. The manner in which the narrator mediates the reader’s perception of the narrative’s events is an effort to have the reader perceive accidents *as accidents*, that is, as highly contingent events that either challenge our notions of probability or reveal a conflict between our expectations and a reality that defies those expectations. If the happy union of Tom and Sophia is the end toward which the narrative moves, it is essential that the reader appreciate the nature of the incidents which potentially thwart but ultimately result in that union. The narrator repeatedly calls our attention to the seemingly insignificant events that produce large effects in the overall “design.” Early in the novel, for example, Jones resolves to abandon Sophia and remain faithful to Molly when “a very trifling accident set all his passions again on float,” as he learns of the incident of the muff from Honour (177). The narrator reflects that although this incident appears of “little consequence,” “there are many little circumstances too often omitted by injudicious historians, from which events of the utmost importance arise” (179). This leads the narrator to compare the world to “a vast machine, in which the great wheels are originally set in motion by those which are very minute, and almost imperceptible to any but the strongest eyes.” This emphasis on the significance of trifling events appears again at the end of the text, when the narrator notes “the many strange accidents” that prevented Partridge from seeing Mrs. Waters/Jenny Jones at Upton and led to the presumed incestuous encounter between Jones and Mrs. Waters: “Instances of this kind we may frequently observe in life, where the greatest events are produced by a nice train of little circumstances; and more than one example of this

may be discovered by the accurate eye, in this our history” (765). The narrator’s emphasis on vision foregrounds the way in which he shapes our perception of events, putting into proper perspective the “trifling accidents” that set the “great wheels” in motion. Perceiving accidents *as accidents* requires credible yet suppressed narration. Without the credibility of the historian, the accidents and coincidences which bring about the conclusion might appear simply as the “supernatural” intervention of the author engaged in imaginative romance. Without the suppression of information, our perception of the “minute” causes might be too greatly colored by the end at which they arrive. In other words, with knowledge of the end in hand, we might overlook the causality of natural means and attribute “a nice little train of circumstances” to providential intervention.

It is necessary to describe in more detail the specific nature of the function I am attributing to accidents in relation to the texture of the reader’s experience of the novel. This is best accomplished through comparison to readings that understand accidents as manifestations of either *the hand of providence* or *the hand of the author*. The providential reading would describe the texture of the reader’s experience as follows: the reader begins with confidence yet uncertainty about Tom’s ultimate fate (about whether Tom is deserving of happiness and about whether he will achieve it); however, as accidents accumulate, the reader becomes increasingly certain that Tom is both deserving and destined for happiness because the world of the novel is one in which divine justice prevails—the fortuitous accidents assure us of Tom’s merit as they work toward his happiness. The generic reading—that is, reading accidents as manifestations of the author working within the conventions of an established genre—would describe the texture of the reader’s experience as such: the reader, understanding the prevailing comic form of the novel, confidently knows that the novel will end with Tom’s happiness; accidents which divert the trajectory unsettle

this confidence, but only in a manner that creates more suspense. This, I would argue, approximates R.S. Crane's famous reading of the novel.<sup>55</sup> The texture I am describing is as follows: the reader, realizing the novel's comic form, has confidence in Tom's ultimate happiness; accidents, however, not only divert this trajectory, but do so in a manner that generates skepticism about the certainty or adequacy of the comic form itself. While we remain confident that Tom, despite his indiscretions, is deserving of happiness, accidents provide us with a rich picture of the world in which lives, where the alignment of merit and fortune is not guaranteed. In other words, the ebbs and flows of confidence and uncertainty in the comic plot are not just about suspense, but also about the production of a particular ideational content. While my reading is certainly closer to the generic reading, it differs from both the generic and providential readings insofar as it insists on this ideational content regarding the nature of the world he inhabits. As William Empson says of Crane's reading, it ultimately "assume[s] the basic impulse behind the book to be pretty trivial."<sup>56</sup> Whereas Crane sees the accidents and indiscretions that divert the trajectory of the narrative as mere occasions for the production of suspense and laughter, I am suggesting that they divert the trajectory in a manner that reveals a conflict between generic or ideological expectations and lived reality.

This understanding of the effect produced by accidents sees both accidents and the narrator's intrusive presence as integral to the form of the novel. It is not just the reader's sense of probability that is undermined by accidents. The novel shows how unexpected events can also undermine attempts to anticipate or control the outcome of

---

<sup>55</sup> See "The Concept of Plot and the Plot of *Tom Jones*," reprinted in *Critics and Criticism (Abridged Edition)*, ed. R.S. Crane (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), Crane, pgs. 62-93.

<sup>56</sup> "Tom Jones," *The Kenyon Review* 20.2 (1958): 217. The providential reading, of course, attributes an ideational content to the novel, but, as I suggested above, it is content in the form of an abstract, formulable statement.

other events. Just as Tom's virtuous intentions toward Molly are overpowered by the incident of the muff, characters' plans perpetually fail to account for events beyond their control. Such a dynamic cuts both ways: it produces the failure of Blifil's malicious plot to deceive Allworthy and assume Tom's place, but at the same time it creates the necessary limitations on Allworthy's judiciousness that result in Tom's expulsion from Paradise Hall. These limitations are thematized in a variety of ways. Although doctors are satirized throughout the novel, they are themselves keenly aware of their inability to anticipate the progress of a disease. After Allworthy's seemingly improbable return from the brink of death, we learn that his "situation had never been so bad, as the great caution of the doctor had represented it": like a "wise general," a good doctor "never despises his enemy, however inferior his force may be" and with good reason, for "by these means the greater glory redounds to them if they gain the victory, and the less disgrace if by any unlucky accident they should happen to be conquered" (*Tom Jones* 200).<sup>57</sup> In discussing how to discover the deceit of others, the narrator's story of the Wiltshire thief inculcates the same point:

Three countrymen were pursuing a Wiltshire thief through Brentford. The simplest of them seeing the Wiltshire House written under a sign, advised his companions to enter it, for there most probably they would find their countryman. The second, who was wiser, laughed at this simplicity; but the third, who was wiser still, answered, 'Let us go in, however, for he may think we should not suspect him of going amongst his own countrymen.' They accordingly went in and searched the house, and by that means missed overtaking the thief, who was, at that time, but a little way before

---

<sup>57</sup> This, of course, also helps explain Fitzpatrick's seemingly "improbable" recovery from the wounds he receives in his fight with Tom.

them; and who, as they all knew, but had never once reflected, could not read. (226)

Even the episode of the Man of the Hill reiterates this point, as his misanthropy is shown to result from a misguided attempt to deduce universal human nature from the isolated instances of his experience. As Tom points out to him, “if there was indeed much more wickedness in the world than there is, it would not prove such general assertions against human nature, since much of this arrives by mere accident and many a man who commits evil, is not totally bad and corrupt in his heart” (392). Accidents, therefore, undermine the various systems of knowledge that attempt to impose order onto the world (by moving from individual incidents to principles of knowledge). At the same time, accidents also challenge the generic expectations readers use to organize and interpret events presented to them in narrative.

It is important to note, within the context of my reading, the novel’s explicit critique of the providential reading of events. In introducing the “accident [...] of a very extraordinary kind” that brings about the revolution in Allworthy’s opinion of Tom, the narrator describes it as one “of those strange chances, whence very good and grave men have concluded that Providence often interposes in the discovery of the most secret villainy, in order to caution men from quitting the paths of honesty, however warily they tread in those of vice” (769). While “very good and grave men” might discern providential intention behind such “strange chances,” the narrator is reluctant to draw such conclusions. Furthermore, the providential interpretation of events is embodied by Partridge, whose superstitious beliefs are a constant source of humor and ridicule. When Tom fortuitously catches scent of Sophia’s path toward London, Partridge “assured Jones, that he would certainly have good success in the end: for, he said, ‘two such accidents could never have happened to direct him after

his mistress, if Providence had not designed to bring them together at last” (535).<sup>58</sup> More importantly, even though things work out for Tom and Sophia in the end, that conclusion cannot be read as illustrating the operations or even a confident belief in a benign providence. As Robert Wess puts it, “Merit and fortune are finally aligned not because ‘poetic justice’ rules in the world of *Tom Jones* but because things just happen to turn out that way.”<sup>59</sup> Didactic readings of the novel that understand the happy union to be a consequence of Tom’s acquisition of prudence fail to recognize not only that Tom changes little during the course of the novel, but also that prudence in the novel is not the unequivocally positive value that some critics take it to be.<sup>60</sup> While Tom is ultimately rewarded for his goodness, the reader is forced to recognize that that reward is not a consequence of moral or generic necessity. The novel promotes a Christian ideal of goodness, but in doing so demonstrates that it is not a guaranty of earthly happiness. Far from undermining the novel’s rhetorical force, appreciating the highly contingent nature of the novel’s conclusion actually heightens the comic delight it produces: we are pleased by Tom’s fate precisely because we grasp that it is contingent rather than necessary.

The novel’s accidents, therefore, direct the reader to the vicissitudes of human freedom and responsibility in a material world whose complexity exceeds our

---

<sup>58</sup> Aubrey Williams curiously reads Partridge’s comment as proof of the providential design of the novel’s events. After presenting Partridge’s comment, he remarks, “And to underscore his point here, Fielding adds that ‘this was the first time that Jones lent any attention to the superstitious doctrines of his companion’” (280). The fact that this is the first time Tom heeds Partridge’s superstitious beliefs is clearly a sign of a failure on Tom’s part, rather than a sign of the truth of Partridge’s statement. Tom, of course, gives credence to Partridge’s superstitions at this moment because they happen to coincide with his desires.

<sup>59</sup> Wess, pg. 44.

<sup>60</sup> See Dwigth Codr, “In the Interest of Saving Time: *Tom Jones* and the Prudence of the Serpent” (*A Store Yet Untouched: Speculative Ideologies in Eighteenth-Century English Literature* [diss., Cornell University, 2006], pgs. 104-161) for a perceptive account of how goodness and prudence are inherently conflicting, yet ultimately reconcilable qualities in the novel.

capacities of anticipation. In XII.viii, the narrator remarks that Sophia is more upset at “freedoms which she thought, and not without good reason [Tom] had taken with her name and character, than at any freedoms, in which, under his present circumstances, he had indulged himself with the person of another woman.” Although Sophia’s aversion is founded on mistaken grounds (as it was Partridge and not Tom who indulged in the specific freedoms that offend her), the narrator notes that this situation “must please all”:

For wise and good men may consider what happened to Jones at Upton as a just punishment for his wickedness, with regard to women, of which it was indeed the immediate consequence; and silly and bad persons may comfort themselves in their vices, by flattering their own hearts that the characters of men are rather owing to accident than to virtue. Now perhaps the reflections which we should be here inclined to draw, would alike contradict both these conclusions, and would shew that these incidents contribute to confirm the great, useful and uncommon doctrine, which it is the purpose of this whole work to inculcate, and which we must not fill up our pages by frequently repeating, as an ordinary parson fills his sermon by repeating his text at the end of every paragraph. (536)

Far from “frequently repeating” the “great, useful and uncommon doctrine,” the narrator famously never specifies what it may actually be, and this refusal is characteristic of the way in which our hopes and expectations are continually aroused only to be thwarted or diverted. More importantly, in suggesting that there is some but no direct correlation between action and consequence, the narrator highlights the problems and possibilities of human freedom and happiness in a contingent world. The probabilities and improbabilities of the world require us neither to believe in accidents as “just punishment” nor to completely abandon principles and give

ourselves over entirely to chance. The most we can do is to cultivate a certain disposition toward accidents. What ultimately distinguishes Tom's virtue is not prudence but his "naturally sanguine" temper (582). It is this temper which the narrator hopes his reader is "possessed of," "since, after having read much, and considered long on that subject of happiness which hath employed so many great pens, I am almost inclined to fix it in the possession of this temper; which puts us, in a manner, out of the reach of Fortune, and makes us happy without her assistance." While accidents that potentially remove Tom from all that is good in the novel threaten this sanguinity, the accidents that bring about the happy union at the end encourage this sanguinity, tempered, of course, by a profound understanding of that union's contingency.<sup>61</sup>

### III. Conclusion: From Accident to Coincidence

This reading of the importance of accidents to *Tom Jones* has several implications for both theoretical conceptualizations of literary realism and historical considerations of the development of the novel form. First, it casts further doubt upon the widely held critical assumption that realism is, by its very nature, "probable." While *Tom Jones* has always existed on the margins of literary realism, my reading has suggested that what can be understood as its realism emerges precisely through its treatment of accidents. As events which defy expectations of the probable or likely, accidents have the potential to stage a confrontation between those expectations and the world as it is. It is precisely through improbable events that *Tom Jones* directs the

---

<sup>61</sup> William Empson comes to a similar conclusion about Fielding's "doctrine" in the novel. My argument differs from his primarily in terms of its focus: whereas Empson is concerned with describing how Fielding's "doctrine" can be inferred through a proper understanding of the novel's habitual use of double irony, my point has been to suggest that the novel's ideational content is best approached through its deployment of accidents. Of course, part of my point has also been to suggest that the novel itself complicates the very adequacy of doctrines in the face of the contingencies of the world.

reader's attention to the contingencies of a world in a manner that complicates a simplistic understanding of the relationship between Tom's goodness and his fate. This suggests that what is at stake for literary realism in discussions of improbable events is not whether events themselves are "probable" or whether they disrupt an "illusion of reality," but rather what kind of representational opportunities such events make possible. Indeed, it is the effects of the novel's improbable events and its intrusive narrator that help us to understand just how *Tom Jones* participates in establishing this "new province" of writing in the eighteenth century.

Second, this reading illustrates *Tom Jones* to be a special case of a general phenomenon whereby improbable events became an important site for the exploration of issues of agency and self-determination in modernity. This phenomenon includes considerations of the importance of accidental events on individual fate, such as whether the flattening of Tristram's nose at birth has any effect on his identity, or whether Crusoe's success is a product of hard work or divine intervention, or whether Tom's potential demise results from his actions or chance. More importantly, however, it also includes an understanding of how those events are shaped by narrative form. Since accidents elicit competing interpretive frameworks, we can see how the novel emerges as a narrative form precisely through negotiating such frameworks. Like *Tom Jones*, *Robinson Crusoe* is structured around a series of accidental events. More importantly, however, the effort to shape the reader's interpretation of these accidents also significantly influences the form of Defoe's novel. While Crusoe's journal describes improbable events such as the miraculous appearance of the corn, his narrative embeds these descriptions in a framework that gives his experience on the island meaning. Just as our reading of *Crusoe* (as either a spiritual autobiography or capitalist allegory, for example) depends largely on how we read this dynamic between accidents and their interpretive framework, so too does our

understanding of *Tom Jones* hinge upon how we read its coincidences. Accidents direct our attention to the way in which Tom's happiness is neither destined by an intervening providence nor entirely the subject of chance, but rather embroiled in the contingencies of a complex social world. To be sure, *Tom Jones*'s representation of the social and historical forces shaping Tom's agency is not nearly as rich as that provided by the nineteenth-century novel, but it nevertheless demonstrates how improbable events become an important site where the influence of those forces can be represented. As I will argue in Chapter Two, it is this same capacity of coincidence to elicit competing interpretative frameworks that Scott utilizes to more thoroughly historicize human agency in particular social milieus in his historical novels.

Third and finally, if *Tom Jones* demonstrates the importance of accidents to both the cultural imagination and the exploration of self-determination in the eighteenth century, it also elucidates why coincidence—as a special subset of the accidental event—becomes integral to the emerging narrative form we call the novel. If accidents disrupt the course of events in a manner that elicits our narrative capacities to make sense of our world, coincidences lend themselves to narrative form precisely because they direct us to other events. Out of all the accidents in *Tom Jones*, the most significant are those which coincidentally tie together seemingly disparate events: accidents create or disrupt sequences, but coincidences generate the patterns and narrative arcs that become an important feature of the novel form. Accidents and coincidences in *Tom Jones* divert the trajectory of the plot, threatening Tom's happiness, but they also function to bring about that happy resolution. As I have argued, the effect of the novel emerges through a complex critique and affirmation of readerly expectations. If accidents disrupt expectations generated by generic conventions, coincidences generate a plot with a new shape and function, one which directs the reader's attention toward complex features of a particularized reality.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Improbability and the Representation of the Past:

#### Reading Coincidence in Sir Walter Scott

In the previous chapter, I both substantiated and provided a historical framework for the theoretical claims I made in the Introduction about the relationship between realism and improbability, and more particularly, coincidence. Prevalent critical accounts of realism are predicated upon the (either explicit or assumed) premise that realism as a literary mode emerged in part through the adoption of standards of probability that prohibit the use of mechanisms such as coincidence. My reading of *Tom Jones*, however, demonstrated that from its earliest days the modern novel actually incorporated and harnessed coincidence. More importantly, I suggested that the novel's treatment of coincidence constitutes an important contribution to the development of realism because the novel's rhetorical deployment of coincidence points the reader toward the structures of the material world. In this chapter, I turn to the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott to argue that understanding Scott's use of coincidence can help us better understand the formal means by which the nineteenth-century novel represents reality. In doing so, I will be both following and complicating Georg Lukács's reading of Scott in *The Historical Novel* (1937), which despite its initial impact has had less influence than befits the work of one of most important Marxist philosophers of the twentieth century. Lukács remains an important theoretician of realism, and his work is especially significant to my concerns for two reasons. First, Lukács identifies "what was *new* in Scott's art" in relation to his

predecessors.<sup>62</sup> Although certain writers of the eighteenth century such as Fielding were able to “grasp the salient features of their world with a bold and penetrating realism” (20), Lukács argues that the emergence and spread of historicist thinking in the wake of the French Revolution generated “the concrete possibilities for men to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned” (24). Scott’s historical novel marks an important moment in the history of the novel not because it represents history but because it represents a *historicized* reality. Second, Lukács’s writings on realism are important because he addresses—both in *The Historical Novel* and elsewhere—the status of chance or accidental events in the realist novel. Even though Lukács sees chance events and coincidental encounters as foundational to the realist mode, he ultimately treats them in a manner that negates their accidental quality. I want to suggest that it is this very accidental or chance quality of coincidence that Scott harnesses in order to represent and historicize the past.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1989) pg. 30. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

<sup>63</sup> My emphasis here on “representation” is important. One prevalent critique of realism (as well as historical writing) raises the question of the adequacy of language to grasp (or reference) reality—whether it can be “true” in any objective capacity. In an analysis of the effect of “the linguistic turn” in literary theory on historical writing, historiographer Frank Ankersmit argues that this linguistic critique of historical writing mistakenly introduces epistemological questions into the problem of representation. Ankersmit argues that critiques of historical representation on the basis of language mistakenly treat historical *representation* as historical *description*. Description involves the epistemological relationship between language and the world, whereas representation is a relationship between two things (a thing made of words and the world). Historical writing, in other words, is not a description of things (the world or the past), but rather a representation of those things. The critical problem is not the adequacy of language to grasp the world, but rather about the relative adequacy of different representations: a historical account cannot stand in for the past, but different historical accounts more or less adequately represent that past. When I say that Scott’s novels represent the past, I mean that a representation of the past that is both fictional and improbable has the potential to represent features of the past as adequately as a representation of the past that is non-fictional. See Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2001), pgs. 29-74. Ankersmit has recently made the explicit connection between historical writing and the historical novel (and by extension, literary realism) in his article “Truth in History and Literature” [*Narrative* 18.1 (2010): 29-50]. For another, more rigorous consideration of the problem of reference in realist representation, see Harry Shaw, *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1999), pgs. 38-89.

My argument—both here and in the remaining chapters of this dissertation—will be that coincidence generates opportunities for representation particularly suited to the historicizing inclination characteristic of the nineteenth-century realist novel. Although Scott, Dickens, and Hardy each develop unique fictional forms, they all use coincidence to cultivate a historicist consciousness in their readers. I begin this chapter with a discussion of Scott’s story “The Two Drovers” in the context of Lukács’s various comments on the status of chance events in the realist novel. While Lukács’s theoretical framework can help us understand how chance is productive for realism, Scott’s story demonstrates the limitations of his framework. More importantly, the story reveals the two distinct functions of coincidence in Scott: coincidence is a basic narrative mechanism that highlights unique features of a particular milieu, and it is used to historicize that milieu by juxtaposing two competing interpretations of coincidence against each other. After identifying these two functions, I turn to *Redgauntlet* to illustrate in more detail how that novel makes use of coincidence in its representation of historical process in the decades following the ’45 Jacobite rebellion. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of *The Bride of Lammermoor*, which shows the different ways in which Scott’s novels pit competing readings of coincidence against each other for different ends.

#### I. “The Two Drovers” and Lukács on Chance in Realism

Scott’s story “The Two Drovers,” published as part of the *Chronicles of the Canongate* in 1827, provides a helpful starting point for considering the function of coincidence in Scott’s works. It also provides an example through which to evaluate Lukács’s comments on the status and function of the accidental in realism. These comments offer a productive alternative to the theoretical accounts of coincidence I have discussed in the preceding chapters, yet ultimately reflect many of their

shortcomings. “The Two Drovers” represents a conflict between the eponymous drovers—the Highlandman Robin Oig and his English friend, Harry Wakefield—that causes Robin to kill his friend in an effort to avenge his reputation, a sense of pride which is shaped by his social position within his Highland culture. The story opens with an extended portrait of Robin that shows him to be very much a “cultural middleman,”<sup>64</sup> straddling the boundaries of both the Highlands and modernity as a result of his trade. Robin is proud of both his reputation and birth, as we learn that his grandfather was friends with the famous Highland marauder Rob Roy. Although Robin is “proud accordingly,” his trips to England and the Lowlands “had given him tact enough to know that pretensions, which still gave him a little right to distinction in his own lonely glen, might be both obnoxious and ridiculous if preferred elsewhere.”<sup>65</sup> His pride of birth, therefore, exists merely as “the secret subject of his contemplation.” Our sense of Robin’s self-consciousness is heightened when, as he is about to depart on his journey, his aunt Janet appears and insists on performing an ancient ritualistic blessing. Although Robin is “rather impatient of her presence,” he nevertheless allows her to perform the ritual, “half embarrassed, half laughing, and signing to those around that he only complied with the old woman to soothe her humour” (127). Her presence becomes even more irritating to Robin when during the ritual she stops in “alarm and horror” and claims through her “second sight” that there is “English blood” on Robin’s hands, insisting that he not set off on his journey. Impatient to meet up with his friend Harry and “determined to close [the scene] at any sacrifice,” Robin refuses to abort his journey but placates his aunt by surrendering his dirk to a fellow drover (128).

---

<sup>64</sup> Shaw, *Narrating Reality*, pg. 198. See pgs. 197-212 for a thorough discussion of the story’s exploration of cultural embeddedness.

<sup>65</sup> *Chronicles of the Canongate* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), pg. 126. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

The central conflict of the story occurs as the two friends travel south into England. When they attempt to secure fields in which to rest their droves, “unhappily it chanced that both of them, unknown to each other,” coincidentally secure the same field on a gentleman’s property, as Oig makes a deal with the squire himself and Wakefield with the squire’s bailiff (131). Wakefield acknowledges the primacy of Oig’s claim when the coincidence comes to light, but the misunderstanding temporarily wounds Wakefield’s pride. His resentment rises later in the evening at an alehouse, where the prejudices of his fellow countrymen against the Highlander and the influence of whiskey lead him to assault Oig. Wakefield’s anger is mollified by the brief pugilistic encounter, leaving him quite willing to let bygones be bygones. For Robin, however, the encounter has indelibly marked his reputation since he has been assaulted without having recourse to his weapon for defense. Indeed, as the men go their separate ways,

there remained one party from whose mind that recollection [of the unpleasant scuffle] could not have been wiped away by the possession of every head of cattle betwixt Esk and Eden.

This was Robin Oig McCombich.—“That I should have had no weapon,” he said, “and for the first time in my life!—Blighted be the tongue that bids the Highlander part with the dirk—the dirk—ha! the English blood!—My muhme’s word—when did her word fall to the ground?”

The recollection of the fatal prophecy confirmed the deadly intention which instantly sprang up in his mind. (138)

Robin’s recollection of his aunt’s prophecy gives his “impetuous spirit [...] a fixed purpose and motive of action” (139). He walks a dozen miles round trip to retrieve his dirk, returning to the alehouse to slay Wakefield. It is the contingency of Robin’s

walk to retrieve his weapon that ultimately condemns him in the eyes of the English law to which he is subjected. In the extended description of Robin's trial that concludes the story, the judge recognizes that Robin's "rooted national prejudices...made him consider himself as stained with indelible dishonor" (142). This leads the "English audience [...] to regard his crime as the wayward aberration of a false idea of honour rather than as flowing from a heart naturally savage, or perverted by habitual vice." Yet the English law cannot fully recognize Robin's sense of honor or countenance his action. While immediate retaliation may have been justifiable, "the pinch of the case [lay] in the interval of two hours interposed betwixt the reception of the injury and the fatal retaliation"—Robin's act is viewed as "predetermined revenge" and necessitates his execution (144-5).

If a central feature of this story is the complex exploration of the incongruity between Robin's character and English cultural and legal codes, then it is the "unhappy" coincidence of Robin and Harry accidentally contracting the same field that enables such an exploration. It not only sets in motion the conflict between Robin and Harry, but its highly coincidental nature is essential for the story to unfold in the way that it does. The bystanders at the alehouse are horrified by Robin's retaliatory assault on Harry, "the provocation being, in their opinion, so utterly inadequate to the excess of vengeance" (142). Similarly, the dissonance between the initiating action (an "unhappy" coincidence) and its ultimate effects (a murder and an execution) is essential to how the story develops our capacity to understand Robin's identity: even though he has one foot in modernity, his agency and identity are nevertheless shaped by the traditional Highland culture from which he comes. To invoke the critical terminology I have been attempting to complicate, the story is certainly structured by a "cheap plot trick," but it is one that enables the story to do some serious representational work.

In the Introduction, I demonstrated that while many critics have recognized the structural utility of coincidence, they have simultaneously argued that coincidence must be “naturalized” in order to be productive for realism: texts either use coincidence well or poorly depending on whether it appears “natural” or “artificial.” This categorical distinction was shown to be theoretically problematic; more importantly, it is on a pragmatic level clearly of little use in helping us understand how “The Two Drivers” works. In contrast, Georg Lukács’s discussions of the role of chance in realism can move us closer toward describing the relationship between coincidence and realism in this story. Lukács begins his 1936 essay “Narrate or Describe?” with a comparison of the way in which two important novels—Zola’s *Nana* (1880) and Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1875-7)—utilize a horseracing scene at a critical juncture in the plot. The horserace is important to both plots even though “objectively, attendance at or participation in the race is only an incident in life.”<sup>66</sup> The difference between the two scenes for Lukács lies in how the two novelists integrate the horserace into the larger fabric of the novel’s representation of reality. In Zola’s novel, the scene is ultimately “mere filler” because its link to the main plot is a “tenuous chance association”: the meaning that emerges through the connection between the heroine (Nana) and the victorious horse (also named Nana) is merely “symbolic.” In Tolstoy’s novel, however, the race is “no mere tableau but rather a series of intensely dramatic scenes which provide a turning point in the plot” (111). In the categorical terms of Lukács’s essay, the scene is *narrated* in Tolstoy rather than *described* (as in Zola), enabling the reader to “experience” events and grasp “the general social significance emerging in the unfolding of the characters’ lives” (116). Therefore, even though in both novels the linkage between the race and the

---

<sup>66</sup> “Narrate or Describe?” in *Writer and Critic*, trans. Arthur Kahn (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1971), pg. 112. Subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text.

protagonists' lives is "itself a chance event," Tolstoy's handling of the scene "go[es] beyond crass accident and elevate[s] chance to the inevitable" (112). This has something to do both with the way in which the scene is presented and also with the relationship between the meaning of the scene and the content of the rest of the novel.<sup>67</sup>

In this analysis Lukács simply seems to be replacing a problematic distinction (natural/artificial) with an equally, if not more problematic one (chance/inevitable). One might say, in other words, that the seemingly chance event in *Anna Karenina* appears more "natural" than the one in *Nana*. However, Lukács's terminological shift is important because it authorizes an appreciation of chance's role in realist representation. It moves us beyond conventional denigrations of nineteenth-century modes of plotting, critiques which Lukács himself was attempting to combat. For example, in both "Narrate or Describe?" and an essay on Balzac's *Lost Illusions*, Lukács cites the comment by Sinclair Lewis that appeared at the very beginning of this dissertation. In his review of Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*, Lewis comments upon the superiority of Dos Passos's method of plotting over Dickens's: "And the classic method [of plotting]—oh, it was rigged! By dismal coincidence, Mr. Jones has to be produced in the stage-coach at the same time with Mr. Smith, so that something very nasty and entertaining might happen."<sup>68</sup> To understand, as Lukács does, that "without chance all narration is dead and abstract," is to appreciate not only that chance events promote dramatic intensity but also that they are necessary for representing the impact of abstract social forces on the lives of individuals ("Narrate or Describe?" 112). Yes, "The Two Drivers" concocts a "dismal coincidence" so that

---

<sup>67</sup> One might rephrase Lukács's claim by saying that the relationship is metonymic rather than metaphoric. For a discussion of the importance of metonymy to realist representation, see Shaw, *Narrating Reality*, pgs. 101-9.

