Plights Of The Embodied Soul: Dramas Of Sin And Salvation In Augustine And Updike

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No two writers are more continuously concerned with sex and salvation than Augustine and Updike. Augustine describes his own life prior to his conversion as an ongoing and intense struggle between the demands of the spirit and the temptations of the body:

But when I rose in pride against you and “made onslaught” against my Lord, “proud of my strong sinews [Job 15:26],” even those lower things became my masters and oppressed me, and nowhere could I find respite or time to draw my breath. Everywhere I looked they loomed before my eyes in swarms and clusters, and when I set myself to thinking and tried to escape from them, images of these selfsame things blocked my way, as though they were asking where I meant to go, unclean and undeserving as I was.¹

Updike has similarly remarked on the allures of the body as a perilous housing for the soul, seeing us as subject to “the power of sex to bind souls to the transient, treacherous world,” wherein “sexual appetite ... calls into activity our most elegant faculties of self-display, of social intercourse and of internal idealization.”² Updike is aware of his affinities with Augustine in emphasizing the moral perils posed by our embodiment, noting that a “dark Augustinian idea lurked within my tangled position [on the Vietnam War], ... [a refusal to pretend] that bloody hands didn’t go with having hands at all. A plea, in short, for the doctrine of Original Sin.”³ This avowed Augustinianism represents, for Updike, a rejection of “an easy humanism that insists that man is an animal which feeds and sleeps and defecates and makes love and isn’t that nice and natural and let’s all have more of

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that,” a position that omits “intrinsic stresses in the human condition—you foresee things, for example, you foresee your own death. You have really been locked out of the animal paradise of unthinking natural reflex.” This Augustinian sense of the allures and perils of embodied consciousness informs all of Updike’s fiction. The intimate detail of his observations of the travails of embodiment is the signature of his style, evident, for example, in his tracing of Harry Angstrom’s thoughts about how women make love:

That wonderful way they have of coming forward around you when they want it. Otherwise just fat weight. Funny how the passionate ones are often tight and dry and the slow ones wet. They want you up and hard on their little ledge. The thing is play them until just a touch. You can tell: their skin under the fur gets all loose like a puppy’s neck.

For both Augustine and Updike, in a position that has come to be identified as Augustinian, the body is something to be struggled with, a vehicle of both the soul’s life and of original sin. Our very ability to know human and divine reality—and hence our politics and morality insofar as they depend on an understanding of these realities—is deeply shaped by how we engage in this inevitable struggle, by whether we succumb to lust or embrace a pious continence.

But something in us—whether it is pride or good sense is unclear—resists this distinctive construal of embodiment as original sin. Both Augustine and Updike are consistently accused of confusion, of promoting dangerously unhealthy views without really having given them much thought. It is difficult to think of two writers who are more often condescended to than these two, praised for minor virtues while being condemned for somehow having gone massively wrong, chiefly through a lack of thought.

Augustine, Copleston tells us, “deals with man in the concrete,” producing “an approach, an inspiration, certain basic ideas” that are distinctive for their “suggestiveness.” But “he never elaborated a philosophical system as such, nor did he develop, define and substantiate his ideas in the manner to which a Thomist is accustomed. . . . There is often an aura of vagueness, allusion, lack of definition about his ideas which leaves one dissatisfied, perplexed and curious.” We never get “a complete system to be accepted, rejected or mutilated.” The implication here is that Augustine was so absorbed in his personal struggles that he never stopped to sort things out, never separated epistemology from ethics from aesthetics from theology, so that it’s hard to tell what kind of thinker or writer he is. Gareth Matthews, while praising Augustine’s concentration on the first-person standpoint and arguing his interest as a philosopher, echoes this reservation in noting that Augustine is “only, so to speak, a major ‘minor’ philosopher” without “formal training in philosophy” and “without the benefit of an academic environment or the stimulus of astute philosophical colleagues, or students.” There is, as Copleston puts it, in Augustine’s writings a “mingling of theological and philosophical themes [that] may appear odd and unmethodical to us to-day.”
But not only does Augustine fail to sort things out, the picture of human virtues and vices that he abstracts from excessive concentration on his own struggles may very well be a dangerous one. In setting continence as the chief virtue against "that stream of boiling pitch, the hideous flood of lust" (Confessions 3.2), the chief vice, Augustine at the very least promotes an unhealthy, unnatural repressiveness. At worst the sort of obsession with the control of the body that he manifests may lead to anorexia or other forms of neurotic self-loathing. As Updike has observed, "How strangely on modern ears falls the notion that lust—sexual desire that wells up in us as involuntarily as saliva—in itself is wicked! . . . Impotence, frigidity, unattractiveness—these are the sins of which we are truly ashamed." Elaine Pagels has noted that Augustine's views about sin "will appear to many readers . . . antinatural and even preposterous," and she has gone on to suggest that his focus on the control of the body promotes political authoritarianism. "By insisting that humanity, ravaged by sin, now lies helplessly in need of outside intervention, Augustine's theory could not only validate secular power but justify as well the imposition of church authority—by force, if necessary—as essential for human salvation." Piety construed as continence, the control of an essentially unruly body, engenders unhealthy self-loathing and potentially brutal political authoritarianism.

