# Contingency and Method

## Working Together

When I was small, I stained my hands iodine-purple helping my papa milk his cows, and I cramped my wrists writing out the names of seeds I found in the bush and in some old Funk and Wagnall’s encyclopedias. Between sentences of this essay, I greased my fingers fixing machinery and gummed them in propolis tending honeybees. Whether or not it’s true—and especially if I were to insist that it is—this talk of working hands, this synonymizing of manual and mental labour, is an old trope of “farming romance,” “written agriculture,” or “book husbandry.”[[1]](#footnote-1) We read it in the *pius manus* in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the “gentle hand” in William Wordsworth’s “Nutting,” or William Cobbett’s description of how “the two first fingers of my right hand are still somewhat bent, from having been, more than forty years ago, so often in close embrace with the eye of the spade and the handle of the hoe.”[[2]](#footnote-2) My intuition that there’s something dispositionally and historically Romantic about how we farm and how we think and feel about farming prompted my moving to the study of Romantic literature from a BSc in genetics, where I learned the importance of long histories and selection pressures, and from an MA in modernist poetry, where I learned the value of every line, word, letter, and figure.

But what are the relationships between farming and Romanticism, then and now? And what’s the best way to talk about them? Like plenty of contemporary research, mine’s wrestling with questions of terminology and methodology has also taken to the mat questions about Romanticism as a field and the literary humanities as a discipline. The causes of this self-reckoning are overdetermined, though, and include the humanities’ perennial introspection about its disciplinary status, economic inequality coupled with the neoliberalization of the university and its STEM-oriented funding, ecological catastrophe, and systemic injustice. My questioning, as a contingent scholar, is contingent on these questionings; I find myself dizzyingly caught up in what historian Andreas Malm calls “an endless cycle of turns—cultural, linguistic, affective, cognitive, performative, material, posthuman, nonhuman.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet regardless of the “turn,” most theories of late ostensibly afford engagements with “interdisciplinarity” and, if more subtly, with “foundationalism.” My essay examines “contingency” as the avatar of both engagements and of our disciplinary self-inquisition in these modes and at these times.

What we often mean by “contingency” is something like “systemically dependent,” as in “this event was contingent on those events,” something like “precarious,” as in “contingent faculty,” something like “possible,” as in “contingency plan,” or some combination thereof: fortuitous chance, a butterfly effect, an accident rendered into an act. This meaning of contingency relies on rupture or change rather than continuity, succession rather than sequel, difference rather than similarity. It lends itself well to “Theory” in the sense of hypostatizing, systematizing, taxonomizing, and, however each turn may try to duck it, foundationalizing. When we blew up foundationalism in the 1960s, its shrapnel lodged in our collective body. Every “turn” is a scar tissue of theory knotted around a necrotic foundationalism. Anahid Nersessian puts her finger on some of them when she identifies the “materialisms *manqué*—monism, mechanism, physicalism, vitalism, Spinozism, Lucretianism—that have for some time now been presenting themselves as antidotes to the harms wrought” by the polysemy of poststructuralism.[[4]](#footnote-4) Likewise helping us specify Malm’s observation above, Fredric Jameson traces another foundationalism in how literary theorists’ “unconscious” is paradoxically “an *enlargement* of consciousness, a widening of the very concept of intention so as to catch these aberrant phenomena also in its net.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In response to the aforementioned overdetermined crises and the position of the humanities within them, Theory either seems to seek a new fundament or firmament, a new paradigm, whether it be the material, the unconscious, language, form, objects, ecology, or history, on which everything is contingent, or it gestures toward, at best attempts to dialogue with and at worst appropriates, expertise in other disciplines that may offer some such purchase, whether physics, mathematics, or philosophy. That is, we go in for some kind of foundationalism or interdisciplinarity.

Whether these are the right things to do is beside the question of whether these are the only things we can do. There’s at least one other meaning of “contingency,” and it comes from its etymology (*con*-, together; *-tangěre*, touch): in contact, side by side, touching together. These meanings of “contingency” are themselves contingent in this side-by-side sense, and we can work them together to develop something fruitful. I follow Nersessian again, in “Romanticism as Method” (2016), where she writes that “etymologically speaking, method (*meta*-, after, beyond, alongside; *hodos*-, way) can mean either a travelling-past or else a travelling-alongside.”[[6]](#footnote-6) There’s a deeper root for “meta”: “with” or “between”; “compare Mycenaen Greek *me-ta*, ‘together with,’ which is perhaps the original sense in Greek.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This root supports Nersessian’s conclusion that methods require “crowd-sourced scholarship” and “multiple forms of knowledge.”[[8]](#footnote-8) With all this in mind, I offer a close reading of the thinking *style* that disguises foundationalism in gestures to interdisciplinarity. I study and repurpose some of its figures, such as *systrophe* and *ellipsis*, and some of its motifs, such as cosmic exile and semantic ascent. My essay proceeds by the neglected meaning of contingency, in a side-by-side, nested-example, by-the-way manner, drawing on and examining this thought-style in an array of thinkers with whom I work together metaphors, methodologies, and materials.