<sup>68</sup> *John Dos Passos: The Critical Heritage*, pg. 70.

“something very nasty and entertaining might happen,” but the more important question is whether that coincidence is, as Lukács says in the Balzac essay, “artistically productive.”<sup>69</sup>

The essay on *Lost Illusions*, reprinted as part of *Studies in European Realism* (1948), provides a slightly more robust articulation of the role of chance in the representation of social reality. For Lukács, of course, the importance of the realist novel developed by Scott and Balzac dwells in its capacity to “represent social trends and historical forces” through the lives of individuals (*The Historical Novel* 34). Thus, in *Lost Illusions*, Balzac is able to portray “the tragic self-dissolution of bourgeois ideals by their own economic basis, by the forces of capitalism” (*Studies in European Realism* 47). Crucially, however, “the unfolding of material problems is always indissolubly bound up with the consequences arising from the personal passions” of characters (51). The decisive aesthetic question is how to accurately grasp the interplay of concrete individual action and abstract social determinants. For Lukács, the “dialectics of freedom and necessity” in realism consists in a proper representation of how the individual is determined by and determines social processes (*The Historical Novel* 147).

In Lukács’s estimation, for example, historical necessity in Scott is “of the most severe, implacable kind,” but “this necessity is no otherworldly fate divorced from men; it is the complex interaction of concrete historical circumstances in their process of transformation, in their interaction with the concrete human beings, who have grown up in these circumstances” (58). *Lost Illusions*, Lukács suggests, negotiates this problem successfully because “the aggregate of social determinates is expressed in an uneven, intricate, confused and contradictory pattern, in a labyrinth of

---

<sup>69</sup> *Studies in European Realism*, trans. Alfred Kazin (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), pg. 55.

personal passions and chance happenings” (*Studies in European Realism* 53). In other words, the relationship between the level of the general (the processes of capitalism) and the particular (Lucien’s passions) is represented obliquely rather than directly. Chance events are suited to such a mediation of levels because they can generate “chain[s] of necessity” that represent the material out of which those chains are forged (57). The chance event thus comes to appear as “inevitable” not because it represents an abstract fatalism but because the chance event illustrates or makes accessible social forces whose impact cannot be represented directly.<sup>70</sup>

A crucial aspect of Lukács’s discussion—and one that I want to challenge—is his claim that the character of the chance event is actually transformed through its adequate integration into novelistic representation. While Lukács recognizes that realism must utilize chance events to represent how the larger processes of capitalism concretely impact the lives of individuals, he also asserts, consistent with his Hegelian framework, that such representation ultimately negates the accidental quality of these events. What is objectively or categorically chance no longer appears so: “the necessity which nullifies chance consists of an intricate network of causal connections” so that “an entire trend of developments constitutes a *poetic* necessity” (*Studies in European Realism* 56, emphasis in original). As a result, chance is—and, more importantly, must be—“sublat[ed].”<sup>71</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Lukács also discusses this dialectic of causality and chance in his treatment of biography in *The Historical Novel*. There, he writes, “It is characteristic of human life that the occasions which produce the most important feelings, experiences or deeds are accidental. If, however, the real character of the given literary figure is properly revealed in his deed, then although the occasion of the deed remains accidental it occupies precisely the position which would be required of it in reality. For it is part of life that necessity asserts itself through accidents of this kind” (306). His point of reference here is the historical necessity of Marx’s discovery of the class struggle: “From the viewpoint of objective necessity it is a matter of pure accident whether Marx came to his formulation in a conversation with Engels, on his own walking up and down his study or elsewhere” (305). Lukács’s point is that important (“necessary”) events always appear as purely accidental unless we understand the various forces which make that event a necessity despite its irreducible contingency.

<sup>71</sup> Kazin translates this as “sublimat[ed].” However, in the original German, the sentence reads: “Balzaes Form der dichterischen Aufhebung des Zufalls ist also noch ‘altmodisch’ und unterscheidet

Lukács's critique of "the non-dialectical approach to causality and chance" reflects the same insight that has motivated my critique of more recent critical accounts of the role of chance in realism (*Studies in European Realism* 56). In the Introduction, I demonstrated that prevalent accounts of realism assume or argue that realism represents the processes of the world by reflecting or mirroring these processes, and as a consequence see improbable or unlikely events like coincidence as "rigged" and antagonistic to the mode. This model, I suggested, is heavily indebted to Aristotle's understanding of a well-constructed plot in the *Poetics*. For Aristotle, plot in tragedy accomplishes its end by stripping away the contingencies of situation so that the consequences of actions can be traced according to the laws of probability and necessity. Chance is excluded from plot on philosophical grounds—for Aristotle, tragedy's virtue is its capacity to transcend the realm of the particular and access the universal. Adopting this model for realism is problematic because the situation of modernity—and representing that situation in its particularity—requires understanding how the contingencies of circumstance shape self-determination, not stripping them away. Grasping the relationship between Lucien's passions and his fate requires understanding how those passions interact with Lucien's concrete material situation. Lukács, therefore, recognizes that chance events not only facilitate but are in fact necessary to representing this relationship: access to the universal (or for Lukács, totality) now requires a passage through the accidental, the contingent.

However, if it is Lukács's Hegelian framework that enables him to recognize the importance of chance, it is this same framework that causes deficiencies in his

---

sich grundsätzlich von der Art neuerer Schriftsteller" ("Balzac's mode of the poetic sublation of chance is thus still 'old-fashioned' and differs in principle from the method of recent writers") [*Balzac und der Französische Realismus* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1952), pg. 55].

treatment of it.<sup>72</sup> Lukács may modify Aristotle's framework in order to incorporate chance, but he does not abandon that framework, leading him into similar conceptual territory as those he critiques. On one level, we might challenge the validity (or practicality) of his Hegelian framework and ask what it means for chance to be sublated—both preserved and negated. On a more basic level, however, we can see that Lukács's framework forces him to make fairly rigid and evaluative distinctions between different instances of chance. Although Lukács and Hilary Dannenberg have very different conceptions of realism, they end up with similar frameworks for understanding the relationship between chance or coincidence and realism. Both show how coincidental events contribute to effects they understand realism to produce—for Dannenberg, immersion in the narrative world and for Lukács, the representation of the “totality of the social process” (*Studies in European Realism* 55). Somewhat paradoxically, however, coincidences for both contribute to these effects in a self-negating fashion: the coincidental character of the event is ultimately occluded or sublated. In the same way that, for Dannenberg, mismanaged realism leads to expulsion of the reader from the narrative world, mismanaged realism for Lukács can lead to chance events (like the horserace in *Nana*) whose relationship to the representation of the total social fabric is “symbolic” or tangential rather than dialectical.

Therefore, while Lukács makes an important effort to recuperate chance for realism, that effort is constrained by his philosophical commitments. Ultimately, we might say that his philosophical commitments get in the way of his aesthetic insights. Recognizing this fact, I want to argue for the importance of his insight that chance

---

<sup>72</sup> Lukács's idea that necessity asserts itself through contingency is drawn from Hegel. For Hegel's discussion of contingency and necessity, see *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Humanity Books, 1969), pgs. 541-71.

events are “artistically productive” because they enable complex relationships between the social base and individual identity to come into view. What I am interested in is how certain authors—namely, those I deal with in this dissertation—make coincidence “artistically productive” for the realist novel. A brief comparison of the methods Scott and Tolstoy use to represent history can bring Scott’s specific use of coincidence into sharper focus. *War and Peace* (1869) is concerned, like Scott’s novels, with understanding the “dialectics of freedom and necessity” and how social forces and historical events shape the lives of individuals. However, Tolstoy’s novel makes no attempt to mediate levels as disparate as the lives of individuals and the movement of history. According to Tolstoy’s narrator, attributing the French invasion of Russia to “Napoleon’s love of power, [or] Alexander’s firmness” mistakenly presupposes the capacity of individual actors to bring about enormous events, just as attributing the French loss at Borodino to Napoleon’s cold overestimates the influence the decisions of general have on the outcome of wars.<sup>73</sup> For Tolstoy, large events can be understood only as the product of innumerable coinciding causes; necessity, therefore, asserts itself only on a very general level. This philosophical position determines the representational method of the novel: individuals in their daily lives are represented as acting freely according to their own wills, while the narrator shows how historical necessity asserts itself through the collective force of these individual actions. There are, of course, coincidences in the novel—such as when Pierre sees Natasha as she flees Moscow—but they have little to do with uniting the two sides of the novel’s representation of history. Scott, however, “shifts the primary focus of attention away from the individual and toward the social, and this allows him to concentrate on that area of human experience where history is most likely to reveal its influence—on the

---

<sup>73</sup>Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), pg. 603.

forces that bind together individuals into historically distinctive societies.”<sup>74</sup> Scott is concerned with particular social milieus rather than with individual lives or the causality of large historical events. Chance events provide him with *a particular way into those milieus*: they create situations and chains of events that enable the influence of social and historical forces to reveal themselves. Even though the brevity of “The Two Drovers” prevents us from taking it as representative of Scott’s novelistic methods, we can nevertheless see how the coincidence structuring the story is artistically productive, an enabling mechanism.

However—and here is where the limitations of Lukács’s account come into focus—coincidental events are productive in Scott precisely through their coincidental nature. Scott harnesses coincidences not by sublating them but by utilizing the inherent tension in the chance/inevitable distinction. Coincidences for Scott are productive precisely through their capacity to create conflict and highlight contrasts between different social and cultural formations.<sup>75</sup> As I’ve already suggested, part of the effect of “The Two Drovers” is a consequence of the disparity between Robin’s actions and the nature of the events that generate those actions. More important,

---

<sup>74</sup> Harry E. Shaw, *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and His Successors* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), pg. 128.

<sup>75</sup> Scott himself noted that his historical novels frequently utilize such tensions. In the 1831 Preface to *The Fortunes of Nigel*, he wrote, “The most picturesque period of history is that when the ancient rough and wild manners of a barbarous age are just becoming innovated upon, and contrasted, by the illumination of increased or revived learning, and the instructions of renewed or reformed religion. The strong contrast produced by the opposition of ancient manners to those which are gradually subduing them, affords the lights and shadows necessary to give effect to fictitious narrative; and while such a period entitles the author to introduce incidents of a marvelous and improbable character, as arising out of the turbulence, independence and ferocity, belonging to old habits of violence, still influencing the manners of a people who had been so lately in a barbarous state; yet, on the other hand, the characters and sentiments of many of the actors may, with the utmost probability, be described with great variety of shading and delineation, which belongs to the newer and more improved period, of which the world has but lately received the light” [*Novelists on the Novel*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), pg. 50]. This, of course, is an attempt to justify the inclusion of “marvelous and improbable” events in historical fiction, but one of his points is that such events highlight the contrast between ancient “manners” and modern ones.

though, is the fact that the story relies upon what we might call a second-order coincidence—namely, the juxtaposition of Janet’s prophecy against the conflict between Robin and Harry. As Robin laments the absence of his dirk after being beaten by Harry, his train of thought leads him back to the prophecy: “‘Blighted be the tongue that bids the Highlander part with the dirk—the dirk—ha! the English blood!—My muhme’s word—when did her word fall to the ground?’” Not only does Robin’s attitude toward his aunt change radically in this moment, but “the recollection of the fatal prophecy confirmed the deadly intention which instantly sprang up in his mind.” The causality here is peculiar: although Robin’s “deadly intention” exists prior to and independently of his recollection of the prophecy, it is this recollection that confirms his intention and causes him to carry it out. If it is the duration of Robin’s murderous intention through his two-hour walk that both marks his cultural embeddedness and his otherness to the English legal code, it is his reaction to Janet’s prophecy that causes his immediate impulse to harden into fixed purpose. If Robin, like the reader, regards Janet’s prophecy at the time of its utterance with skepticism, then presumably such a judgment would still be available to him at the moment he recollects it. In other words, Robin could read, as the reader does, the relationship between Janet’s prophecy and his fight with Harry as a mere coincidence. Such an interpretation on Robin’s part would, of course, have opened the possibility of an alternative response to the situation. The fact that he takes Janet’s words seriously at this moment causes the prophecy to become self-fulfilling. Robin’s agency is determined not by a predestined ‘fate’ to which Janet has prophetic access, but rather by his response to the prophecy itself, a response that is a product of the Highland culture that has shaped his self-understanding and pride. Part of the effect of the story, then, relies on the reader’s capacity to see the relationship between the prophecy and the initial altercation as potentially coincidental. Recognizing that the relationship between the prophecy and

the altercation is open to interpretation enables us to understand that Robin's response to the prophecy is a possible (rather than necessary) reaction that discloses the degree to which Robin remains a product of the traditional Highland culture. Put differently, if—as I suggested in the last chapter—*Tom Jones* must do considerable rhetorical work to have readers interpret coincidences in a particular manner (as accidents rather than as providential intervention), then Scott's story both presupposes and utilizes the reader's capacity to make such discriminations.<sup>76</sup>

## II. Coincidence and the Movement of History in *Redgauntlet*

Although different in form from Scott's novels, "The Two Drovers" nevertheless illustrates the way in which Scott utilizes coincidence and makes it artistically productive in "specifying cultural-historical typologies of character and agency."<sup>77</sup> More importantly, the story shows how coincidence functions on two distinct levels in Scott's works. On one hand, the story makes use of what we might call a highly artificial event to initiate the narrative sequence. Coincidence operates as a plot mechanism that grants a particular type of access to a milieu and enables particular features of that milieu to manifest themselves. On the other hand, the story also utilizes coincidence to juxtapose two distinct ways of seeing the world. Coincidences become productive for Scott because their causally-ambiguous nature inherently elicits larger frameworks and structures of meaning. Coincidences by their nature prompt discriminations between "mere chance" or "intentionally motivated," interpretations which are themselves manifestations of cultural differentiation. Is the

---

<sup>76</sup> In his comments on the Gothic and the supernatural—which I discuss later in this chapter—Scott remarks that he lives in "an age of universal incredulity" [*Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction*, ed. Ioan Williams (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1968), pg. 115].

<sup>77</sup> James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), pg. 96.

relationship between Janet's prophecy and the conflict between Robin and his English friend meaningful or merely coincidental? Although the story only presents one reading of this coincidence, I suggested that the effect of the story relies upon the reader implicitly supplying an alternative reading: we do not read the coincidence as the *negation* of Robin's agency (i.e., that his actions are determined by "otherworldly fate") but rather as the *attenuation* of his agency insofar as his response to the prophecy demonstrates the degree to which he is shaped by his Highland culture. The fact that the story relies upon the *interaction* between two readings or understandings of coincidence demonstrates that Scott's realism does not "sublate" chance events into a higher order of necessity—sublation would negate the very feature of coincidence that makes it productive.

With these two functions of coincidence in hand, I turn now to *Redgauntlet* to demonstrate how Scott uses coincidence as an instrument in the representation of historical processes. The third and final of Scott's Jacobite novels, *Redgauntlet* stages a fictional Jacobite rebellion two decades after the '45 in order to portray how and why Jacobitism is no longer a viable historical force. It is through the failure of this rebellion that the novel is able to represent the processes through which Jacobitism has become obsolete. Like *Waverley* (1814), *Redgauntlet* is about both an individual's search for identity and larger historical processes. Whereas *Waverley* explores Jacobitism by having Edward Waverley come into contact with the opposing sides of the '45 rebellion, *Redgauntlet* does so by bringing Darsie Latimer into contact with his uncle Hugh Redgauntlet, the chief leader of the fictional rebellion. However, what is important for my analysis is the particular way in which Darsie comes into contact with Hugh: the coincidence—or, as Darsie says, the "accident"<sup>78</sup>—that brings them

---

<sup>78</sup> *Redgauntlet* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), page 301. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

into contact on the Solway Firth early in the novel. As in “The Two Drovers,” this coincidence serves two functions: on a basic level, it is an enabling mechanism that sets things in motion, but, more importantly, it also enables the novel to juxtapose two distinct understandings of identity. The coincidence pits Hugh’s Jacobite ideology and its notion of hereditary determination against Darsie’s notion of bourgeois self-determination. Whereas Hugh reads the coincidence as a sign of the forces of history determining the actions both he and Darsie must perform, Darsie believes the encounter has no bearing on his freedom. It is through the interaction of these two readings that the novel is able to represent Jacobite ideology and its necessary obsolescence. As with “The Two Drovers,” then, *Redgauntlet* utilizes the interaction between two potential readings of a chance event in the service of historical representation. However, whereas “The Two Drovers” calls upon the reader to supply one of those interpretations, *Redgauntlet* has individual characters voice those competing interpretations.

Many critics have demonstrated that Scott’s novelistic technique is predicated upon the interaction of two modes or forms of representing the world. James Kerr, for example, sees “fiction” and “history” as two competing forms of understanding that Scott makes use of to both grasp and shape the past. According to Kerr, “while Scott rejects the language of romance as a means of grasping the movements of history, he uses romance plots as a way of reshaping the past, of mastering history.”<sup>79</sup> While Kerr focuses on the tension between the particularities of historical fact and the literary forms which shape our understanding of those facts, both Ian Duncan and Fiona Robertson emphasize Scott’s use and transformation of the conventions of his Gothic predecessors. In Duncan’s estimation, the opposition between “romance” and

---

<sup>79</sup> *Fiction Against History: Scott as Storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), pg. 9.

“history” in the *Waverley* novels is “complicated and delusive” since “neither carries total authority, [and] their dialectical complicity is insisted upon”: “history is compounded of romance tropes, figures, episodes; a romance is historically embedded.”<sup>80</sup> *Waverley*, for example, begins with the narrator’s discussion of the novel’s subtitle, “’Tis Sixty Years Since,” and the problem of the reader’s generic expectations. “Had I,” the narrator remarks, “announced in my frontpiece, ‘Waverley, a Tale of other Days,’ must not every novel-reader have anticipated a castle scarce less than that of Udolpho [...]?”<sup>81</sup> More importantly, the novel stages the conflict between romance and history through Edward’s experience. While his romantic imagination “communicates to [occurrences] a tincture of its own romantic tone and colouring,” those romantic colorings are subsequently tempered by more realistic apprehension (55).

Whereas *Waverley* represents the past through the interaction of Edward’s romantic imagination and the reality he encounters, *Redgauntlet* gives voice to various modes of seeing through its form, which includes not only the epistolary correspondence between Darsie Latimer and Alan Fairford, but also the editor’s narration and the interpolation of “Wandering Willie’s Tale.” Indeed, Kerr reads *Redgauntlet* as “an elaborate study [by Scott] of his own methods as historian and romancer” not only because it “elid[es] the historical referent” (by representing a fictional event) but also because the reader’s experience of the narrative’s events is mediated by characters themselves. Whereas in Scott’s previous novels, the reader’s “access to the past is always mediated by one of Scott’s editor-figures,” in *Redgauntlet*

---

<sup>80</sup> *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), pgs. 59-60. See Robertson, *Legitimate Histories: Scott, Gothic, and the Authorities of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), for a much more extensive discussion of Scott’s relationship to particular Gothic authors and tropes.

<sup>81</sup> *Waverley* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), pg. 33. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

that access comes—at least initially—through the dialogue between Darsie and Alan.<sup>82</sup> From the beginning, Alan identifies Darsie’s imagination as the “point of [his] character most pregnant with peril” and implores him to “View things as they are, and not as they may be magnified through thy teeming fancy” (*Redgauntlet* 14, 13). This tension only increases between Darsie and Alan’s ways of interpreting and describing their experience as the narrative progresses. Both men offer accounts of their encounters with the mysterious Hugh Redgauntlet and equally intriguing Green Mantle, and the differences between these accounts makes explicit the fact that access to reality is always mediated. The novel, in other words, foregrounds and makes explicit use of the incongruities between different modes of seeing the world.

If it is through the interaction of Darsie and Alan’s ways of seeing that Scott reflects upon his novelistic techniques, it is through the interaction of Darsie and Hugh that the novel represents the obsolescence of Jacobitism and the disappearance of the social structures which sustained its ideological force. Darsie and Hugh articulate two distinct and competing conceptions of identity, and the very ideological estrangement of Darsie (the rightful heir of Redgauntlet) from his uncle reveals the processes through which Jacobitism has become obsolete. On one hand, Redgauntlet, whom Darsie describes as living in the abode of “a decayed gentleman,” is devoted to the restoration of the Stuart line despite the failure of the ’45 rebellion and the consequent necessity of living in hiding (26). His allegiances structure his understanding of the relationship between heredity and social identity, as he believes that the blood flowing through his and Darsie’s veins and the “fatal sign” of the horse-shoe on their brows link their fate to that of the Stuart cause (192). The extreme nature of his views is revealed when he tells Darsie to “Beware [...] of struggling with a force sufficient to

---

<sup>82</sup> Kerr, pgs. 102-3.

crush [him], [and to] abandon [himself] to that train of events by which we are both swept along, and which it is impossible that either of us can resist” (168). Darsie, on the other hand, holds a very different conception of identity, precisely because at the beginning of the novel he is ignorant of his heredity. Far from understanding his identity as overdetermined, Darsie feels himself to be a “solitary individual,” who is “in the world as a stranger in the crowded coffee-house, where he enters, calls for what refreshments he wants, pays his bill, and is forgotten so soon as the waiter’s mouth has pronounced his ‘Thank ye, sir’” (4). Darsie’s social identity is a product of both his ignorance of his genealogy and his legal education, and it reflects the process which Andrew Lincoln has called the “disembedding” of identity “from the social, material, and cultural grounds that governed individuals in earlier ages.”<sup>83</sup> The disembedding of Darsie’s identity subverts Redgauntlet’s attempt to put Prince Charles Edward Stuart on the throne since the remaining Jacobites require Darsie’s participation in the rebellion as a condition of their own.

Of course, it is not Darsie’s mere ambivalence that dooms Redgauntlet’s plot, as the novel represents the various social and legal processes that have led to the vanishing of Jacobitism and the necessary failure of the fictional rebellion.<sup>84</sup> These processes enter the novel in large part as a consequence of the conflict that

---

<sup>83</sup> *Walter Scott and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2007), pg. 9.

<sup>84</sup> In a 1958 essay on *Redgauntlet*, David Daiches argues that the novel “exposes the widening gap between sentimental Jacobitism and active rebellion” [“Scott’s *Redgauntlet*,” reprinted in *Critical Essays on Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Harry E. Shaw (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1996), pg. 142]. What is most interesting about Daiches essay for my purposes is his claim that “the Dickensian complications and resolutions of the plot, though done with considerable adroitness, are somewhat mechanical” (147). Although Daiches is not perhaps referring explicitly to the coincidence I discuss, his anachronistic application of “Dickensian complications and resolutions” to Scott’s work is significant in showing the degree to which Dickens’s methods of plotting become representative in critical analysis of “mechanical” plotting (as in the statement from Sinclair Lewis above). Although to apply here my analysis of Dickens that occurs in the following chapter would be similarly anachronistic, I will simply suggest that the rethinking of Dickens’s realist techniques that I perform in the next chapter is intended to have repercussions on critical presuppositions about the methods and modes of the nineteenth-century novel more broadly.

materializes between Darsie and Hugh over the question of who has legal right over Darsie's body. This conflict, in turn, is a product of the particular manner in which the two men come into contact: their chance encounter on the Solway Firth that occurs during Darsie's journey from Edinburgh to Dumfries in search of knowledge about his identity. Redgauntlet's rescue of Darsie from the tides and the subsequent necessity of boarding him for the evening are significant not simply because they give Redgauntlet an inkling that Darsie is his sought-after nephew. The encounter, in which Darsie meets the woman he later learns to be his sister, also causes Darsie to linger in the area despite warnings of imminent danger to himself. Although Lillas later suggests that Hugh's eventual capture of Darsie was "doomed to be," the consequences of this chance encounter are far different than if, for example, Redgauntlet had simply gone to Edinburgh and kidnapped Darsie (311). Redgauntlet interprets Darsie's sudden appearance in his vicinity as another sign of the forces of destiny conspiring to create the ideal conditions for his contemplated rebellion. Lillas tells Darsie, "Just before you came to the country, my uncle's desire to find you out, became, if possible, more eager than ever—he talked of men to be presently brought together, and of your name and influence for raising them. At this very time, your first visit to Brokenburn took place" (310). While Hugh interprets the event that brings him into contact with Darsie providentially, Darsie's response to what he deems an "accident" acquires significance in his search for a social identity (301). His refusal to leave the area despite warnings of personal danger intimates his passive complicity in his kidnapping, a passive complicity that will come to epitomize his relationship to the processes of history. Although he knows that he cannot enter England without forfeiting certain legal rights, by lingering near the utmost geographical boundary where he retains legal independence, Darsie resigns himself to the course of external events.

As in “The Two Drovers,” then, Scott utilizes a coincidence as a way of entering into a particular milieu, in this case the decades following the ’45 rebellion. The chance encounter is important not simply because it sets the plot in motion, but also because it enables two culturally embedded understandings of identity to come into contact.<sup>85</sup> After he is kidnapped by Hugh, Darsie explicitly articulates the conflict between these competing ideologies: “I, as well as you, am actuated by impulses, the result either of my own free will, or the consequences of the part which is assigned to me by my destiny. These may be—nay, at present are—in direct contradiction to those by which you are actuated [...]—*You* perhaps feel yourself destined to act as my jailor. I feel myself, on the contrary, destined to attempt and effect my escape” (194, emphasis in original). As in “The Two Drovers,” the coincidence draws our attention to agency, but it is not to agency as a philosophical or theological conflict between free will and destiny, but rather to agency as a product of social and cultural differentiation. The question here is not whether Darsie is actuated by “free will” or “destiny,” any more than whether in “The Two Drovers” Robin is “fated” to kill Harry or not. The point is that the social and cultural conditions that compel Redgauntlet to conceive of his destiny in a particular manner simply do not obtain for Darsie.

The obsolescence of Hugh’s self-understanding manifests itself when the ideological conflict between Hugh and Darsie acquires an explicitly legal character. When Darsie learns from Lillas the full extent of the plot which Hugh is planning with the other residual Jacobites, he exclaims, ““they cannot, at this time of day, think of subjecting their necks again to the feudal yoke, which was effectually broken by the

---

<sup>85</sup> As Rohan Maitzen remarks, “Darsie’s and Redgauntlet’s worlds are at once simultaneous and incompatible, and their juxtaposition reveals the heterogeneity, the fragmentation, that each individual narrative conceals” [“By No Means an Improbable Fiction’: *Redgauntlet’s* Novel Historicism,” reprinted in *Critical Essays on Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Harry E. Shaw (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1996) pg. 129].