Things are no better when it comes to Updike. A chorus of critics has praised his style while condemning his thought. Thus Harold Bloom characterizes Updike as "a minor novelist with a major style." Though he is "perhaps the most considerable stylist among the writers of fiction in his American generation," Updike is, Bloom argues:

somewhat victimized aesthetically by . . . conventional religious yearnings. . . . Piety, hardly an imaginative virtue in itself, becomes polemical [in Updike], and testifies unto us with considerable tendentiousness, belatedness, and a kind of supernatural smugness that allows Updike to say "the natural is a pit of horror" and "one has nothing but the ancient assertions of Christianity to give one the will to act."

Bloom's suggestion here is that Updike, too, has not sorted things out: he has let dogma get in the way of the exercises of iconoclastic, creative imagination that are, for Bloom, proper to art. This charge of a failure to sort, to think, is echoed in John W. Aldridge's remark that "as a rule one senses that [Updike] does not, after all, know quite what he means to say and is hoping that sheer style will carry him over the difficulty," a criticism that is itself a transcription of Norman Mailer's 1963 sneer: "trouble is that young John, like many a good young writer before him, does not know exactly what to do when action lapses, and so he cultivates his private vice, he writes." Garry Wills has similarly jibed that Updike's "endless verbal cleverness . . . can run unimpeded by the weights of moral insight or of judgment.

The common thread of these criticisms is that Updike's prose is too comfortable, too easy, too seductive. Behind this complaint lurks the charge that his plot of
human experience is either, like Augustine’s, tendentious and authoritarian in urging a dogmatic pietism or, failing that, simply absent, so that Updike is taken to be evading serious political realities, offering us instead a narcotic entertainment that encourages bourgeois complacency and thoughtlessness. It just can’t be right, seemingly, to spend all that lush prose on patterns of wallpaper in the late afternoon sun or on memories of pulling a young sister on a sled or on the look of leaves on a copper beech tree. Where’s the action? And if there’s no action, is there then any thought about politics or human life? Isn’t it all just too comfortable, too middle class? Or if not that, then too piously repressive?

An enormous certainty lies at the hearts of these judgments: the certainty that reality manifests itself to us (and in us) in distinct kinds that do not muddle one another’s natures. Thus God’s reality is a distinct kind of thing that is properly treated by theology or philosophy of religion rather than by ethics or psychology. Human interactions in exchanging and competing for goods are the proper subject of politics, not of a theory of salvation. Sexual behavior is the concern of ethics or psychology, or maybe, lately, politics, but not of the philosophy of religion. Aesthetics treats iconoclastic artistic imaginings, according to Bloom, but art has little per se to do with religion (except for the fact that J., the Yahwist, was a great precursor writer). Epistemology, ontology, and logic are best left to philosophers, probably to philosophers who have a healthy understanding of mathematics and the natural sciences; certainly ethicists, philosophers of religion, philosophers of art, and writers of fiction ought not to intrude upon them.

Underneath this certainty about the kinds of realities that we confront lies the further thought that ordinary life is not terribly interesting, that the things most worth knowing are in the province of one or another expert rather than surfacing fitfully in the consciousnesses of gas station attendants, childcare workers, or, say, linotype operators, car dealers, or lawyer-rhetoricians. In seeing reality as divided into kinds, each of which is to be studied by its appropriate experts, it is as though we don’t find ordinary human life itself very deep or interesting.

