

Roger's Version

J. Updike

May 5-7, 2019

Updike is a slick author. Slick being a disparaging way of denoting anyone with an unusual writing skill which is more likely to engender jealousy than admiration. Or at least to admission of the latter. He is always a pleasure to read, there never being an awkward snag in his prose that flows so easily and seemingly effortlessly. When you read a book by him you are reminded of photo-realism, all the details are there in high resolution. He takes pictures of our contemporary world, focusing not on the obvious but what is to be found in the interstices and those being more real than real. Even when such endeavors are bound to lead to tedious lists or exhaustion, both as to the material as of the reader, his prose manages to make it palatable as well as merely palpable. It is of course true that many contemporary writers try to catch the mundane aspects of everyday life, but few if any do it so systematically and skillfully. Greene does not even attempt it, David Lodge does, but his efforts are fuzzier, falling short of attaining the crispness of Updike. As a master chronicler of American life, or at least the segment of life that involves likely readers of Updike, he is unchallenged. Yet, this particular book takes place in an unspecified university location on the East Coast in the mid eighties, but how much sense would it make to people in the future who never experienced those times first hand? So much of the evocation depends on shared associations (as pictures in a family album), otherwise it will fall short of its goal. When reading Victorian novels of mid 19th century, how much of them do we really understand? A writer conveys the concrete as well as the abstract. The former is particular and specific and will outside its context make no sense and be ignored, the latter is more universal and thus easier to communicate. Thus we can sympathize with people of the past only so far as it concerns the general and the abstract, that which is part of being human, and maybe this is in the long run the only thing that matters. As the British historian and philosopher R.G. Collingwood preaches, the past cannot be transported into the present only reconstructed, meaning reinterpreted and only partially to boot. On the other hand with Proust we have the tantalizing possibility that remembrance can under special circumstances be just that. The past imported into the present wholesale as a thing in itself, not reconstructed, as our normal memories are involving sight and sound, not smell. The former are more abstract entities which hence can be imagined and thus exist in imagined form, but our senses of smell are far more concrete and cannot be imagined in the same way, thus being beyond the grasp of the imagination, (which, however, does not mean that it cannot stimulate the imagination), and thus can only be experienced wholesale if at all. But we are now talking of memories, thoughts within the same universe, but surely it is impossible to convey the wholesaleness of sensation and memory from one mind to another? At least when it comes to qualia we are all trapped in solipsistic monadism.

The most striking and original aspect of the novel, at least as far as Updike is concerned, is the evocation of cosmological and evolutionary theory together with theological

musings. Updike was a Christian, a devout and sincere Christian, testified by his deep crisis of faith. People who have no faith cannot have a crisis about it, and when ostensibly losing it, feel no sense of loss, let alone regret. Updike did study a fair bit of theology and thus the musings on theology, in particular the writings of Barth, seem to be genuine, as they pertain to things he has thought deeply about and struggled with. But what about cosmology and evolution, or computer graphics, how much of that does he really understand or have any deeper experience of? Thomas Mann, to take another example, is not shy of displaying his erudition, although the impression you get, at least in the lengthy introductory parts of 'Doctor Faustus' is of an individual who has conscientiously done his homework and is regurgitating it (Mann also does a lot of musical theory in the same book, theory which he may have been tutored on by serious musicians, or at least by Adorno). Is Updike only regurgitating or should it be seen as the honest display of an intelligent and serious layman? There are a lot of popular books on cosmology and evolution, who reads them, and what do the lay readers get out of it? And how much can we expect them to get out of it? And more exactly what specifically can we hope they will take home with them? Obviously not that they will become cosmologists and evolutionary biologists; most experts cannot expect to become experts in fields beyond their expertise anyway. But is there a way of a general intelligent understanding of the significance of science and its findings and paradigms. It means something, and that this meaning can be understood and assimilated by intelligent laymen? If this is the case, that scientific culture can diffuse in its essentials beyond itself, attempts at popular communication are worthwhile after all.

