

# 1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era

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Volume 23

Article 7

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2016

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Kevin L Cope

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### Recommended Citation

Kevin L Cope (2016) "DRIFTING Unguided or Involuntary Motion and the Enlightenment Sense of Direction," *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*: Vol. 23, Article 7. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty/vol23/iss1/7>

# DRIFTING

## Unguided or Involuntary Motion and the Enlightenment Sense of Direction

KEVIN L. COPE

Topics like “motion” or its somewhat more ideological synonym “movement” encourage scholars to think in grand terms and to celebrate formidable ideas such as freedom and social change. For those lucky enough to have found a job in a college or university, academic life, despite its thousands of (imagined) miseries, provides for a high degree of liberty and for pleasantly erratic mobility. Busy as they are with raising funds and cultivating images, deans and chancellors seldom stand in the way of obscure professors who want to travel the world conferring about the history of the glass harmonica or about Augustan precursors of spaghetti or about any of a thousand offbeat topics. Accustomed to grandeur as well as to liberty, most

professors think of “movement” as something done by masses of people who have chosen for good reason to move from one destination to another along a direct route. They visualize the persecuted Mayflower “pilgrims” voluntarily leaving England or Holland to create a religious utopia in Massachusetts; they see the beleaguered Huguenots proudly dispersing to Britain, South Africa, and the new world to escape persecution. Scholars likewise habitually associate “motion” with action that occurs in the foreground. Asking an eighteenth-century scholar to identify a work in which “motion” plays a prominent role will usually elicit answers like “any of the action-packed picaresque novels of Smollett” or “Voltaire’s rollicking *Candide*.” An interdisciplinary reference to the narrative drawings and paintings of Hogarth, Fuseli, and Jacques-Louis David or to the operas of John Gay and William Davenant may follow. Rank-and-file Anglo-American scholars may feel some confusion about the *kind* of motion to be considered, whether the decorative motion of the late neo-Catholic baroque (as in the ornamental allegorical frescoes of Tiepolo or in John Dryden’s *Song for St. Cecilia’s Day*) or the deliberative, step-by-step, scientific action portrayed in the paintings of Joseph Wright of Derby or in the research proposals of Joseph Glanvill and Thomas Sprat.

Concentrating on voluntary motion—on the kinds of actions that characters in novels undertake when they make a journey or enter a brawl or sweep across the floor at one of Jane Austen’s fictional balls—makes it easy to forget that one of the greatest discoveries of the “long” eighteenth century was the value of unguided or outright *involuntary* motion. Numerous scholars have addressed, for example, the scientific and the social implications of the hot-air balloon as developed by the James Tytler, Vincenzo Lunardi, and Joseph and Étienne Montgolfier, paying attention to what these early aeronauts *did* and also to what the public *did* in response to their innovations.<sup>1</sup> The colorful exploits of these aviation pioneers distract scholars from the important

<sup>1</sup> A detailed inventory as well as cultural interpretation of early balloon travels can be found in Jessika Wichner, *Der Traum vom Fliegen von der Antike bis zu den Ballonaufstiegen im Großbritannien des ausgehenden 18. Jahrhunderts: Eine wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Studie* (Göttingen: Cuvillier Verlag, 2010). See also Bärbel Czennia, *From Eolus to Erology. Or, Boreas Meets the Barometer: Clouds, Winds, and Weather Observation in Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, in Kevin L. Cope and Robert C. Leitz III, eds., *Imagining the Sciences: Expressions of New Knowledge in the “Long” Eighteenth Century* (New York: AMS Press, 2004), 44–46, 52–56; Czennia emphasizes the intense popular and poetic interest in meteorology, an interest that was jump-started by balloon probes that took unexpected turns. In “The Progress of Knowledge in the Regions of Air? Divisions and Disciplines in Early Ballooning,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45 (2011): 71–86, Clare Brant addresses the ability of the eighteenth-century balloon to drift between disciplinary boundaries and between vacillating conceptions of “men of science.”

