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**THE CONFLICT
BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION
IN JOHN UPDIKE'S *IN THE BEAUTY OF THE LILIES***

FLORENTINA ANGHEL¹

Abstract

In 1996 John Updike publishes *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, a novel whose narrative structure covers the evolution of an American family over four generations. The protagonist of the first part, Reverend Clarence Arthur Wilmot, realizes that he no longer believes in God as a result of his philosophical readings. His decision to quit his position and the church will determine his and his family's inexorable fall within an abyss without either spiritual or material values. Therefore the main theme of the novel is the relation between agnosticism and atheism on the one hand and religion on the other hand. While philosophical thinking apparently provides a more reasonable perspective upon life and faith, the evolution of the Wilmot family shows that philosophy has no practical applicability and, instead of undermining religion, it actually reinforces its importance in everyday life.

Key words: American literature, philosophy, religion, conflict

Contemporary literature echoes trends in other domains which are part of the net entrapping life and which contribute to its newness in both form and content. Seemingly, John Updike's novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, published in 1996, encompasses aspects of the life of an American family. The end of the twentieth century is marked by 'the invasion of the social sciences – anthropology, sociology, psychology, history – into the study of religious systems' (Charlesworth 2), which may explain Updike's interest in focusing on the relationship between philosophy and religion in his novel.

Starting from the late-nineteenth-century clash between philosophy and religion, the author shows that life can be determined by people's

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decision to embrace the theories promoted by one or the other of the mentioned domains. John Updike's impressively constructed novel reestablishes, in its cyclicity, some commonsensical rules that should, morally speaking, assist man's evolution, which strengthens the ever growing contemporary interest in religion seen as what exists beyond the visible world.

In this approach philosophy is associated with reason, with what is visible and within the reach of human understanding and explanation and the novelist alludes to David Hume, Robert Ingersoll, Ernest Renan and Friedrich Nietzsche. Religion defies reason and crosses the limits of human understanding and perception, which makes it manifest through faith, frequently referred to in the novel, and intuition and includes the idea of the existence of God and the idea of ritual and prayer that eventually will be spiritually rewarding. While philosophy and its impact on faith are overtly discussed in the first chapter of the novel, references to religion and spirituality pervade the whole book.

John Updike showed his interest in religion as a theme in literature before writing *In the Beauty of the Lilies* and gathered these earlier lectures and essays on the topic and other critical works in the collection entitled *More Matter. Essays and Criticism*. In 'Religion and Literature' – a contribution to the volume *The Religion Factor: A Introduction to How Religion Matters* (1996) republished in *More Matter* – the author prefers a more neutral journey through literary works breathing spirituality in different cultural contexts at different times. His personal involvement is emphasized in the last paragraph where he praises a metaphysical union between religion and literature:

[...] it remains curiously true that the literary artist, to achieve full effectiveness, must assume a religious state of mind – a state that looks beyond worldly standards of success and failure. A mood of exhalation should possess the language, a vatic tension and rapture. [...] The work of literary art springs from the world and adheres to it but is distinctly different in substance. (Updike 1999: 62)

Two years before writing *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, John Updike delivered a lecture 'on religion and contemporary American literature' at Indiana/Purdue University in Indianapolis (1994). This time he abandons the neutral tone for a more personal attitude towards the role contemporary and young writers assign to religion in their works as well as in their relation with their works. Despite a modest representation of religion that

he associated with Allen Ginsberg, Charles Wright, Philip Roth, Ron Hansen, and other contemporary writers, 'the point is,' he states, 'that for an averagely interested and distracted reader of *belles lettres* like myself, religion is not getting through.' (Updike 1999: 849) A virulent attack against those writers who stripped their fictitious world of the benefits that religious references would have brought, Updike's lecture eventually concludes with the 'religious sensation' of the artist's limited condition:

This writer's most important asset is not wisdom or skill but an irrational, often joyous sense of importance attaching to what little he knows; and this is a religious sensation. (Updike 1999: 850)

By writing his novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, John Updike attempts to respond the 'religious needs' of his times and creates a world in the apparent absence of God where, despite Clarence Wilmot who obsessively voiced 'There is no God' (Updike 1996: 5-6), God's presence is, paradoxically, meant to be obvious. As the author mentions in a message he wrote for the First Edition of the Franklin Library (1996), the family saga 'in terms of God's dealings with four generations' (Updike 1999: 830) is a recontextualization of the 'tale of Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers' (Updike 1999: 830). The novel is an overwhelming proof of a researcher's activity, as Updike rigorously constructed a century of American culture, and the details testifying the identity of a place or time are carefully documented and chosen. There are four major characters (Clarence, Teddy, Essie/Alma and Clark/Esau/Slick) around which and through which he tells the story in an omniscient narrative voice. The evolution of these characters is assisted by God, in Updike's intention: '... I was trying through this throng of identities to tell a continuous story, of which God was the hero. I invited Him in, to be a character in my tale, and if He declined, with characteristic modern modesty, to make His presence felt unambiguously, at least there is a space in this chronicle plainly reserved for Him, a pocket in human nature that nothing else will fill.' (Updike 1999: 831)