## The Parable of the Skylark

Before I “ascend” into the heady space of theory—though I would like to render this movement as a back-and-forth rather than an ascent-and-descent—I situate myself more firmly in the study of Romantic poetry. The relation between understanding Romanticism as a break with its past and understanding it as an “eventuality” of its past is dialectic;[[9]](#footnote-9) contingency as precarious path-dependence and contingency as codevelopment relate dialectically, though perhaps we’ve given the former terms somewhat more priority. My argument is that the contingencies within and of these two understandings, their tensions and intersections then and now, are integral to Romanticism, with consequences for what we study and how we do so. There are a lot of ways to make an argument like this, but in “the spirit of the age-of-the-spirit-of-the-age,” I’ve chosen to use the skylark as the “figure of these figures,” to employ some favourite formulae of Romanticists since Paul de Man.[[10]](#footnote-10) The poems I read (of many options I’ve chosen five) could be paraphrased as being “about” a skylark; they hang together on the rack of this symbol, and how they do so allegorizes Romanticism’s “contingency.” I structure my essay’s movement from poem to poem, then from poetry to theory, then from poetry-and-theory back to my scholarly situation, on the movement of these poetic skylarks.

The most famous of these five skylarks is surely Percy Bysshe Shelley’s. Written as an “other poem” in his *Prometheus Unbound* (1820)volume, Shelley’s “To a Skylark” showcases the poet’s formal virtuosity and revolutionary idealism. Opening with praise not for the skylark but for this “. . . blithe spirit! / Bird thou never wert,” the poem figures the skylark not as a bird but as a symbol of Romantic genius, soaring through a systrophe of nested similes, characteristic Romantic images, that reify its power and beauty—it’s like a cloud of fire, an unbodied joy, a star of heaven, an arrow of a silver sphere, the moon raining out its beams, a rain of melody, a poet hidden, a high-born maiden, a glow-worm golden, and a rose embowered—until “heaven is overflowed” with music, light, sympathy, colour, and scent “better than all measures” and “better than all treasures.” Shelley’s skylark is on the one hand a symbol of Romantic symbols and a symbol of Romanticism. It is pure figure, high figure, “scorner of the ground” in his proleptically gestalt terms. But on the other hand, the poet concludes by asking, “Teach us, sprite or bird, | What sweet thoughts are thine” and “What objects are the fountains | Of thy happy strain”; “Teach me half the gladness | That thy brain must know.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This skylark is a speculative pedagogy driven by a desire to know what material grounds (objects, brain) facilitate figurative flights of fancy, or vice versa, a sum of similes whose limit asymptotically approaches “reality.”

William Wordsworth’s two “To a Sky-lark” poems likewise figure the bird as an ideal transcending the mundane. The first (1807) is a jaunty, exclamation-mark–ridden ballad in which the poet asks, before Shelley and in a Shelleyan manner, the happy, strong-souled Lark to go “up with me into the clouds” and to “guide me, till I find / That spot which seems so to thy mind.”[[12]](#footnote-12) The second (1827) is three heroic sestets, its lines longer and slower than the first, as if Wordsworth had read Shelley’s poem and sought to revise it and his original (which also appears in the 1827 volume, indeed revised). Instead of singing only of the skylark in the sky, this poem opens by asking if the “Ethereal minstrel” “despise[s] the earth where cares abound” or fixes his heart on “thy nest upon the dewy ground.” However, it moves in a trajectory similar to the former’s, if more earnest and less exuberant, when it encourages the skylark to soar “To the last point of vision, and beyond,” “to sing / All independent of the leafy spring,” and to “Leave to the Nightingale her shady wood,” that it might pour its “rapture more divine” upon the world. Unlike the first poem’s unqualified praise of the skylark in metaphysical flight from the physical, this second poem also refigures the physical *as* metaphysical, for the skylark is not merely heavenly but “True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home!”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Before Wordsworth’s 1807 poem exclaims about “joy divine,” before Shelley’s 1820 poem proclaims the “rapture so divine,” and before Wordsworth’s 1827 poem revises this into a “rapture more divine,” farmer’s-boy-cum-London-cobbler and Aeolian harp maker Robert Bloomfield wrote of a skylark in his wildly popular *Farmer’s Boy* (1800). This georgic, which sold more copies than Wordsworth’s and Shelley’s volumes combined, precociously criticizes the skylark of these Romantics’ Romantics in a passage worth quoting entirely:

But what can unassisted vision do?

What, but recoil where most it would pursue;

His patient gaze but finish with a sigh,

When music waking speaks the *sky-lark* nigh.

Just starting from the corn she cheerly sings,

And trusts with conscious pride her downy wings;

Still louder breathes, and in the face of day

Mounts up, and calls on *Giles* to mark her way.

Close to his eyes his hat he instant bends,

And forms a friendly telescope, that lends

Just aid enough to dull the glaring light,

And place the wand’ring bird before his sight;

Yet oft beneath a cloud she sweeps along,

Lost for awhile, yet pours her varied song:

He views the spot, and as the cloud moves by,

Again she stretches up the clear blue sky;

Her form, her motion, undistinguish’d quite,

Save when she wheels direct from shade to light:

The flutt’ring songstress a mere speck became,

Like fancy’s floating bubbles in a dream;

He sees her yet, but yielding to repose,

Unwittingly his jaded eyelids close.

