I. Barth, Tocqueville, and Emerson:  
Updike’s Appeals to the Self

In an unfavorable—and now legendary—review of Toward the End of Time (1997), David Foster Wallace refers to John Updike as one of the “Great Male Narcissists who’ve dominated postwar American fiction” (51). The label is apt, for many of the specific indictments that have been lodged against Updike in the course of his career—misogyny, satyriasis, quietism, racism, preciousness of style, distortion of Christian doctrine—converge upon the accusation of a pervasive narcissism. Whatever his ostensible subject, Updike’s constant focus is his ineffable self, embracing contradiction and perpetually affirming, even in his weaknesses and anxieties, the wondrousness of his being. It may be a remarkable feat to win both the St. Edmund Campion Medal (awarded by the Catholic Book Club to a “distinguished Christian person of letters”) and a “Lifetime Achievement Award” for “Bad Sex” in fiction—but somehow it seems less surprising in a man who titled his memoir Self-Consciousness and devoted far more space in it to his psoriasis than to his wives and children.¹

¹ The phrase “distinguished Christian person of letters,” from the award description of the Campion Medal, is quoted by Updike in the remarks he delivered upon receiving the medal on 11 September 1997 (More Matter 850). Updike won the Bad Sex in Fiction
To call Updike’s fiction narcissistic is of course to criticize the author as well as the work, and indeed, to an unusual degree readers who dislike the work view the man as reprehensible. No doubt this has something to do with the fact that many of Updike’s fiercest critics have been feminists who have interpreted the slogan “the personal is the political” as license for ad hominem attacks. Yet this cannot be a sufficient explanation, for in the case of many other twentieth-century male writers, “personal” attacks in the 1970s soon gave way to more sophisticated critiques that located sexism less in the malice of the author than in all-encompassing structures of discourse or ideology—while critiques of Updike have frequently retained their personal character. Though I agree with feminist critics that Updike is as self-absorbed as his writing suggests, I do not agree with their implication that his work may therefore be dismissed as unconscious solipsism or gratuitous offense. (No merely solipsistic writer, after all, can sustain the interest—or even the opposition—that Updike has.) Wayne Booth’s famous distinction between the implied and real author of a work of fiction, intended to forestall unproductive debates about the sincerity of authors when readers judge their work, may or may not be tenable—Richard Walsh, for instance, has mounted a vigorous critique of it—but whether readers regard the narrators of Updike’s novels as real or implied stand-ins for the man (as I am usually comfortable doing) or not, they can certainly identify a deliberate rhetoric of narcissism as central to his work.

2. Consider, for instance, Mary Gordon’s judgment: “[Updike] has a real problem about women. He covers that up with a notion that he really does love women, but he doesn’t. . . . For him, women are really corrupt in the flesh. He’s a liar, stylistically and morally” (Conversations 66–67). Such a judgment seems on a continuum with the (admittedly anecdotal) judgments reported by David Foster Wallace as representative of “literary readers . . . under forty . . . a fair number [of whom] are female”: Updike is “[j]ust a penis with a thesaurus,” a “son of a bitch” who has never had “one unpublished thought,” who “[m]akes misogyny seem literary” (52).

3. For Walsh, “fictions are narrated by their authors, or by their characters. . . . Extradi- egetic heterodiegetic narrators (that is, “impersonal” and “authorial” narrators), who cannot be represented without thereby being rendered homodiegetic or intradiiegetic, are in no way distinguishable from authors” (84). The “implied author” disappears entirely. What do we make of fictions by a writer such as Updike, whose characters, whether first-person narrators or not, are often versions of himself? I am not sure that “reliability” (or the lack thereof) is a sufficient criterion for distinguishing between Updike the author and one of his narrated characters, for many of the hallmarks of an “unreliable” narrator—such as inconsistency between thoughts and actions, or false consciousness—are revealed, once one has explored Updike’s fictional project more closely, not to indicate unreliability at all. Updike’s work, that is to say, is inconsistent in the same consistent ways. We may reject his premises or the judgments of his characters that they imply, but if my argument in this chapter is correct,
Updike’s protagonists present themselves or are limned by their narrators both as representative selves of their historical moment—an effect typically achieved through the proliferation of realistic detail about the world they inhabit—and as quasi-shamanistic illuminators who bestow meaning on this world through their sustained attention to it. When they succeed in persuading readers of their sometimes outrageous claims, they do so because Updike has successfully exploited his readers’ own narcissism. This is so not only when the territory is sex—where the possibilities for solipsism are obvious—but also, more audaciously, when Updike presses the claims of his Protestant Christianity.

For Updike, the necessity of Christianity is described in unabashedly narcissistic terms, as the means to thwart death, to go on “being a self forever.” Updike has candidly identified himself as one “for whom nothingness . . . is an insuperable problem, an outrageous cancellation rendering every other concern, from mismatching socks to nuclear holocaust, negligible” (Self-Consciousness 228). He also implies that the division of humanity into those who fear nothingness and those who regard it with indifference is a phenomenon that fully comes into its own in the twentieth century, when not only grave and high-minded Victorian agnostics but also large numbers of professed Christians in the United States find belief difficult:

During [my] adolescence, I reluctantly perceived of the Christian religion I had been born into that almost no one believed it, believed it really—not its ministers, nor its pillars like my father and his father before him. Though signs of belief (churches, public prayers, mottos on coins) existed everywhere, when you moved toward Christianity it disappeared, as fog solidly opaque in the distance thins to transparency when you walk into it. I decided I nevertheless would believe. I found a few authors, a very few—Chesterton, Eliot, Unamuno, Kierkegaard, Karl Barth—who helped me believe. Under the shelter (like the wicker chairs on the side porch) that I improvised from their pages I have lived my life. (Self-Consciousness 230)

This confession emphasizes not only the fiercely willed quality of Updike’s belief, but also his sense that his predicament is historically representative. As an educated man of the twentieth century, unable to deny the strengths of a thoroughgoing materialism, he suggests that if Christian belief is salvageable, it must be buttressed by arguments both suitably intellectual (hence his need for the imprimatur of celebrated theologians and writers)

his authorial intentions, whether expressed through an extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator or a character, are discernible.
and deeply felt—arguments that seem absent from the daily life of existing congregations. Yet what makes this desire for eternal life narcissistic is neither the desire itself nor the arguments that it marshals but the nature of the life imagined. As the Reverend Tom Marshfield puts it in *A Month of Sundays* (1975), humans possess “a craving not for transformation into a life beyond imagining but for our *ordinary life*, the mundane life we so driftingly and numbly live, to go on forever and forever. The only Paradise we can imagine is this Earth. The only life we desire is this one” (209). The corollary is announced by Alfred Clayton in *Memories of the Ford Administration* (1992): “We want life eternally, or else its joys are hopelessly poisoned” (215). Hence the continuity between the erotic and the religious in Updike’s work: sex, like Christian belief, is a fist shaken in the face of death, an intimation of familiar corporeal splendors forever. What Freud calls primary narcissism—“the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation” (546)—corresponds more closely to Updike’s sexual and religious yearnings alike than to the orthodox Christian hope for a transfigured life in the presence of God.

To be sure, Updike sometimes obscures the narcissism of his writing by casting it as testimony to the splendor of God’s creation, in a manner that occasionally recalls O’Connor’s notion of writing as sacramental: “The yearning for an afterlife is the opposite of selfish: it is love and praise for the world that we are privileged, in this complex interval of light, to witness and experience” (*Self-Consciousness* 217). Or, more explicitly:

Imitation is praise. Description expresses love. I early arrived at these self-justifying inklings. Having accepted that old Shillington blessing, I have felt free to describe life as accurately as I could, with especial attention to human erosions and betrayals. What small faith I have has given me what artistic courage I have. My theory was that God already knows everything and cannot be shocked. And only truth is useful. Only truth can be built upon. From a higher, inhuman point of view, only truth, however harsh, is holy. (231)

Yet such sentiments are accompanied by a note of deliberate self-justification, a rhetorical ploy that admits to the compensatory nature of narcissism. Humans love the created world and yearn for an afterlife not because the world exists and is good but because they desire “an intended relation to the outer world,” a “coherent matrix [that] has been prepared for this precious self of ours” (218). Even the truth-telling of writing is, in the end, about comfort: “The fabricated truth of poetry and fiction makes a shelter in which I feel safe, sheltered within interlaced plausibilities in the image of
a real world for which I am not to blame. Such writing is in essence pure” (231). The confession of self-love and the conviction of “purity” follow so swiftly upon the theological affirmation that they cannot but be read as an invitation to fellow narcissists, a wager that readers will recognize their own desires in the work and enjoy with Updike the fellowship of complicity. Like David, the protagonist of his early story “Pigeon Feathers,” Updike pays tribute to creation but does so because he believes that it confirms his own centrality: “[T]he God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever” (150).

Updike’s suturing of this narcissistic motive for Christian belief to a theology derived from Karl Barth is one of the most intriguing aspects of his work, for it distinguishes him both from the other major Christian fiction writers of the mid-twentieth century (most of whom were Roman or Anglo-Catholic) and from the half-secularized mainline American Protestantism of the late twentieth century. A schematic account of Updike’s differences from mainline Protestantism might read like this: Barth, not Paul Tillich or John Shelby Spong; sola fide, not faith and works; a God transcendent and absconditus, not immanent and accessible; traditional dogma, including the insistence that some will be damned, not trendy appeals to social justice and feel-good universalism. Updike’s sanctioning of unrestrained erotic pursuit is, of course, inconsistent with traditional Christian morality—as John Gardner once sarcastically put it, “Christ has redeemed us in advance, so let’s fornicate” (98)—but it has its origins in Luther’s injunction to “sin boldly” and in Barth’s pugnacious claim that Satan’s appeal is “to genuine morality, to the freedom of a knowledge which distinguishes and an activity which elects” (qtd. in Wood, Redemption 46) instead of to a simple, abiding trust in God. Such a position rejects ethics as sinful presumption and calls into question Updike’s own assertion that his novels “are all meant to be moral debates with the reader,” in which “[t]he question is usually, ‘What is a good man? or ‘What is goodness?’” (“One Big Interview” 502). Only in Updike’s earliest work—and above all in The Poorhouse Fair (1959)—are there protagonists in whom ethical action and orthodox belief form a coherent whole, and it seems significant that

4. It is instructive to contrast Updike’s use of the word “good” here with his complaint elsewhere that Muriel Spark’s novels “lacked a compelling portrait of the good, and that without that it was difficult to provide a convincing portrait of evil” (qtd. in Spark, Interview with Sara Frankel, 452). Once, when once asked about this judgment, Spark retorted, with much justice, “Well I think it depends on what you mean by a portrait of the good. . . . I don’t know whether John Updike has given us a convincing portrait of the good, mind you; his characters are just in and out of bed all the time” (Interview with Sara Frankel 452–53).
the clearest of these exemplars, John Hook, is modeled on Updike’s grandfather, whose serene connection to a premodern ethos is assumed. For anxious moderns such as Updike himself, it would seem, orthodoxy can be preserved only when ethics is renounced altogether, for ethics is by its very nature too worldly, too unconcerned with eternity—indeed, too feminine. It may be uncharitable to attribute the change in Updike’s attitude, as Frederick Crews does, to “an overreaction to self-judgment on the single point of adultery” (173)—but it is true that the “charitable works and kindly feelings” that Barth denigrates as a retreat from true Christianity are indeed, in Updike’s fiction, “the values invariably associated with the deserted or soon-to-be-deserted wife” (173).

