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Critical Essay

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David Kern is the Arbiter of His Own Discontent

What distinguishes John Updike's collection of literary works from many of his contemporaries is not necessarily the subject of Protestant faith in middle class America but instead his seeming insistence that we consider its continuing relevance. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the character of David Kern, respectively protagonist and narrator of "Pigeon Feathers" and "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, a Dying Cat, a Traded Car." David's role, in the words of Sandra Conn, is largely contemplative, linking "everyday [objects] or [scenes]" to "imaginative vision... thus serving as a vehicle for transcendent truth" (25). These two short stories span David's late adolescence through his early adulthood, and as he and his thoughts grow in complexity and number, so too do the various truths that he perceives. The character Updike offers is a man who has recognized the anticlimax of constantly redefining one's faith in order to reconcile it with human experience. David recognizes his ability to sculpt his discontent with previous definitions of faith toward new experiences of transcendent truth in the salient, thought-provoking moments of his life, developing as a character in line with Updike's ontological conception of humankind that "a contented person... ceases to be a person. Unfallen Adam is an ape" (qtd. in Conn 25). David's beliefs do not amount to any concise aphorism or worldview; instead, they allow him to experience momentary respite from dread, ennui, and

anxiety. This can come, he decides, through even traditional religious means that have fallen by the cultural wayside.

David's budding discontent with some traditional paradigms for understanding—which his faith and family have provided him with—first avers itself in "Pigeon Feathers." Fear of eternal death is the catalyst for this change, and the fear manifests itself in two distinct instances: first in his "exact vision of death" at the outhouse, and again as "his own dying, in a specific bed in a specific room with specific walls mottled with a specific wallpaper" (Updike 17-20). What frightens David into his state of unrest is a core issue of the human condition: recognizing the inevitable obliteration of one's own nominal value that comes with death. Conn notes that being "eternally forgotten is the final manifestation and determination of being eternally dead" (26). As he loses certainty in the Christian metaphysic, there is less comfort in the indemonstrable claims of faith that have hidden him from this fear.

His first response to this fear is escape into the world of scientific rationalism, which ironically is what disturbed his unexamined faith originally. However, because pure scientific rationalism also provides no hope for the individual in the face of oblivion, these truths feed into the "spectres of science fiction" that chase him back to the house (Updike 18). He digresses next into a state of avoidance, which breeds further discontentment and only prolongs the inevitable confrontation with his fears. At "the sight of" the Wells volumes and the Plato dialogue his mother offers him in particular, "the memory of his fear reawakened and came around him. He had grown stiff and stupid in its embrace" (29). The authors and the worldviews they champion yield no comfort for David's flourishing discontent, so David's response to this growth

throughout most of “Pigeon Feathers” is avoidant and fearful—such is the natural first response to dread.

David grows to be more like his adult self by rejecting the solutions to discontentment that his family and faith thrust upon him, but he undoes his work towards an actualized life of discontent in his final epiphany. His mother lets her faith inform a pantheistic humanist worldview and offers him both teleological and allegorical explanations to lead him back to comfort. The “evidence” that surrounds David “out the window [in] the sun [and in] the fields” is one avenue, and the exaggerated realism of the “Parable of the Cave” from her “college text of Plato” both offer explanations beyond the axioms of unquestioned Christian faith (26). When his mother’s adages prove unhelpful, David’s father, characterized as both stoic and dogmatic, offers no comforting truths; instead, he offers only harsh realities David now understands as well. In doing so, we see the father’s life remains unexamined beyond this bitterness. If “the world’ll be better off” without his father, and death is “a wonderful thing” to him, then his ethics are not that of a traditional Christian (27). Yet at the same time, the base for many of his arguments is a lifeless “because the Bible tells us so” (16). The two notions do not line up, thus obfuscating David’s quest for meaning.

All that is left in this line of reasoning for David, then, is divine impartation. Conn argues that “salvation” for David “is to come” descending in a vision of equal intensity to those that brought problems of death and evil and will give him definitive answers to these troubling questions (27). This, she claims, happens in his experience of killing the pigeons. However, Pat C. Hoy’s alternative reading is that “David has rejected the traditional argument from design and has instead put himself on a par with this creator” and in doing so subverts the narrative’s

expected conclusion (220). The problem with these two conclusions is that they betray Updike's conviction that the human condition is bound to its own discontent. A reading that stays true to that message (especially in light of the David-Kern-as-narrator in "Packed Dirt") is that David forces this epiphany in order to acquiesce to the explainable, and his faith upbringing then must lead to a traditional conclusion. David makes this decision as a child, and when he later speaks to the issue of truth as an adult, he seems to experience this decision as a mark of his childhood.

