

Why We Enjoy Coincidences

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Timothy McDermott's piece in *New Blackfriars*, March 1991, raised a number of fascinating themes. In this article, inspired by his, I would like to bring together two areas of thought not usually connected: the study of chance and coincidence and the study of the function of the human mind in the construction of its own perceptions. The link between the two will be a consideration of the metaphysical status of literature.

McDermott quotes Jacques Monod on coincidence: 'The convergence of two totally-independent causal chains of events, the convergence itself being causeless.' There is nothing unusual about either chain considered in itself. It is in the bringing together of the two chains that the coincidence lies. A coincidence only springs into existence when perceived by an appropriate, a 'skilled' observer. For example Leicester's Moslems were recently excited by the discovery of the word 'Allah', in Arabic script, formed by the seeds on the inside of an aubergine. Many were the speculations about what this article portended. Had that aubergine instead been opened in the Leicester of 1931, few would have realised that they were in the presence of wonders.

Coincidence is a subject which many find fascinating and delightful. Arthur Koestler was overwhelmed with responses when he requested examples of coincidence stories from the public. Countless articles on coincidence have been written. Jung even attempted to establish a principle of acausal causation for coincidences, which he called synchronicity. Coincidence is a grey area of human experience. Obviously coincidences happen. Yet they are unpredictable in their occurrence and either ambiguous or simply vacuous in their significance. Timothy McDermott gave us this example in his Thomas Aquinas lecture:

As a student in Cambridge I lodged in a house where French students learning English also lodged; one year a young fellow called Jerome, the next a French princess called Thamar. Some years later I received a letter from Jerome and, in it, a newspaper cutting announcing Thamar's forthcoming marriage. 'How thoughtful of Jerome' I murmured, and then came all over goose-pimples, for Jerome had never known Thamar, hadn't even known of her existence; how then could he be sending me notice of her wedding? The cutting was folded and I opened it up. On the

other side was a photograph of May madrigals being sung under King's College bridge. Jerome had noticed it in the newspaper that morning, felt a pang of nostalgia and wanted to pass the pang on. That it was back to back with the announcement of Thamar's wedding was simply an amazing coincidence. (*New Blackfriars*, March 1991, p. 118)

The story is quaint, a little touching perhaps, and quite devoid of any serious meaning. Yet oddly it somehow suggests that in some imperceptible way it is significant, perhaps enormously so, were we only able to see. It almost vibrates with hidden meaning and yet the hidden meaning refuses to disclose itself. I wish to argue that the reason why we pore over coincidences, seeking to extract from them an ever-absent meaning, is that our perceptions of the world, our expectations of reality, have, throughout our entire lives, been moulded by oral and literary forms, by poetry, myths and stories, in which deliberately manufactured coincidences play an enormous, a necessary and, so far as I am aware, largely unacknowledged place.

The most striking example of the dependence of all literary form upon coincidence is provided by poetry. Indeed one could go so far as to define poetry as 'the deliberate induction of aesthetic effects by the manipulation of linguistic coincidence.' To elucidate: a word is both a sign and a set of specific sounds. It is axiomatic that there is no intrinsic connection between the sound of a word and the object or idea it designates, except in very rare and atypical cases. The material nature of a word consists of no more than a series of syllables and pauses, each syllable being based upon vowels and consonants. Likewise there is no intrinsic connection between the sound of a sentence and the message which that sentence carries. But the art of poetry consists of deliberately undoing this truth, in giving existence to a nonexistent congruence between the sound of a sentence and its significance. A line of poetry or a poem moves us because of the perfect coincidence between the sounds, rhythms and pauses of which it consists at a material level, and the message it carries at a semiotic level.

Let us take some specific examples. The formation of rhyming words in English is a typically random process. The verb to repent derives, via middle English from the old French *repentir*. The verb to consent derives from the old French *consentir*. The arrival of both words in our language is directly due to political and military events of the 11th century. Had William of Normandy died of smallpox in 1064 neither word would have passed into our vocabulary. Linguistically speaking the presence in English of both words is a pure accident. No essential relationship of any kind exists between the two. That the words rhyme with each other in itself has no significance at all. Yet how inevitable, how right and how comic is their juxtaposition in Byron's famous couplet from 'Don Juan':

A little still she strove and much repented
And whispering 'I will ne'er consent' — consented.