The straight line between Updike’s version of Christianity and the importance of adultery and divorce to his work reveals that for all its debt to European theologians, Updike’s Christianity is also distinctly American, for it conflates adherence to sola fide with an American ideal of innocence, as Mary Gordon, following Leslie Fiedler, once shrewdly noted. Updike retains the notion of sin, which in orthodox Christianity maims all human beings, as the chief source of evil and confusion in the world. Yet in a development that can be read either as a startling reversal of orthodox Christianity or as its necessary evolution in a secularized world, Christian faith often appears not as the mark of God’s redemption from sin but as the expression of a primordial innocence, a matter of narcissistic being rather than doing, that is somehow retained in the face of evil. Unlike the heroes of the nineteenth-century novels that Fiedler examines, for instance, Updike’s run toward rather than away from sex, but the underlying fear remains: there is always, as Ralph Wood observes, “the fearsome coincidence and equation of opposites: sex equals life equals death” (Comedy 189). That they pursue sex nevertheless and sing in praise of it suggests that adultery is in part a testing ground for innocence, that one confirms one’s innocence by plunging into carnality and emerging unscathed, ready, like Rabbit Angstrom, to run again. The materiality of sex, however enjoyable, becomes a focus of contempt—as Rabbit puts it, “the mud of women, of making babies” (Rabbit is Rich 202)—but the essential and innocent self remains unengaged. Indeed, the distaste with procreation that accompanies such an attitude helps to explain the increasingly outré depictions of car-

5. “One of the things that I think is remarkable about the American idea of innocence is that it doesn’t seem connected to behavior. So that, in other words, you can behave badly, you can even kill and still be called an innocent. And that, to me, is extraordinarily peculiar. That is, I think, a tremendously Protestant notion of innocence, that goodness is something you’re born with and that you don’t lose by behaving un-innocently. And I think this is very, very different from a European tradition.” (Gordon, Conversations 75) Because Updike embraces such innocence, he is, for Gordon, “a kind of professional boy” (66).
nality in Updike’s work (in Rabbit’s case, from fellatio to anal sex to sleeping with his daughter-in-law—not, perhaps, comparable to the Marquis de Sade, but certainly “transgressive” enough to earn notoriety). The power of reproduction, figured as belonging to women, becomes a trap for men to escape or triumph over—either by conceiving of nonprocreative sexuality as fecund nevertheless, or, in the most chilling instances, as something close to celebrating sterility for its own sake.  

Indeed, in his most unguarded moments, Updike’s reflections about innocence and death seem less an expression of Christianity than of a thinly disguised version of what Harold Bloom calls the Gnostic “American religion,” delivered in an Emersonian accent. The Calvinist mystery—that God is the ultimate author of evil, but human beings are nevertheless responsible for it—becomes transmuted into a kind of radical innocence that would equate creation with the fall and yearn for whatever spark of uncreated divinity might still be imprisoned within matter. Consider, for instance, this autobiographical account of watching a rainstorm from the safety of his porch as a boy:

On our side porch, it was my humble job, when it rained, to turn the wicker furniture with its seats to the wall, and in these porous woven caves I would crouch, happy almost to tears, as the rain drummed on the porch rail and rattled the leaves of the grape arbor and touched my wicker shelter with a mist like the vain assault of an atomic army . . . [T]he experiencer is motionless, holding his breath as it were, and the things experienced are morally detached from him: there is nothing he can do, or ought to do, about the flow, the tumult. He is irresponsible, safe, and witnessing: the entire body, for those rapt moments, mimics the position of the essential self within its jungle of physiology and its moldering tangle of inheritance and circumstance. Early in his life the child I was sensed the guilt in

6. A few examples: The ludicrous poem “Fellatio” (1969) imagines that “each of these clean secretaries” “takes / a fountain into her mouth / and lets her insides, drenched into seed, / Bower into landscapes” that include “small farms each / with a silver silo” (Midpoint 73). In *Rabbit Is Rich*, Rabbit Angstrom describes anal sex with Thelma in this way: “The grip is tight at the base but beyond, where a cunt is all velvety suction and caress, there is no sensation: a void, a pure black box, a casket of perfect nothingness. He is in that void” (417). Marshall Boswell associates this passage with references to homosexual ministers in Updike’s work and argues that in both instances, we see the influence of Barth’s notion of evil as “the power of the being which arises out of the weight of the divine ‘No’” (qtd. in Boswell 165). That Roger Lambert cheerfully urges his niece Verna to have an abortion in Roger’s Version, despite the fact that he is not the father of the child, may also be relevant here.

7. For this reason, I find it ironic that Bloom has consistently ranked Updike as a second-rate writer, “a minor novelist with a major style” (7). For a good exposition of Updike’s Emersonian strain in the *Rabbit* novels, see David Jarraway.
things, inseparable from the pain, the competition: the sparrow dead on
the lawn, the flies swatted on the porch, the impervious leer of the bully
on the school playground. The burden of activity, of participation, must
plainly be shouldered, and has its pleasures. But they are cruel pleasures.
There was nothing cruel about crouching in a shelter and letting phe-
omena slide by: it was ecstasy. The essential self is innocent, and when
it tastes its own innocence knows that it lives forever. If we keep utterly
still, we can suffer no wear and tear, and will never die. (Self-Consciousness
34–35)

This passage, an extraordinarily pure distillation of Updike’s rhetoric
of narcissism, is surpassingly lovely but difficult to describe as Christian.
Its Cartesian implication that the “essential self” is imprisoned in a “jungle
of physiology” works against a sacramental understanding of matter and
tends toward heterodox interpretations of the Incarnation, while the notion
that this self is “innocent” as long as it does nothing contradicts the doc-
trine of original sin. We would die, of course, even if we could “keep utterly
still,” but the Christianity that we believe will save us from eternal death
does not, in Updike’s view, transfigure us in ways now unimaginable; it
returns us to our individual childhood narcissisms, before we sensed “the
guilt in things.” The narcissistic appeal is thus inseparable from a capac-
ity for American nostalgia, but the imagined lost golden age is usually, in
Updike, the recent past, a time actually experienced by his characters and
invested both with its glamour and with a wistful sense of failure by the
very fact of their having lived through it.

As a fictive strategy of persuasion, a rhetoric of narcissism is fraught
with danger. Unlike more forthright appeals to elitism (whether aesthetic
and intellectual or ethical and religious), which gesture toward objective
standards against which a claim to elite status can be measured, narcissism
offers no justification for itself and thus always risks the response, “Who
the hell do you think you are?” Yet in another sense, narcissistic appeals are
more in keeping with the character of everyday life in secular, democratic
societies, for in precisely this lack of justification they reflect what Alexis de
Tocqueville called the democratic “passion for equality” (226). Noting that
“[i]n democratic societies, each citizen is usually preoccupied with some-
thing quite insignificant: himself” (561), Tocqueville hypothesized that such
preoccupation explains why an American who approaches poetry expects
“some prodigious thing to behold” as “the price he demands to tear himself
briefly away from the myriad small concerns that keep him busy and lend
charm to his existence” (561). Tocqueville feared that such demands would
produce a literature of the bizarre; he did not foresee that in the work of
Whitman and many of his successors, the tendency toward grandiosity would be applied to and conflated with the perceiving consciousness itself, with more felicitous, if uneven, results. He did, however, accurately perceive that such a literature springs from conditions of broad equality and gives rise not only to vaunting feelings of independence but also to fantasies of plenitude that mask or self-consciously transfigure the weakness of any given individual.

The egalitarian impulse behind Updike’s rhetoric of narcissism helps to account, I believe, for the delight with which Updike adopts so-called politically incorrect positions—for it suggests that those who style themselves as progressives or leftists are similarly motivated and have no claim to a bogus ethical superiority. In Self-Consciousness, the Rabbit tetralogy, and the “Pennsylvania books” (such as The Centaur, Of the Farm, and the play Buchanan Dying), Updike identifies with the rural and small-town world of what has come to be called “Red America” and suggests that his own life among readers of The New Yorker has been a deliciously ironic exile. Christopher Lasch notes that many cosmopolitan Americans imagine this territory to be “technologically backward, politically reactionary, repressive in its sexual morality, middlebrow in its tastes, smug and complacent, dull and dowdy” (5–6), and both Updike and his characters have accepted many of these characterizations with a kind of whimsically defiant pride. (As D. Keith Mano once jeered: “Pennsylvania, my God. Only a magnificent eccentric could run up debts to Pennsylvania” [75]). Yet this egalitarian narcissism applies no less to characters and narrators from Updike’s novels of suburban New England, such as Couples or Roger’s Version. Neither the working-class- and petit bourgeois nationalism that led Rabbit (and Updike) himself to support the Vietnam War nor the cold self-indulgence of his affluent Tarboxes in Couples is subject to anything approaching a rigorous critique; both are equally the expression of narcissistic rather than elitist attitudes. If there is any justification for these attitudes, something that might allow readers to identify with and share them, it is to be found in the egalitarian, American milieu of the fiction itself, no matter where it is set—hence the affectionate profligacy of Updike’s descriptions, which strive in Whitmanian fashion for an observer who assimilates and redeems the observed.

Christians and non-Christians alike have observed that one of the attractions of Christianity is its insistence that before God, human beings are, in Peter Augustine Lawler’s words, “unique, free, and infinitely valuable” (33), irrespective of their intelligence, moral standing (if anything, conspicuous sinners have a certain advantage), taste, or degree of wealth. The conviction of their own value that Updike’s protagonists generally
possess seems to be derived from both their Christianity and their American-ness, which for some characters appear to be conflated. (In Rabbit Angstrom’s words, “America is beyond power, it acts as in a dream, as a face of God” [Rabbit Redux 47]). While Updike and his more cerebral narrators may have required the permission of Barth or Tertullian to believe, he does not demand similar justification for Rabbit, nor does he intend that his readers despise the “unexamined” quality of Rabbit’s faith or his visceral love for the United States. Updike’s theology and patriotism are deeply personal: characters who quote Barth or meditate upon James Buchanan do so not out of a snobbish or sincere desire for intellectual rigor or amplitude, but simply because they are the kind of people who do this kind of thing. (Indeed, their intellectualism is itself mediocre.) Other characters, equally narcissistic and mediocre, do their own kinds of things. Most often, the stakes are weighted most heavily against those characters who reject not only the “infinite value” of Updike’s heroes but also their own—those characters, that is, who refuse to wear their American innocence proudly, either because they are women or because their adherence to liberalism or secular humanism entails a critique of American innocence. To be American, or, more precisely, to be privileged observer and participant of the American scene, is to be already redeemed—all one has to do is acknowledge the fact.

Paradoxically, Updike’s egalitarianism produces an ethos both affectionate and misanthropic. On the one hand, everyone is eligible for the redemptive embrace of Updike’s American Christianity; on the other hand, no innocent American owes anything to anyone but God, and in this isolation cruelty and solipsism spring eternal. Perhaps Updike’s greater popularity with educated general readers than with tenured critics springs in part from this egalitarianism, which makes intellectuals understandably distrustful. On the other hand, if Updike succeeds in making Christian belief attractive, this may have something to do with the appealingly egalitarian, yet also complacent revelation that believers are not only just as susceptible to cruelty as anyone else, but also already forgiven for it and therefore (and here the claim becomes doctrinally problematic) immune to further charges of hypocrisy.

