Singles and Couples: Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms" and Updike's "Couples"

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ON a first inspection these two novels may appear to offer a contrast in theme and method and to have little in common: Hemingway's love story set against the background of the collapse of the Italian army at Caporetto in the First World War, and John Updike's book about adulterous middle class couples in an imaginery Massachussetts coastal town somewhere in the neighbourhood of Harvard and Cambridge in the last year of the presidency of John F. Kennedy. Do they hold, it might be asked, any feature that can be called a common denominator? Two twentieth century American novelists, one of the last generation, the other of the present, Ernest Hemingway, a master in an epoch of masters,—Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Dos Passos—John Updike, a contemporary, still in his thirties, a writer prolific and brilliant, already the author of seven novels, three volumes of short stories and three of poetry, trained in the exacting school of the *New Yorker* to which he sold his first story at the age of twenty-two.

War and peace, the writer who came to writing like so many of that generation from journalism and particularly sports reporting, who reports through the medium of fiction the campaign in which he had fought and been wounded (one should be a little more exact here: the young Ernest Hemingway arrived in Italy after the Caporetto disaster and so though he was severely wounded like Frederick Henry it was not in the Isonzo in the autumn of 1917

but on the Piave in July 1918); and then as a contrast, the staff contributor to the *New Yorker,* the writer too young for the last war, who in spite of all his knowledge of the society he depicts seems coolly unidentified with the carefully observed beddings of his New England copulatives. War and peace, involvement and detachment, yet here at the beginning it must also be recognized that the extreme economy and objectivity of Hemingway's prose is a means of distancing and placing those tracts of personal experience on which the biographies suggest that he is drawing.

It is just at the point where the two books share a common subject matter that they would seem at least on the surface to divide most sharply in treatment. Both are stories of sexual love; but Hemingway's is at first glance a traditional romantic love story in which a pair of lovers contract out of the general struggle of war and intrigue in order to enjoy a perfect union with each other. The union of Frederick Henry and Catherine is indeed made in heaven and lies apart from the limitations or inequalities of ordinary human, social marriage. As in the conventional language of the tradition of romantic love they have become a single person, they are divided halves of a sole personality when they are apart; and of course this makes their separation by Catherine's death in the final instance all the more poignant and terrible. The interinvolved couples of Updike's novel always remain couples in their lovemaking whether the relationship is jealous, dissatisfied or tender; this comes out strongly in *Couples* in the detailed and lyrically beautiful passages of description of the sexual act: the lyricism never dissolves one party's appreciation of the performance of the other: "for of those conversations of tranced bodies there is little distinct to recall, only the companionable slow ascent to moon-blanched plateaus, where pantomimes of eating and killing and dying are enacted, both sides taking all parts. He found Marcia kittenish, then tigerish, then curiously abstract and cool and mechanical, and finally,

afterwards, very grateful and tender and talkative and sticky." The stress, even in the moment of passion, is on companionship, not on union, and on how one person finds another, a mode of speaking which implies that they might find the other person otherwise, and that therefore there is no assurance of permanent selves which might guarantee a permanent unity of relationship. And even where there is some striking and apparently unique quality in the sensual personality of one of the woman in *Couples* the effect of experiencing and defining it on the part of her lover or husband is still more to hold it in isolation and contemplate it as separate. This is the case with the opulent sexuality of Angela; her husband, Piet Hanema, can never quite come to terms with it though he moves from one temporary affair to another with other women:

> She pulled his hair, *Come up.* "Come inside me?" He realised, amazed, he who had entered Foxy Whitman the afternoon before, that there was no cunt like Angela's, none so liquorish and replete. He lost himself to the hilt unresisted. The keenness of her chemistry made him whimper. Always the problem with their sex had been that he found her too rich to manipulate. She touched his matted chest, *wait,* and touched her own self, and mixed with her fluttering fingers, coming like a comet's dribble, he waited until her hand flew to his buttocks and urging him to kill her, she gasped and absolved herself with tension.[1]

Sexual comparison here and in some of the other descriptive passages produces a certain intellectual detachment, an uneasy presence during lovemaking, briefly laid, at the moment of sexual climax only to return immediately afterwards.

