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NARRATIVE ACCIDENTS AND LITERARY MIRACLES

ON SEPTEMBER 12, 2008 a Los Angeles commuter train collided with a freight train, killing 25 people and injuring another 135. In chapter 56 of Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son*, a passing train collides with a character, running him over and casting "his mutilated fragments in the air."

The first of these we might well call an accident. No malicious human agent was at work in that fatal Los Angeles encounter; whenever you have large numbers of vehicles traveling on shared tracks with massive inertial force, then occasionally there will be fatalities—certainly there have been since the dawn of the railway age. Indeed, it was precisely the public's lurid and sensational interest in those railway fatalities that made the train such an appropriate vehicle for resolving Dickens's plot. And resolve the plot it does. The "petrified character" who is mutilated in *Dombey and Son* is not just one character among many. He is the one character we most want to be mangled, the great, scheming villain John Carker whose gruesome extermination clears the tracks for a speedy and happy homecoming. Dickens's train accident, in other words, has an important function; it is an agent of narrative justice. And the question we must ask is whether it still makes sense to call it an accident, given that it fits so neatly into the design of the novel. Unlike the characters, who no more foresee the collision than the passengers on those two Los Angeles trains, we readers can see the design that governs the whole, the intricate arrangement of motifs, the movement of foreshadowing, the gap between story and discourse—all of the elements that make up the narrativeness of Dickens's novel. And because we see all that, we see that this accident was, in fact, planned in advance.

Literary accidents so often are. There is so much conspicuous design

in literature that it is difficult to imagine how anything truly accidental could survive—whether it be a train wreck, a car crash, a stray shooting, or even something as benign as a coincidence. Part of my argument, in fact, is that accidents cannot survive in literature, that literature affords little or no room for acts that are both unintended and unforeseen, as accidents must be. This absence of accident, moreover, is something more than a curiosity; it is a deep problem for literary criticism and especially for historically-minded criticism. In particular, if the shared objective of historicism (old and new), cultural studies, and Marxist literary criticism is to reveal the many ways that history shapes literature, accidents suggest a limit to this process. They show us, essentially, two things: first, that there are aspects of historical experience which cannot be integrated into literature, events that are simply incompatible with the organization of narrative and the work of literary representation; second, that even those historical events which can cross must pay a hefty toll. When literary texts do attempt to approximate the experience of the accidental—producing what I will call partial literary accidents—those accidents come to look suspiciously like narrative miracles.

I

The philosophical notion of the accident dates back at least as far as Aristotle, but current usage is rather more narrow, referring not to the qualities of a thing but rather to the qualities of an event, a happening that could easily not have happened. Accidents are events that appear disconnected from human agency in some fundamental way. They do have causes, but those causes are somehow buried, the accident itself emerging as if unsought or unforeseen. When I trip and fall, there is always a reason: perhaps the pavement was uneven or my daughter's toy was left in the middle of the room. That reason—whatever it is—doesn't change the fact that my fall is still an accident. As the early 19th-century author of *The Accidents of Human Life* put it "they [accidents] are all produced by their proper causes, as much so as the most regular and uniform appearances in nature. They are only called accidents, because previous circumstances did not appear to indicate them, or, in simpler terms, because they come upon us unawares."¹ What makes accidents accidental, above all, is that they take us by surprise. If we wanted, we might point to other notable features, but what is most essential to the modern understanding of accidents is that they are untimely, unintended, and unforeseen.

Accidents that occur “in chapter 56,” however, work quite differently. In the one example we have so far—the case of *Dombey and Son*—Carker’s death is not accidental at all. To begin with, it is hardly unforeseen, being in fact elaborately prefigured. And beyond that, its timing is quite serendipitous: killing off the bad guy just at the moment when his bad work is complete and ushering in the novel’s denouement. In Dickens, accidents serve the needs of design.

The notion of design has long been central to literary theory, especially narrative theory. To return to Aristotle, the *Poetics* everywhere insists that successful narratives involve highly elaborate forms of organization. The best narratives, in fact, comprise an organic whole: “Just as, therefore, in the other mimetic arts a unitary mimesis has a unitary object, so too the plot, since it is mimesis of an action, should be of a unitary and indeed whole action; and the component events should be so structured that if any is displaced or removed, the sense of the whole is disturbed and dislocated. . . .”² For Aristotle, plots are so intricately structured that moving or removing any one element would change everything, leaving the work “disturbed and dislocated.” And if that is the case—if shifting just one piece vitiates the whole—then the *Poetics* would seem to preclude all accidents. There can be no place for the untimely if every event must happen at the most opportune time.