In this chapter, I will consider Updike’s rhetoric of narcissism broadly over the course of his career, focusing primarily on his first novel, The Poorhouse Fair (1959), and his late historical novel, In the Beauty of the Lilies (1996), though I will also touch briefly on a number of his other texts, including Couples (1968), Roger’s Version (1986), and Terrorist (2006). I do not develop an extended reading of the Rabbit novels, partly out of a desire not to step onto well-trodden ground or to repeat critical commonplaces, but also out of a conviction that the two novels at the center of this chap-
ter have not yet received the attention that they deserve. I argue that these two novels can be viewed as poles between which Updike’s rhetoric of narcissism moves, and the premise common to both is the waning of historic Christianity in the United States—a problem that extends back at least as far as to what Ann Douglas called “the feminization of American culture” in the early nineteenth century, but which is exacerbated by the remoteness of God in Updike’s Barthean theology. In *The Poorhouse Fair*, Updike has not yet broken with the conviction that belief and right conduct should accompany each other, and in the novel’s central debate between a believer and an atheist, the believer compels not so much because of his arguments—the atheist’s are in fact stronger—but because of his personal integrity. The believer’s ringing defense of Christian belief and evident charity toward his opponent, moreover, reveal that at the beginning of his career, Updike was willing to take the claims of atheism seriously and to combat those claims in the culture at large, even if the overwhelming fear of death as a motive for belief is still present. In *The Beauty of the Lilies*, on the other hand, suggests that because Updike finds it hard to take disbelief seriously—despite the fact that two of its protagonists are professed unbelievers—he also has difficulty portraying authentic belief convincingly. Across the whole of his career, Updike retains the image of a God who has withdrawn, but in his later work, his characters’ reasons to believe or not to believe become equally narcissistic yet also more marked with a persistent sense of personal failure. Indeed, for all that Updike maintains his critique of liberal, feminized theology, his own protagonists increasingly seem too conscious of—indeed, too narcissistically delighted by—their own weaknesses to proffer a convincing alternative.

**II. When the Wood Was Green:**

Fears of Religious and National Decline in *The Poorhouse Fair*

Readers who come to *The Poorhouse Fair* after having read Updike’s more celebrated works are generally surprised: no sex, no thinly disguised ciphers for Updike himself, no extended discussions of Protestant theologians, no icy misanthropy lurking in the wings. Yet it is not necessarily misleading to call the novel, as George J. Searles has done, Updike’s “thesis statement” (231), for at its center is a defense of traditional Christian belief. This defense partakes of several rhetorical strategies, of which an actual positive argument for God’s existence (a fairly predictable argument from design) is the least prominent. More often, God is presented as the neces-
sary precondition for love, patriotism, excellence, and—most uncharacteristically for Updike—goodness. At the same time, arguments against God, grounding themselves in a desire that the world should be other than it is, are revealed to spring from the same narcissistic impulses as belief in God, so that their ethical force is called into question. Published before “the sexual revolution” became a slogan, *The Poorhouse Fair* does not revel in the putative gap between ethics and Christian orthodoxy, as many of Updike’s later works do. Yet it is continuous with them in its overt argument that religious faith and love of the sensuous particular are essential to the good life in general and to the continued existence of the United States in particular.

At the center of the novel is the debate between John Hook, a ninety-four year-old former schoolteacher, and Conner, the administrator of the poorhouse where he lives, about the existence of God and the afterlife. Structurally, the debate recalls similar verbal tussles in O’Connors’s fiction—between Sheppard and Rufus Johnson in “The Lame Shall Enter First,” or between Mason Tarwater and Rayburn in *The Violent Bear It Away*—and like O’Connor’s characters, Hook and Conner are types: the one deeply religious, gentle, and slightly ridiculous but lovable; the other tormented but passionate in his atheism and torn between a heartfelt desire to do good and an even more powerful desire to be admired for his goodness. Yet despite Updike’s clear sympathies for Hook’s side in the argument, there is an apparent effort to be fair to Conner, evident in the greater portion of the novel devoted to Conner’s thoughts and words, which are often sympathetically presented, though never without the narrator’s irony.

The debate between Hook and Conner springs up when Amy Mortis, another resident of the poorhouse, speculates about what Heaven must be like. Conner responds with a rapturous picture of the future:

“I see [Heaven] placed on this earth. There will be no disease. There will be no oppression, political or economic, because the administration of power will be in the hands of those who have no hunger for power, but who are, rather, dedicated to the cause of all humanity. . . . No longer suffering but beauty will be worshipped. Art will mirror no longer struggle but fulfillment. Each man will know himself—without delusions, without muddle, and within the limits of that self-knowledge will construct a sane and useful life. Work and love: parks: orchards. Understand me. The factors which for ages have warped the mind of man and stunted his body will be destroyed; man will grow like a tree in the open. There will be no waste. No pain and above all no waste. And this heaven will come to this earth, and come soon.”
Mrs. Mortis asked, “Soon enough for us?”

“No you personally perhaps. But for your children, and your grandchildren.”

“But for us ourselves?”

“No.” The word hung huge in the living room, the “o” a hole that let in the cold of the void.

“Well, then,” Mrs. Mortis spryly said, “to hell with it.” (106–8)

In this first stage of the argument, before Hook joins it, Conner’s vision is deflated by Mrs. Mortis’s final remark, and everyone listening laughs with her in agreement. Mrs. Mortis voices here the characteristic Updikean narcissism: what good is a heaven confined to this life, from which vast numbers will be excluded simply because they die before technology and proper education make it available? Only eternal life would allow Conner’s vision to be a true heaven, for only it would guarantee the infinite value of each human being, in his or her solitariness, without qualification. Conner appeals to an image of individual strength when he describes the future man as “like a tree in the open,” but his heaven is nonetheless communal, with “work,” “love,” and—implicitly but nonetheless inescapably—sacrifice (“above all no waste”) as essential to it. Mrs. Mortis’s response refuses sacrifice for the happiness of future generations and reaffirms her earlier resentment toward Conner when he suggested that she might like to move her table: “You expect us to give up the old ways, and make this place a little copy of the world outside, the way it’s going. I don’t say you don’t mean well, but it won’t do. We’re too old and too mean; we’re too tired. Now if you say to me, you must move your belongings over beneath the tree, I’ll do it, because I have no delusions as to whose mercy we’re dependent upon” (43). Conner is astonished by the “blunt injustice” (43) of her words. Yet her selfishness binds her more closely to her fellow human beings, who laugh in identification with her, while Connor, feeling “the common exclusion from the run of human hearts that minutes before he had imagined as binding them” (108), is pained. The man who imagines future humanity in terms of communal work and belonging nevertheless perceives his own isolation from more fundamental forms of connection, such as the family. It is fitting that he hates beds—those most common foci of domestic and erotic relation—because they are “damp and possessive” (49).

Belittled by Mrs. Mortis, Conner continues the argument with Hook. Hook does not contradict Mrs. Mortis, but he turns the argument away from the desire for eternal life and toward the conviction that God exists and that faith in God requires right conduct. According to Hook, punish-
ment necessarily follows sin and is even transferred between generations: “And who is to say how the ailments of my childhood may have been the fruit of my father’s short-comings, or of his before him. . . . The bookkeeping is far more strict than even that of a Boston banker. If the size of a mouth is passed down, why not the burden of wrongdoing?” (111). When Conner asks for evidence that God exists, Hook turns to the argument from design, professing delight in creation and skepticism that something could be generated from nothing without God. Conner counters with the existence of pain, ugliness, and stupidity, contending that “if the universe was made, it was made by an idiot, and an idiot crueler than Nero. . . . Life is a maniac raving in a sealed room” (113, 114). The two sides of the argument are familiar enough, drawing opposed conclusions from the same points of reference, and they quickly end in an impasse. Conner speaks of the terrible immensity of the stars in the nothingness of space, while Hook speaks of them as “points of light arranged at random, to give the night sky adornment” (114). In the end, Conner wins the argument on logic, shaking Hook with his anecdote of a Peruvian Indian who, upon being given electric shock, had a hallucination of Christ speaking. But Hook wins rhetorically, charging Conner with a “bitterness” that “is the willful work of [his] own heart” (111) and concluding that “[t]here is no goodness, without belief. There is only busy-ness” (116). His perception that Conner is both bitter and full of busy-ness (the novel begins, in fact, with Hook’s quite unnecessary marking of the chairs in the poorhouse with personalized nameplates for each resident—an action that provokes anger in most of the residents and that Hook dismisses with the phrase “A child must tinker” [4])—does not, of course, prove the existence of God, but it does suggest that atheism is more often the result of personal bitterness than of logical arguments pursued in good faith.

Conner is wounded by Hook’s accusations because he knows them to be true. For all that he desires to do good, he is even greedier for praise. Stirred by music, he indulges in fantasies that combine his desire to be worshiped for his achievements with visions of corporeal beauty and sexual fulfillment:

In the language of melody speeches about man’s aspirations and eventual victory could be made that explicit language would embarrass. He could not hear a dozen chords without crystals building in his head, images: naked limbs, the exact curve of the great muscle of a male thigh, cities, colored spires soaring. Man was good. There was a destination. Health could be bought. . . . He envisioned grown men and women, lightly clad, playing, on the brilliant sand of a seashore, children’s games. A man threw
a golden ball, his tunic slowly swirling with the exertion; a girl caught it. . . . Another man caught the girl by the waist. She had a wide belt. He had her above his head; she bent way back, her throat curved against the blue above the distant domes. The man was Conner. Then there was Conner again, at his desk, speaking to grateful delegates, calm, flexible, humorous; the listeners laughed, admiringly. Conner shunned admiration, and gained it doublefold; the world was under his wing. Yet in visualizing this world which worshipped him, he returned to the triangles and rhomboids flashingly formed by the intersection of legs and torsos scissoring in sport, and the modulated angles of nude thoracic regions, brown breasts leaning one against another, among scarves of everlasting cloth, beneath the sun. (124–25)

Again, Conner is made both sympathetic and ridiculous. His discomfort with language is of course disadvantageous for a character in a novel, for the music and mental imagery that move him must be rendered verbally—and were he real, he would no doubt be embarrassed by Updike’s description of his fantasies. His delight in the human form of course makes him a kindred spirit of humanists who trace their intellectual heritage to the Greeks, while the playful eroticism of the scene might be seen as tribute to Updike’s praise of creation. Yet there is a disturbing undercurrent as well. Conner responds less to the particularity of human flesh than to its ability to be redescribed as geometric figures, as “triangles and rhomboids,” so that his delight in it seems continuous with that of the cities with “colored spires soaring.” The power to refigure human beings as manipulable shapes, in turn, is continuous with his own desire for power, both sexual and political, and with his conviction that intangible markers of well-being such as health may be purchased. Conner may dream of a world in which power is exercised by “those who have no hunger for it,” but his own hunger for it raises the question of how one knows such a world could ever exist.

Indeed, Conner provides a textbook illustration of the tension inherent within many contemporary intellectuals’ embrace of Darwin. On the one hand, the process of evolution, guided as it is by natural selection, cannot possibly be teleological, and viewed objectively, existence cannot have any meaning beyond what is groundlessly attributed to it. On the other hand, Conner’s faith in an evolutionary telos—a thoroughly human world without oppression, greed, or the desire for power—is clung to despite this lack of grounding, and in this sense his view is just dependent upon faith as Hook’s. Repeatedly Conner torments himself with the discrepancy between the glorious imagined future and the intolerableness of what is, and while
he is capable of flashes of searing humility when he realizes how imperfectly he lives his ideals, more often he is “appalled by the conservatism zoological charts portrayed” and indulges eugenicist thoughts about his subhuman enemies: “He could picture the woman who had sent him the letter, her active pink nose, her dim fearful eyes, her pointed fingers crabbedly scraping across the paper—a tree-shrew, a rat that clings to bark. When would they all die and let the human day dawn?” (78). Conner is in this sense faithful to the project that Alain Badiou identifies as the crucial to the thought of the twentieth century, “the idea of changing man, of creating a new man . . . [which] always comes down to demanding that the old one be destroyed” (8). If the possibility of creating human beings who do not desire power is at all feasible, then much blood will have to be spilled. Under the cover of Darwinian science, dependent upon the vagaries of genes and environments, Conner espouses a Promethean and even transhumanist liberation, looking forward to “the crystalline erections”—a revealing double entendre that suggests a mineral rather than an animal sexuality—“that in his heart he felt certain would arise, once his old people were gone” (64).

