

Matrix accidents in Rick Moody's fiction

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In the fiction of Rick Moody, accidents are the privileged modality of events and often provide an organizing principle around which most narratives revolve. Central to the novel *The Ice Storm* (1994) is the accidental death of a teenager who is victim of an electrocution. *The Black Veil* (2002), Moody's fictional memoir, lies on a double accident: the car crash of the sister's narrator and the accidental shooting committed by one of his alleged ancestors. All sorts of random accidents punctuate *Demonology*, a collection of stories which opens and ends on the repeated motif of the car crash.

Accidents, fatal or not, engage the reader in a reflection about the possibility for fiction to represent the real in its indiscipline, in its chaotic and unexpected nature. As the Latin etymology reveals, *accidens* is "what happens". In that sense, the accident predates the event, it is a raw encounter with the real that cannot be made sense of. As Emmanuel Boisset remarks, the event is contrarily to be understood in a teleological perspective and thus implies both preparedness and expectation. *Evenire* does suggest that something is about to happen but assumes that a process is being accomplished. While an event can be looked forward, the accident, in its sudden manifestation, fails to be anticipated. The writing of the accident consequently raises interrogations about the mediation of the real. It is highly problematic for it challenges the very nature of language. In an article devoted to the notion of event, historian François Dosse quotes Jorge Luis Borges who clearly formulates the limits to the mimetic quality of language: "What my eyes saw was simultaneous; what I shall write is successive, because such is the nature of language"¹.

1. The sentence from Jorge Luis Borges is quoted in French by François Dosse: "Ce que virent mes yeux fut simultané : ce que je transcrirai,

Moody's texts attempt at bridging the gap Borges points out for there is indeed a constant effort to present the accident as it happens. However, it is my point to show that Moody's fiction² revolves around a central paradox which consists in transforming the accident into a long-awaited event. The writing of the accident lies on deceptive encounters with the real for as soon as accident enters narrative, it becomes an event. Its repeated staging subverts its spontaneous occurrence. Being systematic, it becomes instrumental in the diegesis.

Simulating the accident

Demonology (2000) is framed by the motif of the car crash which is to be found both in the inaugural and closing stories, "The Mansion of the Hill" and "Demonology". Common to those two short stories is the accidental death of the narrator's sister, a motif that derives from the author's personal past³. Despite their manifest echo, the two stories do stand in sharp contrast since one offers a moving recollection of the sister's accident while the other reads like a live coverage of the crash. The strategies adopted largely vary but, in their efforts to come to grips with the unruly nature of the accident, they mostly reveal the impossibility for language to present the accident as it happens.

As a coda to the whole collection, "Demonology" narrates the sister's accident and the subsequent seizure that caused her death. Such a choice has several consequences on the way the story unfolds for it is quite close to an accident report. As a result, the narrative voice recedes and changes into a voyeuristic prying eye set on giving a minute detailing of the sister's accidental death. Although the story is written in the first person, it must be noticed that the pronoun "I" is scarcely used which contributes to creating

successif, car c'est ainsi qu'est le langage." (Borges, 1993, p. 662) in François Dosse, "L'événement historique : une énigme irrésolue", *Nouvelle revue de psychosociologie* 2015, vol. 1, n° 19, p. 18.

2. I will mostly focus on the motif of the car crash to be found extensively in two collections of stories, *Demonology* (2000) and *The Ring of Brightest Angels around Heaven* (1995).
3. Moody uses the real name of his deceased sister, Meredith, several times in his fiction.

the impression of a total absence of control. In an article devoted to Rick Moody's fiction, critic Joseph Dewey draws a parallel with Nathaniel Hawthorne's Surveyor Pue the better to evidence that Moody takes an opposite stance.

In "Demonology" Moody drops authorial posturings and confronts the reader within uncharacteristic vulnerability: this is the story of his sister's death. There is no voice-over, no framing Surveyor, no reassuring larger authority safely removed from the unfolding experiences recounted in the narrative and free to experiment with the appropriate language technology to deploy. (37)