In the Beauty of the Lilies is a title of Biblical inspiration suggesting God's care for people and flowers alike, as Jesus says when he preaches to his followers in Matthew's Gospel (*The Book* 942). By associating the title with Christ's birth – the author says: 'The title has been long in my mind, as in its surreal sadness summing up a world of Protestant estrangement – *In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea.*' (Updike 1999: 830) –, the novelist makes the idea of spiritual rebirth emerge and

harmonizes the unrolment of the novel to construct a character free of earthly concerns, to eventually suggest Christ's sacrifice.

Not only the artistic purpose to attract the reader into the challenging debate between philosophy and religion, but also his attempt to rehabilitate religion made Updike begin his novel with the conflict between reason and faith. The protagonist of the first chapter, Clarence Wilmot, is the one who has to make a decision while being torn between his studies at the Princeton Seminary and his philosophical readings. Reverend Clarence Arthur Wilmot who used to preach in a Presbyterian Church and was much admired by his churchgoers simply loses his faith at the beginning of the novel. His loss is described as a physical sensation, faith acquires shape and colour and man has no power over it: '[he] felt the last particles of his faith leave him. The sensation was distinct – a visceral surrender, a set of dark sparkling bubbles escaping upward.' (Updike 1996: 5) The image of the upgoing religious belief reminds of St. Paul seeing faith as 'a dark and enigmatic way of knowing very seriously' (Charlesworth 66) and of Hume's atheistic friends creating the very concrete image of the 'religious belief [that] would shrivel up and disappear.' (Charlesworth 197).

Clarence's impressive education and former experience as a reverend do not help him to keep or regain his faith, which shows that the author, in the spirit of the Presbyterian Church, transmits the idea of the lack of free will in man's existence. Besides, as Charlesworth states in his analysis of Saint Thomas Aquinas' philosophy of religion, faith empowers a person 'to know, directly or indirectly, things that [the person] could not know by ordinary reason,' (Charlesworth 66) in fact faith makes a person 'will to believe propositions (since revealed by God) which do not seem to be true.' (Charlesworth 66) Clarence Wilmot is confronted with his new position – that of an atheist – and, by rummaging through his past and readings, he realizes that certain books had started undermining his faith a long time ago. The new perspective upon his past is quite contrary to what he thought in the past: as a student 'hungry for knowledge and fearless in his youthful sense of God's protection close at hand' (Updike 1996: 15) he decided to read books criticizing the Bible. This experience 'had given Clarence as a divinity student a soaring sense of being a trapeze artist to look down into these depths of dubiousness and facticity.' (Updike 1996: 15)

In his reinterpretation of the past, Clarence discovers his inner disunity and concludes that his present situation is based on a continuous erosion. The moments that he spends in his study looking at his books, seen

as pieces of his mind, eventually unveil to him the power of the words hidden by the apparently similar and innocent spines. The fragment can be read as a metaphor of the character's mind vacillating between the Bible and some philosophers' writings. By making Clarence Wilmot repeatedly mention Ingersoll next to Darwin, Nietzsche, Hume, etc., the author aims to promote the American philosopher. Robert Green Ingersoll, also known as the 'Great Agnostic', dedicated much of his time to write works like: 'About the Holy Bible' (1894), 'The Foundations of Faith' (1895), 'Inspiration of the Bible' (the early 1880's), 'The Brain and the Bible' (1881) in which he criticizes the veridicity of the events presented in the Bible as well as their morality, without forgetting to emphasize the extreme cruelty of a merciless God whose son was sent to bring fire and sword instead of peace. His arguments ranged from commonsensical statements to purely scientific demonstration, neglecting the artistic devices the authors of the Bible used to attract and impress their audience. For example, in 'The Foundations of Faith' Ingersoll shows that the age of the world was scientifically proved to be different from the one mentioned in Genesis and also that the creation of the universe could not have covered only seven days.

In 'The Brain and the Bible' Robert Ingersoll focuses on the relation between will and the brain aiming to demonstrate that the brain cannot be mastered by one's will as there are many involuntary stimuli that make it think. Besides, being a visionary able to anticipate the tendencies to historically and culturally contextualize and determine literary works, the philosopher states: 'Man is collectively and individually what his surroundings have made him.' (Ingersoll 2009:28)

To follow Ingersoll's demonstration of the way in which the brain reacts to external stimuli, it can be said that Clarence has deliberately exposed his faith to the challenges of reason and his brain has acted against his will to believe. His 'hunger for knowledge' weakened his faith, reminding of Adam's sin and his fall. The way in which Updike chooses to contextualize and build the frame for his saga, which is meant to exemplify the theories in the first chapter, makes the reader's mind identify similarities with the Bible which are different from those mentioned by the author in his message for the first edition. Both Clarence and Clark, the protagonists of the first and the last chapters, echo other characters in the Bible: as said above Clarence can be Adam, while Clark, despite his second name Esau, appears more like a contemporary Jesus, the saviour announced to be born 'in the beauty of the lilies' (Updike 1999: 830).