Yet one of the more intriguing aspects of *The Poorhouse Fair* is that Conner and Hook are equally frustrated by the contemporary world because of its lack of opportunities for heroism, a lack associated with the ascendancy of feminine values. Readers may be appalled by intimations of bloodshed in Conner’s worldview, but Hook too admires martial values, and even though he speaks of “a war we can wage without blood” (160), he also thinks of virtue—which he at one point defines as “obedience to the commands of God” (111)—as “[a]n austerity of the hunt, a manliness from which comes all life, so that it can be written that the woman takes her life from the man” (160). It follows that because such manly austerity is almost gone—Hook opines oracularly that “[t]his last decade . . . has witnessed the end of the world, if the people would but wake to it” (152)—the United States has become feminized and pathetic: “Women are the heroes of dead lands” (160). Conner’s preferred metaphors are vegetative rather than feminine, but his own sense of the contemporary scene is much the same: “He wanted things clean; the world needed renewal, and this was a time of history when there were no cleansing wars or no sweeping purges, when reform was slow, and decayed things were allowed to stand and rot themselves away” (64). It seems to him unaccountable that the heroic humanist forebears should have produced a modern world with “few opportunities for zeal anywhere” (64), and he “envie[s] the first rationalists their martyrdoms and the first reformers their dragons of reaction and selfishness” (65). He has little of the delight in creation that even O’Connor’s
Rayber perceives, and when he finds himself “content to gaze at nothing, or what amounted to nothing,” he can think only that he has been “infected with the repose that was only suitable to inmates waiting out their days” (66). Against the humanist vision of perfected humanity and the Christian eschatological hope looms the decadent present of political consensus (“[t]he opposition of Republican and Democrat had been unreal since the Republican administrations of a generation ago” [93]) that embraces instead “the tendency of the universe toward eventual homogeneity, each fleck of energy settled in seventy cubic miles of otherwise vacant space” (65) and crafts policies toward this end under the rubric of “Settling."

Updike has called *The Poorhouse Fair* “a deliberate anti-Nineteen Eighty-Four,” explaining that his vision of the near future (the book is set in 1977) does not portray “the death of everything”—the most terrifying implication of Orwell’s vision—but rather a milder dystopia in which “it is others that die, while an attenuated silly sort of life bubbles decadently on” (Foreword x). The poorhouse is relatively cut off from this “silly sort of life,” because both its elderly inhabitants, remembering an older world, and Conner, anticipating a brave new one, would prefer not to dwell on the realities outside—the decline of traditional values, the shoddiness of contemporary manufactured goods, the soulless “administrators [and] report-readers” who are Conner’s superiors (14). Yet the poorhouse fair, at which the townspeople of Andrews come to buy handcrafts made by the residents, is an intrusion of the outside, made more symbolically pointed when a delivery truck, driven by a sullen teenager, breaches the stone wall that surrounds the property. The final third of the novel, consisting largely of glimpses of random townsfolk at the fair, their thoughts, and their interactions with the residents, has an elegiac tone, heightened by the narrator’s intermittent declarations that Americans have become a sad lot, aware of their own material and spiritual decline and quicker than ever to seek solace in nostalgia. Demand for the old people’s wares bespeaks “a keen subversive need, at least in the cities, for objects that showed the trace of a hand” (145). In the longest of these declarations, the narrator identifies boredom, prosperity, and meaninglessness as the causes of their “silly” life:

Heart had gone out of these people; health was the principal thing about the faces of the Americans that came crowding through the broken wall to the poorhouse fair. They were just people, members of the race of white animals that had cast its herds over the land of six continents. Highly neural, brachycephalic, uniquely able to oppose their thumbs to the four other digits, they bred within elegant settlements, and both burned and interred their dead. History had passed on beyond them. They remembered its
moment and came to the fair to be freshened in the recollection of an older America, the America of Dan Patch and of Senator Beveridge exhorting the Anglo-Saxons to march across the Pacific and save the beautiful weak-minded islands there, an America of stained-glass lampshades, hardshell evangelists, Flag Days, ice men, plug tobacco, China trade, oval windows marking on the exterior of the house a stair landing within, pungent nostrums for catarrhal complaints, opportunism, churchgoing, and well-worded orations in the glare of a cemetery on summer days. . . . There was to be no war; we were to be allowed to decay of ourselves. And the population soared like diffident India’s, and the economy swelled, and iron became increasingly dilute, and houses more niggardly built, and everywhere was sufferance, good sense, wealth, irreligion, and peace. The nation became one of pleasure-seekers; the people continued to live as cells of a body do in the coffin, for the conception “America” had died in their skulls. (158–59)

The shift here toward a discourse of American exceptionalism and decline parallels Conner and Hook’s longing for struggle, though with a complex irony that doubles back upon itself and appeals to readerly complicity. The narrator waxes ironic about the racialist overtones of (white) American identity, its bygone belief in Manifest Destiny, its susceptibility to crass commercial appeals (“nostrums for catarrhal complaints”), and even about the belief in human distinctiveness (“highly neural, brachycephalic”). Yet this irony registers both an appropriate liberal discomfort with such notions and a conviction that they are nevertheless valuable (even, perhaps, the quack medicines), that irony provides cold comfort when genuine vitality is lost. Moreover, the continued population growth (Updike did not foresee the drop in the birth rate in the United States after the postwar “baby boom”), traditionally associated with ethnic conquest, becomes itself an index of decline, associated not with American destiny but with Third World fatalism. (Here, perhaps, is an early hint of Updike’s discomfort with procreation itself.)

If the double irony of this passage seems unpalatable to many readers, it is because Updike has taken too much for granted an audience that believes in the fearful possibility of national decadence, an audience that might be persuaded that shared religious belief constitutes the best defense against it—in short, an audience shaped by the historically specific fears of the early Cold War, when the phrase “under God” entered the Pledge of Allegiance and the struggle against Soviet Communism was widely perceived as a struggle against godlessness. 8 Updike’s scriptural epigraph for the

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8. Although D. Quentin Miller is correct to see expressions of Cold War anxiety in The Poorhouse Fair—references to atomic bombs, as well as Updike’s prediction that the Cold War
novel—“If they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when the wood is dry?” (Luke 23:31)—evokes both what Updike would consider the thinness of half-secularized mainline Protestantism and the complacency of newly prosperous postwar America, but for a contemporary audience accustomed to think of the Cold War largely in terms of oppression and what Alan Nadel calls “containment culture,” it may also appear shocking that anyone might consider a pre–women’s movement, pre–civil rights America a land of “green wood.” Here the divide between nonacademic and academic readers of Updike might loom especially large: for all the prominence of pop-cultural critiques of the 1950s, nostalgia for that era of putative American strength has not disappeared. From the standpoint of such nostalgia, Updike’s worry about the long-term viability of American strength might today appear prophetic.

What finally distinguishes The Poorhouse Fair from Updike’s later work, however, is its hint that fears of national decline or of creeping meaninglessness must be combated not only with vaunting egoism and with obeisance before God but also with the moral actions that such an attitude demands. Hook’s insistence that belief itself, though a necessary prerequisite for a worthwhile life, requires “obedience to the commands of God” (111) is a far cry from the tortured rationalizations for adultery that later Updike protagonists will offer up, all the while proclaiming their belief in the God who forbids it. Indeed, despite the novel’s effort to present the debate between Conner and Hook fairly, it is on the question of how their beliefs affect their actions that the tables finally swing against Conner. The key moment occurs when Conner, trying to organize the poorhouse men to help cart away the stones that have fallen when the wall was breached, sud-

9. The Poorhouse Fair did not anticipate the women’s movement, but it did project the successful passage of civil rights laws: “Dark-skinned people dominated the arts and popular culture; intermarriage was fashionable, psychologists encouraged it; the color bar had quite melted in all states save Virginia. The Enforced Reforms, so stirring to Conner’s youth, might never have occurred, to hear Hook talk” (93). Here Conner’s identification with the post–civil rights order serves to bring the movement itself into question. The coming of racial equality is linked with the disappearance of meaningful distinctions, so that intermarriage becomes both a fashion statement and a kind of therapy, while the older, more vital America is explicitly racialized as white (158). The only redeeming feature of Ted, the teenaged driver of the truck that breaks the wall, is his disdain for “all this Latin stuff. Every other movie star was a Cuban or mestizo or something, as if you had to be brown to look like anything. Some guys he knew wore ‘torero’ pigtails standing up from the back of their heads and sprayed their hair with perfumed shellac. Ted’d be damned if he’d do this. They could call him a Puritan all they wanted” (55).
denly finds himself being stoned by some of the men who have resented his treatment of them. The assault is over quickly—a show of “disdain” (133) is enough for Conner to quell it—but it brings Conner closer to his desired martyrdom than anything else in the novel, and even Hook, who did not take part in the stoning but witnessed it, “had the thought that here was something glorious. Battles of old had swayed beneath such a canopy of missiles” (132). And indeed, Conner rises to the occasion magnanimously, continuing to gather the stones after the men disperse and telling his enraged friend Buddy that he intends to “forgive them” (134).

Conner’s caritas, however, is short-lived: he soon feels that “it was not quite enough, merely to forgive them” (135), and he confronts Hook, whom he falsely believes to have been the instigator of the attack. Hook, not understanding Conner’s suspicion, attributes the attack to boredom and idleness, which provokes an angry reply: “My patience is not limitless. Any repetition of mass defiance, and there will be measures taken” (136). He then orders Hook to stop smoking cigars, lest he endanger himself and the wooden buildings on the grounds, and permits Buddy to wrench the cigar away and to stamp it into the ground. Even the impulse to forgive cannot long triumph over petty vindictiveness, and Conner’s last appearance in the novel—in which he reads, for the tenth time, an angry anonymous letter accusing him of not respecting the inmates’ rights—suggests that he will cling to his injuries petulantly.

Hook, on the other hand, receives the final word in the novel, and his actions convey a more genuine desire for reconciliation with Conner. He wakes in the middle of the night because

[h]is encounter with Conner had commenced to trouble him. The young man had been grievously stricken. The weakness on his face after his henchman had stolen the cigar was troubling to recall; an intimacy had been there Hook must reward with help. A small word would perhaps set things right. As a teacher, Hook’s flaw had been over-conscientiousness; there was nowhere he would not meddle. 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? (185)

Even as the narrator hints at the futility of Hook’s desire to give advice—his schoolteacher’s “meddling” is, indeed, a humorous counterpart to Conner’s “busy-ness”—its poignancy is undeniable. The denotative ambiguity of the final sentence—is it the “testament” or Hook himself that must “endure” (survive? tolerate?) his dying?—also suggests a sympathetic vul-
nerability, a desire to put accounts in order before death and a fear that he might be unable to do so. Whether readers interpret this passage primarily as the upsurge of a usually suppressed (and quintessentially Updikean) fear of nothingness or as a wholly selfless desire to comfort, what seems crucial here is its direction outward, toward relieving Conner’s anguish. Even if I place the most narcissistic construction on Hook’s motive here, I must acknowledge that it pushes him toward what is not merely the “right” thing to do but an act of gratuitous kindness. Its placement at the end of the novel, after the less conclusive arguments about the existence of God and the more potentially unsavory arguments about national decline, suggests that Updike intends for this appeal to Christian caritas to be decisive. Never again would Updike be so explicit in aligning belief in God with goodness. In the name of the new possibilities for self-affirmation afforded by the sexual revolution, Updike would increasingly come to sunder Christian belief from ethical action. Continuing to reject versions of Christianity that minimize unfashionable dogma and emphasize good works and social justice, Updike would eventually come to suggest that even belief itself is a matter of indifference, given humans’ inability to approach God at all—that what truly matters is not being taken in by ethics.