The long second section of the novel is concerned with the double adultery of the Smiths and the Applebys, Harold and Marcia, Frank and Janet, the "Applesmiths" as the members of their circle come to call them. At first Marcia and Frank are deceiving Harold and Janet; then when Janet becomes suspicious she throws herself upon Harold (almost literally, in the laundry-room, when she is able to convince him that the others have gone away for

the day with each other); but she is not so much doing this in revenge, to make herself even with her husband, as to avoid being left out of the quartet, to assuage the despair that comes to her if she has to face the fact of being left alone:

> Janet wished powerfully not to be frigid. All her informal education, from Disney's *Snow White* to last week's *Life*, had taught her to place the highest value on love. Nothing but a kiss undid the wicked apple. We move from birth to death amid a crowd of others and the name of the parade is love. However unideal it was, she dreaded being left behind. Hence she could not stop flirting, could not stop reaching out, though something distrustful within her, a bitterness like a residue from her father's medicinal factory, had to be circumvented by each motion of her heart. Liquor aided the manoeuvre. (p. 177)

"The name of the parade is love." Love for the partners in *Couples* is thus up to a certain point something involving the membership of a group, first of the couple in which the partner is linked, either legitimately or adulterously, then of the society to which all the couples belong; this is the select, self-created society of the small group, not natives of the town, who have made their homes in the seaside place of Tarbox—a society moulded by free choice and taste, not status, and only by money within certain obvious limits—a society that is in fact an admirable expression of that "secularized spirituality" characterizing the private life in the modern world of which Lionel Trilling has traced an anticipation in Jane Austen's heroines and their emancipation from mere status.

The Applebys and little-Smiths and their affairs are studied with extraordinary closeness; great detail is lavished on their friendships, their period of mutual tolerated adultery when Harold and Janet are drawn into a quartet, and the ultimate breakup of their relations. At least one writer on Updike has seen the whole eighty-eight page section, "Applesmiths and other Games," as an excrescence on the novel, a useless if exuberant deployment of comic energy on a group of characters who have nothing to do

with the central plot of the book. That plot involves the love affair of Piet Hanema and Foxy Whitman, and it includes Piet's earlier liaison with Georgene Thorne; this liaison is linked to the Piet-Foxy affair in terms of structure: it increases and concentrates the hatred and temperamental opposition to Piet of Georgene's husband Freddy Thorne, once he has become suspicious; and it is Georgene and Freddy Thorne respectively who reveal Foxy's unfaithfulness to her husband and arrange for her to have an abortion of Piet's child. The abortion is the dramatic crisis of the book.

It seems unlikely that a technician of the calibre of John Updike, schooled in the demanding economies of the short story, would kick over the traces of relevance and plot just for the pleasure of the comic recreation in depth of carefully observed minor characters of manners. It is much more likely that the Applesmiths are studied at this length because they are a microcosm of the complex Tarbox society which composes the world of *Couples;* they are more broadly comic because they are figures of manners, dancing to the tune of the social patterns they enact. Janet, less well educated than her husband or the other couple, with her growing indignation at their shared infidelity, her honest sense of sinfulness, is the most appealing of the four, and acts as a catalyst who helps to dissolve for the reader the moral confusion on which the life of the quartet has been based. This implies that Foxy and Piet, more complex and interesting witnesses are also involved deeply in the social world of the couples: their crisis and near-tragedy has to be seen against this ludicrous way of life, cosy companionship crossed with deceit and topped with a thin ice of sophistication. The significant thing about the relations of the Applesmiths is that they continue to sleep with their husbands or wives as well as their lovers; there is no question of breaking the social pattern. The following passage anatomizes the solidarity of a new society, the society of "secularized spirituality,"[2] and it is of course not necessarily linked

with the adulterous microcosm of Tarbox; its solidarity of freedom to which its individual members conform is its main feature; and to say this is not only to remind us that the society described is by no means a purely transatlantic phenomenon, but, if we focus on the novel, it is to be conscious that its subject is Piet's, Angela's and Foxy's involvement with this society, not just the effects of love, marriage, and betrayal as they might have been experienced in the nineteenth century or in any other particular society:

> . . . to this new world the Applebys and little-Smiths brought a modest determination to be free, to be flexible and decent. Fenced off from their own parents by nursemaids and tutors and "help," they would personally rear large intimate families; they changed diapers with their own hands, they did their own housework and home repairs, gardened and shovelled snow with a sense of strengthened health. Chauffered, as children, in black Packards and Chryslers, they drove second-hand cars in an assortment of candy colours. Exiled early to boarding schools, they resolved to use and improve the public schools. Having suffered under their parents' rigid marriages and formalized evasions they sought to substitute an essential fidelity set in a matrix of easy and open companionship among couples. For the forms of the country-club they substituted informal membership in a circle of friends and participation in a cycle of parties and games. They put behind them the stratified summer towns of their upbringings with their restrictive distinctions . . . and settled in unthought-of places, in pastoral mill-towns like Tarbox, and tried to improvise here a fresh way of life. Duty and work yielded as ideas to truth and fun. Virtue was no longer sought in temple or market place but in the home—one's own home, and then in the home's of one's friends. (p. 121)

We note that the keynote of this ideal is fidelity within a context of freedom—"open companionship among couples." So, as I have just said, the crux of the problem for Piet, Angela and Foxy, as for all the other couples is not so much their desire to be unfaithful as their continued pleasure in remaining faithful at the same time; it has to be put like this because it is a matter of desire and pleasure, not of conventional conformity to the legal bonds of a sterile institution as in the treatment of the husband-

wife-lover triangle in nineteenth century farce or libertarian drama.

