

Horror, Ecstasy, God: *In Memoriam*, John Updike

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ABSTRACT

*This paper looks to examine the closely connected themes of God's existence, suffering and the goodness of the world in the work of American novelist, short-story writer, essayist and poet, John Updike, who died earlier this year. The text that structures the discussion is the syllogism he sets out in his semi-autobiographical work, *Self-consciousness*, which captures the thematic core of so much of his thought on these themes: viz, "If God does not exist, the world is a horror show; but the world is not a horror-show; therefore, God exists". The discussion interweaves Updike with a various other conversation partners, in particular the late cultural anthropologist, Ernest Becker, and contemporary philosopher, William Desmond.*

When American novelist, short-story writer and poet John Updike died earlier this year, the Anglophone literary world lost an incisive social analyst and one of its most poetic voices on the human condition. However, Updike's subtle contributions around religious themes remain one of the most enduring features of his vast corpus. Of particular interest in this respect, are the many ways he speaks to what William Desmond has referred to as the "traces" or "intimations of transcendence"¹ which he reads off both the intricate beauty and brutality of the natural world and the turbulent depths of human interiority, rent as it is among powerful impulses both carnal and spiritual.

In what follows, I wish to examine, in dialogue with several others, this theme in Updike's thought, and to do so through an exploration of the tightly compressed but suggestive syllogistic framework he provides in his memoirs, *Self-consciousness*:

If God does not exist, the world is a horror-show

But the world is not a horror-show

Therefore, God exists²

¹ See, e.g., William Desmond. *Ethics and the Between*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001, 220; and *Perplexity and Ultimacy*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, 227.

² John Updike. *Self-consciousness*. New York: Knopf, 1989, 230.

Updike's use of such a "logical formulation" is not, it seems to me, to be read as a serious philosophical argument in any narrow technical sense. Rather, form aside, its textual function seems ironically closer in some senses to a rhetorical flourish; it is, after all, recounted as his "adolescent" solution to the equally superficial univocity of the "airtight case for atheism" he confronted at the time.³ In this way, Updike is largely pointing beyond the whole tradition of rational arguments for God's existence and of philosophical theodicy, even in mimicking them here.⁴ Having said that, it is in some form clearly still an argument he wishes to defend, at least in terms of its central intuitions, and this he does not just in *Self-consciousness*, but throughout his vast *oeuvre*. Indeed, it is perhaps not too long a bow to view these three lines as encapsulating the thematic marrow of so much of his writing: viz, the existential and religious tumult of so many of his characters, alongside an abiding sense of the primal goodness of life, *despite everything*.

Of course, what underpins the noontime certainty of this flawless *modus tolens* logic are two hardly self-evident premises whose claims to truth are essentially rooted in an interpretation of the dynamics afoot in the dim recesses of the human soul. In what follows, then, I trace something of Updike's vision of the human lot as a way of illuminating the implicit underlying convictions to which his syllogism alludes. I do so in conversation with several others, in particular the late cultural anthropologist, Ernest Becker, and contemporary philosopher, William Desmond, both of whom have written with great incisiveness on these matters. As such, the following is intended not as a 'tribute' to Updike per se, either as a human being or as a writer; many such pieces have emerged in the months since his passing written by those far more qualified, by scholarship and/or personal acquaintance, than I. My purpose here is rather to engage – as a fellow traveller – with Updike's body of thought, sympathetically, but not uncritically. If the result provides a level of illumination of some of the matters central to his thought, then this is perhaps as worthy a tribute as I can offer.

³ *Self-consciousness*, 229.

⁴ In unfolding his case for God's existence on the basis of the ultimate goodness of the world, Updike is clearly nonetheless uninterested in developing anything like a traditional theodicy that offers a privileged perspective (far less, a 'metric') for comparing evil against grace, the horrors against the joys, demonstrating the triumph of the latter. What he does provide is a richly textured description of the whole of life in all its deep ambiguity, with the only evaluative perspective offered being his own experience that it does not *feel* as though horror has the last word; that in his reading there is an overriding goodness to the whole that indicates hope is justified. The question of whether theodicy can ever actually do more than this is a question for another time.

Ambiguity and Drivenness: The Human Lot

Central to Updike's conception of personhood is an absolute insistence on its ambiguous and dialectical nature: to be human is "to be in a situation of tension".⁵ In the tradition of Pascal, Kierkegaard and their kin (whom he read avidly in his youth), Updike sees the individual as unavoidably beset with an existentially-rooted anxiety that thrusts the soul into an unremitting restlessness and an insatiable drivenness. We are a tangled mess of energies, experiencing the pleasures and pains engendered by our embodiedness, together with the fears and hopes connected with our (frequently distorted and perverted) desire for spiritual transcendence. Human existence is in a sense all about the living out of these entangled and conflicted energies and motivations: hence the agonies and ecstasies, the "sound and fury", of individual lives. Human society inevitably resembles Glaucon's "fevered city" which, as William Desmond puts it, "is the communal embodiment of the relentless misery and hope of our desire" in its insatiable momentum and infinite restlessness.⁶ To live is to be on a constant quest to 'complete' ourselves, to address our finitude, and the very inevitable failure to achieve such fulfilment is the root of the rapacious desire and anxiety that defines human being. Thus, for Updike, human life is "a maddeningly turbulent and obscure mixture of laughter and weeping, pleasure and pain, hope and despair, tenderness and violence, purity and lust ... faith and doubt".⁷

In a strong sense, then, Updike sits within a long tradition of existentialist and proto-existentialist thought according to which humanity is placed ambiguously between the animal and the angelic, or as Abraham Maslow put it, "we are simultaneously worms and gods".⁸ Pulled in these irreconcilable directions, inevitable conflict ensues. While stopping short of a Sartrean conclusion that would see the human as a "useless passion",⁹ Updike is close to a post-Freudian view that sees human individuals as open to experience in a unique way. According to Ernest Becker, for example:

⁵ James Plath, ed. *Conversations with John Updike*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1994, 34.

