

Are you sure it exists? . . . Is it hard or soft? Harry. Is it blue? Is it red? Does it have polka dots?" Badgered by Eccles' mockingly empirical questioning, Rabbit finds his answer by hitting, at last, the perfect drive.

In epiphanies, prose fiction comes closest to the verbal intensity of lyric poetry (most modern lyrics are in fact nothing but epiphanies); so epiphanic description is likely to be rich in figures of speech and sound. Updike is a writer prodigally gifted with the power of metaphorical speech. Even before he gets to the main subject of this paragraph he sets the scene with an effortlessly vivid description of the fruit tree, its "fists of taut pale buds" hinting at both the antagonism of the moment, and the promise of release. But the initial description of the drive is deliberately literal. "Very simply he brings the clubhead around his shoulder into it," is like a golf pro's description of a natural swing. "The sound has a hollowness, a singleness he hasn't heard before." The transformation of the epithets *hollow* and *single* into abstract nouns gives them a mysterious resonance. Then the language takes a metaphorical turn: "his ball is hung way out, lunarly pale against the beautiful black blue of storm clouds," and this cosmic, astronomical strain of imagery is extended later in "sphere, star, speck." The boldest trope is rightly reserved for the last: just as Rabbit thinks his ball is going to die, it "makes this hesitation the ground of a final leap: with a kind of visible sob takes a last bite of space before vanishing in falling." The synaesthesia (mixing of senses) of "visible sob" might seem a bit too rich to apply to a golf ball, if it didn't occupy the climactic position in the description. When Rabbit turns to Eccles and cries triumphantly, "That's it!" he is answering the minister's question about what is lacking in his marriage. But there is a suggestion of religious transcendence in the language applied to the golf ball ("the ground of a final leap" could be a phrase from modern existentialist theology) which comments obliquely on Eccles's own lack of real religious faith. Perhaps in Rabbit's cry of "That's it!" we also hear an echo of the writer's justifiable satisfaction at having revealed, through language, the radiant soul of a well-struck tee-shot.

33 Coincidence

For two very happy persons he found himself straightway taking them - a young man in shirt sleeves, a young woman easy and fair, who had pulled pleasantly up from some other place and, being acquainted with the neighbourhood, had known what this particular retreat could offer them. The air quite thickened, at their approach, with further intimations; the intimation that they were expert, familiar, frequent - that this wouldn't at all events be the first time. They knew how to do it, he vaguely felt - and it made them but the more idyllic, though at the very moment of the impression, as happened, their boat seemed to have begun to drift wide, the oarsman letting it go. It had by this time none the less come much nearer - near enough for Stretcher to fancy the lady in the stern had for some reason taken account of his being there to watch them. She had remarked on it sharply, yet her companion hadn't turned round; it was in fact almost as if our friend had felt her bid him keep still. She had taken in something as a result of which their course had wavered, and it continued to waver while they just stood off. This little effect was sudden and rapid, so rapid that Stretcher's sense of it was separate only for an instant from a sharp start of his own. He too had within the minute taken in something, taken in that he knew the lady whose parasol, shifting as if to hide her face, made so fine a pink point on the shining scene. It was too prodigious, a chance in a million, but, if he knew the lady, the gentleman, who still presented his back and kept off, the gentleman, the coalescent hero of the idyll, who had responded to her start, was, to match the marvel, none other than Chad.

HENRY JAMES *The Ambassadors* (1903)

THERE IS ALWAYS a trade-off in the writing of fiction between the achievement of structure, pattern and closure on the one hand, and the imitation of life's randomness, inconsequentiality and openness on the other. Coincidence, which surprises us in real life with symmetries we don't expect to find there, is all too obviously a structural device in fiction, and an excessive reliance on it can jeopardize the verisimilitude of a narrative. Its acceptability varies, of course, from one period to another. Brian Inglis observes in his book *Coincidence* that "Novelists . . . provide an invaluable guide to their contemporaries' attitudes to coincidence through the ways in which they exploit it in their books."

Lord David Cecil's witicism that Charlotte Brontë "stretched the long arm of coincidence to the point of dislocation" could be applied to most of the great Victorian novelists, who wrote long, multi-stranded and heavily moralized stories involving numerous characters drawn from different levels of society. Through coincidence, intriguing and instructive connections could be contrived between people who would not normally have had anything to do with each other. Often this was linked with a Nemesis theme – the idea, dear to the Victorian heart, that wrongdoing will always be exposed in the end. Henry James was perhaps pointing the same moral in the coincidental meeting that forms the climax to *The Ambassadors*, but in a characteristically modern way the innocent party is as discomfited as the guilty ones.