III. The Feminization of American Religion and the Refusal of Argument: Couples and Roger’s Version

One year before Updike published The Poorhouse Fair, the now mostly forgotten Nebraskan novelist Wright Morris brought out The Territory Ahead, a study of the persistence of nostalgia as a major theme in American fiction. For Morris, one of the most revealing traits of American writers—exemplified by Faulkner’s famously overblown praise of Thomas Wolfe—is their glorification of failure:

Failure, not achievement, is the hallmark of success. The romantic origins of this statement are less pertinent to this discussion than the prevailing tendency to find in such a statement a profound truth. The great writer must fail. In this way we shall know that he is great. In such a writer’s failure the public sees a moral victory: what does his failure prove but how sublime and grand the country is? This point of view has so much to recommend it that to call it into question smacks of un-Americanism. It calls, that is, for a shrinking of the national consciousness. (xiv)
According to this logic, all American writers will fall short of the sheer, raw sublimity of America itself, but in their ambition to do so, they return obsessively to the places and the moments when they first confronted this sublimity in all its transformative power. For earlier generations of writers, this meant, quite literally, taking to the woods and recording the immensity of the American landscape; in the twentieth century, now that the frontier is no more, the same move focuses on the epiphanies of childhood and youth, which are figured, in Wordsworthian fashion, as intimations of privileged glory. There is, to be sure, a good deal of egoism in such strategies, and indeed, the effect among readers is frequently the reverse, so that Whitman or Thoreau, for instance, seems to invest the scenes he describes with meaning rather than being their passive recorder. Yet in both cases, the writer’s greatness is achieved by his very woundedness, which he probes by returning to the scene of former glory and contrasting it with the present.

Updike’s novels participate in this dynamic, though in a curiously attenuated fashion. Few of his protagonists can be called successful in any conventional sense; many are detached and lacking in worldly ambition, and their obsessive yet complacent attention to the world—what James Wood calls their “quality of fattened paganism” (227)—is matched by a querulous suspicion that things were once better still. Rabbit Angstrom may be prototypical in that he often looks back on the glory days of his youth (in the first paragraph of Rabbit, Run [1960], the note is already present, as the twenty-six-year-old watches a group of youths playing basketball and thinks, “the kids keep coming, they keep crowding you up” [1]), but one of the most striking features of Updike’s work as a whole is its wistful dwelling on the recent past. The moment so prized shifts from novel to novel—typically, there is a gap of five to twenty years between the relatively disillusioned present of either the novel or the moment of the novel’s publication and the splendors of the past remembered or immediately depicted in the novel. This gap, moreover, persists whether the novel is narrated in the first or the third person. The Poorhouse Fair, set in 1977, looks back to the moment of the novel’s actual publication as a time when “the wood was green”; the notorious Couples shortens the interval to a mere five years, valorizing 1963 as the charmed moment after postwar prosperity and the sexual revolution had contrived to create an affluent sexual utopia, but before feminism and the antiwar movements had brought civil division and rancor between the sexes. In Marry Me: A Romance (1976), the same early 1960s moment is the site of a narrative of adultery and remarriage whose cruelty is matched only by its lyricism. And in Memories of the Ford Administration, Alfred Clayton, though he acknowledges them to have been
a time of “post-apocalyptic let-down, of terrifying permissiveness” (248), nonetheless delights in “those far-off Ford days [when] it was assumed that any man and woman alone in a room with a lock on the door were duty-bound to fuck” (16)—in contrast to the 1980s and 1990s, when AIDS and the recognition of sexual harassment as a crime have imbued relations between men and women with caution and bitterness.

Such depictions of nostalgia are familiar enough when the focus of the nostalgia happens to be (as the previous examples have suggested) youth, sexual delight, or belief in American exceptionalism. The fact that all of these are entangled with Updike’s version of Christianity, however, complicates matters, for it raises the question of just when the “fall” away from orthodox Christianity occurred and why. In Updike’s fictional world, this fall is rarely personal—which is to say that Updike’s protagonists seldom lose their faith, though they do often wonder why they continue to believe and even, like Roger Lambert, glory in the distance between themselves and God. Some are even inclined to consider their faith a moral weakness, an exaggerated respect for conventionality. Piet Hanema, for instance, wonders in Couples “what barred him from the ranks of those many blessed who believed nothing. Courage, he supposed. His nerve had cracked when his parents died. To break with a faith requires a moment of courage, and courage is a kind of margin within us, and after his parents’ swift death Piet had no margin.” As an apparent afterthought, the narrator adds, “Also, his European sense of order insisted that he place his children in Christendom” (20). Such passages, however, seem intended ironically: David Lodge is much closer to the truth when he speaks of Updike’s attempt to depict Piet as “a kind of primitive, a rough diamond” (36) who might plunge just as readily into adultery as his fellow Tarboxers but who nevertheless stands apart from them, lacking the secular alienation that makes their own attempts to “break back into” hedonism so unsatisfying for them (48). Piet’s faith remains secure, but it depends for its resonance on a sense that everyone else’s is irretrievably lost, and that believers and unbelievers languish—though with considerable compensations—“in one of those dark ages that visit 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” (31). Has so much changed in the four years between the publication of The Poorhouse Fair, when it is still possible to imagine that in 1977 a few elderly folk might still abide by Christian morality, and the events depicted in Couples?

Updike’s work as a whole suggests that the collective American fall from Christian orthodoxy took place long ago, but that Americans have only begun to perceive this fall and its effects in the recent past. It may
be, in fact, that his characters’ personal nostalgia for lost youth or American self-confidence is misplaced, that it serves to conceal an authentic desire for God that can no longer declare itself without irony in a world of waning belief. Perhaps the clearest sign of this argument can be found in Updike’s sustained engagement with the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, who even appears as a minor character in *Memories of the Ford Administration.*

David Lodge has argued that *Couples* is, in part, a rewriting of *The Blithedale Romance* (“Post-Pill” 33), and it has become common to speak of the later novels *A Month of Sundays, Roger’s Version,* and *S.* (1988) as a *Scarlet Letter* Trilogy, whose three protagonists are modeled upon Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth, and Hester Prynne. Updike’s own claim that “[a] very vivid ghost of Christianity stares out at us from [Hawthorne’s] prose, alarming and odd in not being evenly dead, but alive in some limbs and amputate in others” (“Hawthorne’s Creed” 76) seems, particularly in the novels written after *Couples,* to be a description of his own stance. Moreover, both Updike and Hawthorne associate their sense of the decline of American religious orthodoxy with the ascendancy of not only women in general but also with a cloying and sentimental ideology of femininity. Hook’s claim in *The Poorhouse Fair* that “women are the heroes of dead lands” takes on additional resonance in light of this comparison and suggests that Updike’s often-remarked antifeminism, though certainly no less narcissistic for being so, is not merely a matter of misogyny.

In *The Feminization of American Culture,* Ann Douglas famously argues that a sea change in American Protestantism took place between roughly 1820 and 1875. The Calvinist orthodoxy of Presbyterian and Congregational denominations that had dominated the American colonies until soon after the Revolutionary War was, after a protracted struggle, disestablished in the states where it had been an official creed, and in the free marketplace of religion that ensued, it quickly lost ground to upstart denominations (Baptists, Methodists, and in New England, Unitarians) that competed for souls by stressing an emotional rather than an intellectual relationship with God, holding out the possibility (if not always the likelihood) of universal salvation, and promoting a saccharine and overtly feminized cult of domestic and necrophilic piety. Douglas discerns in this development the beginnings of American mass culture and describes its ascendancy as a remarkably successful push for power on the part of

10. Perhaps it is more accurate to speak of Updike’s Hawthorne as a character conceived by a character. Alfred Clayton, the novel’s narrator, is writing a fictionalized biography of James Buchanan, and Hawthorne appears in this section of the novel as the focalizer of a scene in which he and Buchanan converse, during the days of the Pierce administration, in Liverpool, where Hawthorne was serving as the American consul.
two allied but culturally marginalized groups—American clergymen and white, middle-class women. Douglas’s account sheds considerable light on Hawthorne’s ambivalent relation to the Calvinist culture that these women and nineteenth-century clergy routed. Wendy Piper notes that Hawthorne “believed the Puritan doctrine of natural depravity, despite its severity, to be a more accurate understanding of human nature than that suggested by the optimism and ideals of the Transcendentalists” (40–41). Accordingly, he admired the Puritans’ unsentimental sounding of human depravity and rigorous habits of thought—both virtues traditionally coded as “masculine”—while deploving their scorn for fleshly life, including sexuality, which bespeaks a false belief that spirit and matter are opposed to each other and leads to what Aquinas called *libido dominandi*. The tension in such an attitude is evident in Hawthorne’s depiction of Hester: she is celebrated for her own emotional strength, resilience, maternal ardor, and sexual warmth—qualities that Hawthorne attributes in lesser degree to her contemporaries, with “broad shoulders and well-developed busts, and . . . round and ruddy cheeks, that had ripened in . . . far-off [England], and had hardly yet grown paler or thinner in the atmosphere of New England” (161). Yet she is also implicitly condemned for her own antinomianism, which is well-nigh Transcendentalist—when she tells Dimmesdale, “What we did has a consecration of its own!” (286), she replaces a Puritan conviction of evil with an even less tenable sense of natural goodness. Both she and the Puritans who condemn her, however, appear in a more favorable light than many of Hawthorne’s contemporaries, who have abandoned both a rigorous, unsentimental religion and a robust emotional life for a cloying sentimentality.

Updike’s own beliefs about the relationship between orthodox religion, femininity, and national decline follow Hawthorne’s in broad outline, although where Hawthorne suggested both irreconcilable difference and comfortable proximity—preventing Hester from ever achieving a full reconciliation with her community yet maintaining her in a relationship with it nonetheless—Updike exaggerates the impossibility of reconciliation, even hinting that orthodox religion gives a more delectable savor to one’s adulteries than atheism, agnosticism, or Transcendentalism would. As many commentators have observed, when lightning destroys the Congregationalist church at the end of *Couples*, this is presented not as God’s wrath against an epidemic of adultery, but rather as further evidence of God’s self-withdrawal, his taking leave of a house that has become an empty shell. Being abandoned by God in this way might be painful, but it is nothing new—it is only to be expected from the Calvinist God who selects a few as his elect and predestines everyone else to eternal damnation. The
distance and otherness of God becomes, paradoxically enough, the surest license for one’s own narcissistic pleasures.

