John Updike and the Changing of the Gods

By Victor Strandberg

Back in the second decade of this century, Herman Hesse remarked that "Human life is reduced to real suffering, to hell, only when two ages, two cultures and religions overlap."¹ Hesse was thinking in particular of Nietzsche, that shrill prophet of the oncoming crisis in culture resulting from our civilization's transition from a Christian to a naturalistic view of life. But Hesse's remark applies with equal force to a great number of writers both before and after his own time. With the rise of the natural and social sciences, including quasi-sciences like Marxism and Freudian analysis, and with the concomitant erosion of Christianity as a stay against death, the search for beliefs to live by has visibly escalated from the merely urgent in Tennyson and Melville to the desperate in T.S. Eliot and Hemingway. In the figure of John Updike, Hesse's crisis of culture attains what we might call a culminating expression. Unwilling to exorcise the dilemma by making a game of it, in the mode of black humor widely prevalent among his contemporaries, Updike has confronted the problem of belief as directly as did Tolstoy and Tennyson a century earlier, but with the added authority of a mind keenly aware of twentieth-century science and theology. In this paper we shall follow Updike's shifting path across the spectrum of beliefs that undergirds his total literary canon. Moving out from an intensely imagined vision of death as its starting point, this search for a belief that might provide a stay against

¹Herman Hesse, Steppenwolf (New York, 1963), p. 23.
death comprises the “figure in the carpet” that Henry James spoke of, the master theme that, threading from book to book, gives design to Updike’s work as a whole and marks him as one of the leading religious writers of his age.

I. Moloch

“Our fundamental anxiety is that we do not exist — or will cease to exist.” That statement from Updike’s essay on Denis de Rougemont’s writings (Assorted Prose, p. 233)² compresses within its narrow pith the most recurrent nightmare in Updike’s work, evoking as well some giant specters of our age — the near-madness of Eliot’s Hollow Men, the nocturnal bouts with Nada in Hemingway’s people, and much of the black humor literature of recent decades. The dread of Death stalks softly through all of Updike’s books, scattering visions of extinction to characters like the narrator of “Lifeguard,” who watches the sunbathers around him and muses, “Each of our bodies is a clock that loses time. Young as I am, I can hear in myself the protein acids ticking; I wake at odd hours and in the shuddering darkness and silence feel my death rushing toward me like an express train.” (Pigeon Feathers, p. 148)

This mood has persisted. The Poorhouse Fair, Updike’s first novel, dealt with aging people (its hero is 94 years old) dwelling precariously in death’s imminent, towering shadow, “with Death at their sides, the third participant in every conversation, the other guest at every meal.” (p. 57) Rabbit, Run!, his second novel, was written under the pressure of an intense personal crisis in its author’s life, occasioned (Updike says) by “a sense of horror that beneath this skin of bright and exquisitely sculpted phenomena, death waits.” (TIME, April 26, 1968, p. 74) Although he managed to survive this period of Kierkegaardian terror with sanity intact, the dread of death did not depart far from Updike’s thoughts, for his third novel, The Centaur, is stuffed with mementoes of death, like so many grinning skulls reflecting the drunk’s question, “Are you ready to die?” (p. 121) There are dead animals, dead gods, and dead languages (Greek and Latin). There is the sudden death of Charlie the hotel clerk, who had refused father’s check with “Why not wait till morning... I guess we’ll all still be here.” (p. 124) There is a lengthy, death-dreading wait for Caldwell’s x-ray report, complete with prospective obituary, followed by a ride in the family car (a hearse) that stalls at the Jewish cemetery. Even dreams and memories tend to be death-haunted, as when Peter dreams about the Sybil’s death-wish in The Waste Land (“I want to die, I want to die.” — p. 128) or recalls the mummy room in the museum: “As a child this floor filled me with dread. So much death; who would dream there could be such a quantity of death?” (p. 199)³

²I am incorporating all references to Updike’s Fawcett Crest paperback editions within my main text; references to other editions of his work will be separately footnoted. In order to further economize on footnoting, I have also included certain references to TIME and HORIZON magazines within my main text.

³The sovereignty of death is built into the structure of The Centaur by way of
In similar fashion, *Couples* (1968) notably places its erotic episodes against a background saturated with news of expiring flesh: the slow death of Pope John, the mysterious sinking of the submarine *Thresher*, the death of the Kennedy infant, the Diem assassinations, the murder of the President himself, the killing of Lee Oswald (which the Hanemas watch on television), two planes crashing in Turkey, a great Alaskan earthquake. The fictional world of *Couples* can hardly compete with such real life extinctions, but it does offer the slow dying of John Ong by cancer in counterpoint with the insomniac dread visited upon Piet Hanema ever since his parents died in a crash. The hero of *Bech: A Book* (1970) likewise fights the old metaphysical panic in this otherwise comic novel: "He felt dizzy, stunned. The essence of matter, he saw, is dread. Death hung behind everything, a real skeleton about to leap through a door.... His death gnawed inside him like a foul parasite while he talked to these charming daughters of fertile Virginia." (125–126)

Beyond this prospect of personal extinction lies that ultimate formulation of doom from the science of Physics, the theory of Entropy, which foresees the whole universe eventually burning out into a final icy darkness. This idea horrifies a good many Updike people, a typical instance being the tortured insomniac at the end of *Pigeon Feathers* who wakes his wife at last to share his terror: "I told her of the centuries coming when our names would be forgotten, of the millennia when our nation would be a myth and our continent an ocean, of the aeons when our earth would be vanished and the stars themselves diffused into a uniform and irreversible tepidity." (p. 177) Worst of all is the eternally "forgotten" state in the above passage, a final and total extinction of the self that has haunted George Caldwell in *The Centaur* ever since he witnessed his father's death, though Caldwell accepts both death and entropy cheerfully enough otherwise.