The hero of the story, Lambert Stretcher, is an amiable, elderly American bachelor who is despatched to Paris by his formidable patroness, Mrs Newsome, to check out rumours that their son Chad is misbehaving himself with a Frenchwoman, and to bring him back to run the family business. Stretcher, enchanted with Paris, and with the much-improved Chad and his aristocratic friend, Mme de Vionnet, and trusting Chad's assurances that the relationship is entirely innocent, sides with the young man in the family struggle, at some cost to his own prospects. Then, in the course of a solitary excursion into the French countryside, while stopping at a riverside inn, he encounters Chad and Mme de Vionnet, who arrive unchaperoned at the same venue by rowing boat. For Stretcher the realization that they are, after all, lovers, is a

bitter and humiliating disillusionment. The European culture whose beauty, style and elegance he has so enthusiastically embraced, turns out to be morally duplicitous, confirming the prejudices of puritanical and philistine New England.

This dénouement is contrived by means of coincidence, "a chance in a million," as the text itself boldly states. If it doesn't *seem* contrived, in the reading, that is partly because it is virtually the only twist in the entire plot (so that James has large reserves of credibility to draw on), and partly because the masterly narration of the event from Stretcher's point of view makes us experience it, rather than merely receive a report of it. Stretcher's perceptions have three stages, which are presented in, as it were, slow motion. First we share his benevolent observation of the couple in the boat on the assumption that they are strangers, whose appearance happily completes the idyllic scene he is contemplating. He constructs a little narrative around them, inferring from their comportment that they are "expert, familiar, frequent" visitors (which means that, when he identifies them as Chad and Mme de Vionnet, he must face the unpleasant fact that they are expert, familiar, frequent lovers, and have been deceiving him for some time). In the second stage he perceives various puzzling changes in the couple's behaviour: the boat drifts wide, the oarsman stops rowing, apparently at the behest of the lady who has taken note of Stretcher's presence. (Mme de Vionnet is wondering whether they can back off without being recognized.) Then, in the third and final stage Stretcher realizes that "he knew the lady whose parasol, shifting as if to hide her face, made so fine a pink point on the shining scene." Even now Stretcher's mind still clings to his aesthetic idyll; just as, in registering the presence of Chad, he tries to conceal his own dismay from himself by a hollow impersonation of pleased surprise. Having rendered the encounter so vividly, James can risk in the next paragraph terming it "as queer as fiction, as farce."

The frequency of coincidence in fictional plots varies with genre as well as period, and is related to how much the writer feels he can "get away with" in this respect. To cite my own experience, I

felt much less inhibited about exploiting coincidence in *Small World* (the very title of which foregrounds the phenomenon) than in, say, *Nice Work*. *Small World* is a comic novel, and audiences of comedy will accept an improbable coincidence for the sake of the fun it generates. In associating coincidence with "farce", James was no doubt thinking of French boulevard comedies at the turn of the century, by writers like Georges Feydeau, which all turn on sexually compromising situations, and *Small World* belongs to this tradition. It is also a novel that consciously imitates the interlacing plots of chivalric romances, so there is an intertextual justification, too, for the multiplicity of coincidences in the story. One of the more outrageous examples in the story centres on Cheryl Summerbee, an airline employee at Heathrow airport who serves an improbable number of the novel's characters in the course of the book. At a late stage in the pursuit of the heroine, Angelica, by the hero, Perse McGarrigle, the former leaves the latter a message on the petition board of the chapel at Heathrow, coded as a reference to a stanza in Spenser's *Fairie Queene*. Having tried the Heathrow bookstalls in vain for a paperback edition of this work, Perse is just about to travel back to London when Cheryl, who is in charge of an Information desk, produces the very thing from under her counter. It transpires that she has substituted this for her usual reading of cheap romances as a result of having received a lecture on the nature of authentic literary romance from the relentlessly pedagogic Angelica, whom she recently checked in for a flight to Geneva. Thus Perse obtains both the means of decoding the message and information of Angelica's whereabouts. This is all highly implausible, but it seemed to me that by this stage of the novel it was almost a case of the more coincidences the merrier, providing they did not defy common sense, and the idea of someone wanting information about a classic Renaissance poem getting it from an airline Information desk was so piquant that the audience would be ready to suspend their disbelief.

Nice Work has its comic and intertextual elements, but it is a more serious, realistic novel, and I was conscious that coincidence must be used more sparingly as a plot device, and more carefully disguised or justified. Whether I succeeded is not for me to say,

but I will give an example of what I mean. In Part Four of the novel, the hero Vic Wilcox is addressing a meeting of his workers when he is interrupted by a Kissogram, delivered by a girl dressed in sexy underwear, who sings a derisive message to him. This is a practical joke perpetrated by Vic's disaffected Sales Director. The meeting is about to collapse when the heroine Robyn Penrose comes to the rescue. The girl immediately obeys Robyn's command that she should leave because she is one of Robyn's students, Marion Russell. This is obviously a coincidence. If it works in narrative terms it is because certain clues have been planted earlier in the text which hinted that Marion might be doing this kind of job — not so obviously that the reader would guess that the Kissogram girl was Marion as soon as she appeared, but clearly enough in retrospect. Thus scepticism about a coincidence is, I hope, deflected by satisfactorily solving an enigma (what is Marion's part-time job?) and also by putting emphasis on Robyn's successful intervention rather than on her perception of the coincidence.