⁶ William Desmond. *Philosophy and its Others: Ways of Being and Mind*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990, 171. See Plato's *Republic*, 372a ff.

⁷ James Yerkes. "As Good as it Gets: The Religious Consciousness in John Updike's Literary Vision", in Yerkes, ed. *John Updike and Religion: The Sense of the Sacred and the Motions of Grace*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999, 10.

⁸ Maslow (1963). Quoted in Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press, 1973. The title of Updike's novel, *The Centaur* (1964), notes the mismatch using this classical mythical image: "Our human heads endow us with a self-transcending consciousness that no earthly joy can satisfy; yet our equine torsos root us in mortal passions that no heavenly hope can assuage" (Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Cosmic Vision in Four American Novelists*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, 181).

⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*. London, Routledge, 1958, 615.

Nature has protected the lower animal by endowing them with instincts ... They live in a tiny world, a sliver of reality, one neuro-chemical program that keeps them walking behind their nose and shuts out all else. But look at man ... Here nature seems to have thrown caution to the winds ... He not only lives in this moment, but expands his inner self to yesterday, his curiosity to centuries ago, his fears to five billion years from now when the sun will cool, his hopes to an eternity from now.¹⁰

Updike concurs: “[we] have really been locked out of the animal paradise of unthinking natural reflex”.¹¹ The result, in his judgement, is both sublime and tragic.

Horror-show: The Prospect of Godlessness

“If God does not exist, the world is a horror show”. For Updike, it seems, that the thought of God’s non-existence equates to unrelieved horror, has a certain self-evident power. Its justification is provided not through rational demonstration, but in the myriad presentations and explorations of its truth revealed throughout his voluminous works concerning the roots and profundity of the human need for God and the consequent ubiquity of religion. While in the second premise of his syllogism Updike denies that the world *is* unrelieved horror, his works provide ample evidence of its horrors nonetheless.

Famously, Updike’s work highlights the pall that the fear of death places over the human spirit. The fear of nothingness, of personal annihilation – and thus of the quest for God as a guarantor of eternal survival and significance – is the theme of many an Updike leading character, from the strangely introspective dictator, Colonel Ellelloû, who is tortured by the idea of his being utterly forgotten,¹² to the spiritual crisis of Rev Clarence Wilmot who is condemned to live with the very practical consequences of his catastrophic loss of religious faith, as are generations of his family thereafter,¹³ to Henry Bech’s horror at the sheer perversity of knowing that he is simply “a fleck of dust condemned to know it is a fleck of dust”.¹⁴ These fictional portraits give eloquent voice to the words of Unamuno, “spoken with the rhythms of a stubborn child”, as Updike puts it in

¹⁰ Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 50-51.

¹¹ John Updike. *Picked-Up Pieces: Essays and Criticism*. New York: Knopf, 1975, 504.

¹² Updike, *The Coup*. New York: Knopf, 1979, 149.

¹³ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1997.

¹⁴ Updike, *Beck: A Book*. New York: Knopf, 1970, 138.

quoting him in *Self-consciousness*: "I do not want to die ... I want to live forever and ever and ever. I want this 'I' to live – this poor 'I' that I am and that I feel myself to be here and now".¹⁵

For Updike, the thought of Godlessness leads inexorably to a crushing denial of the human desire for some kind of lasting significance, and this is, I would suggest, the deepest sense for him of the "horror-show" to which he refers.¹⁶ A cosmos without God is for Updike the very realisation of Macbeth's vision of "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing", and each of our pathetic parts within its script is no more than that of the "poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more".¹⁷ In places, Updike gives voice to this sentiment with a full-blown cosmic vision that looks imaginatively out into the cold and dark recesses of space-time with a palpable sense of the loneliness and desolation this implies. For all its fecundity and moments of nurture within the phases of earthly life, nature offers no lasting consolation, only a ruthless and relentless efficiency that holds no value for human (let alone individual human) specialness. This idea is vividly set forth in the persona of Bela in the short story *The Astronomer*,¹⁸ but is most movingly dramatised in the figure of Ben Turnbull in *Toward the End of Time* who in a 'Wilmotian' moment of falling out of faith – ironically, while nurturing his daughter by building her a dollhouse – experiences a visceral realisation of his unrelieved and global vulnerability: "There was no God ... just Nature, which would consume my life as carelessly and relentlessly as it would a dung-beetle corpse in a compost pile".¹⁹

Updike's fictional portraits mirror what he tells us of his own personal musings on this theme throughout his life. He tells the story of an existential panic, felt as a boy, at the thought of future aeons after his death, of "the cosmic party going on without [him]", and of his foreboding at the sight of old photographs that capture the now long-dead when they were in the full blush of life.²⁰ Like skulls speaking from a monastic ossuary, these figures tell the truth: 'As I once was, so you are now, and as I am

¹⁵ Updike, *Self-consciousness*, 229.

¹⁶ This is, of course, a contentious point, both as an interpretation of Updike himself, as well as a claim about the nature of evil. On the relationship between existential and theological anxiety and horrendous suffering, see below.