Early twentieth-century critics, like the Russian Formalist Boris Tomashevsky, brought new rigor to Aristotle’s ideas, but no greater room for accidents. Borrowing an example from Chekhov—that if a nail is beaten into a wall at the beginning of a story, then at the end the hero must hang himself on that nail—Tomashevsky argues that events in narrative can’t appear out of nowhere; they have to fit both into the existing symbolic structure and the unfolding causal structure. When that fails, the work will seem less like a true narrative and more like a “simple statement of the sequence of events.”³ At roughly the same time, E. M. Forster was making this same point with his own famous distinction between plot and story: “‘The king died and then the queen died,’ is a story. ‘The king died, and then the queen died of grief’ is a plot.”⁴ For Forster as for Tomashevsky, plots are built around clear and visible causal chains. When those chains become obscure—as they must if an untimely event is to break through—all that remains are the bare event-sequences called stories.

Already these kinds of arguments seem sufficiently far-reaching to rule out any place for literary accidents, but in some ways they don’t go far enough. It is not just that events in a narrative must be linked by clear

causal connections; it is that they must be integrated into a causal web that is far thicker and more substantial than anything we experience in everyday life. In particular, narrative events have a kind of bidirectional causality; they are the result of prior events, as one might expect, but they are also caused by events that have not yet happened. At first blush, this can sound hopelessly convoluted, but the effect is actually as familiar as the term *foreshadowing*. Carker's accident provides another good example, but we might look, instead, to the famous car accident in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. I say "famous" because if I just said "car accident," I might be referring to any number of moments in the text. At various points, one of Gatsby's many guests tears a wheel off his car, Tom Buchanan does the same, and Jordan Baker talks incessantly about making herself prey to collision. All of these little car accidents—and all the talk about other car accidents—are in a sense caused by the later set-piece, where Daisy accidentally drives a car over the body of her husband's mistress. They are the fore-shadows and the premature reflections of a narrative event that has not yet happened but which still gives them their meaning.

The same could be said about that most memorable of settings in Fitzgerald's novel, the dark and dismal valley of ashes. From the beginning, the valley of ashes is already a place of death: of bleak dust, gray land, and crumbling men. That is not because of the patterns of 20th-century urbanism or the ring of outer-city banlieues in the age of commuting. It is because the valley of ashes is the stage for an accident that has not yet happened. It is a great, textured, dismal locale that will find its reason for being dismal only later, in the morbid motorway collision. This place, like the people and cars that pass through it, is shaped not only by things that have happened but also things that are sure to happen later and which are strangely allowed to cast their shadows backwards in time and to color their own prehistories.

In such a universe, there is little chance of ever stumbling across a genuine literary accident. Narrative events can't be untimely because, following Aristotle, they must always find their proper place within the organic narrative whole. And neither can they be unforeseen because, as in Fitzgerald, they leave traces of their impact well before they actually arrive.

II

History is full of accidents, and literature is not. That, essentially, is the point to which we have come, and unless it is also going to be the point at which we end, we need to find a new way forward. What if history, for instance, isn't riven with accidents but overseen by Providence. That, certainly, would solve our problem—bringing history and literature back into alignment by making them both fully accident-free. Accepting this solution, however, means accepting a providentially-organized universe, and my argument is directed, much more fully, towards those who feel that their lives are shaped as much by the desultory as by the providential, those who know that heavy rains worked as mightily against the Spanish Armada as against the French at Agincourt, and that these various weather patterns were each chaotically caused by a proverbial butterfly flapping its wings. From that perspective, any effort to deny the role of accident in history must seem willful, if not wholly fatuous.

Perhaps, though, the best way to reconcile history with literature is not by showing that history is secretly accident-free but rather that literature is secretly accident-full. If, for instance, we redefined the term accident to mean, "things which look untimely, unintended, and unforeseen *to the characters*," then literature would abound with accidents. For Mr. Dombey, watching Carker get mutilated by a passing train, the collision seems genuinely unexpected. And for Daisy, careening back and forth amidst the ash-gray landscape, the murder of a rival is strikingly unmotivated. At that level, these events have all of the hallmarks of real accidents. The trouble with this, however, is that there are other levels. Mr. Dombey, after all, hasn't been reading his novel and so cannot see its larger orchestration. Readers, on the other hand, can. At times, no doubt, they enjoy the pleasure that comes from fitting themselves into the fictional frame and feeling the surprise of a sudden collision, but they also stand above the text, watching the arc of the whole and tracing the design that shapes its unfolding. Because of that, readers can see that the events which seem like accidents—crashes, coincidental encounters, dropped pieces of paper—always manage to appear at just the right time.