recognition that these bold explorers of the third dimension not only popularized the idea of free and uncontrolled motion but also made it palatable to an assortment of xenophobic, absolutist regimes. True, the first air travelers struggled to develop steering mechanisms, but surely part of the excitement that surrounded balloon ascensions arose from their unpredictability: from the fact that early aeronauts might go or land anywhere that the winds might carry them, even across national boundaries, bodies of water, cultural regions, or lines of battle. In the psychological and aesthetic economy of the balloon ascent, the initial sense of control that had been gained through research and planning was exchanged for a perilous liberty. As the balloon rose, ever more mobility came at the cost of ever more danger and ever less control.

The balloon as cultural icon points up the pervasiveness of "drifting" as the preeminent kinetic mode of the long eighteenth century. Minimally voluntary or unguided motion stood at the foundation of long-eighteenth-century cosmology. Sir Isaac Newton's mathematical explication of motion made it clear that most objects in the universe were drifting through empty space. Planets, comets, and interstellar bric-a-brac were set in motion at the creation, then floated through their daily rounds until perturbed by some force, encounter, or other accident. Once God was done with them, created objects rolled through space without the benefit of additional corrective guidance. Press magnate Robert Dodsley's periodicals published orbital charts for comets and meteors that were drifting within striking distance of the earth. This taste for speculative journalism about low-probability, multi-dimensionally extended, potential calamities suggests that the eighteenth century audience was ready to allow that, however wondrous and careful the designing providence revealed by Newton and other virtuosi might be, objects in space might nevertheless catastrophically collide with one another. One need not, however, look to the heavens in order to see the pervasiveness of unguided motion in long-eighteenth-century life. Popularized versions of Thomas Hobbes's atomism provided the quasi-philosophical underpinnings for the popular "rake" and "libertine" idioms, lifestyles that took "matter in motion" as their credo and that promoted the unguided interplay of careening atoms as an explanation for almost anything that might happen. Glimpses through the microscope revealed swarms of creatures that lived by drifting, whether in sea or air: creatures that challenged common-sense notions of scale, orientation, and position by thriving at differing depths, altitudes, and angles. The poetry of Margaret Cavendish, likewise, reflected on the possibility that entire miniature worlds could drift by on winds comprised of populated atoms.



This paper will begin probing the *less* voluntary eighteenth century: that eighteenth century that looks at, showcases, and celebrates unguided motion. The boldly unqualified term “Enlightenment,” with its teleological ring and with its suggestion of assured eventual arrival at the precincts of truth, contrasts with a “drifting Enlightenment” that reaches its destinations through irregular routes, around spontaneous detours, and on unpredictable schedules. What might be called the “medical Enlightenment” went even further in its attention to unpleasant varieties of unguided motion such as those fits, spasms, and convulsions. This preliminary study will attend primarily to true drifting. I shall avoid going overboard into the sea of interdisciplinarity by focusing not on violent unguided motions but rather on literary versions of drifting, whether drifting as the topic of literary works or drifting as a literary mode.

Let us first look at a few examples of optional or even “recreational” drifting: instances in which unguided motion was selected on a discretionary or voluntary basis in order either to advance knowledge or to provide an interesting topic. Those who study the history of exploration are accustomed to navigators such as Captain Cook, who, at the least, could set aside his sextant, neglect his compass, and gaze over the bow of his ship to get at least a rudimentary idea of where he might be going. Other, less glamorous explorations proceeded in domains where all navigation, whether visual or instrumental, was impossible—where drifting along with impinging influences was the only option. Both for technical and for cultural reasons—as a result of improving mining technology and in response to an outburst of seismic activity—subterranean exploration became something of a rage in the long eighteenth century. The world underground, with its lack of familiar visual references, its elimination of the horizon, and its hidden magazines of mighty forces, resisted easy investigation while imposing its own itineraries on aimless amblers. Nondirectional exploration of underground spaces opens new territories for literary drifting: for writing about journeys that might go anywhere. In 1682, Captain William White followed up on an initial probe by Captain Sturmy into Penpark Hole, a chasm containing an underground lake beneath the surface of Gloucestershire. Captain White makes a leisurely perusal of the cavern aboard a conveniently if inexplicably placed vessel:

On my return back to the Bay, I found about 12 feet descent to the Water; where was a small Boat and a shaft, with other necessary Utensils to search the Hole. I sailed several times round the Pool

and every time found something new to gratify my Curiosity; and  
I was near 5 Hours on the Water.<sup>2</sup>

From the surface of the water to the roof of the chasm, we later learn, is a distance of about 40 feet. Following out the likely proportions of such a chasm and also looking at contemporary sketches of the pit, it is difficult to imagine that a waterborne journey through Penpark Hole would require five hours cruising time. Rather, White describes a genial as well as scientific version of the classic "drunkard's progress." He bounces around a barely discernable lake, butting into novelties and drifting into sublimities while moving willy-nilly through the dark, with little or no wind for what he poetically calls "sailing" underground. Drifting about in a small puddle provides Captain White with an occasion for jotting down anecdotes and discovering occasions for conversation. This "drifting" model of storytelling stands in marked contrast to our own commonplace notions about the production of narratives, in which clearly defined influences such as political movements or authorial genius overdetermine the course of reported events such that the resulting novels always look a little more organized than day-to-day life. Sailing narratives like *Roderick Random* or *Robinson Crusoe* or *Captain Singleton* assume at the very least that the wind will move the story along toward its conclusion, but Captain White relies on microscopic oscillations in a pool to set up the drift of his multidirectional story. It is specifically the *under*-determination of his motion that allows Captain White to turn not a molehill but a hole into the narrative equivalent of a mountain.

Memorable stories were always emerging from the subterranean water table. John Housman recounts a fashion-oriented demonstration of underground disorientation and narrative nonlinearity:

A remarkable circumstance took place about thirty years ago, which proves that the water of Hurtlepot is immediately connected with that of Weathercote cave: ——— a woman lost her bonnet in Weathercote cave, which disappeared among the rocks, and afterwards was found in Hurtlepot; consequently, a

<sup>2</sup> William White, *An Account of Penpark Hole by Mr Will<sup>m</sup> White*, an undated handwritten manuscript bound in with the Harvard University (Houghton library) copy of George Catcott's *Descriptive Account of a Descent made into Penpark-hole, in the Parish of Westbury-upon-Trim, in the County of Gloucester, in the Year 1775* (Bristol, 1792).

subterranean passage, together with the brook, leads from the former to the latter.<sup>3</sup>

In an instance of almost miraculous drifting, a bonnet disappears beneath the earth only to reappear miles away, drifting along unseen waterways and picking up an imaginative charge that sparks the imagination and elicits imagined narratives. In the Hurtlepot incident one can see the importance of the “drifting” mode to popular eighteenth-century poems about the unguided travels of modest objects. In John Philips’s *The Splendid Shilling*, for example, the tides of circumstance move a coin from pocket to pocket and venue to venue until it travels all the London world. Indeed, speculation on the movement of underground water became something of a genre during the eighteenth century, whether among those accounting for the whereabouts of surplus water before, during, and after Noah’s flood; those explaining the origin of the steam accompanying volcanic eruptions; or those seeking shortcuts between world waterways.