Throughout his books, then, Updike's original trauma about the protein acids ticking and death coming on like an express train lingers on. Updike might as well have been speaking of himself when he described Conrad Aiken's stories as projecting a world whose "horror is not Hitlerian but Einsteinian," concerned not with crime and war but with the "interstellar gulfs" and "central nihil" of "the cosmic vacuity." (*Assorted Prose*, 179) All of Updike's major work to date may be seen as some kind of response to this trauma; his people variously resist death through Christian faith (John Hook in *The Poorhouse Fair*), through the way of Eros (the Rabbit books, *Couples*), through Agape (George Caldwell), through art (Bech, Peter Caldwell), and through the metaphysical intuition that Updike himself calls "duality" (*A Month of Sundays* and elsewhere). A look at each of these responses in turn may reveal why *The Centaur*, which gathers them all in its purview, remains Updike's most satisfactory treatment of his grand obsession.

the geological sandwich, a metaphor also used by Melville (*Mardi*, chapter 132) to depict the earth's expiring fauna spread like meat over successive layers of the earth's crust. In *The Centaur*, Updike not only casts a geology teacher, George Caldwell, as the doomed meat about to be folded into the earth's sandwich, but he designed the book itself (so he stated in a television interview) in the shape of a sandwich, with Caldwell's obituary precisely central (chapter 5) within the book's nine chapters.
II. From Christ to Eros

To deal with the threat of non-existence, Updike has resorted largely to the oldest modes of immortality known to man — God and sex, more or less in that order, but sometimes meshed in a dubious combination. To judge from the bulk of Updike's writing, we might well surmise that Freddy Thorne, the high priest of Couples, speaks for his author when he says, "In the western world, there are only two comical things; the Christian church and naked women.... Everything else tells us we're dead." (p. 155)

Concerning these two "comical" (that is, life-affirming) things, piety dictates that God alone should grant the immortality counterposed against death and entropy, and Updike tried mightily to make it so in his lengthy stint as a Christian warrior. Born and raised a Lutheran (Assorted Prose, "A Boyhood"), at length he emerged from the usual adolescent doubt to seize — in his early twenties — upon Kierkegaard as a "giant brother ... [beside whom] I could walk safely down ... the street of my life." (Horizon, Autumn, 1972, p. 105) Kierkegaard was succeeded in turn by Karl Barth, whose blast against liberal Protestantism in his Commentary on Romans (1919) effectively launched modern Christianity's neo-orthodox movement. In Assorted Prose, Updike applauds Barth's "uncompromisingly supernaturalist exposition of the Apostle's Creed" and his thunderous rebuke "to all that is naturalistic, humanistic, demythologized, and merely ethical" in contemporary Christianity. ("Faith in Search of Understanding," p. 212, 216)

Updike's poem, "Seven Stanzas at Easter" (1963), likewise insists upon a clearly supernaturalist Christianity:

> Make no mistake: if He rose at all
> it was as his body;
> if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
> reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
> the Church will fall.

(Verse, p. 164)

These comments — Updike's own, not those of a dramatic character — seem assured in their orthodoxy, yet the doubt Updike expresses through his fictional characters seems far too corrosive to permit total exorcism. Back in his earliest novel, The Poorhouse Fair, where a head-on debate between a Christian and an atheist comprises the intellectual center of the work, it is ominously the atheist whose argument carries the weightiest evidence:

> The truth is, Mr. Hook, that if the universe was made, it was
> made by an idiot, and an idiot crueler than Nero....
> Natural history is a study of horrible things.... Have
> you ever walked around the skeleton of a brontosaurus? Or
> watched microbes in a drop of water gobble each other up?
> ... What was your second piece of evidence? Inner spokes-
> man?.... We've sifted the body in a dozen directions, look-
> ing for a soul. Instead we've found what? A dog's bones, an

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4In his Foreword to Assorted Prose (p. viii), Updike says that his essay on Karl Barth "was written in acknowledgement of a debt, for Barth's theology, at one point in my life, seemed alone to be supporting it (my life)."
ape's glands, a few quarts of sea water, a rat's nervous system, and a mind that is actually a set of electrical circuits....

(abridged from pp. 78-80)

Perhaps Updike's most harrowing — and most brilliantly written — plunge into the abyss of religious skepticism occurs in "Lifeguard," whose divinity-student narrator skewers the whole line-up of Christian theologies like so much shish-ke-bob:

For nine months of the year, I pace my pale hands and burning eyes through immense pages of Biblical text barnacled with fudging commentary; ...through handbooks of liturgy and histories of dogma; through the bewildering duplicities of Tillich's divine politicking; through the suave table talk of Father D'Arcy, Etienne Gilson, Jacques Maritain, and other such moderns...; through the terrifying attempts of Kierkegaard, Berdyaev, and Barth to scourge God into being. I sway appalled on the ladder of minus signs by which theologians would surmount the void. I tiptoe like a burglar into the house of naturalism to steal the silver. An acrobat, I swing from wisp to wisp. Newman's iridescent cobwebs crush in my hands. Pascal's blackboard mathematics are erased by a passing shoulder. The cave drawings, astoundingly vital by candlelight, of those aboriginal magicians, Paul and Augustine, in daylight fade into mere anthropology.

(Pigeon Feathers, pp. 146-147)

His faith reduced to such feeble embers, we need not marvel that our narrator, as mentioned earlier, cannot bear the thought of stars nor the nocturnal tick of the protein clock in his body announcing the onrush of death like an express train in the shuddering silence and darkness.

When God goes, half-gods arrive; and in our post-Freudian age, what other god can stand before Eros, "the Genesis of All Things," as the Centaur teaches (p. 78), and the one surviving deity who delivers a kind of immortality people may yet live by. Perhaps it is natural that when faith fails, God and sex become blurred, unified, so that latter-day theologians may see in the cathedral's rose window a huge vagina symbol, or take Eden's forbidden Tree of Life (later, the Cross) to have been, actually, a stiffened primal phallus. Some such subliminal transference seems to have worked itself out in Updike's fiction of the 1960's, whose tones have become steadily less Christian and more pagan, though without a clear victory on either side.

Updike's psychology of sex, as he himself has attested, owes a great deal to two books by Denis de Rougement, Love in the Western World and Love Declared. Focusing on the myth of Tristan and Isseult (and its subsidiary, Don Juan), Love in the Western World announces its purpose to be an analysis of "the inescapable conflict in the West between passion and marriage."