Clarence's spiritual fall for the sake of knowledge is presented metaphorically so as to include the lack of divine help, which makes the reverend conclude that there is no God. The perspective upon Clarence's ability to influence his way of thinking may explain the metaphors with the entrapped or exposed insects and the metaphor of the study.

Clarence's mind was like a many-legged, wingless insect that had long and tediously been struggling to climb up the walls of a slick-walled porcelain basin; and now a sudden impatient wash of water swept it down into the drain. *There is no God.* (Updike 1996: 5-6)

Such a metaphor may make more images and associations emerge: a reduced image of hell seen as an abyss where the insect, which can be a metonymical reference to man (brain), is meant to die by water; or the myth of Sisyphus who uselessly and relentlessly climbs up the mountain pushing his burden. The ambiguity of the excerpt can engage the reader in more interpretations. On the one hand, man is seen alone in his struggle for survival and ascent ('climb up the walls') within a deceitful world ('a slick-walled porcelain basin') and his efforts are not repaid and have no result as 'there is no God'. On the other hand, man's mind acquires negative connotations by being compared with a 'many-legged, wingless insect' – therefore doomed to crawl and fall – that struggles to climb up claiming more than it was meant to have, and that, lured by 'slick' ways, is punished by the merciless God of *The Old Testament*. The final sentence may suggest the existence of God and man's inability to control his evolution. John Updike reiterates the same idea in the metaphor of the spiders threatened to be sucked in by the flames of hell:

Luther's terror and bile flavored the Reformation: Calvin could not reason his way around preordained, eternal damnation, an eternal burning fuelled by a tirelessly vengeful and perfectly remorseless God. The Puritans likened men to spiders suspended above a roaring hearth fire; election cleaves the starry universe with iron walls infinitely high, as pitiless as the iron walls of a sinking battleship to the writhing, screaming damned trapped within. (Updike 1996: 18)

To continue the sequence of metaphors, Clarence's study, 'his book-lined cave that smelled of himself, scented with the odor of his tobacco and of paper piled on paper, undusted books and yellowish magazines' (Updike 1996: 12), illustrates his inner collapse and

uncertainty: ‘Here in his home study the disarray of death reigned, its musty surrender to chaos.’ (Updike 1996: 12) Although he initially felt safe among his books, ‘which had so much danger in them’ (Updike 1996: 13), he now realizes that his response to their challenges has dragged him down: ‘the spines of his books formed a comfortless wall, as opaque and inexorable as a tidal wave.’ (Updike 1996: 15) Books written by his professors at the Princeton Seminary (*Apostolic History and Literature* and *Systematic Theology* and *What is Darwinism?* by Charles Hodge, *The Atonement* and *Popular Lectures on Theological Themes* by Archibald Alexander Hodge, *Introduction to the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* by Benjamin Warfield) share the same space with Darwin’s *Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, Ingersoll’s *Some Mistakes of Moses*, etc. Similarly religious and philosophical ideas dwell in his brain, and his way towards freedom is blocked by the wall he has built with his readings.

John Updike relates Clarence Wilmot’s ‘hunger for knowledge’ with two ideas promoted by the Presbyterian Church and derived from Calvinism: the idea of election and of predestination. A striking opposition appears between Reverend Clarence Wilmot and Mr. Orr, one of the Reformers attending his services. The latter is very anxious to know whether he will be among the elect or not, while Clarence has just discovered freedom from predestination and election:

The clifflike riddle of predestination – how can man have free will without impinging upon God’s perfect freedom? How can God condemn man when all actions from alpha to omega are His very own? – simply evaporated; an immense strain of justification was at a blow lifted. The former believer’s habitual mental contortions decisively relaxed. And yet the depths of vacancy revealed were appalling. (Updike 1996: 7)

Clarence’s sudden atheism comes as a rejection of ambiguities and absurdities in the religious writings but it means a terrifying projection into reality: if he abandons his job as a result of having lost his faith, he and his family will have no place to go and he cannot do anything else as ‘[h]is faith was what paid their way.’ (Updike 1996: 11) The protagonist’s choice not to preach is not only a result of his loss of faith, but it is also determined by the loss of his voice, which reinforces the idea of election and predestination. However, at this point Clarence understands his change as being a result of his failure and for which he has himself to blame, as