Delicious sleep! From sleep who could forbear,

With no more guilt than *Giles*, and no more care?[[14]](#footnote-14)

Bloomfield prefigures several of the images used by Wordsworth and Shelley. The skylark “pours” its song out, soars so high it’s almost lost to sight, and is compared to fancy and dream. But Giles, watching it, falls asleep. There is no rapture and no divinity, just a farmhand observing an animal. Accustomed as I was to the Romantic skylark, I missed the implicit criticisms of the passage when I first encountered this poem, but Giles’s visceral sleep, in contrast to their cerebral dreams, turned me back again. This skylark passage opens with a question about the limits of vision, then emphasizes how Giles sees the bird—his hat shades the “glaring light” (resonantly opposed to the “glorious light” of the later poets), the bird flies beneath the clouds (as opposed to above them), and it wheels from shade to light. Crucially, the passage concludes with Giles’s earthly cares overcoming him.

John Clare, another agricultural-labourer-and-poet, was almost certainly responding to his predecessors in his “Skylark” (1835). In Clare’s poem, hurrying schoolboys startle the skylark out of “her half-formed nest.” She “Winnows the air […] / Then hangs a dust spot in the sunny skies” before dropping back to her nest unbeknownst to the boys, on whom the poem meditates:

they unheeded passed—not dreaming then

That birds, which flew so high, would drop again

To nests upon the ground, which any thing

May come at to destroy. Had they the wing

Like such a bird, themselves would be too proud,

And build on nothing but a passing cloud!

As free from danger, as the heavens are free

From pain and toil, there would they build, and be.

Opening with a terrified hare among corn “sprouting its spiry points of tender green,” the poem closes with the skylark lying “safely, with the leveret, in the corn.” As Bloomfield’s skylark, also nesting in corn, was a momentary reprieve from farm labour for Giles, so Clare’s is an unnoticed part of the agricultural landscape—although it too is constituted by agriculture, “winnowing” the air and hanging like threshing dust. But Clare extends Bloomfield’s critique. Whereas Bloomfield describes how the skylark is visible to Giles, Clare explains that the boys’ ignorance makes the skylark invisible to them, then contrasts what he imagines to be their proud, ignorance-inspired fancies “buil[t] on nothing but a passing cloud” and thereby free of danger, pain, and toil, with the skylark’s vulnerable “nests upon the ground.”[[15]](#footnote-15) If Wordsworth and Shelley, and the kind of Romanticism I’m using them as a synecdoche for, give us a metaphysical skylark *from* which we’ve scarcely looked back, Bloomfield and Clare give us a physical skylark *to* which we ought to look back. A “physical” skylark only loosely, of course, for we are still reading poems, and a figuredskylark nevertheless.

## Real Language of Nature

So far, it may seem like I’ve set up a standard dichotomy within Romanticism, two canonical poets vs*.* two less canonical poets, majoritarian center and minoritarian margin. This rupture in the Romantic era along class lines (*ca*. 1820) continues in Romanticist scholarship along methodological and disciplinary lines (*ca*. 1835–2020). These ruptures and the language used to describe them, including mine above, depend on and make it all too easy to fall back into a singular and hypostatic understanding of “contingency.” But in simply touching these poems together so they overlap and intersect—Bloomfield’s earthly cares, Shelley’s systrophe, Wordsworth’s transfiguration, Clare’s critique of imagination—I hope to unsettle and reimagine this singular account, to show not only that are the ruptures complicated but that their intertwinings and continuities are as vital as their fractures and tensions to what Romanticism is. I want to contrast the recognized-as-Romantic skylark with the as-yet-unrecognized but no less Romantic skylark in order to revive Romantics’ latent understanding of and participation in their late Georgian age as Enlightenment eventuality, as improved improvement, ruptures and continuities and all.

Before I get there, and as a step on the way to “theory,” I examine Romanticism’s “semantic ascent.” This is W.V.O. Quine’s phrase for shifting from a material to a formal mode of talking. One example is the shift “from “talk of miles to talk of ‘mile.’” Quine does not intend it to be positivistic disinterpretation into a logical vocabulary that attempts to, but cannot, neglect pragmatic considerations, but to be a way to “carr[y] the discussion into a domain where both parties are better agreed on the objects (*viz*., words) and on the main terms concerning them.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The trouble with semantic ascent is that it creates a high-low dichotomy, privileges the high over the low, and then neglects the low. When I wrote that the skylark of the two quintessentially Romantic poets was a “figure of a figure,” I meant semantic ascent, or Celeste Langan’s “reduction and abstraction.”[[17]](#footnote-17) This is one of the central figures of the Romantic movement, and it’s how these poets figured language itself. Famously, Wordsworth writes in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) that poets must use “a plainer and more emphatic language,” “the very language of men,” and “the real language of nature” by judiciously choosing “incidents and situations from common life,” particularly from “low and rustic life” and “rural occupations” that the poet must “make […] interesting.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Shelley echoes these decrees in the preface to *The Cenci* (1819), where he claims that “in order to move men to sympathy we must use the familiar language of men,”[[19]](#footnote-19) and in the preface to *Hellas* (1821) he writes that “[I] must trespass on the forgiveness of my readers for the display of newspaper erudition to which I have been reduced.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Their decrees are like their skylarks, singing and soaring about knowledge rather than stooping to know—as has been much acknowledged about Wordsworth’s so-called “real language,” starting with Coleridge’s observation that nobody talked the way Wordsworth wrote.[[21]](#footnote-21) Shelley and Wordsworth claim that poetry must be written in a pastoral “real language,” though neither mean any particular dialect; rather, by “real” they mean what they theorized, what their improvement milieux told them, language should be.

