

Yes Coincidence

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“For the Jamesonian critic “nothing is random or accidental; every textual detail harbours a hidden purpose and pulsates with fateful meaning.”

—Rita Felski¹

I. Noncoincidence is Symbiotic on Wholeness

For a long time I used to think about coincidence. One specific knot held my attention: that in a work of art (I will qualify the concept) there are no coincidences, but in real life there are.

I am not even really sure that this is true—partly since it depends so clearly on an opposition between the work of art and real life that ignores, minimally, the fact that works of art do not just represent real life but help compose it. Nonetheless, the problem has been bothering me for long enough that I have decided to do something about it. Hence this essay.

What could one mean by “no coincidences” in the work? Simply that in the artwork *everything is interpretable*. Everything is meaningful. Any repetition or reappearance, any act of chance, any seemingly random articulate of either content or form, can be read, and *must* potentially be read, as an essentially intentional feature of social and symbolic force. This is as true for the various obvious narrative accidents that litter modern literature—*Finnegans Wake*’s protagonist falling off the ladder, Vronsky’s horse breaking its back—as it is for the fated events of older classical or religious texts: Oedipus meeting dad at the crossroads, Moses’s fortuitous basket ride, and so on. And it is as true for literature as for the other arts, including painting or sculpture, where for certain kinds of works even the width or direction of a single brushstroke or the feel of any given surface (perhaps especially if it breaks or shifts a pattern) can be read (and must be read, in certain professional circles) as semantically or symbolically significant.

When I say “everything is meaningful” in the noncoincidental work, you might reasonably ask, “meaningful in relation to what?” The answer is: in relation to the structural whole the work composes. The work’s wholeness is in fact the obverse side of the coin of its symbolic fullness: no work is whole, no work is, in this respect, a “work” (as we interpret and manipulate the concept of the “work” in a variety of social situations) unless everything in it is noncoincidental.

Such a wholeness is itself of course historical, composed by a set of patterns and structures and forms of recognition that establish the framework for the things we call genre or form. So it would be in fact widely recognized as a coincidence that the letter a appears as the first letter on twenty consecutive pages of a given novel (the placement of letters on the page is not conventionally considered to be an intentional feature of novel-production); similarly it would certainly be considered a coincidence that the actor and her character and the play’s author all shared the first name... unless the actor, character, and author were themselves figures in a religious or sacred text of some kind, at which point there would be no coincidence at all.

¹ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 96.

This allows me to clarify what I mean when I say there are no coincidences in the work of art. I mean that works of art are defined socially by being things in which (1) there are no coincidences (2) relative to a set of conventions determining the aesthetic “whole” which both (3) organize the distinction between works of art and non-works of art, and among the varieties of works of art for any given culture.

My goal here is first to describe how and why this system of distributing noncoincidence works. I then want to consider how it makes the transition from a sacralizing, classical model to a modern, historicist one. And then I want to think about how that system affects scholars in the humanities—and about why, if one believes that coincidence is in fact a feature of real life, one ought to believe that it is a feature of artworks as well. Doing so will have some interesting and possibly very wacky implications for scholarship in history and literature departments, as you shall see.

II. Interlude on My Somewhat Idiosyncratic Understanding of Coincidence

Here are two weird things about the ways I’m talking about coincidence.

First: it is normal to imagine coincidence as taking place when two different things come together (“fancy meeting you here!”). I mean to use it to refer to the idea that something—the artwork, the historical situation—coincides, rather, with itself. The work, the situation, is not excessive or exorbitant: nothing escapes its limit. Likewise, the work is internally full, it is replete: all its parts collaborate in the production of its wholeness. Nothing is left to chance. In the work of art “no coincidence” means that the work of art is not two things coming together, not some large combination of accidents and intentions, but rather one thing coming together entirely in its own wholeness, such that nothing about it comes from an “outside” that would be governed by different rules from its inside. It is because the work of art coincides entirely with itself that there are no coincidences in it.