Updike's debt to de Rougement is acknowledged in his lengthy essay entitled "More Love in the Western World," Assorted Prose, pp. 220-234. In his Foreword to this book, Updike further states that his doubts about de Rougement's theories...
Updike’s essay on de Rougemont explains that “perversity is the soul’s very life. Therefore the enforced and approved bonds of marriage, restricting freedom, weaken love.” *(Assorted Prose, p. 233)* In his Foreword (p. ix), Updike adds a confirming extract from Freud showing that “some obstacle is necessary to swell the tide of the libido to its height” so that mankind may enjoy copulation.

Whereas Freud found the necessary obstacle in the taboos of civilization, the obstacle in traditional literature, as the Tristan myth illustrates, is that of the Unattainable Lady; this is why romantic fiction invariably deals with the separation of lovers, and indeed goes to incredible lengths to raise obstacles to love’s fulfillment. The secret reason for this, according to de Rougemont’s formulation, is that “Tristan and Iseult do not love one another…. What they love is love and being in love.” *(p. 41–2)* The lady remains unattainable, then, precisely because the lover’s soul, in its perversity, loves passion itself rather than the other’s being: “Eros had treated a fellow-creature as but an illusory excuse and occasion for taking fire; and forthwith this creature had to be given up, for the intention was ever to burn more fiercely, to burn to death.” *(p. 68)* And consequently, for our Western love myths — Heloise and Abelard, Paolo and Francesca, Romeo and Juliet, even Nabokov’s Lolita — the Tristan story expresses “the dark and unmentionable fact that passion is linked with death, and involves the destruction of anyone yielding himself up to it with all his strength.” *(p. 21)* Updike renders this connection between Eros, narcissism, and death metaphorically in his Erotic Epigram III *(Verse, p. 170)*, which reads:

Hoping to fashion a mirror, the lover
doth polish the face of his beloved
until he produces a skull.

So Eros becomes another mask for death, after all, rather than death’s adversary; and the servant of Eros becomes “Mr. Death,” as Ruth calls Rabbit — that proud lover — at the end. Presumably, the very reason Rabbit insisted on having sex with Ruth without contraceptives was to loosen his seed against death, affirming his being in reproduction. *(During his symbolic stint as a gardener, Rabbit likewise loves to plant seeds, seeing “God Himself folded into the tiny adamant structure.” — p. 115)* Yet the final effect of Rabbit’s erotic adventures is to inflict death by water upon his new-born daughter, death by fire upon his girl friend *(in Rabbit Redux)*, death by abortion upon his unborn descendant, and spiritual death upon both his wife and his concubine: “I’m dead to you, and this baby of yours is dead too. Now; get out.” *(Rabbit, Run!, p. 253)*

have faded, while “his overriding thesis [that in the West marriage and passion are incompatible] seems increasingly beautiful and pertinent.” *(p. ix)* The two books I shall be citing are *Love in the Western World*, first published in English in 1940 and republished under the title *Passion and Society*, translated by Montgomery Belgion *(London, 1956)*, and *Love Declared: Essays on the Myths of Love*, translated by Richard Howard *(New York, 1963).*
Couples is Updike's ultimate statement on the theme of Eros. Guided by Paul Tillich's headnote from The Future of Religions that our present world, like that of the Roman Empire, presents "a mood favorable for the resurgence of religion," we find in Couples just what that religion is likely to be: a worship of Eros complete with its high priest and prophet (Freddy Thorne), its sacrificial victims (Angela and Ken), and its lay communicants (the couples) — all under the purview of the town church with its "pricking steeple and flashing cock." (p. 90) The ultimate sacrament of this Eros-worship is its near-blasphemous lovers' eucharist: the "Take, eat: this is my body" of oral-genital connection (Foxy swallows Piet's semen) and breast-feeding (he swallows her mother's milk). The association with the Christian communion service is made deliberate when Piet thinks, "To eat another is sacred," as he and Foxy service each other, oral-genital style, on "Sunday morning, beneath the hanging clangor of bells." (p. 456)

Piet — the name suggests both Piety and Peter, the rock on whom the church resides — sometimes is freed from his death-obsession in his copulations (with Bea Guerin, for example, "he experienced orgasm strangely.... Death no longer seemed dreadful" — p. 352), but of course this feeling is only momentary. In this book, Death is once again linked with Eros, in Foxy's abortion, for example, and even in the assassination of the President, who is seen as a martyr to Oswald's sexual problems ("A martyr to what? To Marina Oswald's sexual rejection of her husband" — p. 470). More significant is the loss of personality, a kind of psychic death, that Eros exacts as its payment. Contrary to Freddy Thorne's sudden "vision" that "We're all put here to humanize each other" (p. 158), Eros obviously dehumanizes his worshippers in this novel, not only — again — in victimizing the (as Updike put it in his TIME interview, p. 67) "distressed and neglected children," but with respect to the lovers themselves: "Frank and Harold had become paralyzed by the habit of lust; she and Marcia, between blowups, were as guarded and considerate with one another as two defaced patients in an accident ward." (p. 169) Those critics and readers who complained of the lack of character development in Couples — the characters are mostly indistinguishable — have missed the point that it was meant that way. Such, as de Rougemont keeps saying, are the ways of Eros; Love in the Western World describes polygamy as "an indication that men are not yet in a stage to apprehend the presence of an actual person in a woman." (p. 315) And Karl Barth, in his "Eros and Agape" section of Church Dogmatics (p.189), says "Erotic love is a denial of humanity."