Bloomfield’s vicious oscillation in *The Farmer’s Boy* between scenes of cliché pastoral bliss and of inevitable anti-pastoral brutality offers a glimpse at what he made of the idealization of “low and rustic life.” For instance, we read of “tufted barley yellow with the sun,” a “fav’rite morsel with the Rook and Crow,” who are so “Familiariz’d” with Giles’s scarecrows that he must resort to a grim method:

Let then your birds lie prostrate on the earth,

In dying posture, and with wings stretch’d forth;

Shift them at eve or morn from place to place,

And death shall terrify the pilfering race.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Similarly, the poet moves from cows’ yielding bountiful milk to impossibly hard cheese,[[23]](#footnote-23) from an anthology of flowers to enclosure’s fences,[[24]](#footnote-24) from the playing of companion lambs to “their fleeces drench’d in gore” by a “murd’ring Butcher,”[[25]](#footnote-25) from a beautiful maiden’s golden hair to horsetails clipped too short to fend off flies,[[26]](#footnote-26) from harvest feasts to tyranny’s scarcity,[[27]](#footnote-27) and from maids looking for love to one “Crazy Poll” sleeping in pig-sties.[[28]](#footnote-28) Bloomfield’s skylark section makes these moves, too, as does Clare’s, in which the scared, vulnerable, toiling bird is contrasted with the flights of fancy of the ignorant boys. These poets defamiliarize a metaphor and its metaphysics by familiarizing contingent ecological and economic histories. Their language was not less or more “real” because they were grounded on some foundation or looking down from some firmament. My turn to Bloomfield and Clare is therefore not a turn to authors who wrote in some mythical, monolithic “real language,” but a turn to authors who knowingly wrote in what the others, following the long-standing capitalist naturalization of labour and labourers, considered as such—*viz*., Wordsworth’s “lower classes,” Shelley’s apology for “erudition,” Capel Lofft’s correcting Bloomfield’s “Jiles” to “Giles,” and John Taylor’s redacting Clare’s solecisms.

If the “real language of men” is a fantasy, as Bloomfield and Clare remind us, their languages are nonetheless real, and we ought to renegotiate what we mean by “real” and “fantasy” and how they are contingent, in every sense. This needs to be applied to Shelley and Wordsworth. If consensus frees these canonical skylarks from the vicissitudes of contingencies but insists on them with respect to the non-canonical skylarks, then for symmetry’s sake and contingency’s sake we might insist on them with respect to both. If there’s no one “real language,” there might be languages more or less “real” given a certain situation; there might be languages that accomplish different purposes in different contexts, along different figural-historical axes. If it’s easy, as above, to conclude that Bloomfield and Clare’s languages, as their skylarks, come from their contingency with farming and labouring, then it should be just as easy to conclude that Shelley and Wordsworth’s language, as their skylarks, comes from contingency with philosophy and poetry—Shakespeare, for instance, writes a lark “arising” to sing at “heaven’s gate,”[[29]](#footnote-29) and Gray writes a skylark who “melts into air and liquid light.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

However,we can also observe that it is Wordsworth and Shelley who insist on the contingency of the skylark’s ability to sing while soaring, and it is Clare and Bloomfield who insist on the contingency of people’s perceptions, experiences, and descriptions of the skylarks—both, indeed, responding to the poetic tradition of using the skylark as a figure. Both are as informed by ornithology as by mythology, by material history as by poetic convention, by fact as by fiction. The ways these languages are already contingent *on* their own histories complicate the ways they become contingent *with* each other. Approaches to these tangled figural histories can only benefit from contingent methods. To anticipate my turn to Meillassoux, the problem with this thought-style isn’t metaphysics or figuration, but, having metaphysicalized and figured, a neglect to also return to the physics and the ground—pithily, perhaps, theory without method. Calls to do so are loud in these skylark poems: Shelley’s conclusion, rife with questions, begs for that return, that recontextualization, as does Wordsworth’s uneasy opening and aporetic conclusion. But they’re also audible in Bloomfield’s skylark calling on Giles to “mark her way” and in Clare’s wistfulness for heavenly imagination.

