Book Reviews


In this illuminating and impeccably researched book, Maurice Lee rejects the idea—first advanced by Howells, Twain, and Henry Adams—that the Civil War represented America’s traumatic introduction to chance, when a population previously unfamiliar with its vagaries finally lost faith in teleological order. As Lee convincingly demonstrates through a deft combination of transatlantic intellectual history and close readings of early nineteenth-century literature, such a theory is untenable because probabilistic thinking had a rich and variegated history in the antebellum U.S.

The deck, one might say, is stacked in Lee’s favor, as he is able to call on an impressive array of supporting evidence. His chapters on Poe, Melville, Douglass, Thoreau, and Dickinson describe how these authors feature chance not only in their plots but also, and more interestingly, in their narrative structures, as each acknowledges that “the messiness of reality cannot be contained by literary forms” (p. 75); that is, each writer encompasses in his or her style a dialectical tension between the desire for total causal coherence and the recognition of its impossibility given the aleatory aspects of the world and our experience of it. Thus, for Lee, Poe “pursues [a] nearly impossible task of writing both plausibly and unexpectedly” (p. 28); Melville’s Pierre “mock[s] the idea of formal unity as causal continuity” (p. 76); Douglass’s My Bondage and My Freedom reveals through its “surprising stylistic disruptions” that “the interplay between confusion and order can realistically depict the slavery experience” (pp. 100, 93); “the episodic form and immediacy” of Thoreau’s journals testify to “a statistical aesthetic” through which their author “finds wonder in both order and chaos” (pp. 141–42); and Dickinson’s “empirical skepticism and concomitant openness to chance” manifest themselves in a “poetics . . . of surprise” (p. 177).
These brief excerpts may suggest that Lee positions his authors as, anachronistically, antirealists or, most monstrous of terms, proto-postmodernists, but his actual argument is more compelling. He contends that in their engagements with the probability theories of Pierre Laplace and Adolphe Quetelet (or, more often, with the probabilistic cultural revolution that they helped to inaugurate), Poe, Melville, Douglass, Thoreau, and Dickinson articulate ways to move beyond the paralysis of pyrrhonist skepticism and doubt. Far from being antirealist, then, their works attempt to accommodate the reality of chance through literary forms that are as indeterminate, surprising, and open ended as it is. What’s more, Lee continues, these efforts are not only epistemological and aesthetic but also ethical: accepting the impossibility of mastering chance allows the writers to experiment with new ways to live, act, and write, abandoning universal truths for usable, experientially derived practices; when judgment can be neither sure nor suspended, when neither the law of averages nor the individual case can offer total explanatory power, the authors draft provisional, revisable versions of “a purpose-driven life” (p. 147). With refreshing candor, Lee explicitly endorses this risky-yet-practical ethos—of “a decisiveness guided by probability and restrained by fallibility . . . in a pluralistic universe” (p. 79)—as the basis of his own methodology.

The echo of William James is not accidental. In addition to placing his authors in the context of nineteenth-century probabilistic thought, Lee also works to situate them in an expanded history of classical U.S. pragmatism, one that looks to literary figures other than Emerson as precedents (an endeavor also found in Lee’s 2005 book, *Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature, 1830–1860*). As he argues, “extending the roots of pragmatism more promiscuously into mid-nineteenth-century literature not only enriches pragmatist genealogies but also reframes—and exposes some limitations of—the thinking of James, Peirce, Dewey, and Holmes Jr.” (p. 14). Consequently, each chapter of *Uncertain Chances* pairs the featured author with one or more of the pragmatists (Douglass and Holmes Jr., Dickinson and Dewey, etc.). In this respect, Lee’s book can be read as filling in the gaps of Louis Menand’s rightly acclaimed *The Metaphysical Club* (2001), which traces the lines of influence between Laplace’s and Quetelet’s theories and the pragmatists while largely eliding, in Lee’s apt phrase, those traditions that fall outside of “New England Puritanism and its discontents” (p. 44). Although Lee does not claim that his authors influenced the pragmatists in any direct way, his contribution is nevertheless a crucial one, redefining not only histories of pragmatism but also current discussions of its applicability today.
If one were to quibble with an aspect of *Uncertain Chances*, though, it might be with this lack of information regarding the paths that connect Poe, Melville, Douglass, Thoreau, and Dickinson to the pragmatists, as the book’s pairings are more associative than historical. Admittedly, this is consistent with a text that is about the loss of causal totalities and teleological narratives (Lee even emphasizes that his strands are “synergistic but not utterly unified” [p. 16]), yet one still wonders how, in the absence of direct influences or common sources, his antebellum and postbellum pragmatisms are related. In a similar vein but from the opposite direction, there are times when the very different authors Lee surveys threaten to blur together; although he stresses the particularities of each writer’s encounter with chance, his success at demonstrating the pervasiveness of probabilistic thought before the Civil War and its resonances with postwar American philosophy works to occasionally obscure these distinctions. (To take one example, versions of “expect the unexpected” [p. 35] appear in the chapters on Poe, Thoreau, and Dickinson, but the ways in which the idea assumes radically different valences for each author remain underexamined.)

These minor criticisms ultimately stem from my desire to read more, a testament to the persuasiveness of Lee’s endeavor and the genuine interest I took in it. As if drawing inspiration from Poe, *Uncertain Chances* displays the genius of unlikely combinations, taking topics that have been thoroughly researched individually—namely, the histories of probability, pragmatism, and antebellum U.S. literature—and combining them in novel and exciting ways. Transformative in its own right, it is also a book that, in the pragmatist spirit, will provoke further thought.

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Metempsychosis—or the transmigration of the soul, sometimes called reincarnation—is traditionally understood in religious and