Indeed, the story is composed of snapshots that are meant to illustrate the last twenty-four hours of the sister's narrator. These random vignettes present the sister as the narrator is perusing a photo album. Disjoined paragraphs follow one another and the absence of a framing voice mainly derives from its paratactic construction. The collection of clichés contributes to the blunt exposition of events and the action unfolds in a continuous present. Presentation thus supplants representation as evidenced by the choice of presentative structures or adverbs. The sister's accident is thus introduced via the adverb "here" in a desperate attempt at making visible what was not possibly visible nor was witnessed by the narrator: "Here's the local news photo that never was: my sister slumped over the wheel of her Plymouth Saturn after having run smack into a local deer." (299) The colon that separates the sentence into two halves disrupts the syntax and imparts it with a hectic rhythm which intensifies the random surging of the accident. Narrative devices are scarce which adds to the sense of immediacy and emergency. The story can thus be read as a chain of accidental episodes that are loosely connected in order to compete with an ever-accelerating present. The moment the sister seizes is exposed bluntly and without warning: "Out of nowhere. All of a sudden. All at once. In an instant. Without a warning. In no time. Helter-skelter. *In the twinkling of an eye*. Figurative language isn't up to the task." (302)

Words crash into each other, connections disappear to make language break free from all narrative constraints. The accidental

death happens, *it* happens, the narrator does not wish to make it happen. Words run freely and phrases seem to generate each other. Grammar is disrupted so is time. The litany of synonymous expressions prevents the story from moving on so does the concatenation of time-markers. As we read on, figurative language seems next to be defeated by medical language in an attempt at reporting the accidental death the way a forensic doctor would.

My sister's hands balled up. Her heels drumming on the carpeting. Her muscles all like nautical lines, pulling tights against cleats. Her jaw clenched. Her heart rattling desperately. Fibrillating. If it was a conventional seizure, she was unconscious for this part – maybe even unconscious throughout – because of reduced blood flow to the brain, because of the fibrillation, because of her heart condition; which is to say that my sister's *mitral valve prolapse* – technical feature of her *broken heart* – was here engendering an arrhythmia, and now, if not already, she began to hemorrhage internally. (304)

Facts seem to be presented very logically here. The numerous conjunctions "if", "maybe", or "because", structure the medical report and reinforce the scientific reasoning. The description is quite didactic; the sister's death being presented as a clinical case. However, despite the effort to imitate a true-to-life report, the telling of the accident itself resists live coverage and immediacy. Moody does exhaust the possibility for language to cover a real-time accident but the accident itself still appears in this passage as a literary construct. Language is indeed put to the test: the literal report is defeated and figurative language strikes back. The ostensible scientific language adjoins metaphors and images that contaminate the medical report of the sister's death. Muscles are compared to "nautical lines" while the image of the "*broken heart*" is the figurative translation of the "*mitral valve prolapse*". Ironically enough, the very naïve and commonplace image of the "*broken heart*" is much more meaningful than the literality of medical language.

Such competition between figurative and literal language reveals how resistant language is when it tries to come to terms with the surging of the accident. The medical language and its

technicalities obfuscates meaning while images like “nautical lines” or “*broken heart*” produce some, and doing so, the very writing of the accident is driven off the text. In other words, raw encounters with the real are deceptive as there is a constant wish to make sense of the accident and to include it in a chain of events. The connection made between the “*mitral valve prolapse*” and the image of the “*broken heart*” actually conflates two factors that can account for the sister’s death – the first sticks to medical discourse, the second suggests the possibility that her accident was the logical outcome of her unhappy married life. In that respect, the accident loses its spontaneous character and becomes part of the plot.

Plotting the accident

The accident actually presides over the composition of many texts and provides a matrix for the author. It is thus only logical that accidents recur and keep being reconfigured in Moody’s fiction. For that reason, accidents are not to be considered as unique nor random since they echo one another. The seminal accident of the sister’s author is being declined endlessly. Not only does it appear twice in *Demonology* but it is also reconfigured in *The Black Veil*, Moody’s autobiographical novel. Its recurrence turns it into a performance that readers regularly attend, some event they are likely to witness at any moment. Being expected, the accident becomes constitutive of the narrative.

In “The Mansion on the Hill”, the inaugural story of *Demonology*, the writing of the accident contrasts with the accident report-like style identified earlier. Indeed, the telling of the accident does not obey a strict chronology and evades a linear recounting. As of line one, the accidental death of the sister is being anticipated; the word “sister” is truncated and shortened to a mutilated form “Sis” foretelling her death which is explicitly mentioned a few lines below in the incidental clause “after you were gone.” (3) The accident is given bit by bit and is scattered throughout the story – the fragmented narrative metaphorically pointing at her disarticulated body. Events are rearranged according to a fictional timeline. Therefore, the surging of the accident keeps being delayed. Besides, the narrator, who is the brother, promises no

faithful report of the accident but deliberate fiction: "Dead sister, said I. And then, completing my betrayal of you, I filled out the narrative, so that anyone who wished could hear about it." (15)