¹⁷ See Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, V, 5, l.24 ff.

¹⁸ John Updike, "The Astronomer", in *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories*. Penguin, 1965, 124ff.

¹⁹ Updike, *Toward the End of Time*. New York: Knopf, 1997, 83.

²⁰ Updike, *Self-consciousness*, 217 and 201 respectively. See also earlier (40) where Updike ponders over the "[b]illions of consciousnesses silt history full, and every one of them the centre of the universe", each one a 'somebody' with their own cherished inner lives. His point is clear: what is the significance of having lived at all, if it is to be all lost after such a brief sojourn? "What can we do in the face of this unspeakable truth", he asks, "but scream or take refuge in God?"

now, so you shall be'. What is at stake here is the irrecoverable loss of one's self, in all its uniqueness and unrepeatability.

For Becker, what such moments of realisation of one's radical finitude signify – i.e., moments in which one's morality is not simply acknowledged, but is *felt* in one's bones – is a telling failure of the egological defence mechanisms by which this realisation is routinely denied. It is only in this state of open vulnerability that one is enabled to 'mourn' oneself. It is only then that the tragedy of death, as a loss of the self, can be faced, along with fundamental questions concerning the apparent futility of a life destined to end in annihilation. The problem is not simply the loss of the self, but the self-conscious *knowledge* of the inevitability of this loss:

What does it mean to be a self-conscious animal? The idea is ludicrous, if it is not monstrous. It means to know that one is food for worms. This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression and with all this yet to die. It seems like a hoax, which is why one type of cultural man rebels openly against the idea of God. What kind of deity would create such a complex and fancy worm food? Cynical deities, said the Greeks, who use man's torments for their own amusement.²¹

It is on this basis that Becker offers this haunting Updikean lament:

A person spends years coming into his own, developing his talents, his unique gifts, perfecting his discriminations about the world, sharpening his appetite, learning to bear the disappointments of life, becoming mature, seasoned – finally a unique creature in nature, standing with some dignity and nobility and transcending the animal condition; no longer driven, no longer a complete reflex, not stamped out of any mould. And then the real tragedy ... that it takes sixty years of incredible suffering and effort to make such an individual, and then he is good only for dying. This paradox is not lost on the person himself – least of all himself – he feels agonizingly unique and yet he knows that this doesn't make any difference as far as the ultimates are concerned. He has to go the way of the grasshopper, even though it takes longer.²²

²¹ Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 87.

²² Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 268-69. Cf: Updike's "Perfection Wasted" in *Collected Poems: 1953-1993*. New York: Knopf, 1995, 231.

Even more than this, Updike seems to suggest that the process of living itself involves a continual dying of selves: "That we die and leave behind this litter of dead, unrecoverable selves is both unbearable and the commonest thing in the world".²³

A key question here, of course, is whether Updike (or indeed Becker) is justified in claiming or assuming that the idea of death has an inevitable sense of tragedy for human selves in general. It is on this point that a comment Updike makes in passing is perhaps more telling than he realises: i.e., that "[p]erhaps there are two kinds of people: those for whom nothingness is no problem, and those for whom it is an insuperable problem".²⁴ Though he doesn't mention him, the ghost of William James – with his famous distinction between the "morbidly-minded" and "healthy-minded" approaches to life and religion – is palpable here.²⁵ One is left wondering what Updike makes of "those for whom nothingness is no problem": say, the indifferent naturalistic agnostic, whose very sanguinity concerning such matters would seem to undermine the 'self-evidence' of his first premise. Updike's focus, of course, is on the other kind of person – those for whom death is "an insuperable problem" – his own kind, and the kind of the vast number of his characters, whether they are aware of it yet or not. Perhaps for Updike (though this is only a supposition), to be sanguine or indifferent to such matters is merely to be as yet unawakened from a sleep of immediacy and thus to lack spirit, as Kierkegaard might have put it.²⁶

In any case, if the very idea of personal extinction is, for Updike, horror enough, then there is also the contingent circumstances of its coming. As John Macquarrie outlined some time ago, what might be construed as the 'evil' of death is not so much its inevitability, as its apparent capriciousness, its arbitrariness, its failure to conform to reasonable rules of fairness or predictability.²⁷ For some, death is appropriate or timely: it comes as a completion or release, though as often than not, death lacks any such sense: it can come "out of season": cutting short a young life in full bloom; killing off great potential; or leaving important work begun but unfulfilled. It may come too late, after years of suffering, or it may take the innocent or virtuous and spare the guilty.

²³ Updike, *Self-consciousness*, 226.

²⁴ *Self-consciousness*, 228.

²⁵ See William James. *Varieties of Religious Experience*. London: Longman Green & Co, 77-162.

²⁶ See Søren Kierkegaard. *The Concept of Anxiety*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, 43-44. Alternatively, to use the language of Beckerian psychodynamics, such sanguinity would indicate that the individual is firmly under the sway of the ubiquitous denial of death.

²⁷ John Macquarrie. *In Search of Humanity*. London: SCM, 1982, 235-36.