The Applesmiths may be explored in extraordinary detail, but even more attention is given to Piet and Angela, almost as much to Georgene and Freddy and to Foxy and her husband Ken Whitman. Then there are still five other couples, the Guerins, the Constantines, the Ongs, the Salzes and the Gallaghers, ten couples in all, in fact. Piet is also involved at different times with Marcia, with Bea Guerin and with Carol Constantine; the Salzes and the Constantines have a relationship similar to that of the Applesmiths though we learn less about theirs. Angela and Ken remain loyal to their respective partners; Terry Gallagher, the wife of Piet's partner in his firm of architects, is once seen at the beach with an elderly bearded man, her pottery teacher: this slight episode, further away than the Applesmith saga from the main plot, has the remarkable effect of placing the central happenings of the book in a real world to which they are connected by filaments of observation like this. The reader can make what he wants of them or make nothing at all; he is placed in exactly the same position as the observer of such an ambiguous incident in real life. The commenting, explaining novelist seems absent; of course we are used to his significant absences when with carefully engineered neutrality he presents us with a gigantic photograph of an enormous slice of real life, or allows us to overhear a lengthy recording of conversation—editing is all, as television news reports can teach us if we have not learnt it in any other way. But however sophisticated and critical we may profess to be about the technical means of realistic fiction, I think we are unused to this deliberate withdrawal of authorial interpretation or commitment at the fringes of a large and ambitious narrative: it has the effect of mingling the crowd of couples in Tarbox with a vaster crowd; they merge imperceptibly into history, since at no point is a seam detectable between their behaviour, their cliché-ridden speech, their carefully

modelled and modish interiors, and their total background of contemporary history.

In comparison with the couples of Tarbox, Frederick and Catherine, the single pair of characters in *A Farewell to Arms,* enjoy their love in a complete insolation from other people; the Tarbox couples have the freedom of a leisured, peaceful society; Catherine and Frederick, on the other hand, as nurse and officer in an ambulance unit respectively, are subject to regimentation and danger, the threat of death for the latter. But paradoxically they retreat into themselves away from the war to enjoy a self-contained relationship. This can be seen even when their love has to subsist on snatched meetings in the ward at night in the hospital in Milan; when they go to the race meeting at San Siro with Frederick's friends they remain somehow apart; everyone from Dr. Valentini who examines Frederick's shattered leg to the various hotel servants regard them as inevitably together, a pair of lovers. The course of the book traces the development of this isolation to its logical conclusion in their complete withdrawal from society and the war. After Frederick has returned to the front he is caught up in the Caporetto offensive; from being a fugitive he becomes a deserter and makes what he calls his "separate peace." The ostensible reason for this is the incident during the retreat on the bridge over the Tagliamento: the Italian battle police are shooting all officers without trial on the suspicion that they have abandoned their men. Frederick escapes by jumping into the river. Circumstances and sheer self-preservation lead him to desertion, but his disenchantment with the war has been growing for a long time and the incident at the bridge is really only a dramatic occasion for it. Escaping on the floor of the ammunition car he meditates: "You had lost your cars and your men as a floorwalker loses the stock of his department in a fire. There was, however, no insurance. You were out of it now. You had no more obligation. If they shot floorwalkers after a fire in the department . . . then cer-

tainly the floorwalkers would not be expected to return when the store opened for business."[3]

But in the same passage he dreams of lying with Catherine on the floor of the car; so far their love has been marked by some inequality of commitment; it had begun as a casual intrigue on his part, as an immediate commitment to total love on hers—the contrast between her "Darling, do be good to me, we are going to have a strange life" (p. 25), at the very beginning, and his inward comment a few hours later that he thinks he is probably a little crazy but he does not care what he is getting into. Then he is prepared to accept that, in her words, "this is a rotten game they have been playing," and after he returns to Gorizia wounded his attitude has certainly changed: but their relationship is still characterized by her total, passive surrender, her desire to be good, to do what he wants. Now Frederick's expression of need for her, the fact that one aspect of his "separate peace" is simply a desire to run away to her, equalizes the balance. But even earlier the rejection of the society that has made the war has been growing within him. On the slopes of the Bainsizza before the attack when the shell hits him Frederick expresses his hatred of the falsifications of language and meaning which a prolonged, unwanted war has brought about:

> I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice, and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory, and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of the places were all you could say and have them mean anything. (pp. 143-44)

After the crisis of his decision to desert, Frederick's rejection of the war is not easily to be separated from his acceptance of his need for Catherine: "You did not love

the floor of a flat-car nor guns with canvas jackets . . . you loved someone else whom now you knew was not even to be pretended there; you seeing now very clearly and coldly—not so coldly as clearly and emptily." At the time of their meeting Catherine had already reached a point of disillusion with the war similar to his or even more bitter: she has lost the man to whom she was engaged on the Somme; she has discarded her former romantic notions of seeing her fiancé brought to her hospital, a hero with his head in a bandage, and continues to nurse merely to keep herself going, mechanically. " 'Yes,' she said. 'People can't realize what France is like. If they did it couldn't all go on. He didn't have a sabre cut. They blew him all to bits.' " Thus knowledge and suffering separate both Catherine and Frederick from the less sensitive beings around them who continue to accept the war.

Their isolation becomes a literal withdrawal. They escape by boat across Lake Como to neutral Switzerland. Their love endows them with the exclusiveness of initiates, but at the edge of their security there is a fear. Because nothing but death could touch them now they are more acutely aware of the presence of death (especially Catherine who is afraid sometimes when the rain is falling, a premonition of the rain that falls incessantly as she lies dying from a haemorrhage):

> "We really are the same one and we mustn't misunderstand on purpose."
> "We won't."
> "But people do. They love each other and they misunderstand on purpose and they fight and then suddenly they aren't the same one."
> "We won't fight."
> "We musn't. Because there's only us two and in the world there's all the rest of them. If anything comes between us we're gone and then they have us." (p. 110)

When Frederick is returning to the front from Milan Catherine accompanies him to the station. They see a soldier and his girl embracing by one of the stone buttresses of the cathedral. Frederick says "They're like us," but Catherine replies, "Nobody is like us," and Fred-

erick in his role as narrator adds "She did not mean it happily" (p. 116).

In the hotel at Stresa before the police come searching for him and they escape across the lake at night Frederick has attained a full parity with Catherine in the acceptance of the special marked-off nature of their love; they have become a gathered church, the Catharist heretics of Denis de Rougemont's analysis of the passion myth, superior in their knowledge to the rest of the world, and for this reason impelled towards death with a special understanding of its meaning:

> Often a man wishes to be alone and a girl wishes to be alone too and if they love each other they are jealous of that in each other, but I can truly say we never felt that. We could feel alone when we were together, alone against the others. . . . If people bring so much courage to this world, the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. (pp. 192-93)

Uninvolved any longer in the doings of society, neutral in a neutral country, cut off by the surrounding snow in the bedroom of the hotel in Montreux, they reach the climax of their isolation. In the warm embrace of Catherine's lovingness, and with the fact of her pregnancy, it is Frederick who seems the more passive and slightly the inferior now: he is doing nothing; he has left the world of men; and she suggests that if she cut her hair and he grew his a little longer they would be "just alike only one of us blonde and one of us dark." Their sexual union has reached a stage where sexual divisiveness is overcome and they can aim at recapturing the unity of the original hermaphrodite in Plato's *Symposium*.

In Updike's novel Piet and Foxy are not just another couple. Their adultery takes on more serious dimensions; it ultimately divides them from the other couples and thus brings them into a state of separation like that achieved by Frederick Henry and Catherine when they escape across the lake. Only their end, though it involves social danger, rejection and the loss of friends, is not a tragic one: Catherine dies and Foxy lives to marry Piet

after her divorce. Before that however they have come near to the edge of tragedy when Foxy has an abortion of Piet's child. The love of both couples is at once threatened and cemented by biological risk. In either case their reaction to the pregnancy is at first one of fear and resentment. Later they come to accept the carrying of the child as some sort of higher definition of their love. The fact Catherine has her child, though dying in the process, while Foxy successfully gets rid of hers, does not really distinguish the situation of one from the other. Piet and Foxy toy not very seriously with fancies of what the child might look like if it were born, and some regrets that it is not allowed to be. Correspondingly Catherine and Frederick let the pregnancy take its course because they are in a position to do so without coming up against a wall of social impossibility (in this respect the permissive society of Tarbox may seem alongside the freedom of Hemingway's "good and gentle" extremely conformist, the latest avatar of the bourgeoisie). In both cases the intimacy of procreation draws the man and woman together, but it is more as fellow soldiers, shoulder to shoulder in the biological warfare against life than as members of society or the species who have made their compromise with generation and paternity. Frederick is not really moved by the death of the child with the mother, and Piet during and after the abortion thinks only of Foxy. Earlier, when Catherine first tells Frederick she is pregnant, they sit apart uneasily for a time: "I was looking at her but we did not touch each other. We were apart as when someone comes into a room and people are self-conscious." There is some correspondence with Foxy's words to Piet in *Couples*: "Nature is so stupid. It has all my maternal glands working, do you know what that means, Piet? You know what the great thing about being pregnant I found out was? . . . You're never alone. When you have a baby inside you are not alone" (p. 498).