I want to be clear that I don’t think this theory of the artwork is correct—disabusing myself of it is the main goal of this experiment—but I do think that it’s normative, as a matter of both professional practice and epistemological justification, for the work of historical and aesthetic interpretation.

Second: as you’ve already seen I am using a variety of words to describe what noncoincidental art (that is, all art) looks like: everything in it is *meaningful*, it is *intentional*, it is *interpretable*. (Again, I don’t totally believe this; I’m describing a basic intellectual presumption of humanistic work.) I mean this in a couple obvious ways: one, that the very act of interpreting an artifact requires one, as Knapp and Michaels argue in “Against Theory,” to assume the intentionality of the artifact with respect to some *meaningful* causal force. This is true for the artwork, where the causal force can be “the author” or “the text,” but it is also and quite obviously true for any historical action, event, or social form.

To be interpreted as meaningful, the action/event must be understood as causally intentional in relation to some other acting force that is conceived as prior to it. We say that the bourgeois

mores of the nineteenth-century London household affect the development of British feminism in the same way that we say that Paul Celan's relation to the Holocaust determines the rhythm and language of "Todesfuge."

III. From the Sacred to the Historical

One can distinguish two main forces contributing to the noncoincidental nature of the classical work of art. The first line comes from the symbolic intensity granted to a work by virtue of its *sacredness*; the second comes from the sociocultural intensity granted to a work by virtue of its *relation to a tradition*. These two more or less amount to the same thing.

In the first case, every symbol of the work carries the signature of a divine or at least inspired hand: you don't argue that God didn't really mean what he did, or that the words that describe his actions are anything other than lithographically, inalterably so; nor do you permit yourself to wonder if Confucius misspoke, or was misquoted, in whatever dialogic lesson he imparts.² The second case is more a matter of textual endurance and canonicity: the accretion of tradition within a text allows it, either quickly or over the course of centuries, to bear an enormous historical weight. Even when, as with the Homeric texts, we know for a fact (though only since the 1930s) that before us appears only one set of words for a story frequently told otherwise—which would minimally suggest that the version we inherit is in fact full of coincidences, featuring choices made in the context of a real-life recitation that don't mean much more than "this set of words fit the rhythm"—we can simply integrate our knowledge of the practices of the Homeric poet into the larger structure of the work, and read those factors back into the symbolic wholeness of the text itself. The same holds for something that comes to us in fragments, like Sappho; the fact of fragmentation, rather than disrupt symbolic completeness (it is the product of the vagaries of textual preservation, and therefore strictly speaking non-meaningful or coincidental), becomes integrated into the work's symbolic totality at a higher level: isn't love, too, a kind of fragmentation? Doesn't the loved one, in fact, always already come to us, like Sappho, in fragments?

Modern works of art inherit these pathways, but modify them. The symbolic intensity associated with the sacred warps, in modernism, and in the hermeneutic forms that modify themselves in relation to it, into an increased semiotic density of the artwork. This is the realm of the "aesthetic," the portion of the lifeworld held back (theoretically) from commerce or exchange,

² *Pace* the entire tradition of arguments about what Confucius said or meant (or indeed what God or Allah or Mohammed or Jesus said or meant): the point is not that the meanings are incontrovertible, the point is that they are being treated like they *should* be incontrovertible. It is not possible that Confucius misspoke, but it is entirely possible that some idiot post-Confucian ordinary person misunderstood Confucius entirely; read *my* interpretation, dear reader, and you will finally understand what Confucius *actually really meant*. Thus, the entire commentarial tradition insofar as it is *originalist* affirms the noncoincidence of the sacred text. Indeed originalism is in some respects just another name for noncoincidence, a kind of refusal not only of what one might think of as textual microhistory (someone misspoke, or miswrote, something just happened) but of historicism more broadly (since you cannot argue that something in the text means what it does "just" because of the political situation Confucius was living in, and therefore ought not to be taken too seriously).

preserved in museums and schoolroom reading lists. “Art” is the name of the place where society insists on, and practices, the idea of total symbolic intensity, the idea that every choice means something, the idea of a thing, a world, where there are no accidents. The surface of the art object is saturated with symbolic possibility: in it the reader or viewer can be overwhelmed or reassured by, terrified or resentful of, the absolute *fullness* of meaning.