Perhaps most painful of all is the suspicion – seen in the dark thoughts of many an Updike character from Henry Bech to Ben Turnbull and beyond – that the whole ‘miracle’ of human selfhood may just be a cruel epiphenomenal accident, at best an ironic footnote to the natural history of this planet. Others have noted the perversity of a situation in which the human person instinctually considers his/her individuality to be of the essence, while nature seems to have a wholly different set of priorities. The laws of biological evolution are orientated toward the *conatus* of the species rather than that of the human individual with its need for personal transcendence and symbolic selfhood. “Nature”, says Becker, “seems unconcerned, even viciously antagonistic to human meanings”.²⁸ Stephen Jay Gould is more lacerating still:

Nature is amoral ... It existed for eons before we arrived, didn't know we were coming, and doesn't give a damn about us ... Nature betrays no statistical preference for being either warm and fuzzy or ugly and disgusting. Nature just is: in all her complexity and diversity, in all her sublime indifference to our desires.²⁹

For Updike, then, the very thought of nothingness – that we are alone, insignificant and utterly ephemeral in a meaningless universe – is fundamentally *unacceptable* to the human spirit. This does not mean, of course, that human beings might not act as self-sufficient little gods by day. However, “in the dark”, when all such pretensions come to nothing, “the self curls ... and presses” against God. What is ultimately at stake here is the “need for our ‘I’ to have its ‘Thou’, something other than ourselves yet sharing our subjectivity, something amplifying it indeed to the outer rim of creation”.³⁰ As if reiterating Updike in another key – and thereby providing a worthy epigraph for the whole Updikean corpus of deeply conflicted and often tragic characters – Becker memorably thematises this human need for what might be called ‘cosmic agapē’:

[Man] is not just a naturally and lustily destructive animal who lays waste around him because he feels omnipotent and impregnable. Rather, he is a trembling animal who pulls the world down around his shoulders as he clutches for protection

²⁸ Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 120.

²⁹ Stephen Jay Gould. *Rocks of Ages*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1999, 195.

³⁰ Updike, *Self-consciousness*, 229. Whether a profound *need* for God can in any way be a ground for belief that such a God exists, is a matter taken up below.

and support and tries to affirm in a cowardly way his feeble powers.³¹

There nonetheless remains a question in all of this as to whether Updike's conception of the "horror" of the world is sufficiently broad and balanced; specifically, whether his strongly existentialist account is unsustainably skewed in the direction of an angst-centred, subjective, perhaps even 'bourgeois' point of view which does insufficient justice to more tangible horrors endured by those well-accustomed to 'real' suffering. Such a critique is, I would suggest, to miss the depth and complexity of Updike's confrontation with these issues. He would of course want to insist that those who experience the threat of existential nothingness endure a particularly acute form of suffering in its own right. But beyond this, perhaps it could be said that for him suffering directly suggests the threatening problem of nothingness itself. The "horror" that so oppressed Joseph Conrad's Kurtz, for example, was not simply born of the 'fact' of the evils he both witnessed and perpetrated; rather there comes a point at which evil evokes the abyss of nothingness that makes it possible in the first place. There is a paradox here that Updike's fiction highlights often: that nothingness is not *simply* a privation, but has the potential to grow into an over-determined presence capable of engulfing the human spirit. This alone seems to be able to do justice to the kind of horror and despair to which Conrad portrays Kurtz as succumbing as his life seeped away.³²

Further, notwithstanding the broader existential context within which he develops such themes, it is also the case that Updike unpacks the apparent "horror-show" of the world in ways that touch very directly on moral and natural evils in themselves. One of the principal modes within which he does so concerns the pain of Divine inaction in the face of horrendous suffering and tragedy. At times, the outlines of a *prima-facie* anti-theodicy emerge here. "I've never really understood theologies", he says, "which would absolve God of earthquakes and typhoons, of children starving",³³ and he places similar sentiments in the mouths of many of his most thoughtful characters, from Rev Thomas Marshfield who at one point reels off a damning litany of Divine sins,³⁴ to the dying President Buchanan who

³¹ Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 139.

³² "His was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines ... It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror – of an intense and hopeless despair." (*Heart of Darkness*, London: J M. Dent, 1965, 163-64).

³³ Updike. *Picked-Up Pieces*, 504.

³⁴ Viz: "the pain of infants, the inexorability of disease, the wantonness of fortune, the billions of fossilized deaths, the helplessness of the young, the idiocy of the old, the craftsmanship of torturers, the authority of blunderers, the savagery of accident, the unbreathability of water, and all the other repulsive flecks in the face of creation" (*A Month of Sundays*, New York: Knopf, 1975, 38.)

protests that he is “not troubled by the sins of men, who are feeble; [but] ... by the sins of God, who is mighty”.³⁵ The Divine ‘sins’ that are recounted in Updike’s fiction are construed in a variety of ways. The callous face of nature has already been highlighted, and this gives rise to some extended reflections on what might be understood as ‘natural’ or ‘physical’ evil which God permits to flourish. But like Dostoyevsky, Updike’s most telling protests relate to the vast evil perpetrated by “feeble” individuals, and of this there is no better case than the horrendous scene in *Rabbit, Run* in which baby Rebecca drowns in the presence of her drunken mother Janice, with God almost palpably watching on.³⁶

Ecstasy: The Shining Underbase of the World

“*The world is not a horror-show*”. Given the profundity of Updike’s documentation of worldly horrors, and of the silence of God in the face of it, it is at first glance somewhat surprising that he should insist as much. This he acknowledges, noting that:

The second premise, of course, is the weaker; newspapers and biology lessons daily suggest that it *is* a horror show, of landmines and plagues and massacres and falling airplanes and incessant carnivorousness.³⁷

What is the ground, then, of the assessment Updike makes in his second premise? There are, I would suggest, two main points here, of which I will dwell especially on the second.