Piet himself is at last a victim of this phenomenon. Although Updike stoutly insists that the book's "happy ending" is not a satire (Gado, "A Conversation with John Updike"), he does see a great loss of meaning in his hero's final state: "he becomes a satisfied person and in a sense dies. In other words,  

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a person who has what he wants, a satisfied person, a content person, ceases to be a person. ... I feel that to be a person is to be in a situation of tension, is to be in a dialectical situation. A truly adjusted person is not a person at all — just an animal with clothes on.” (Paris Review Interview, p. 101)

So the case against Eros stands hard — an agent of death and loss and suffering deceitfully disguised. But this is only part of the story. The other part is the fact that, for better or worse, Eros is in reality a living god of this world to whom all flesh must render service. And in that service may actually reside some measure of joy and hope and meaning, for here we encounter a strange paradox: the Christian hedonism of John Updike. He that lusteth after a woman in his heart hath defiled her already, according to Jesus Christ, but Updike’s religious people seem marvelously at ease in their compliance with the laws of Eros. “Lust stuns me like the sun,” admits the divinity student watching the beach maidens in “Lifeguard,” who then goes on to justify himself: “You are offended that a divinity student lusts? What prigs the unchurched are.” Christ and Eros are not adversaries, he maintains, but collaborators, the asceticism of the Bible notwithstanding: “To desire a woman is to save her.... Every seduction is a conversion.” (Pigeon Feathers, pp. 149-150)

De Rougemont finds support for this contention in the Don Juan myth, which sustains the idea that “the true expression of woman consists in her desire to be seduced.” (Love Declared, p. 116) Freudian psychology similarly asserts that being sexually desired is indeed a woman’s “salvation,” absolutely crucial to the meaning of her life, whereas prolonged virginity means not virtue but simply a wasted life.

Far from judging the crowd harshly, then, the student-lifeguard sees a sanctity in the Sunday morning swimmers: “Protestantism’s errant herd seem gathered by the water’s edge in impassioned poses of devotion.” They even drain, like communion wine, “our most platitudinous blessing, the moment, the single ever-present moment that we perpetually bring to our lips brimful.” And the lifeguard’s concluding dictate, “So: be joyful. Be Joyful,” nicely anticipates George Caldwell’s belief at the conclusion of The Centaur: “All joy belongs to the Lord.” (p. 220) The joy Caldwell refers to is the drunken laughter emanating from a barroom, “a poisonous laughter that seemed to distill all the cruelty and blasphemy in the world,” but even this joy belongs to the Lord: “Wherever in the filth and confusion and misery, a soul felt joy, there the Lord came and claimed it as his own; into barrooms and brothels.... And all the rest, all that was not joy, fell away, precipitated, dross that had never been.” (p. 220)

The lifeguard’s changing investment of belief, shifting from God to sex — that is, from a supernatural to a naturalistic mainstay against death — portends, I believe, a significant movement in Updike’s larger career. (The fact that “Lifeguard” was meant to be a novel but failed, as Updike told

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an interviewer, implies the unusual importance of its ideas.) Certainly, his *Midpoint*, a collection of poems published in 1969 and narrated by Updike himself, would appear to verify a shift, though not a full break, away from Christianity towards hedonism in Updike’s view of life. While formally affirming his Christian faith in a couplet like “Praise Barth, who told how saving Faith can flow/From Terror’s oscillating Yes and No,” (*Midpoint*, p. 38) Updike altogether easily takes his own “Intelligent hedonistic advice” (p.38, headnote) and joins “mankind’s copulating swarm” (p. 8) in some of these verses.

That this drift toward hedonism stems from Updike’s own philosophy rather than from some remove of aesthetic distance seems clearly evident in the book’s title poem “Midpoint,” which contains a confessional section most memorable for its author’s boasts about his rich and varied sexual encounters. Subtitled “The Play of Memory,” this part of “Midpoint” sheds a particularly interesting light on Updike’s pornographic fiction, even though some of this sexual autobiography may be falsified by braggadocio or faulty memory. Here our poet boasts of having popped off with a girl friend six times in one night, “my prick toward morning a battered miracle of response” (even Johnson’s Boswell, though proud of his size, claimed a more modest five ejaculations); he crows how he brought off another girl until “[her] head beat like a wing on the pillow”; he gloats over getting another sweetheart from behind, just like a dog, until they got snarled up in the mosquito netting down in the Caribbean; and he celebrates the girl with the “shampooed groin” who nearly snapped his neck during cunnilingus. Culminating the homage to Eros in this book is the poem entitled “Fellatio” (which is brief enough to be quoted in its entirety below), a lyric in the Imagistic tradition:

It is beautiful to think
that each of these clean secretaries
at night, to please her lover, takes
a fountain into her mouth
and lets her insides, drenched in seed,
flower into landscapes:
meadows sprinkled with baby’s breath,
hoarse twiggy woods, birds dipping, a multitude
of skies containing clouds, plowed earth stinking
of its upturned humus, and small farms each
with a silver silo.

Though obviously far more tender and lyrical and humane in its sexuality than Philip Roth’s *Portnoy*, “Fellatio” still registers rather more of a pagan than a Christian mentality.

The “intelligent hedonism” of *Midpoint* and the “happy ending” of *Couples* (Updike called it that in the *Paris Review* interview) would appear to reflect an increasing commitment to the pleasure principle in Updike’s thinking, as

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8 *Paris Review* Interview, p. 96.
supernaturalism wanes and naturalism waxes. But Updike is nothing if he is not double-minded. *Rabbit Redux* (1971) gives us a revulsion against naturalism as powerful as T.S. Eliot's, where Eros is again the mad, cruel god, where all sexuality is joyless exploitation, and where drugs and the moon-landing (of 1969) prove empty substitutes for spiritual meaning. Replacing the dying Christianity of the times is a *spiritus mundi* fearfully similar to Yeats's sphinx in the desert, with gaze blank and pitiless as the sun. In the literal desert of Las Vegas, Rabbit's sister is now a prostitute; his wife becomes the discarded mistress of a car salesman; his teenage girl friend is a heroin addict whose death by fire is shrugged off by her black lover: "there's a ton of cunt in the world."