The historical pathway is simpler, and more processual. As they age, works of art back slowly into the tides of a historical wave receding from the present, acquiring along the way an increasing capacity to bear the weight of tradition, becoming more and more noncoincidental as a result. Seeing that process, modern artists respond with various attempts to cheat the necessity of historical time, attempting to produce, for instance, the modern epic (Pound’s Cantos), or the “Great American Novel.” Whether or not these succeed matters little; the point is that they represent an attempt to restore to the modern period a kind of symbolic absolutism that had historically only been granted to texts from the classical or sacred canon.

Of course it turns out that if you wait long enough you don’t even need to cheat. At this point the modernist attempt to recapitulate tradition is a century old. Once enough time passes just about anything will acquire the weight it needs to become worthy of full symbolic attention, whether or not it intended to do so in the first place. In this way the modernist epics can now be read with the same intensity as we might read Homer... but so can early twentieth century newspaper advertisements, or ordinary household objects. Once something is old enough that we can hear the full intensity of its *Zeitgeist* speaking through it, everything in it becomes intentional, not in the sense that any specific person actually intended it, but in the sense that the object itself expresses, whether it wanted to or not, some meaningful, readable, and therefore noncoincidental aspect of its era.³

When is too soon to read the work this way? After all, once you’ve seen the full-on symbolic density of the age-spirit in an eighteenth-century porcelain teacup you might wish to see it in something closer to home. And of course it turns out that you can. The spirit of historicism replaces, in the modern university, the earlier concepts of fate, divine will, or cosmological cyclicity, each of which authorizes a reading of any action or event, even the most seemingly coincidental and insignificant, as in fact a deeply meaningful expression of an unseen sustaining totality or whole. (Consider: this act of sexual reproduction recapitulates the act of sexual reproduction that gives birth to the world; this sacrifice reproduces in simultaneously metaphorical and real form, as in the body of Christ, the act of sacrifice at the origin of all action.)

Together these processes generate an entire lifeworld in which everything has the capacity to be interpreted as a symbolic totality. Mostly only certain kinds of things are, for social and institutional reasons: the work of art more likely than the missed appointment, the slip of the tongue more likely than the slip of the pen, and so on. But the possibility remains: in the modern as in the ancient world *anything*, looked at the right way, can be understood as a fully intentional

³ This is, for what it’s worth, the sense of “intention” that Michaels and Knapp intended (ha!) in “Against Theory”: not intention in the sense of a direct conscious intention of the author, but intention in the sense that something bears a causal relation to a socially or historically meaningful actant.

(and therefore fully noncoincidental) artifact. What we historically call “art” is therefore a particular manifestation and organization of that possibility in the social.

This is true both if we think of an object “itself,” in its intentional self-orientation towards an interpretive community of some kind, and if we think of its consumers or interpreters, who impose upon it some level of semiotic intensity, one that may or may not correspond to the full assignment of symbolic totality that I am arguing characterizes the historical or sacred work of art. Sometimes the work and its audience match up; Joyce famously said that he filled *Ulysses* with “so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant.” On the opposite side, the makers of Reese’s Pieces are not expecting, and have yet to receive, so far as I know, an extensive Lacanian analysis of the tension between, say, the singularity of Reese (on one hand) and the multiplicity of his pieces (on the other). We recognize, as we match objects to interpretations, that any given object may be, by our standards, overinterpreted (in a kind of institutional or political paranoia) or underinterpreted (as when someone looks at a Rothko painting and claims their child could do that).