First, counterbalancing worldly horror for Updike, are the supreme qualities of vitality, energy, volition, ambition and hope. Without these forces of animation, life, for him, would indeed be horrific. This force for good is portrayed in Updike’s fiction not only by those who live it to the full, but also – perhaps even more starkly – through those who lack it. And in almost all cases, this genuine vitality is associated with visceral belief (at some level) in God, from whom it is drawn. This very contrast provides the ground of the whole inter-generational drama of *In the Beauty of the Lilies* in which, as James Schiff points out, it is interestingly the female characters (Stella, Emily and Essie) whose belief allow them to live lives of hope, dynamism and strength, in contrast to the faithless, desperate and hollow

³⁵ John Updike. *Buchanan Dying*. New York: Knopf, 1974, 167. However, on this, see point four in the final section of this paper.

³⁶ John Updike. *Rabbit, Run*. New York: Knopf, 1960, 226-27.

³⁷ Updike, *Self-consciousness*, 230.

lives of the males (Clarence, Teddy and Clark).³⁸ The figure of Clarence Wilmot is pivotal here. His life changing loss of religious belief is accompanied by a loss of vitality, leaving him “numb” and “hollow”: “Life’s sounds all rang with a curious lightness and flatness, as if a resonating base beneath them had been removed”.³⁹ Echoing Nietzsche’s madman, Wilmot’s horizon has been sponged away, his earth unchained from its sun.⁴⁰

Second, even in portraying worldly horrors, Updike sees in our reaction to it of sombre fascination, an intimation of a deeper truth about us and our implicit sense of ourselves in the world: i.e., bad news is *news* for us precisely because “our general expectation is for good”. In other words, “an instinctive vision of health and peace underlies our horror stories”.⁴¹ This “general expectation”, this “vision” that all is very good despite all evidence to the contrary is, for Updike, grounded in the “resonating base” itself. Thus, in support of his second premise and in negation of the first, he announces:

Existence itself does not feel horrible; it feels like an ecstasy, rather, which we only need to be still to experience. Habit and accustomedness have painted over pure gold with a dull paint that can, however, be scratched away, to reveal the shining underbase. The world is good, our intuition is, confirming its creator’s appraisal as reported in the first chapter of Genesis.⁴²

Updike’s case here is rooted not in intellectual demonstration; its ‘warrant’ is far more visceral: life, to him, does not *feel* horrible. Our very dismay over the horrors life can bring speaks to its preciousness for us. Like the accentuated pangs we feel when a loved one lets us down, the very deliciousness of being alive is sullied by its horrors, but rarely does it break our instinctual love. We cling to the world of our dwelling in its elemental preciousness.

In this sense, Updike seems to suggest that the religious instinct is not *simply* what psychodynamic theory would classify as a reaction formation against the horror of nothingness, but rather the inevitably inadequate attempt to affirm something of this unconditional goodness of the world.

³⁸ James Schiff, “The Pocket Nothing Else will Fill: Updike’s Domestic God”. In James Yerkes, ed. *John Updike and Religion: The Sense of the Sacred and the Motions of Grace*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999, 62.

³⁹ Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, 7.

⁴⁰ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. Walter Kaufmann trans, New York: Vintage, 1974, 181.

⁴¹ Updike, *Self-consciousness*, 230.

⁴² Updike, *Self-consciousness*, 230.

This, it seems, is central to what he holds onto of his religious upbringing: a fumbling affirmation of the goodness of the world, an offering that drew forth an equally fumbling acceptance. He puts it as follows:

What I felt, in that basement Sunday school of Grace Lutheran Church in Shillington, was a clumsy attempt to extend a Yes, a blessing, and I accepted that blessing, offering in return only a nickel a week and my art, my poor little art.⁴³

On the basis of these humble beginnings, there are times when Updike's later reflections on the goodness of the world become lyrical, almost hymnic, such as in the stunning conclusion to *Pigeon Feathers*.⁴⁴ His final published work, the tellingly titled *The Full Glass*, continues the theme of Yes saying, even in the midst of suffering and regret. In the final lines, the narrator, now an old man, takes a sip of water, as if "drinking a toast to the visible world, his impending disappearance from it be damned".⁴⁵ Death retains its sting precisely because life – for all its struggles and horrors – is experienced as good.

The claim that human existence, for all its horrors, has a "shining underbase" is one that seriously confronts arguments for atheism on the basis of evil. This is not to say that it works as a rational 'refutation' of either the logical or evidential arguments; rather it answers by pointing towards an underlying goodness that, it is contended, renders the horror contingent rather than essential. Similarly, while taking absolutely seriously the howling protests of Ivan Karamazov, Updike, it would seem, would urge him not to return his ticket after all. Perhaps he would ask of him two things. First, there would perhaps be a request to dwell a while longer on the ordinary and yet astonishingly intricate beauty of lilies and pigeon feathers, and the taken-for-granted miracles of sun and rain,⁴⁶ or as Ivan himself relates, on the "blue sky" and the "sticky little leaves" of springtime.⁴⁷ Second, and more crucial still, perhaps he would urge that the final word should not be given to the sufferings of the little children

⁴³ Updike, *Self-consciousness*, 231.

⁴⁴ John Updike, "Pigeon Feathers" in *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories*. Penguin, 1965, 103. Updike himself suggests the reference here to his writing as hymnic: "With writing, or generally with art, we show the world our admiration and express out thanks that we are here ... Any act of description is, to some extent, an act of praise ... [T]he world wants describing, the world wants to be observed and 'hymned' ... So there's a kind of hymning undercurrent I feel in my work" (Plath, ed, *Conversations*, 175, 253).