Of course, it could also be that this whole argument about design is overstated. Perhaps, that is, narratives are not wholly but only mostly designed, leaving gaps just wide enough for accidents to slip through. Up to now, I have been following a familiar structuralist path from Aristotle through the Russian formalists, and that alone suggests that my

conclusions should be susceptible to the post-structuralist critique that all systems, including literature, produce their own internal contradictions—thus allowing, it may be, some room for literary accidents. It was Jonathan Culler's *The Pursuit of Signs* that brought this post-structuralist approach closest to the question of narrative design. Culler himself acknowledges that narrative events have what he calls a "double logic," meaning that they make sense both from the vantage of the characters and from the vantage of the reader. He argues, however, that these two ways of looking never quite cohere: "Theorists of narrative have always, of course, recognized these two perspectives, but they have perhaps been too ready to assume that they can be held together, synthesized in some way without contradiction. Not only is there a contradiction, but it will characteristically manifest itself in narratives, as a moment that seems either superfluous—a loose end, as in *Oedipus Rex*—or too neat, as in *Daniel Deronda*."⁵ As Culler sees it, the perspective of the characters and the perspective of the reader are not just different but strictly incompatible. It is not enough to say—as I have—that characters see one thing and readers another, because no one can see the text in both ways at once. And if this is right, then not only are literary accidents possible, they are inevitable. Every text will evince this basic fault line, and with it some room for fortuity.

The trouble, however, is that while this is certainly a kind of solution, it isn't much of one. Design is prevented from exercising absolute tyranny over the text, but its sovereignty is threatened only at the margin—Culler himself points only to loose ends and "too neat" resolutions. Even if literature is not perfectly designed, in other words, it is still overwhelmingly designed, and so long as that is true, there cannot be much room for accident. Not even a theory as ambitious as post-structuralism, it seems, can get around the fact that authors plot, that foreshadowing predicts, and that themes weave their way from beginnings to ends.

As an alternative, Gary Saul Morson has suggested a more radical undoing of narrative design, one which requires not only a new critical paradigm but a new way of writing, a processual aesthetic that mimics the experience of our own contingent lives. "Such works," he says, "would lack an overall design that makes everything fit; and the temporality of the work, not just of the characters, would be open."⁶ In Morson's processual aesthetic, that is, the perspective of the characters becomes the dominant perspective of the work as a whole—thus eliminating foreshadowing and letting the book proceed along an uncharted path into an unknown future. Morson's exemplar is *War and Peace*, which in

his reading becomes a book about historical contingency itself, written without any particular plan and moving towards a conclusion that Tolstoy refused to foresee. His basic idea, however, has a far longer pedigree. It's the impulse to take creation out of the hands of omniscient creators, to eliminate consciousness and let reality imprint itself directly on the finished work. Coleridge's Opium-vision of Xanadu could be counted among these, as an early instance of what we would call unconscious writing—where the meandering path of the unthinking mind finds its aesthetic match. A similar approach was embraced by the surrealists, who developed a number of more-or-less sophisticated techniques for creating without consciousness and whose general method might be well summarized by the writer who used to hang a sign on his door when he slept that read "Le poète travaille."⁷

The peculiar thing about these examples, and about Morson's argument in general, is that they seem to prove the opposite case. The processual aesthetic is not a simple, if long-overlooked choice. It is a far more difficult and far more demanding creative path, requiring one or another elaborate strategy of active resistance. The mere fact that artists had to develop techniques for evading conscious design shows just how powerfully design shapes the creation of art, and not least of all literature. In everyday life, you don't have to go out of your way to make room for accidents. You don't have to close your eyes or drip paint or engage in automatic walking. You don't even have to resist the urge to think about how to conclude your novel. You simply have to board a train and wait for an accident to find you. What the example of the surrealists shows, by contrast, is that artists have to go looking for accident; they have to search for new methods if they want to weaken the influence of design and narrow the gap between art and reality.

