Post-Pill Paradise Lost: John Updike's *Couples*

by David Lodge

Reviewing some books about Utopia recently (*Encounter*, April, 1969), I ventured the suggestion that 'Eros is traditionally an anti-utopian force, though he is catered for in the specialized utopias of pornography—what Stephen Marcus has called "Pornotopia".' I used the word 'traditionally' because we have seen in modern times the emergence of a school of thought that may properly be termed 'utopian', in that it is concerned to construct ideal models of the good life, but which inverts the values we normally associate with Utopia, recommending not the enhanced exercise of rationality but the liberation of instinct, not the perfecting of the mind, but 'the resurrection of the body'. The latter phrase is adopted by Norman O. Brown as a concluding slogan in *Life Against Death* (1959), a representative text of the new utopianism. It is not, of course, wholly new, and may be readily traced back to earlier sources—to Nietzsche, to Lawrence and, pre-eminently, to Freud, on whom *Life Against Death* is a commentary.

Brown begins with the paradox propounded by Freud, that civilization or 'culture' (which is prized by traditional utopists, and which they wish to perfect) is based on the repression and sublimation of erotic energy. Freud himself was shifty about the proportionate loss and gain of this process, but Brown is quite certain and uncompromising: civilization is self-evidently neurotic, and the only solution is to end the tyranny of the reality-principle, to substitute 'conscious play' for alienated labour as the mainspring of society, and to restore to adult sexuality, narrowly fixated on genital and procreative functions, the 'polymorphous perverse' of infantile eroticism. This utopian adaptation of Freud both feeds and is fed by the sexual revolution in contemporary society, and the third inter-acting contribution comes from the arts. Thus, in this perspective, pornography is the product of a sexually repressed society and would disappear in the erotic utopia by a process of assimilation. Not surprisingly, therefore, we are witnessing today a determined effort by the arts to render pornography redundant by incorporating its characteristic materials into 'legitimate' art.

John Updike's *Couples*[1] seems to me likely to be best understood and appreciated against this kind of background. It is concerned with the efforts of a number of couples in contemporary New England to create a clandestine erotic utopia; and it is, notoriously, a serious novel which exploits extensively the matter and diction

[1]Knopf, New York (1968), Deutsch, London (1968). My page references are to the Deutsch edition.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1970.tb07723.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

traditionally reserved for pornography. As this latter feature would suggest, the utopian enterprise is treated with a good deal of sympathy; and the novel is notable for its lyrical celebration of the sensual life, including the 'perverse' forms of love-making. But whereas Brown, at the outset of his book, asks the reader to make a 'willing suspension of common sense',[1] Updike is, as a novelist, basically committed to realism (however much heightened by mythopoeic allusion) from which common sense—and the reality principle—cannot be excluded. Thus in *Couples* the note of celebration is checked by irony, the utopian enterprise fails on a communal level, and the struggle of life against death is ambiguously resolved.

Erotic utopianism is, of course, at odds with conventional Christian morality and with the Christian counsels of perfection through asceticism; yet at the same time it claims to be basically religious in its values, and to have in common with 'true' Christianity a virtuous indifference to worldly and materialistic standards of achievement and success. It thus draws on the Christian tradition of a pre-lapsarian paradise, which in turn has literary associations with the ideal world of pastoral. This matrix of ideas is kept constantly before us in *Couples*, sometimes lightly—as when the hero's first mistress stills his fears about conception with the gay greeting, 'Welcome to the post-pill paradise' (p. 52)—and sometimes gravely, as in the epigraph from Tillich:

> There is a tendency in the average citizen, even if he has a high standing in his profession, to consider the decisions relating to the life of the society to which he belongs as a matter of fate on which he has no influence—like the Roman subjects all over the world in the period of the Roman empire, a mood favourable for the resurgence of religion but unfavourable for the preservation of a living democracy.