Yet virtually all theologies would contest this certainty about kinds of realities and this thought about the banality of everyday life. The notion that reality is created inevitably refers all kinds and natures to God, seeing kinds on the model of interrelated roles, each intelligible only in terms of the others, in an ordained plot. Within Christian theology each person’s life is of full and independent interest, in that each person’s soul is a locus for the playing out of the infinitely important drama of salvation or condemnation. In the eyes of God no aspect of reality is self-sustaining, and no person’s life is banal.

Both Augustine and Updike write deliberately out of this sort of theological conviction in the existence of created reality in which human beings have an especially dramatic role to play as objects of God’s judgment, directed at all their behavings, political, economic, sexual, parental, consumptive, artistic, and so on, as may be. Their writings aim at dramatizing how a human identity is built up, sustained, and articulated in a single, specifically situated person, whether in
fourth-century Thagaste, Carthage, and Milan or in Brewer, Pennsylvania, between 1932 and 1989, in such a way that divine reality is or is not fitfully honored and realized in it. That divine reality should be honored, realized, in a situated human life is, for Augustine and Updike, always a dramatic possibility, one that impinges on politics, sexual behavior, artistic imagining, and consumption without these behaviors going their own ways one by one.

But while the terms of the dramas are similar the fates of the protagonists are not. Augustine in a certain way claims salvation, or at least accord with the will of God, as that accord is manifested in his postconversion continence, for the protagonist of the *Confessions*. Updike’s Harry Angstrom dies comparatively young, following a sense-dominated, present-experience-oriented life that consistently lacks continence and self-discipline. But, for all their differences, juxtaposing the plots of Augustine’s and Harry Angstrom’s developments (as their writers recount them) helps to bring out two things. First, it shows the pattern of necessities of embodied soul and of possibilities of response to them that are, for a Christian sensibility, built into the fact of our existence as God’s creatures. A kind of ground human plot, a set of temptations, threats, and possibilities necessarily encountered and variously dealt with, informs each human life on such a view. This ground human plot emerges through the comparison of Augustine’s and Updike’s two different ways of playing it out. Second, this juxtaposition shows how finally tentative is each writer’s account of the meaning of the life he treats. Some of Augustine’s uncertainties survive his conversion, and, more deeply, the narrative’s sense of its human protagonist lapses after the conversion is accomplished, as though to suggest that an intelligible human life requires ongoing temptation, struggle, difficulty. Harry Angstrom is, whatever his failings, interesting. His sense-oriented sensibility affords him moments of awareness, especially of beauty, but also of nothingness, in any case of engagement with a divine order, that many of us block or refuse. If he is unable to integrate these moments of awareness into a way of life, perhaps because of the fragmentation and antiritualism of his public culture and the routes of identity formation its economy affords, he nonetheless has them in the face of his culture’s scanting of them. It is not, in the end, so easy for us to say where or how grace might have manifested itself, where or how salvation might have been attained. In comparing the narrated developments of Augustine and Harry Angstrom we can see both the narrative delicacy of Augustine (the writer’s) development of his protagonist and the thoughtful weight of Updike’s inheritance of theological tradition. The comparison helps to illuminate what it is to try to narrate, to understand, any human life, once grace, and salvation, sin, and condemnation are regarded as possibilities, perhaps inevitabilities.

It will in the end remain unclear whether any such narratives, or comparisons among them, can or should unseat our temptations to regard reality as finally articulated into kinds, understandings of which are the proper provinces of experts, and to find ordinary life banal. The comparison will not tell us whether grace is a genuine present possibility for us. But it will perhaps be no more unclear whether
we should regard a divine intermingling of created natures and a divine interest in ordinary life as actual than it is unclear whether we should regard Augustine or Harry as saved or condemned. If their salvation is an issue for us, perhaps our salvation should be too. It will be some achievement if Augustine and Updike, by recounting their protagonists’ developments, can make our often hard certainties about reality as uncertain as the possibilities of grace. What, then, do their plots of the necessary temptations and possible manners of response to embodiment show? The ground plot of human necessities and possibilities that underlies their specific narratives looks something like this.

