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THOMAS H. HICKS

A Return to Updike's "Post-Pill Paradise"

John Updike's latest book, *Self-Consciousness*, a collection of autobiographical pieces, was published this past spring. Updike is the most prolific living major American writer. Over many decades now many have enjoyed his work, readily connecting to the ethical dilemmas he poses and the moral debates about goodness he carries on with the reader. I respond especially to Updike's religious and moral sensibilities, and appreciate how his works invite several layers of interpretation as they join classical and Christian themes, and in particular are artistic adaptations of certain themes found in Kierkegaard's writings. Above all, I respond to Updike's extravagant sense of individual existence and the precious burden of selfhood. He makes me conscious of life's singularity and the irrevocability of our decisions, how inexorably linear our lives are even though the cycles of the day and of the year suggest that there will always be another chance. Updike conveys a kind of spiritual fear, and he does it without resorting to melodrama.

Updike portrays life with special attention to human erosions and betrayals. His novels are about knowing what's right and doing what's wrong anyway, about a kind of love that is mostly pain. Adultery as a form of human anguish is the central theme of most of his novels; he is preoccupied by the uses of infidelity. Reading *Self-Consciousness* induced me to re-read two of Updike's most famous novels, *Couples* and *Marry Me*, which were published twenty and fifteen years ago. *Marry Me* is a replay of the themes that appeared in *Couples*. The dust-jacket for both books depict Adam and Eve, symbolic of the fact that both books explore the disruption of the ideal man-woman relationship as established by the Creator and people's inability to recapture the lost order of things. Updike implies that this disorder results, as the Adam and Eve story has it, from a breach between humans and God — because that relationship is awry, the others are also awry.

Both books sketch the New England of the Kennedy era. A place named Tarbox, Massachusetts, is the scene of *Couples*. Tarbox is what suburbia meant during the Kennedy era. It is described by one

character as “the post-pill paradise.”¹ Physically, though not spiritually, Tarbox is still dominated by the old Congregational church at its center. This remnant of traditional religion is one of the novel’s major metaphors.

The action of *Couples* extends from spring 1963 to spring 1964 and recounts the activities of ten Tarbox married couples. Several of the couples seem interchangeable, duplicates of each other and without distinctive personalities, and so the reader is hard put to tell them apart. This blurring is deliberate. Only gradually does the reader differentiate who’s who. One soon discovers that these couples are drawn to each other in an unconscious effort to find substitutes for that sense of “congregation” that the old church once provided. As one character observes, “we have made a church of each other.”² As a result, the couples’ gatherings take on cultic and quasi-religious alignments. Their get-togethers are punctuated by celebratory feast-days (secularly inspired) and are replete with repetitive rituals like Sunday basketball games, party games that demand confession, ceremonies of induction, and so on.

Updike is depicting an America in moral transition, a new culture in the making. Freudian tolerance and the Pill have eroded the dangers and moral impediments involved in extramarital love. There is the utopian vision of a new society that these couples embrace. “Having suffered under their parents’ rigid marriages and formalized evasions, they sought to substitute an essential fidelity set in a matrix of easy and open companionship among the couples . . . they tried to improvise a new way of life.”³ For the couples sex is the emergent religion, the only thing left since God packed up. Sex becomes the symbol for human meaning in a world that seems devoid of meaning. Over the course of these novels, one is made to wonder if the future will understand how much sex meant to us. However, as Jerry, the main character in *Marry Me*, observes, “Maybe our trouble is that we live in the twilight of the old morality, and there’s just enough to torment us, and not enough to hold us in.”⁴

In Updike’s novels, complication comes not so much through plot but through character. The characters in Updike’s novels rarely travel any distance, their pilgrimages are interior journeys. The main plot in *Couples* involves the internal struggle of Piet (whose name suggests the “spirit” element in man) who is drawn to both his wife Angela (whose name implies facets of the pre-lapsarian Eve) and

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Foxy (who represents the sexual urges). The Piet-Foxy affair develops symbolically during the sterility of winter. The novel ends when the Congregational church burns (the lightning that strikes the church is probably reminiscent of the flaming sword of Genesis). The burning of the church symbolizes that Piet is relieved of morality and a sense of guilt and is able to choose Foxy. He divorces the supernatural, so to speak, to marry the natural. He is able to move out of the paralysis of guilt into "a kind of" freedom by embracing one phase of the dialectic, Foxy's body, and renounce the searches of soul, represented by Angela. At the end of the novel, a resolution has been made in freedom. However, as Kierkegaard reminds us, unhappiness and guilt or dread are not identical. The book ends with a good deal of ambiguity and the reader is left to wrestle with the terms of the debate. Over the course of *Couples* the circle of friends is destroyed by adultery. The ideal of brotherhood among the couples is replaced by selfhood. Suspicion, not love, eventually reigns. At the end of *Couples*, the members of the "church" are either lapsed or scattered.

In both *Couples* and *Marry Me* the children are rarely center-stage; rather, they drift on like a Greek chorus offering an ironic commentary on the adults' lives. Their imagined hurts, suspicions, recriminations, and impulsive acts parallel the emotions and actions of their parents. Both children and parents share the same humanity and the same spirit.