In the history of most literary or artistic genres, there is usually some point at which the material concerns that gave rise to the form subside before its emergent aesthetic goals. Thus, Vergil converted practical farm lore into beautiful pastorals; thus, Francis Bacon and Michel de Montaigne nudged the essay away from laboratory reporting and toward the art of wit; thus, Horace, Juvenal, Dryden, and Pope removed the remedial element from satire to make punishment into a salon art; and thus the eighteenth century abounds in authors who got the water out of drifting in order to create a more perfect literary version of floating. True, there are plenty of ship’s logs written during the period that address the usual, wet sort of drifting, but there is also a marine literature that takes a longer view, that reflects philosophically (and sometimes dryly) on the free motion suggested by the sea. The maritime culture of eighteenth-century Britain makes it easy to find aesthetically enhanced examples of uncontrolled fluid motion. One thinks of the multitudinous “shipwreck” narratives and other ocean disaster stories, from journalistic reports of foundering to Daniel Defoe’s rendering of Robinson Crusoe’s adventures to Swift’s use of the shipwreck as a way to deliver his character Gulliver to various satirized cultures and on to William Cowper’s self-presentation, in *The Castaway*, as a wretched soul adrift in the sea of religious despair. One superb

<sup>3</sup> John Housman, *A Descriptive Tour, and Guide to the Lakes, Caves, Mountains, and other Natural Curiosities, in Cumberland, Westmoreland, Lancashire, and a Part of the West Riding of Yorkshire* (Carlisle, 1800), 44.

example of a work in which literal, waterborne drifting coincides with drifting as refined into a genre is William Falconer's best-selling poem, *The Shipwreck*, a sentimental epic in which the long wait for the titular calamity gives the author time to mix wrenching tragic scenes with high adventure and with nautical lore.<sup>4</sup> Falconer, a middle-ranking mariner who discovered his literary talent aboard ship, rose to brief prominence in the later eighteenth century owing to his remarkable ability to fuse familiar literary tropes and motifs with hands-on knowledge of ships, seas, and sailors. Somewhat naive and somewhat overawed by neoclassical verse, Falconer uses nautical and literary idioms interchangeably, recasting real-life drifting as a marine literary mode. He deploys introductions, invocations, and the entire armada of highly conventionalized poetic devices both to address serious situations aboard ship and to reflect on literary issues. Falconer's "Introduction" opens with an invocation to the muse of memory, an invocation that tackles the problem of setting a descriptive poem in a venue that is nothing more than an immense, undifferentiated sheet of water. "Say on what seas, for thou alone canst tell, / What dire mishap a fated ship befell":<sup>5</sup> it is not so much that Falconer is unable to recall which venue on the aqueous plenum provided the setting for his shipwreck, but rather that most such venues look alike. Calling attention to the unrelenting similarity of the open ocean proves more interesting and more informative than the jotting down of navigational fixes for a ship that very soon will be lost. Despite the prominence of storms in his poem, Falconer highlights the slow, minimally differentiated nature of marine motion, putting the focus on drifting. Languishing in the southern hemisphere, "Four days becalm'd the vessel here remains" (I:90), adrift on a vast desert of flat water; even when in motion, the ship moves in an undifferentiated way, as "Along the glassy plain the vessel glides" (I:706). The recurrent image of a "glassy plain" or "pathless tide" (I:47) emphasizes Falconer's apparent plan to extrapolate a high-seas drama from this baldest and cleanest of stages, to build a story, a seascape, and a poetic idea on a platform that is almost not there: that, if touched, literally dissolves; that, if viewed earnestly, tends to level itself out of view; that, if followed, drifts and wanders around the circuit of the globe.

<sup>4</sup> On Falconer's program of elevating and refining maritime exploits into high literature, see Victoria Bridges Moussaron, "The Adventure of a 'Sublime Subject': *The Shipwreck* (1762) by William Falconer," in Serge Soupel, Kevin L. Cope, and Alexander Pettit, eds., *Adventure: An Eighteenth-Century Medium: Essays on the Daring and the Bold as a Pre-Modern Medium* (New York: AMS Press, 2009), 125–43.

<sup>5</sup> William Falconer, *The Shipwreck*, ed. John Mitford (Boston: Little, Brown, 1863), "Introduction," ll. 109–10. Subsequently cited intratextually, by canto and line.