This is not to dismiss Morson's argument, any more than Culler's. What these critics tell us is that the divide between literature and history is not absolute, that there is room for accident in literature, provided we look carefully enough or write blindly enough. Still, there isn't much room. Even if authorial designs are not absolute (as Culler says), and even if under certain rather austere conditions artists can create differently (as Morson suggests), in most cases and for the most part literature is still saturated with design—and still bereft of accidents. Our first conclusion, then, must be that there is some widespread, if not fundamental, incommensurability between the historical and the aesthetic, which any rigorous critical enterprise needs to carefully accommodate. There are things that happen in history—namely accidents—which can only rarely

happen in literature, just as there are things that happen in literature—namely design and bi-directional causality—which do not pertain to history. This is the reason that literary studies can never be fully assimilated to historicism or cultural studies. Against such an effort, there will always remain a resistant aesthetic core, which has the improbable but nonetheless essential quality of being nearly accident-free.

III

It is possible, however, to put too much weight on this first conclusion. Even if there can be no grand solution to the problem—no way to completely reconcile literature with history or perfectly translate accidents into the domain of narrative—there are still partial solutions. There are ways for literature to capture something of the experience of accidents without capturing everything. Accidents, as I had it, are events which are: (1) unforeseen, (2) unintended, and (3) untimely. And the reason literature has proved so inhospitable to such accidents is: (1) because foreshadowing makes events easy to foresee, (2) because intention can always be projected onto the author, and (3) because design ensures that events happen at the time of their greatest impact. Finding a way around all three of these is too much to ask—despite Culler and Morson's suggestions—but escaping even one of them can allow literature to approximate some aspects of the accidental. And the one that is easiest to escape is the first, the effect of foreshadowing. Not only is it possible for authors to make events seem unforeseen, it is actually quite simple. They just have to refrain from describing them in advance.

What makes the train accident, in *Dombey and Son*, so obviously non-accidental is the novel's early interest in the menace of trains; in the same way, what makes the car accident so obviously non-accidental, in *Gatsby*, is the profusion of earlier car accidents. There can be nothing unforeseen about events with this much preparatory armature. Yet, there are other kinds of literary events which do seem genuinely unexpected. At a different point in *Dombey*, for example, a young maid strolling with her two dependents is nearly killed by a runaway carriage: "The astonished Susan Nipper and her two young charges were rescued by the bystanders from under the very wheels of a passing carriage before they knew what had happened; and at the moment (it was market day) a thundering alarm of 'Mad Bull!' was raised."⁸ Prior to this moment, there has been no mention of mad bulls, carriage accidents, or market days—and thus no reason to think that an event like this was in the works. That is not

to say that this sequence is somehow free from the demands of narrative design; to the contrary, it is quite obviously intended and quite carefully timed. Yet, because it casts no shadow backwards over the text, it still has the feel of an accident. Narrative surprises like this one constitute what I call partial literary accidents, events which are designed to seem unforeseen. And generally speaking they are the nearest thing to real accidents that readers of narrative can hope for.

The trouble with these partial literary accidents, however, is that they come with a certain risk. In trying to seem accidental, they often end up seeming manipulative—less like events which disrupt a neat story and more like events which fix a troubled story. Sometimes, that is, these partial accidents feel more like *Deus ex Machina*, desperate attempts by an author to solve the problems of his plot by way of a new, unmotivated intervention. And going back to Aristotle, that has long been regarded as a cheap, aesthetic trick whose only justification is the need to patch an earlier failure in planning.⁹ Design, in other words, is not just a feature of narrative; it is also an expectation. When a surging narrative event fails to fit into the integrated, doubly caused universe that Aristotle, Tomashevsky, and Forster so ably describe, it begins to look less like a regular narrative happening and more like an unwarranted authorial intervention. For just this reason, though, not even well-orchestrated partial literary accidents can escape looking like literary miracles, like crude authorial attempts to violate the basic laws of narrative design in the name of patchwork closure.