A long chain of events led to those words accidentally having the property of rhyming with each other. It was Byron's art to bring them together and to force that accidental coincidence into significance.

Or consider the Pun, mightier than the word as Joyce said. Punning is central to poetry. Every word is a potential pun, provided we can find the right partner or the right context for it. Shakespeare's sonnet no. 135 uses the sound 'Will' 12 times in 14 lines:

Whoever hath her wish, thou hast the Will,
And Will to boot and Will in overplus
More then enough am I that vex thee still,
To thy sweet will making addition thus.
Wilt thou whose Will is large and spacious,
Not once vouchsafe to hide my will in thine,
Shall will in other seem right gracious,
And in my will no fair acceptance shine?
The sea all water, yet receives rain still
And in abundance addeth to his store,
So thou being rich in Will adde to thy Will,
One will of mine to make thy large will more.

Let no unkind, no fair beseechers kill,
Think all but one, and me in that one Will.

The one sound, *will*, carries at least all of the following meanings: Will Shakespeare himself, Shakespeare's capacity to wish a situation that was not the case, Shakespeare's penis, the probable name of his rival and the last testament of a dead person. Had Shakespeare's parents called this son Richard the poem might still have been written, but if Richard Shakespeare had written it its meaning would have been changed utterly. Dick Shakespeare could have obscenely punned upon his name but no effort on Shakespeare's part could have made the word Dick mean the faculty of volition. And if we were to follow Virginia Woolf and invent Judith Shakespeare, William's sister, and ascribe the poem to her, the meaning mutates still more radically. Shakespeare has taken these ready-made linguistic coincidences which were, as it were lying idly about, and put them to work. They become the means by which the sound and the significance are fused. Moreover the poem only functions as it does because 'will' happily rhymes with such other useful words as 'still' (in the sense of without motion), 'still' (in the sense of continuing unchanging over time), and 'kill'.

If we consider the element of rhythm, so central to poetry we find the same deliberate manipulation of coincidence to produce significance. There is no relationship between the length of a word or the number of syllables it contains and its sense. A writer of haiku must write a poem of 17 syllables, divided into subgroups of 5, 7, and 5. The poem must also convey meaning and a zen aesthetic frisson of a peculiarly defined type.

Let us examine a single haiku, considered by Japanese to be one of the greatest ever written, by the master of haiku, Basho:

Mono iye-ba	Emitting words
Kuchiburu samu-shi	A chill about my lips
Aki no kaze	The autumn wind.

and then imagine that, by some bizarre chain of events, the Japanese word for wind is not 'kaze' but, shall we say, 'suzuki'? The final line would have contained 6 syllables and this haiku, while still remaining a meaningful sentence, would never have been a haiku and would therefore never have been written.

It is the poet's reliance upon the accidentally-acquired possibilities of specific words which makes it impossible to translate poetry directly from the original language to another. A translator can either seek to reinvent the poem in his own tongue, in which case it ceases to be the original poem, or he can simply follow Nabokov's advice and provide the original text, a literal translation and a sufficient body of notes for the dutiful reader to recreate the original experience for himself.

The centrality of coincidence in all narrative forms is slightly less obvious. Yet coherent narrative without artificial coincidence is impossible. I am not here referring to the plots of 19th century novels, hinging as they so often do upon lost family connections and long-forgotten guilt. Rather I mean what we might call 'the coincidence of narrative attention.'

Every novel, every epic poem, every short story is premised upon the 'ghostly', observing, listening, omniscient presence of the author at precisely those moments in the lives of the protagonists which are to be made significant by that same presence of the author. For example, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus had probably, by the age of 17, sat through in excess of 800 sermons. *A Portrait of the Artist* presents us with one of those sermons, in its entirety. Why that one? Why not any one of the other 799? Why not all the other 799? What if Joyce's narrative presence had arrived a week earlier and missed the sermon altogether? The answer is of course that this sermon is the one which most significantly affects Dedalus' development. All the others had to be consigned to ontological oblivion for sound aesthetic reasons.

