Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 248 pp.

This collaborative work gives the lie to the old saw that nothing worthwhile was ever written by a committee. The authors provide a fresh and coherent perspective on the hoary problem of why human beings engage in ritual and how such activities relate to everything else that people do. Ritual is depicted here as a controlled enactment of subjunctivity, like play or theater. As such, ritual seeks to describe not the world (as some social scientists have argued) but a possible world—an "as if," not an "as is." With a broad and surprisingly deft interweaving of scholarship in historiography, the social sciences, philosophy, religious studies, and even architecture, the authors argue that ritual practice and ritual consciousness can be contrasted broadly with the attitude of "sincerity." For reasons related to its own moral coherence, sincerity displaces ritual by refusing to engage in "as if" play. Orthodox Jews and Confucians are said to be ritual virtuosi, while Protestants (and the societies they have built) strive to be sincere. This is too simplistic, because fundamentalist movements in every society are characterized by a sincerity that requires the forceful imposition of ideal models upon a recalcitrant reality. One may quibble with aspects of the argument, but *Ritual and Its Consequences* is an enormously important and paradigm-changing book. The audacity of its scope is refreshing—a turn to grand theory in an academic culture whose trend is to say more and more about less and less.

— Don Seeman

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Ross Hamilton, *Accident: A Philosophical and Literary History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 320 pp.

Hamilton's book presents itself as a "philosophical and literary history." It has something of Auerbach's brand of intellectual history, but most of its ideas come from commentaries rather than primary texts. The main thesis seems to be that Aristotle's distinction between accident and substance "set in motion a system of thought whose conceptual fertility remains astonishing." The system is pseudonymically (or metonymically) presented as a long series of names and episodes, from *Metaphysics Z* and the equestrian mishaps of King Saul and Montaigne, to standard English department syllabic fare (Rousseau as Locke, Wordsworth as Rousseau, Kant as Burke, Jane Austen as George Eliot), along with discussions of Eucharist (the contemporary unbeliever's favorite sacrament) and a car accident.