Reading Updike one is amazed to find no egregious misunderstanding of neither cosmology nor evolution, in fact it is all basically correct and properly understood, in fact with an understanding that seems to go beyond the merely intended one, as if there has been a certain amount of digestion. And even more amazing, Updike does it on two levels, he first presents the crude accounts of the confused and evangelical graduate student, then tops it off with a more professional one, that crushes the half-baked ruminations of the youth. A rude awakening indeed, because metaphysical brooding unchallenged leads to a certain hubris of spurious insight, and when confronted with reality, or at least that of those who have probed it even deeper, involves a total deflation. So thin and transparent is the membrane which separates the profound from the merely ridiculous, So how does Updike do it, unless he has actually seriously thought things true? Has he had the sense of knowing when to stop, the skill to conceal his ignorance at least not to have it revealed. Or has he picked things up as you pick up a language or your native grammar, with thoughtless emulation, as modern programs are taught to do, under the pretense of 'deep learning'?

If there is a message to it all, it is the confrontation of Updike's theological mind with the pretensions of modern science, or rather its modern and naive interpreters. What the protagonist is repulsed by is the notion of turning God into just one more fact among others. If God is demystified as a mere fact, even if it gets him objective existence, it does that at the prize of making it pointless. The naivety of proving Gods existence by appealing to statistical extreme unlikeliness or arcane patterns of numerology (Updike would not know, or at least not the graduate student that the number 24 is actually intimately connected with K-3 surfaces, two-dimensional simply connected compact manifolds with

trivial canonical bundle, and as I used to claim, only half jocularly, that whenever 24 turns up in mathematics, a $K3$ surface is hidden somewhere, that there is but one '24' in the mathematical universe) that disgusts Updike's protagonist as well as himself. The old medieval scholasticism, spurned by both Erasmus and Luther, tried to prove the existence of God, thus making him subject to the whims of human reason. Talk about heresy. Heresy, of course, is not something of the past but still very much alive as a threat, in a world no longer ruled by authoritative religion but social political correctness.

A book by Updike always contains sex. In this case it concerns the sexual transgressions of the protagonist and his wife, mutually estranged through a tepid aftermath of a mutual illusion of fervent passion reduced to contented boredom. The protagonist, who serves as the classical all-knowing narrator, has an unusual detailed knowledge of his wife's trysts with the graduate student, one explanation being that it is indeed all in his head. A kind of wishful fantasy, many men get a kick out of imaging their spouses being intimate with others; in extreme cases they may even go at lengths to enact them. There is a term for this kind of deviation which I have forgotten, but apparently Salvador Dali (among others) indulged in it. But what about his own incestuous attraction to his half-sister's daughter? Is it technically incest by the way? You are not more related to your half-siblings progeny than you are to your cousins, and marriage between cousins are tolerated in many cultures, although we would feel it being a little bit too close for comfort. This young woman, still a teenager, has come into the protagonist's life only recently. She is in addition to being a relative also something of a slut, in fact already a mother through a most casual of couplings. The protagonist a former minister is now a professor of divinity, and the coupling of his immaculate credentials with a wanton slut, are most titillating, at least to him. He has the 'hots' for her, as she teases him, saying that it all goes back to his old desire for his half-sister (and a half-sister that is definitely incestuous), but if you want to fuck your sister, fuck me instead, I am a better lay, she taunts him. And the professor of divinity is turned on by the vulgarity of her speech and eventually succumbs, at a most inappropriate moment to boot, after returning the illegitimate child to the hospital under rightful suspicions of child abuse. Is this realistic? The desire certainly is, but actually to succumb to it so easily? That would entail not only the comical worries of AIDS but surely much more. Is this also just in the head of the protagonist or maybe more to the point in the head of the reader? One should not forget that in spite of the photo-realism, one should not expect it to extend to the psychology, it is after all fiction, and in fiction you can safely indulge in forbidden fantasies. The whole book is in fact written to allow the reader the titillation of indulging in the unspeakable in pursuit of the inedible, to invoke Oscar Wilde, with the alibi of actually pretending to be interested in a philosophical discussion of God versus science. But in the end, the flesh overpowers the spirit, its desires trumps the pretensions of the latter. And is it not the case that at least in Catholicism the sins of the flesh are forgiven, while the sins of the spirit are not?

May 8, 2019 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se