

‘Personal relations, sex and otherwise, are very much where one lives today.’

This sentiment would probably receive immediate assent from so many people today. It represents a deep aspiration of our time, receiving so much attention in contemporary literature and philosophy—and therefore also in contemporary theology, since nothing human is alien to the Church. It is therefore all the more interesting that the author of this particular formulation of our aspiration should himself see the limitations of this truth, when erected into a principle of life. For John Updike, as the author is, has already expressed certain important reservations himself.

The perhaps unlikely context of his remarks is an interview between himself and Leigh Crutchley of the B.B.C. and reported in *Penguinews* to introduce the Penguin edition of his latest novel *Couples*, now to be seen titillatingly displayed in so many bookshops. He explains that his fable of ten prosperous, thirty-five-ish couples engaged in various forms of exchange—from words to partners—is meant to be a study of couples becoming an organism and so a social unit striving implicitly to be an ideal community, a Utopia in the New England tradition. And he then goes on to try to say why this ‘latter-day Utopia’ goes bad. And this is where he makes his first fascinating comment: ‘I suppose I myself doubt that even companionship in its full range, from playing word-games to going to bed together, really can be made a total basis for life. And that is what they try to do.’

In a way, of course, this would be the very minimum reservation that another, younger group of our contemporaries would want to make. The original sentiment quoted would in their eyes appear to be quaintly dated, not to say contemptibly reactionary. But John Updike is once again perspicuous enough to have anticipated this response: ‘I know that my generation is one that wanted to have a lot of children and in a way shut out the big world. It was not a politically involved generation, unlike the present.’ In these words, ‘politically involved generation’, he does indeed well hit off the opposite perception: that life cannot be thought of as the progressive satisfaction of multiple personal fulfilments, individual or conjugal, that it must be thought of in terms of society as a whole and therefore of some overarching common goal, demanding appropriate disciplines and enablements. Whence ‘politics’ in its enlarged new—and old—sense of all that makes for living together in one *polis*, one civic community—a common culture, a dialogue society, a socialist Utopia. The dimension of a collective destiny, of the mystery of some sort of *mission* through and beyond personal and inter-personal fulfilment makes its appearance.

The deep human need for intimate warmth and communication cannot, however, be dismissed so easily in the name of this counter-

vailing truth, especially when this latter tends as a matter of experienced horror to degenerate so readily into totalitarian manipulation. Some creative tension at least is indicated here: the sensed and explored limits on the possibilities of 'companionship in its full range' as a total basis for life, of brotherhood, *philadelphia*, in this sense, finds its rational explanation in the perceived need for some trans-personal goal, whilst the potential inhumanity of such a trans-personal drive needs to be broken against the integrity and anguish of its human subjects.

And it is here that a third comment of John Updike becomes very relevant. For the remark quoted at the beginning was immediately followed by the following comment: 'and I think that work moving away from the centre of man's life is a loss—we have nothing yet to put in its place. The sense of craft, the pride in your craft, and even the disappearance of what used to be called hobbies all indicate a loss of contact with the material world; and other people's bodies become the world.' For what is immediately suggested by these words is that it is in work that we could potentially find the meeting-place we are looking for. And one thinks straightway of that genial and deceptively simple insight of Marx formulated by Engels: 'economics deals not with things but with relations between persons . . . ; these relations are, however, always *attached to things*. . . .' Do we not have here the sketch of an integrated view of life, according to which it is in terms of people's mutually complementary work on the natural, physical, material world that they feel out, negotiate and discover relationships which by pointing beyond themselves confirm and respect their intrinsic limitations but which also thereby become truly, because socially, fulfilling?

The potential synthesis hinted at here by John Updike, the developed positive of his negative, is enticing. And yet is it not precisely here that we must this time make our own qualification? If we subscribe to this revised version of Utopia, do we not relapse once more into a 'work-ethic' which can be variously termed Promethean or Pelagian? Nor is the invocation of the theological variant an accident. For it suggests the opening up of a quite different horizon and context of inter-related ways of looking at things: the necessary limiting of the due claims of companionship by some trans-personal principle does not therefore entail some *non*-personal principle. Likewise, the recognition of work does not preclude some notion of a Sabbath-like leisure that is the very summation as well as the ridiculing of work.

All these lines of exploration and criticism, then, converge finally on a glimpse of a super-personal being in whose image co-working, pro-creating together as gift becomes the means of attaining to the companionship of complementarity that is joke, play, comedy, celebration and perfect content.

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