The telling of the accident thus becomes an opportunity for fiction to emerge as it triggers a multitude of hypotheses which aim at turning it into a comprehensible event. This quest for meaning materializes into thirty-two questions which punctuate the vibrant address of the narrator to his sister, most interrogations deriving from the anaphoric matrix, "Have I asked why [...]?" and occasional variations:

Have I asked, for example, why you were taking the winding country road along our side of the great river, when the four-lanes along the west side were faster, more direct, and in heavy rain, less dangerous? Have I asked why you were driving at all? Why I was not driving you to the rehearsal dinner instead? (16)

This litany of rhetorical questions delays the report of the accident and contributes to increasing suspense. Indeed, the narrator, who did not witness the car crash, reviews the possible circumstances of it and multiplies its potential causes. The accident thus generates fiction or rather a surplus of fiction as the narrator has no choice but to make up for what he has not seen and what remains for him an experience by proxy. The questions being formulated in the first person prove how the accident becomes part of a broader plot that impacts as well the brother's narrative of mourning and guilt. The irrepressible wish to make sense of it makes the siblings' stories coalesce in an eighteen-line long sentence.

My car was a death trap; and I was its proper driver, bent on my long, complicated program of failure, my program of futures abandoned, of half-baked ideas, of big plans that came to nought, of cheap talk and lies, of drinking binges, petty theft; my car was made for my own death, Sis, the inevitable and welcome end to the kind of shame and regret I had brought upon everyone close to me, you especially, who must have wept inwardly in your bosom, when you felt compelled to ask me to read a poem on your special day, before you

totaled my car, on that curve, running up over the berm, shrieking, flipping the vehicle, skidding thirty feet on the roof, hitting the granite outcropping there, plunging out of the seat, (why no seat belt ?), snapping your neck, ejecting through the windshield, catching part of yourself there, tumbling over the hood, breaking both legs, puncturing your lung, losing an eye, shattering your wrist, bleeding, coming to rest at last in a pile of moldering leaves, where rain fell upon you, until, unconscious, you died. (45)

First of all, what is striking in this sentence is the initial confusion between the brother and sister. The narrator first stages himself driving the fatal car and seems to suggest that the accident was bound to happen except that it accidentally happened to his sister not to him: “my car was made for my own death”. The experience of the accident becomes shared so is its responsibility. The sentence starts with “my car” and ends with “you died”, the accident making a unique link between the living narrator and the dead sister.

Yet, the convoluted sentence delays and lengthens the moment of the crash. The litany of present participles slows down the action which remains in the process of being accomplished, the soothing rhythm of the “ing” providing an elegiac soundtrack to the sister’s death. Central to this passage is the dying body but not the dead body. The telling of the accident evades pure physicality: the sister’s corpse is replaced with a poetic body that eventually lies peacefully among dead leaves. The confusion between the brother’s car and the sister’s car crash reveals how necessary it is to orchestrate the accident in a broader chain of events in order for it to make sense.

In an essay entitled *Premium Doloris, l'accident comme souci de soi*, Cynthia Fleury recalls the inexplicable and random nature of the accident. However, she distinguishes two different phases: the moment when the accident happens and the moment when, being interpreted, it becomes an event.

L'accident est, d'abord, sans raison, “hors de propos”, hors de mon histoire. Puis dans un second temps, c'est l'expérience essentielle d'une nouvelle datation fondée par un nouvel acte de

présence, "actif" à deux niveaux : historique et herméneutique. "Historique" parce que l'accident fait date, il inaugure une histoire ; herméneutique", parce que l'accident est une clé de lecture, un événement métahistorique, non strictement historique, qui dit le sens de l'histoire. (150)

Such a distinction can explain why fiction oscillates between the desire to cover the accident as it happens and the wish to fictionalize it so as to derive meaning from it. I would suggest that, in Moody's texts, accidents are to be considered as events for narrators and victims hardly ever coincide. As a result, the very telling of the accident turns it into an event for it is mediated by a narrator who takes on the role of the witness he never was in order to produce a sensible explanation. The accident turns into an event when a quest for meaning is conducted in retrospect. Florence Giust-Desprairies and André Levy stress the fact that the event creates a temporal breach that both opens and ends a period of time. It is thus only afterward that the event makes sense: “L'événement ne fait sens que de son ressaisissement”⁴.

The telling of the accident thus implies its necessary fictionalization and possible distortion. Besides, the temporal chaos it provokes relates the accident to a broader reflection on man's mortal condition. Cynthia Fleury argues indeed that the accident provokes the sudden awareness of our own death. In other words, it both plunges one in the hectic flow of the present while already hinting at the future event of his death. Such time overlap is made manifest in “The Mansion on the Hill” when the narrator interlaces his sister's accident and the possibility of his own death.