Act in 1748, abolishing vassalage and hereditary jurisdictions” (309). Darsie’s allusion to the Heritable Jurisdictions Act is significant. The Act—which was passed in 1747 in the wake of the ’45 and took effect in 1748—worked to dissolve the social influence of the clans and contributed to the development of the legal structures through which Darsie secures his self-understanding.<sup>86</sup> Lillas’s reply that Redgauntlet sees it “as it the act of an usurping government” intimates the inherent contradictions in his self-understanding (*Redgauntlet* 309). Redgauntlet must appeal to the very legal structures he purportedly rejects to secure Darsie’s participation in the rebellion. During his confinement, Darsie writes in his journal that “under a legal pretext, I am detained in what must be a most illegal manner, by a person, too, whose own political immunities have been forfeited by his conduct” (198). Although Redgauntlet is able to make Justice Foxley recognize his legal right of guardianship over Darsie, Darsie views this as a mere “pretext” that violates his inherent legal right of self-possession. Redgauntlet can physically compel Darsie’s participation, but he cannot command Darsie’s ideological assent. The fact that he must use a “legal pretext” to secure the “rightful” heir of the Redgauntlets to the Jacobite cause indicates that the cause is doomed.

Furthermore, the scene with Justice Foxley concretely demonstrates the futility of Redgauntlet’s endeavors. As Redgauntlet takes measures to secure guardianship over Darsie, his own identity is revealed to the magistrate and he is nearly arrested. When the magistrate’s clerk informs him that there are warrants issued against him,

---

<sup>86</sup> See Ann Whetstone, “The Reform of the Scottish Sheriffdoms in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries” [*Albion* 9:1 (1977): 61-71], for a longer account of the effects of the reform of the Scottish sheriffdoms on Scottish legal practice. Whetstone suggests that “there was no real reason to suppose that the system [of heritable jurisdictions] was related to Jacobitism, but with attention finally turned to Scottish affairs such obvious anachronisms became a clear target for reform.” In other words, the legal and social reforms that took place in response to the ’45 rebellion worked both explicitly and in more diffuse ways to dissolve the influence of the clan system.

Redgauntlet claims he is surprised ““that, at the distance of so many years, the Secretary of State should trouble himself about the unfortunate relics of a ruined cause”” (182). And when the clerk produces the warrant itself, Redgauntlet attempts to escape the predicament by destroying it: “he flung the warrant into the fire with one hand, and fixed the other, with a stern and irresistible gripe, on the breast of the attorney, who, totally unable to contend with him, in either personal struggle or mental energy, trembled like a chicken in the raven’s clutch” (183). While Redgauntlet can destroy the warrant and intimidate whoever attempts to serve the warrant, he cannot destroy the social structures which guarantee the authority of the warrant. Indeed, the doomed rebellion ends with General Campbell deciding ““to make no arrests, nay, to make no farther inquiries of any kind”” because such measures are unnecessary: the force of the law need not be physically invoked to quash the Jacobites because the social and cultural structures that sustained Jacobitism have disappeared (373). Ironically, then, Redgauntlet is ultimately correct in his estimation that the government need not trouble itself about “the unfortunate relics of a ruined cause.”

Through the coincidence on the Solway Firth that brings Darsie into contact with his uncle, *Redgauntlet* is able to represent how and why Hugh is merely a relic of a ruined cause. In showing the cultural transformations that make Redgauntlet’s self-understanding a thing of the past, the novel also shows how such transformations have altered the individual’s relationship to history. As I suggested above, Darsie’s curiosity about his identity, aroused by his coincidental encounter with Hugh, causes him to respond to that meeting in a way that suggests his passive complicity in the processes of history. After learning of the history of his family from Lilius later in the novel, Darsie is unsure whether he should consider this meeting with his uncle ““lucky or unlucky”” (301). Even though he begins the novel as an individual on a “wild-goose jaunt” in search of his identity, he eventually finds himself embroiled in matters

of political and national importance (6). After Darsie learns of his personal history and the role Redgauntlet has assigned to him, the narrator notes:

His station in society was changed from that of a wandering, unowned youth, in whom none appeared to take an interest, excepting the strangers by whom he had been educated, to the heir of a noble house, possessed of such influence and such property, that it seemed as if the progress or arrest of important political events were likely to depend upon his resolution. Even this sudden elevation, the more than fulfilment [*sic*] of those wishes which had haunted him since ever he was able to form a wish on the subject, was contemplated by Darsie, volatile as his disposition was, without more than a few thrills of gratified vanity. (312)

The “influence” Darsie believes he acquires after learning of his heredity, a power that both gratifies and frightens him, turns out to be another of those “romantic visions” that he must continually caution himself against. He eventually realizes that “his resolution” has absolutely no effect on “the progress or arrest of important political events.” Meeting with the conspirators, “He began to believe that the conspiracy would dissolve of itself, without the necessity of his placing himself in direct opposition to so violent a character as his uncle, and incurring the hazard with which such opposition must need be attended” (346). Just as the events of the novel affirm the claims to free will and self-possession Darsie asserts in his ideological conflict with his uncle, they also demonstrate the circumscribed nature of that freedom.

While *Redgauntlet* utilizes the ideological displacement of Darsie from his uncle to represent the processes that have led to the disappearance of Jacobitism, this displacement is predicated upon a geographical displacement. It is Darsie’s childhood and education in Edinburgh that have assimilated him to the modern world and “disembedded” his identity from the structures that inform Redgauntlet’s worldview.

The decidedly legal character of his education emphasizes that his identity is one predicated upon and determined by rights rather than by specific forms of inheritance. While Darsie may have inherited the horse-shoe mark of the Redgauntlets on his brow, he did not “inherit” the ideology that interprets that mark as a determinant of identity. On a basic level, then, the chance encounter between Darsie and Hugh on Solway Firth serves an important function in the novel’s narrative structure. I have shown, however, that much of the importance of that encounter inheres in its particular texture. The conflict that results between the different ways Darsie and Hugh read the import of the encounter generates a series of events that demonstrate the status of their respective conceptions of identity, conceptions that have a concrete relationship to their reading of the coincidence. Redgauntlet’s providential reading of the encounter as a sign of history working toward the restoration of the Stuart line is contradicted not simply because things happen to unfold otherwise. His view is contradicted insofar as it is shown to be divorced from social and historical reality. Coincidence, therefore, facilitates the novel’s effort to put us into contact with history. James Kerr, as I noted above, argues that Scott uses “romance plots as a way of reshaping the past, of mastering history.” Although coincidence is generally regarded as a trope of the romance plot, it does not follow that coincidence is therefore a manifestation of Scott attempting to “reshape” history. *Redgauntlet*’s use of coincidence is not Scott imposing form onto history (by consigning Jacobitism to the past), but rather Scott representing historical process in order to help us understand why Jacobitism has become a thing of the past.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> The question of whether narrative inherently imposes ideological form onto history has its origin in the work of Hayden White in the field of historiography. For a concise discussion of White’s main points, including a discussion of Lukács and a refutation of common misreadings of his work, see his essay “Storytelling: Historical and Ideological,” in *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory 1957-2007* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2010), pgs. 273-292.

*Redgauntlet* thus also demonstrates how Scott's use of coincidence marks a development from Fielding's use in *Tom Jones*. As I suggested in the previous chapter, *Tom Jones* asks us to question Partridge's providential interpretation of the chain of events that appear to portend the union of Tom and Sophia. We question Partridge's claim that "two such accidents could never have happened to direct him after his mistress, if Providence had not designed to bring them together at last" because Partridge himself and his superstitious beliefs are a constant source of ridicule in the novel. In *Tom Jones*, the question is primarily an epistemological one—do "two such accidents" necessarily imply "design" of a particular kind? Fielding uses coincidences to explore different ways of thinking about and interpreting the world: "two such accidents" do not guarantee providential design, just as prudence does not guarantee happiness. In *Redgauntlet*, however, Hugh's providential interpretation is called into question by a wealth of concrete details that reveal it to be in conflict with the context in which it is made. What is presented as a conflict between two forms of thinking in Fielding is presented as a conflict between a form of thinking and its historical context in Scott. In this way, then, Scott presents Redgauntlet's reading of coincidence and the worldview that informs it in order to historicize them, showing that they belong to a particular period and place, developing under historical conditions which no longer obtain.

### III. Coincidence, the Gothic, and Indeterminacy in *The Bride of Lammermoor*

Both "The Two Drovers" and *Redgauntlet*, then, deploy coincidences in order to make use of the conflicting interpretations which they generate. In both cases, the text makes coincidence "artistically productive" in its representation of historical particularity or historical process. While in "The Two Drovers" Robin's interpretation of the power of his aunt's prophecy is pitted against a competing interpretation which

I suggested the reader implicitly supplies, in *Redgauntlet* those competing interpretations are voiced by characters in the novel. In both texts, however, the “conflict” is resolved in a manner that contributes to the text’s attempt to historicize the “cultural-historical typologies of character and agencies” embodied by Robin, Redgauntlet, and Darsie. In this final section, I would like to briefly consider *The Bride of Lammermoor* as a text in which no such resolution occurs in order to demonstrate the different ends toward which Scott utilizes coincidence. *The Bride* certainly uses coincidence as a plot mechanism—most notably in the “singular event”<sup>88</sup> where Edgar Ravenswood goes to kill William Ashton but is diverted when he finds Ashton and his daughter threatened by a bull. However, it is more noteworthy for its use of what I called second-order coincidences in my analysis of “The Two Drovers.” Just as “The Two Drovers” juxtaposes the conflict between Robin and Harry with Janet’s prophecy about the “English blood” on Robin’s hands, *The Bride* juxtaposes concrete events with prophecies or omens which seem to predict their occurrence: the legend of the Mermaid’s Well, Old Alice’s prophecies, and of course, Edgar’s death in the quicksands of Kelpie’s Flow, a death which fulfills the prophecy of Thomas the Rhymer. In both texts, the reader is compelled to make a determination about the relationship between the event and the prophecy, a determination which informs a broader interpretation of the text. Whereas interpretation is straightforward in “The Two Drovers” (we regard Robin as determined by his response to the prophecy rather than by the prophecy itself), the issue is less decisive in *The Bride*. The indeterminacy that ultimately surrounds the novel’s coincidences, I want to suggest, is a product of the novel’s relationship to the

---

<sup>88</sup> *The Bride of Lammermoor* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), pg. 45. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

Gothic and its use of Gothic elements, which establish a different relationship with the past than that present in Scott's other works.

Recent critics of Scott all agree that *The Bride* is distinct among his major works. Fiona Robertson, for example, suggests that of all Scott's novels, *The Bride* "follows most closely the historicizing of terror which characterizes the Gothic."<sup>89</sup> While Robertson characterizes the novel's uniqueness in terms of its relationship to the Gothic, Harry Shaw understands this uniqueness in terms of the status of history in the novel, arguing that "*The Bride* thus turns out to be the only major novel by Scott in which history does not function as the primary subject."<sup>90</sup> Ian Duncan, finally, understands the novel's distinctiveness to be a product of the particular historical period which the novel represents. Whereas Scott's novels generally depict "the middle road" of compromise in the process of British history, the action of the novel takes place during the period of social and political instability between the 1688 Revolution and the 1707 Act of Union. Therefore, "the utopian settlement" that generally occurs in Scott "cannot take place in private life because it has not arrived in public life."<sup>91</sup> These identifications of the novel's Gothic and subjective elements, as well as its formal refusals, are all in turn bolstered by consensus over the novel's uniquely biographical status: critics have long recognized that elements of the novel reflect Scott's devastation over his unhappy relationship with Williamina Belsches.

Therefore, while critics agree about *The Bride*'s distinctiveness, they tend to disagree about how best to describe or account for this distinctiveness. This disagreement is a product of certain ambiguities or ambivalences within the text itself, and it can in part be traced to residual ambiguity in the novel's representation of

---

<sup>89</sup> Robertson, pg. 215.

<sup>90</sup> *The Forms of Historical Fiction*, pg. 225.

<sup>91</sup> Duncan, pg.136.

supernatural elements. On one hand, certain elements of the text suggest that the demise of Edgar Ravenswood is the product of what Lukács would call “otherworldly fate.” Analyzing the betrothal scene between Edgar and Lucy at the Mermaid’s Well, Kathryn Sutherland writes, “What the heavy irony of the Well legend implies for the novel’s characters, of course, is the impossibility of acting for or as oneself, of taking control of one’s actions.”<sup>92</sup> Sutherland continues, “either fate or hereditary law or the workings of his own superstitious imagination—it is any and all of these—consign him to the impotent repetition of past deeds and surrender him finally to a gruesome personal identity, fulfilling the prophecy of Thomas the Rhymer, told by Caleb Balderstone.” On the other hand, there is too much social and historical particularity in the novel to simply reduce Edgar’s tale to one of otherworldly fate. James Kerr, for example, analyzes the same betrothal scene as Sutherland and concludes that “Ravenswood’s gestures in this scene are to be regarded as the result of his own choice, rather than of the pattern of fatality embodied in the family legend.”<sup>93</sup> How can a novel generate such diametrically opposed readings of the same scene, and, more importantly, how can we adjudicate between these competing interpretations?

There is, of course, enough fodder in the text to at least suggest the supernatural reading of events. The sense of doom hanging over the text is cultivated by the frame narrative, which foregrounds the impending tragedy of the events being narrated. This sense of fatality is furthered by the various myths, legends, and prophecies that surround Edgar’s courtship of Lucy. These are compounded by symbolically charged scenes, such as the scene where, on the way to avenge his kith and kin by killing William Ashton, Ravenswood instead saves Lucy by shooting the

---

<sup>92</sup> “Introduction” to *The Bride of Lammermoor* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), pgs. xxiv-xxv.

<sup>93</sup> Kerr, pg. 94.

wild bull that threatens her and her father. There is also the visit by the Ashtons to Ravenswood's abode, a meeting which Ashton purportedly desires, but is only made possible by the "accident of the storm," which forces him to seek shelter with Edgar (*The Bride of Lammermoor* 92). This visit leads to a provisional reconciliation between the two families, but it is accompanied by an ominous bolt of lightning, making it appear "as if the ancient founder of the castle was bestriding the thunderstorm, and proclaiming his displeasure at the reconciliation of his descendent with the enemy of his house" (93). And the novel ends with the literal fulfillment of the prophecy by Thomas Rhymer that "'When the last Laird of Ravenswood to Ravenswood shall ride, / And woee a dead maiden to be his bride, / He shall stable his steed on the Kelpie's flow, / And his name shall be lost for evermoe!'" (139).

At the same time, however, the novel complicates the novel's Gothic elements by placing the relationship between Edgar and Lucy in a definite historical context. Indeed, for Kerr this context significantly alters our interpretation of those elements, as he argues that "Scott deploys the Gothic in order to expose it as the irrational and therefore false consciousness of a moribund feudal order, as he places the myth of supernatural necessity in the service of his realism."<sup>94</sup> From this perspective, Edgar's plight is not the product of supernatural necessity but of determinate social and historical forces. As Edgar takes possession of the castle after his father's funeral, it is a "scene of desolation" (*The Bride of Lammermoor* 63). This is a product not simply of the debaucheries that follow the funeral, but also of the changing economic conditions that have dissolved the basis of the Ravenswood estate. This economic shift is exemplified in Caleb's trip to Wolfshope in the middle of the novel, where he attempts to secure a meal for those stranded in the barren castle after the storm. The

---

<sup>94</sup> Kerr, pg. 90.

economic structure whereby the inhabitants of the village provided food to the castle through feu-rights is no longer in place, and Caleb is forced to steal a hen in a paltry effort to maintain the dignity of the Ravenswood name. “Emancipated from the chains of feudal dependence,” the local inhabitants “began to grumble, to resist, and at length to positively refuse compliance with the exactions of Caleb,” eventually presenting him with a lawyer rather than eggs and butter (101). Just as *Redgauntlet*’s “fate” is inscribed in his appeal to the very legal structures he is attempting to overthrow, the fate of Ravenswood and his estate is inscribed in Caleb’s need to steal that which was once the Ravenswoods’ by right. Furthermore, the novel explicitly describes how the courtship of Edgar and Lucy is fueled by their romantic imaginations and also shows how it is caught up in the political turmoil at the fringes of the novel. Ashton’s desire to seek reconciliation with Ravenswood is motivated by his “useful and practical” nature, for it had been his “policy on all occasions to watch the changes in the political horizon, and, ere yet the conflict was decided, to negotiate some interest for himself with the party most likely to prove victorious” (121). Thus, while Edgar’s fate is linked to a series of prophecies and omens, it is also embedded within political and economic circumstances whose significance he largely fails to recognize throughout the text. If we privilege this aspect of the novel—as Kerr does—then we might argue that *The Bride* uses coincidence in a manner similar to *Redgauntlet*. Just as *Redgauntlet* historicizes Hugh’s interpretation of his encounter with Darsie on Solway Firth by showing it to be in conflict with his social and historical context, *The Bride* elicits a particular worldview in order to historicize it. For Kerr, to view Edgar’s demise as a product of supernatural fate is to indulge in the “false consciousness of a moribund feudal order.”

However, while the novel certainly shows Caleb’s worldview to be tied to a passing order, such a tidy resolution of the indeterminacy surrounding the novel’s

Gothic elements and its representation of historical context remains unsatisfying. *The Bride of Lammermoor* is, ultimately, a different kind of novel than *Redgauntlet*, and Scott's various comments on the Gothic novel can help us understand the ends to which he puts coincidence in *The Bride of Lammermoor*. In the chapter on Ann Radcliffe in *Lives of the Novelists* (1821-4), Scott discusses the status of the supernatural in "an age of universal incredulity." One characteristic of modern romances particularly distasteful to Scott is the rule that all circumstances of the novel "however mysterious, and apparently superhuman, [must] be accounted for on natural principles, at the winding up of the story."<sup>95</sup> While the bulk of such novels excite "interest and apprehension," the concluding chapters disappoint because authors must "unravel the skein of adventures which they have been so industrious to perplex, and account for all the incidents which they have been at so much pains to render unaccountable." The alternative offered to the author is simply to claim "the knot as worthy of being severed by supernatural aid," and Scott goes on to say that there is a claim to be made for this "more simple mode" of "boldly avowing the use of supernatural machinery" (116). Although this might seem an odd statement from a novelist committed to realism, Scott argues that since "ghosts and witches, and the whole tenets of superstition" were once the matter of "universal belief," then "it would seem no great stretch upon the reader's credulity to require him, while reading of what his ancestors did, to credit for the time what those ancestors devoutly believed in." Thus, even though the reader may be naturally skeptical, asking him or her to indulge in the supernatural is ultimately more palatable than feeling compelled to unravel a complex skein through trite explanation.

---

<sup>95</sup> *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction*, pg. 115. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

Interestingly, however, Scott then goes on to note that some authors have endeavored “to compound betwixt ancient faith and modern incredulity.” Rather than either boldly avow the supernatural or fall back on natural explanation, these authors have exhibited phantoms, and narrated prophecies strangely accomplished, without giving a defined or absolute opinion, whether these are to be referred to supernatural agency, or whether the apparitions were produced (no uncommon case) by an overheated imagination, and the presages apparently verified by a casual, though singular, coincidence of circumstances.

While this method is “an evasion of the difficulty, not a solution,” Scott nevertheless suggests that is perhaps “the most artful mode of terminating such a tale of wonder.” This is not simply because it appeals to readers both credulous and incredulous, but also because, as he suggests in a review of Maturin’s *Fatal Revenge* (1807), supernatural agency “appeals to the belief of all ages but our own; and still produces, when well managed, some effect even upon those who are most disposed to condemn its influence.”<sup>96</sup> It is not, then, just that the incredulous reader might be asked to indulge in the beliefs of his ancestors, but that he or she might in fact be affected by such beliefs.

Scott’s comments, then, help us to understand the unique form of *The Bride* and, more specifically, its use of coincidence. As in the other texts I’ve examined, the novel utilizes the chance/inevitable tension elicited by coincidence, but instead of harnessing the “fateful” interpretation in order to historicize it, the novel leaves both interpretations in play.<sup>97</sup> The power of this indeterminacy is seen most clearly in the

---

<sup>96</sup> *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction*, pg. 210.

<sup>97</sup> David Brown also suggests that two modes of vision exist side by side in the novel: “For Edgar, a product of the feudal system, and for the other feudal characters, however, the economic causes of their downfall remain obscure: instead, Scott dramatizes their decline in the way they themselves experience

novel's conclusion, as Edgar's disappearance into the quicksands of Kelpie's Flow fulfills the prophecy of Thomas the Rhymer. Although our modern incredulity causes us to be skeptical of this "prophecy strangely accomplished," the "singular coincidence of circumstances" nevertheless has an effect over us, in keeping with the irreducible element of Gothic terror in the narrative. To be sure, we can read Edgar's death in relation to the decline of the feudal order to which he belongs. His failed attempt to reach the site upon which he is to defend his honor signifies the disappearance of the socio-historical grounds of that honor, just as much as it represents the fulfillment of the prophecy. And the quicksands of Kelpie's Flow can be seen as representing the shifting economic and political basis that has displaced the Ravenwoods from their ancestral estate and necessitates the demise, if not the death, of Edgar. Such readings, however, remain suggestive; or, to put it in Lukács's terms, the event remains only symbolic of larger historical forces.<sup>98</sup>

---

it, as an inexplicable, fatal, eclipse. For this reason the realistic action of the novel is juxtaposed with supernatural omens, legends and prophecies, all of which offer a superstitious 'explanation' of events. Thus, Scott's ambivalent attitude towards the social transition he treats is reflected not only by his attitude towards the protagonists in the main and sub-plots, but by the conflicting modes of writing" [*Walter Scott and the Historical Imagination* (London: London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pgs 149-50]. My interest, of course, is not to understand Scott's "ambivalent attitude towards the social transition he treats," but rather to understand how his use of coincidence contributes to the form of the novel and the effects it produces.

<sup>98</sup> Fiona Robertson, for example, suggests that Edgar's death "*metaphorically* suggests his shifting and ambiguous social status" (216, emphasis added). Similarly, Bruce Beiderwell suggests that "*it seems fitting* that Ravenswood's own death is emptied of dramatic moment," meaning that his literal disappearance is symbolic of the disappearance of his social standing ["Death and Disappearance in *The Bride of Lammermoor*," reprinted in *Critical Essays on Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Harry E. Shaw (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1996), pg. 200, emphasis added]. One might argue that the ending of *The Bride of Lammermoor* is no more "symbolic" or "metaphorical" than the conclusion of *Redgauntlet* or *Waverley*: the departure of Hugh and Charles Edward Stuart from the shores of England is symbolic of the disappearance of Jacobitism, just as the painting of Edward Waverley and Fergus MacIvor is symbolic of the mediation of certain historical forces. However, I would argue that these endings are qualitatively different. The particular events or scenes in *Waverley* and *Redgauntlet* can be understood in direct relation to historical contexts represented in the texts. Hugh's departure is not so much *symbolic* of the disappearance of Jacobitism so much as it *represents* the disappearance of Jacobitism, just as the painting *represents* the aesthetic mediation of certain historical forces at war in *Waverley*. Such a claim could not be made about the particular nature of Edgar's death and its historical context: the quicksands have no concrete or metonymical relation to the historical context of the novel.

Understanding *The Bride*'s unique use of coincidence can, in turn, help us articulate its difference from Scott's other works. Both "The Two Drovers" and *Redgauntlet* juxtapose competing readings of coincidence for specific ends. In the case of "The Two Drovers," it was to represent the historical particularity of a cultural middleman such as Robin Oig, whereas in *Redgauntlet* it was to grasp and represent the disappearance of Jacobitism and the social structures that supported it. In both instances, such effects were predicated upon an interaction of these competing readings of coincidence in a manner that generated certain forms of resolution (enabling the reader to make determinate judgments about the events, their causes, and their consequences). *The Bride* similarly juxtaposes readings of coincidences, but the effects of this juxtaposition are contingent upon indeterminacy—the compound "betwixt ancient faith and modern incredulity." The manner in which the reader not only indulges, but is affected by ancient ways of seeing reflects the novel's broader engagement with the past. Whereas *Redgauntlet*, like most of Scott's works, attempts to circumscribe and make peace with the past, in *The Bride of Lammermoor* the past and its mode of seeing still retain an ability to haunt and destabilize the present. This not only shows that Scott harnessed coincidence in a variety of ways throughout his novelistic career, but more importantly that coincidence is a key site through which to understand the form and function of particular works.

#### IV. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the particular ways in which Scott makes coincidence "artistically productive" for the realist novel. A fundamental critical debate about Scott's historical novel—and by extension, the realist novel more generally—is its capacity to represent reality. This debate is frequently staged in terms of a conflict between the "stuff" of reality and literary form. Many of the critics

I have cited in this chapter see in Scott's novels a tension between historical facts and the literary tropes and narrative structures which shape and impose ideological structure onto those facts. Depending on their particular methodological or critical position, these critics emphasize either the capacity of Scott's novels to put the reader into contact with history or the fact that Scott's novels shape that history for particular ideological ends. My concern has not been the specific contours of this broader problem of realist representation—all literary representation is ultimately ideological in a weak sense.<sup>99</sup> Rather, my concern has been to demonstrate that coincidence, as deployed by Scott, falls onto the side of history rather than ideology: it is a narrative mechanism that enables him to put his reader into contact with history, rather than a manifestation of Scott deploying romance tropes in order to shape history. Because coincidence appears alien to the “stuff” of everyday reality, critics have almost exclusively taken it to be a sign or manifestation of ideology. It has been regarded as a narrative mechanism through which the author imposes ideological meaning (via narrative structure) onto reality. By showing that coincidence in both Fielding and Scott shows us more about the reality they represent in their novels than about their beliefs, I have suggested that narrative structure can be thought of as *providing a way into* a particular social milieu, rather than simply *imposing form* onto that milieu. While Scott's use of coincidence has not been a preeminent concern for those critics eager to critique the realist novel and its methods of representation, the matter is quite different for the two authors that I will discuss in the following chapters. As in Fielding, coincidence in Dickens and Hardy has been read almost exclusively as a manifestation of their beliefs *getting in the way* of their representation of reality. The reading of coincidence in Scott that I have provided in this chapter, however, can

---

<sup>99</sup> See fn. 63 above.

perhaps help us begin to see how coincidence might actually be a way for these authors to *get into* that representation.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Improbability and the Reform of the Present:

#### Coincidence and the Representation of Selfishness in *Martin Chuzzlewit*

The function of coincidence in Scott's novels supports Georg Lukács's idea that chance events are "artistically productive" for realism because they enable the novel to represent complex relationships between the social base and individual agency, relationships which cannot be represented through the straightforward, "inventorial" depiction of reality. However, Scott's use of coincidence challenges Lukács's claim that the successful integration of chance events causes them to be "sublated" by a higher aesthetic unity. As I suggested, it was the causally-ambiguous nature of coincidence—its very chanciness—that Scott harnessed in his representation of the past. In this chapter, I turn to a consideration of Dickens's use of coincidence, developing the claim that coincidence became artistically productive for realism in large part through the exploitation of its improbability. It certainly comes as no surprise that the author of *Hard Times* (1854) would delight in such events that capture the fancy and imagination precisely through their defiance of the everyday. In his biography of Dickens, John Forster noted: "On the coincidences, resemblances and surprises of life Dickens liked especially to dwell, and few things moved his fancy so pleasantly. The world, he would say, was so much smaller than we thought it; we were all so connected by fate without knowing it; people supposed to be far apart were so constantly elbowing each other."<sup>100</sup> Yet interpretations of coincidence in Dickens, firmly rooted in the tradition of probable realism, have claimed that its use was at odds

---

<sup>100</sup> *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), pg. 69.

with his development as a realist author. Neil Forsyth, for example, has argued that Dickens's delight in coincidence became increasingly tempered by his focus on the larger design of his plots as his career progressed.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, George Levine has suggested that "where [Dickens] persists in the contrivances of coincidence, their discontinuity with the worlds he is creating is disturbing. [...] In most cases, while there are no naturalistic laws by which to account for the 'chances' in Dickens's novels, coincidence feels too often like a matter of the conventions of narrative."<sup>102</sup> Critical practice, in other words, would have us believe that the Dickens who reveled in the fact that "people supposed to be far apart were constantly elbowing each other" was in conflict with Dickens the mature social realist.