The couples of Tarbox, a 'pastoral milltown' (p. 106), a 'bucolic paradise' (p. 317) as it is variously called, within commuting distance of Boston, re-enact or parody the situation of the early Christians. ' "We're a subversive cell . . . " ' their 'high-priest' and 'gamesmaster' Freddy Thorne, the dentist, tells them. ' "Like in the catacombs. Only they were trying to break out of hedonism. We're trying to break back into it. It's not easy." ' (p. 148.) It's not easy partly because the Christian religion still retains a vestigial hold over them. Of the Applebys and the Smiths, who first develop the protocol of wife-swapping, and earn the corporate title of the 'Applesmiths', Janet Appleby develops an 'inconvenient sense of evil' (p. 151) which the other three try patiently but unsuccessfully to assuage. The main characters, and most adventurous explorers of the erotic, Piet Hanema and Foxy Whitman, are also the most

[1] *Life Against Death: the Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*. Vintage edn. New York (undated), p. xi.

regular churchgoers of the group. Piet, indeed, is burdened with an inherited Calvinist conscience, much obsessed with death and damnation. This makes him the fitting culture-hero—and, as it turns out, scapegoat—of the new cult; for in him the struggle of id against ego and super-ego is most intense and dramatic.

The sex-and-religion equation—sex as religion, sex versus religion, sex replacing religion—is insisted upon even in the topography of Tarbox, with its streets called Charity and Divinity trodden by adulterers and leading to the landmark of the Congregational Church with its 'pricking steeple and flashing cock' (p. 82). At the end of the story this church is destroyed by lightning in a furious thunderstorm that has overtones of Old Testament visitations upon sinners; but the damage reveals that the church has long been structurally unsound—in other words, the religious spirit has already passed into the intimate circle of the couples. ' "He thinks we're a circle" ', Piet's wife Angela says of Freddy Thorne, ' "A magic circle of heads to keep the night out. . . . He thinks we've made a church of each other." ' (p. 7.) The American couples, however, though they copy the early Christians' withdrawal from the public world in which secular history is made, lack their innocence and confidence. They are apt to feel that they are rejected rather than rejecting. ' "God doesn't love us any more" ', Piet asserts (p. 200). Their magic circle is, in this light, not the seed of a brave new world but a temporary resource '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' (p. 372).

This ambivalence is maintained by the two alternative notes that sound throughout the narrative: romantic-lyrical celebration, and realistic irony. The honorific description of the couples' attempt to 'improvise . . . a free way of life' in which 'duty and work yielded as ideals to truth and fun. Virtue was no longer sought in temple or market place but in the home—one's own home and the home of one's friends' (p. 106), is balanced by the more reductive comment, 'The men had stopped having careers and the women had stopped having children. Liquor and love were left.' (p. 12.) Adultery opens the way to erotic delight which is far from being selfish or brutalizing, for in changing partners the ageing couples achieve an enhanced awareness of their own and others' beauty:

> Harold believed that beauty was what happened between people, was in a sense the trace of what had happened, so he in truth found her, though minutely creased and puckered and sagging, more beautiful than the unused girl whose ruins she thought of herself as inhabiting. Such generosity of perception returned upon himself; as he lay with Janet, lost in praise, Harold felt as if a glowing tumour of eternal life were consuming the cells of his mortality. (p. 138.)

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1970.tb07723.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

But adultery also imposes its own demeaning code of intrigue and stylized deception:

'Are you sleeping with Janet?'
'Why? Are you sleeping with Frank?'
'Of course not.'
'In that case, I'm not sleeping with Janet.' (p. 140.)