The starting point for each writer’s narrative is an overwhelming sense of the embodiment of consciousness and personality in a sensing, fleshly human body. Consciousness and personality are neither reduced to material facts nor regarded as independent of them. It is impossible either to explain human conceptual consciousness as a bodily process or to regard one’s personality as existing unhoused by a body, at least in its present earthly life. Augustine refers naturally to himself as formed by God from the flesh of his parents, “the two from whose bodies you formed me in the limits of time” (Confessions 1.6.). The realities of the body are prior to the rational deliverances of God-attuned intellect. In infancy, Augustine tells us, “all I knew was how to suck, and how to lie still when my body sensed comfort or cry when it felt pain” (1.6). These bodily realities are, moreover, on earth inescapable: “soon I was dragged away from you by my own weight and in dismay I plunged again into the things of this world. The weight I carried was the habit of the flesh. . . . For ‘ever the soul is weighed down by a mortal body, earth-bound cell that clogs the manifold activity of its thought’ [Wisdom 9:15]” (7.17). His opening question—roughly, “How might I praise God?”—modulates quickly into the questions, “What are my possible manners of life as an embodied human consciousness? What way of embodied life would count as God’s praise?” While eternal life for the soul is at stake in addressing these questions, the soul’s merit is tested by how it comports itself in its present ineluctable embodiment. The turmoils of lust and reverence, concupiscence and charity, are playings out of possibilities that are built into the fact of embodiment.

Harry Angstrom is no less an embodied personality. He notices things not through abstract intellection but by having bodily experience. In picking up a basketball at the age of twenty-six he finds that “That old stretched-leather feeling makes his whole body go taut, gives his arms wings. It feels like he’s reaching down through the years to touch this tautness.” “That his touch still lives in his hands elates him. He feels liberated from long gloom. But his body is weighty and his breath grows short. It annoys him that he gets winded.” Remembering that elation of touch, and seeing it in another player, he thinks, “Naturals know. It’s all in how it feels” (Ran, 10, 11).

Awareness of bodily sensation, including visual sensations of the detritus of culture, is Harry’s principal mode of awareness of himself through time. “He rec-
ognizes elapsed time in the parched puffiness on his lips.” As Ruth thinks to herself about Harry, “That was the thing about him, he just lived in his skin and didn’t give a thought to the consequences of anything” (Run, 43, 139).

This tendency to be aware of himself and to think through sensory experience does not change much as Harry ages. At forty-seven “a big bland good guy is how he sees himself; six three and around two ten by now, with a forty-two inch waist the suit salesman at Kroll’s tried to tell him until he sucked his gut in and the man’s thumb grudgingly inched the tape tighter.” Bodily coordination remains for him the chief virtue, “uncoördination the root of all evil as he feels it” (Rich, 6, 48).

Crucially, it is not that bodily processes are all there are; it is rather that something is experiencing the world through its embodiment. There’s something in there, held within the flesh. “Sometimes Rabbit’s spirit feels as if it might faint from lugging all this body around. Little squeezy pains tease his ribs, reaching into his upper left arm. He has spells of feeling short of breath and mysteriously full in the chest, full of some pressing essence.” (Rest, 6–7). Perhaps no one but Updike is as capable of writing a nine-page description of what it feels like to the person to have a heart attack in one’s body (Rest, 134–42), during which Harry “closes his eyes intermittently in obedience to the animal instinct to crawl into a cave with your pain” (Rest, 137). To be a person, as Augustine and Updike know it, is to be subject to pains and pleasures, motions of one’s fleshly weight.

It is not simply that we are embodied, it is also that our intelligence enjoys and sustains itself on sensory experience. Not only do we exist as embodied persons, “we know that we exist and we love that fact and our knowledge of it.” While Augustine typically represents knowledge of our own existence as inner and as more certain than knowledge of external things, his narrative suggests that love of one’s own existence is love of oneself as a locus of experience, sensory experience initially and most powerfully and experience of God perhaps later. “By [the bodily senses] we have learned to know the heaven and the earth.” Bodily sensations are both vehicles of our embodied life—without them we would not be as we are—and revelations of God to the inner self:

> it was to the inner part of me that my bodily senses brought their messages. They delivered to their arbiter and judge the replies which they carried back from the sky and the earth and all that they contain, those replies which stated, “We are not God” and “God is he who made us.” (Confessions 10.6)

God “made . . . beautiful shapes of different sorts and bright and attractive colors . . . all ‘very good’ [Genesis 1:31]” (10.34), all at once attractions in themselves, vehicles of perceptive and bodily life through our awareness of them and use of them, and evidences of their maker. If sensation is, for Augustine, someday to be transcended as a mode of experience in favor of inward contemplation of God, it
is nonetheless a first and central mode, full of its own charms, shaped by and revelatory of God's making of its objects, and never fully transcended by us as long as we live on earth.