What is made evident in the narration of "Packed Dirt" is that several contrasting faith claims can inhabit someone who is willing to be subject to uncertainty. The narrator David seems to have mastered such a state of uncertainty, becoming the arbiter of his own discontent. His vignettes into the four titular "things that move us" signal, per Michael Novak, his search beyond rationality 'for that serene, deep, perennial way of looking at life which the secular, active West has lost'" (qtd. in Conn 28). The motion through these fleeting, contrasted moments without clinging to any one learned truth as supreme communicates a lack of personal desire to find the world he experiences in front of him to be explainable, a distinct growth from the protagonist needing epiphany at the end of "Pigeon Feathers." By way of his discontentment and one belief system not necessarily being utterly satisfying, all of these symbols host important yet competing tenets of his composite worldview.

The symbol of packed dirt celebrates faith as ceremony, something Updike deems retainable in the modern age. In contemplation of it, David memorializes "our sense of God's forested legacy to us [that] dwindles" while celebrating that "in these worn, rubbed, and patted patches" we retain "a sense of human legacy—like those feet of statues of saints which have lost their toes to centuries of kisses" (Updike 103). All ritual, then, renders God a discoverable entity

without regard to the degree to which it is considered sacred. At the same time, the traditional avenues of ceremony and discovery through faith – those which his mother’s worldview initially offered him – have renewed their own significance as he attends various churches over his lifetime. The drive to become “sated even with consolation,” David realizes, he can ward off with “escape” to the world that “God made... Aquinas says, in play” (106). Thus, the first two symbols David ponders in “Packed Dirt” hardly venture beyond a typical experience of truth by contemplating a narrow definition of the divine, but he holds to these as equally viable to the truths with which the remaining symbols provide him.

In contrast, the images of the dying cat and the birth of his daughter explore understandings of truth beyond the conception of the world ordered by and in service to the divine. The two illustrate the necessary link between life and death, yet David’s response to the inevitability of the cycle borders on total apathy. His newfound place as a father is defined by “the failure of sympathetic pain, the anesthetized dread, [and] the postponement of pride” that it produces in him (107). These feelings are contradistinguished against his fixation on the cat, where his concern elucidates “Updike’s point... that a birth necessitates a death” (Conn 29). As David reflects on the increased frequency of his feelings of dread, ennui, and anxiety, he realizes “the contemptible answer—animal stoicism” has been a repeated truth found in his own resignation (Updike 111). Because David grapples with this detached, quasi-nihilistic determinism in tandem with the hope found in the earlier symbols, he exudes a more substantial ability to believe contradictory truths. His discontentment prevails because the human tendency toward metanarrative is undone in his ethical and epistemological quandaries. For David, seeking contentment is circuitous because any delineation of a narrative arc is futile.

With the human proclivity for order cast aside, David's last meditation on the traded car provides a place for a new experimental form of human ceremony—the technological sublime. Updike chooses this as the last interaction the audience has with David, rendering the character a man freed to scrutinize his human experience as caught in a state of perpetual discontent. David's return drive from Pennsylvania details the melding of his organic form with the mechanical body of the vehicle as he "[loses] first heart, then head, and finally any sense of ... body" (Updike 121). His self is reduced plainly to its senses, rendering the vehicle something akin to Emerson's transparent eyeball. David dilutes the self so much that the "car, though its soul the driver had died, [maintains] steady forward motion" and becomes responsible for the trip's completion (121). Escape nor order function as the goal of this mental state as they would with all his previous epistemologies; rather, David revels in the solace of the unadulterated experience. The "momentary [death]" of David's soul is what "moves him steadily forward along this seemingly endless journey" (Hoy 223). Glimpsing this unexpected mode of the sublime is predicated on the authority David finally has gained over his discontent. He may now find ceremony where he chooses, and his assimilation into the car in this final journey indicates as much.

Ultimately, David's struggle through belief offers no recompense for its seemingly distressing assertions, those which often plague the rational mind. No single epistemological, metaphysical, or ethical stance will provide a clear and impactful guiding focus to a life without eventually becoming trite and losing its applicability. Instead, David and Updike both extend their search beyond a rational means. Where David succeeds is in unceasing exploration, not allowing himself a sense that his soul is contended and therefore no longer searching. Updike's accentuation of this narrative allows the careful reader to piece together a unified message from

the narrative of David Kern in “Pigeon Feathers” and “Packed Dirt.” One needn’t search for contentedness as the end of imaginative self-reflection; on the contrary, imaginative self-reflection will lead to a continually renewing sense of one’s own humanity.

Works Cited

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