The paradoxes and tensions of the theme are most dramatically enacted by Piet Hanema (partner in a Tarbox building firm) and Foxy Whitman (wife of a frigid biochemist who is still competing in the 'real' world, and hence hostile to the world of the couples). They dare, erotically, more than any of the other couples. Their affair is both the most romantically intense and the most sensual (their oral-genital lovemaking given an extra quality of polymorphous perversity by the circumstance that Foxy is heavily pregnant by her husband); but they also suffer most, both comically and tragically. Mastered by an overwhelming desire to suck the milk-filled breasts of his mistress at a party,[1] Piet locks himself in the bathroom with her, and escapes discovery by his wife only by leaping from the window, straight into the arms of another, sardonically teasing couple—hurting his leg into the bargain. Later in the story a stiffer and more traditional price is paid for sexual indulgence: Foxy, untypically in the post-pill paradise, fails to take contraceptive precautions in her first post-natal encounter with Piet, and becomes pregnant by him. An abortion, with all its attendant anxiety, misery and guilt, is arranged, but fails to conceal the affair. Piet and Foxy are banished by their respective spouses, and cold-shouldered by the other couples, whose disregard for convention does not extend thus far, and who cannot forgive them for making the clandestine cult scandalously public. They go through a bad time; but when the wrath of God that Piet has always feared finally strikes, it does so harmlessly, merely symbolically, on the empty church. After their temporary purgatory of exile and separation, Piet and Foxy are allowed to marry, and settle happily enough in another town where, 'gradually, among people like themselves, they have been accepted, as another couple' (p. 458).

Updike is, of course, neither the first nor the last American writer to take as his subject an attempt (usually unsuccessful) to found a new kind of human community, one based on values that run counter to those prevailing in society at large. The place of *Couples* in this tradition is not immediately apparent only because the utopian experiment it describes is interpersonal rather than social or economic, and thus, on the outside, scarcely distinguishable

[1]Brown quotes from Freud as follows: 'The state of being in love results from the fulfilment of infantile conditions of love . . . whatever fulfils this condition of love becomes idealized.' 'The desire to suck includes within it the desire for the mother's breast, which is therefore the first object of sexual desire; I cannot convey to you any adequate idea of the importance of this first object in determining every later object adopted. . . .' (p. 51.)

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1970.tb07723.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

from the way of life it is rejecting. Utopian communities usually signal their intentions more openly: thus, the middle-aged radicals in Mary McCarthy's *A Source of Embarrassment* set off in covered station wagons to found an agricultural co-operative, and the hippies in the movie *Alice's Restaurant* set up their commune in a deconsecrated church. The tradition can be traced right back to *The Blithedale Romance*, and it is interesting to place *Couples* beside that earlier account of 'an exploded scheme for beginning the life of Paradise anew'[1] in New England.

Like Updike's couples, Hawthorne's characters have opted out of the competitive, acquisitive rat-race. The narrator, Coverdale, explains: 'We had left the rusty iron framework of society behind us; we had broken through many hindrances that are powerful enough to keep most people on the weary treadmill of the established system. . . . ' In both novels the utopian experiment founders, eventually, on the reef of sex and sexual intrigue. In *The Blithedale Romance* Coverdale is in love with Priscilla who is in love with Hollingsworth who is in love with Zenobia who is secretly and unhappily married(?) to Westervelt who has a mesmeric hold on Priscilla. Coverdale might almost be describing Tarbox when he says:

> the footing on which we all associated at Blithedale was widely different from that of conventional society. While inclining us to the soft affections of the golden age, it seemed to authorize any individual, of either sex, to fall in love with any other, regardless of what would elsewhere be judged suitable and prudent. (p. 481.)

There are differences, obviously enough. Blithedale is, officially, dedicated to work rather than play, and its play never becomes overtly erotic. Nevertheless *The Blithedale Romance* contains some of Hawthorne's sexiest writing. Coverdale, for instance, is naughtily given to imagining Zenobia in the nude:

> Assuredly, Zenobia could not have intended it—the fault must have been entirely in my imagination. But these last words, together with something in her manner, irresistibly brought up a picture of that fine, perfectly developed figure, in Eve's earliest garment. Her free, careless, generous modes of expression often had this effect of creating images which though pure, are hardly felt to be quite decorous when born of a thought that passes between man and woman. . . . One felt an influence breathing out of her such as we might suppose to come from Eve, when she was just made, and her creator brought her to Adam, saying, 'Behold! Here is a woman!' Not that I would convey the idea of especial gentleness, grace, modesty and shyness, but of a certain warmth and rich characteristic, which seems, for the most part, to have been refined away out of the feminine system. (p. 448.)