Falconer is especially fond of what might be called the "youth afloat" trope, in which a promising youth floats about the Mediterranean, drifting with the tide and indulging in reveries. Palemon, the tragic hero of the tale, floats along the sea while his beloved "Anna's image swims before his sight" (I:301). Despite the harsh physical realities that it represents, *The Shipwreck* never tells readers where the story might be occurring. The sailors are on an inbound course from Egypt, but how far they have progressed remains unclear (I:1 ff.); the protagonists wander into unidentified hidden alcoves that shimmer with a fairy ambiance (I:365-66); now and then Falconer draws back into a remote perspective so as to compare his characters' experiences to events in classical epic (see, for example, II:394-411 and III:1-58); characters even gather atop heaving masts, waving to-and-fro somewhere out on the bounding main (III:596-97). These indeterminate "settings" juxtapose a plentitude of action against a paucity of information or detail. Falconer asks readers to do more than a little bit of imaginative work in passing from a "glassy plain" that could lie anywhere between Pago Pago and Rejkavik to the highly descriptive, highly tangible world on deck. He presents his poem as a training regimen in which readers learn to see an abundance of detail in a great field of repetitive information that just happens to drift by. So with time: Falconer opens each of his cantos with a note indicating that the cantos take place over specific but somewhat dispersed intervals ranging from four and one-half days to seven hours—intervals rather longer than the two hours of action-packed Elizabethan drama. These intervals decrease as the poem progresses and as Falconer's readers learn to pick out the interesting junctures in the field of time. The poem as a whole deals with the protracted nature of sea travel—with the fact that it takes a long time and a good amount of drifting to get anywhere—by introducing time-consuming set-pieces such as laments and soliloquies that elide the drifting of open time. Falconer is more "empirical" than hard-edged naval novelists like Daniel Defoe or Tobias Smollett, who present adventure after adventure and utterly distort the tedious life aboard ship. Falconer at least attempts to suggest the flavor of the long dull hours, training his audience to look out for an excess of information in routine events. Falconer's poetry is the poetry of attention: attention to detail, attention to slowly moving, slowly emerging phenomena, attention to the all-but-invisible motion of time itself. Through the compression rather than the deletion of time, he extracts action-packed sequences from languid motion—from drifting.

One of Falconer's favorite techniques involves what might be called "ocular drifting." In the midst of a major scene (such as the commencing of a

voyage) he allows his characters' eyes to wander off in an emotionally charged "glance" at a beloved person, place, or thing:

Our eyes transfix'd with agonizing look,  
One sad farewell, one last embrace we took.  
Forlorn of hope the lovely maid I left,  
Pensive and pale, of every joy bereft :  
She to her silent couch retired to weep,  
Whilst I embark 'd, in sadness, on the deep. . . .

First, with attention roused, Arion eyed  
The graceful lover, form'd in nature's pride. . . .

The sun's bright orb, declining all serene,  
Now glanced obliquely o'er the woodland scene . . .

As lightning glances on the electric wire.<sup>6</sup>  
(I:601–8 and I:629–30 I:639–40 II:649).

In such melodramatic moments, the entire shipwreck story seems to stretch out and wander—to drift—within the elastic movement and moment of the glimpse. Through the clever use of multiple negation, Falconer manages to present what looks like action in the more passive form of ebbing and drifting. "With cruel haste the shades of night withdrew," he remarks of the moment when Palemon must leave his lady love for his ill fate; night, the negation of day, withdraws—an inverted form of the entrance of day—to allow for the hero's departure. Subsidence, after all, is a form of motion: of drifting backwards, of going into slow reverse. What is barely a perception—the disappearing of darkness—expands out into the occasion for a vignette. This technique is stretched still further when Falconer presents a variety of less than clearly visible phenomena:

The watchful ruler of the helm no more  
With fix'd attention on the adjacent shore,  
But by the oracle of truth below,

<sup>6</sup> Quotations from William Falconer are from the electronic transcription, at Archive.org, of William Falconer, *The Poetical Works of William Falconer* (London, 1836): See [http://archive.org/stream/poeticalworkso00fal/poeticalworkso00fal\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/poeticalworkso00fal/poeticalworkso00fal_djvu.txt).