It may be possible to imagine all this historical effort as the result of a simple human problem: how to figure out what in the world is meaningful and what is not. The question is as relevant for natural signs (a mark on the ground, the movement of stars in the sky) as it is for linguistic ones, especially when it may not be clear whether in fact the nature/language distinction holds in the first place (as it does not, when some god or another has placed the mountains on the horizon, or the moon in the sky, just so, for our benefit). I am suggesting that this essentially fundamental set of questions—fundamental in the sense that I do not believe that any humans have ever lived without them—take in the modern period a particular social form in which the work of art and its interpretation, as well as the rise of the modern humanistic disciplines, play a special and important role.

IV. Process Thematized in Artworks

Anticipating forms of reception that assign to them total symbolic integrity and noncoincidence—and seeing such forces operating in the world—allows works of art to thematize the question of coincidence in a variety of ways. I have already mentioned the idea of fate, which like the Shakespearean tragic flaw functions as a kind of inevitability engine, a simultaneously diegetic and metadiegetic figure that explains the necessity of happenstance. We can recognize, as well, one pole of the coincidence-no coincidence continuum in the rule of Chekhov’s gun: the pistol on stage in Act I must be fired by Act III. Such a rule can be rewritten and generalized: any object in the diegetic space that has a certain symbolic or sociocultural intensity must be used *twice* (first, in its appearance, and second in its use). Using it only once violates the rule of symbolic integrity and annihilates the sacred quality of the artifact. That is why one form of violation of the rule—the gun that is used without first appearing, the object or result that comes out of nowhere to allow the plot to conclude as it must—is named for the false god it requires, the *deus ex machina*, and not the real one who governs, invisibly, the formal workings of totality.

At the other end of the continuum from Chekhov one finds the random objects seeded throughout certain works of modern literature, the ones that produce what Roland Barthes called their “reality-effect”: these are objects that appear *in order to* not be used, in order to indicate, by their “mere” presence, the proximity of the diegetic world to the real one. Such objects produce inside the diegesis a representation of reality as at least partly coincidental: like the real world, they aim to suggest, this diegesis too is incomplete, unfinished.⁴ That such stuff is only there to be irrelevant—and that in this way it acquires a kind of second-order relevance that undermines its first-order coincidence—does not mitigate the attempt to represent in the work something like the profane qualities of real life.

So too can one understand the practices that attempt to integrate coincidence into the very production of the work of art. Burroughs’s cut-ups, Pollack’s paint sprays, the various random experiments of the French Oulipo group, the making of found art or poetry—all of these shape artifacts that wear on their surfaces the evidence of their resistance to totality. The object made by chance, whose edges bleed into the real world, attempts to dissolve the barrier between the romantic, created universe of the work of art and the stochastic givenness of the real one. It thus emblemizes the general attempt in the modern period to grapple with, or represent, a fully secular vision not only of aesthetic production but of life itself.

V. Interpreters Ruin Everything

At some level, you might say, the “random” artwork thus succeeds in finally destroying the symbolic integrity of the conceptually noncoincidental one. In this way it achieves the liberation of the artwork from the realm of the sacred, and integrates into the profanity of everyday life the socially established limit to it. Thus humanity reaches the “end” of art as such, and moves one step forward toward the transcendence of the symbolic split between meaninglessness and plenitude. In abandoning the fantasy of plenitude, in integrating the randomness and chaos of the physicists’ universe into the no-longer-whole worlds of the work of art, these artists show us the possibility of a future in which the dream of totality no longer dominates the field of interpretation.

If only!

Because of course what really happens is that the thematization of the idea of randomness in the artwork—in both its symbolic action and in its processes of production—can be immediately retrieved for the concept of wholeness at a higher level. The idea that the work of art is a whole or complete thing simply expands to treat randomness or putative noncoincidence as intentional aspects of the work’s engagement with reality... which is not that hard to do, because of course they *are*. The random artwork’s randomness exorbitance is thus dismantled and rebuilt inside the circle of totality. This seemingly inevitable pattern confirms my sense that the idea of the work remains, even in the modern period, essentially sacred.

Sacred? Really?

⁴ “Incomplete” here refers to a specific philosophical usage. For more on completeness and realism, see Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (Oxford, 2012).