[1] *The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Modern Library Edn., New York (1937), ed. Norman Holmes Pearson, p. 444. All page references are to this edition.

Coverdale thinks Zenobia should pose for sculptors, 'because the cold decorum of the marble would consist with the utmost scantiness of drapery, so that the eye might chastely be gladdened with her material perfection in its entireness' (p. 464). Looking at 'the flesh-warmth over her round arms, and what was visible of her full bust' he sometimes has to close his eyes, 'as if it were not quite the privilege of modesty to gaze at her' (p. 464). And he is sure that she is sexually experienced: 'Zenobia is a wife; Zenobia has lived and loved! There is no folded petal, no latent dew-drop, in this perfectly developed rose!' (p. 466).

There is no such carnal element in Coverdale's 'love' for Priscilla —who is, indeed, precisely the kind of de-sexualized Victorian maiden with whom Zenobia is contrasted in the first of these quotations. He apologizes for his suspicions about Zenobia: 'I acknowledged it as a masculine grossness—a sin of wicked interpretation, of which man is often guilty towards the other sex—thus to mistake the sweet, liberal, but womanly frankness of a noble and generous disposition.' (p. 466.) But his suspicions prove well founded, and Hawthorne evidently shared his narrator's mixture of guilty excitement and genteel *pudeur* when contemplating a fully sexual woman, since he is at pains to present Zenobia as a kind of witch, and sends her eventually to a sudden and sadistically relished death by drowning.

Updike, in contrast, is much more 'emancipated', much more tolerant and sympathetic towards the erotic, and lets his lawless lovers off lightly in the end. But there is something of the witch about Foxy, something sinister and depraved, Lamia-like, about the magnetism she holds for Piet, who is himself quite as much haunted by the God of Calvin as any Hawthorne hero. Indeed, the more one dwells on the comparison, the more plausible it becomes to see Hawthorne as Updike's literary ancestor among the classic American novelists. Both writers like to temper romance with realism, lyricism with irony; both tend to rely on ambivalent symbolism at crucial points in their narratives; both are highly literary, highly self-conscious stylists, fussing over every word to a degree that can be self-defeating; and both seem at their best in the short story, over-extended in the long narrative.

Updike's literary gifts, especially his remarkably precise, sensuous notation of the physical texture of ordinary experience, are well suited to the evocation of a suburban pastoral paradise with a snake in the grass. The descriptions of Tarbox, its couples and their way of life—the neglected beauty of the landscape, the comfortable elegance of the expensively remodelled homes, the casual entertaining, the ball games and parlour games, the plentiful food and drink, the intimate uninhibited conversations, as the children watch the blue flickerings of the TV bring meaningless messages of remote disasters and upheavals in the outer, public world (only

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1970.tb07723.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

the assassination of J. F. Kennedy, whose combination of personal stylishness and political weakness makes devious claims on their allegiance, disturbs the couples' calm assumption that 'news happened to other people' (p. 214))—all this is exquisitely rendered, so that we feel the charm, the allure of this way of life, and also its weakness, its fragility. The most eloquent passages in the novel are elegiac—for example:

> Foxy said, 'We must get back', truly sad. She was to experience this sadness many times, this chronic sadness of late Sunday afternoon, when the couples had exhausted their game, basketball or beachgoing or tennis or touch football, and saw an evening weighing upon them, an evening without a game, an evening spent among flickering lamps and cranky children and leftover food and the nagging half-read newspaper with its weary portents and atrocities, an evening when marriages closed in upon themselves like flowers from which the sun is withdrawn, an evening giving like a smeared window on Monday and the long week when they must perform again their impersonations of working men, of stockbrokers and dentists and engineers, of mothers and housekeepers, of adults who are not the world's guests but its hosts. (pp. 73-4.)