The wondrous magnet, guides the wayward prow.  
 The powerful sails, with steady breezes swell'd,  
 Swift and more swift the yielding bark impell'd:  
 Across her stem the parting waters run,  
 As clouds, by tempests wafted, pass the sun. (II:103–10)

Unseen minor forces lightly nudge and tug at parties afloat in the sea of destiny. Invisible magnetic powers guide the needle that guides the ship; unseen breezes push the ship; waters seem to run past the bow, even though, in fact, the bow is runs through the waters; clouds seem to “pass” the sun. Despite his enthusiasm for storms, tsunamis, and other violent phenomena, Falconer shows almost nothing whenever he wants to maximize effect. The high point of the crisis—when the imperiled ship is allowed to run before the tempest—is a passive, inverted travelogue in which a disembodied narrator’s voice offers a cultural and geographical travelogue of the countries that the ship passes as it slams along toward its doom (III:145–377). Strange as it may seem, Falconer spends over 200 lines at the climax of his poem pointing out sites of cultural, historical, political, and scientific interest as his foundering ship tears along hazardous coastlines. The moment of crisis opens up into a leisurely review of world geography: into a less physical sort of time and space where the sudden story of the shipwreck is superimposed on the more deliberate, slow, and expansive history of cultural evolution. As Falconer says, “the sad Muses with prophetic eye / At once the future and the past explore,” putting a genuine emphasis on the *at once*.

Falconer’s technical expertise and shipboard career made it easy for him to lift drifting into a high literary mode, but landlubberly writers could also bring drifting media into the service of purposive art. Abraham Cowley, for example, adapted the “metaphysical” mode of the Donnes and the Crashaws to the increasingly straightforward language of the “Augustan” age by developing a poetry based not on complicated images but on complex viewpoints, viewpoints that, in the new scientific age, seemed to encourage material as well as literary-theoretical explanations. The leading panegyrist of his day, Cowley creates a highly complex yet technically correct multipoint viewpoint on Somerset House, a viewpoint that allows him to review and to celebrate the entirety of that house, both front and back, within one short paragraph. That side of the house that is most easily seen and that is most engaged with the physical world—the street-side façade—is mentioned only in passing while the riverside elevation receives a beautiful philosophical elaboration:

My other Fair and more Majestick Face  
(Who can the Fair to more advantage place?)  
For ever gazes on it self below,  
In the best Mirror that the World can show. (43–46)

The street side of the house appears solid, physical, and familiar. The river side of the house, however, is seen as an abstracted, aqueous image rippling in the waters of the great river of British commerce, which also reflects assorted, drifting images of British imperial power. Cowley's philosophically bifurcating perspective shows the house lodged between town and court, where it reposes between "Wealth on the Left, and Pow'r on the Right" (54) and thereby defines the thin line dividing monarchical prerogative from capitalist expansion. Somerset House itself speaks by way of describing another floating viewpoint, that of the ships guarding it from the Thames anchorage (61). Thames waters bearing the reflective imprint of Somerset House drain out to sea charged with inspecting and reflecting upon every building, port, or scene by which they might waft, if only to confirm that no site could be nobler than the Thames river front (93–102). Coherent yet also fluid—amalgamative, flexible, and drifting—the image of Somerset House is dissolved in the world's waves while its grandeur is aqueously distributed throughout the world.