This chapter challenges this story of Dickens's development, offering instead an account of the way in which Dickens harnessed coincidence for realist ends at an important juncture in his career. More specifically, I argue that in *Martin Chuzzlewit* coincidence enables Dickens to represent and historicize selfishness—that is to say, to represent selfishness as a behavior resulting from the increasingly mediated nature of social relations in the Victorian milieu. Dickens's place in a study such as this which seeks to establish coincidence's contribution to realism seems both obvious and problematic. On one hand, perhaps no other author in the realist mode employed coincidence so consistently or with such affective force as Dickens. On the other hand, Dickens's works are those in which we can most readily explain and perhaps even forgive the presence of coincidence. Not only did he develop the complex multi-

---

<sup>101</sup> "Wonderful Chains: Dickens and Coincidence," *Modern Philology*, 83.2 (1985): 151-165.

<sup>102</sup> *Darwin and the Novelists*, pg. 142. See also W.J. Harvey, "Chance and Design in *Bleak House*" [in *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1962), pgs. 145-57]. Harvey identifies the prevalence of coincidences in *Bleak House*, yet argues that most readers do not recognize them as coincidences because Dickens uses "a good deal of naturalistic, rational explanation" and because coincidence is so extensive in the novel that it becomes "natural" (155).

plot novel in which coincidence seems such a necessary device, but he was often quite literally making things up as he went along due to the contingencies of serial production. This is especially true of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, a novel occupying a critical juncture in Dickens's career between the episodic form of his early works and the more deliberate and planned design that began to emerge with *Dombey and Son* (1846-8). Critical assessment of *Martin Chuzzlewit* has generally echoed Forster, who judged the novel "defective" in "construction and conduct," with "character and description constituting the chief part of its strength."<sup>103</sup> From this perspective, the staggering number of coincidences in the novel—at least eighteen by my count<sup>104</sup>—suggests that Dickens was still struggling to orchestrate a large cast of characters and coherently develop a complex plot, belying his claim in the Preface that he had "endeavoured in the progress of this Tale, to resist the temptation of the current Monthly Number, and to keep a steadier eye upon the general purpose and design."<sup>105</sup>

---

<sup>103</sup> Forster, pg. 335. George Gissing significantly remarked, "No great work of fiction is so ill put together as *Martin Chuzzlewit*" (*Critical Studies of the Works of Charles Dickens* [New York: Haskell House, 1965], pg. 72). Edwin Benjamin suggests that "plot is subordinated to theme" in the novel, and that the novel is divided into three phases "showing the rise, triumph, and fall of hypocrisy" ["The Structure of *Martin Chuzzlewit*," *Philological Quarterly* 34.1 (1955): 39-47]

<sup>104</sup> Encounters in the novel that can be categorized as coincidental include: Pecksniff encounters Mr. Chuzzlewit at the Blue Dragon (Ch. 3); Tom Pinch encounters Mark Tapley on the road to Salisbury (Ch. 5); the Pecksniffs find themselves in the same carriage to London with Jonas and Anthony Chuzzlewit (Ch. 8); Jonas runs into Pecksniff in the streets of London (Ch. 11); Martin encounters Tigg in the pawnbroker's shop in London (Ch. 13); Mark passes Martin in the streets of London (Ch. 13); Mark sees Mr. Chuzzlewit in London (Ch. 13); Pecksniff overhears Tom and Mary talking in the church (Ch. 28); Mark meets the nameless woman from 'The Screw' and her husband in Eden (Ch. 33); Mark and Martin reencounter Mrs. Hominy on their trip back to New York (Ch. 34); Mark and Martin see Pecksniff pass while sitting in a tavern upon their return to England (Ch. 35); Tom gets lost in London and runs into Charity Pecksniff by the Monument (Ch. 37); Tom and Nadgett pass each other on the street in London (Ch. 38); Tom and Ruth encounter Nadgett on the wharves (Ch. 40); Tom finds that the man he is delivering Nadgett's note to is Jonas (Ch. 40); Tom and Ruth, on their way to Mrs. Todgers's, encounter Charity and Moddle looking into a shop window (Ch. 46); Martin, by chance, discovers that Tom's employer is his grandfather (Ch. 50); Mark encounters his neighbours from Eden on the streets of London (Ch. 54).

<sup>105</sup> *Martin Chuzzlewit* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), pg. 5. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

However, it is this very ubiquity of coincidence in the novel that necessitates a more nuanced account of its role. Social space in the novel is notoriously labyrinthine, famously embodied in Mrs. Todgers's boarding house, which "Nobody had ever found [...] on a verbal direction, though given within a minute's walk of it" (131). Dickens's decision to continually deploy unexpected and improbable encounters seems not ancillary, but rather intimately connected to this vertiginous conception of social space. Although we might disdain these coincidences as mere plot mechanisms, their consistent appearance from the outset of the novel challenges such handy dismissals. As I shall argue, coincidences link the novel's representation of social space to the central theme of selfishness. Coincidences reveal how the complexity and opacity of the social world generate the subjective feelings of independence and self-containment from which selfish impulses spring. Throughout the novel, coincidences continually draw our attention to a discrepancy between an individual's sense of self-sufficiency and various webs of social connection. In other words, if characters in the novel exist in a "state of isolation" or a "warm cocoon," as J. Hillis Miller suggests, then coincidences illuminate the fact that this self-containment is a subjective illusion rather than an objective fact.<sup>106</sup> This reading not only suggests a greater coherence to a novel usually seen as disjointed at best, but it also shows how Dickens's increasing emphasis on "general purpose and design" developed in tandem with his growing commitment to reform and social realism.

### I. Coincidence, Figuration, and the "Exhibition" of Selfishness in *Martin Chuzzlewit*

Throughout this dissertation, Dickens has appeared as a touchstone for those critics who find modes of nineteenth-century emplotment aesthetically deficient,

---

<sup>106</sup> Charles Dickens: *The World of His Novels* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), pgs. 104, 98.

particularly in their reliance on coincidence. Sinclair Lewis—author and critic—saw Dickens’s plots as emblematic of the “rigged,” where “by dismal coincidence, Mr. Jones has to be produced in the stage-coach at the same time with Mr. Smith, so that something very nasty and entertaining might happen.” Robert Newsom launched his study of fictional probability by reflecting on the implications of statements such as “The plot of *Oliver Twist* is too full of coincidences to be probable.” And in the previous chapter, I noted that David Daiches, in a discussion of *Redgauntlet*, remarked upon the novel’s “Dickensian complications and resolutions.” The fact that Daiches here anachronistically describes the nature of Scott’s plot in terms of his successor illustrates the degree to which, for many, Dickens exemplifies an aesthetically deficient mode of plotting. Indeed, even contemporary novelists use Dickens as a point of reference in their discussions of narrative aesthetics. The narrator of Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), for example, remarks that “there’s something cheap and sentimental about [coincidences in books...] the sudden but convenient Dickensian benefactors [...] I’d ban coincidences, if I were a dictator of fiction.”<sup>107</sup>

A coincidence in the early chapters of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, however, reveals that such generalizations can obscure much more than they reveal about Dickens’s plotting and his use of coincidence. At the beginning of Chapter 8, Mr. Pecksniff and his daughters are quite literally “produced in the stage-coach at the same time with” Misters Anthony and Jonas Chuzzlewit. This encounter has a clear function for the plot, as it initiates the courtship plot between Jonas and Pecksniff’s daughters that unfolds during the Pecksniffs’ stay in London. Yet the encounter also demonstrates how the novel deploys coincidence to represent the material foundations of selfishness through a striking juxtaposition of connection and disconnection. As Pecksniff and his

---

<sup>107</sup> London: Picador, 1984. Pg. 67.

daughters enter a heavy coach bound for London, they find the outside of the coach crowded with passengers chilled by the weather. The detachment Pecksniff feels from his proximate companions is evinced by the fact that he takes “great comfort” in their plight, observing to his daughters that “it is always satisfactory to feel, in keen weather, that many other people are not as warm as you are” (*Martin Chuzzlewit* 120). Pecksniff feels that this is a “quite natural” and “very beautiful arrangement.” It is an arrangement, he suggests, “not confined to coaches, but extending itself into many social ramifications,” since the sight of others enduring hardship nourishes “our sense of gratitude, which [...] is one of the holiest feelings of our common nature.” Far from being unsettled by the suffering of his fellow passengers, the arch-hypocrite actually feels it is justified because it engenders the noblest human sentiments in his breast. When the coach next stops, Anthony and Jonas Chuzzlewit coincidentally enter, making similar use of the beleaguered passengers for selfish ends. The unavailability of seats outside allows them to demand seats inside the coach at the lower price: “That was lucky!’ whispered the old man [...] ‘And a great stroke of policy in you to observe it. He, he, he! We couldn’t have gone outside. I should have died of the rheumatism!’” (122). Whereas Pecksniff utilizes the suffering of the strangers to cultivate his façade of virtue, Anthony and Jonas capitalize upon it for financial gain. In both instances, their selfishness manifests itself as a particular dissociative stance toward the other travelers: only because Pecksniff and the Chuzzlewits believe themselves to be independent and isolated from those proximately nearest to them can they sever any moral relationship between themselves and the other travelers. Nevertheless, while the mail coach appears to generate an anonymity that enables this kind of moral detachment, the coincidence that brings Pecksniff face to face with his relatives reveals a deficiency in their capacity to confidently assess their relation to others. Although the three men

remain undisturbed by the encounter, the coincidence shows that connections may exist between ostensible strangers in such a social space, even if those connections are illegible to individuals.

This scene exemplifies the manner in which *Martin Chuzzlewit*'s coincidences contribute to the representation and historicization of selfishness. The coincidence draws the reader's attention to a discrepancy between the subjective experience of Pecksniff and the Chuzzlewits (their feeling of independence from their fellow travelers) and objective facets of social experience (the fact that connections between individuals exist despite the feeling or appearance of anonymity). The seemingly contradictory juxtaposition of connection and disconnection is characteristic of what Raymond Williams identifies as a paradox of the emerging urban landscape of the nineteenth century: people appear to be at once grouped into a collectivity or aggregate but simultaneously atomized.<sup>108</sup> While the individual experiences the social world as illegible and even chaotic, the novel also intimates that webs of connection exist within that complexity. In an important passage that will be discussed in more detail below, the narrator describes Tom Pinch and Mr. Nadgett bumping elbows in the street without knowing that their fates are connected, prompting him to remark that "there are a multitude [in London] who shooting arrows over houses as their daily business, never know on whom they fall" (554). Just as the inability to see the consequences of one's actions—to see where one's arrows fall—does not mean that there are no such consequences, Pecksniff's refusal to acknowledge any connection to his fellow travelers does not mean that there are no such connections. Thus, while Hillis Miller asserts that "it is impossible to imagine the process by which this

---

<sup>108</sup> See Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), pgs. 215-32. Williams remarks that Dickens "worked to reveal a practical underlying connection, in human love and sympathy" (216). My point is that Dickens is not simply asserting connectedness through mere affective cudgeling, but also by expanding his readers' perception of the conditions of their society.

situation [of isolated individuals in the novel] came into existence,”<sup>109</sup> the coincidence on the coach shows that this isolation is a social and structural condition of selfishness. In other words, *Martin Chuzzlewit* may not provide an etiology of selfishness, but it does represent selfishness as a consequence of particular social conditions.

In this way, coincidences in the novel can be read as a unique aesthetic response to what Frederic Jameson has called “problems of figuration” in the representation of capitalist space. In outlining the three stages of capitalist space, Jameson argues that in the first stage—classical or market capitalism—space is still organized in a manner that enables it to be represented in an unproblematic manner because the conditions of experience are still accessible to individual consciousness. As Jameson puts it, “the immediate and limited experience of individuals is still able to encompass and coincide with the true economic and social form that governs that experience.”<sup>110</sup> However, in the passage from market to monopoly capital, problems of figuration emerge insofar as there is “a growing contradiction between lived experience and structure, or between a phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience.” The “lived experience of the individual” no longer “coincide[s] with the true economic and social form that governs that experience.” The “truth” of life in the metropolis lies elsewhere—in “Jamaica or Hong Kong”—as that life is predicated upon a larger system whose structure is beyond the ken of the individual. This poses problems for the work of art insofar as it suggests that “enormous global realities” are no longer accessible to the individual subject and consequently unrepresentable (350). Nevertheless, Jameson suggests that the “play of figuration” enables that which is

---

<sup>109</sup> *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*, pg. 101.

<sup>110</sup> “Cognitive Mapping,” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1988), pg. 349.

unrepresentable to express itself, to manifest itself “in distorted and symbolic ways” in the literary text.

Jameson is obviously more concerned with the third stage of capitalist space and with modernist and post-modernist responses to problems of figuration, particularly in the form of the representation of individual consciousness. Nevertheless, he illuminates difficulties inherent in the representation of an increasingly complex Victorian social milieu. Indeed, Marx himself located this growing gap between social experience and social conditions at a much earlier period. In describing the historical genesis of alienation, Marx wrote: “Only in the eighteenth century, in ‘civil society,’ do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means toward his private purposes, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social [...] relations.”<sup>111</sup> The moment at which the individual appears capable of manipulating forms of social connectedness is actually the moment in which the individual is most mediated by social forms. Coincidence is a particularly apt mechanism for representing such a structure because the unexpected and seemingly improbable assertion of narrative and spatial connections between characters bursts their bubbles of presumed self-containment.

Coincidences in *Martin Chuzzlewit* not only enable the reader to glimpse the social conditions that breed selfishness, but also generate opportunities for showing how selfishness is a particular response to those conditions. The coincidental encounter in Chapter 3 between Pecksniff and Mr. Chuzzlewit<sup>112</sup> initiates the major action of the novel, but it also displays how selfishness both depends upon anonymity

---

<sup>111</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), pg. 84.

<sup>112</sup> For the sake of clarity, the younger Martin Chuzzlewit is referred to as Martin, and his grandfather is referred to as Mr. Chuzzlewit.

and attempts to cultivate it where it does not exist. The novel opens with Mr. Chuzzlewit attempting to distance himself from his family members, whose status as his potential legatees has fed their self-interest and corrupted their relationships with him. When Mr. Chuzzlewit falls ill and is forced to stop at the Blue Dragon, Pecksniff is coincidentally summoned to attend to the sick man. After Pecksniff recognizes his relative in a “consternation of surprise,” the two men immediately contrive to address each other as if they were strangers (*Martin Chuzzlewit* 45). Although Mr. Chuzzlewit is ill-pleased to see his cousin, Pecksniff quickly tries to regain his footing with the misanthrope by noting, “I should have been, of all things, careful not to address you as a relative” (46). Pecksniff reassures him that “I regard you as a stranger, and I have just that amount of interest in you in which I hope I should feel in any stranger, circumstanced as you are.” Mr. Chuzzlewit only agrees to speak to Pecksniff on the condition that he does so “as to a stranger: strictly as to a stranger,” assuming that, unlike the blood-relation, the stranger-relation can be disinterested (47). Just as Mr. Chuzzlewit displays his selfishness in his effort to distance himself from his family, so too does Pecksniff serve his self-interest by concertedly estranging himself from Mr. Chuzzlewit in order to become his confidant. While the coincidence affirms the ties between the two characters, their selfishness causes them to occlude or sever those ties through a process of estrangement. Estrangement is thus not, as Pecksniff would have it, a by-word for disinterestedness in the novel, but rather a manifestation of self-interest attempting to cultivate and exploit anonymity.

Although the novel, according to the Preface, “exhibit[s], in a variety of aspects, the commonest of all the vices,” the various manifestations of selfishness are all united by their reliance on this process of estrangement (5). Just as Pecksniff initiates his project to become Mr. Chuzzlewit’s heir by estranging himself from the old man, he attempts to further ingratiate himself both when he renounces Martin in

Chapter 12 and later when he dismisses Tom Pinch from his service, saying, ““We part, Mr. Pinch, at once, and are strangers from this time”” (472). While Pecksniff’s method of estrangement is rhetorical, other characters engage in estrangement by deploying various modes of disguise. Montague Tigg, for example, disguises himself as Tigg Montague in order to create the spurious Anglo-Bengalee Disinterested Loan and Life Insurance Company and defraud investors, who include acquaintances like Pecksniff. Tigg’s secretive assistant, Nadgett, also relies upon estrangement: he manages to spy upon Jonas Chuzzlewit by making it appear as if that is the very thing he is not doing. Jonas never comprehends the reason for Nadgett’s frequent proximity to him because Nadgett always appears to be keeping an appointment “with the man who never appeared” (446). Put differently, Nadgett deceives Jonas by making it appear as if his proximity is coincidental rather than intentional. The fact that characters such as Nadgett can self-consciously deploy the category of coincidence demonstrates the degree to which social connections are illegible in the social space of the novel.<sup>113</sup> Even Mrs. Gamp uses a false connection to promote her own designs by constantly invoking the praises of the apocryphal Mrs. Harris. Selfishness thus embraces and capitalizes upon the opacity of social space through the process of estrangement: to estrange oneself is to assert that you are a stranger to me, that I have no connection and therefore no obligation to you, that my interests are in no way connected to yours. If selfish characters in the novel exist in a milieu whose material and spatial complexity generates a sense of self-sufficiency, then their responses to these conditions sever moral connections through deception and misrepresentation.

---

<sup>113</sup> The narrator also self-consciously uses the category of coincidence, describing meetings that are intentional as coincidental as a way of both veiling and ironically revealing intention. When Ruth Pinch, for example, enters Temple Bar late in the novel and finds her lover John Westlock passing through, the narrator remarks, “The Temple is a public thoroughfare; they may write up on the gates that it is not, but so long as the gates are left open it is, and will be; and Mr Westlock has as good a right to be there as anybody else” (645). The narrator, of course, is here revealing while also obscuring John’s amorous intentions toward Ruth.

In characteristic fashion, Dickens provides in the minor character Mark Tapley a counter-example to selfishness who offers an alternative moral response to the material conditions of the novel. Whereas selfish characters practice estrangement in the effort to sever bonds of obligation, Mark is characterized by a neighbourliness that forges such bonds.<sup>114</sup> The coincidences involving Mark not only provide points of contrast to selfishness that further reveal its causes and consequences, but they also illustrate how the novel attempts to reform selfishness. During Mark and Martin's transatlantic voyage aboard 'The Screw,' Mark befriends an overwhelmed mother, who significantly remains nameless—anonymous—throughout the novel. As Mark helps her care for her children, Martin implores him to stop “worrying with people who don't belong to you” (243) and asks him to “tell your friend, who is a nearer neighbor of ours than I could wish, to try and keep her children a little quieter tonight” (247). Unlike Martin who strives to dissociate himself, Mark accepts that these people “belong to him” because of their proximity, and his neighbourliness creates bonds that transcend location. Indeed, just as coincidences belie the selfish belief in self-sufficiency, they affirm Mark's assertions of moral and social obligation. When Martin falls ill after their arrival in Eden, Mark knocks on the nearest door in search of medicine, saying, “Neighbour [...] for I *am* a neighbor, though you don't know me,” only to “[hear] his own name pronounced, and [find] himself clasped about the skirts by two little boys, whose faces he had often washed, and whose

---

<sup>114</sup> What I call “neighbourliness” here could also be called “civility” or “sociability.” In *Dickens and the Social Order* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2004), Myron Magnet discusses how Dickens's early works (from *Nicholas Nickleby* to *Chuzzlewit*) reflect his social philosophy, which emphasizes the humanizing benefits of society. See Magnet, pgs. 203-37, for a discussion of how Dickens's experience in America influenced his portrayal of civility in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Mark is not the only figure of neighbourliness. When Martin explains his American trip to his grandfather, he tells him of his debt to Mr. Bevan: “I am indebted to the charitable help of a stranger in a land of strangers, for the means of returning here” (*Martin Chuzzlewit* 627). Bevan is, aside from the nameless family Mark befriends, the only person they meet in America who takes any interest in their well-being and does not deceive or exploit them.

suppers he had often cooked” during their transatlantic voyage (p. 485, emphasis in original). While the sudden appearance of this family in Eden is certainly improbable, Mark’s neighbourly assertion of *connection in spite of anonymity* provides a stark contrast to the selfish assertion of *disconnection because of anonymity*, a difference further emphasized when the purportedly anonymous turn out to be known. The coincidence is not just droll sentimentalism: if Mark only seemed fleetingly connected to this family on the voyage, their coincidental reappearance in the backwoods of America reminds us that social connections persist across expansive and within convoluted social spaces.

The novel’s most improbable coincidence, which occurs in its closing pages and also involves Mark and this nameless family, exemplifies *Martin Chuzzlewit*’s sophisticated treatment of the relationship between social space and social relation. In the midst of rescuing Mercy Pecksniff from the scene of her sister’s ill-fated wedding in the heart of London, Mr. Chuzzlewit notices a peculiar look on the face of Mark Tapley and inquires about its cause:

‘The wonderfulest ewent, sir!’ returned Mark, pumping at his voice in a most laborious manner, and hardly able to articulate with all his efforts.

‘A coincidence as never was equaled! I’m blessed if here ain’t two old neighbours of ourn, sir!’

‘What neighbours!’ cried old Martin, looking out of the window.

‘Where!’

‘I was a walkin’ up and down not five yards from this spot,’ said Mr Tapley, breathless, ‘and they come upon me like their own ghosts, as I thought they was! It’s the wonderfulest ewent that ever happened!’ [...]

‘What do you mean!’ exclaimed old Martin, quite as much excited by the spectacle of Mark’s excitement, as that strange person was himself.

‘Neighbours where!’

‘Here, sir!’ replied Mr. Tapley. ‘Here in the city of London! Here upon these very stones! Here they are, sir! Don’t I know ’em! Lord love their welcome faces, don’t I know ’em!’ [...]

‘Neighbours, WHERE!’ old Martin shouted: almost maddened by his ineffectual efforts to get out at the coach-door.

‘Neighbours in America! Neighbours in Eden!’ cried Mark.

‘Neighbours in the swamp, neighbours in the bush, neighbours in the fever... Haven’t they come a strugglin’ back, without a single child for their consolation! And talk to me of neighbours!’ (775-6)

Our initial reaction might be to scoff at this encounter, or to interpret it along with Hilary Dannenberg as a manifestation of Dickens’s “playfully nonmimetic style.”<sup>115</sup> Yet focusing on whether this coincidence is “realistic” or “probable” distracts us from the importance of the conversation between Mark and Mr. Chuzzlewit. Mr. Chuzzlewit must thrice repeat his question—“Neighbours where?”—because of confusion about both the “where” of the neighbours as well as the concept of “neighbour” itself. Mark misinterprets Mr. Chuzzlewit’s question—first as, *In what location did you just meet these people?* and then as, *Where are these people now?*—because he and Mr. Chuzzlewit hold conflicting understandings of a neighbour. Only when he realizes that Mr. Chuzzlewit is asking him *In what location were these people your neighbours?* can he provide a suitable answer. For Mr. Chuzzlewit, a neighbour is a relation defined by and predicated upon a specific location. One may meet this

---

<sup>115</sup> *Coincidence and Counterfactuality*, pg. 156.

person elsewhere—“in London” or “upon these very stones”—but the “in Eden” is the necessary condition of addressing her as a neighbour. For Mark, however, being a neighbour is not tied to a specific time and location, but rather describes one’s comportment toward another: they are neighbours here in London at the present moment, just as they were neighbours in Eden. The novel’s persistent use of the vocabulary of “strangers” and “neighbours” to describe modes of comportment is therefore intimately connected to its representation of social space. In a complex and opaque social world where “daily business” involves “shooting arrows” onto an anonymous multitude, proximity and location are neither markers nor guarantees of social connection. This vocabulary, like coincidence, draws our attention to the unmoored nature of social relationships in the world of the novel.

Even though Mark’s neighbourliness is the antithesis of selfishness, his behavior nevertheless reflects the atomizing effects of social space in the novel. Just as coincidences assert connection in a manner that cuts against the selfish drive for disconnection, they curiously undermine Mark’s attempts at a different kind of disconnection. Mark’s “whimsical restlessness” has largely escaped critical attention despite being central to the moral logic of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (17).<sup>116</sup> Mark explains his condition to Tom Pinch: “My constitution is, to be jolly; and my weakness is, to wish to find a credit in it” (690). Jolly by nature, Mark describes himself as “a roving sort of chap” (119). He itinerantly seeks a difficult situation in which to be jolly because, as he constantly reiterates, there’s “no credit” in being jolly in circumstances that would make anyone happy. The problem he faces, however, is that his jolliness

---

<sup>116</sup> Most critical accounts of the novel do not mention Mark, and where they do, he is usually referenced simply as Martin’s companion in America. Sylvère Monod, in a book-length study of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), notes that Mark is “an original creation and a character in whom Dickens took much interest,” only to follow on the heels of other critics to say that “he is not totally convincing and engaging.” See Monod, pgs. 115-7.

actually transforms trying circumstances to the point where there's no longer "credit" in them, compelling him to seek new difficulties. As Martin endures illness in the swamps of Eden, he asks Mark if he could possibly ask for better circumstances in which to "come out strong" than the deplorable ones they have found in America.

Mark replies,

'On the first morning of my going out, what do I do? Stumble on a family I know, who are constantly assisting us in all sorts of ways [...] That won't do, you know: that ain't what I'd a right to expect. If I had stumbled on a serpent, and got bit; or stumbled on a first-rate patriot, and got bowie-knifed [...] I might have distinguished myself, and earned some credit. As it is, the great object of my voyage is knocked on the head. So it would be, *wherever I went.*' (490, emphasis added)

Mark's neighbourliness means that he is always at home and never at home because his jolliness is "contagious" and prevents him from dissociating himself from his environment in order to be "jolly with credit" (385). Mark's inability to dissociate himself from his milieu manifests itself in the formation of bonds, bonds which coincidentally follow him around and undermine his attempts to be jolly with credit. Thus, while his neighbourliness forges bonds of moral obligation where estrangement would normally sever them, his desire to earn "credit" is a self-confessed weakness. It is an effort to detach himself from his surroundings that slips into the acquisitive and monetary idiom of selfishness, causing him to be constantly on the move. Although he personifies moral behavior, the persistent irrationality of his restlessness foregrounds his deficient perception of his relation to his surroundings.

Thus, far from detracting from the novel's realism, *Martin Chuzzlewit's* coincidences represent how the illegibility of social connections generates subjective feelings of isolation and independence. They also reveal how selfishness manifests

itself as a particular behavioral response to these conditions. The very unexpectedness of such encounters highlights the discrepancy between the fact of various connections between characters and those characters' denial or foreshortened perception of such connections.<sup>117</sup> Although coincidences might seem to be a manifestation of formal chaos—a chaos befitting the representation of a world in which Mrs. Todger's boarding house can only be found by chance—they are in fact a unique means of organizing that social space.<sup>118</sup> These coincidences are in themselves “improbable,” but their improbability creates opportunities for the novel to represent aspects of reality that are otherwise unrepresentable. What makes realism unique is not its capacity to conform to our experience of the everyday, but rather its capacity to put us into contact with features of a particular milieu. To invoke Jameson's terminology, coincidences in *Martin Chuzzlewit* enable a certain “figuration” of reality that uniquely “exhibits” selfishness.