There is thus a resentment on the part of both pairs of lovers of the intrusion into their enclosed timeless world of

the fact of generation which would fix them in a time sequence and a biological cycle. At the beginning of *Couples* we see Georgene, Piet's first mistress giving herself to him and saying, "Welcome to the post-pill paradise"; it is a paradise from which Piet and Foxy are rudely expelled. In both books conception is a trap, a trap that springs to confine and even to destroy the lovers; Catherine is doomed to die in childbirth: "Yes, but what if she should die? She can't die. Why would she die? What reason is there for her to die? There's just a child that has to be born and then you look after it and get fond of it maybe. But what if she should die? She won't die" (p. 246). The child is at once an imposition on their mutual pleasure and an inevitable concomitant of life. She does die, and the effect of her death coming as the climax of the novel is I think twofold: it is peculiarly numbing and shocking because Frederick can not join her in death; in this mode of high romantic union against the world with its Wagnerian overtones of *Liebestod* we are prepared for the tragic satisfaction of seeing the lovers die together. This we are denied, and this is denied to Frederick Henry. The perfection of their love-making is betrayed by death; he thrusts the nurses out of the room but with the dead Catherine now it is "like saying goodbye to a statue"; left alone their love recedes from him like a tide: "After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain." This numb abandonment, this atmosphere of what Donne called "absence, darkness, death," at the end of the novel leads on to a second effect. It alters our perspective over the whole course of the previous action and particularly over the final chapters, the movement from Milan to Stresa to Switzerland, the escape of Frederick and Catherine; or rather it brings into full light the fears and premonitions that have strewn the narrative so far (like Catherine's fear of the rain at night which is later associated with her haemorrhage). Now their escape can be seen as an escape towards death; the idyllic interludes in Montreux and in the country can-

not postpone the climax for long. And it is not a *Liebestod* but Frederick's deprival of love: life takes everything away:

> That was what you did. You died. You did not know what it was about. You never had time to learn. They threw you in and told you the rules and the first time they caught you off base they killed you . . . you could count on that. Stay around and they would kill you. (p. 252)

There are certain striking parallels to this in the different, because not ultimately tragic, situation of Piet and Foxy. The child signifies an acceptance of risk which marks them off from the easy-going permissive conformity of the couples of Tarbox who play a game according to fairly strict rules, as Catherine and Frederick have opted out of the war and the cynical games played by other people, which they were prepared to attempt at the beginning of their relationship. It is interesting here to note that in *A Farewell to Arms* there is the world of male promiscuity which Frederick shares with his friend the medical officer Rinaldi and the other Italian officers in the mess; they bait the priest from the Abruzzzi who talks to Frederick about the love of God and foresees his own love: " 'But there in my country it is understood a man may love God. It is not a dirty joke . . . What you tell me about in the nights. That is not love . . .' 'I don't love.' 'You will, I know you will. Then you will be happy.' "

The world of male promiscuity serves the same role in the narrative as the world of the Tarbox couples. It is a background against which the distinctiveness of Catherine-Frederick and Foxy-Piet is sharply outlined; a life of repetitive assertiveness of masculinity or femininity from which the singleness of the lovers, total and sacrificial, not pleasure-directed, must detach itself. And it is noteworthy that just as Hemingway's hero is closer than his Italian friends to the values of the priest,—he is a sort of crypto-Christian who thinks of God sometimes in the night—so Piet and Foxy are the only two members of the Tarbox couples who go regularly to church, she Epis-

copalian, he Congregationalist. Piet retains a core of the Dutch Calvinist faith of his childhood because of his parents' early death in an accident: "Piet wondered what barred him from the ranks of those many dead 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' death Piet had no margin." It is their acute sense of mortality which inclines both Piet and Frederick to religious belief, however desperate and vestigial their gestures in this direction may seem: there is the splendid melancholy scene with the very ancient Count Greffi after the game of billiards:

> "We none of us know about the soul. Are you *Croyant?*"
> "At night . . ."
> "I had expected to become more devout as I grow older but somehow I haven't," he said, "It is a great pity." (p. 202)

And Piet "places his children in Christendom" as Updike phrases it; as he sees his daughter Ruth singing in the children's choir, "his blood shouted *Lord* and his death leaned above him like a perfectly clear plate of glass." Their vestigial religious belief, groping and ill-assured, makes them capable of the tragic sense of life; and this in turn draws them dangerously towards the point of tragedy in their own lives.

