Fortuitous
Aleksandra Wagner

“It related the fortuitous and the ordained into a reassuring union which we recognized as nature.”

Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

When did you last utter [för-ˈtū-təs]? Where do you stand on Cicero’s salvo, *Vitam regit fortuna, non sapientia*? Or on Stéphane Mallarmé’s, *A throw of dice will never abolish chance*?

Should we judge the word—and ourselves—by appreciation of its antonyms?

Let us try here the *voluntary; destined; predetermined …* pass the merely *unpromising; foreseeable; inauspicious …* what remains is the *ill-starred; catastrophic; conscious …*

We learn that the usage of *fortuitous* tended to operate in a gradation—from *occurring by chance* to *fortunate*. About a decade ago, Merriam-Webster assuaged any anxieties by noting, “if you use *fortuitous* to mean *happening by a lucky chance*, you have nothing to worry about.” By letting luck level all that may appear daring, your stance will be “unlikely to cause much stir.”¹

An absolutely not-stirred Sigmund Freud dedicated chapter nine of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) to “Symptomatic and *Chance Actions*” (if you choose to be helped by translations of A. A. Brill [1914] and Alan Tyson [1960]), or to “Symptomatic and *Fortuitous Actions*” (if you read while aided by Anthea Bell [2002]).² Of all these translators, how did a woman come to a taste for the *fortuitous*? Better yet, how did *chance* come to be standardized for so long? Was it by accident?

For Freud, nothing was *zufällig*. For some of those who closely followed him, “nothing, in effect, can be grounded on chance … that does not involve at the outset a limited structuring of the situation.”³

We read that the scientific discoveries are either logic-based or fortuitous—the latter implying that they may arise unexpectedly; they could not have been anticipated, for there was no available knowledge to enable such anticipation. Once you submit to a pedestrian thought—that you are on the road to discovery—this works pretty well. Indeed, on such a road, they (the things) may arise unexpectedly. Moreover, they (the very wild things), arising (or falling) unexpectedly, may crush the hypothesis—one or more—and whisk you away from logic’s relative safety. Let it be known that

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such exhilaration cannot last long. All too soon you will destroy the fortuitous moment, locking it up by giving it a meaning.

Isaac Newton, the one who uttered, *Hypotheses non fingo*, may have had the last laugh. He kept the fortuitousness through suspense: an accidental apple had nothing to do with it.

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