This passage illustrates very well how Updike has taken a large abstract theme about contemporary culture and embodied it in a densely-textured novel about a particular social milieu. On this level, and as long as he keeps our interest distributed fairly evenly over a considerable number of characters, *Couples* seemed to me remarkably successful. But in the latter half of the book the whole weight of the theme and structure is shifted on to the shoulders of Piet and Foxy, and they are not sufficiently realized to sustain it. Foxy is acceptable as a beautiful witch, but as an Eloise to Piet's Abelard, analysing her feelings in long, fey epistles, she becomes something of a bore. Piet is more solidly drawn, but his passiveness in the crisis of his marriage induces tedium; and Updike's incorrigible greed for stylistic effect makes nonsense of his attempt to portray his hero as a kind of primitive, a rough diamond who doesn't really belong among the college-educated couples. Walking on the shore, for instance, Piet notices 'Wood flecks smoothed like creek pebbles, iron spikes mummified in the orange froth of oxidization, powerfully sunk horseshoe prints, the four-tined traces of racing dog paws, the shallow impress of human couples that had vanished (the female foot bare, with toe and a tender isthmus linking heel and forepad; the male mechanically shod in the waffle intaglio of sneaker soles and apparently dragging a stick), the wandering mollusk trails dim as the contours of a photograph over-developed in the pan of the tide', etc. (pp. 428-9). This is a poet's, not a builder's, sensibility. The rather Shakespearian intrigue whereby Freddy Thorne arranges Foxy's abortion in return for a night with Piet's wife, Angela, who obliges without enquiring

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1970.tb07723.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

into the basis of the bargain, seems to violate the probabilities of the rest of the action. This is reminiscent of Hawthorne, and so is the device by which Updike displaces the catastrophe of his story from the human characters to the inanimate church—an effective set-piece, but too obviously stage-managed, a purely aesthetic climax where we have been led to expect a moral one.

For all that, *Couples* impressed me as an intelligent and skilfully composed novel on a significant theme, and most of the comment I have heard or read upon it seems to me to have done Updike less than justice.

The Church and Moral Decision[1]
by Peter Harris

Not all the discussion between progressive and conservative wings in the Church is about doctrine and liturgy. As the *Humanae Vitae* affair revealed there are growing areas of disagreement on questions of morality. Though the ones I want to write about are found in acute form in Roman Catholic circles where there is a sharper clash between individual and authority, they are also frequent wherever any strong doctrine of revelation, particularly of a fundamentalist kind, prevails. This essay aims simply to elucidate some of the questions which do not always get properly examined in the heat of debate and to analyse some of the presuppositions behind popularly held and taught views which lay some claim to being representative of 'traditional Christian morality'. Not infrequently the views of serious moral thinkers are dubbed 'situation ethics' or 'purely subjective morality' and by being so labelled are accounted suitably disposed of along with the rest of the contents of the bin marked 'new theology'. There is a risk that more than garbage is disposed of in this way. I want in this essay to do a bit of 'cool looking' at some of the presuppositions of the supporters of 'traditional Christian morality' (self-styled) and also to look at a problem that crops up frequently in these discussions: what can be reckoned as specifically 'Christian' in a moral view which does not understand moral imperatives to have been delivered timeless and eternal in some earlier period of history? In other words this part of the essay could be seen as an attempt to answer the accusation of reductionism, 'that's just humanism' which is often levelled at

[1]This essay grew out of a paper delivered to the National Theological Commission o England and Wales and later expanded for the Conference at Spode House in January 1970: *The Teaching Church and the Taught Church.*

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1970.tb07723.x Published online by Cambridge University Press