Throughout the whole collection of stories, the accident is stripped from its accidental nature and consequently provides a

4. “L'événement fait signe et prend sens avec la résurgence d'un passé, proche ou lointain, insuffisamment pensé, ou frappé d'interdit, et l'anticipation d'un futur qui se présente encore non tracé et peut faire dire qu'il y aura un avant et un après'. Moment de déconstruction, de perte, mais aussi moment d'éveil, d'émergence, de création, l'événement engage un processus de réflexion et d'analyse qui peut conduire à des changements, parfois irréversibles. Mais il n'acquiert de signification et n'a prise sur le réel qu'à partir du moment où l'émotion qu'il suscite en première instance se traduit en prises de conscience dans l'après-coup. L'événement ne fait sens que de son ressaisissement.” (8)

useful compositional tool generating endless narratives of loss and mourning. Indeed, the accident never comes up incidentally but is rather to be considered as a staged event.

Event and performance

Moody pushes the theatricality of the accident to its extreme limit when he transforms it into a happening, an event being prepared and performed. In “The James Dean’s Garage Band”, a story to be found in the collection entitled *The Ring of Brightest Angels around Heaven*, Moody subverts once again the very nature of the accident. Indeed, the story offers a variation on a persistent rumor according to which James Dean never actually killed himself in a car crash. The accident was a staging that provided the actor with an opportunity to withdraw from his public life and allowed him to lead a peaceful existence afterward.

Interestingly enough, Moody’s story does not open on an accident report but on a non-accident report: “He walked away from the accident, of course. He left the insurance adjusters and the film agents and lawyers to sift through the wreckage for his remains, and he walked away.” (71) As we move on in the story, we understand that the loquacious omniscient voice knows nothing about the circumstances of the accident. He is an unreliable witness who presents himself as James Dean’s friend but it is made clear that he is making up the report in retrospect, drawing extensively on what “Dean told him later.” (71) In the short story, Dean’s accident is reported in a cinematic way and staged like an event.

On route 466. Dean had been driving all day. Speeding like a motherfucker. Rolf Wutherich riding shotgun. Wutherich had tuned up the car that morning. It was performing. This much is well known. Leaving the scene of the accident, Dean started walking out into the desert. He was crying. The sun was on its way down. [...] And though he was no athlete soon he was running. Running as fast as his cinematic legs could carry him. (71-72)

The verb performing obviously hints at the staging of the accident and confirms its dramatic potential. The hero leaves the scene of the accident as he would leave the set after a day's work, while the narrative voice edits the scene changing focus from Dean to the sky and then back to Dean. What is particularly interesting in this story is that Dean's accident is not unique, it is repeated twice and reappears at the end of the story in a much more laconic statement: "And it was in Cleveland, of course, that he had his second crash." (99) The adverb "of course" suggests that the second accident was to be anticipated and again strips the accident of its unique and unexpected character. On the contrary, the accident, being repeated, or, to put it in cinematic terms, rehearsed, becomes the flawless performance of a staged event. By having it proliferate in his texts, Moody shows the accident's dramatic potential when its very nature is being challenged.

The accident, in its spontaneous manifestation, only deceptively creates an effect of immediacy and instantaneous presentation. Moody's attempt at engaging in a confrontation with an unmediated reality is systematically defeated by a constant necessity to reconfigure the accident and include it into a chain of events. In that respect, the effort to cope with the accident as it happens is vain for the event relates less to the present than to the past or the future. Being repeated, they become ritualized events that are bound to happen. Such a challenge to the unexpected nature of the accident allows Moody to play stage characters who can logically be late to their accident. Such is the case of Gerry Abramowitz in a short story called "The Carnival Tradition". The accident of the protagonist is ironically postponed to the second part of the story because the character is always late in life. His accident happened late because he did upset the timing of the accident:

He'd even been late to his *accident*, that frivolity of kids in their twenties. He'd waited until later, a decade later, after giving up on New Jersey, before finding himself on a stretch of interstate between Brattleboro and Northampton, on a rainy autumn afternoon, at dusk. (176)

It is made clear here that the accident is transformed into a ritual event, a rite of passage, and is thus bound to happen. The possibility for it to come up is always already here which subverts its accidental nature. As a result, the accident maintains a very tenuous link with the event for, in Moody's fiction, it is always lying in wait and the *accidens*, in other words, *what happens*, is rather a process being completed, an event that has long been anticipated.

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