Well, not exactly. Interpreters of artifacts in the modern period essentially transition from sacred justifications for noncoincidence to secular ones, in four related ways:

1. An intense critical focus on details, and particularly on the passage from the detail to very large scales (including the scale of the universal). The process by which this happens goes by a number of different names, including close reading, ethnography, the case study, microhistory, and idiographism. These linked approaches each borrow from the critical work in philosophy of knowledge done at the end of the nineteenth century, one of whose major effects was to turn sacred hermeneutics into a secular practice.
2. Psychoanalysis and ideology critique. Together these function as sites for the assignment of causality and intention to processes that would otherwise be assigned to accident or coincidence, with psychoanalysis doing for the individual unconscious what ideology does for the general one. Jokes and slips of the tongue are no longer “just” jokes or slips of the tongue; likewise any given historical statement or action can, when connected to the ideological structures that make it possible and thereby govern it at some level, be seen as the articulated (and therefore interpretively relevant) expression of a larger whole. (What is Freud, after all, but a way of rectifying the tendency to read in all sorts of things, dreams included, too much happenstance or meaningless? He’s not wrong! But at the Freudian limit, everything means something: coincidence disappears, and you end up with a symbolic totality that resembles in every respect the *haruspex*’s relation to livers.)
3. Historicism/*Zeitgeist*. At some level simply less Marxist versions of ideology critique, these theories (which predate the foundation of the modern humanistic disciplines) provide a kind of intentionality behind or underneath all historical action. No matter what appears in the real—even, for instance, in the actualized fact of a typo—is, from this perspective, merely an era giving voice to the possibilities latent within it.
4. Structuralism/systems. Though it may not be possible to distinguish these from ideology or historicism (highlighting the overlap between all these structures is one point of putting them in a list like this), we might well say again that the structure of a social form acts as a kind of intentional actor to capture variability or randomness within a system at a higher level of organization. What results is a kind of impersonal intentionality, an intentionality in which the system (or language itself) “speaks,” or a social pattern “acts,” such that any given gesture or movement within that systematicity can be resolved meaningfully at a higher level.

That each of these appears separately on the list does not mean that they operate independently (I wondered whether psychoanalysis even needed to be its own category). They often overlap and borrow strategies from one another. What matters is not the relations among them but the overall collective work they do, which is to turn the interpretive object of hermeneutic and historical inquiry into something that has the same symbolic structure as the idealized work of art—into something, that is, where everything is meaningful, and there are no coincidences. Together they

represent the various ways in which the humanistic fields have attempted to grapple with the relationship between their evidence and the conclusions that can be drawn from it.⁵

The question is, then, whether this commitment to noncoincidence distorts our understanding of artworks and history alike. Because at one level, the commitment is completely reasonable: it corresponds, in ways I've described, to the social and institutional ontologies of artifacts, and to the procedures—modern and classical—that we have for interpreting them. If we are describing *how people think of artifacts*, this strategy makes a ton of sense.

VI. The Limits of Interpretation

But what if we are trying to describe *how things actually work*? Well, now we have a problem. For if we agree that the real world does in fact include coincidences,⁶ if the real world does include—ontologically and/or interpretively—things that cannot be reduced at any level to the forms of totality, aesthetic or historical, that one might wish to see in them, then what do we do with the fact that artifacts and artworks are also in fact part of the real world? Though we might agree that artworks in general try to produce themselves as symbolic wholes, or that artifacts can be historically interpreted to exclude accidents, it may nonetheless be the case that these attempts or possibilities always fail—that the real (secular) world overwhelms, as it were, all the objects on the interior of its Venn diagram, no matter how hard they try to avoid that fate.

We would then have to imagine a limit to interpretation. Not in the fancy deconstructive sense—I'm not coming around to saying that all texts resist the reader because of the infinite variability of language, or whatever.⁷ I mean this prosaically: that at some level the interpreters of culture would have to account for the idea that most of the time not everything in the work/artifact is interpretable. Why only most of the time? Because we are dealing here not with a philosophical ideal but with a statistically distributed one: some small percentage of the time there will in fact be no coincidences! And at others there will be lots of coincidence, perhaps so much so that the entire artifact would not be worth interpreting at all.