*Martin Chuzzlewit*, of course, not only exhibits selfishness but also works to reform it, and coincidences are also integral to the novel's didactic effort to rebuke

---

<sup>117</sup> It is worth emphasizing that the novel thematizes this foreshortened perception in a variety of ways. Consider this passage describing Tom's suspicions regarding the identity of his anonymous patron late in the novel: “He sat with the outer door wide open at all times, that he might hear the footsteps as they entered, and turned off into chambers on the lower floors. He formed odd prepossessions too, regarding strangers in the streets; and would say within himself of such or such a man, who struck him as having anything uncommon in his dress or aspect, ‘I shouldn't wonder now if that were he!’ But it never was. And though he actually turned back and followed more than one of these suspected individuals, in a singular belief that they were going to the place he was then upon his way from, he never got any other satisfaction by it, than the satisfaction of knowing it was not the case” (584).

<sup>118</sup> In *Cooking With Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), David Trotter links the emerging concept of “mess” in the mid-nineteenth century to the notion of “the contingent self.” In his discussion of Dickens, Trotter discusses mess in Dickens in relation to chance, suggesting that it reflects Dickens's growing recognition of “an autonomous social order whose medium is secular history rather than providence” (161). Trotter, in other words, supports the idea that something like coincidence, which may appear “messy” or extraneous on a formal level, is actually a manifestation of new way of thinking about the social world. Trotter, however, follows others in suggesting that this shift in Dickens's thinking, resulting in the recognition of an “autonomous social order,” occurred in the early 1850s (i.e., between *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House*). My reading of selfishness in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, of course, would suggest that as early as the 1840s Dickens was beginning to conceive of the idea of a “contingent self” that is shaped by the social order. See *Cooking with Mud*, pgs. 161-75 for Trotter's discussion of Dickens.

selfishness while promoting Mark's neighbourliness. Although the novel's didacticism may seem to return us to the problem of authorial ideology, it is more productively considered as illustrating what James Chandler describes as the inherent link between historicization and politicization. As Chandler argues, for early historicists like John Stuart Mill and Thomas Carlyle, "to represent a historical state of affairs is to begin to transform it, to make 'history' is to begin to 'make history'."<sup>119</sup> Similarly for Dickens, the effort to reform selfishness follows logically from the apprehension of it as a product of particular historical circumstances. In the novel, as characters constantly encounter people they thought were physically distant from them, they are forced to recognize, like the reader, the illusory nature of their self-sufficiency. When Jonas finds Pecksniff spying through his window, for example, he exclaims, "It's enough to make a man stare, to see a fellow looking at him all of a sudden, who he thought was sixty or seventy miles away" (291). Not only is Jonas unable to successfully deploy disguise to commit murder without detection, but he is also later confronted by Lewsome, the man from whom he purchased the poison to potentially murder his father and whom "he had supposed to be at the extremest corner of the earth" (732). Whereas these encounters force Jonas to confront his guilt, a coincidence involving Martin illustrates more clearly their consequences for selfishness. In order to raise money after being dismissed by Pecksniff, Martin enters a London pawnbroker's shop, where he coincidentally encounters Tigg, who exclaims, "This is one of the most tremendous meetings in Ancient or Modern History!" (218). This particular coincidence is significant for the plot, as we learn later that Tigg is at this moment employed by Mr. Chuzzlewit, and this encounter enables Mr. Chuzzlewit to send Martin the money that funds his trip to America. At the same time, the encounter also frustrates Martin's attempt at anonymity:

---

<sup>119</sup> *England in 1819*, pg. 93.

It was with a bitter sense of humiliation that he cursed, again and again, the mischance of having encountered this man in the pawnbroker's shop. The only comfort he had in the recollection was, Mr Tigg's voluntary avowal of a separation between himself and Slyme, that would at least prevent his circumstances (so Martin argued) from being known to any member of his family, the bare possibility of which filled him with shame and wounded pride. (220)

Martin's pride—his sense of self—is predicated upon the possibility of maintaining a distance between himself and his family, a distance which this coincidence collapses. It exposes and challenges Martin's selfishness by dissolving his sense of independence and anonymity.<sup>120</sup>

A series of coincidences involving Tom Pinch and Nadgett provides the most extended example of how coincidences dissolve the belief in self-sufficiency through the assertion of interconnectedness. This series also demonstrates most clearly how this reading of coincidence requires us to look beyond the conditions of serial production in order to fully appreciate the function of coincidence in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Chapter 38, entitled "Secret Service," opens with this striking passage:

In walking from the City with his sentimental friend, Tom Pinch had looked into the face, and brushed against the threadbare sleeve, of Mr Nadgett, man of mystery to the Anglo-Bengalee Disinterested Loan and Life Insurance Company. Mr Nadgett naturally passed away from Tom's

---

<sup>120</sup> In his recent biography of Dickens, Michael Slater notes that in late 1823 and early 1824—in the period leading up to his father's imprisonment for debt and young Charles being sent to work in Warren's Blacking Factory—Dickens's errands for his family "mainly consisted of taking household items (as well as precious books from his father's library) to the pawnbroker's while his parents made a last desperate struggle to stay afloat" (*Charles Dickens* [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2009], pg. 19). While Martin experiences the shame the highly self-conscious young Dickens no doubt felt as a result of his family's debasement, that shame is amplified by the fact that he encounters someone he knows in the pawnbroker's shop.

remembrance, as he passed out of his view; for he didn't know him, and had never heard his name.

As there are a vast number of people in the huge metropolis of England who rise up every morning, not knowing where their heads will rest at night, so there are a multitude who shooting arrows over houses as their daily business, never know on whom they fall. Mr Nadgett might have passed Tom Pinch ten thousand times; might even have been quite familiar with his face, his name, pursuits, and character; yet never once have dreamed that Tom had any interest in any act or mystery of his. Tom might have done the like by him, of course. But the same private man out of all the men alive, was in the mind of each at the same moment; was prominently connected, though in a different manner, with the day's adventures of both; and formed, when they passed each other in the street, the one absorbing topic of their thoughts. (554)

The peculiarity of this passage is only increased when we realize that the presentation of Pinch and Nadgett as “strangers” is technically a mistake. It is subsequently revealed that Tom and his sister have actually become Nadgett's lodgers two chapters prior to this moment. In Chapter 36, Tom and Ruth travel to London's outskirts in search of suitable lodgings, eventually securing them in what the reader later learns is Nadgett's house. The landlord is not named in that passage, so to say in Chapter 38 that Tom “didn't know [Nadgett], and had never heard his name” is not an explicit contradiction—though one would assume that even if the transaction were not conducted with the landlord himself, his name nevertheless would have been mentioned.<sup>121</sup>

---

<sup>121</sup> This is the full passage from Chapter 36: “After roaming up and down for hours, looking at some score of lodgings, they began to find it rather fatiguing, especially as they saw none which were at all adapted to their purpose. At length, however, in a singular little old-fashioned house, up a blind street,

Thinking about the compositional history of the novel can help us to explain some of the peculiarity of this passage. First, we can see this passage operating as a transition from Tom's adventures in London to Nadgett's stalking of Jonas in order to obtain information that will help Tigg gain financial leverage over him. The previous few chapters have dealt with Tom's arrival in and wanderings through London, including his coincidental meeting with Charity Pecksniff, which brings him into contact with Jonas's wife, Merry. Having Tom pass Nadgett in the street enables the narrative to transition between two different sets of characters within the same monthly number. Second, and perhaps more importantly, we can safely conclude, as Jonathan Arac suggests, that Dickens decided only later in the novel's composition to make Nadgett the landlord as a means of tightening the plot.<sup>122</sup> That is to say, this particular relationship between Pinch and Nadgett was not "planned" but came about after the composition of this passage, retroactively creating a minor glitch in the narrative's logic.

While these contingencies of serial production provide traction in making sense of this passage, they also attempt to explain away the coincidence. To account for or explain the coincidence in these terms implies that it is somehow foreign to the novel's proper content, that it simply doesn't belong. This requires deemphasizing or even overlooking how this passage explicitly describes the way in which the conditions of "daily business" shape the way individuals in "the huge metropolis of England" relate to each other. Bracketing the question of authorial intent or compositional history allows us to see this moment as part of a larger pattern and

---

they discovered two small bed-rooms and a triangular parlour, which promised to suit them well enough. Their desiring to take possession immediately was a suspicious circumstance, but even this was surmounted by the payment of their first week's rent, and a reference to John Westlock, Esquire, Furnival's Inn, High Holborn" (543-4).

<sup>122</sup> See Arac, *Commissioned Spirits* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1979), pgs. 86-7.

appreciate its thematic importance. It is not just that Tom and Nadgett are both thinking of Jonas, or that they cross paths without knowing it: both men are thinking of Jonas at the same time and in the same place without being aware of the connection between them.<sup>123</sup> Significantly, Jonas is also the common link in the third and final coincidence involving Tom and Nadgett, which occurs in Chapter 40 and involves Jonas's attempt to flee England and escape Tigg's persecution. Nadgett follows Jonas to the wharves, where Tom and Ruth happen to find themselves on one of their morning perambulations. Nadgett sees his lodger watching the ship that the disguised Jonas is boarding, and he asks Tom to deliver the blackmailing note that recalls Jonas to shore. Tom agrees to deliver the note, not knowing that the recipient is Jonas, so "What was Tom's astonishment to find in [the recipient] the man with whom he had had the conflict in the field, poor Merry's husband. Jonas!" (592). This moment is constructed with great dramatic effect, as the blow that thwarts Jonas's flight is delivered by the novel's central figure of morality, a man who has physically struck Jonas earlier in the novel. The fact that neither man can comprehend the other's relation to the note only adds to this effect.

Considered simply as a plot mechanism, coincidence appears to be the imposition of narrative structure onto reality—a way of "artificially" creating connections where they do not exist. Yet this terminology is inadequate for describing the effect of these moments. Coincidences here do not *impose* structure by creating

---

<sup>123</sup> This is not the only moment in the text when two characters are imagining the same face at the same time and place. When Tom and Martin first meet in Chapter 5, Tom tells his new friend about playing the organ for a beautiful stranger. "It led to my seeing," said Tom, in a lower voice, "one of the loveliest and most beautiful faces you can possibly picture to yourself." "And yet I am able to picture a beautiful one," said his friend, thoughtfully, "or should be, if I have any memory" (*Martin Chuzzlewit*, p. 85). Both are picturing Mary Graham. This particular technique of drawing the reader's attention to common referents is central to Dickens's method of imbuing the significance of isolated narrative moments with broader social meaning. See, for example, Ralph Rader's discussion of the passage in *Bleak House* where Jo looks at the cross atop St. Paul's ("The Comparative Anatomy of Three Baggy Monsters: *Bleak House*, *Vanity Fair*, *Middlemarch*," *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 19.1 [1989]: 49-58).

connections where they do not exist, but rather *reveal* structure by making extant connections visible. The reader does not need Tom and Nadgett to bump elbows in order to trace how they are connected in the novel (i.e., that they both have some connection to Jonas). However, these moments reflect the characters' increasing consciousness of that connection. The connection between Tom and Nadgett has four discrete moments: (1) Pinch and Nadgett are connected *mediately* through their individual relationships with Jonas; (2) Pinch and Nadgett are connected *economically*, with Pinch as lodger (Ch. 36); (3) Pinch and Nadgett are connected *spatially* by their shared involvement with Jonas as they pass each other without recognition (Ch. 38); and (4) Pinch and Nadgett are connected *concretely* in the plot by their convergence with Jonas on the wharf, an encounter that happens by chance but allows them to see their triangular relationship (Ch. 40). It is important to note that the connection between Pinch and Nadgett exists prior to the last two moments, but it is these two moments that make the connection legible. While the connection becomes explicit to the reader in the third moment, only in the fourth moment do the characters begin to grasp the full extent of their interconnectedness. Until that point, Nadgett is unaware that Pinch knows Jonas; Pinch is unaware that his landlord knows Jonas; and Jonas cannot fathom any connection between Pinch and the Anglo-Bengalee Company. By aligning homelessness with "daily business" in the passage at the beginning of Chapter 38 and then having Tom and Nadgett pass each other without recognition, the novel highlights a fact of modern social existence: every day we are brought into contact, either physically or mediately, with an anonymous multitude without being able to determine our exact relation to them. To be sure, Dickens uses coincidence as a way of tightening the plot of the novel and as a means of creating and sustaining suspense. By obscuring the connections between Pinch, Nadgett, and Jonas, Dickens can both surprise the reader and orchestrate moments of great effect,

such as Tom's confrontation with Jonas on the wharf. However, the point to be emphasized is that this obscured nature of social connections is a reflection of social reality.

Coincidences, therefore, enable characters to develop a better understanding of the social space in which they live by forcing them to acknowledge their previously obscured relation to others. In doing so, they are integral to the novel's understanding of moral transformation. In undermining the selfish plotting of Tigg, Jonas, and Pecksniff, the novel promotes an understanding of social interconnectedness embodied by Mark's neighbourliness. Moral transformation for the two Martin Chuzzlewits requires a fundamental change in the way they see the world. Martin's transformation occurs in the swamps of Eden, where privation and illness induce reflection, and eventually the epiphany that he has acquired selfishness from his grandfather and that it has grown quietly in his breast. As a result of this recognition, "He made a solemn resolution that when his strength returned he would not dispute the point or resist the conviction, but would look upon it as an established fact, that selfishness was in his breast, and must be rooted out" (497). Having acknowledged his selfishness, Martin resolves to root it out by constantly putting "his purpose before his own eyes." The success of his resolution is evident not only in his altered perception of Tom Pinch, which convinces John Westlock that Martin has changed for the better, but also when he meets with his grandfather upon his return from America. Still engaged in his scheme to expose Pecksniff's true nature, Mr. Chuzzlewit remains silent during Martin's pleas for reconciliation and merely hangs his head while Pecksniff castigates his grandson. "In his most selfish and most careless days," the narrator remarks, this scene would have wounded Martin's pride. However, "changed for the better in his worst respect; *looking through an altered medium* on his former friend [...] resentment, sullenness, self-confidence, and pride, were all swept away" (624,

emphasis added). Martin reacts out of compassion rather than wounded pride because he no longer sees the world through the medium of self. Mr. Chuzzlewit experiences a similar change in vision, inspired largely by Mark Tapley's mild-mannered accusation that he has been self-deceived in his perception of Martin. Mr. Chuzzlewit admits that he had been possessed by "a kind of selfishness... which is constantly upon the watch for selfishness in others; and holding others at a distance by suspicions and distrusts, wonders why they don't approach, and don't confide, and calls that selfishness in them" (752). The moral movement of the novel is thus to overcome the myopia of selfishness by altering the way characters see their relation to others and consequently how they comport themselves toward the world.

Although Tom Pinch, whose sincerity Alexander Welsh has eloquently shown to be the foil of Pecksniff's hypocrisy in the novel, does not experience moral transformation, he nevertheless sees the world differently by the novel's end.<sup>124</sup> In his break with Pecksniff, Tom realizes that "It was not that Pecksniff: Tom's Pecksniff: had ceased to exist, but that he had never existed" (467). In Pecksniff's death, the narrator remarks, "Tom would have had the comfort of remembering what [Pecksniff] used to be, but in this discovery, he had the anguish of recollecting what [Pecksniff] never was. For as Tom's blindness in this matter had been total and not partial, so was his restored sight." This ocular vocabulary returns when Tom leaves to seek his fortune:

Oh! what a different town Salisbury was in Tom Pinch's eyes to be sure, when the substantial Pecksniff of his heart melted away into an idle dream! He possessed the same faith in the wonderful shops, the same intensified appreciation of the mystery and wickedness of the place [...] and yet it was

---

<sup>124</sup> See Welsh, *From Copyright to Copperfield: The Identity of Dickens* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), pgs. 29-58.

not the old city nor anything like it [...] For in the centre of the market-place he missed a statue he had set up there, as in all other places of his personal resort; and it looked cold and bare without that ornament. (524-5)

Tom's blindness was not a product of his selfishness, but rather a consequence of Pecksniff's hypocrisy. Although the world looks "cold and bare" to Tom without his idealized vision of Pecksniff, his "restored sight" means that he is no longer hoodwinked by Pecksniff and that his goodness can no longer be manipulated in the service of Pecksniff's selfish aims.

Even Mark Tapley experiences an alteration in his vision of his relation to others, and in overcoming his "whimsical restlessness," Mark projects an alternative to the social space of the novel. At the end of the novel, Mark finally settles down and decides to marry Mrs. Lupin, and the couple change the name of the Blue Dragon to the "Jolly Tapley." He explains his decision to marry: "Then all my hopeful wisions bein' crushed; and findin' that there an't no credit for me nowhere; I abandons myself to despair, and says, "Let me do that as has the least credit in it, of all; marry a dear, sweet creetur, as is wery fond of me: me being, at the same time, wery fond of her: lead a happy life; and struggle no more again' the blight which settles on my prospects"" (691). In abandoning his "hopeful wisions" of trying to distinguish himself, Mark embraces his connections to others and to his surroundings. His ultimate fate as proprietor of the Jolly Tapley embodies the novel's vision of unalienated social space. His constitutional jolliness becomes the quality of a visual social space, as his neighbourliness generates a neighbourly place. After Pecksniff's final defeat and the reunion of the two Martins, the characters plan a celebratory feast, and Mark is put in charge of the dinner. He and Mrs. Lupin serve the guests, "but Mark could by no means be persuaded to sit down at the table; observing, that in having the honour of attending to their comforts, he felt himself, indeed, the landlord

of the Jolly Tapley, and could almost delude himself into the belief that the entertainment was actually being held under the Jolly Tapley's roof" (768). Although the ideal offered by the Jolly Tapley is still here a "delusion," it nevertheless posits a social space that promotes interconnectedness rather than self-interest. When he encounters his anonymous American neighbours on the streets of London in the closing pages of the novel, Mark whisks them away to the Jolly Tapley, where, as he says, "'There's nothin' in the house they sha'n't have for the askin' for, except a bill'" (776).

## II. *Martin Chuzzlewit* and Dickens's Development as a Novelist

I am by no means trying to suggest that *Martin Chuzzlewit* is a superbly plotted masterpiece comparable to *Bleak House* (1852-3) or *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5). However, my reading does demonstrate that the novel's "construction and conduct" are neither entirely "defective" nor at odds with its thematic content. More importantly, understanding the role of coincidence in *Martin Chuzzlewit* helps link two strands of Dickens's development as a novelist. As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, Dickens's Preface to *Martin Chuzzlewit* demonstrates an emerging desire to "resist the temptation of the current Monthly Number, and to keep a steadier eye upon the general purpose and design." This tension between part and whole, or number and novel, certainly has its origins in the compositional history of Dickens's early works, works in which coincidences play an important structural role. Dickens's first "novel," *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1836-7), did not commence as a novel: Dickens was only commissioned to provide copy for a series of plates by Robert Seymour. When Seymour committed suicide in April 1836, however, Dickens took control of the text and developed it into something that moved beyond the picaresque. He accomplished this not only through the introduction of

Sam Weller, but also by coincidentally bringing back Alfred Jingle and Job Trotter. A similar process can also be seen at work in his next novel, *Oliver Twist* (1837-9). Although the content of the “Parish Boy’s Progress” was Dickens’s from the beginning, the renegotiation of his contract with *Bentley’s Miscellany* midway through the work’s composition—from a series of monthly contributions to a novel—transformed the narrative’s arc and development.<sup>125</sup> From this compositional perspective, coincidence appears primarily as a product of the novel’s material production. To be sure, *Martin Chuzzlewit* certainly bears the scars of its compositional history, as seen in Dickens’s seemingly rash decision to send Martin off to America at the end of the fifth monthly number, suggesting that at times the pressures of the monthly number ultimately prevailed.<sup>126</sup> However, my reading has shown that coincidence is more than a mere plot mechanism in the novel. While Dickens relied on coincidence early in his career as a way of moving beyond the episodic in order to generate narrative structure, by the time of *Martin Chuzzlewit* Dickens began to understand that such plot devices could also be utilized in the service of the novel’s realist aims.

*Martin Chuzzlewit* not only initiates Dickens’s growing concern with the “general purpose and design” of his novels, but, as other critics have suggested, it also marks the starting point of his career as a mature social realist. Jonathan Arac, for example, has argued that during the novel’s composition, Dickens began to understand London as a place where he could analyze social reality and create a “vision of

---

<sup>125</sup> See Robert Patten, “When Is a Book Not a Book?” [*The Book History Reader*, eds. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (New York: Routledge, 2006), pgs. 354-68] for a discussion of the conditions of serial production of *Oliver Twist*.

<sup>126</sup> The decision to send Martin to America has usually been read as an attempt to boost the disappointing sales of the early numbers, though Sidney Moss intriguingly suggests that it was actually an attempt to gall American publishers, who in order to profit by pirating the novel would have to print passages offensive to their readers [*Charles Dickens’ Quarrel with America* (Troy: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1984), pgs. 131-2].

people's specific interdependence, a sociology to replace the atomism and laissez-faire of Utilitarian psychology and political economy."<sup>127</sup> And Amanda Claybaugh has suggested that through his trip to the United States in 1842, Dickens "learned that he could present himself publicly as a reformer [...] and] that he could be a reformist writer."<sup>128</sup> Dickens's emerging reformist impulse can be seen in *Martin Chuzzlewit*'s use of coincidence to explore how specific social conditions generate particular types of social behavior. The novel's rendering of moral transformation in visual terms looks forward to the social vision that comes to dominate Dickens's subsequent works. The effort to reveal obscured connections in the service of moral reform becomes the groundwork for a reforming perspective, which *Dombey and Son* posits as "a good spirit who would take the house-tops off [...] and show a Christian people what dark shapes issue from amidst their homes." Such a view would "[rouse] some who never have looked out upon the world of human life around them, to a knowledge of their own relation to it, and [make] them acquainted with a perversion of nature in their own contracted sympathies and estimates."<sup>129</sup> Social vice, in this view, is a result of a distorted vision of social relations, a perversion that the perspective generated by the novel is capable of correcting. *Martin Chuzzlewit*'s engagement with social alienation

---

<sup>127</sup> Arac, pg. 69. Arac also suggests that the novel attempts to represent social interconnectedness within legible social space. My argument, however, differs from Arac's in terms of the scope of that space within the novel. Arac argues that during the composition of the novel, Dickens began to see London as a ideal space for uncovering connections between individuals, citing Nadgett's navigation of the city as a reversal of "the famous 'view from Todgers's' [that] shows the observer helpless before the energy of random surfaces turbulent with the energy of obscured meaning." This reading, in my opinion, projects the London of the later novels onto the London of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Nadgett is certainly a forerunner of Mr. Bucket in *Bleak House*, and in the novel we can see Dickens's later London in embryonic form, but as I've noted, even Nadgett is unable to fully untangle the web of connections that ultimately unites the characters. In my reading, it is not London, but rather the Jolly Tapley that is posited as place where social connection is joined to an intelligible social space. See Arac, pgs. 67-93.

<sup>128</sup> Claybaugh, *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-America World* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2007), pg. 82.

<sup>129</sup> Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), pg. 703.

also anticipates *Bleak House*'s more thorough exploration of the connection between social distance and moral obligation through the critique of Mrs. Jellyby's telescopic philanthropy. Although Dickens may have deployed coincidence more carefully as his novels became both more deliberately planned and more engaged with particular aspects of Victorian reality, the use of coincidence in *Martin Chuzzlewit* should be understood not as a deviation, but rather as a unique moment in that development.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Improbability and the Historicist Habit of Mind:

#### Coincidence and the Form of Hardy's Novels

The preceding chapters of this dissertation have explored how coincidence functions as a realist technique, challenging the dominant critical notion that realism is by definition probable. As a fuller picture of “improbable realism” has emerged through readings of particular novels, two more general insights have also materialized. First is an understanding of how coincidence frequently draws the reader’s attention to the features of a particular social milieu. Presupposing that improbable events are foreign to literary realism forces us to explain (or explain away) their presence, which usually results in reading them strictly in relation to authorial ideology or the contingencies of production. Doing away with this presupposition has enabled me to concentrate on the formal effects of coincidence. For example, whereas critics have generally read *Tom Jones*’s coincidences as a manifestation of Fielding’s beliefs, attention to the narrator’s sophisticated framing of accidental events showed that the novel’s coincidences in fact focus the reader’s attention on features of the world in which Tom lives. Similarly, although we can turn to the conditions of serial production to account for the prevalence of coincidence in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, doing so occludes the fact that they enable Dickens to represent and historicize selfishness as a consequence of the Victorian social milieu. The second thread that has emerged involves seeing how coincidence often performs this task through apt juxtapositions. In *Redgauntlet*, for instance, the competing interpretations Hugh and Darsie offer of the coincidence that brings them together enable the novel to historicize the obsolescence of Hugh’s Jacobite ideology. In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, coincidence’s

curious blend of connection and disconnection allows Dickens to juxtapose the subjective experience of isolation and self-sufficiency against the illegible webs of social connection that both generate but ultimately challenge that sense of disconnection.

This fourth and final chapter builds on these insights as it offers a reconsideration of the function and effect of coincidence in Hardy's novels. I shall be arguing that coincidences in Hardy's novels foreground the fact that individual experience is embedded in a social milieu that profoundly shapes identity and agency. Coincidences in Hardy direct us toward the social forces that shape the character's lives, not—as is usually assumed by critics of Hardy—to the hand of fate or the power of chance. The heroine of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), for example, coincidentally encounters relics from her past relationships, highlighting how her identity and fate are shaped by social forces such as class. Whereas coincidences in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* juxtapose the past and present, coincidences in *The Return of the Native* (1878) generate opportunities for the juxtaposition of different perspectives on events. Such juxtapositions illustrate the limitations on individual perspectives, and in doing so cultivate an awareness of how experience is embedded in a particular social milieu. Ultimately, I will be arguing that understanding coincidence in Hardy's plots is necessary to correctly apprehending the form of his novels.<sup>130</sup> The tragic form of Hardy's plots marks their fundamental difference from those of realist authors such as Scott and Dickens. Whereas Scott and Dickens explore, among other things, issues of self-determination in particular social milieus, Hardy's novels involve the more general fact of social embeddedness. His novels, in other words, do not so much

---

<sup>130</sup> By form, I mean (borrowing James Phelan's definition) "the particular fashioning of the elements, techniques, and structure of a narrative in the service of a set of readerly engagements that lead to particular final effects on the implied audience" (*Experiencing Fiction*, pg. 3).

explore the particular features of nineteenth-century “Wessex” that shape identity as they explore the tragedies that result from the fact that individuals are shaped by social and historical forces beyond their control. At the same time, however, I shall also be insisting on the fundamental difference of Hardy’s plots from the tragic form. Many critics have suggested continuities between Hardy’s works and Greek tragedy. RM. Rehder, for example, argues that Hardy’s “characters are set against the nature of things, the entire universe, as in the Greek tragedies.”<sup>131</sup> As I argued in the Introduction, although in a somewhat different context, applying the terms or elements of Greek tragedy to the realist novel creates more problems than it solves. The central tragic struggle in Hardy is not that of individuals in an indifferent universe, but rather that of individuals coming to terms with their existence in history.

This consideration of the form of Hardy’s novels entails complicating ingrained ways of thinking about several aspects of his works, particularly the role of chance and coincidence. Although the body of criticism on Hardy is vast and diverse enough to defy easy generalizations, the interpretation of coincidence in his work is peculiarly univocal. Chance and coincidence have generally been read as manifestations of Hardy’s pessimistic or agnostic worldview, a reading that involves emphasizing the influence of Darwin (and others such as Schopenhauer) on his thinking. Irving Howe voices this view succinctly: Hardy “wanted plot to serve as a sign of philosophic intent and this seduced him into relying too heavily upon mechanical devices,” resulting in “coincidences which cannot be justified even in terms of his darkening view of life.”<sup>132</sup> This reading of coincidence is predicated upon

---

<sup>131</sup> “The Form of Hardy’s Novels,” in *Thomas Hardy After Fifty Years*, ed. Lance St. John Butler (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), pg. 24.