⁴⁵ John Updike, "The Full Glass", *The New Yorker*, May 26, 2008. Downloadable from: http://www.newyorker.com/fiction/features/2008/05/26/080526fi_fiction_updike

⁴⁶ The symbols of sun/light and rain recur as images of the Divine in Updike's work: e.g., see the following from *Self-consciousness*: "Rain is grace; rain is the sky condescending to the earth ... [bringing] life" (41); "To be forgiven by God ... the sun's weight on my skin always meant this to me" (68).

⁴⁷ See Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Pt 2. 4. Ch3), Penguin, 1958, 268.

per se, but rather to the prior beauty, preciousness and innocence of the children themselves *whose enormous value is the very reason why their sufferings are so horrific and unacceptable in the first place*. This is to urge the mind to “be still” so that it might explicitly appreciate the basic goodness of the world that makes its horrors so shocking. The problem with Ivan’s decision (albeit a thoroughly conscientious one) to return his ticket, or of Silenius’ counsel that it is comprehensively best not to have been born at all, or otherwise to die soon,⁴⁸ is that such assessments overlook the fact that they are each parasitic on a prior generosity – of life itself – to which living things instinctively cling, valuing it as the supreme good.

A number of times in the foregoing paragraph I was sure to say “perhaps” in that this is – it seems to me – to go somewhat beyond what Updike himself has to say on this matter. Nonetheless, what is found in Updike is an emphasis on two points that are absolutely central also for William Desmond, and which go to the heart of this matter: viz, the contingency, and the intrinsic goodness, of being. While lurking often in the subtexts of his fiction, these themes are discussed in a particularly explicit way in Updike’s commentary on his own work. For him, contingency bespeaks of gratuity:

[O]ne of my independent philosophical obsessions was that there is a certain gratuitousness in existence at all. That is, however riddles [of life] are unravelled, why the void itself was breached remains permanently mysterious, and, in its own way, permanently hopeful-making.⁴⁹

This insight leads Updike to a second closely connected and just as revolutionary one: that having breached the “void” of nothingness, being has intrinsic value: “I frequently find myself saying ... be grateful for existence; that is, ‘nothing had to be’. And that advice, I think, is religious advice”. This, according to Updike, is the basis of his vision of creation as good, and this deeply informs his practice as a writer:

I’m trying to capture ... the wonder of the real, which is very easy to ignore since we’re surrounded with the real day after day ... I’m trying to convey the fact that the creation of the world is in some way terribly good. We love being alive.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Nietzsche recounts “the old story” of Silenius’ granting of this counsel to King Midas in *The Birth of Tragedy* (Ch 1. 3: Penguin, 1993, 22).

⁴⁹ Plath, ed, *Conversations*, 100.

⁵⁰ Plath, ed, *Conversations*, 159.

There are also times when this theme of the inherent love of being comes to the fore in Updike's fiction. "What bliss life is", Ben Turnbull reflects as he approaches death in *Toward the End of Time*, and what a tragedy it is to feel the pangs of its immanent loss, when the time for taking it for granted has passed.⁵¹ When all is said and done, we cling to life, even a life filled with more than a fair share of suffering, because being itself – and our own in particular – has inherent value.

It is here that Desmondian thought provides valuable flesh on the bones of Updike's passionate assertions concerning this felt goodness of existence.⁵² For Desmond, as for Updike, human beings are fundamentally *in love* with being, even if its ubiquity, richness and profusion have the effect of blinding us to this most self-evident of truths. And it is because we instinctively understand being as something good, that nothingness and horrendous evil, are such a threat. Albeit in a different mode, passages in Desmond's works resemble Updike's strategy of revealing what is at stake in very ordinary moments of life that spontaneously celebrate the unconditional goodness of things. There is a double movement at play here. On one hand, he highlights the basic *conatus essendi* of living things, this elemental desire to remain in being pointing towards a particular kind of love of being: viz, the love of one's *own* being as good. On the other hand, beyond *self-focus*, he points to the uncomplicated rejoicing that accompanies the birth of a child, and subsequently, of the child's wonder and delight in its discovery of the world: i.e., we delight in the child's own delight with the world.⁵³

The key point here – and this is at the heart of Desmond's approach to the issue at hand – is that there is a basic sense of the Good which is *prior to* and *in excess of* moral good and evil: this is the ontological goodness of being over nothingness.⁵⁴ This means that being is an always already inalienable good that can never be diminished (or, for that matter,

⁵¹ Updike, *Toward the End of Time*, 299.

⁵² On Desmond on this theme, see *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, Ch 6; *Being and the Between*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995, Ch 13; *Ethics and the Between*, Ch 5, 16; *God and the Between*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008, Ch 12, 14.

⁵³ See Desmond. *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, 150.

⁵⁴ It is precisely, and *only*, on the basis of the complete absence of any sense of the intrinsic goodness of being that the argument of a book like David Benatar's *Better Never to have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford University Press, 2006) could ever be conceived. Echoing Nietzsche's Silenius, Benatar argues that "coming into existence is always a serious harm", since the pleasures one might experience can never outweigh the harm of actually existing (1). Without engaging here with Benatar's at best eccentric notion of the alleged "asymmetry between pleasures and pains", what is most telling about his argument is the very idea that the value of life could ever be reduced to such a logicist calculus. The issue is not so much the notion of a utilitarian approach to deciding the value of any particular life (as problematic as that also is), but rather its pre-emptive ruling out of any human life at all, given the inevitability of some level of suffering.

enhanced) by the actions of any existing being/s, by any particular natural event, or by the joys or sufferings of creatures. Rather, all of these things are made possible in the first place by the prior gift of being in its goodness. In making this claim, Desmond proposes a 'revaluation' of being, not in the Nietzschean sense of uncovering a higher good *beyond* moral good and evil, but rather in the sense of a primal good that is *prior* to and which underpins good and evil in its moral concretion. Accordingly, moral good and evil amount, respectively, to the acceptance or rejection of this primal goodness of being, and each is possible only on the basis of this prior goodness, which is itself the condition of possibility of any action at all, regardless of its moral character. In this way, all worldly horrors are contingent and parasitic on primal goodness in its profusion.