There is no subject, then, upon which Updike is so ambiguous in his judgments as the subject of Eros, doubtless because sex is so ambiguous a feature of actual life, almost evenly balanced between its pleasures and pains, its warmth and its cruelty, its powers to create and destroy. Looking at *The Centaur*, we find both attitudes locked in a typically dialectical configuration. On behalf of Love, Chiron (who is himself nearly seduced by Venus — p. 24) tells of the Genesis of All Things, how Eros, hatched from the womb of Darkness, "set the Universe in motion" (p. 78) and presided over a Golden Age in antiquity. Caldwell, Chiron's successor, likewise accepts the primacy of Venus both in the planetary symbolism — "Venus is the brightest planet" (p. 32) — and in describing biological immortality: "those male sperm cells which enjoy success become the cornerstone of new life that continues beyond the father." (p. 37) On the other hand, *The Centaur* shows as plainly as ever the disruptive (if comic) effects of Eros at work, effects which only Caldwell is free from: Zimmerman's unruly lechery with Becky and Mrs. Herzog; the queer hitchhiker, whose coarse language ("What a fucking day. Freeze your sucking balls off" — p. 65) reminds us of Gregg in *The Poorhouse Fair*; the obscene graffitus which someone later converts into the word BOOK; Johnny Dedmon's pornographic playing cards; the equating of Peter's girl friend, Penny, with Pandora, and her erotic regions with Pandora's Box — an equation largely borne out in Updike's other writings; and the fact that the Venus of our tale, Vera Hummel, is childless, the proprietress at best of a Bower of Bliss, not a Garden of Adonis. Even the planetary symbolism is less than reassuring in its final recurrence:

> There was a star before us, one low in the sky and so brilliant its white light seemed warm.  
> I asked my father, 'What's that star?'
> 'Venus.'
> 'Is it always the first to come out?'
> 'No. Sometimes it's the last to go....'
> 'Can you steer by it?'
> 'I don't know. I've never tried. It's an interesting question.'

(pp. 211-212)

Judging from those who have tried to steer by it in Updike's other books, Venus is not too reliable a guide. In fact, the "steer by" metaphor recurs in *Couples* in a context where Eros seems sovereign only because of men's
despair: "he talked to her ... about the fate of them all, suspended in this one of those dark ages that visits mankind between millennia, between the death and rebirth of the gods when there is nothing to steer by but sex and stoicism and the stars." (p. 372)

So the turn from Christ to Eros ends in paradox. On the one hand, in a time of failing belief Eros is at least one god that all men can believe in, one to whom bodies may be offered a living sacrifice and who may confer in return a provisional shelter against death and entropy and the protein acids ticking. On the other hand, the capture of civilization's inner citadel from its few rear-guard Christian defenders yields little joy to the army of neopagan victors, for the disappearance of Christianity in books like Couples and Rabbit Redux only displays the "central nihil" of the "cosmic vacuity" all the more intolerably. To find Updike’s true refuge from death and its terrors we shall have to look to neither classical Eros nor orthodox Christian metaphysics but to a highly personal theology that sees Agape love and Erotic love as pointing toward "Duality," like two sides of a triangle or a Gothic arch whose base is Earth and whose tip pierces heaven.

III. Agape/Duality

The Gospel of Mark (8:35) proclaims that he who would save his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for the gospel's sake, the same shall save it. What this means in Updike's system is best seen by comparing those companion novels, Rabbit, Run! and The Centaur. In running to save his life, Rabbit flees from the face of death in its various guises, including expressly that continuous extinction of self which society calls obedience to duty: "If you're telling me I'm not mature, that's one thing I don't cry over since as far as I can make out it's the same thing as being dead." (p. 90)

This portrait finds its opposite epitome in George Caldwell, whose most important characteristic is contained in the statement, "Chiron accepted death." (p. 222) That Updike includes more than physical death in this statement is indicated in the book's closing litany: "What is a hero? A hero is a king sacrificed to Hera." (p. 221) Hera, the Matron goddess of the family Caldwell, a king sacrificed. Again, those critics who complained about the vagueness of Caldwell's destiny — did he die of cancer? commit suicide? — missed the point that he dies every day, in pain and humiliation and futility: a living sacrifice. As Updike put it in his Paris Review interview (p. 93-94), "The trauma or message that I acquired in Olinger had to do with suppressed pain, with the amount of sacrifice I suppose that middle-class life demands, and by that I guess I mean civilized life. The father, whatever his name, is sacrificing freedom of motion, and the mother is sacrificing in a way — oh, sexual richness, I guess; they're all stuck ... [in the] irremediable grief in just living, in just going on." Thinking of the Greek mythology in this book, one of whose characters is named Penelope, we might consider how, of all the world's classics, The Odyssey may best reflect the perfect life of a man, spun out in various and continuous adventures. Measured against its pattern, Caldwell's "suppressed pain" in losing his "freedom of motion" assumes a touching and heroic magnitude, gauged by his envy of the wandering hitchhiker (Dionysus)
and his wish for the stimulation of the city (a lifelong sacrifice to his wife's love of the farm).

So Chiron accepted death. But he who will lose his life for the gospel's sake shall save it. This is where Updike's Christian bias reasserts itself most willfully, in the spectacle of "the Protestant kind of goodness going down with all the guns firing." (TIME essay, p. 74) The goodness Updike speaks of is what theologians call agape, that love which St. Paul placed at the top of his famous triad in I Corinthians 13; and though we see very little faith and not much hope in The Centaur, we do see an abundance of love in George Caldwell, love which in the Pauline phrases "suffreth long, and is kind ... seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil." Moving through a world that otherwise seems a throwback to the pagan hedonism of pre-Christian antiquity, Caldwell anachronistically dispenses agape-love in all directions.10

Here perhaps a few words from Updike's religious mentor, Karl Barth, will focus Caldwell's role more clearly: "In agape-love a man gives himself to the other with no expectation of a return, in a pure venture, even at the risk of ingratitude." (Church Dogmatics, p. 188)11 Or again: "In his love there takes place the encounter of I and Thou, the open perception of the other and self-disclosure to him, conversation with him, the offering and receiving of assistance, and all with joy." (p. 188) Caldwell's encounter with the queer hitchhiker appears consciously designed to bear out these Barthian precepts:

'I was living with a guy up in Albany,' the hitchhiker said reluctantly.
'What happened? He pull the old double-cross?'
'That's right, buddy,' he told my father. 'That's just what that fucking sucker did...'
'I've enjoyed talking to you,' my father called to him.