Once one has gone so far, the distance between a Calvinist God who may be abscenditus but remains no less real and the human God whose death is plangentely announced by Nietzsche becomes very small indeed, even if Updike cannot join Nietzsche in his brand of tragic affirmation after such an announcement, tending instead toward what I called before an attenuated celebration of failure. Roger’s Version suggests how small the difference between these two conceptions might be by making its central religious debate occur not between an atheist and a believer but between two believers. The first, Roger Lambert, is a middle-aged professor of theology and former minister, an avid Barthean, misanthrope, and connoisseur of pornography; while the second, Dale Kohler, is a young “Jesus freak” and computer scientist who wishes to prove the existence of God mathematically. Whereas in The Poorhouse Fair Updike attempted to present both sides of a debate on religion fairly, in Roger’s Version—as the novel’s very title suggests—Roger’s victory is a foregone conclusion, and Dale’s eventual loss of faith is presented with malevolent glee. Roger considers Dale’s desire to prove God’s existence “blasphemy” and “loath[es] the icy-eyed fervent way” Dale declares Christ to be his Savior (22); he even goes so far as to name the Devil “the absence of doubt . . . [that] pushes people into suicide bombing, into setting up extermination camps” (81), thus suggesting that atheism may be preferable to much of what passes for Christianity. He also prefers to keep his own faith as secret as possible, hating the fact that his “hot Barthian nugget insulated within layers of worldly cynicism and situation ethics” are “dragged toward the light by this boy’s earnest agony” (180). Dale, for his part, is genuinely needy in his own faith—when he loses it, “he can’t sleep . . . because he always used to pray and that would put him to sleep” (315–16). While Roger does believe Dale’s approach to be wrong and blasphemous, it is clear that he is repulsed even more by how obvious Dale’s neediness is: the pathos of Dale’s loss of faith only strengthens Roger’s contempt for him.

Readers of Roger’s Version have judged Roger and Dale in diametrically opposed ways, despite general agreement that the game is rigged against Dale. James Wood, for instance, maintains that “Dale is, throughout, a repulsive character; Roger Lambert, a genial, mild professor” (229), while Frank G. Novak, Jr., making much of the parallel between Lambert and Hawthorne’s Chillingworth, considers Roger a “satanic personality” who deceives many readers into believing that Updike endorses his Barthean theology (3). Such divergent responses are themselves enabled by Updike’s severing of ethics and morality from Christian orthodox belief. It is tempt-
ing to conclude that those who rate orthodoxy higher than morality, perceiving them as separable, will prefer Roger, while those who maintain that orthodoxy must be demonstrated by a moral life will prefer Dale. Even this judgment, however, is too simple. Viewed from the standpoint of orthodoxy, Roger is correct that only revelation guarantees the truth of Christianity, and any response to that revelation is always “subjective,” in that it engages us not merely intellectually, but (as the She’ma puts it, “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength” [Deuteronomy 6:5]). Yet it does not follow that reason is worthless and has no place in theological reflection. It is significant, moreover, that despite his professed allegiance to Barth, Roger is an academic specialist in Christian heresy and a former teacher of a course on blasphemy. In the central section of the novel, when he imagines (or, implausibly but not impossibly, has revealed to him in a vision) his wife’s possible adultery with Dale, his pornographic description of the scene is juxtaposed against passages from Tertullian, the orthodox champion who became a heretic (though Roger proposes that the work from which he quotes is not heretical at all). Indeed, Roger accuses himself of heresy after his affair with his niece, Verna—“that of committing deliberate abominations so as to widen and deepen the field in which God’s forgiveness can magnificently play” (289). On the other hand, although Dale professes belief in Jesus as his Savior, he admits that his efforts to prove God’s existence, if successful, will only prove deism: “we’re not trying to prove anything about the Incarnation, or the Trinity—a Hindu could be just as happy with this news as a Christian” (25). In this way, for all

11. It is also, of course, possible to compare Roger’s quotations from and commentaries about the texts by Barth and Tertullian in the novel, taking into account such factors as when these texts appeared in their author’s careers. Such an effort requires a familiarity with theology beyond what most educated general readers will possess. Frank G. Novak, Jr., for instance, has argued that Updike sides decisively against Roger in part because his favorite passages from Barth come from earlier works whose ideas Barth himself later corrected by placing less emphasis on the total otherness of God and more on the Incarnation. Although my own theological commitments lead me to agree with Novak more than I disagree with him in my own judgment of Roger as a character, his reading implies a degree of gamesmanship in Updike’s novel that complicates the rhetorical situation that is my primary interest here—the communication from an avowedly Christian author to a (probably) secular audience. Unlike Walker Percy, for instance, whose own engagements with philosophy and theology in his novels are presented accessibly and in a way that leads little doubt as to how the author intends for readers to interpret his work, Updike makes the relationship between these passages and his own purposes more obscure—even going so far as to leave several of the quoted passages from Tertullian untranslated into English. I am not sure that Updike intends for readers to come to particular conclusions about how Roger’s use of Barth and Tertullian reflects upon his theological or moral beliefs; rather, I take this use primarily in a broad, sociological sense: Roger is the kind of man who reads theologians to justify his actions, and other men aren’t. Even if he misreads them, the only readers who might be able to identify this misreading are those who are already interested in theology.
the fervency of his belief, Dale’s actual project seems congruent with the long nineteenth-century effort to “rescue” Christianity with science, and in the process of doing so discarded much of its dogma as mere myth. At the same time, however, if Roger’s allegiance to Barth is more consistent with Updike’s own professions of faith, Dale’s terror of nonbeing suggests something of Updike’s own similarly professed fear.

Nor does judgment become clearer if one shifts its criteria from orthodoxy to morality. Both Roger and Dale are adulterers, and Roger’s adultery is also incestuous. Though it is eventually confirmed that Dale did have an affair with a woman who could have been Roger’s wife Esther (318–19), it is not fully established that it was Esther, or that Roger’s pornographic visions were true, though there is some circumstantial evidence to suggest as much. Esther herself, however, is not very compelling as a Hester Prynne: readers are led (though by Roger) to believe that her affair with Dale is the result of suburban housewifely boredom and resentment against her husband’s relative freedom, and though Roger’s callousness toward her is evident throughout the novel, it is balanced against her desire to remain with him because she enjoys “the solid and lively social matrix” that her position as his wife gives her (293). Dale’s own relative sexual inexperience and immense gratitude toward Esther might make his participation in the adultery less culpable, but the novel prevents us from making an informed judgment on this point: readers are never shown how he reconciles the fact of the adultery with his professed Christianity. The novel ends with Roger triumphant and Dale crushed, but with a wide variety of specific judgments of both characters left open. Indeed, the final sentences of the novel open yet a new possibility: Esther, an avowed atheist throughout the book, decides one Sunday to attend church. If one takes her at her word when she tells Roger that she does so to annoy him (329), one might be led to the conclusion that nothing has changed, that her attendance merely begins a new cycle of boredom, resentment, and possible adultery; if, however, one assumes that behind this stated motive there is a genuine interest and even an incipient faith that might have been stimulated by her interactions with Dale, one might reach an altogether different conclusion about the mysteries of divine grace.

Ultimately, I would argue that Updike creates such ambiguous ending in order to suggest that none of these judgments, however one might personally resolve them, necessarily follow. The primary fact is that God, after having intervened through the Incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, has withdrawn, and in the long interval until Jesus returns, there is no practical difference between believers and unbelievers. Roger is closer to the atheist Myron Kriegman (and indeed, to the atheist critic James Wood)
than to Dale precisely because he believes that God cannot be proven, and while he may derive a certain comfort from his faith, the nature of this comfort seems no different from Dale’s—it is, inevitably, a response to the fear of death. Moreover, if belief or unbelief has no bearing on one’s moral life—so that Updike reflects what Ralph Wood calls “an ethical quietism” (*Comedy* 190)—then why not indulge in all that the modern world has to offer? Wood is correct to note that “[u]nlke Nietzsche, Updike does not envision humanity as the inventor of life’s meaning and value” and that he “is not finally a tragedian but an ironist” (204). A “tragic” view of the death of God, like Nietzsche’s, offers something to reckon with. A merely ironic view might serve, as Booth claims that irony inevitably does, to build a community—in this case, Updike implies, the entire human race, which needs God and yet cannot approach him. But this very need becomes a focus for complacency, both in those who acknowledge it (and in doing so, forgive themselves for almost anything) and in those who profess to have overcome it. God becomes an object among others that might help one get one through the night, chosen for reasons that are therapeutic at best and irreducibly selfish at worst. Those who choose objects other than God for this purpose have no reason to gloat, and if they fancy that they have freed themselves from the irrationality of “needing” God, they condemn themselves to false consciousness. Though Updike theoretically acknowledges the existence of people who do not share his terror of death and whose belief or unbelief might therefore be grounded on something else, the major work of his last two decades, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, suggests that he finds it increasingly hard to credit such positions. Roger may share Dale’s fear of death, but he takes a stubborn pride in not admitting as much. There is no such pride in the later novel—everyone needs God, and those who profess not to are whistling in the dark, proving themselves pathetic.

IV. The American Sadness:

*In the Beauty of the Lilies*

*In the Beauty of the Lilies* follows four generations of an American family from the period 1912 to 1990. The novel reaffirms Updike’s implicit claim that Christian belief has been waning for decades yet remains as necessary as ever to the psychic health of Americans. George Steiner’s judgment that “[j]one puts down this novel with the intimation that America is, very near its center, the saddest country on earth” (106), rings true, for here Updike suggests, more clearly than in any novel since *The Poorhouse Fair*, that without the conflation of American identity with doctrinally Protes-
tant commitments and a capitalist work ethic, Americans are condemned to a profound sense of emptiness. The novel begins with the loss of faith of Clarence Wilmot, a Presbyterian clergyman in Paterson, New Jersey, and ends when Clarence’s great-grandson Clark, having joined a religious cult that is almost too heavy-handedly called the “Temple of True and Actual Faith” (360), loses his life in a conflagration modeled on the 1993 Branch Davidian disaster in Waco, Texas. Paralleling the vicissitudes of the Wilmot family’s faith is a transformation in American life, in which traditional virtues of industry and Protestant self-reliance (presented, as in *The Poorhouse Fair*, with an irony that doubles back upon itself in an effort to redeem its ethnocentrism) yield to the solipsistic pleasures of motion pictures and pornography and the hollowing out of American identity itself. Clarence loses “the last particles of his faith” (5) at the very moment that Mary Pickford, who is being filmed by D. W. Griffith in Paterson, faints—as if to suggest that faith in God and faith in the illusions of film serve the same purpose and are similarly vulnerable.

One significant historical context for the novel is provided by the industrialization of Paterson and the waves of immigrants that it attracts. As Clarence adjusts to life without his faith, Paterson becomes the scene for a confrontation between the Industrial Workers of the World (the “Wobblies”) and the owners of textile mills, between a largely Catholic and Jewish population of workers and the “born Protestants” (26) who own the mills. Though the strike is broken, in the long run the immigrants win precisely by embracing a superficial Americanness without also adhering to the religious (and capitalist) values that sustained such Americanness in the past. “The climate of the times,” opines the narrator, only half ironically, “was against [Clarence]. The immigrant hordes had brought to America German radicalism and Italian anarchism and Semitic materialism; this was no time for native-born Protestants to grow lax and abandon the sublime values and articles of faith that had induced God to shower down upon them the blessings due a chosen people” (89–90). It is fitting that when Clarence gives up his pastoral duties, he finds work selling *The Popular Encyclopedia* door to door—an inferior product whose chief appeals are that it “is edited entirely by Americans, and is much superior on American subjects” (91) and that its articles on religion are “uniformly respectful and studiously neutral” enough for “[n]o child’s faith, of whatever denomination,” to be disturbed” (94). Even more fittingly, in this capacity he is patronized by his former housekeeper, an Irish immigrant now pregnant out of wedlock, who takes pity on him. The loss of national faith entails that “real” Americans of Protestant background are becoming aliens in their own country. Seventy-six years later, Clarence’s son Teddy will write to his own
grandson about the eventual fate of Paterson: “Pretty near everybody is black. Those that aren’t are spic. Market Street looked like something out of Haiti, it felt to me like carnival time, all these boom boxes and the girls in bright rags and not much of them, the men standing around laughing as though every day was a legal holiday” (417–18). Though Teddy professes not to be “put off” by the scene and to prefer “people jiggling down the middle of Market Street than huddled in those slave shacks over on Beaver Road [as in Paterson’s industrial heyday]” (418), the irony is palpable.