All this casts a compelling light on the moral conflictedness and pathos of Updike's many characters. For Desmond, while the being of any particular being (qua a singular concretion of the good) is in itself intrinsically and inalienably good, in the case of self-conscious human *conatus*, the way is open for a sliding from the "I am good" toward the "I am *the* good". This is, for Desmond, nothing less than "the usurpation of the good"⁵⁵. Or as he puts it elsewhere: "the power of freedom is the power to let the 'no' shut out the primal 'yes', closing itself in, by closing transcendence as other out"⁵⁶. Moral evil, then, is rooted in the freedom of singular being, which is in turn rooted in the primal goodness of being, though it amounts to a shallow rootedness that draws just enough sustenance for an insistence on the good of the self, but which is blind to the underlying goodness of the whole, of which it is only a tiny part. It is difficult to conceive of a more comprehensive description than this of the characterological feebleness, and horrendous selfishness, of Updikean characters like Harry ('Rabbit') Angstrom.

Notwithstanding its many horrors, the world is not, for Updike, an unredeemable horror-show; the "pure gold ... shining underbase" of the world in its primal goodness is evident, at least for those with eyes to perceive it.

Hope: The Religious Response

"Therefore, God exists." A great deal has already been written on the topic of Updike's attitudes toward religion per se. In what follows, I make just a

⁵⁵ Desmond, *Being and the Between*, 516.

⁵⁶ Desmond, *Perplexity and Ultimacy*, 231.

six brief points in which I describe rather than explore his explicitly religious conclusions.

First, Updike is very clear that religious belief is never a ticket out of the ambiguity and drivenness of the human condition, nor of its seemingly inevitable horrors. Following Kierkegaard's lead, faith is for him simply (though it is anything but a 'simple' matter) a considered *response* to this situation, one that *chooses* faith over despair. As Updike relates his own story, the syllogism that has formed the subject of this paper was part of his own adolescent *decision to believe* despite the vacuousness of the 'culturalised' faith he observed around him.⁵⁷ In making such a decision, everything changes even as nothing changes. Yerkes captures Updike's position on this when he notes that "nirvanic quietude" is out of the question here. Rather:

To be religious is necessarily to exist inextricably inside of such excruciating tensions, spared nothing ... And yet, to be religious is also to be seized and energised day by day, strangely, at some deep and intuited level, by something that answers to hope.⁵⁸

Even from a faith perspective, nature retains its deep ambiguity. Indeed, there is perhaps no more deeply equivocal category in all of Updike's works than nature itself: nature as a presence both nurturing and salvific *and* ominous and vicious. The difference between the two is only ever partly mediated by religious faith.⁵⁹

Second, given Updike's emphasis on the problem of death as being, as William James put it, "the worm at the core" of the self's pretensions to happiness,⁶⁰ and the prime mover towards the asking of what are eventually religious questions, it is clear that for him the answer to these questions is nothing less than eternal life. Whatever one may think about his insistence on this point, it is clear that there is a completely organic link between his notion of the goodness of existence and his hope for an afterlife. This is because, he argues, it is rooted not in simple self-insistence,

⁵⁷ Updike, *Self-consciousness*, 230.

⁵⁸ Yerkes, "As Good as it Gets", 14-15.

⁵⁹ The juxtaposition of nature's transcendent beauty with its unforgiving brutality – and that both are equally a feature of life on this planet – is perhaps what moves Ralph Wood to suggest extra-Christian roots of Updike's vision. For him, Updike "shares the Greek tragic conviction that the world's vitality is at war with its order, destroying itself even as it creates and renews". Yet, for Wood, Updike sees this not as an ultimately futile process that justifies nihilism, but as something that rightly still engenders hope: "The world is more creative than destructive, and thus more worthy of gratitude than accusation" (Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption*, 204).

⁶⁰ James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*. 138.

but in "love and praise for the world that we are privileged ... to witness and experience".⁶¹ This is, after all, the lingering theme of the final sentence of *Pigeon Feathers* which strongly recalls the reassurances of the Sermon on the Mount concerning human worth vis-à-vis the lilies and the birds.⁶² Further, there is a strong sense in which for Updike hope in eternal life for the self indicates a decision to embrace the idea that – despite all evidence to the contrary – the nurturing aspect of nature prevails over its viciousness; that nothingness is not the final fate of subjectivity; that "the universe has a personal structure" after all.⁶³

Third, since for Updike belief in God means being energised by hope, then such belief is closely related to the value of work. It is because life is experienced as meaningful, that work – as an expression of the self's passion and confidence – makes sense. More pragmatically put, "[r]eligion", says Updike, "enables us to ignore nothingness and get on with the jobs of life".⁶⁴

Fourth, there is a strongly Kierkegaardian and Barthian sense to Updike's emphasis on God's hiddenness. The novel *Roger's Version* is a strong statement of this position. Here Dale Kohler tries in vain to find God in the complex algorithms and swirling images generated by his computer programs. As if speaking on Updike's own behalf, Roger Lambert's response is to mock all such "Tower[s] of Babel". For him, the human yearning for God is ultimately "our only evidence of His existence", for we are always – by nature – in motion toward "the God Who flees, the *Deus Absconditus*".⁶⁵ This very idea of our being drawn towards a withdrawing God is, it seems, perhaps the closest Updike ever gets to offering a substantial theodicy of sorts. Here the emphasis is on God's silence as the ground of human freedom: "A loud and evident God would be a bully, an insecure tyrant, an all-crushing datum instead of, as he is, a bottomless encouragement to our faltering and frightened being".⁶⁶

⁶¹ Updike, *Self-consciousness*, 217.