One way to escape this trap, however, is to trip it on purpose. Some of the most effective uses of the partial literary accident have flaunted their resemblance to the miraculous, and Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" provides a good example. It is, to begin with, no exception to the rule of narrative design, being a carefully structured and highly elaborate verse narrative. It is also a poem built around two partial literary accidents, two dramatic and largely unforeseen events: the shooting of an albatross, and the blessing of crawling things. The shooting is certainly the poem's most remembered feature, but it is not its most predictable. There is no hint of a shooting until it actually happens—no reference to the mariner's bloodlust, no talk of anger or frustration, no allusion to the cross-bow, and no reason to think that either mariner or author is planning a violent act. But then it happens, and at that moment we are confronted with a version of Forster's non-plot—instead of "The King died and then the Queen died," we get "the Albatross follows the ship, and then the mariner shoots him." Between these two events, there is

no clear causal connection. The shooting just happens, and it happens in a way that makes it wholly unforeseen, disconnected from both the causal and thematic sequences that precede it.

Some few hundred lines later, there is yet another great, partial literary accident. Peering at the water-snakes that surround him, the mariner suddenly finds himself blessing the crawling things and then, just as suddenly, finds himself unburdened:

O happy living things! no tongue
 Their beauty might declare:
 A spring of love gushes from my heart,
 And I bless'd them unaware!
 Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
 And I bless'd them unaware.

The self-same moment I could pray;
 And from my neck so free
 The Albatross fell off, and sank
 Like lead into the sea.¹⁰

Again, there is no motive for this, no stated reason for the mariner's sudden "spring of love." He happens to be looking at the snakes, and then he happens to bless them—"unaware." The mariner doesn't foresee his change of heart, nor do we, his readers. It simply arrives, at this moment, and when it does it frees the mariner of his heavy burden.

The fact that these two accidents make a pair already tells us that they are not accidents at all, at least not in the strong sense. They are part of the intricate design that governs this poem. Yet, they are still accidents in the weak, partial, literary sense; they have not been prefigured by the narrative and they seem, for that reason, either fortuitous or miraculous. Notice, though, that in this case the risk that these events will seem miraculous is tempered by the fact they should seem miraculous. This is a poem about the twin accidents of sin and redemption, about the fact that for protestants, at least, these are things that happen to us, rather than things that we cause or earn. Part of the power of Coleridge's poem comes from this recognition, from its ability to take the ambiguity of the literary accident—the fact that it can seem either accidental or miraculous—and make it resonate with the mystery of grace.

It was Dostoevsky, however, who pushed this possibility to its limit, building an entire novel around the confusion of accident, design, and miracle. *Crime and Punishment* is a self-conscious exploration into the

possibilities and limitations of narrative accident, and by this I mean both the impossible, genuine accident and the possible but dubious partial one. It is the first of these—the possibility of a genuine literary accident—that preoccupies the opening sections of the novel. From the beginning, Dostoevsky's main character, Raskolnikov, seems to know that the universe around him is just a bit too neatly arranged. The things that look like accidents, he senses, must be something else, something more carefully designed. One evening, for instance, as he walks around with the still-unconsummated idea of murder floating dreamily through his head, Raskolnikov decides, for no particular reason, to take the long route home through the Haymarket. In so doing, he happens to overhear the sister of his intended victim telling a friend when, precisely, she will be out of the house—in effect, giving Raskolnikov the exact time frame he needs for his crime. And with such inside information, he feels that he now has no choice. Motive he has developed on his own, but it is this accident that hands him the means and, in that way, clinches his decision to commit murder. The coincidence seems so unaccountable that Raskolnikov is compelled to wonder whether it is really unaccountable at all: “But why, he always asked, why had such an important, decisive, and at the same time highly accidental encounter in the Haymarket (where he did not even have any reason to go) come just then, at such an hour and such a moment in his life, to meet him precisely in such a state of mind and precisely in such circumstances as alone would enable it, this encounter, to produce the most decisive and final effect on his entire fate? As if it had been waiting for him there on purpose!”¹¹ These accidents that keep thrusting themselves into Raskolnikov's path look, as he says, “highly accidental” but they don't work that way. They provide precisely the encouragement Raskolnikov needs at the very instant that he needs it. Far from untimely, this conversation in the Haymarket takes place just at the moment when it can “produce the most decisive and final effect.” As Raskolnikov himself recognizes, it is “as if” it has been planned. And we the readers know that it has. It is part of an intricately orchestrated narrative design—not untimely but timed, not unforeseen but foreshadowed, and not unplanned but fully authorized. Such accidents are not really accidental at all, but that shouldn't be surprising since we already know that literature does not allow for real accidents.