More significantly for Updike’s theological purposes, Clarence’s loss of faith conforms to Douglas’s account of the feminization of American culture and religion. As a Calvinist minister, Clarence must be committed both to the dogma of double predestination and to sola fide. Yet even though he reads atheist writers such as Robert Ingersoll, Herbert Spencer, and Nietzsche and eventually comes to agree with them, the initial cause of his loss of faith is his reading in the Higher Criticism: “They called themselves theologians, these Teutonic ravagers of the text that Luther had unchained from the altar and translated out of Latin, and accepted their bread from the devout sponsors of theological chairs, yet were the opposite of theologians, as in the dank basement of Greek and Aramaic researches they undermined Christianity’s ancient supporting walls and beams” (15). Clarence concludes: “For all its muscular missions to the heathen and fallen women and lost souls of city slums, the nineteenth century had been a long erosion, and the books of this century that a conscientious clergyman collected . . . Clarence now saw as so much flotsam and rubble, perishing and adrift, pathetic testimony to belief’s flailing attempt not to drown” (16). The older, orthodox books of Bunyan, Kempis, and Calvin, by contrast, were “ignorant but not pathetic” (16). Because faith is a “force of will,” Clarence accuses himself of listening to the feminizing blandishments of liberalizing Christianity: “the failure was his own, an effeminate yielding where virile strength was required” (18).

A turning point occurs when Clarence is called to comfort Mr. Orr, a dying, elderly member of his congregation. Much to his surprise, even though Mr. Orr is concerned about his salvation, he chides his pastor for not emphasizing damnation enough in his sermons, for shrinking from what he perceives to be a logical consequence of Christian teaching: “Take away damnation, in my opinion, a man might as well be an atheist. A God that can’t damn a body to an eternal Hell can’t lift a body up out of the grave either” (47). Just as the Barthean Roger Lambert has more in common with his atheist colleagues than with Dale Kohler, Clarence Wilmot finds himself agreeing with his congregant despite his loss of faith, and when, the following Sunday, he preaches a sermon that culminates in the claim
that “election . . . is choice” (54), he loses his voice immediately afterward. As if to consummate the feminization of religion, his wife Stella finishes the service for him and continues to do so on future occasions, enjoying her new power immensely. The implication that it is better to be an atheist than to subscribe to such an effete version of Christianity, with its “sickly” talk of compassion (41), is unmistakable. Even Stella’s faith, however, proves not to be solid: when Clarence finally confesses to her his loss of faith, she becomes angry, advises him to “stop this tedious mooning about faith” (65), and complains bitterly about the loss of income and social standing that will follow should he give up his position. Indeed, after Clarence’s death, once the family has relocated to the small town of Basingstoke, Delaware, she lies to her son Teddy about the end of her husband’s career as a minister: “He didn’t lose his faith, he lost his voice” (140). Teddy discerns in such lies further evidence that Christianity is false, and resolves to remain loyal to his father’s unbelief: “He used to wonder how the stories of Jesus’ miracles and Resurrection could have been spread across the world if they were not true, but his mother had showed him how” (140).

Yet though Stella is lying here, she may be speaking more truly than she knows. Clarence loses his faith, yet the passivity into which he sinks, which he at first attributes to relief at no longer having to maintain “an immense strain of justification” (7), becomes more serene even as his health and his family’s economic position deteriorate, as if he comes eventually to abandon himself to God’s mercy. The brief, despairing prayer that he speaks, “smiling at the futile sound of it,” in the immediate aftermath of his loss of faith—“Have mercy” (24)—is repeated at the end of his chapter by the omniscient narrator (108), hinting that it has become more genuine. Even Teddy comes to suspect as much: “Looking back I wonder if Dad didn’t believe more than he knew, and that’s what made him so serene at the end” (417). Because Teddy considers faith a security blanket, he does not begrudge other people’s faith and does not object when his grandson joins the cult. Indeed, his own attitude is less active disbelief than anger at God: “[I]t seemed to me God could have given Dad a sign. To help him out. Just a little sign would have done it, and cost God nothing much. Damned if I’d go to church to sing His praises after that” (410). Teddy himself inherits much of his father’s passivity and spends years after his father’s disgrace “waiting for some second, even bigger blow to fall” (114), but ultimately his life is more successful than his extreme caution would suggest: he marries the woman he loves, lives into old age, and attributes his own serenity to the fact that he “never expected too much out of life” and thus escaped disappointment (418). His melancholy does not cross into
genuine despair, and he retains both a sense of basic decency and a genuine curiosity about the world. Though I agree with Ralph Wood’s judgment that the novel “tells us, with great power and poignancy, what is happening to us and why,” I do not share his sense that Teddy becomes “something of [Updike’s] self-portrait,” nor the implication that Teddy, because he does not blame others, fails to regard others as fully human (“Updike’s Sloth” 457). Both Clarence and Teddy believe more than they know, if only because they know what they have lost. A truly committed atheist would neither pray even so vague a prayer as “Have mercy” nor feel any anger toward God. Their very existence confirms Updike’s inability to believe, as it were, in disbelief—they belong to the ranks of those who claim to have overcome a need for belief yet merely channel their need into substitutes.

Of the four Wilmot protagonists whom In the Beauty of the Lilies follows, it is Teddy’s daughter Essie, eventually the movie star Alma DeMott, whose obsessions and self-image correspond most closely to those of Updike himself. Whether his decision to filter his own convictions so largely through a female character springs from an ironic response to hostile feminist critics, or an ironic rethinking of what the feminization of American culture might portend in the age of film, Updike chooses to combine his own reverent yet contemptuous attitude toward sexuality in the person of Alma, for whom sex is both bliss—“an entertaining smooth chute into the dark red bliss of things” (313), a phrase worthy of Piet Hanema—and an unsentimental, devious livelihood: “sex was at the heart of show business, but was not worn, actually, on its sleeve” (305). She stands in contrast both to her father and grandfather, who for Updikean protagonists are mostly diffident about sex and completely uninterested in adultery. Alma’s breathtaking narcissism, which her career permits her never to outgrow, also raises the question of whether feminine narcissism is qualitatively different—and thus either more or less culpable—than the masculine narcissism that is Updike’s usual trademark. Her girlish sense that God’s love “pressed down from Heaven and fit her whole body like bathwater in the tub” (233) never leaves her: as a teenager, she reasons that “God understood” her sexual desires because “He made us, after all” (267), and even as an experienced, middle-aged star, she regards moments of unusually felicitous acting as instances when “something from God would flow into her face from behind” (336). As a child, she associates her feelings with God with the stories she hears about her grandfather Clarence; when she is old enough to learn the particulars of his story, she pities him for having “fallen into a shining white hole of damnation forever” (334), but remains secure that her own faith will compensate for her own ethical failures—above all, her pro-
miscuity and her benign neglect of her son Clark, who grows up appropriately jaded. 12

What ostensibly distinguishes Essie’s faith from that of Updike’s previous protagonists is her sense that God remains continually close to her. Unlike Roger Lambert, she does not envision God as remote, awful, and self-concealing—on the contrary, she marvels at one point at the fact that “God always answered [her] prayers” (277). This difference, however, may be less significant than it seems, for unlike Dale Kohler, Essie does not ground her sense of God’s involvement in her life in scientific or philosophical arguments; she simply takes it for granted and lives as she pleases. Both she and the male protagonists struck by God’s absence invoke God in the course of licensing their pleasures. On the other hand, Essie’s beliefs can be seen, perhaps, in Douglas’s terms as signs of the transformation of nineteenth-century post-Calvinist Protestantism into the twentieth-century mass culture of stardom. There may well be more gravity in choosing damnation, as Clarence and Teddy do, than in nodding piously toward God while selling sexual fantasies—yet her character also raises the possibility that Updike himself may not be doing anything so different.

Clark is the most elusive of the four Wilmots. He becomes acquainted with the Temple when he picks up a young woman, Hannah, at a ski resort, who takes him back as a potential convert and sleeps with him. Yet though he does so willingly enough, he has none of the single-minded focus on sexual desire that is typical in Updike, and the experience itself is anticlimactic—“sleepy and dutiful, a poke and a submission” (390). Moreover, the events of his life before the Temple tend to confirm a sense that sex as he has learned about it, in the context of the impossibly beautiful people of Hollywood and the falsity of film, is always distasteful: in one memorable scene, he masturbates to a pornographic film, concludes immediately afterward that “people are disgusting,” and resolves “to get out of Los Angeles, out of reach of the fucking movies” (434). Hannah’s offer of herself may have been a necessary lure, but what seems to confirm Clark in his decision is not the promise of sex, but the cult leader’s declaration that he is “the only person you will meet . . . who is not interested in your

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12. Interestingly, the consciousness of parental neglect appears to be the one thing that reliably makes Updike’s male protagonists feel pangs of remorse for their adulteries and desertions of their spouses—the short story “Separating” and the novels Marry Me and Memories of the Ford Administration provide especially wrenching examples. Essie, however, has no such regrets. When Clark asks her why she had (briefly) married his stepfather Rex, she replies, “Rex was all cock.” Reasonably enough, Clark translates this response as “Get off my case, kid” (363, italics in text). Indeed, she is relieved when Clark elects to join the Temple, seeing it as just the latest instance of how God continually provides for her: “Off her hands, and into God’s. So be it. Good riddance” (360).
mother. I am interested in you” (383). Jessie is also uncannily correct when he opines, “Your mother perhaps was jealous of her God and did not wish to share Him with the world, even with her son” (383). Jessie’s is a Tocquevillian appeal to an ordinary young man in a democratic culture preoccupied with the petty object of himself and whose frustrated egoism burns bright. It is also, as Peter Augustine Lawler has noted, the essential (albeit distorted) appeal of Christianity for many Americans: God loves you too, even if you find that hard to believe, and no one has the right to keep you from him. In this, Clark is his mother’s son, though either he or the narrator (Updike’s use of free indirect discourse makes this distinction ambiguous at this point) seems more clear-eyed about the denial involved: “A company of believers is like a prisonful of criminals: their intimacy and solidarity are based on what about themselves they can least justify” (416)—in theological terms, their fallenness and their need for God’s mercy, which they do not deserve.

Though Clark is attracted to the Temple in part because it offers an escape from a world of meaningless sexualization, Jessie’s vision of the corrupt American culture and of the impending apocalypse that he believes he will usher in is no less distorted in its understanding of sex. Officially suggesting that women and men in the Temple can sleep freely with each other, in practice Jessie tries to keeps the women for himself, believing that it is his duty to father as many children as possible. His condemnation of the “whoremongering” outside the Temple is directed less against the sin of fornication than against the separation of sexual intercourse from procreation. From the point of view of orthodox Christianity, his preaching on the subject is a mixture of the true and the false:

“Scientific studies show, brother, that alcohol and tobacco impair sexual potency, and this impairs a man’s bounden duty to disseminate his seed, as enjoined in Genesis, Leviticus, and the Song of Songs. In the Song of Solomon, six eight, we read, ‘There are threescore queens, and fourscore concubines, and virgins without number’ . . . Keep that temple pure,” Jesse told him, “and it will function.” (382)

Accordingly, Jessie hates contraception, and one of the few ways in which Clark proves unfaithful to his teaching is by using condoms on the rare occasions when Hannah sleeps with him. As I have suggested above, procreation is a vexing subject in Updike’s fiction: men tend to associate it with female wiles, for children, once they are brought into the world, bind men to their wives, and the genuine love that men feel for their children makes this fetter all the more painful. Updike’s preoccupation with nonprocre-
ative sex seems in part a defiant effort to bypass this hazard of lovemaking, and Jessie’s desire to bring as many children as possible into the world would probably be anomalous enough, even without his bizarre religious framework, to mark him as suspect in Updike’s world. When the Temple’s compound is eventually attacked by law enforcement and Jessie begins to kill the women and children in the belief that he is sending them to heaven, the implication seems to be that his desire to procreate and his murderousness are complementary: he who makes life has the right to destroy it as well. As insane as Jessie’s position is, it sheds additional light on the usual distaste of Updike’s heroes for procreation: to bear and raise children is to be responsible for them unto death, and this is a responsibility not gladly embraced, except, it seems, by madmen.