<sup>132</sup> *Thomas Hardy* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), pgs. 90-1. In a similar vein, Leland Monk writes, “Hardy writes in a traditional narrative mode the formal properties of which derive for the most part from a providential aesthetic; but in his own thinking he emphatically denied the existence, or at least the benevolence, of an all-seeing deity. He therefore manipulates his plots, arranging sometimes

three interdependent assertions: (1) that Hardy had a more or less defined and consistent “habit of mind”; (2) that Hardy’s novels voice this habit of mind in a “relentlessly monological”<sup>133</sup> manner; and (3) that coincidences are a direct manifestation of this worldview (i.e., that coincidences point us in an unmediated way to Hardy’s worldview). My aim in attending to the effects of coincidences in Hardy’s works and highlighting the historicist strain of his thought is to demonstrate that, as Angelique Richardson suggests, Hardy’s fiction strives to represent life “without falling victim to a single scientific theory, [to] a single way of seeing.”<sup>134</sup> In other words, attending more closely to the effects of coincidence in Hardy will allow us to appreciate the richness and complexity of his “habit of mind,” which in turn will enable us hear the multiple voices at play in his works.

The first section of this chapter provides a brief consideration of Hardy’s historicist habit of mind. Although I have argued throughout this dissertation that identifying an author’s beliefs is a problematic way to account for particular features of a novel, it is necessary to distill this strain of Hardy’s thought before turning to a

---

implausible coincidences, in order to illustrate his belief that there is *not* a supreme being. [...] As a result, chance in Hardy’s novels usually signifies an *inverted* Providence” [*Standard Deviations: Chance and the Modern British Novel* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1993), pg. 158]. William Newton provides a similar view in “Chance as Employed by Hardy and the Naturalists” [*Philological Quarterly* 30 (1951): 154-75]. However, Newton’s comparison of Hardy with Zola and other Naturalists is illuminating because he points out how Zola’s novels frequently use coincidence, even though his “scientific” theory of the novel explicitly precluded chance.

<sup>133</sup> Charles Lock, “Hardy and the Critics” [*Palgrave Advances in Thomas Hardy Studies*, ed. Phillip Mallett (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004)], pg. 20. An essay by Virginia Woolf, written shortly after Hardy’s death in 1928, illustrates the way in which these three assertions are interconnected. Woolf remarks that Hardy’s early novels demonstrate that he must be “driven by some sense that human beings are the sport of forces outside themselves, to make use of an extreme and even melodramatic use of coincidence,” and concludes her remarks by saying that his novels present “a vision of the world and of man’s lot as they revealed themselves to a powerful imagination” [“The Novels of Thomas Hardy,” in *Collected Essays: Volume I* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1980), pgs. 256-266].

<sup>134</sup> “Hardy and Science: A Chapter of Accidents” [*Palgrave Advances in Thomas Hardy Studies*, ed. Phillip Mallett (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004)], pg. 176.

consideration of his novels. Critical emphasis on the fact that Hardy depicts individuals in conflict with natural laws that are indifferent to human forms of meaning has occluded Hardy's rich appreciation of the fact that human meaning is shaped by particular social formations. Glances at several passages from his novels and non-literary writings will bring this aspect of his thought into focus. More importantly, it will also identify the conceptual importance of "relics" to this line of his thinking. As vestiges of the social past, relics in Hardy have the power to unite the past and present in a manner that forces individuals to recognize the entanglement of their lives in the social web. The remaining sections of the chapter examine two novels—*A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *The Return of the Native*—whose forms embody Hardy's historicist habit of mind. The second section considers the way in which the plot structure of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* relies upon coincidental encounters with "casual relics" of the heroine's past in order to draw the reader's attention to the social forces that shape her fate. While I only offer a fairly schematic reading of what is certainly not one of Hardy's best novels, this reading will illustrate the particular ways in which his historicist habit of mind informs his aesthetics. In the third and final section, I offer a more detailed reading of *The Return of the Native*. My focus will be not only on the effects of coincidence, but also on the effects of the novel's use of free indirect discourse (FID). Although coincidence is not the sole focus of my reading, my aim is to show that Hardy's use of coincidence works in conjunction with other formal elements in order to cultivate a historicist perspective.

#### I. "Casual Relics" and Hardy's Historicist Habit of Mind

During the construction of Hardy's new home Max Gate in 1884, two graves from the Roman period were unearthed, yielding skeletons and fragments of pottery. Hardy described the findings to the local Dorset Natural History and Antiquarian Field

Club in a speech entitled “Some Romano-British Relics Found at Max Gate.” After providing a description of the various articles found in the graves, Hardy concludes his remarks with these thoughts:

In spite of the numerous vestiges that have been discovered from time to time of the Roman city which formerly stood on the site of modern Dorchester, [...] one is struck with the fact that little has been done towards piecing together and reconstructing these evidences into an unmutilated whole—[...] a whole which should represent Dorchester in particular and not merely the general character of a Roman station in this country—composing a true picture by which the uninformed could mentally realize the ancient scene with some completeness.

It would be a worthy attempt to rehabilitate, on paper, the living Durnovaria of fourteen or fifteen hundred years ago—as it actually appeared to the eyes of the then Dorchester men and women, under the rays of the same morning and evening sun which rises and sets over it now. [...Standing on some] commanding point, we may ask what kind of object did Dorchester then form in the summer landscape as viewed from such a point; where stood the large buildings, where the small, how did the roofs group themselves, what were the gardens like, if any, what social character had the streets, what were the customary noises, what sort of exterior was exhibited by these hybrid Romano-British people, apart from the soldiery?<sup>135</sup>

---

<sup>135</sup> *Thomas Hardy's Public Voice: The Essays, Speeches, and Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Michael Millgate (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), pg. 64.

As Michael Millgate suggests, Hardy's speech is "frankly amateurish"<sup>136</sup> from an antiquarian or archaeological perspective, yet his concluding remarks display a strange fascination with the way in which relics enable us to reconstruct a past culture into an "unmutilated whole." The unexpected discovery of vestiges of the past reminds Hardy that an ostensibly "natural" landscape is in fact layered with history. As the foundation is dug for his new home, Hardy discovers that he is building not on top of a natural landscape, but on the remnants of past civilizations. Hardy imagines standing on a hill, looking out onto the Dorset countryside, and being able to "mentally realize" what that scene might have been like millennia ago. While the landscape is largely the same, the social character of that area is now entirely different. Hardy's idea of moving from shards of pottery and fragments of bone to the "unmutilated whole" of a departed society is clearly fanciful, but it demonstrates the power such relics had over his imagination.

The Preface to the 1895-6 edition of *The Trumpet-Major* (1880), Hardy's only historical novel, voices similar ideas and also illustrates more precisely the conceptual importance of relics to Hardy's thinking. In describing the origins and sources of the novel, Hardy writes:

Down to the middle of this century, and later, there were not wanting, in the neighbourhood of the places more or less clearly indicated herein, casual relics of the circumstances amid which the action moves—our preparations for the defence against the threatened invasion of England by Buonaparte. An outhouse door riddled with bullet-holes, which had been extemporized by a solitary man as a target for firelock practice when the landing was hourly expected, a heap of bricks and clods on a beacon-hill,

---

<sup>136</sup> "Some Romano-British Relics Found at Max Gate," pg. 61.

which had formed the chimney and walls of the hut occupied by the beacon-keeper, worm-eaten shafts and iron heads of pikes for the use of those who had no better weapons, ridges on the down thrown up during the encampment, fragments of volunteer uniform, and other such lingering remains, brought to my imagination in early childhood the state of affairs at the date of the war more vividly than volumes of history could have done.<sup>137</sup>

As opposed to religious relics, which are preserved for an explicit memorial purpose, Hardy's "casual relics" are material remnants that have simply survived the transformations of time. Yet, like religious relics, they have the power to inspire awe and immerse one in the past "more vividly than volumes of history."

Like this description of the casual relics of the Napoleonic era, a description of the well-shaft in Marygreen at the beginning of *Jude the Obscure* (1895) demonstrates that the power of such casual relics depends upon the knowledge of the observer. As Jude peers down the well-shaft after Mr. Philloston's departure for Christminster, the narrator remarks that the well-shaft "was probably the only relic of the local history that remained absolutely unchanged. Many of the thatched and dormered dwelling-houses had been pulled down of late years... [and] the original church... had been taken down, and either cracked up into heaps of road-metal in the lane, or utilized as pig-sty walls, garden seats, guard-stones to fences, and rockeries in the flower-beds of the neighbourhood."<sup>138</sup> Just as the "heap of bricks" from *The Trumpet-Major* is simply a pile of rubble to the casual observer, the well-shaft has no historical significance for Jude. For the narrator, however, it is a relic because he knows, among

---

<sup>137</sup> *The Trumpet-Major* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), pg. 3.

<sup>138</sup> *Jude the Obscure* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), pg. 12.

other things, that the material of the original church has been incorporated into other structures. The fact that in Hardy a relic is always a relic “for someone” focuses our attention on the effects such encounters have on observers, enabling them to discern both their connection and disconnection with past social worlds. Just as relics provide a connection to the past for the observer, they also immerse the observer in a past that is fundamentally different from their present.

If the Roman bones and Napoleonic bullet-holes show the power relics possess to immerse the observer in a past milieu, a passage from *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876) reveals the effects such moments can have on the observer’s perception of their own situation. Visiting in the seaside village of Knollsea, Ethelberta decides to explore the celebrated ruins of Coomb Castle and attend a meeting of the association devoted to its preservation. Ethelberta had never been to such a meeting, but

what was left in any shape from the past was her constant interest, because it recalled her to herself and fortified her mind. Persons waging a harassing social fight are apt in the interest of the combat to forget the smallness of the end in view; and the hints that the perishing historical remnants afforded her of the attenuating effects of time even upon great struggles corrected the apparent scale of her own. She was reminded that in a strife for such a ludicrously small object as the entry of drawing-rooms, winning, equally with losing, is below the zero of the true philosopher’s concern.<sup>139</sup>

Whereas Hardy’s encounter with the Romano-British relics thrusts him imaginatively into the past, Ethelberta’s experience of the remnants of Coomb Castle “[recalls] her to herself.” The juxtaposition of the remnants of the past with her current social

---

<sup>139</sup> *The Hand of Ethelberta* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), pg. 235.

situation enables her to put that situation into perspective, to recognize its particularity and its transience. The encounter with relics of the past, in other words, not only offers the individual a vision of the past, but in doing so also generates an altered perspective on the present.

While this process is beneficial for Ethelberta, enabling her to fortify herself for the petty social struggles she faces in her attempts at social ascent, such realizations of the “attenuating effects of time” can also be threatening to the individual’s sense of self. The “cliffhanger” scene in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* is the most famous episode in the novel, one often discussed in the context of Hardy’s relationship to Darwin. As the novel’s heroine Elfrida and her second lover—the geologist Henry Knight—stroll along the “Cliff without a Name,” they are caught in a sudden storm, which results in Knight finding himself on the brink of death, hanging perilously from the cliff:

By one of those familiar conjunctions in which the inanimate world baits the mind of man when he pauses in moments of suspense, opposite Knight’s eyes was an imbedded fossil, standing forth in low relief from the rock. It was a creature with eyes. The eyes, dead and turned to stone, were even now regarding him. It was one of those early crustaceans called Trilobites. Separated by millions of years in their lives, Knight and this underling seemed to have met in their death. It was the single instance within reach of his vision of anything that had ever been alive and had had a body to save, as he himself had now.

The creature represented but a low type of animal existence, for never in their vernal years had the plains indicated by those numberless slaty layers been traversed by intelligence worthy of the name. Zoophytes, mollusca, shell-fish, were the highest developments of those ancient dates.

The immense lapses of time each formation represented had known nothing of the dignity of man. They were grand times, but they were mean times too, and mean were their relics. He was to be with the small in his death [...]

Time closed up like a fan before him. He saw himself at one extremity of the years, face to face with the beginning and all the intermediate centuries simultaneously.<sup>140</sup>

The passage extends for several pages, as Knight travels imaginatively in time, reflecting on the life of prehistoric man and his own mortality. Whereas the realization of the “attenuating effects of time” fortifies Ethelberta insofar as it enables her to recognize the “smallness” of social customs, for Knight the realization seems to have quite a different effect. His encounter with the trilobite, a relic of a time before human existence, forces him to recognize the insignificance of his own life in relation to the grand scale of geological time.

This passage is one of the most significant in Hardy’s early works, and in it Darwin’s influence on Hardy’s thinking and art is clearly palpable. For critics wishing to emphasize Hardy’s “Naturalist” or “Darwinian habit of mind,” this passage provides plenty of food for evolutionary thought. Such readings of Hardy tend to emphasize the way in which his novels depict the plight of humankind in a world indifferent, if not antagonistic, to human meaning. As Gillian Beer remarks in her influential study of Darwin’s influence on the Victorian novel, plot in Hardy usually “involves the overthrow of the individual by the inevitability of death or by the machinations (or disregard) of ‘crass casualty’.”<sup>141</sup> Yet the drive to “find Darwin” in

---

<sup>140</sup> *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), pgs. 213-4. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

<sup>141</sup> *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), pg. 223. The term “crass casualty” is from Hardy’s poem

Hardy forces us to disregard other important elements of his work. In the passage from *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, for example, it is necessary to remember that the entire passage is focalized through Knight, the geologist. It is his knowledge which allows him to understand the trilobite as a “mean relic” and to imaginatively span the eons between its existence and his own. More importantly, if his encounter with this relic forces him to recognize the smallness of his existence, it also—like Ethelberta’s visit to Coomb Castle—“recalls him to himself.” After Knight pictures the eons uniting him with the fossil, his first thought is, “Was he to die? The mental picture of Elfride in the world, without himself to cherish her, smote his heart like a whip” (*A Pair of Blue Eyes* 214). The consequences of Knight’s confrontation with his own mortality are distinctly social, since it is this adventure that leads him to abandon his class scruples and declare his devotion to Elfride. As different as Knight and Ethelberta’s encounters with relics might be, they have similar effects insofar as the juxtaposition of past and present puts that present into perspective and draws our attention to its unique features.

Put somewhat differently, how we understand such juxtapositions depends on our emphasis. Read in isolation, what is remarkable about the cliffhanger scene is the way in which it places Knight’s individual existence and the relic he encounters against the backdrop of grand scales of time. However, read in the context of these

---

“Hap.” For other discussions of Darwin and Hardy, see George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists*, pg. 227-34 and “Hardy and Darwin: An Enchanting Hardy?” [*A Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. Keith Wilson (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2009), pgs. 36-53], as well as Richard Kaye, *The Flirt’s Tragedy: Desire Without End in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction* (Charlottesville: The Univ. Press of Virginia, 2002), pgs. 118-150. As Kaye notes, “Although Hardy’s fictional extrapolation of Darwinian concepts has been a mainstay of criticism of the novelist’s work, such correlations more often have been evoked than fully illustrated” (142). A statement from Angelique Richardson exemplifies my claim that Hardy’s historicist habit of mind needs to be distinguished from Darwinian influence. Richardson writes, “Through this emphasis on the environment Hardy embraces the central tenet of Darwinism, the interrelation of individual and environment, and ultimately, the subordination of species to their surroundings” (“Hardy and Science: A Chapter of Accidents,” pg. 167). I, too, believe that Hardy is interested in exploring the “interrelation of individual and environment,” but I believe it is imperative that we think of “environment” in a strict social sense.



## II. Coincidence and “Casual Relics” in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*

The manner in which relics generate juxtapositions of the past and present and highlight their salient features provides a context for analyzing the form of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. In teasing out the historicist strain of Hardy’s thought, the importance of coincidence was not readily apparent, though Hardy’s unforeseen encounter with the relics at Max Gate and Knight’s meeting with the trilobite intimated that the power of relics for Hardy inheres in their ability to generate unexpected confrontations with the past. The plots of Hardy’s novels frequently utilize coincidences to create such confrontations with relics and the past. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), for example, the return of the furmity vendor brings to light the truth about Henchard’s past, and Tess, of course, is frequently reminded of the past she is trying to escape through encounters with Alec D’Urberville and others. While in these novels characters encounter relics of their past in the form of people, in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* such encounters involve “casual relics”—seemingly ordinary objects that nevertheless retain the power to revive the past. Coincidences involving three casual relics—an earring, a potted plant, and a tombstone—are central to the novel’s structure because they bring about the dissolution of the engagement between Elfride Swancourt and her second lover, Henry Knight. Attending to the effects of coincidence in the novel, therefore, can enable us to understand how Hardy’s historicist habit of mind manifests itself in the form of his novels.

Hardy’s third published novel, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* has the explicit class concerns, biting humor, semi-autobiographical characters, and sensational plot that characterize many of Hardy’s “lesser” works, those novels not belonging to the half-dozen “Wessex Novels” considered to be his finest. Despite its marginal status in Hardy’s oeuvre, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* is an important forerunner of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, particularly in the way that the heroine’s marriage is ruined by the

revelation of a past lover. In both novels, this revelation is damaging not necessarily in itself, but because the men fetishize the “natural” purity of their lovers. Both novels use coincidences to stage a confrontation between the fantasy of naturalness and the reality of social existence, thus highlighting the tragic limitations on the heroine’s self-determination. Therefore, although *A Pair of Blue Eyes* does not demonstrate Hardy at the height of his powers, it is nevertheless an important novel because it deals with issues and utilizes devices Hardy would return to throughout his career as a novelist. In the same way that *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) provides a helpful point of reference for understanding Austen’s more mature works, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* is useful for drawing our attention to certain features of Hardy’s aesthetics.

*A Pair of Blue Eyes* opens with the arrival in Endelstow of Stephen Smith, a young architectural assistant from London who has come to make sketches for the restoration of the local church. As Stephen lodges with the local parson, Mr. Swancourt, romance blooms between Stephen and Swancourt’s daughter, Elfride, and the father allows the courtship to proceed, believing Stephen to be of the professional class. On the brink of engagement, the two lovers make confessions: Stephen admits that, although he has professional ambitions, he is actually the son of the local stonemason, and Elfride confesses that she has been loved before by a boy named Felix Jethway. Elfride is emphatic that she did not reciprocate Felix’s feelings—in fact, she spurns Felix when he attempts to kiss her, which causes Felix to essentially pine to death (he is, we learn later, buried on the day of Stephen’s arrival). Mr. Swancourt strictly forbids the marriage when he learns of Stephen’s heritage, as he has his own class pretensions and ambitions. Stephen receives an opportunity in India to advance his prospects, and the two lovers decide to wed before his departure in order to solidify their commitment while Stephen attempts to make himself worthy in Mr. Swancourt’s eyes. However, confusion over the local marriage license dooms their

plan, and their only option is to elope and marry in London. Although they depart with the intention of getting married, Elfride loses courage and insists that they return immediately upon their arrival at Paddington station. Elfride realizes the potential disgrace that might arise from her “wretched vacillation,” and, unluckily, the couple is seen upon their return by Mrs. Jethway (*A Pair of Blue Eyes* 113). Her coincidental appearance is significant because the woman believes that Elfride has “killed” (79) her son, leading her to “haunt Elfride like a shadow” (287) for the remainder of the novel. During Stephen’s absence in India, Elfride is thrown into contact with Henry Knight, a more worldly man who is both Stephen’s mentor and the relative of Elfride’s rich new stepmother (whom Swancourt has married primarily to advance Elfride’s prospects). Knight initially finds Elfride silly, having been the reviewer who panned her historical romance, but the two are gradually brought together, as Elfride’s supposedly “raw” (292) and “unused state” have “great charm” for Knight (320-1). Their engagement dissolves, however, when through the “concatenation of circumstance” Knight’s growing doubts about Elfride’s past are confirmed by encounters with casual relics of her previous relationships, which compel her to confess her past lovers (323). A final blow is struck when Mrs. Jethway forwards Knight a letter written by Elfride, which begs the grief-stricken mother not to ruin her prospects. Knight, having definitively broken the engagement, departs for a tour of Europe to clear his mind. Returning over a year later, he chances upon Stephen. The two exchange their experiences, causing both to realize their continued love for Elfride. Both rush to Endelstow to claim her, only to find that she has recently died after marrying the local nobleman, Lord Luxellian.

The central issues in the novel are similar to the ones Hardy would later return to in *Tess*: the question of purity—as a bodily fact, a moral quality, and a social fantasy—and the power of the past to haunt and determine the present. These two

issues become intertwined through coincidences. Chance encounters with casual relics of the past juxtapose that past with the present in a manner that foregrounds the fantasy of Elfride's "naturalness" or purity. These irruptions of the past into the present draw the reader's attention to the social forces—most notably those related to class—which shape and determine Elfride's fate. In other words, the structure of the novel's plot, through its various returns and repetitions, highlights the social context of Elfride's life and the courtship of her blue eyes.

While Stephen is away in India seeking his fortune, coincidences involving casual relics of Elfride's relationship with him—an earring and a potted plant—bring that past to bear on the present. During their courtship, Stephen and Elfride visit the seaside cliffs, and after their first kiss, Elfride promises Stephen that ““nothing shall make me cease to love you”” (62). Upon their return home, Elfride discovers that she has lost an earring and tells Stephen that it must be on the cliff since she ““remember[s] a faint sensation of some change about me”” (67-8). The earring becomes a symbol of the change occurring in Elfride, a symbol which in turn becomes external to her and part of the landscape. Later in the novel, Knight proposes to take Elfride to the same cliffs, and Elfride is keenly aware of the repetition: “A duplicate of her original arrangement with Stephen. Some fatality must be hanging over her head [...] Elfride had still too lively a sense of the past to enjoy the idea of imitating to the letter peculiar actions she had lately gone through with another lover and other hopes” (308). As the lovers gaze upon the sea, Knight wonders if other lovers have sat where they now sit, prompting Elfride to recall her visit with Stephen and her lost earring. Elfride glances around for the earring and sees it glinting in a crevice: “Only for a few minutes during the day did the sun light the alcove to its innermost rifts and slits, but these were the minutes now, and its level rays did Elfride the good or evil turn of revealing the lost trinket” (309). Elfride, having previously mentioned the loss

of the earring to Knight (though not the circumstances of the loss) is “seized with a misgiving that Knight, on seeing the object, would be reminded of her words.” However, in attempting to surreptitiously dig the earring out of the crevice in order to conceal it, she in fact draws Knight’s attention to it.

In the previous chapter, Elfride has offered to give Knight, who is preparing to return to London for a time, something “to make [him] think of [her] during this autumn at [his] chambers” (297). Rather than choosing the customary lock of hair or portrait, Knight selects a “dwarf myrtle-tree in the pot, which [Elfride has] been so carefully tending” (297). Like the earring, the myrtle-tree enacts a repetition, for “it so happened that the myrtle Knight unluckily had singled out had a peculiar beginning and history. It had originally been a twig worn in Stephen Smith’s button-hole, and he had taken it thence, stuck it into the pot, and told her that if it grew, she was to take care of it, and keep it in remembrance of him when he was far away.” In attempting to create a memento of Elfride to unite the distance between London and Endelstow, Knight actually brings Elfride’s past alive by the same process. Not only does the plant form an objective link between Elfride and her first lover, who is now geographically distant, but its natural attribute—the fact that it has grown from a twig into a plant—objectifies the time between her commitment to Stephen and the present moment. Like the earring, then, the potted plant reminds Elfride of the persistence of the past, while simultaneously eroding the image of purity that Knight idealizes.

Following the trip to the cliffs, Knight interrogates Elfride about her past, his suspicions having been aroused by Elfride’s reactions to the myrtle-tree and earring. Before she can reply to Knight’s inquiries about past lovers, “the moonlight returned again, irradiating that portion of the churchyard within their view” and illuminating “a white tomb—the tomb of Felix Jethway” (315). Felix’s tomb is an extremely important site in the novel, as aside from being an explicit memorial of Felix, it is also

the location where Stephen and Elfride first come to an understanding. After Stephen confesses his lowly class origins, Elfride confesses that someone has loved her before: “‘Where is he now?’ ‘*Here.*’ [...] ‘Where here?’ ‘Under us. He is under this tomb. He is dead, and we are sitting on his grave’” (78). The tombstone not only revives these memories in Elfride, but it spurs a series of associations in Knight’s mind and impels him to wrest a confession from Elfride about Felix and eventually about Stephen. Knight exclaims, “‘What, a lover in the tomb and a lover on it?’” (318). The repetition of events on the tombstone—a lover in it and then a lover on it, and now another lover near it—reflects its function as palimpsest, a piece of stone that becomes a relic memorializing Elfride’s experiences with Felix and Stephen. All of these objects, then, are objectifications of Elfride’s past that have a distinct power over her memory. Although the past they memorialize has receded out of view, moments of chance or coincidence activate that past and bring it to bear on Elfride’s present.

These objects are not the only means by which Elfride’s past is objectively carried forward into the present. Mrs. Jethway also plays an extremely important role to this effect, most vividly when she accuses Elfride of killing Felix. Although Mrs. Jethway tells Elfride, “‘He died because you were his own well-agreed sweetheart, and then proved false—and it killed him,’” the attachment appears to have been entirely on Felix’s side (271). Elfride simply “‘said [she] liked the name Felix better than any other name in the parish,’” and then later asked Felix to help her dismount from her horse, only to later rebuff his attempt to kiss her. Felix here seems to be an anticipatory parody of Michael Furey of Joyce’s “The Dead,” and his mother is a figure of excessive grief turned into melodramatic vengeance. Elfride’s behavior is far from coquettish, having never encouraged Felix “‘by look, word, or sign,’” yet she is nevertheless made to feel the guilt of both a murderess and a sexual being (78). As she tells Mrs. Jethway, “‘I little expected to be scourged with my own kindness’”

(273). Her guilt is an illusion—both in the sense that Felix and his death are not represented in the novel and in the sense that she is not culpable—but it pursues her in the guise of Mrs. Jethway. When Mrs. Jethway is coincidentally present when Elfride and Stephen return from London, Elfride’s illusory sexual guilt is united to her more substantive guilt because Mrs. Jethway becomes the bearer of her secret. Ultimately, Mrs. Jethway is the vehicle of Elfride’s undoing, since she sends Knight the note Elfride has written to her, which pleads with her “in the name of common womanhood” not to “execute the threats you have repeated to me” (331). However, Elfride is the agent of her own demise insofar as, by writing the note, she accepts the illusory guilt attributed to her.

The importance of coincidence to the novel’s events certainly makes it seem as if some “fatality must be hanging over” Elfride. The terror aroused by the menacing presence of Mrs. Jethway is extended to everyday objects and to the landscape itself as the plot of the novel coincidentally and repeatedly presents Elfride with relics of her past. Indeed, the third volume of the novel seems to justify complaints about the mechanistic nature of Hardy’s plots.<sup>144</sup> The first chapter contains Elfride’s failed confession to Knight, a chance encounter with Mrs. Jethway, and then her engagement to Knight. Following this, encounters with relics come in quick succession: Mrs. Jethway is coincidentally on the same boat as Elfride and Knight (Ch. II); Knight asks

---

<sup>144</sup> For example, in *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harvest Books, 1956), E.M. Forster says that Hardy’s works exemplify those in which “plot triumph[s] too completely.” According to Forster, as opposed to *The Dynasts* (1904-8) in which “the hammer-strokes are heard, cause and effect enchain the characters despite their struggles, complete contact between the actors and the plot is established,” in Hardy’s novels “though the same supreme and terrible machine works, it never catches humanity in its teeth” (pgs. 93-4). In a much more recent article, Zena Meadowsong focuses on the “mechanical” nature of *Tess*, arguing that the novel’s plot devices—including coincidence—reflect the novel’s formal internalization of the problem of industrialization. I agree with Meadowsong insofar as she sees coincidence and other aspects of the novel’s form as directing the reader toward the social realm; however, I disagree with her characterization of coincidence as a “deformation of narrative realism” because it implies that coincidence is inherently opposed to realism. See Meadowsong, “Thomas Hardy and the Machine: The Mechanical Deformation of Narrative Realism in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*,” *Nineteenth Century Literature* 64.2 (2009): 225-48.

to have the myrtle-tree as a memento of Elfride (Ch. III); Elfride and Knight travel to the cliffs where the lost earring is discovered (Ch. IV); Felix's tomb is illuminated during the conversation in the churchyard (Ch. V). Knight finally breaks off their engagement in Chapter VII after receiving the note from Mrs. Jethway. The timing of the letter is more significant than its contents, as it "had a virtue in the accident of its juncture far beyond any it intrinsically exhibited" (331).