(pp. 66-67; 72)

Earlier, in his science lecture, Caldwell had described death as the result of altruism on the part of the volvox, a primitive microorganism:

'...the volvox, of these early citizens in the kingdom of life, interests us because he invented death. There is no reason intrinsic in the plasmic substance why life should ever end. Amoebas never die.... But the volvox, ... by pioneering this new idea of cooperation, rolled life into the kingdom of certain — as opposed to accidental — death. For ... while each cell is potentially immortal, by volunteering for a specialized function within an organized society of cells, it enters a compromised environment. The strain eventually wears it out and kills it. It dies sacrificially, for the good of the whole. These first cells ... were the first altruists.' (p. 37)

11Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics: A Selection, translated by G. W. Bromiley (New York, 1962), p. 188. This is the text for my other quotations from Barth, also.
From the beginning, then, "goodness" had created death, but it also transcends death, in Updike's thinking. In view of the traumatic dread of death evident throughout Updike's writings, his sense of the immortality of agape gathers paramount importance: "Only goodness lives. But it does live." (The Centaur, p. 220) This is his version of Karl Barth's assertion that "love, agape, never fails (1 Cor. 13:8). . . . It is imperishable even in the midst of a world which perishes." (Church Dogmatics, p. 190)

For his "countless, nameless acts of charity and good will," as his obituary puts it, George Caldwell is spared the last despair of his dying father, the minister, over the prospect of being "eternally forgotten," (p. 73) committed without a trace to the geological eons. For George Caldwell, the good is not interred but lives on after him. The statement in his obituary, "What endures, perhaps, most indelibly in the minds of his ex-students (of whom this present writer counts himself one) was his more-than-human selflessness," (p. 133) is borne out by ex-student Diefendorf's statement fourteen years later: "a great man, your Dad. Did you know that?" (p. 81) All the testimony of Caldwell's life is such as to bear out the theme, stated only ironically in Couples, that "we're all put here to humanize each other." In achieving this purpose, Caldwell also solves the mystery that Updike had left unclarified in his closing lines of The Poorhouse Fair: "[Hook's] encounter with Conner had commenced to trouble him.... A small word would perhaps set things right.... He stood motionless, half in moonlight, groping after the fitful shadow of the advice he must impart to Conner, as a bond between them and a testament to endure his dying in the world. What was it?" (p. 127) The small word was agape.

Love — as agape — is a mighty ethical force, but matters of even greater moment hang by this tale. Ultimately, love implies that the physical universe has a spiritual counterpart, that metaphysical dimension of reality whose existence has been so much in question, and whose power is the only final recourse against death and entropy. Updike's word that encompasses this metaphysical dimension is "duality," a word that threads back in Christian history through Pascal and Aquinas and Augustine and St. Paul to its source in Plato and ancient Oriental religions. Duality essentially means the division of reality into two dissociated spheres: earth and heaven, matter and spirit, flesh and soul, with ultimate reality being the spiritual. According to one Updike essay, the not entirely fanciful "Jesus on Honshu," Jesus Christ was a dualist. Embroidering upon a Japanese legend that Jesus actually escaped crucifixion by fleeing to the Orient and living in northern Honshu until his death at the age of 106, Updike writes that a certain "sage of Etchu [a province in Honshu] took him in and taught him many things. He taught the young Jesus that dual consciousness was not to be avoided but desired: only duality reflected the universe." (Museums & Women, p. 214-15) In likewise calling Marcel Proust a dualist, Updike proceeds to define the term: "For all his biochemistry, Proust emphasizes the medieval duality of body/spirit: "the body imprisons the spirit in a fortress." (Horizon, Fall, 1972, p. 105)

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In *A Month of Sundays*, Updike’s most dualistic book, the author’s Reverend-spokesman elaborately restates these Gnostic insights. “For what is the body but a swamp in which the spirit drowns?” inquires the narrator, who sees Christ’s role as a prophet of dualism: “Before Him, reality was monochromatic.... After Him, truth is dual, alternating, riddled.... Christ stands in another light....; by contrast our sunshine burns at His feet blacker than tar.” Like the Gnostics of old, the minister associates this doomed physical universe with Satanic power and sovereignty — “the universe is a dragon.” “The Milky Way is a dragon” (pp. 137, 140) — and he sees his own function to be that of pointing the way of escape: “our task is to witness, to offer a way out of the crush of matter and time.” (p. 70) Proving the existence of a transcendent world is love, “the spiritual twin of gravity,” (p. 113) but as the minister admits, it is a troublesome term (“I have vowed to abjure the word “love”’). Though a Christian minister by profession, in act he is a Catharian heretic, seeking the higher world of love and transcendence through free sexuality. Of “free” and “love,” he declares that “the words are the same underneath, and free love not a scandal but a tautology.” (p. 190)

By setting off *The Centaur* against Updike’s erotic novels — *Couples*, *A Month of Sundays*, and *Marry Me* — we may observe how the author designates Agape and Eros as the two alternative pathways that connect the dualistic realms of reality. The way of Apape is surer but much more difficult, of course — straight is the path and few there be who find it. None do find it after Caldwell, who was not the last Christian for Updike (for his lovers are all Christians too), but who was the last Christian capable of a life of agape love. The noble centaur’s exit thus leaves Eros as the major vehicle of dual consciousness in our ongoing twilight era.

Here Denis de Rougemont’s thought makes its greatest impact on Updike’s writing, for de Rougemont’s connection between Eros and Duality makes possible a molecular fusion between Updike’s sexual and religious psychology. Beyond the pleasure principle, that is to say, the Unattainable Lady of Updike/de Rougemont, provides a stay against death by opening to her lover a secret corridor for periodic visitations into the next world. In *Love in the Western World*, de Rougemont fuses the sexual and metaphysical meanings of Tristan’s Unattainable Lady thusly: “why should she not be the Anima, or, more precisely, man’s spiritual element, that which the soul imprisoned in his body desires with a nostalgic love that death alone can satisfy?” (p. 90) In *Love Declared*, de Rougemont more clearly removes this Anima to an unattainable sphere by designating it as our “Angel,” left behind in heaven upon our incarnation and re-claspable only after death. The great error of Passion, he says, lies in identifying one’s lover with this missing part of the self, thereby denying her true person: “Is what we believe we see in her herself or the image of our Angel? Is what we see in her — and what we may deify at her expense — our projected anima?” (p. 223)

Just such a system of thought pervades Updike’s latest novel, *Marry Me* (1976). Here the protagonist shatters two family units by pursuing his