## A Whole Cloud of Philosophy

Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (2008) is another synecdoche of the thought-style I’m complicating. In particular, Meillassoux’s metaphysical project, including his *antirrhesis* that his project is not metaphysical, is quintessentially Romantic(ist) in that it reduplicates what Walter Benjamin calls “the striving on the part of the Romantic aestheticians after a resplendent but ultimately noncommittal knowledge of an absolute.”[[31]](#footnote-31) It is the surreptitious foundationalism I’ve pointed at above. Meillassoux’s project is Romantic not only in this transcendental, sublime, imaginative sense, but in a close-to-science sense, for much of the force propelling his argument comes from compressed mathematical metaphors—think of Coleridge attending Humphry Davy’s chemistry lectures to “renew his stock of metaphors.”[[32]](#footnote-32) After my reading, I hope this project will be Romantic in a new contingent sense. Here I submit to closer scrutiny two of Meillassoux’s “grammatical figures,”[[33]](#footnote-33) his “metaphors that hold the metaphysics”:[[34]](#footnote-34) systropheand ellipsis. If, as Wittgenstein writes, “a whole cloud of philosophy condenses into a drop of grammar,”[[35]](#footnote-35) then we might analyze this drop to better know the cloud—Meillassoux’s figures to better know the thought-style.

The way I close-read Meillassoux is the way cognitive linguist Margaret Masterman, in 1965, close-read Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962)—and for similar reasons. Kuhn’s book presented the notion of the “paradigm,” the relatively closed, model-based framework of beliefs, values, and practices held in common in a given “normal science.” Paradigms “shift” when the number of anomalies inexplicable within a paradigm accrue and effect new extra-paradigmatic research. Thinking about a natural science or even all knowledge in terms of “paradigms” became its own paradigmatic thought-style, like thinking in “contingency” is now. Both prioritize rupture, discreteness, and the unprecedented over continuity and the known; both bury inconsistencies and alternatives. From her hospital bed in Norwich, Masterman showed that there are twenty-one distinct senses of “paradigm” in Kuhn’s theory, that they fall into three categories (metaphysical, sociological, and artefact), that the former category is grounded on the latter two, and that at their heart is a concrete, analogy-drawing sequence of words (a figure) that focuses a research field, that is constructed and extended “*by using speech,* with or without the help of mechanical apparatus or of mathematics,” and that collapses when it’s pushed too far.[[36]](#footnote-36) If a paradigm has a figure at its heart, then it has a figural history—a history of being rhetorically figured, a history it in turn figures. To analyze a paradigm’s figural history is also a way to analyze the paradigm-shift–paradigm’s figural history, and a model for analyzing “contingency.”

Though Masterman’s disambiguation is frequently cited by Kuhn’s critics, Kuhn himself incorporated her revisions.[[37]](#footnote-37) In this spirit, I use Masterman’s method to deconstruct Meillassoux’s metaphorics, not to refute him and what he represents so much as refigure it, repurpose it, pragmatize metaphysical absolutes and ground transhistorical universals. In *After Finitude*, there are at least 35 senses of “contingency,” listed here in order of appearance, with page references:

1. opposite of inevitability (34)
2. opposite of essentiality (36–37)
3. indifference of physical laws to entities (39)
4. “knowing that worldly things could be otherwise” (39, 53–54)
5. opposite of necessity (40, 65, 67)
6. variability of entities (40)
7. opposite of facticity (53–54)
8. the absolute “capacity-to-be-other” of the given (54, 117)
9. knowledge that there is no reason for entities’ perishability or variability (62)
10. necessary (62, 80)
11. “pure possibility” (62–63)
12. perishability (62)
13. eternal (65)
14. conformity to certain conditions (66)
15. determined or externally guided by chaos (68, 70)
16. becoming of alterity (69)
17. chaos (71)
18. possibility of actualities to exist or not (73–75)
19. possibility of propensities, eventualities, or negative and positive facts to exist or not (75)
20. possibility of existence to exist or not (75–76)
21. unreason (77)
22. possibility of worlds or universes to become other than what they are now (78, 92)
23. conceivability of possibility of worlds or universes to become other than what they are now (78)
24. conformity to speculative criteria (78)
25. conceivability violated by real contradiction and inconsistency (79)
26. background of the cosmos, that from which necessity, an absolute, or a whole emerge (80)
27. possibility of physical laws themselves to become other than what they are now (83)
28. acausality (92)
29. a priori (95–96)
30. opposite of chance (101)
31. inaccessible to reason (101)
32. determinate or precise condition of chaos or of the stability of chaos (101)
33. transfinity (101, 110)
34. “something that finally happens” (108)
35. independence of thought or humans (116, 117).

These thirty-five senses fall into six categories. “Contingency” is something about:

1. entities (6, 34)
2. laws (3, 27)
3. knowledge (4, 8, 9, 14, 23–25, 31, 33)
4. the sum total of entities, laws, and knowledge, perhaps “existence” (8, 11, 12, 20, 22, 29)
5. the negative background from which [IV] emerges (15–19, 21, 26, 28, 32, 35)
6. a quality of any or all of the preceding (1, 2, 5, 7, 10, 13, 30).