⁶² See Updike, "Pigeon Feathers", 103.

⁶³ Updike, *Self-consciousness*, 227.

⁶⁴ Updike, *Self-consciousness*, 228. Becker arrives at a similar conclusion. Like Updike, Becker builds on the thought of Kierkegaard and Tillich, thus seeing faith as a response of hope to the anxiety the self experiences when it frankly faces the threat of nothingness: "Man must reach out for support to a dream, a metaphysic of hope that sustains him and makes his life worthwhile ... One goes through [the school of anxiety] to arrive at faith, the faith that one's very creatureliness has some meaning to a creator ... Man breaks through the bounds of merely cultural heroism ... and by doing so he opens himself up to infinity ... His daily life, then, becomes truly a duty of cosmic proportions, and his courage to face the anxiety of meaninglessness becomes a true cosmic heroism (Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 275, 91, 279).

⁶⁵ John Updike, *Roger's Version*. New York: Knopf, 1986, 246, 67, 219.

⁶⁶ Updike, *Self-consciousness*, 229.

Fifth, in this light, a great many of Updike's tales can be read in terms of the grave consequences of people self-defeatingly turning to what Desmond might call "counterfeit doubles" of religion, and while there are numerous other examples (nationalism, money, power and influence, fame, etc), erotic sublimation plays a prominent role in his fiction, none more so than in *Couples* whose pages are drenched in existential and proto-religious anxiety. As Ralph Wood has pointed out, like Kierkegaard's Don Juan, many of Updike's characters are on a self-frustrating mission to "search for infinity within the world of sex".⁶⁷ There is clearly an Augustinian tenor to Updikean thought in this respect: of the soul's insatiable restlessness for God, and the self-defeating nature of any substitutes; of the self's full 'at-home-ness' in God alone.⁶⁸

Finally, there is a strong tension in Updike's religious vision between the consolations of religious belief and its obligations. On one hand, it is true that Updike insists on the integral connections between the two, such that the flourishing of the energised self is continuous with its moral life. But there is also an at times uneasy relationship with moral obligation not only in the lives of his fictional characters, but also in his reflections on his own life in this respect. Updike has been criticised by many for underselling the centrality of morality, and this charge is clearly something he is aware of in *Self-consciousness* where he admits to being "trouble[d]" by what seems even to him the "pragmatic undercurrent" of his text. "It is not enough, surely", he opines, "to strive for faith because it makes us more effective and holds off terror".⁶⁹ Yet in the same work, in his "letter" to his grandsons, he emphasises the supreme "obligation to our own selves ... to live", an obligation to "nurture" the self and to defend it "against the claims even of virtue". His mother's advice resounds here: "You carry your own hide to market";⁷⁰ but so too does the seminal influence of Kierkegaard for whom we are called to 'become a self' by moving beyond a 'merely' ethical mode of existence.

Ultimately, it seems to me that the circle from anxiety, to horror, to ecstasy, to faith, to morality – and thus, the whole itinerary of this paper – is closed with an extraordinary passage in *Self-consciousness* in which, through the

⁶⁷ Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption*, 180.

⁶⁸ Again, the same point is emphasised by Becker, who further comes at this issue from the perspective of the psychodynamics of transference: "Religion answers directly to the problem of transference by expanding awe and terror to the universe where they belong ... [All] the religious geniuses of history have argued that [we should] ... be submissive to the highest power, the 'true' infinity and absolute – and not to any human substitutes" (Becker, *The Denial of Death*, 202, 251).

⁶⁹ Updike, *Self-consciousness*, 233.

⁷⁰ Updike, *Self-consciousness*, 211.

use of a stunning analogy, the power and function of religious belief for the “trembling animal who pulls the world down around his shoulders”, as Becker so aptly put it, is beautifully sketched:

Wherever there is a self ... the idea of God will arise. Religion, once the self has taken its hook, preaches selflessness. The self is the focus of anxiety; attention to others, self-forgetfulness, and living like the lilies are urged, to relieve the anxiety. Insomnia offers a paradigm: the mind cannot fall asleep as long as it watches itself. At the first observed lurch into nonsensical thought, we snap awake in eager anticipation, greedy to be asleep. Only when the mind moves unwatched and becomes absorbed in images that tug it as it were to one side does self-consciousness dissolve and sleep with its healing, brilliantly detailed fictions pour in upon the jittery spirit. Falling asleep is a study in trust. Likewise, religion tries to put us at ease in this world. Being human cannot be borne alone. We need other presences. We need soft night noises – a mother speaking downstairs, a grandfather rumbling in response, cars swishing past on Philadelphia Avenue and their headlights wheeling about the room. We need the little clicks and sighs of a sustaining otherness. We need the gods.⁷¹

⁷¹ Updike, *Self-consciousness*, 232-33.