The devices Hardy uses here are indeed crude: an earring wedged in a rocky crevice and a bereft mother bent on revenge. However, it would be a mistake to read these events as a sign of a "fatality" besetting Elfride. Indeed, far from being arbitrary, these events draw our attention to the social forces shaping Elfride's fate, most notably the social fantasy of her purity. The juxtaposition of Knight's fantasy of Elfride as "natural" with the numerous objective reminders that Elfride is a thoroughly social being highlights the contradictions in the forces that shape her life. Knight's fantasy is itself a by-product of class ideology, the same ideology that compels Mr. Swancourt to drive away Stephen and instead promote Knight's suit. Elfride here is not up against "the nature of things, the entire universe." Rather, she is up against a set of specifiable social forces, forces to which coincidental encounters with relics direct our attention. To be sure, these forces are not portrayed with much complexity, but they are nevertheless the ones we know Hardy was preoccupied with during the early years of his career as a novelist, such as in his first (unpublished and now lost) manuscript, *The Poor Man and the Lady*.<sup>145</sup>

*A Pair of Blue Eyes*, then, illustrates the role coincidences and casual relics play in Hardy's aesthetics. In a notebook entry from 1890, Hardy wrote, "Art is a

---

<sup>145</sup> See Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: His Career as a Novelist* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1971), pgs. 17-25 for a brief description of what is known about this lost novel. Millgate suggests that Hardy reworked some of the material from the social satire into subsequent novels, including *A Pair of Blue Eyes*.

disproportioning—(i.e., distorting, throwing out of proportion)—of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked. Hence ‘realism’ is not Art.”<sup>146</sup> Although Hardy here dismisses “realism,” he nevertheless posits Art as realist insofar as Art disproportion reality in order to have the reader observe its salient features. Thus, Brian Richardson’s claim that coincidence is excluded from the nineteenth-century novel so that “the extensive effects of social and biological forces can be shown in all their complexity and self-sufficiency”<sup>147</sup> can only cause us to overlook or misunderstand the principles of Hardy’s aesthetics. While coincidences appear to create “unnatural” or “improbable” chains of cause and effect, in the case of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, they disportion features of reality in order to foreground the social forces that shape Elfride’s life and her tragic fate.<sup>148</sup>

### III. Coincidence, FID, and the Form of *The Return of the Native*

While *A Pair of Blue Eyes* juxtaposes the past and present through casual relics to highlight the social forces that shape its protagonist’s fate, *The Return of the Native*

---

<sup>146</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate (Athens: The Univ. of Georgia Press, 1985), pg. 239.

<sup>147</sup> *Unlikely Stories*, pg. 41

<sup>148</sup> In this sense, coincidence in Hardy can be thought of in “positive” terms insofar as it points to a positive content. Most critics have considered chance in Hardy as a negation, both in the sense of it as an explicit negation of human freedom and in the sense of Hardy’s use of failed convergences, which indicate lost opportunity. Viewing coincidence negatively leads logically to certain claims, such as that things would have been different for Tess *if only* her letter had reached Angel as she had intended. My point would be that things might have worked out somewhat differently for Tess, but not *that* differently. And this is not because she is beset by some abstract fatalism, but rather because we have a rich enough picture of the social forces that beset her. Put differently, the complications of plot do not cause Tess’s (and Elfride’s, and Eustacia’s) demise, but rather heighten the reader’s sense of the forces shaping the heroine’s fate. For readings emphasizing the negative side of Hardy’s use of chance and coincidence, see Dannenberg, pgs. 103-4 and Bert Hornback, *The Metaphor of Chance: Vision and Technique in the Works of Thomas Hardy* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1971).

juxtaposes different perspectives on the present in order to do the same. *The Return of the Native* is Hardy's most profound exploration of community and unique among his oeuvre—not coincidentally—in its lack of a central protagonist. The lives of the main characters of the novel—Clym, Eustacia, Wildeve, Diggory Venn, and Mrs. Yeobright—are all shaped in a significant manner by their conflicts with the community and values of Egdon Heath. The tragic fates experienced by most of these characters result from their attempts to achieve happiness without understanding the social context of their actions—that is to say, as a result of their limited perspectives.

In the reading that follows, I argue that the form of the novel attunes the reader to the seeing these characters in the proper (that is, historicist) perspective. On one hand, this will involve an analysis of the way in which coincidences and moments of chance create opportunities for juxtaposing individual perspectives on events, the combination of which enables the reader to achieve a greater understanding of events than characters themselves have access to. As I have argued throughout my discussion of Hardy, coincidences in the novel do not embody some philosophical statement about the rule of chance over characters' lives, but rather generate opportunities for the reader to see the social forces such as class that shape those lives. On the other hand, this reading will also involve an extended analysis of the novel's use of free indirect discourse. Hardy's novels are usually noted for their distinct lack of FID, but *The Return of the Native* is an important exception. As I shall argue, passages of FID in the novel are significant because, like coincidences, they juxtapose different perspectives on events in order to attune the reader to the social context of the characters' lives. Therefore, even though my reading is not focused solely on coincidence, it nevertheless illustrates how coincidence works in junction with other important elements of the novel's form in order to cultivate the proper historicist perspective.

Even though relics do not play an important role in the narrative structure of *The Return of the Native*, the term does appear once in the text, in a significant passage that also illustrates what I mean by “the proper perspective.” As the sixth and final book of the novel opens, we learn that Clym Yeobright, after the tragic deaths of his wife and mother, has developed a new habit:

He frequently walked the heath alone, when the past seized upon him with its shadowy hand, and held him there to listen to its tale. His imagination would then people the spot with its ancient inhabitants: forgotten Celtic tribes trod their tracks about him, and he could almost live among them, look in their faces, and see them standing beside the barrows which swelled around, untouched and perfect as at the time of their erection. Those of the dyed barbarians who had chosen cultivable tracts were, in comparison with those who had left their marks here, as writers on paper beside writers on parchment. Their records had perished long ago by the plough, while the works of these remained. Yet they had all lived and died unconscious of the different fates awaiting their relics. It reminded him that unforeseen factors operate in the evolution of immortality.<sup>149</sup>

Even in a novel as obsessed with seeing as *The Return of the Native*, this is a strange moment of vision. Time is flattened in a peculiar manner, as past and present co-exist: Clym achieves a kind of double vision that enables him “to almost live among” extinct tribes but simultaneously to see them from a perspective where their works are regarded as “relics.” Although Egdon Heath is frequently noted—both in the novel and by critics—for its intractability to human will, it is that very characteristic which

---

<sup>149</sup> *The Return of the Native* (1912 text; New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), pg. 315-6. If further proof of the special importance Hardy attached to “relics” were needed, in 1895 Hardy changed the word “works” to “relics” in the penultimate sentence of this passage.

makes this moment possible. The fact that the Celtic tribes had chosen the heath for their barrows means that their gestures toward immortality have, unlike those of the dyed barbarians, survived. As with the encounters with relics I have discussed throughout this chapter, this is a moment of difference and continuity. Clym is immersed in the past but simultaneously viewing it from a perspective that recognizes its specificity.

The dual perspective Clym achieves in this moment is not only a thematic aim of the novel, but also a way of seeing that the novel cultivates formally through both its plot structure and through its tactical use of free indirect discourse. Throughout the novel, FID appears at moments where characters reflect upon their situations and attempt to anticipate the outcome of events. While in these moments the reader is subtly immersed in the perspective of the situated individual, the shift out of the free indirect mode indicates to the reader the limitations of that perspective. These limitations are in turn further emphasized by the plot, which relies heavily on moments of chance and coincidence. As in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, such events turn the reader's attention to the forces and "unforeseen factors" that shape the characters' lives, factors which characters themselves are unable to fully grasp. Therefore, whereas FID is usually recognized for the way it blends voice, what distinguishes it in *The Return of the Native* is the way it juxtaposes perspectives. In other words, what is important is not that FID is providing us access to characters' interiority, but rather that it is providing us with a detached immediacy to a characters' perspective: we regard events how they regard them but simultaneously see that perspective in its social context. While the plot and tragedy of the novel are fueled by characters' inability to see and anticipate those "unforeseen factors" that Clym appreciates by the novel's end, these failures are embedded within a formal structure that attunes the reader to historical contingency.

Vision is a persistent thematic concern of the novel. It enters the novel not only in the form of the eye troubles that beset Clym, but also in the way that class and education influence people's perception. For example, the complicated romantic entanglements that drive the early part of the novel largely result from Mrs. Yeobright's concern over how people will view Thomasin when they learn that she has not married Wildeve after all. This concern with vision also manifests itself on a discursive level. From the outset of the novel, point of view is continually shifting. The events atop Rainbarrow during the novel's opening scene are first presented as Diggory Venn sees them at a distance as he approaches the heath. Then, as Eustacia's presence atop the barrow is described, the perspective shifts to that of an "imaginative stranger," who might have supposed that the woman was "one of the Celts who built the barrow, so far had all of modern date withdrawn from the scene."<sup>150</sup> As the perspective zooms in to a view of the Egdonites gathered around the bonfire, the perspective on the characters becomes unstable: "the permanent moral expression of each face it was impossible to discover, for as the nimble flames towered, nodded, and swooped through the surrounding air the blots of shade and flakes of light upon the countenances of the group changed shape and position endlessly" (21). While in this moment the point of view is disembodied, external to the characters, at other points in the text the discourse shifts to moments of intense experiential narration, such as when Mrs. Yeobright sits on the heath in her final moments, observing a colony of ants, or the passage describing Clym's "curious microscopic" experience as a furze-cutter (247).

It not just the perspective on events that shifts, but also the perspective on characters. Eustacia and Clym, for example, are both introduced with a full chapter

---

<sup>150</sup> *The Return of the Native* (1878 text; New York: Penguin Books, 1999), pg. 17. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text, unless otherwise noted.

devoted to a description of their characters. At times, these descriptions ask the reader to view the character through mythic lenses. Eustacia is first described as “the raw material of divinity” (68) before the narrator remarks that “the new moon behind her head, an odd helmet upon it, a diadem of accidental dewdrops round her brow, would have been adjuncts sufficient to strike the note of Artemis, Athena, or Hera” (69). However, these gestures toward abstraction are attenuated by persistent acknowledgement that individuals are shaped by their circumstances. Much is made of Eustacia’s education in Budmouth and how it has made her ill-fitted for life on Egdon: “Every bizarre effect that could result from the random intertwining of watering-place glitter with the grand solemnity of a heath, were to be found in her” (70). Thus, although Eustacia appears as the “queen of the night” on the heath, we learn that “a narrow life in Budmouth might have completely demeaned her” (71). This entanglement of character and circumstance is no more apparent than in the case of Diggory Venn. On one hand, we see Diggory as the other characters see him—either as the mythic figure of the reddleman, or a man whose trade physically and socially alienates him from the genteel community. On the other hand, however, the presentation of Thomasin’s letter rejecting his suit enables us to understand that, even before his adoption of the reddle trade, class prejudice has shaped people’s perception of him. Therefore, while the reader is invited to view characters as others in the community see them, he or she is also taught to recognize that such situated perspectives are limited or at least shaped by factors such as class and education.

In my reading of *Tom Jones* in Chapter One, I emphasized how the novel’s narrator “trains” the reader to view accidents in a certain manner. *The Return of the Native* also trains its reader. This training, however, is not in how to interpret accidents, but rather in how to evaluate the competing perspectives on events and characters presented in the novel. Although the shifting perspectives I have discussed

might just seem to offer different, though equally limited views, the narrative attunes the reader to recognize the limitations of such perspectives. The primary mechanism the novel uses to accomplish this training is free indirect discourse. As I've already mentioned, FID is rather sparse in Hardy, particularly in relation to other contemporaries such as Trollope or James. And this absence is usually read as a confirmation that Hardy's novels are only presenting us with one voice—that they are “shamelessly monological,”<sup>151</sup> pitting the voice of the narrator against the characters. However, closer attention to the consistent manner in which FID is deployed reveals that the interplay of voices and perspectives in the novel is much more complex than is usually assumed. Although the free indirect mode only appears sporadically in *The Return of the Native*, these appearances are both significant and extremely tactical, for they always present character's thoughts at critical junctures in the plot. For example, when Eustacia learns that Thomasin might not desire Wildeve, the description of her “stupefied silence” is followed by a passage in the free indirect mode:<sup>152</sup>

*What curious feeling was this coming over her? Was it really possible that her interest in Wildeve had been so entirely the result of antagonism that the glory and the dream departed from the man with the first sound that he was no longer coveted by her rival? She was, then, secure of him at last. Thomasin no longer required him. What a humiliating victory! He loved her best, she thought; and yet—dared she to murmur such treacherous*

---

<sup>151</sup> Lock, pg. 25. As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, interpretations of Hardy's “monologism” and his use of chance go hand in hand. Lock, for instance, cites other critics who have emphasized Hardy's ““spectatorial narrator”” or the fact that he is ““one of the most scopophilic of novelists.”” As Lock notes, the term scopophilic draws on Foucault's theory of power and surveillance, implying Hardy's narrator is one “who enjoys the sense of control and possession that viewing bestows.” If we assume that Hardy's narrator is on “the outside” of his characters and intent on controlling them, then it soon follows that chance and coincidence are simply another instantiation of that control. My aim is to show both that there is not just one dominant vision in the novel and also that coincidence is operating in a more nuanced manner than this “monological” reading of Hardy suggests.

<sup>152</sup> Italics are added in all quoted passages to indicate FID.

*criticism ever so softly?—what was the man worth whom a woman inferior to herself did not value?* The sentiment which lurks more or less in all animate nature—that of not desiring the undesired of others—was lively as a passion in the supersubtle, epicurean heart of Eustacia. Her social superiority over him, which hitherto had scarcely ever impressed her, became unpleasantly insistent, and for the first time she felt that she had stooped in loving him. (101-2)

This passage is characteristic of FID in the novel because it demonstrates the keenness with which some characters perceive their situations. Eustacia here is strongly aware of the fact that her desire for Wildeve is generated by antagonism. In other words, she recognizes not only that her desire is triangulated and inherently social, but also that it is influenced by class (“what was the man worth whom a woman inferior to herself did not value”). At the same time, this passage is characteristic because the shift out of the free indirect mode marks the limitations of Eustacia’s discernment. Eustacia is not aware that the sentiment “of not desiring the undesired of others” lurks not just in herself but in all animate nature (or more particularly, in those with whom she is involved, such as Wildeve). What is important about this passage is not so much that we’re “hearing Eustacia’s voice,” but rather that we’re momentarily evaluating events from her perspective.<sup>153</sup>

A glance at other passages of FID supports the notion that its most important feature in the novel is the way it juxtaposes perspectives rather than how it blends

---

<sup>153</sup> The interpretation of this passage is made considerably more complicated by the allusion (“the glory and the dream departed from the man...”) to Wordsworth’s Intimations Ode: “Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?” (lines 56-57). The question is whose voice we’re hearing at this moment: is the narrator ironizing Eustacia’s experience through the allusion, or is Eustacia herself capable of ironizing her own experience in this way? Given Eustacia’s education, her self-awareness, and her worldview, I certainly think it likely that she could think about her own experience in these terms.

voices.<sup>154</sup> Although there are many passages that illustrate this point, three should be sufficient to demonstrate the pattern. The first passage occurs early in the novel. Mrs. Yeobright is on her way to try and convince Wildeve to fulfill his engagement to Thomasin, when Diggory approaches her and offers to marry her niece. Although Venn's offer does not change Mrs. Yeobright's plan to pressure Wildeve, it changes the manner in which she attempts to persuade him:

She knew enough of the male heart to see that with Wildeve, and indeed with the majority of men, the being able to state, at such a critical juncture, that another lover had eagerly bid for the hand that he was disposed to decline would immensely alter the situation. [...] Mrs. Yeobright accordingly resolved that her system of procedure should be changed. She had left home intent upon straightforwardness; she reached the inn determined to finesse. *To influence Wildeve by piquing him rather than by appealing to his generosity was obviously the wise course with such a man. She thanked God for the weapon which the reddleman had put into her hands.* (98)

The second passage narrates Wildeve's reaction after he receives a letter from Eustacia in which she rejects him, prompting him to marry Thomasin after all:

Wildeve was put upon his mettle by the situation. *To lose the two women—he who had been the well-beloved of both—was too ironical an issue to be endured. He could only decently save himself by Thomasin; and once he became her husband, Eustacia's repentance, he thought,*

---

<sup>154</sup> This is certainly an idiosyncratic way of reading FID; however, my point is that we need to understand FID in Hardy on its own terms and for the particular effects it produces. FID is not like calculus—it's not something you either do correctly or incorrectly. Rather, it's a considerably complex technique that has various effects depending on the context. If we attempt to evaluate FID in Hardy by comparing it to FID in James, then we're likely to draw conclusions very different from those we will draw by attending to its effects.

*would set in for a long and bitter term.* It was no wonder that Wildeve, ignorant of the new man at the back of the scene, should have supposed Eustacia to be playing a part. To believe that the letter was not the result of some momentary pique, to infer that she really gave him up to Thomasin, would have required previous knowledge of her transfiguration by that man's influence. (153)

The final passage details Clym's thoughts as contemplates the "three antagonistic growths" of his relationship with his mother, his desire for Eustacia, and his ambition to start a school. After realizing that Eustacia is in love with an idealized version of himself, Clym reflects:

Along with that came the widening breach between himself and his mother. Whenever any little occurrence had brought into more prominence than usual the disappointment that he was causing her it had sent him on lone and moody walks; or he was kept awake a great part of the night by the turmoil of spirit which such a recognition created. *If Mrs. Yeobright could only have been led to see what a sound and worthy purpose this purpose of his was, and how little it was being affected by his devotion to Eustacia, how differently would she regard him!* Thus as his sight grew accustomed to the first blinding halo kindled about him by love and beauty Yeobright began to perceive what strait he was in [...] Three antagonistic growths had to be kept alive: his mother's trust in him, his plan for becoming a teacher, and Eustacia's happiness. His fervid nature could not afford to relinquish one of these, though two of the three were as many as he could hope to preserve. (198-9)

What is common among these passages is the representation of a character's thought process as he or she attempts to understand and control external events—more

specifically, social relationships. While the free indirect mode momentarily immerses the reader in the character's belief in their ability to "read others" and control the outcome of events, the return of the narrator's perspective identifies contingencies that prevent them from doing so. Mrs. Yeobright believes it best to pique Wildeve rather than appeal to his generosity, but we are immediately told that "the greatest effect of her strategy on that day was, as often happens, in a quarter quite outside her view when arranging it" (100). Wildeve decides to marry Thomasin in order to spite Eustacia, but he is unaware that Eustacia's changed attitude toward him is a consequence of Clym's arrival. And Clym believes that it is possible to reconcile those three antagonistic growths, but he is unaware that "two of the three were as many as he could hope to preserve." Perhaps more importantly, although he believes his three projects are separate, we know that his educational plan and his desire for Eustacia are deeply intertwined. In each of these instances, the narrative discourse encourages us to see events through a character's eyes, but it simultaneously enables us to view that perspective in its broader social context.<sup>155</sup>

---

<sup>155</sup> Hardy's revisions to the text confirm that, on some level, this technique is deliberate. On the night of Eustacia's death, Clym anxiously awaits a response to his letter of reconciliation to his wife: "Secretly Clym had a more pleasing hope. *Eustacia might possibly decline to use her pen—it was rather her way to work silently—and surprise him by appearing at his door.* How fully her mind was made up to do otherwise he did not know" (1912; pg. 297) The first two sentences here appear in both the 1878 and 1895 editions of the text, but Hardy added the final sentence in 1912. Another important aspect of FID in the novel is that we only have access to the thoughts or perspectives of certain characters—Clym, Eustacia, Mrs. Yeobright, Wildeve and Diggory. In a somewhat idiosyncratic approach to the novel via Heidegger, J. Hillis Miller suggests that the use of FID is limited to those characters who have "authentic Daseins" insofar as they lead "an independent inner life" unlike the "they" of the Egdonites. Class and education are certainly a factor in whose thoughts we are presented, and this certainly raises a number of issues, but I'm not sure that ontology is necessarily one of them. What is at stake in the novel is not Being, but rather belonging. FID only appears in relation to these characters because it is their education and class status that put them at odds with the values and structure of the community in which they live. Miller's reading also serves as a useful point of comparison for my reading. Miller suggests that Hardy ascribes to Clym "insights into the way the mismatch between what men and women want and what natural laws allow makes happiness and the satisfaction of desire impossible." My argument is that the "mismatch" is not between human desire and natural laws, but rather between individual desire and its social context. Hardy, in other words, is not trying to move us beyond the milieu to a universal "human condition," but rather turning our attention to the particular milieu to see how it shapes the individual. See Miller, "Individual and

All of these passages dramatize a conflict between the will and circumstance. While this conflict frequently manifests itself in the novel as the desire to manipulate people and relationships, the novel also explores how one's broader milieu remains intractable to individual will. This, of course, is dramatized most explicitly through the failure of Clym's plan to educate the natives of Egdon upon his return from Paris. The text is quite explicit about the necessary failure of his project. In his desire to unite cosmopolitan "high thinking" with the "plain living" of the heath, Clym fails to recognize that the positivism of Comte is not only unintelligible to furze-cutters but more importantly unsuited for them (172). The fact that the community of Egdon will remain resistant to Clym's ideological project is bolstered by the rich sense of that community as a "fossilized survival"—a community formed through inherited social customs and practices (122). The failure of Clym's project, in other words, makes it abundantly clear that the organization and way of life in a particular community are not the product of mere ideas but rather the result of various forms of social inheritance. Clym has a rich understanding of culture, but is nevertheless unable to grasp the extent of its influence. As he waits for Eustacia on the night they become engaged, he gazes at the moon and reflects upon the fact that in returning to the heath community "he had anticipated an escape from the chafing of social necessities; yet behold they were here also": "More than ever he longed to be in some world where personal ambition was not the only recognised form of progress—such, perhaps, as might have been the case at some time or other in the silvery globe then shining upon him" (193). Clym gazes at the moon and fantasizes about a world without culture. In poignant contrast to the moment at the end of the novel which I discussed above, Clym imagines such a world "till he almost felt himself to be voyaging bodily through

---

Community in *The Return of the Native*," in *Thomas Hardy Reappraised*, ed. Keith Wilson (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2006), pgs. 154-173.

[the moon's] wild scenes, standing on its hollow hills, [...] or mounting to the edges of its craters.” At this point in the novel, in other words, Clym can imagine a world without culture, but cannot quite grasp the implications of being immersed in a particular culture.

Whereas Clym desires escape only after the failure of his “culture scheme,” Eustacia desires escape from Edgon from the outset of the novel, and coincidental encounters heighten our awareness of the illusory nature of her desire for escape (245). Even before Clym arrives home, we are abundantly aware that Eustacia desires him almost solely because he is coming from the glamorous world of Paris and, perhaps more importantly, can potentially transport her there. On the night of his arrival, however, this desire is heightened as she coincidentally crosses paths with Clym and his mother on the heath: “she could not, for a moment, believe that chance, unrequested, had brought into her presence the soul of the house she had gone to inspect” (116). While this encounter only increases the mystery surrounding Clym, the implications that Clym and Eustacia are wholly incompatible are readily apparent to the reader as Eustacia overhears Clym remark “upon the friendliness and geniality written in the faces of the hills around.” The fact that Clym represents only the illusion—and not the concrete opportunity—of escape is emphasized by the dream which this encounter generates. Although Eustacia’s dream that night was “amid the circumstances of [her] life [...] as wonderful as a dream could be,” the “heath dimly appeared behind the general brilliancy of the action” (118).

Another coincidental encounter later in the novel further emphasizes the illusory nature of her desire to disentangle herself from her community. In an attempt to “battle against Depression”—depression generated by Clym’s blindness and his growing fondness for life on the heath—Eustacia decides to attend a dance in a nearby village, where she coincidentally encounters Wildeve (251). As the two dance—their

anonymity and their nominal relation as brother-and-sister-in-law making it ostensibly decorous—old desires are awakened in Eustacia:

*How near she was Wildeve! it was terrible to think of. She could feel his breathing, and he, of course, could feel hers. How badly she had treated him! yet, here they were treading one measure.* The enchantment of the dance surprised her. A clear line of difference divided like a tangible fence her experience within this maze of motion from her experience without it.  
(256)

The coincidence, like the free indirect discourse, juxtaposes two perspectives on Eustacia's experience. We see what it is like to be near Wildeve and to feel the sense of escape from the social order that has thwarted Eustacia's hopes. However, even though the dance was "an irresistible attack upon whatever sense of social order there was in their minds," we also understand that the "clear line of difference" dividing this moment from her life in the community is an illusion (257). In a curiously similar manner to *Martin Chuzzlewit*, this coincidence juxtaposes connection and disconnection: the encounter at the dance provides a context of anonymity that enables Eustacia to feel isolated, yet the coincidence also reveals that that sense of isolation and detachment is illusory.

This coincidence that reunites Eustacia and Wildeve at the dance brings us to a broader consideration of chance and coincidence in the novel, and more specifically, the role such events play in readers' evaluation of characters and their fates. Although this coincidence has unfortunate consequences for Eustacia, there is nothing inherently sinister about it. She certainly could have chosen not to dance with Wildeve, and therefore we have no trouble accepting that she is responsible for any consequences attending her decision. Yet the novel's reliance on coincidental events and the disastrous consequences of those events considerably complicate the questions of

freedom and responsibility in the novel (as anyone who has taught *The Return of the Native*, or any Hardy novel, very well knows).