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neighbor's wife, only to draw back from her when the other three parties to the affair—the cuckold and the two wives who are affected—agree that he may have her. His problem is that, like the minister in *A Month of Sundays*, he greatly prefers his lady to remain unattainable, so that passion may continue: "I look up, and there's this radiance I can never reach. It gives you your incredible beauty, and if I marry you I'll destroy it.... What we have, sweet Sally, is an ideal love. It's ideal because it can never be realized.... Oh, we could make a mess and get married and patch up a life together—it's done in the papers every day—but what we have now we'd lose." (p. 46) Like de Rougemont's Tristan, Updike's Jerry loves not his lady but the "idea" she represents, as he ruefully admits in the aftermath of his forsaking her: "As an actual wife or whatever, she stopped being an idea, and for the first time, I saw her." (p. 284)

The "idea" in question is de Rougemont's "duality," the fallen world of time and matter juxtaposed against the transcendent realm of spiritual reality. For the Updike hero, the unattainable lady represents that part of the self which continues to reside in that transcendent realm, having never participated in the soul's earthly incarnation. By the grace of her sexual favor, the Updike heroine affords her lover access, or even "ascent," to that higher dimension of reality: "'Heaven,' Jerry said one night, entering her Afterward, he explained 'I had this very clear vision of the Bodily Ascension, of me going up and up into this incredibly soft, warm, boundless sky: you.'" (p. 153)

As might be expected, the women in *Marry Me* bitterly resent this metaphysical burden thrust upon them. Jerry's mistress protests that if he won't marry her, "I must stop talking to you, because people will say I'm a whore;" (p. 302) and his wife "disliked, religiously, the satisfaction he took in being divided, confirming thereby the split between body and soul that alone can save men from extinction." (p. 186) But to Updike's knights of Eros, actual women do not matter. For Jerry, all that matters is that in his unattainable lady he has glimpsed and touched his saving "Angel," as de Rougemont called this Anima figure: "You're like a set of golden stairs I can never finish climbing. I look down, and the earth is a little blue mist" (p. 46); and again, "you're the only woman I want. You were given to me in Heaven, and Heaven won't let me have you." (p. 56) So Jerry enacts Updike's premise, via de Rougemont, concerning the Anima/Animal duality: "people were animals, white animals twisting toward the light." (p. 47) At the end of the book, Updike affirms de Rougemont's system one last time by bringing into his text that classic movie archetype of the unattainable lady, Marlene Dietrich, whose most famous film, *The Blue Angel*, bears a title that happens to suit Updike's purpose to perfection.

In the end, then, the idea that poor Sally is asked to serve, at the risk of being called a whore, is that of Jerry's immortality: "Whenever I'm with her, no matter where,... I know I'm never going to die." (p. 144) As his Anima or Angel figure, she is his one contact with the world beyond time and matter; but she will remain so only so long as he does not marry her. ("You're death," he tells his wife. "I'm married to my death" — p. 144.) The psychic force behind *Marry Me* thus remains the dread of death made familiar to us in
Updike's earlier books; but here the transition from Moloch to Christ to Eros occupies, in elliptical fashion, barely a single recapitulant sentence: "Jerry ... suddenly dreaded death. Only religion helped. He read theology, Barth and Marcel and Berdyaev; he taught the children bedtime prayers." (p. 78) Perhaps it was some fine artistic reticence on Updike's part that moved him to remove from that list of Jerry's readings the theologian most important to this work, the theologian of Eros, Denis de Rougemont.

In Couples, Updike sometimes verges upon making a stilted morality play with de Rougemont's system, with Piet's name meaning "Hanema/Anima/Life" (according to the Paris Review interview) and with Piet's wife Angela taking the role of the Angel not possessable in this world. (Neither Piet nor Freddy — in that absurdly forced wife-swapping scene — achieves satisfactory sexual possession of her.) Piet even resists their divorce in terms straight out of de Rougemont's thinking: "Don't make me leave you," he begged. 'You're what guards my soul. I'll be damned eternally?" (p. 425) There is one significant difference between Updike and his mentor, however; in Couples the word Anima (Hanema) is not identified with the word Angel, but is the middle part of the psyche torn between its Angel and Animal propensities. (De Rougemont failed to note that Animal is another of the derivatives of the word Anima; in a later generation, Updike knows better.) So Piet Hanema gives up his Angela, and chooses instead an Animal, Elizabeth Fox, thereby becoming, in the "happy ending," himself an animal, according to Updike's Paris Review commentary ("A truly adjusted person is ... just an animal with clothes on" — p. 101). In this fashion, the "splendid redheaded squire" of Eros, as Foxy calls him (p. 470), vanishes toward the "eternally forgotten" state while yet among the living, as the book's closing paragraph tells us: "Now, though it has not been many years, the town scarcely remembers Piet...."

In The Centaur, duality works in the opposite direction, by means of the centaur symbol. Although he is, below the waist, a dung- and semen-spewing animal, his horse's body the very symbol of potent lust, Chiron nonetheless fends off Venus's attempted seduction:

'Have you ever wondered, nephew, if your heart belongs to the man or the horse?'

He stiffened and said, 'From the waist up, I am told, I am fully human.'

(p. 27)

Freed from Eros, Chiron-Caldwell may assert his above-the-waist identity, a mind and spirit capable of Christlike wisdom and selflessness. (In contrary fashion, Piet Hanema in Couples thinks oral-genital sex "sacred" because it resolves the duality that normally divides one's being, uniting the spiritual being above the waist with the animal below: "Mouths, it came to Piet, are noble. They move in the brain's court. We set our genitals mating down below like peasants, but when the mouth condescends, mind and body marry. To eat another is sacred." — p. 456)

Presumably the centaur's preposterously divided nature is the duality Updike had in mind when selecting the quotation from Karl Barth for his book's
headnote: "He [Man] himself is the creature on the boundary between heaven and earth." But the Church Dogmatics from which the quote comes envision a larger duality, this death-bound universe being set off against the Resurrection of Christ and a New Creation. Not being a religious tract, The Centaur cannot speak in Barthian terms about the metaphysical meaning of duality, but there are intimations of it occasionally. One such instance is Peter's sensation of cosmic identity as he lies in bed drifting between consciousness and sleep: "As the sheets warmed, I enlarged to human size, and then, as the dissolution of drowsiness crept toward me, a sensation, both vivid and numb, of enormity entered my cells, and I seemed a giant who included in his fingernails all the galaxies that are. This sensation operated not only in space but in time." (p. 127) Something similar to this experience appears in one of Updike's poems, "Fever" (Verse, p. 163):

I have brought back a good message from the land of 102°:
God exists.
I had seriously doubted it before;
but the bedposts spoke of it with utmost confidence,
the threads in my blanket took it for granted
the tree outside the window dismissed all complaints,
and I have not slept so justly for years.
It is hard, now to convey
how emblematically appearances sat
upon the membranes of my consciousness.

