Introduction

“Pandemic” was Merriam-Webster’s—and everyone else’s—2020 Word of the Year, but the silent partner of any crisis is “contingency.” The unconscionable death toll in the United States is at least partly the result of a failure to prepare for the non-surprise surprise of the pandemic. At the time this introduction was written, we were repeatedly informed that any timetable for a return to normalcy is at the mercy of various, unforeseen contingencies. Moving between reasonable probability and blind chance, contingency as an abstract “three dimensional concept” is the core experience of modernity—contingency promises both freedom from enclosed, controlled systems, and chaos.[[1]](#footnote-1) As the world traveled slowly from the moment of missed chances, the “known unknown,” to the uncertainty of a post-pandemic future—the “unknown unknown,” if you will—it is fitting to by look back to the early nineteenth century, a period during which contingency decisively entered the zone of historical thinking, disrupting progressive historicism with the possibility of uncertain futures.[[2]](#footnote-2)

As Coleridge’s “Fears in Solitude” demonstrates, contingency’s purchase is most evident on the scale of the system. After leaving the productive solitude of the dell, Coleridge’s speaker admonishes the British public that their collective failure of imagination and capitulation to the empty signification of modern print culture has potentially far-reaching consequences. As “spectators and not combatants,” of war, their voyeurism makes them short-sighted, with “no guess/ Anticipative of a wrong unfelt, /No speculation on contingency.”[[3]](#footnote-3) But if contingency here seems to refer to the willful moral blindness of “unknown knowns,” the next lines, where Coleridge appears to qualify speculation as “However dim and vague, too vague and dim/ To yield forth a justifying cause,” launch contingency from the realm of probability and into the far murkier waters of the unknowable.[[4]](#footnote-4) The inverted anaphora in the line is crucial, emphasizing contingency’s uncertain futurity and rendering it impotent, so that, “forth/ (Stuff’d out with big preamble, holy names/ And adjurations of the God in heaven)/ We sound our mandates for the certain death/ Of thousands and ten thousands!” (99-104) Empty mandates take the place of contingency’s justifications, but if contingency is so dim, can it ever be satisfactorily justified? Coleridge attempts to draw a causal line between the failure to speculate and the potential for future harm, but confronted with the multiple forms of empty signification the poem identifies (“Courts, Committees, Institutions, / Associations, and Societies”), the poem’s speaker does not provide a satisfactory way of overcoming a systemic resistance to contingency.

What follows in this volume are a series of productive speculations on the place of contingency in Romantic culture, and on Romanticism’s contingency. We have already seen how we might read contingency’s place in Romanticism, but reading Romanticism’s contingency means confronting its constitutively elusive, often restrictive linguistic, historical and geographical borders. Speculating on a contingent Romanticism also means acknowledging long-standing disciplinary crises accelerated by the pandemic’s ruthless human and civic toll; specifically, universities’ collective overreliance on flexible, contingent faculty, and the ease with which they can be abandoned. In the current crisis, the failure of one form of contingency and the overreliance on another are pushing academia into places of prophetic fulfillment.

In “Fears of Solitude,” contingency’s elusive, frustrating horizon contrasts the productive interplay of mind with spirit, conjured by the tangible-intangible skylark of the poem’s opening stanzas. The skylark first enters the poem as a counterfactual, a potential sonic presence that both establishes and belies silence. The speaker then imagines a conditional scene of pastoral bliss in which a person “might” lie on the heath and hear the skylark, before finally apostrophizing the bird while in a state of imaginative fecundity. The silent, not-silent dell as “an unsettling site of too many possibilities” is thus premised on the skylark’s contingent place in the speaker’s imagination.[[5]](#footnote-5) In his essay for this volume, Nathan Te Bokkel also explores the contingency of skylarks, and skylarks as a figure for Romanticism’s contingency. Stylistically, figurally, and thematically twining together reflections on mathematics, agriculture, and the ornithological poetics, Te Bokkel’s systrophic essay demonstrates how the ways in which we read Romanticism—as either rupture or continuity, as either metaphysical or grounded—may be more usefully considered as contingent, rather than binary, epistemologies.

This is contingency on a large scale, but we cannot forget that contingence, in its earliest definitions, invokes closeness, affinity, and the sensorial (from the Latin *con*, or “with,” and *tangere*, “to touch”). Contingency, then, isn’t merely the unknown or counterfactual, but the affective and intimate. Michele Speitz’s essay on the work of the Haitian revolutionary poet Charles Hérard Dumesle draws on contingency’s other definition as an affinity, or closeness. Identifying an alternative revolutionary spirit in Dumesle’s writings—one that is contingent, local, and grounded rather than transcendent and immortal—Speitz traces how Dumesle’s coining of the neologism *lugubrer*, “to make sorrowful,” is, in the context of Hatian revolutionary aesthetics, inspirational rather than elegiac. Uncovering what Speitz describes as “contingent meanings” in Dumesle’s use of *lugubrer* reveals the human and terrestrial traces of colonial trauma.

Writing on the relationship between unboundedness and fanaticism, Winter Jade Werner’s essay on the politics of despatialization in Hogg’s *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* demonstrates a like investment on the tangible and bounded while demonstrating the pitfalls of assuming virtuality’s equivalence with parity. Charting the rhetorical similarities between the international Protestantism of the early nineteenth century and more recent cyber-utopianism, Werner analyzes the novel’s intersection of spatial and religious politics. Drawing from Hogg’s deft analysis of fanaticism, Werner demonstrates how we, like Hogg, might usefully counter presentist myopia by resisting history’s artifactualization in order to reveal the contingencies of the now.

It’s worth remembering that in the June 8, 1809 issue of his weekly paper *The Friend,* Coleridge referred to his poem as “Fears of Solitude,” an error that critics have suggested can be traced to Coleridge’s fear of the disconnect between the language of sensation and communal feeling.[[6]](#footnote-6) In the final essay in this volume, Chris Washington reads Shelley’s *The Last Man* and *Matilda* as novels in which Shelley establishes loneliness as the original condition of selfhood. Washington demonstrates how temporality in *The Last Man* is displaced from heliocentric, anthropocentric time into a universal contingent temporality, and argument which is then broadened to make an argument for futurity’s lastness. We are all writing, Washington suggests, for the end of the world.

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Bio

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1. Andreas Schedler, “Mapping Contingency,” in *Political Contingency*, ed. Ian Shapiro and Sonu Bedi (New York: New York University Press, 2007),54. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Emily Rohrbach argues that “Romantic anticipations” departed from a progressive teleology to imagine “the present as a historical age whose apparent trajectory might be disrupted by some dark, unpredictable futurity.” *Modernity's Mist: British Romanticism and the Poetics of Anticipation*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Coleridge “Fears in Solitude,” in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Major Works*, ed. H. J. Jackson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), lines 96-98 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Slavoj Zizek defines “unknown knowns” as the “disavowed beliefs, suppositions, and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values.” “What Rumsfeld Doesn’t Know That He Knows About Abu Ghraib”, *In These Times*, (21 June, 2004) https://inthesetimes.com/article/what-rumsfeld-doesn-know-that-he-knows-about-abu-ghraib. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Peter Larkin, “ ‘Fears in Solitude:’ Reading (from) the Dell,” *The Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1991), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Larkin, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)