The themes Updike sounds are artfully planted, almost concealed, within the series of conversations that make up so much of these novels. At one of the couples' parties, a game is organized where each person must name the most wonderful things he or she can think of. As the game develops the players' answers subtly correspond with the Eden motifs that run through the book. The choices offered in this game artfully encapsulate the novel's major themes and dramatic tensions and insinuate the myth of Creation and Fall. One response addresses the wonder of Creation itself — "a baby's fingernails. . . . Well, I mean the whole process seems wonderful. You know, the way it produces out of nothing, no matter almost what we do, want it, this living baby, with perfect fingernails. What a lot of work, somehow, ingenuity, love even, goes into making each one of us, no matter what a lousy job we make of it afterwards."⁵ Foxy's choice is "the Eucharist. I can't explain."⁶

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Occasionally Updike clearly voices some issue through the mouths of the fictional characters he creates. He makes use of a number of ambiguous truth carriers. For example, Jerry in *Marry Me* is both a moral malingerer and spiritually sensitive. Speaking with the woman with whom he is having an affair he says:

“What we have is love. But love must become relaxed and right, and, you know, with a blessing. Does ‘blessing’ seem silly to you?”

“Can’t we give each other the blessing?”

“No. For some reason it must come from above.”
Above them, in a sky still bright though the earth was ripening into shadow, an airplane hung cruciform, silver, soundless . . .⁷

In another scene, Jerry says:

“I’ve figured out the bind I’m in. It’s between death and death. To live without you is death to me. On the other hand, to abandon my family is a sin; to do it I’d have to deny God, and by denying God I’d give up all claim on immortality.”

Sally felt weak; what could she say to such an accusation? She tried to fit herself into his frame of mind; she could hardly believe that minds still existed in that frame.⁸

At one point, Jerry’s wife, Ruth, offers her view of the book’s central crisis: “A lustful man and a greedy woman had fornicated and Ruth could not endorse the illusions that made it seem more than that. They were exaggerators, both of them; someone must stand by truth against their craziness and infatuation and self-deception.”⁹

In one sense, *Couples* and *Marry Me* may be seen as briefs for moral absolutism. One reviewer referred to them as “fictional sermonettes.” Updike himself has admitted that Karl Barth’s theology is important for understanding his own world-view and religious attitude. Barth was a theologian who opposed the liberalizing tendencies of the age and was suspicious of any attempt to water down the stark mysterious sayings of Christianity.

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I think it is safe to say that the central theme of *Couples* and *Marry Me* is that it is the fallen, tragic Adam who is shaping society's sexual mores. Our mistake is to deny Adam's fall. We are destroyed from within. Updike's suburbia is the world as seen without God lending each thing a roundness of significance. In his novels we find a suburbia saturated with the adventures of adultery, the acrobatics its deceptions demand, the new landscapes it makes people master. However, it is also a place where we find what Piet and Foxy talk about in *Couples*:

"It's all so silly, isn't it? Adultery. It's so much trouble."

He shrugged, reluctant to agree. "It's a way of giving yourself adventures. Of getting out in the world and seeking knowledge."

She asked, "What do we know now?"

He hardened his voice: "We know God is not mocked."¹⁰

Updike's observations are probably now more unfashionable than they were in the sixties, however, the lessons of these novels remain applicable to our times.

Before Updike's recent book, *Self-Consciousness*, I sometimes wondered if religion was an interest of Updike's that gave him something to write about rather than a deep conviction (as with Graham Greene). Throughout *Self-Consciousness* Updike directly states his own personal religious convictions. For example:

Lutheran Christianity is part of my make-up. My era was too ideologically feeble to wrest it from me. . . . Among the repulsions of atheism for me has been its drastic uninterestingness as an intellectual position. Where was the ingenuity, the ambiguity, of saying that the universe just happened to happen and that when we're dead we're dead? Truth had to have more nooks and crannies, more ins and outs than that. . . . The Supernatural completes the picture, gives reality its true flavor. . . . Without the supernatural, the natural is a pit

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of horror. The world cannot provide its own measure and standards; these must come from outside, or a sorry hedonism and brute opportunism result — a greedy panicked heart and substance abuse.¹¹

Our brains are no longer conditioned for reverence and awe; we feel morally superior to the Biblical notions of atonement and damnation. . . . The sun was like God not only in His power but also in the way He allowed Himself to be shut out, to be evaded. Yet if one were receptive, He could find you even at the bottom of a well.¹²

The only question that counts is whether God exists and whether His intentions are friendly. . . . I believe that all problems are basically insoluble, and that faith is a leap out of despair. . . . Religion preaches selflessness. Attention to others, self-forgetfulness, and living like the lilies are urged. Religion tries to put us at ease in this world. Being human cannot be borne alone. We need other presences.¹³

Paraphrasing a paragraph from Kierkegaard's *Christendom vs. Christianity*, Updike writes:

I reluctantly perceived of the Christian religion that almost no one believed it, believed it really — not its ministers, not its pillars. Though signs of belief (churches, public prayers, mottoes on coins) existed everywhere, when you moved toward Christianity it disappeared, as fog solidly opaque in the distance thins to transparency when you walk into it. I decided that I nevertheless would believe. I found a few authors, a very few, Chesterton, Eliot, Unamuno, Kierkegaard, Karl Barth — who helped me believe. Under the shelter that I improvised from their pages I have lived my life.¹⁴