Today, "drifting" carries a variety of negative resonances, from itinerancy and joblessness to anxiety and irresolution. In the long eighteenth century, on the other hand, drifting could be pressed into many honorable services, whether the cautious exploration of perilous venues or the veneration of waterways as the avenues of imperial expansion. Popular images of Columbus pounding against the waves en route to a new world or of the "pilgrim fathers" sailing full-speed to America's new Jerusalem dominate even the scholarly imagination, yet American exploration depended on small, powerless boats: on canoes and kayaks drifting along uncharted, meandering waterways. Drifting as a habit—literary or otherwise—was well established as a habit of mind in a culture that prized happenstance discoveries and the rapid amalgamation of anecdotal information. The concluding section of this paper will briefly consider a few examples from "canonical" literature in which the habit of drifting or the practice of unguided motion plays a central part.

Probably the most prominent advocate of unguided mental and physical motion was the emotionally troubled William Cowper,<sup>7</sup> whose sometimes

<sup>7</sup> On links between Cowper and Falconer, see Thomas Keymer and John D. Baird, "Cowper's 'Light Propitious,'" *Notes and Queries* 60 (2013): 110–11.



pathetic, sometimes allegorical, and always ambling poems make use of a pedestrian spokesman possibly modeled after John Gay's "walker" in Gay's poem *Trivia*. Preferring to think of his epic poem *The Task* as a miscellaneous "Volume" rather than a book or poem, Cowper selects the "rural walk,"<sup>8</sup> the minimally navigated amble through the landscape, as the genre most likely to achieve philosophical comprehension owing to its ability *eventually* to cover everything in a more or less random sequence: "Now roves the eye, / And posted on this speculative height / Exults in its command" (I:288–90). Cowper varies *pace*—that is, he drifts—in order to assimilate the diverse and inconsistent oddities that a Rambler might encounter on a stroll: "Descending now [but cautious, lest too fast]..." (*Task*, I:266). He asks the peripatetic and literary idea of a speculative walk to traverse a tale that in fact has no end, that is always diverging into sequels: "Roving as I rove, / Where shall I find an end, or how proceed?" (*Task* IV:232–33). The irregular shape and pace of nature interacts with the ambulatory character of Cowper's verse to advance human thought in a slow and haphazard way:

But trees, and rivulates whose rapid course  
Defies the check of winter, haunts of deer,  
And sheep-walks populous with bleating lambs,  
And lanes in which the primrose 'ere her time  
Peeps through the moss that cloaths the hawthorn root,  
Deceive no student. Wisdom there, and truth,  
Not shy as in the world, and to be won  
By slow solicitation, seize at once  
The roving thought, and fix it on themselves.

(*Task*, VI:109–17)

The tangle of whitewater, brambles, country lanes, and branches through which the pre-Wordsworthian Cowper roves is penetrable only by "slow solicitation," by pushing ahead, bouncing back, pushing ahead again, and, in sum, by pedestrian drifting. Cowper remains utterly free of that hierarchy of roads which, since the invention of the turnpike, has set "A" highways before "B" roads and "C" byways. For Cowper, every road is connected to every other and can equally well lead anywhere at any pace. Permanently decentered in a way that only an obsessive predestinarian could manage, Cowper regards

<sup>8</sup> William Cowper, *The Task*, I:112, in James Sambrook, ed., *William Cowper: The Task and Other Selected Poems* (London: Longman, 1994). Henceforth cited intratextually.

every environment or event that he encounters as a potential digression from an implied main story line (about providence, design, and the eternal destiny of mankind) that never quite materializes. The religiously obsessive Cowper plans to review the world in the context of providence as well as with respect to the salvation of its inhabitants, but there are so many distractions under the broad canopy of "creation" that he never gets round to that central narrative, instead drifting ever further off course. Cowper is always on the lookout for persons, places, or things that make for a good diversionary tale. The paradigm case is the "Crazy Kate" story (*Task*, I:534–56) concerning a maid who went mad when her lover, a sailor, died while exploring new worlds and who now "roams the dreary waste," wandering along the shoreline and drifting forever through a universe of grief. The same story is seen through the other side of Cowper's looking glass in the tale of the mariner (I:447–54), an old salt who, having wandered too long through the world, catches sight of his abandoned country, hungers for his home environment, and longingly lunges from the mast of his ship into a utopian mirage.