It does, however, still allow for the other kind of accidents, the partial literary accidents which may be designed but which nonetheless appear unexpected. Unplanned and untimely, we can't have, but

unforeseen is still possible, and this lesser kind of accident marks the end of Dostoevsky's novel as surely as the other, impossible one marks the beginning. Getting to the end, of course, takes some time, and during that time there is little evidence of narrative development. Each knock on Raskolnikov's grimy door is a strange knock, an unexpected knock. When you await the detective, you are visited by a friend; when you await the friend, you are visited by your mother; when you await either of those, you find a solicitous minor-character; and when you're finally ready for the unanticipated, the detective arrives. In a different book, this might be a matter of suspense, but in *Crime and Punishment*, it all seems too desultory. Even when Raskolnikov goes to turn himself in to the police, it is not because he has achieved some realization. To the contrary, he has no expectation of penance, no feelings of regret, and no conviction that years of hard labor will change his mind. The trial, the judgment, the exile—they all seem pointless to him, as if that governing force which had so carefully arranged his earlier accidents had ceased to design his afterlife.

Of course, it hadn't. It was simply waiting for the right moment. And that moment happens to arrive as Raskolnikov is taking a break from his outdoor labor to sit beside his faithful companion, Sonia:

How it happened he himself did not know, but suddenly it was as if something lifted him and flung him down at her feet. He wept and embraced her knees. For the first moment she was terribly frightened, and her whole face went numb. She jumped up and looked at him, trembling. But all at once, in that same moment, she understood everything. Infinite happiness lit up in her eyes; she understood, and for her there was no longer any doubt that he loved her, loved her infinitely, and that at last the moment had come.¹²

There is still more to come—infinite love must expand into compassion, faith, and penance—but this is how it comes. It comes suddenly and unexpectedly. It picks Raskolnikov up and throws him down on his knees. It acts without preparation and without prior consent. It happens, as it were, by accident. Not in the sense that it is unintended, but at least in the sense that it is unforeseen. There is no gradual process by which Raskolnikov comes to embrace a new ethics of love, nor is there any indication that this change is about to occur. It occurs before we have a chance to prepare for it. Raskolnikov doesn't see it coming—despite his keen eye for design—and neither does the reader. It just happens

to happen at this moment, which is precisely what makes it an effective partial literary accident.

It is also something more than a literary accident; it is a literary miracle. As I said earlier, this is an inescapable part of the duality of the partial literary accident. Events like this, which have no narrative preparation, cannot help but seem like artless interventions. Certainly by flinging its main character on his knees in the name of a last-second redemption, *Crime and Punishment* can be said to run this risk—many readers, in fact, have felt that it didn't quite beat the odds. If, however, Dostoevsky's ending is something other than a mere *Deus ex Machina*, it is because it turns this risk to philosophical use. It takes a fundamental narrative problem—the problem that partial literary accidents can't escape looking like heavy-handed interventions—and couples it with a profound theological question about the accidental experience of grace.

You can think of that solution in theological terms, as a reflection of Dostoevsky's own religious vision. But you could also think of it in purely narrative terms. Dostoevsky's conclusion not only resolves the central moral and religious tensions of the book, in other words, it also resolves the central narrative tension. It offers an effective solution to the problem which has haunted the book and its characters from the very beginning, the problem of accidents in literature. A novel that begins by revealing the factitiousness of literary accidents—like the one Raskolnikov meets at the Haymarket—finds its conclusion in a new kind of partial literary accident, an event comes upon us unaware simply because it comes upon us unforeseen.

The fact that this great, final accident looks also like a great, final miracle is simply the burden that accidents must bear in order to pass from the world of history into the world of the novel. In crossing that frontier, they are transported into a new kind of causal universe—a universe ruled by bi-directional design and insulated from the whims of contingency. The reason this is important is not because we care about the fate of accidents, *per se*; rather, it is because these accidents tell us something about the broader relation between history, which is suffused with accident, and literature which is not. Simply put, these realms are not commensurable; they obey distinct laws and follow discrete logics. No doubt there is a great deal of communication between the two, but also great difficulties of translation—and one effect of this underlying divide has been the split in literary studies between a formalist attention to design and a historicist attention to context. What accidents show

is that this scholarly divide is actually a kind of epiphenomenon, the professional manifestation of a more essential rift between the aesthetic and the historical themselves. If, today, we seem to be moving back in the direction of formalism, it is not simply a periodic changing of the guard; it is the reassertion of an aspect of the literary that historicism has tended to overlook, a reminder that history is not something that can be captured or expressed in literary forms; it is something that literature always redesigns.

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