Among Hardy's novels, *The Return of the Native* arguably has the most intricately plotted causal structure. Serious problems for the characters start when Mrs. Yeobright has Christian Cantle deliver their respective fifty guinea inheritances to Clym and Thomasin. Christian loses all hundred guineas to Wildeve in a game of dice, and although Diggory wins them back, he mistakenly delivers all hundred to Thomasin, "an error which afterwards helped to cause more misfortune than treble the loss in money value could have done" (232). When Mrs. Yeobright learns of the mistake, she decides to visit Eustacia at home and see if she has received them. However, on her way there, she coincidentally encounters Eustacia on the heath, who happens to be on her way somewhere else (a coincidence which is significant insofar as Clym's presence would certainly have caused the conversation to go differently). The unfortunate wording of Mrs. Yeobright's inquiry about the guineas causes Eustacia to think that her mother-in-law is insinuating that she is having continuing interaction with Wildeve. The result of the misunderstanding is the complete rupture of the relationship between Eustacia/Clym and Mrs. Yeobright. When Mrs. Yeobright attempts to make amends by visiting them, Wildeve is coincidentally present and Clym happens to be fast asleep on the floor. Eustacia hides Wildeve and does not answer the door because she overhears Clym say "mother" (though he is only having a dream). Mrs. Yeobright sees Eustacia looking through the window and interprets the closed door as her son's rejection of her, leading her to travel home in the heat and consequently die. Matters are only made worse for Eustacia in the aftermath of Mrs. Yeobright's death when Charley makes a bonfire in an attempt to cheer her, not knowing that this is Eustacia's secret signal to Wildeve. Wildeve obediently responds to what he thinks is a summons, which leads Eustacia to ask him to help her escape the

heath. As Eustacia attempts to execute this plan, she realizes the futility of it due to her lack of money, and more broadly, her inability to escape the troubles that beset her, leading her to drown herself in Shadwater Weir.<sup>156</sup>

Although the chain of events that leads to Eustacia's death is highly contingent, those events all have some relationship to her past actions. Eustacia's disregard for the mores of the heath community are as much at fault for these events as chance. More importantly, these coincidences—as in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*—create opportunities for highlighting the social forces that shape Eustacia's fate. For example, the misunderstanding that arises between Eustacia and Mrs. Yeobright is almost entirely a product of their particular class prejudices: Eustacia's pride causes her to interpret Mrs. Yeobright's question in a particular manner, just as Mrs. Yeobright's pride shapes her perception and response to Eustacia's accusations. The seemingly simple question, "Did you receive the fifty guineas?" becomes extremely complicated in the particular context of its asking. These coincidences not only assert the lingering implications of Eustacia's past involvement with Wildeve, but they also present the opportunity for the juxtaposition of perspectives that I have suggested is so important to the novel's form. When all of the characters converge on Clym and Eustacia's cottage on the fateful day of Mrs. Yeobright's death, we see the events from multiple perspectives. We look out of the window with Eustacia, but we also see, like Mrs. Yeobright, Eustacia's face looking out of the window. Similarly, we see

---

<sup>156</sup> Whether or not Eustacia commits suicide is, of course, ambiguous in the text, though there is considerable consensus among critics that we are intended to read her death as suicide. See Ken Zellefrow, "The Return of the Native: Hardy's Map and Eustacia's Suicide" [*Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 28.2 (1973): 214-20], for a concise and helpful discussion of the debate. If Eustacia's death is not suicide, then it is an accident, which—as Zellefrow notes—"seems probable" to those "accustomed to Hardy's use of ironic incidents of chance and fate." My point throughout this chapter is that chance is more than just the hand of fate in Hardy. Zellefrow supports the idea of suicide by referring to Hardy's maps for the novel. If we are to take the map as accurate (which Hardy himself certainly seemed to have done), then Eustacia would have had to cross the road on which Wildeve was waiting for her in order to get to Shadwater Weir, a fact that for Zellefrow rules out accident.

the bonfire that Charley lights from multiple perspectives—we see it as a gift through Charley’s eyes, as signal through Wildeve’s, and as a burden through Eustacia’s. The way in which we evaluate these events is a product of the juxtaposition and accumulation of these perspectives.

The effect of this training on the reader’s perception is best demonstrated by how we see and evaluate characters at the novel’s conclusion. The following two paragraphs are the last presentation of Eustacia while she is alive:

Anyone who had stood by now would have pitied her, not so much on account of her exposure to weather and isolation from all of humanity except for the mouldered remains inside the Barrow; but for that other form of misery which was denoted by the slightly rocking movement that her feelings imparted to her person. Extreme unhappiness weighed visibly upon her. [...] The wings of her soul were broken by the cruel obstructiveness of all about her; and even had she seen herself in a promising way of getting to Budmouth, entering a coaster, and sailing to some Northern or Western port, she would have been but little more buoyant, so fearfully malignant were other things. She uttered words aloud. When a woman in such a situation, neither old, deaf, crazed, nor whimsical, takes upon herself to sob and soliloquise aloud there is something grievous the matter.

‘I can’t go, I can’t go!’ she moaned. ‘No money: I can’t go! And if I could, what comfort to me? I must drag on next year as I have dragged on this year, and the year after that as before. How I have been tried and tried to be a splendid woman, and how destiny has been against me! ... I do not deserve my lot!’ she cried in a frenzy of bitter revolt. ‘O the cruelty of putting me into this imperfect, ill-conceived world! I was capable of much;

but I have been injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond my control! O how hard it is of Heaven to devise such tortures for me, who have done no harm to Heaven at all!’ (346)

These two paragraphs voice the same idea: the narrator says, “Pity her!” and Eustacia says, “Pity me!” Yet, curiously, the reader’s reaction is not pity, or rather, it is something much more complicated than pity. Eustacia’s failure to take responsibility for her plight and her unqualified attribution of her problems to “things beyond my control” are at odds with our deep sense that certain things have been within her control. In other words, the pity the narrator arouses is undermined by Eustacia’s soliloquy. Two paragraphs that appear monological are in fact dialogical. To the hypothetical observer who has no knowledge of Eustacia and her circumstances, the vision of her on the heath elicits pity, but to the reader, who has a much more nuanced perception of her, this situation elicits a more complex response. In the same way that we know that Eustacia’s suffering is not a consequence of Susan Nunsuch’s voodoo doll, we recognize that Eustacia’s plight is not the product of intangible forces designed to torture her. We have a rich enough understanding of her social context to understand that her fate arises not from an “imperfect, ill-conceived world,” but rather from her interactions with her particular milieu. It is not that the world is ill-conceived, but rather that she is ill-conceived for the society of the heath.

Our perception of Clym at the novel’s close is of the same complexity. As I suggested above, his moment of double vision on the heath illustrates that he has a better sense of his place in history. By the novel’s end, he uses his imagination not to walk among the craters of the moon but rather to walk among extinct tribes. Yet this does not mean that he is able to transcend his own situation. Shortly after this moment, Thomasin informs him of her decision to marry Diggory Venn. Clym is “vexed at what seemed her unaccountable taste” and “half angry with her for choosing

Venn” (385). Thomasin anticipates his objection by admitting that Venn is perhaps not quite “gentleman enough” for her (384). Clym, however, eventually comes round, recognizing that Venn is “after all, as honest and persevering a young fellow as any on Egdon, since he had turned over a new leaf” (385). Clym, like the reader, recognizes Venn’s virtue, but, unlike the reader, he can only do so once Venn has “turned over a new leaf” in abandoning the reddle trade (even though Venn has been honest and persevering all along). Although the suffering Clym has endured has given him a better perspective, his perception is still profoundly shaped by his circumstances. The image at the novel’s conclusion of Clym preaching on the heath reinforces this idea. Clym modifies his culture scheme, becoming an itinerant preacher. Although he has learned enough to speak “in simple language on Blackbarrow and in the upland hamlets around” and “in a more cultivated strain elsewhere,” as well as to abandon “set creeds and systems of philosophy,” this does not mean he is able to alter his community (396). “Some believed him, and some believed not; some said that his words were commonplace, others complained of his want of spiritual doctrine; while others again remarked that it was well enough for a man to take to preaching who could not see to do anything else.” In other words, just when Clym seems to be rising above his circumstances into a kind of transhistorical figure, our knowledge of his reception firmly wrenches him back into his concrete situation within his particular community.

As I’ve argued, the effects generated by *The Return of the Native* are produced through the juxtaposition of different perspectives, through different ways of viewing particular events, people and scenes. The novel accomplishes this both through its use of free indirect discourse and through the structure of the plot, which work together to attune the reader to a proper perspective. This final image of Clym on Blackbarrow, surrounded by listeners, is set against the opening image of the novel, that of Eustacia

standing atop Blackbarrow. Perceived by the hypothetical “imaginative stranger” invoked by the narrator, the vision of Eustacia atop the barrow is “strangely homogenous”: “the vale, the upland, the barrow, and the figure above it, all these amounted only to unity,” as the “form was so much like an organic part of this entire motionless structure” (17). Although the stranger to Egdon Heath might see Eustacia’s relationship to the heath as one of organic unity, it is in truth a false unity. Eustacia, of course, flees the barrow when the other Egdonites approach, and the true conflict in the novel is not that of humankind against the natural world, but rather that of individuals in a particular community. To those like the reader who become acquainted with the community of Egdon during the course of the novel, the proper image of unity is that of Clym as a member of the community at the novel’s close—an image of unity that is not “organic,” but rather tenuous and ambivalent. In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy does not put his characters in an ill-conceived world in order to torture them (as Eustacia suggests); rather, he places them in a social milieu for which they are ill-suited. The consequences that result are certainly tragic, but that tragedy attunes the reader to a proper historicist perspective. Like Clym’s view of those dyed barbarians, we “almost live among” the characters, but simultaneously appreciate those unforeseen factors that operate in the evolution of their immortality.

## CONCLUSION

### Implications of Improbable Realism

One of the insights that launched this dissertation was the recognition that coincidence is productive for the realist enterprise because improbable events often force a confrontation between perceived notions of the world and the world as it is. Precisely through defying the everyday, coincidences in novels often grab the attention of readers and characters alike and enable them to perceive structures that, as Hardy notes, “might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked.” Just as coincidences disclose discrepancies between the expected and the real, they reveal—as I have demonstrated—conflicts between critical expectations and the workings of realist narratives. Coincidence is a site where some of our most codified assumptions about literary realism come up against the reality of texts themselves. The broader goal of this dissertation has been to reevaluate the relationship between realism and probability in a manner more attuned to the workings of novel as they are (rather than according to novels as we think they ought to be). In large part, this has necessitated focusing attention on individual novels in order to analyze the function of coincidence. Nevertheless, broader theoretical and methodological claims have come into view as these individual readings have progressed. This brief conclusion attempts to articulate more clearly these broader claims, as well as to define some of the implications of improbable realism for the study of narrative and the novel. The following list is by no means exhaustive, although the following four areas represent some of the most important contributions this dissertation makes to the study of narrative.

- Throughout this dissertation, I have described the ways in which coincidence is utilized as a realist technique, focusing on how it contributes to what I have called the historicizing impulse of the realist novel. This analysis substantiated my critique of probable realism, which I made in the Introduction, and in doing so supported the notion of “improbable realism” that I have developed. Although I have shown that a number of important authors in the realist canon harness coincidence for realist ends, it is worth indicating the exact scope of the claim I am making about coincidence. Put simply: while I have shown the importance of coincidence to the realist techniques of Fielding, Scott, Dickens and Hardy, I am by no means claiming that coincidence performs a similar function in other authors. One of my consistent targets throughout this dissertation has been generalizing claims critics have made about coincidence, such as Brian Richardson’s claim that “fortunate coincidences are equally excluded [from nineteenth-century realism] so that the extensive effects of social and biological forces can be shown in all their complexity and self-sufficiency” (*Unlikely Stories* 41), or Marie-Laure Ryan’s categorization of coincidence as among those devices which seem “to be borrowed ready-made from a bag of tricks and whose function for the plot as a whole is too obvious” (“Cheap Plot Tricks” 57). Although these claims are not made without some authority, the move toward abstraction or generalization causes significant methodological problems. It is worth noting, then, that even though coincidence is often harnessed for realist ends, this should in no way be taken for a more general claim that can be simplistically applied to other texts. In the end, our understanding of the function of coincidence and other improbabilities must be guided by the text in question. Just as coincidence sometimes directs our attention to relationships between social forces and individual agency (as I have shown),

sometimes it directs us to the author's belief in providential design, and sometimes it is best classified as a "cheap plot trick."

- Although our understanding of narrative devices such as coincidence must ultimately be answerable to the workings of individual texts, this does not simultaneously mean that we must abandon broader conceptualizations or theorizations of realist practice. In other words, I have argued that applying assumptions about an undifferentiated conception of "realism" to a broad range of texts has caused a serious misunderstanding of the function of coincidence in particular authors, but it does not follow that I am advocating some kind of nominalism which would require us to speak of realism only as it is practiced by particular writers in particular works. Nor would I argue that simply falling back on the habit of speaking of "realisms" is sufficient. What is required—both methodologically and pedagogically—is a more pliable notion of realism, one that is attentive to the practices and techniques of particular writers but also able to speak of specific trajectories or genealogies of realist practice. In the Introduction, I noted that each of the authors I discuss in the dissertation has been regarded as somehow deficient in relation to a respective contemporary. What I meant, of course, was that if we take the works of George Eliot as representative of realism, then Dickens's specific techniques will necessarily appear odd, if not downright amateurish. I have returned to this problem in passing, such as in Chapter Four, when I suggested that examining Hardy's use of free indirect discourse in relation to how it is employed by Henry James will force us to make certain (deprecatory) judgments about Hardy's techniques. What this implies is that when we speak of realism in the context of James, we mean—or at least we ought to mean—something quite different than when we speak of realism in the context of Hardy. However, my examination of

coincidence has also shown that there are definite and specifiable continuities between the aesthetics or realist practices of different authors. Therefore, narrative devices such as coincidence (or intrusive narrators, or free indirect discourse) not only compel us to complicate univocal notions of realism, but once we do so they also enable us to reconstruct patterns or trajectories of realist practice.

- This, in turn, suggests the desirability, or even pragmatic necessity, of uniting historicist and formalist approaches to narrative and the novel. As I've argued since the beginning of this dissertation, the dominantly negative view of coincidence in critical practice can be seen as a consequence of formalist approaches to the novel, which maintain rigid conceptions of realism and insist on evaluative categorization of narrative devices. Marie-Laure Ryan's recent categorization of coincidence as a "cheap plot trick" exemplifies and is the logical endpoint of this approach. Purely narratological approaches to the realist novel overlook, in their insistence on universal elements of narrative, fine distinctions and nuances across historical developments. At a certain point, a move toward the general or universal inhibits our perception of the particular. To provide just one example, the narratological treatment of coincidence fails to recognize what Franco Moretti, developing Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, makes clear: that "each genre possesses its own space [...] *and each space its own genre.*"<sup>157</sup> In other words, to treat a coincidental encounter in a sixteenth-century romance as qualitatively similar to a coincidence that occurs in the heart of nineteenth-century London overlooks the different historical spaces in which those coincidences occur. As I argued in Chapter Three, Dickens's use of coincidence in *Martin Chuzzlewit* has very much to do with the historical space which the novel represents. However, just as Dickens's use of coincidence illustrates limitations of

---

<sup>157</sup> *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900*. London: Verso, 1998. Page 35, emphasis in original.

purely formalist approaches to narrative, it also illustrates the limitations of historicist approaches to the novel form. Appreciating the serial form of Dickens's novels helps us to see how his use of coincidence originated, at least in part, as a response to the material conditions of production. At the same time, however, to limit our understanding of coincidence to *merely* a response to serialization causes us to overlook how Dickens began to understand how he could utilize coincidence in the service of his realist aims. In a similar manner, although chance attains a new philosophical importance in nineteenth-century thought, it would be a mistake to move in a simplistic manner from this broader cultural meaning of chance to its function in Hardy. As I argued in Chapter One, the importance of "accidents" in the seventeenth and eighteenth century cultural milieu helps us to identify the potential significance of Fielding's persistent use of the term in *Tom Jones*, but that significance can only be fully understood through an analysis of how accidents contribute to the form of the novel.

- Finally, this reconsideration of aspects of nineteenth-century realism suggests the need to better account for the ways in which our current understanding of the nineteenth-century novel and its modes of representation has been shaped by early twentieth-century critical responses. The first "critics" of the nineteenth-century novel, in other words, were those writers penning novels of their own in the early decades of the twentieth century. While it is by no means a novel insight to realize that writers are frequently responding to those of the previous generation(s), my exploration of coincidence has shown the great degree to which our current view of nineteenth-century modes of representation and emplotment are still informed by the aesthetic principles of literary modernism. The fact that we can hear the voices of Sinclair Lewis, Henry James, and E.M. Forster in current discussions of nineteenth-

century realism suggests that the influence of our critical heritage on our reading practices ought to be tempered by a fresh look at the texts under consideration. Just as Alex Woloch's recent reconsideration of characterization in the novel has attempted to move us beyond debates about character which had their origins in the critical writings of Forster and Virginia Woolf, more work needs to be done to establish conceptual frameworks that enable us to understand and appreciate texts on the terms they themselves present.<sup>158</sup> My reconsideration of the relationship between realism and probability has been an attempt to do just that—to show that for too long we've been evaluating realist novels from the likes of Fielding and Dickens in terms of something they never claimed to be.

---

<sup>158</sup> See Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003). In mentioning Forster and Woolf, I have in mind Forster's still widely used distinction between flat and round characters in *Aspects of the Novel* and Woolf's influential essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" [*Collected Essays: Volume I* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1980), pgs. 319-337].

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allott Miriam, ed. *Novelists on the Novel*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959.
- Ankersmit, Frank. *Historical Representation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- . “Truth in History and Literature.” *Narrative* 18.1 (2010): 29-50.
- Arac, Jonathan. *Commissioned Spirits*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1979.
- Barnes, Julian. *Flaubert’s Parrot*. London: Picador, 1984.
- Beer, Gillian. *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. 1983. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Beiderwell, Bruce. “Death and Disappearance in *The Bride of Lammermoor*.” 1991. *Critical Essays on Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Harry E. Shaw. New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1996. Pages 194-201.
- Benjamin, Edward. “The Structure of *Martin Chuzzlewit*.” *Philological Quarterly* 34.1 (1955): 39-47.
- Battestin, Martin. *The Providence of Wit*. London: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Booth, Wayne. *The Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. 1847. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.
- . *Villette*. 1853. New York: Penguin Books, 1979.
- Brown, David. *Walter Scott and the Historical Imagination*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.
- Chandler, James. *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Claybaugh, Amanda. *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007.

- Codr, Dwight. "In the Interest of Saving Time: *Tom Jones* and the Prudence of the Serpent." *A Store Yet Untouched: Speculative Ideologies in Eighteenth-Century English Literature*. Diss. Cornell University, 2006. Pages 104-161.
- Crane, R.S. "The Concept of the Plot and the Plot of *Tom Jones*." *Critics and Criticism (Abridged Edition)*, ed. R.S. Crane. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966. Pages 62-93.
- Daiches, David. "Scott's *Redgauntlet*." 1958. *Critical Essays on Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Harry E. Shaw. New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1996. Pages 137-48.
- Dannenberg, Hilary. *Coincidence and Counterfactuality: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008.
- Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. 1719. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994.
- Dickens, Charles. *Barnaby Rudge*. 1841. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.
- . *Bleak House*. 1853-4. New York: Penguin Books, 1996.
- . *David Copperfield*. 1849-50. New York: Penguin Books, 1996.
- . *Dombey and Son*. 1846-8. New York: Penguin Books, 2002.
- . *Hard Times*. 1854. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- . *Martin Chuzzlewit*. 1843-4. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.
- . *Oliver Twist*. 1837-9. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.
- . *Our Mutual Friend*. 1864-5. New York: Penguin Books, 1997.
- . *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*. 1836-7. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Drake, George. "Historical Space in the 'History of': Between Public and Private in *Tom Jones*." *ELH* 66.3 (1999): 707-737.
- Duncan, Ian. *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, Dickens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Empson, William. "Tom Jones." *The Kenyon Review* 20.2 (1958): 217-249.
- Fielding, Henry. *Amelia*, 2 vols. 1751. London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1962.

- . *The History of Tom Jones*. 1749. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.
- . *Joseph Andrews*. 1742. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987.
- Forster, E.M. *Aspects of the Novel*. 1927. New York: Harvest Books, 1956.
- Forster, John. *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 2 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902.
- Forsyth, Neil. "Wonderful Chains: Dickens and Coincidence." *Modern Philology* 83.2 (1985): 151-65.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. 1960. New York: Pantheon Books, 1970.
- Frede, Dorothea. "Necessity, Chance, and 'What Happens for the Most Part' in Aristotle's *Poetics*." *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992. Pages 197-219.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. 1957. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- Gissing, George. *Critical Studies of the Works of Charles Dickens*. New York: Haskell House, 1965.
- Goldknopf, David. "Coincidence in the Victorian Novel: The Trajectory of a Narrative-Device." *College English* 31.1 (1969): 41-50.
- Hacking, Ian. *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction, and Statistical Inference*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1975.
- . *The Taming of Chance*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Hamilton, Ross. *Accident: A Philosophical and Literary History*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Hardison, O.B. Jr. *Aristotle's Poetics: A Translation and Commentary for Students of Literature*, trans. Leon Golden. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968.
- Hardy, Thomas. *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Samuel Hynes. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- . *Desperate Remedies*. 1871. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.

- . *The Hand of Ethelberta*. 1876. New York: Penguin Books, 1996.
- . *Jude the Obscure*. 1895. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.
- . *A Laodicean*. 1881. New York: Penguin Books, 1997.
- . *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1985.
- . *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. 1886. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- . *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. 1873. New York: Penguin Books, 2005.
- . *The Return of the Native*. 1878. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.
- . *The Return of the Native*. 1912. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006.
- . “Some Romano-British Relics Found at Max Gate.” 1884. *Thomas Hardy’s Public Voice: The Essays, Speeches, and Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Michael Millgate. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Pages 61-64.
- . *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. 1891. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.
- . *The Trumpet-Major*. 1880. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.
- . *Two on a Tower*. 1882. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.
- Harvey, W.J. “Chance and Design in *Bleak House*.” *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. John Gross and Gabriel Pearson. London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1962. Pages 145-57.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller. New York: Humanity Books, 1969.
- Hornback, Bert. *The Metaphor of Chance: Vision and Technique in the Works of Thomas Hardy*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1971.
- Howe, Irving. *Thomas Hardy*. 1967. New York: Macmillan, 1985.
- Hunter, J. Paul. *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990.

- Jameson, Frederic. "Cognitive Mapping." *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988. Pages 347-357.
- Kaye, Richard. *The Flirt's Tragedy: Desire Without End in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction*. Charlottesville: The Univ. Press of Virginia, 2002.
- Kerr, James. *Fiction Against History: Scott as Storyteller*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Lewis, Sinclair. "Manhattan at Last!" *Saturday Review* (5 December 1925). Reprinted in *John Dos Passos: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Barry Maine. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Levine, George. *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- . "Hardy and Darwin: An Enchanting Hardy?" *A Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. Keith Wilson. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2009. Pages 36-53.
- Lincoln, Andrew. *Walter Scott and Modernity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
- Lock, Charles. "Hardy and the Critics." *Palgrave Advances in Thomas Hardy Studies*, ed. Phillip Mallett. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Pages 14-38.
- Lukács, Georg. *Balzac und der Französische Realismus*. Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1952.
- . *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. London: Merlin Press, 1989.
- . "Narrate or Describe?" 1936. *Writer & Critic and Other Essays*, trans. Arthur Kahn. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1971.
- . *Studies in European Realism*. 1948. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964.
- MacDonald, Walter. "Coincidence in the Novel: A Necessary Technique." *College English* 29.5 (1968): 373-88.
- Mack, Ruth. *Literary Historicity: Literature and Historical Experience in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.
- Magnet, Myron. *Dickens and the Social Order*. Wilmington: ISI Books, 2004.

- Maitzen, Rohan. "‘By No Means an Improbable Fiction’: *Redgauntlet’s* Novel Historicism." 1993. *Critical Essays on Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Harry E. Shaw. New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1996. Pages 121-133.
- Marx, Karl. *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.
- McKeon, Michael. *The Origins of the English Novel 1600-1740*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.
- Meadowson, Zena. "Thomas Hardy and the Machine: The Mechanical Deformation of Narrative Realism in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*." *Nineteenth Century Literature* 64.2 (2009): 225-48.
- Miller, J. Hillis. *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958.
- . "Individual and Community in *The Return of the Native*." *Thomas Hardy Reappraised: Essays in Honor of Michael Millgate*, ed. Keith Wilson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006. Pages 154-173.
- Millgate, Michael. *Thomas Hardy: His Career as a Novelist*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1971.
- Monk, Leland. *Standard Deviations: Chance and the Modern British Novel*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.
- Monod, Sylvère. *Martin Chuzzlewit*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985.
- Moretti, Franco. *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900*. London: Verso, 1998.
- Moss, Sidney. *Charles Dickens’ Quarrel with America*. Troy: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1984.
- Newsom, Robert. *A Likely Story: Probability and Play in Fiction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988.
- Newton, William. "Chance as Employed by Hardy and the Naturalists." *Philological Quarterly* 30 (1951): 154-75.
- Patey, Douglas Lane. *Probability and Literary Form: Philosophic Theory and Literary Practice in the Augustan Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

- Patten, Robert L. "When Is a Book Not a Book?" *The Book History Reader*, eds. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery. New York: Routledge, 2006. Pages 354-68.
- Phelan, James. *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007.
- . *Living To Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.
- Rader, Ralph. "The Comparative Anatomy of Three Baggy Monsters: *Bleak House*, *Vanity Fair*, *Middlemarch*." *Journal of Narrative Technique* 19.1 (1989): 49-58.
- Reed, John R. *Victorian Conventions*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1975.
- Rehder, R.M. "The Form of Hardy's Novels." *Thomas Hardy After Fifty Years*, ed. Lance St. John Butler. Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977. Pages 13-27.
- Richardson, Angelique. "Hardy and Science: A Chapter of Accidents." *Palgrave Advances in Thomas Hardy Studies*, ed. Phillip Mallett. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Pages 156-80.
- Richardson, Brian. *Unlikely Stories: Causality and the Nature of Modern Narrative*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997.
- Robertson, Fiona. *Legitimate Histories: Scott, Gothic, and the Authorities of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Rosengarten, Richard. *Henry Fielding and the Narration of Providence*. New York: Palgrave, 2000.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Cheap Plot Tricks, Plot Holes, and Narrative Design," *Narrative* 17.1 (2009): 56-75.
- . *Narrative as Virtual Reality*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- Sacks, Sheldon. *Fiction and the Shape of Belief: A Study of Henry Fielding With Glances at Swift, Johnson and Richardson*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964.
- Scott, Walter. *The Bride of Lammermoor*. 1819. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.
- . *Chronicles of the Canongate*. 1827. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

- . *Ivanhoe*. 1819. New York: Penguin Books, 1984.
- . *Redgauntlet*. 1824. New York: Penguin Books, 2000.
- . *Waverley*. 1814. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.
- Shaw, Harry. E. *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and His Successors*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983.
- . “Is There a Problem with Historical Fiction (or with Scott’s *Redgauntlet*)?” *Rethinking History* 9.2-3 (2005): 173-195.
- . *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.
- Slater, Michael. *Charles Dickens*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.
- Smith, J.F. *An Inquiry into Narrative Deception and Its Uses in Fielding’s Tom Jones*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1993.
- Sterne, Laurence. *Tristram Shandy*. 1767. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1980.
- Sutherland, Kathryn. “Introduction” to *The Bride of Lammermoor*. New York: Penguin Books, 2000. Pages xiii-xxxv.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. 1869. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.
- Trotter, David. *Cooking With Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Uzzell, Thomas. *Narrative Technique: A Practical Course in Literary Psychology*. 1923. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934.
- Vargish, Thomas. *The Providential Aesthetic in Victorian Fiction*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985.
- Watt, Ian. *The Rise of the Novel*. 1957. Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 2001.
- Welsh, Alexander. *From Copyright to Copperfield: The Identity of Dickens*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987.

- Wess, Robert V. "The Probable and the Marvelous in 'Tom Jones'." *Modern Philology* 68.1 (1970): 32-45.
- Whetstone, Ann. "The Reform of the Scottish Sherifffdoms in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries." *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 9:1 (1977): 61-71.
- White, Hayden. "Storytelling: Historical and Ideological." 1996. *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory 1957-2007*, ed. Robert Doran. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. Pages 273-92.
- Williams, Aubrey. "Interpositions of Providence and the Design of Fielding's Novels," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 70 (1971): 265-86.
- Williams, Ioan, ed. *Sir Walter Scott on Novelists and Fiction*. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1968.
- Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Witmore, Michael. *Culture of Accidents: Unexpected Knowledges in Early Modern England*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Woloch, Alex. *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Collected Essays: Volume I*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1980.
- Wordsworth, William. *Selected Poems*. London: J.M. Dent, 1995.
- Zellefrow, Ken. "The Return of the Native: Hardy's Map and Eustacia's Suicide." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 28.2 (1973): 214-220.
- Zimmerman, Everett. *The Boundaries of Fiction: History and the Eighteenth-Century British Novel*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996.