Although a popular author in his time, Cowper today draws only specialists' attention. Without venturing too far into one of the world's largest critical literatures, it is also possible to show the importance of drifting for popular genres such as the novel. It is no accident that the most successful novels of the period took an epistolary form, for the use of any postal or delivery system implies a degree of unguided motion. Senders or receivers seldom control or even know the routes, conveyances, or techniques used in mail delivery. Letters are cast, if not into the winds, then into black boxes or flying chaises or even into the wind. Epistolary novelists like Frances Burney or Samuel Richardson exploit the uncertainty of postal systems to produce crucial turns in their narratives, most often when letters are delayed or go astray or drift to the wrong destination. Elsewhere, I have argued that novelists like Burney and Richardson try to combine "closed" with "open" narrative universes: that they zoom in from a broad view of the English world into individual environments or social systems or households that, being small, allow freewheeling chance to produce an amazing number of seemingly coincidental events that cumulatively look like an organized plot.<sup>9</sup> In a small environment, chance can bring all possibilities to pass in a comparatively short time—a time typically measured by four-hundred pages of prose. To put the matter metaphorically: if there are enough pieces of driftwood bumping together in a small pond,

<sup>9</sup> See Kevin L. Cope, *In and After the Beginning: Inaugural Moments and Literary Institutions in the Long Eighteenth Century* (New York: AMS Press, 2007), 285–361.

they will quickly combine together in what looks like a raft, whereupon the tale of Huckleberry Finn may begin. Frances Burney, for example, routinely relies on the numerous “chance” encounters that occur within a compressed universe to hold together complex stories in which the probable and the improbable converge. Her characters are constantly running into one another as they wander about London or Bath or other circumscribed locales. By allowing “chance” to bring about the kinds of well-plotted encounters that would interest an omniscient narrator, Burney blends order with disorder and drifting with navigation. Samuel Richardson’s character Pamela opines that “my story, surely, would furnish out a surprising kind of novel, if well told,”<sup>10</sup> suggesting that the surprises in her story occurred in a narrative order even before a narrator could arrange them but that a proper narrative technique could further enhance them. Evelina, too, speaks in a narratorial way about chance events in her life: “finding I seemed destined to pass a few days longer here,” she sees traces of authorial control emerging from her random experiences (III:xi).

The foregoing have been but a few examples of the various species of “drifting”: drifting in a literal, aquatic sense; drifting as a topic for literary compositions; and drifting as a mode, way of life, and verse or prose technique. Many more examples of “drifting” occurred and would merit analysis. One thinks, for example, of the personae adopted by periodical writers, whether presented as ramblers or idlers or spectators or any of a dozen other reticent persons; one thinks of Benjamin Franklin and his electrically wired kite drifting on the breeze; one thinks of the Grand Tour, with its strange mixture of formatting and leisureliness; one thinks of the dreamy sky, sea, and landscapes of Richard Wilson, John Robert Cozens, and John Constable; one notices that even George Washington’s chopped cherry tree slid along the waves of gravity. “Drifting” occurs in an academic blind spot. Ambitious scholars tend to look askance at those who simply float through cultural life. No one seems eager to advance (or ruin) an academic career by writing a book on “the lazy eighteenth century.” Yet drifting is surely a central feature of a period that adored easy acquiescence in all its forms, from the fundamental Newtonian physical concept of inertia to Henry Mackenzie’s comic celebration of enlightened men who cannot help but go with feeling’s flow.

<sup>10</sup> Frances Burney, *Evelina*, ed. Edward A. Bloom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), I:218. Henceforth cited intratextually.