Freddy Thorne, the enemy of Piet and Foxy because of Piet's affair with Georgene, has much to say about death. I do not think his attitude is at all the same at Piet's, and this is not surprising if we consider that they are posed in contrast to each other in the novel so as to produce an almost melodramatic opposition. Freddy is epicene, hairless, a buffoon who is slightly disgusting, patronized by the Tarbox wives but not a lover of any of them as Piet is. The final twist of the plot is a piece of sheer melodrama. Freddy procures an abortionist for Piet and Foxy, but his condition for doing this and maintaining secrecy

is that Piet should arrange for him to sleep for one night with Piet's wife Angela whom he had long admired. Piet and Angela are willing to oblige though Freddy's impotence contrives to make his humiliation of Piet only partial. The episode does however complete the wreck of the Hanemas' marriage; in terms of character it seems the least convincing thing in the book but it does illustrate how extraordinarily Gothic in imagination American novels can be. The trouble is that Updike does not ordinarily write in the broad symbolic manner of the classic tradition of American fiction; his books are anchored by a wealth of social and personal reference, and show no dangers of taking off into allegory. So it comes as a shock and a dissonance when Freddy and Angela, the two who have not been involved in the ronde of the couples, the simple against the subtle, the honest against the disingenous, sexual against bisexual, accepter of life against rejecter, are thus lined up in a purely schematic way.

Freddy's metaphysical opinions, often inflicted on his friends and particularly the Tarbox wives, in long brilliant drunken sermons at the Tarbox evening parties, spring from his professional position as a dentist. He is a specialist in rot and decay, holding the dirty saprophytic secrets of the whole community. He sees death everywhere, but it is in terms of decay, the inevitable corruption of people and the world, not in terms of threat to a life which has a kind of validation, as in Hemingway's characters and in Piet. It is significant that Freddy identifies God with death while Piet identifies him with the world: for Piet and Frederick death is coming in from outside, may be tragically and inevitably, but an open challenge to be resisted by dignity: Freddy revels in the degradation of death; for him the corruption is inwards:

> You never get your own smile back when you lose your teeth. Imagine the horseshit a doctor handling cancer has to hand out. Jesus, the year I was in med. school I saw skeletons talking about getting better. The funny fact is you don't get better, and nobody gives a cruddy

> crap in hell. You're born to get laid and die, and the sooner the better, Carol, you're right about the nifty machine we begin with; the trouble is, it runs only one way. Downhill. (p. 269)

And on his disastrous night with Angela the one time he seems to be near success is when he is sexually excited by something in his own drooling monologue: "Every meal we eat breaks down the enamel." "Hey. You've gotten bigger." "Death excites me. Death is being screwed by God. It'll be delicious." The thought of death is not delicious for Catherine or Frederick or Piet or Foxy, though it is never far from being present. Acknowledgement of a religious dimension may be due to the fear of death on Piet's and their part, but his and their feeling for life is never circumscribed, determinist: he builds, or would build if commercial circumstance allowed him, good houses, like the one for Foxy, as an assertion of freedom and living:

> "Piet. What will the world do to us?"
> "Is it God or the world you care about?"
> "You think of them as different? I think of them as the same.
> "Maybe that's what I mean to say when you're perverse." (pp. 227-28)

Against the view I am developing here might be instanced a passage late in the novel when Piet's affairs have come to a crisis and Angela is leaving him: "he believed that there was, behind the screen of couples and houses and days, a Calvinist God who lifts us up and casts us down in utter freedom, without recourse to our prayers or consultation with our wills" (p. 459). But in denying freedom to his will in this passage Piet abundantly enlarges it for those forces in life which he recognizes as God or the world: his vision is of a splendid dynamism, with all its tragedy of man caught in the universal toils, not the running down of a machine, the steady impersonal erosion of enamel as in Freddy's vision.