Let me give you one small illustration of how this might be true. Imagine that by some strange act of God all of the existing copies of *Moby-Dick* would have a few small words changed: an article here or there, perhaps an adverb or two. Imagine that all these changes were plausible, meaning that they would fit within the generally recognized vocabularies of Melville's time,

⁵ Each one of these approaches can be conceived as both a theory of the objects they describe (societies, works of art, pieces of language) and as a particular way of relating to (interpreting, understanding) those objects, and can be usefully described from either direction. Most of the time you can remain essentially agnostic as to which conceptualization motivates you, hotfooting it from one to the other as necessary when challenged on the question.

⁶ Does it? Certainly most of us in our ordinary lives accept the possibility of coincidence; a person who refuses to accept the idea becomes essentially paranoid, or a conspiracy theorist. That such terms exist, and describe, I think, a kind of approach to symbolic totalization that takes things (at least by the general social account that names them) "too far," suggests minimally that there is some socially conceived limit to symbolic totalization that "believes" in a world in which coincidences do sometimes happen, and have to be accepted as a feature of both ordinary and historical life.

⁷ I actually think this is true! But I'm saying something much simpler here.

make sense relative to his choices elsewhere in the novel. Surely at a certain level of reading—the very close—such changes would make some small differences to certain existing interpretive work. But for the most part they wouldn't matter at all; the text is big enough to sustain such changes without shifting much. Certainly our general sense of *Moby-Dick* as a whole would not need to be altered, and indeed one can imagine that if the changes were few and small enough, no one would even notice.

In such a scenario, the actually existing text we have would reveal itself to be at least partially coincidental—coincidental in the sense that it does not in fact matter whether something happens “damply” or “wetly,” whether it’s “that” boat or “the” boat,” on any given page. The symbolic totality turns out not to be so total after all—the text we have becomes merely a kind of actualized surface on top of a series of possibilities, rather than the sacred object normally addressed by professional readers.⁸

But maybe all this is cheating, since I declared that the changes would be “small” and “few.” What about, instead, if we discover instead Melville’s secret final message: “I meant all along to call the guy Samuel.” Now we’ve got some interpretive rewriting to do—we have to go back and change our references to the narrator being a figure for Abraham’s first-born son, and so on. On the other hand, Samuel is a fairly plausible substitute for Ishmael—they both contain the Hebrew “el” syllable (meaning God), they both derive from the same general area of the same holy texts, and so on. The name *could* have been Samuel, you think—certainly could have been Samuel more than it could have been Adolf Hitler. It would make a difference, but...maybe not too much of a difference?

My question is: to what extent ought we try to be responsible to that *could have been*, to the possibility that though Ishmael (far more than any particular adverb or article in the text; Melville revised, yes, but as we all know about our own prose not everything we write is intentionally chosen to the same degree) was the name Melville chose, he could also reasonably have chosen Samuel or something else entirely? What if “Ishmael” is “just” a coincidence?

From there you can ask whether at any given moment in the novel, whatever intended the text into existence (Melville himself, his editor, the nineteenth-century author-function, textuality as such, or the entire ethos of modernity) may not be acting with the same intensity as at its other moments? What if coincidence is not a matter of yes or no, but a matter of the distribution of possibility, a kind of topology of uncertainty layered over the text? A minimal level of responsibility to that possibility, which is endemic to the real world and therefore to any of its artifacts, would be to lay off *some* of the symbolic weight that we normally professionally assign to every aspect of the work.

⁸ To say it another way: what exactly is *Moby-Dick*? My argument is that the text is not just the “words on the page” as they actually come down to us (assuming they come down in a definitive edition), but rather a kind of fuzzy penumbra that includes a wide variety of meaningless or semi-meaningless changes, that includes, that is, many words not in fact on the page (or at least not on the page in the same place as they are now). To study *Moby-Dick* would require one to have a much more rigorous and competent grasp of the boundaries of that penumbra, and a healthy epistemological respect for the fuzziness of it.