Why does Thomas Hardy present us with the tale of Tess Durbyfield and not, as it were, accidentally, the tale of Martha Shrimpton, an exact contemporary of Tess who lived in Ipswich? Because the story of Tess is the story he has elected to tell, out of all the other millions of stories he could have told. Every tale also excludes in its telling all the other possible tales which are not told in that time and place. Every event described is described at the expense of all the other events which could be but are not described. How lucky for readers throughout history that Homer managed to arrive at the right Troy out of the twenty which occupied that site, that Dante got lost one Good Friday and instead of going safely home found himself in Hell, and that David Lodge was able

to locate the one Midlands factory linked to a University English department.

A reader would be bewildered to find a novel in which the author admitted that he had failed to encounter any of his characters, having set his scene in the wrong city perhaps, or fifty years too early, or that he had failed to understand any of the dialogue because it was all in the wrong language. Some such novel might be written, possibly in France, and it would occupy the same aesthetic limbo as Andy Warhol's 12 hour filmic study of the Empire State Building. Any completed novel is a set of coincidences successfully arranged by the author, so that he did manage to be there at all the important moments, did manage to locate the characters, did manage to put the clues in the right places and did manage to overhear all of the significant dialogue. If only life could be more like that.

An awareness of this situation lies at the heart of so much modern writing. Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, for example, is about two *real* people accidentally trapped within the plot of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, who are able to wander around Elsinore and see what is happening there while Shakespeare's attention is focussed elsewhere. This awareness is at the heart of Flann O'Brien's modernist comic masterpiece, *At Swim Two Birds*. O'Brien's characters manage to escape when the author falls into a drugged sleep. They are then able to rearrange the plot to their own advantage. O'Brien describes examining his manuscript and finds that four pages are missing. The missing pages included 'one of the four improper assaults required by the ramification of the plot'. The assault had in fact been deleted by the intended victim. If only Tess Durbyfield had thought of that!

In a justly celebrated passage in *After Virtue* Alasdair MacIntyre wrote of the centrality of narrative forms to all human self-understanding.

Man is a story-telling animal. He is not so essentially but becomes through his history a teller of stories that aspire to truth. We enter human society with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed. It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, good but misguided kings, youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile to live with the swine, that children learn or mislearn what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted anxious stutters in their actions as in their words.

After Virtue, p. 216.

If anything, MacIntyre understates his case. Narrative is central to all forms of human understanding. We constantly retell reality to ourselves as a story. It is hard for us to communicate in any other way. At school we endure assemblies about suitable role models. Our adolescent love affairs are constructed around popular songs. When George Bush issued his final ultimatum to Saddam Hussein, every tabloid newspaper in Britain bore the headline 'High Noon'.

It is a cliché that Religions are built upon stories. Every Sunday Christians gather together to tell each other stories. Jews do the same one day earlier and Moslems one day earlier still. Yet even the natural sciences are not immune from story-telling. When Stephen Hawking wished to convey his theories to the man in the street he inevitably wrote a narrative: *A Brief History of Time. From the Big Bang to Black Holes. A Short Biography of the Universe* could be an alternative title. When Richard Dawkins wished to explain post Mendelian evolution to us, he too told a tale, this time of the struggles and adventures of the Thatcherite 'Selfish Gene'. The success of the Darwinian theory of evolution had not a little to do with the improving Victorian moral tale which it was presented as being, of how hard work and perseverance could turn even the lowliest ape into homo sapiens. Freud's professional success was far more the result of his own brilliant narrative gifts than it was of his scientific observation.

We inhabit a mental world of stories and poems. This means that we inhabit a mental world structured upon the principle of deliberate artificial coincidence. And this is precisely the source of the fascination of the 'real life' coincidence. For a coincidence is that moment when life most exerts itself to immitate art, when lived reality assumes the perfection, the symmetry, the rightness of fiction. Participants in a coincidence can briefly feel snugly fitted into the company of Arthur Clennan happening upon Little Dorrit in his mother's house, of Pierre managing to be present as Napoleon burns Moscow, of Agent Cooper finding the missing pages from *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer*. We have been schooled from birth to see ourselves as the heroes of our own stories. A coincidence is that magical instant when the celestial scriptwriter almost allows himself to be glimpsed, when we almost read the plot in which we are characters.

It is for this reason that coincidences are scanned so closely for the meaning which should be there and which *would* be there if only our lives had been written properly, by Dickens, Or Tolstoy or David Lynch, if only our lives functioned with the signficatory seamlessness of *Don Juan* or a Shakespeare sonnet.