Clark is given the name “Esau” in the Temple, though he is also called “Slick” in mocking tribute to his wealthy and socially adept background, and his sense of having found a home is tempered by a nagging sense of hostility toward him. His mixed motivations ensure that judging him for his violent role in Jessie’s endgame will be difficult. As policemen begin to descend on the Temple, Clark kills one—in part, it seems, to overcome “his unease, his virginity in regard to guns” (399) and to gain respect from the harder men in the compound. Still later, as he finds himself in the same room with a group of women and children and anticipating that he and everyone else will be in heaven shortly, he asks with exasperation, “How had he acquired this clattering scorpion’s tail of women and children?” (481). Yet when he is ordered by Jessie to kill Hannah, the woman who brought him to the Temple, and her two children, the narrator abruptly speaks of Clark’s “non-coöperative streak,” repeating a phrase that had earlier been associated with Essie’s judgment of her son (484, 360), and immediately afterward, Clark kills Jessie and another of his henchmen before he is himself shot. His motivations are unclear: is it because he pities Hannah and her children, or because Jessie calls him “Slick” at this crucial moment? Moreover, how does he evaluate his own action in the moments before his death? In this crucial paragraph, Updike’s use of free indirect discourse becomes maddeningly ambiguous:

There was nothing for him on the outside now, just hassle, and embarrassment for Mother. Whoremongers, sorcerers, the whole pack of supercilious shits. He wasn’t worried; the living God had laid hold of him, the present-tense God beyond betting on. . . . Even through the chemical filter, the smoke was palpable, like a fine rich coke being stuffed very fast up his nostrils, down his throat, into his eyes. His head was losing its ability to make pictures. *The second death*, when had the first been? *The Lamb*
shall overcome, how could a Lamb overcome, by letting Its throat be slit? That vast indignant beast with seven heads was whuffing and beating on the panelled white door as if entitled to admission. Esau was a cunning hunter. He had a twin, somewhere in the smoke. He heard a noise, soft but pointed, over where the cups and plates used to be: a cup settling on a saucer or a twig snapping in the fire or the bolt of a rifle being stealthily slipped back. Go ahead and shoot. You’ll be doing me a favor. (486)

Is this heroism, stoic resignation before death, panic, or despair? The characterization of the outside world as “whoremongers, sorcerers, and supercilious shits” connotes both theological condemnation and the pain of social rejection. The death-bringing smoke may be a harbinger of his salvation, or a perverse thrill like the rush of cocaine. The distinction between the “living God”—into whose hands it is a fearful thing to fall—and the God on whose existence people merely place bets suggests a sudden fullness of faith (hence the accompanying lack of worry), but Clark’s subsequent remembrance of Biblical references bespeak incredulity and irony—doubt at the efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice, confusion about whether hell (“the second death”) awaits him, whether the seven-headed beast of Revelation is “entitled” to him. There is also, in the reference to Esau’s twin Jacob, a question as to whether he sees his role to destroy not just the false prophet but the true patriarch who will become Israel as well. Is it therefore just that the imagined Jacob destroys him? That Updike attributes his confusion to the loss of his ability to “make pictures” is characteristic, for it resonates with Updike’s continual gesture of simply pointing to the visible world and celebrating it in all its detail. Perhaps the suggestion is that someone who is no longer able to see properly is beyond any intimation of salvation, and that Clark’s apparent welcoming of death should be attributed to despair at losing his vision.13

Although the question of Clark’s motivation and ultimate salvation is unclear, as news of what happened at the Temple reaches the outside world, he is acclaimed as a hero who has saved the lives of women and children. Essie, in fact, thanks God for letting him achieve this heroism,

13. In The Humiliation of the Word, the French theologian Jacques Ellul mounts a sustained critique of vision as that which deceives by falsely establishing human perceptions at the center, so to speak, of the universe. Writing itself is problematic insofar as one reads instead of hears it, for faith comes by hearing. What Clark sees in these final moments is fragmentary and ambiguous; what he hears is the harbinger of his death. To the extent that Updike’s fictional project privileges sight over sound and associates nonbeing with the absence of visual sensation, it is possible to locate his theological problems precisely in this lack of concern with what one hears—a call not only to believe the Gospel but also to transform one’s life in accord with that belief.
once more reinforcing her own egoistic conception of her relationship with God (488). The proverbial last word in the novel is given to Teddy, who, watching the news reports and reflecting on how much more depraved the world has become since his childhood, watches women from the Temple emerging “as if just waking up, carrying or holding on to the hands of their children, too many to count. The children” (491). Ralph Wood calls this final sentence “a blank cry for pity,” and though he is correct, such pity is uncharacteristic for Updike, who rarely shows such concern for the welfare of children (“Updike’s Sloth” 455). I would argue that this pity is directed less at the children than at the United States, for whose future the children serve as a familiar metaphor. These children have, after all, survived the carnage along with their mothers; if they are to be pitied for what they have lost, the implication is that they may have been better off in the Temple. Leaving it, they enter a world that has its own “whoremongers and sorcerers,” but which, lacking the drama of apocalypse, might prove more emotionally barren. Jessie’s faith may have been neither “true” nor “actual,” but clearly his power drew upon hungers for genuine religious conviction. The novel’s title, which quotes the line “In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea” in Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” seems relevant here. In Ralph Wood’s words, “American exceptionalism does not mean, for Updike, that this nation is God’s ‘last, best hope of earth,’ as Lincoln declared. It means that our Union is uniquely blessed and cursed by God’s absence. . . . The Christ of Updike’s fiction strikes me as stratospherically remote, dwelling in the distant loveliness of lilies that fester far more than they transfigure” (“Updike’s Sloth” 455–56). Updike is unable to take disbelief seriously, but he is also unable to take belief in Christ’s presence seriously—his attempt to do so in this novel, through the character of Essie, is sincere, but it appears as yet another version of the feminization of religion that he decries. The children are bereft—not, strictly speaking, by their loss of faith, but by their inevitable going out into a disencharred world, where even Updike’s egoistic and cheap version of sacramentalism cannot long prevail.

V. Coda:
Christianity versus Islam in Terrorist

Updike’s rhetoric of narcissism, as a strategy intended to make Christian belief credible and compelling, is a calculated and audacious risk. The degree to which Updike connects both narcissism and Christian belief to a discourse of American exceptionalism bespeaks a certain shrewdness,
for in contemporary democratic culture, egoism is simultaneously reviled (since radical equality regards airs of superiority as intolerable) and celebrated (since equality guarantees the supreme worth of each individual). Readers who are unsympathetic to Updike’s Christian project are quite able to see in it nothing but a terrified flailing against death, an interpretation that Updike anticipates and even, at times, appears to endorse: “Of my own case, looked at coldly, it might be said that, having been given a Protestant, Lutheran, rather antinomian Christianity as part of my sociological make-up, I was too timid to discard it. My era was too ideologically feeble to wrest it from me, and Christianity gave me something to write about, and a semblance of a backbone, and a place to go on Sunday mornings, when the post offices were closed” (Self-Consciousness 234). Some might add: and it also gave you a point from which you could contemptuously disregard all the accusations of sexism, racism, and sheer personal arrogance that you deserve.

Yet if this were the whole story, Updike would simply not have the following that he has attracted. What might be most compelling in his religious vision, finally, is the way he simultaneously presents Christianity as embattled—a “ghost” in American life since the nineteenth century, despite many Americans’ belated realization of this fact—and yet as so necessary that alternatives to it are almost unthinkable. Acknowledging the theoretical possibility of people for whom nonbeing holds no terrors, Updike finds their actual existence incredible, and the effects of this disbelief become more pronounced as his career progresses. The respect accorded both to believers and unbelievers in The Poorhouse Fair dissolves into an indifferent embrace, as both come to be seen as advancing their own narcissistic dramas, their own secret forms of belief—dramas that the reader is cordially invited to identify with his or her own. Atheists and lukewarm believers are, in the end, the same, whether they admit it or not—so why not, Updike implies, go all out and wager on eternal life?

And yet, even with his increasing equivocation between belief and unbelief, Updike insists that if one sides with belief, it must be Christianity, and not any other religious alternative—both for the historical reason that the United States was founded and sustained by Christians and for the self-serving reason that no possible competitor affords the same degree of narcissistic delight. This, I would argue, is the main interest of Terrorist (2006), Updike’s penultimate novel, which was widely criticized for its implausible portrayal of Ahmad Ashmawy, a high school student in north New Jersey who comes to espouse Islam and becomes involved in a plot to blow up the Lincoln Tunnel. Ahmad resembles Clark Wilmot in his disgust for the lax religiosity and triumphant license of contemporary American society—yet,
in characteristic Updike fashion, he does not let this disgust prevent him from accepting a sexual favor from a fellow student. The degree to which Ahmad resembles many previous Updike forebears is indeed implausible, as is the epiphany he experiences at the last moment that compels him not to trigger the explosion: “[God] does not want us to desecrate His creation by willing death. He wills life” (306). The novel’s final paragraph, however, suggests that Ahmad recoils immediately from his epiphany once he emerges from the tunnel into Manhattan:

All around them, up Eighth Avenue to Broadway, the great city crawls with people, some smartly dressed, many of them shabby, a few beautiful but most not, all reduced by the towering structures around them to the size of insects, but scuttling, hurrying, intent in the milky morning sun upon some plan or scheme or hope they are hugging to themselves, their reason for living another day, each one of them impaled upon the pin of consciousness, fixed upon self-advancement and self-preservation. That, and only that. These devils, Ahmad thinks, have taken away my God. (310)

Ahmad may voice something of Updike’s praise of creation and refrain from murder, but he does not accept what appears in Updike’s work as its necessary corollary—the love of self as the perceiving consciousness that confirms creation’s value. It would seem that for Updike, Islam is not a viable alternative to Christianity precisely because it lacks such a conception of the centrality of the self: Ahmad perceives his Updikean epiphany as a fall into the kind of self-consciousness that disgusts him, a desire for self-preservation that he rationalized into a belief that he was doing God’s will in not causing the explosion. Ahmad has, it would seem, lost his faith precisely because he has discovered his capacity for narcissism even in the midst of what would seem an act of total submission to God. Yet he does not embrace this capacity, and the chilling quality of the final sentence suggests that for Updike, not to do so compromises one’s humanity. Whether Ahmad presents a convincing portrayal of Muslim belief in America in the early twenty-first century or not, Updike wagers that readers will recoil not from his sense of shame but from his refusal to celebrate himself, his dogged insistence that if one believes, one ought to live as if one does. For all of Updike’s professions of orthodoxy, in this respect, at least, he drearily conforms to Amy Hungerford’s thesis of postmodern belief: orthodoxy is a private matter, and one must accept the trivialization of public and communal life that accompanies such a stance.