“Contingency” is a systrophe, a “turning together,” the figure of listing many qualities without explicit definition.[[38]](#footnote-38) Systrophe is the figure at the heart of Meillassoux’s paradigm, but one he doesn’t embrace. The reader is instead encouraged to smooth these complications into a definition: “contingency” is the possible emergence of existence from, or the capacity-to-be-other of, a necessary chaos. Meillassoux hypostatizes, from observable entities within the universe, a chaos behind the multiverse, from [I] to [V]. The centerpiece of this argument is Chapter 4, “Hume’s Problem,” which refutes consensus probabilistic arguments for the truth of causal necessity (the reason the same effects always follow from the same causes is that the universe in which the physical laws governing causality always emerges from the set of all possible universes, “given a sufficiently gigantic number of attempts”) with a Badiouan take on Cantor’s theorem (the set of all possible universes cannot be totalized and so does not exist), in order to turn our usual order of operations on its head and attempt to explain causal necessity given that it must be contingent.[[39]](#footnote-39)

This catachresis of mathematical metaphors (or, per Meillassoux, “anhypothetical principles” and “axiomatics”) has more than a family resemblance to the humanistic theories of the past half-century. It’s a variation in a metaphysical key on a common motif, from paradigm shifts to contingency and between foundationalism and interdisciplinarity. Meillassoux does something Romantic in figuring contingency via a series of expropriations that free various kinds of contingency or contingent things from their social contexts, figural histories, and material referents, and then by attempting to fuse them into an organic whole, to use Langan’s analysis of the same process of “reduction and abstraction” in Wordsworth’s poetry. And in Wordsworth’s own words, Meillassoux “might’st seem, proud privilege! to sing / All independent of the leafy spring.”[[40]](#footnote-40) But since one of my purposes here is to get back to the leafy spring, to de-hypostatize Meillassoux’s conclusions, I develop the systrophe elided in his theory. I want to restore systrophe from this thought-style’s reifying use of “semantic ascent” to humanistic methods in general and Romanticism in particular. It’s one drop of grammar—a useful one—in this cloud of philosophy.

Another figure at the heart of Meillassoux’s contingency is ellipsis—not just of his integral systrophe, but also with respect to the verb “think.” Instead of common, idiomatic verb phrases like “think about *x*” or “think of *x*,” “think over *x*” or “think through *x*,” Meillassoux uses “think *x*.” As far as my French allows me to read, this isn’t an effect of Ray Brassier’s translation but is also true in the French original, *Après la Finitude* (2006), which uses neither the idiomatic and most common “penser à *x*,” nor the idiomatic but less common “penser de *x*,” “penser *z*” (where *z* is an infinitive), or “penser que *x*,” but opts instead for “penser *x*.” I don’t mean Meillassoux (or Brassier) simply elides “that,” which is idiomatic and which he sometimes does. I mean that he deploys a grammatical figure. Excluding adjective or noun uses of “thinking,” “think *x*” appears 100 times in *After Finitude*, almost always when Meillassoux presents his own argument, whereas idiomatic uses of “think” (with a preposition or an elided “that”) occur only 32 times, almost always when Meillassoux presents arguments to refute or characters discussing his arguments.

This ellipsis is no inexplicable quirk, and regardless of whether it has precedents in Pascal or Descartes, it’s nevertheless that from which not a little of this contingency’s philosophical *je ne sais quoi* derives. Witness it in examples of senses (20), (22), and (35) above:

“I can think the contingency of this existing thing” (75)

“I cannot think the contingency of *existence* as such” (75)

“I am perfectly incapable of thinking the abolition of existence” (76)

“it becomes possible to think a plurality of contradictory worlds” (78)

“thought has become able to think a world […] unaffected by whether or not anyone thinks it” (116)

A reduction and abstraction complementary to that from a congeries of senses to one definition occurs in this ellipsis of “thinking *about* a world” into “thinking a world”: the former merely conjures a representation in the mind of a world that has mind-independent existence, whereas the latter either produces a world in the mind or calls it into existence from the unthought void, and as such it is not mind-independent (contrary to Meillassoux’s larger “post-Kantian” project). But we don’t say “I think a skylark”; we say “I’m thinking *about* a skylark.” There is a tantalizing intimation of agency, being, or power in the way the preposition-less “think” works. Yet, when prepositions are re-inserted, “contingency” re-systrophized, made contingent, this cloud of philosophy condenses into a drop of grammar, static theory into dynamic methods.

Prepositionalizing in this way has its own figural history. Wittgenstein does it in his celebrated complication of “seeing” into “seeing-as,” in which he postulates the ineluctable conditioning of perception by precognition, habit, and experience[[41]](#footnote-41)—not unlike Clare and Bloomfield do. Philippa Foot does it in her elegant reconceptualization of Aristotelian necessity “all things considered” (a.t.c.) into necessities “relevant to certain considerations” such as species’ habitats, patterns of life, and repertoires of working things out[[42]](#footnote-42)—not unlike Shelley and Wordsworth do. Contingencies-as, contingencies-for: these are more fruitful than Contingency a.t.c. This Contingency is a foundation on which a given thing, event, even world “could have been otherwise”—a conditional perfect tense that enjoins a wistful imaginary to wring its hands while transmogrifying “could” into “would” and “should”—and, moreover, it conflates concepts we already have handy phrases for, such as “path-dependent” or “systemically caused” or, in a pinch, “socially constructed.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Refiguring it does not trivialize it, merely repurposes it, for to mistake de-metaphysicalizing for trivializing is only the contrapositive of hypostases in the thought-style represented by Meillassoux. The grammars and the figures are the vital parts—they’re parts of how we organize our forms of life.