Freddy however philosophizes a great deal. It is not always consistent, and it is certainly not always possible to treat his pronouncements as those of the adversary, a

Mephistophelian counterpointing to Piet's search for meaning in work and love. Sometimes he speaks as the tempter; but he often seems to be perceiving the implications of the life of the couples more clearly than is possible for any other individual member of Tarbox society. There are occasions when his confrontation with Piet seems that of one whose despair sees further and who knows Piet's separateness from the others and where he is going better than Piet does himself. "People are the only thing people have left since God packed up." There is a sense in which this is what the whole book is saying and Freddy then becomes the major spokesman of its meaning (as Marcia says, "His charm is that he cares"). But even in this passage his humanism looks soft and regressive alongside Piet's and Foxy's interpretation of the same problem; they bring to it a sense of otherness as well as "people," which in the Tarbox world means people like us, a sense of the hard objective outer world as is demonstrated in Piet's insisting on good workmanship to his assistants; his moral world when it is not shaken is a matter of firm carpentry. His comfort to Foxy when he hears about the child naturally finds expression in a metaphor from carpentry: "In the illusion of giving advice he found some shelter, right angles and stress beams of sense they could inhabit." As his crisis brews up Piet is helping his workmen to align cedar shingles over insulating foil for the ranch-style houses on Indian Hill: "The cedar had an ancient fragrance; the method of aligning the shingles, by snapping a string rubbed with chalk, was agreeably primitive." One might compare here the description of the house in Montreux in *A Farewell to Arms,* with its porch, plain wooden walls, big store, box of logs and general plainness and honesty. He insists on waterproofing the foundations which takes at least a day, and sharply rebukes his assistant Jazinski who says that if they omitted this job nobody would be any the wiser: "People have a nose for the rotten, and if you're a builder the smell clings." He stumbles into the image of decaying roots which is always present

with Freddy, but Piet is trying to shore up his foundations, just as in continual evocations of his Dutch parents and upbringing he is trying to come to terms with his past.

The Tarbox couples on the contrary only go through the motions of having jobs in order to be able to enjoy fully the protected space of the private life in which they have cushioned themselves against the world; when Carol Constantine says she thinks Piet's houses are hideous she creates a shock because she has broken one of the unwritten laws of the community: "For one of their unspoken rules was that professions were not criticized; one's job was a pact with the meaningless world beyond the ring of couples." In an earlier episode there is one of John Updike's beautiful, careful (one wants to say "curious" in the Elizabethan sense) evocations of the chronic sadness of a late Sunday afternoon in Tarbox:

> . . . 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 impersonation 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. (p. 86)

Even the ambitions of Ken Whitman, the biochemist working on photosynthesis, have been cut down to the size of the Tarbox pattern: "He had over-reached. Life, whose graceful secrets he would have unlocked, pressed upon him clumsily"; he too has been forced back into the limited warmth of the private life from the meaningless world beyond the ring of couples.

Piet builds her house for Foxy. In their dedication to workmanship, as in their lurking religious sense, their attitude to death, they reach out to the meaningless world and resemble in this Frederick and Catherine and other Hemingway characters. But above all other parallels the resemblance lies in their commitment to the risk of love:

> In leaving the limits of Tarbox they had acquired a perspective; their friends and their houses seemed small behind them. Only they, Foxy, and Piet, were life-size.

> Only they had ceased flirting with life and permitted themselves to be brought, through biology, to this intensity of definition. (p. 379)

And of Georgene's angry consciousness of their separateness when she says that they should move out of Tarbox because they have poisoned the air, but thinks that Piet "had brought her word of a world where vegetation was heraldic and every woman was some man's queen . . . like the marsh seen through the windows, where grasses prospered in salty mud which would kill her kind of useful plant" (p. 425).

This discussion has traced the emergence of a single theme from the comparison of the two novels: the separation of the pair of lovers and their values from the world of war and the world of couples. The difficulty would here seem to be that on the surface one could not have a much greater contrast than war and peace, people in the middle of a military campaign in 1917, and people in professional suburbia in Massachussetts in 1964. The difficulty is bridged by the alienation of the Tarbox characters from the social and political world which encompasses them but which they are powerless to control; they are caught in the toils by impersonal forces as much as Catherine and Frederick are caught up in the machine of war:

> Television brought them the outer world. The little screen's icy brilliance implied a universe of profound cold beyond the warm encirclement of Tarbox, friends, and family. Mirrors established in New York and Los Angeles observed the uninhabitable surface between them and beamed the children's faces in a poisonous, flickering blue. This poison was their national life. Not since Korea had Piet cared about the news. News happened to other people. (p. 240)