Another poem, in Midpoint (p. 11), speaks of Updike's hope, "incapable of being dimmed," that beyond "the tide/That this strange universe employs/To strip itself of wreckage in the night" is a creative power offsetting entropy: "The motion that destroys/creates elsewhere."

These are, of course, mere intimations, but in a universe made more and more mysterious by our new knowledge of pulsars and quasars, black holes and white holes, sub-atomic particles and anti-matter, twisting spirals of coded genetic energy, and the like, intimations may be as effective as science in grasping for the nature of the whole thing. The stakes, in any case, are very high; as Couples says, in a different context, "All things double. Without duality, entropy. The universe God's mirror." (p. 58)

Such intimations aside, in the spiritual universe love is the one thing known to us with certitude, the one absolute, analogous to the speed of light in the physical cosmos. It is the one connecting link between the dualistic universes, according to Karl Barth's theology of the Incarnation; and even without the faith and hope of Barth's neo-orthodoxy, love remains a living remnant of St. Paul's triad, transcendent and efficacious. "Only goodness lives. But it does live." The ambiguity of Updike's erotic love, a life force harboring brutality, selfishness and a "mask of Death" quality, renders agape-love that much more efficacious by comparison. Parallels to Updike's theme of agape are obvious enough in several of the greatest writings of the West, including parts of the Bible and Plato's Symposium, but probably Updike's most immediate support for this theme is again de Rougemont, especially in the last few pages of Love Declared, where love is a positive antipode to the nihilism
postulated by natural science: "If thought finds no answer to the fundamental question asked by the Void: why not nothing? it surrenders to the Void and is reduced to nothing. What can retain it on the brink of nothing is the direct intuition of love." (pp. 233-4) These last sentences from *Love Declared* comprise, I think, a perfect summary of the meaning of *The Centaur*:

I might have doubted being, and becoming, and all our ideas about ‘God’: I have never doubted love itself. I might have doubted almost all the truths of Western morality and culture.... I have doubted most of the truths successively demonstrated by our sciences; and I do not cease to doubt our image of the world.... But I believe I have never doubted all this except ... in the name of love. It is the indubitable grace. I have no other certain faith, no other hope, and I see no meaning save love.

(p. 235)

It is this spirit that enables Caldwell-Chiron, in the book’s last chapter, to accept death not only in the daily immolation of self for his work and family, but also with respect to his imminent final extinction: “His will, a perfect diamond under the pressure of absolute fear, uttered the final word. Now.” (p. 222) Like the medieval Everyman, Caldwell has only Good Deeds as his companion going into the great darkness, but as Updike sees it, even among the burned out ruins of modern theology, this will suffice.

IV. Apollo

On his trip to the men’s room (p. 185), George Caldwell spots a graffitus, now sanitized, that puzzles him: “...he absorbs the fact, totally new to him that every FUCK could be made into a BOOK. But who would do such a thing?” Who indeed but the figure of the artist, forever bent to his sacred summons of transforming the gross crudities of the world into the delicate pressed flowers of perpetual memory? Through his ancient alchemy, FUCK becomes BOOK, life becomes art, flux becomes permanence: so that nothing of it may be eternally forgotten. The artist too, in our human scale, may confer immortality, and thereby share in it.

Updike’s own aspirations as an artist appear most openly in “Archangel,” a brief but consummate tally of his gifts and hopes and promises that seems to mirror his innermost craving. Like Wallace Stevens’ Necessary Angel of Earth, Updike’s Archangel works through the five senses, offering irresistible food and immaculate shelter and perfectly salvaged memories (including that of “the fair at the vanished poorhouse”). For the memories he reserves his greatest promise, in an archangelic prophecy worthy of Updike’s favorite secular writer, Proust: “Such glimmers I shall widen to rivers; nothing will

14 This ingenious analysis of the word in the men’s room was suggested to me by a magazine article I came across several years ago. Most regrettably, I have not been able to recall the name of the author or the magazine, and my substantial sleuth work in the library has failed to turn up the missing information. As I recall, it was a very short note, perhaps a page or less in length, and so may have escaped the usual bibliographical cataloguing.
be lost, not the least grain of remembered dust, and the multiplication shall be a thousand fold.” *(Pigeon Feathers*, p. 119) Here, at last, speaks a champion for the (otherwise) eternally forgotten.

In *The Centaur*, it is Peter Caldwell who must carry out the sacred mission: a Peter to his father’s Christ; an apostle of art rendering the Master’s example to the ages; a Fisher of Men like the artist in one of Updike’s earlier sketches (“The Sea’s Green Sameness” — 1960): “I do not expect the waves to obey my wand, or support my weight.... All I expect is that once into my blindly spun web of words the thing itself will break: make an entry and an account of itself.” *(Museums & Women*, p. 164) It doesn’t matter that Peter, having denied his father over and over again, is the weakest of disciples; nor even does it matter that, as a third-rate painter requiring the props of a pad in the Village and a Negro mistress, he lacks the goods to do the job. All that matters is that he has caught the fiery vision and now burns to transmit its splendor, moved by the artist’s eternal “hope that, my submission being perfect, the imprint of a beautiful and useful truth would be taken.” (p. 218)

Critics like Leslie Fiedler and Norman Podhoretz have sometimes disparaged Updike’s work, calling it poor, mindless, and irrelevant, but those of us who find *The Centaur* a brilliant, moving book will agree that in his portrayal of George Caldwell, Peter/Updike has netted a splendid catch indeed, worthy of its epic analogies. In this apostle of agape-love, Updike has presented what still remains his surest answer to the problems of nihilism and the changing of the gods. As a side effect, he has also insured that his own name, while civilization lasts, is not likely to be forgotten.

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