## Cosmic Exile

If we hew only to this Contingency that affords a semantic ascent away from the everyday, a streamlining of systrophic mess, we end up with the kinds of foundationalizing, totalizing, and teleologizing that “contingency” is meant to resist. Quine calls this move “cosmic exile” in the final paragraph of *Word and Object* (1960), which concludes his discussion of semantic ascent:

The philosopher’s task differs from the others’, then, in detail; but in no such drastic way as those suppose who imagine for the philosopher a vantage point outside the conceptual scheme that he [*sic*] takes in charge. There is no such *cosmic exile*. He cannot study and revise the fundamental conceptual scheme of science and common sense without having some conceptual scheme, whether the same or another no less in need of philosophical scrutiny, in which to work.[[44]](#footnote-44)

That is, fruitfulness comes from working conceptual schemes together, making them contingent in the side-by-side sense, from moving back-and-forth between them, not from ascending out of them all. Without returning systrophe to the heart of Meillassoux’s paradigm, without adding prepositions back to his ellipses, *After Finitude* performs two kinds of cosmic exile. The first is Quine’s: this thought-style *exiles itself into the cosmos*. It takes an outside vantage, allowing philosophers (and literary theorists) to see “themselves as presiding over a tribunal of pure reason,” as legislating disciplinary bounds, as handling the reallyR/real.[[45]](#footnote-45) The second is one Quine might not have foreseen: this thought-style *exiles the cosmos itself*. With pure reason allegedly encroached by math and physics, theory can reclaim its prestige by presiding over a tribunal of pure *unreason*, from which reason emerges and on which it is contingent (*viz*. Meillassoux, also François Laruelle and “non-philosophy”). This is the regressive and foundationalist move we make when, for example, we state or imply that, yet elide how, poetry is about or even *is* ecology, ontology, affect, history, or otherwise, though plenty of tough questions call to us from the “is” that brings these fields together, if it’s more than “the fantastic interdisciplinary nothingness of metaphor.”[[46]](#footnote-46) This is also the move we make when we both substitute an authoritative gesture at a field for authority in that field *and* disavow authority in general or authorities outside our fields—Benjamin’s “noncommittal knowledge” or Liu’s “detached immanence”[[47]](#footnote-47)—though plenty of problems ask us to bring such fields together.

Instead of cosmic exile, I want to explore the borderless free flow of ideas between cosmoi, disciplinary fields as an open-field commons, before the enclosure that transformed the Georgian era set off a series of enclosures (of knowledge, culture, biology, *etc.*) amid which we still find ourselves. There’s no one contingency, but all kinds, visibly so in farming, which is another one of my systrophe of examples. I’m editing this paper in spring, the season in which every decision—when to clean the germination greenhouse, how to plant a new variety of cantaloupe, what old blueberry growth needs to be pruned, who will rake the straw off the strawberries—has effects amplified a hundredfold some months from now, even more so because this season these sensitively dependent decisions are made during the manifold uncertainties of a pandemic. This is the Lorenz attractor, butterfly effect, path-dependency kind of “contingency” with which we Romanticists are most familiar, not least because of Meillassoux.[[48]](#footnote-48) It also shows up in the way farmers rely on their previous decisions, review their past seasons, and stick with what worked as much as possible—a reliance on tradition that might raise the hackles of the critical Romanticist, but one that such a Romanticist shares, at least in continuing to consult two-hundred-year-old poetry.

At least one other kind of contingency is contingent with this kind, though. This contingency is what farmers have to know and do in dozens of fields and communities at once, an overlapping Venn diagram and exploded-view drawing, and a concern, as contemporary-and-Romantic farmer-and-poet Wendell Berry says, “for the way that things are joined together.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Farmers have to know ecology, botany, animal biology, soil science, chemistry, climatology, machinery, carpentry, fieldwork techniques, worker management, legislation, they have to know people who know these things better than they do, and they have to know how these fields interact. If they are experts in one field, sometimes literally, their expertise diffracts against,[[50]](#footnote-50) interferes with, relies on, builds with numerous others’. This is, I would submit, what the literary humanities have been at their best, too. Conditioned by a Romanticist’s reflexivity, Meillassoux’s systropheis the figure *sine qua non* for grappling with this contingency in all its movement, mess, and “mangle of practice,”[[51]](#footnote-51) for it’s neither a smooth synthesis nor a total definition, but centers versatile, accommodating methods.