This does not mean that the work of interpretation would have to suddenly become more modest or more simple. In fact I think it would have to become more complex: it would have to acknowledge, for every instance of symbolic force, the latent capacity of the object so interpreted to have been otherwise—and to consider, therefore, for each object, not only the symbolic force of the actually existing choice, but also the range of possibilities (likely and unlikely) that remain latent within it. It would have to recognize the final object as at least partly or potentially coincidental: as a semi-stable accretion sitting on top of a pile of plausible and even implausible alternatives.

I have no doubt that such a procedure, taken to extremes, could in its production of a full theory of the object and all its possibilities return us to the more romantic or sacred theory of the artifact that has so far dominated the hermeneutic and historical disciplines. An artifact so theorized would have the same relation to its actually existing counterpart as the forking multiverse does to the singular one, or as does the system to its instances. In this way the idea of the sacred symbolic totality could always recapture the possibility of coincidence within it.

But the fact—and it is a fact—that the world is not complete (and never will be) ought to make two things clear: first that like works of art themselves, the interpretive and historical disciplines belong, in their commitment to noncoincidence, fundamentally to the same form of idealized and utopian discourse from which derives the (suspect) holiness of the sacred texts. And second, that if we want those disciplines to function as what Georg Simmel once called *Wirklichkeitswissenschaften*—sciences of concrete reality—then one path forward will involve abandoning the comforts of that utopianism in favor of something less satisfying but more true.

VII. I Try to Say Things Plainly For a Change

I mean: it is not factually true that artworks or historical events are symbolic totalities, because in reality there are no symbolic totalities (though there are things that are considered symbolic totalities).⁹ It is true that artworks serve a social function of allowing us to imagine symbolic totalities, and that therefore any interpretation of an artwork ought to acknowledge that function. But that does not mean that artworks actually do so. A secular reality means that in fact they never can. It is therefore a problem that professional interpreters tend to act as though they do.

What difference does thinking this way make? How might it change the way we interpret artworks, or historical events? I wrote earlier that we would have to recognize the object of analysis “as at least partly or potentially coincidental: as a semi-stable accretion sitting on top of a pile of plausible and even implausible alternatives.” So that:

1. For the last ninety years or so, points have been awarded to the critics who produce the most complete explanations of literary works: if one person explains 90 percent of the text on their way to producing a general theory of the textual whole, and another explains 95 percent, the 95-percenter wins. (The article goes: “Previous Critic has explained the poem pretty well. But they neglected to include an understanding of My New Thing.

⁹ Again, you can make this case in a sophisticated way, either by referring to an eternal chain of signifiers *à la* Saussure or a Derridean receding horizon of meaning, or with reference to the actually existing diachrony of time, which puts paid to all synchronic structures (via, say, Peter Janich).

Once you grasp My New Thing, the text is better explained.”) This would, or could, stop. In other words: sometimes explaining *more* of something actually explains it more falsely.¹⁰

This opens the door, not only to partial explanations of texts or artifacts, but to interpretations that cut across the object *slant*—that treat their analysis as a creative act of scholarship whose end lies not inside the totality of the work/event but beyond it. You could recognize the object-event’s polyvocality without being obliged to reimagine that polyvocality in a higher fullness.¹¹