Yet throughout Updike's novel the presence of the flickering figures is registered; it is ready to direct itself with impersonal hostility against the folded in private lives of the couples. Just as Frederick hears or reads in the paper of retreats and offensives, or watches the mountain front through his glasses, so the terrors of a peace that is more

like war impinge on the Tarbox community. A newspaper headline seen on the kitchen floor when Piet finds the children's dead hamster says KENNEDY CRACKS DOWN ON STEEL. There is talk with the children of Jackie Kennedy's baby. Piet has a golf date with Eddie Constantine at the height of the Cuba crisis and they decide not to cancel it. Pope John dies, Quang Duc immolates himself, Valentina Tereshkova becomes the first woman in space, Profumo resigns, and the Lord's Prayer is banned in American public schools. Fashion is scrupulously noted—the deep décolletage of the fall of that year. As the year of the action of the story is completed and brought round to mid-May again Piet hears a transistor playing Bob Dylan on the Tarbox beach and thinks, "Rock is out . . . love and peace are in" (p. 486). This is a world running down a rail of history, and it is only Piet and Foxy who try to get off the rail, as Catherine and Frederick extract themselves from the war. And it is really war, not peace, in the other book too. There is the constant presence of Vietnam (one is reminded of the brief list of "Dates" at the end of Robert Lowell's *Notebook* (1970 edition) which begins "The Vietnam War, 1967," and ends at the foot of the page, "The Vietnam War, 1968, 1969, 1970").

The climax of this movement of contemporary history within the action is of course the assassination of Kennedy. In a scene of great brilliance, delicacy and restraint Foxy hears the news over the radio while she is having a tooth filled by Freddy Thorne. He decides not to cancel the party he had been going to hold that night for the Tarbox couples. It becomes a strange wake, marked by Freddy's blasphemies and Piet's increasing desperation about Foxy; skating over their involvements, the couples draw together in a conspiracy to protect themselves from death. They feel a closeness to Kennedy because they regard him as one of themselves; he becomes a martyr and a memory on account of his sense of flair; Foxy has an argument with a New York intellectual who thinks that

the sense of flair might have betrayed him into "blowing the whole game." She writes sadly to Piet that if Kennedy was not fit to rule them then they are not fit to rule themselves, "so bring on emperors, demigods, giant robots, what have you" (p. 496). The one attempt has been made to bridge the gap, to bring under control the meaningless world beyond the ring of couples. As Auden said, "Private faces in public places are better and wiser by far than public faces in private places."[4] Now that the attempt has failed it is time, as it was time for Frederick and Catherine, to make a separate peace.

Forty years of historical cataclysm may separate these two books. So may a series of changes in the style of American fiction, from the classical spareness of Hemingway's prose to the mandarin lushness and literaryness which occasionally becomes oppressive in Updike. Even the death of a hamster is recorded by him with an extremity of mannerism which even go so far as to imagine what the sensations of the hamster would be before the cat jumped. There are things to be said also about the prose of Hemingway and Updike which would require a separate inquiry. The conversations between the lovers in Hemingway which seem raw and limited in vocabulary are really an expression of refinement: they appear to be incapable of defining a feeling or an experience in words and fall back on "fine" and "lovely" because of complexities shared which baffle language.[5] In contrast most of the *Couples* characters speak with a cerebralized cleverness that contorts language, sending up invisible inverted commas in all directions to draw attention to their ironies and allusions (some of which of course are very funny). One little-Smith talks in adaptations of Shakespeare quotations; another in French phrases. This reflects their uneasy grip on any common world outside the cosy circle of their private values, loyalties and infidelities.

So again, each novel illumines the other, and the forty years is not very much since each work describes the fate of characters in similar situations, "suspended in this one

of those dark ages that visits mankind between millenia, between the death and rebirth of gods, when there is nothing to steer by but sex and stoicism and the stars" (p. 411).

NOTES

[1]John Updike, *Couples* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 217. All subsequent references are to this ed.

[2]The term is Lionel Trilling's though he acknowledges that he is adapting a phrase of Hegel on the prime characteristic of the modern age (*The Opposing Self*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1955), p. 228.

[3]Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 181. All subsequent references are to this ed.

[4]Epigraph to *Another Time* (London: Faber, 1940).

[5]Cf.: ". . . quand quelqu'un parle, c'est son refus de parler qui devient alors sensible; son discours est son silence: renfermé, violent, ne disant rien que lui-même, sa massivité abrupte, sa volonte d'émettre des mots plutôt que de parler, Ou simplement, comme il arrive chez Hemingway, cette manière exquise de s'exprimer un peu au-dessous de zéro est une ruse pour nous faire croire à quelque haut degré de vie, d'emotion ou de pensée, ruse honnête et classique qui réussit souvent et a laquelle, chez Hemingway, un talent mélancolique prête des ressources variées," Maurice Blanchot, *Le livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 187

Modern Imagery

As Mr. Eliot has said, the days of
Vegetable voluntarism are over; melons no longer
Snare us, nor do plums fall in our parched mouths;
Mr. Auden said shocking things (dead
Men on tennis courts and defaced busts), but
Said them very well, or take Macleish's
Ever-rising night or Empson's waste
Remaining, there's wisdom for you!
These images suit, but don't we feel
Cleaner washed out with a hose like
Mr. Jarrell's ball-turret gunner?

HUGH MILLER