## Semantic Descent

To the extent that I’ve soared, it has been with a view of nesting back in the corn. If doing metaphysics being foundationalist is useful, then its use comes in its recontextualization, pragmatization, pluralization—in its vulnerabilities, persistences, and responses to difference and difficulty, like Clare’s skylark. We can recover a *semantic descent* from Contingency to a systrophe of contingencies with various non-elided prepositions such as Wittgensteinian “contingencies-*as*” or “contingencies-*of*” or “contingencies-*with*,” and from Necessity to various Footian “necessities-*for*.” In other words, from a Romantic “real language” to many real languages. We can replace cosmic exile with open cosmoi, forming “contingencies” in the “side by side” or “touching together” sense of common fields and of a farmer’s knowledge, the glorious, glaring light of metaphysics helping us, by a bent-hat shade, to carefully scrutinize a penumbrae of practices. These contingencies form and are formed by intersections, path-dependencies, and historical figurations that must be stated and debated—and crucially, they are formed by purposes that must be aired, too. They are less tidy ideas that appear on one or the other side of paradigm shifts, epistemic breaks, Contingency, and incommensurabilities, more messy notions that criss-cross in deep shifts, slow breaks, long contingencies, and commensurabilities. As I’ve tried to demonstrate throughout this essay, this is where Romanticists can use our methodological reflexivity, in retooling the many methods of the post-Feyerabendian “almost anything goes” that results from such contingency; this is where we can use our formalism, in analyzing what Stephen Jay Gould calls “the complex events of narrative” rather than “the simple consequences of natural law” (or, for that matter, of supernatural unlaw and of what we think of as simple, as consequence, as natural, as law); and this is where we can use our historicism, in generalizing the lessons of the conditional perfect to the revolutionary reimagination of what Emily Rohrbach calls the future anterior, of what will have been.[[52]](#footnote-52)

I’m only beginning my foray into the worlds of Romanticists and farmers. But I hope the contingencies of my fields have been and will be fruitful. After Spivak’s assessment of the state of comparative literature in *Death of a Discipline* (2003), and despite my disagreement with her that “‘fieldwork’ belongs to the social sciences,”[[53]](#footnote-53) I think we Romanticists can train ourselves and our students *not* to be Scholars, Theorists, or Philosophers, whose field of choice lies cosmically exiled beneath or behind or beyond all other fields, whether it be because language is everything or mathematics is or affect is or agency is or matter is or form is, *etc.*, but to be a contingent of scholars-and-…, theorists-and-…, philosophers-and-…, whose fields lie beside and between other fields, because language, mathematics, affect, matter, or form belongs to most things in some way. This means decolonizing, remembering, demarginalizing, building specializations and expertise in anything but silos—but building them nonetheless, and lending, borrowing, and helping others build. For me, this also means a systropheof Romanticist-and-farmer, “sideshadowed”[[54]](#footnote-54) by historian and philosopher of science, genetics student, would-be writer. This is, per the parable of the skylark, consistent with a renewed post–Romantic-ideology sense of Romanticism as a vulnerable nest in a certain field from which we can both soar and return to care, Romanticism done by paper-cut, plough-cramped hands. We can make the sophistications of Romanticism complement others, supplement others, “yoking the humanities, however distantly, with however few guarantees, to a just world.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

We might take the lessons learned in our semantic ascent and return from the clouds with them to nestle in fields around, refreshing the purpose of the university within and without it, outside, around, all the time. Berry puts it succinctly in “Unspecializing Poetry” (1983): this semantic descent

calls for a different kind of mind and a different kind of university, in which the motions of intelligence would not follow radii ever outward from the center, each discipline dividing farther from the others the farther outward it goes, but would move in a dance pattern of exchanges and returns. Literary scholars might then begin to teach biology, history, philosophy, science, etc., not to be versatile, but to be pertinent. Writers would begin to feel the judgment of engineers, farmers, and doctors.[[56]](#footnote-56)

I’ve recontextualized Berry’s farmer-poetics as one of my guides to try to show how I might do this—repurpose and ramify, not refute or reify. Insofar as Romanticist approaches to contingency in particular depend on the thought-style I’ve sketched, I hope I have made progress toward repurposing that dependency. And insofar as Romanticist methods in general tend to recreate its cosmic exile and semantic ascent, I hope I have made progress toward reimagining that tendency. As rapturous as it is to soar, the corn needs care too.

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41. Wittgenstein, “Philosophy of Psychology,” secs. 203–40. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), 15, 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Cf. Joel Mokyr, “King Kong and Cold Fusion: Counterfactual Analysis and the History of Technology,” in *Unmaking the West: “What-if?” Scenarios that Rewrite World History*, ed. Philip E. Tetlock, Richard Ned Lebow, and Geoffrey Parker (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2006), 277–322; Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: Norton, 1989), 51, 283–91. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Quine, *Word and Object*, 254, emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979), 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Alan Liu, “The Power of Formalism: The New Historicism,” *English Literary History* 56, no. 4, (1989), 743. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Alan Liu, “Local Transcendence: Cultural Criticism, Postmodernism, and the Romanticism of Detail,” in *Local Transcendence: Essays on Postmodern Historicism and the Database* (Chicago:U of Chicago P, 2008), 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Cf. Christina Lupton, “Literature and Contingency,” *Textual Practice* 32, no. 3 (2018), 375–79; Gillian White, “Poetics of Contingency,” *Textual Practice* 32, no. 3 (2018), 529–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
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51. Andrew Pickering, *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science* (Chicago:U of Chicago P, 1995), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Gould, *Wonderful Life*, 278; Emily Rohrbach, *Modernity’s Mist: British Romanticism and the Poetics of Anticipation* (New York: Fordham UP, 2016), 1–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003), 9, 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994), 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
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56. Wendell Berry, “Notes: Unspecializing Poetry,” in *Standing By Words* (Albany: North Point, 1983), 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)