2. You would have to make arguments, not only about a work’s own orientation toward totality (in general: trying to produce it), but about its actual relation to its own totality. This would require you to have some sense of the work’s position in the general distribution (social and actual, if those could be distinguished) of noncoincidence. My guess is that this would allow one to describe more accurately certain features of aesthetic history that are hard to acknowledge under the current system. Think for instance of all the energy spent describing how different Rothko paintings are truly different from one another. Perhaps they’re just not; perhaps their differences are essentially contingent or random—not in the sense that they were not chosen by Rothko but in the sense that the choice does not itself generate interesting significance. (Does this kind of rejection of interpretation diminish the perceived value of the artwork? Yes. That’s ok. It’s not clear to me that just because an artwork is valuable we need to treat it as though it were entirely noncoincidental.)
3. For historians: on the one hand this might open up an enormous counterfactual can of worms, since one of the things I am saying is that in fact we need to be epistemologically responsible to all those things that could have happened, in order to recognize that what did happen was not necessarily the result of an “intending” causal force (structure or system or the demands of historical progress or whatever). As with the artwork, of course, some events or historical patterns are more coincidental than others. Scholarship would require grasping the pattern of necessity and randomness governing one’s chosen examples.
4. As with the artwork, an emphasis on coincidence, alongside the knowledge that we can never know for certain what is coincidental and what isn’t, would have the effect of reducing the amount of “meaning” in history. Coincidence’s resistance to totality would necessarily make all large-scale conclusions less secure. Here a certain kind of historical work would be particularly vulnerable: namely the type that uses a small number of examples to explain an era (“the fish that changed the world,” e.g.).

¹⁰ The phrase I wish I could have written: “sometimes explaining more of something explains less of it.” Which is lovely for the more/less shift, but unfortunately not as true as the thing I actually had to write. Sigh.

¹¹ Didn’t Bakhtin already do that? No—the polyvocality is always recuperated, either within the work for its aesthetic totality, or without it, as a figure of the polyvocality of the bourgeois era.

The main thing to say is that in this way of thinking the objects of the humanities are able to sustain less *epistemological pressure*. This is true whether the explanatory drive aims to construct the theory of a single event or work, or whether it attempts to connect that work to a larger whole. Some stuff is just an accident—even if those accidents, one formalized into the aesthetic or historical record, come to share the same incontrovertible reality of everything else. Imagine writing about something that didn't end up seeming to matter—an aesthetic object with no successors or any real influence, a historical event that started and stopped in ways that don't even make it a useful or especially instructive instance of failure. There is a whole world of material out there that is not interesting to scholars because it doesn't amount to anything. But history (or the history of art) is not just the history of things that mattered, things that captured a *Zeitgeist*, or altered it. It's also a history of all the stuff that didn't connect. And as I've suggested with the *Moby-Dick* example, this is true not only for the event or object considered as a whole, but also within the socially defined whole that is an object or event in the first place.

It is because humans are not gods that human-made objects, and human history, are both intentional and coincidental, composed of meaning and randomness in infinitely variable measure.¹² Human history is full of attempts to retheorize that leaky reality as replete, assigning to the chosen people, the land or the world or the arc of history a symbolic wholeness that would guarantee its meaningfulness and stability. And it is full of attempts to generate spheres of life and action protected from the forces of coincidence, randomness, or almost-chosen paths that destabilize much of what we hold dear. What is love, after all, what is the Romantic theory of the artwork, but an attempt to hold back from secular life some ration of unimpregnable beauty? What is unimpregnable beauty but the same thing?

If coincidence is real, then coincidence is everywhere. A humanistic scholarship that says yes to it would abandon some of its most powerful rhetorical and epistemological tools. I am not sure if the gains will outweigh the losses here. But sometimes that's the price you pay for saying truer things.¹³

¹² Until the third comma, this is not my sentence; it was written by Will Bridges, but I liked it very much, so I asked him if I could use it.

¹³ At the death a final thought: The opposite of coincidence is probably not noncoincidence but rather randomness or contingency. My point is that we treat the contingency of an event in history or the work (the name "Ishmael," for instance) as a non-coincidence, as not simply the surprising conjunction of events (like seeing the same number several times in a row) but as an event replete with significance. The counterargument is not, the name Ishmael is in fact actually a pure coincidence (again, like seeing random numbers) but rather that it is a contingent event (or rather, the choice of Ishmael by Melville was a contingent event) that could have easily happened otherwise, and that criticism cannot therefore put too much pressure on it. I guess I am saying, at some very simple level: works of art are part of the real world.