Harry Angstrom likewise, and even more desperately, lives his experiences of sensible objects. They are his principal evidences of realities: their own, his, and, fitfully, God's. "He walks downhill. The day is gathering itself in. He now and then touches with his hand the rough bark of a tree or the dry twigs of a hedge, to give himself the small answer of a texture" (Run, 20). Harry's continual recoverings of the sensory realities of objects, realities that inform and survive immediate experience, are his principal means of experiencing the goodness of the world: the light on the copper beech trees outside his bedroom window, water from the ice plant running in the gutter, Lotty Bingaman raising her arm, Janice's "inside sofdy grainy, like a silk slipper" (Run, 18). These are Harry's reassurances of visible realities, of his own reality, and of their goodness, hence perhaps of something higher. Janice's "girl friend at work had an apartment in Brewer they used. Pipe-frame bed, silver medallions in the wallpaper; a view westward of the great blue gas tanks by the edge of the river. . . . Lying side by side on this other girl's bed, feeling lost, having done the final thing; the wall's silver and the fading day's gold" (Run, 18). As Harry watches people going to church on Sunday morning he thinks, "Their clothes, they put on their best clothes: he clings to the thought giddily; it seems a visual proof of the unseen world" (Run, 87). A sense of the goodness of the world, God's work, surfaces within sensory experience, which is sought out and recalled for the evidences and reassurances that it provides.

Sensory experience is also, however, by no means always either innocent or evidently indicative of God's reality. We know the sensible world first, only thereafter knowing ourselves as sensers of it and then yet further, perhaps, knowing God as its creator. The result of this ordering is that the beauties of the world are capable immediately of attracting us on their own. Attraction by the sensible in itself or for its own sake is the primary form of human sinfulness for Augustine, the principal manifestation of pride, of trusting to one's own way and powers rather than God's. "My sin was this, that I looked for pleasure, beauty, and truth not in [God] but in myself and his other creatures, and the search led me instead to pain, confusion, and error" (Confessions 1.20). "I could not conceive of the existence of anything else" than a "bodily substance" (5.1); "I could imagine no kind of substance except such as is normally seen by the eye" (7.1).

Sensing nothing else, and seeing bodily substances as things that fill the eye in vision or the body in eating, hence things to be made use of, Augustine represents himself as pursuing the possession of objects, visually, bodily, and sexually. Seeing nothing else, the will "veers towards things of the lowest order, being 'boweled alive' [Ecclesiastes 10:10] and becoming inflated with desire for things outside itself" (Confessions 7.16). Desire, not reverence, becomes the fundamental form of relationship to sensible objects, whether other persons, foods, or sights. A wish to be
filled up, again and again, predominates. Beginning with being naturally filled with the sight and nourishment of objects, but straying by desiring this filling up on its own, one falls into the habit of repeated consumption of the world, sexual, gustatory, and visual. Augustine treats each modality of experience—sexual, gustatory, visual, and later aural—as involving an effort to be filled up by or centered on an object of experience, an effort that must inevitably, addictively, be repeated once the object has been consumed. The self that seeks to find itself, to center itself and confirm its identity through its sensory experience of objects, therein repeatedly dissipates itself. With regard, notoriously, to sex Augustine writes, “Foolhardy as I was, I ran wild with lust that was manifold and rank. . . . Love and lust together seethed within me. In my tender youth they swept me away over the precipice of my body’s appetites and plunged me in the whirlpool of sin. . . . I was tossed and spilled, floundering in the broiling sea of my fornication” (2.1–2). Repetitive consumption of unnourishing food is put forward as a metaphor for, perhaps part of the substance of, concern with material reality for its own sake under the influence of the Manichaeans. “But I gulped down this food, because I thought that it was you. . . . And it did not nourish me, but starved me all the more” (3.6). Visually, Augustine sought the spectacle of plays: “I was much attracted by the theater” (3.2); “I liked . . . to have my ears tickled by the make-believe of the stage, which only made them itch the more. As time went on my eyes shone more and more with the same eager curiosity” (1.10).

Each of these forms of experience is a form of lust, understood as the wish repeatedly to possess material objects regarded not as created beings but as self-subsistent substances of reality in their own right. “Man . . . is able to ‘catch sight of God’s invisible nature through his creatures’ [Rom.: 1:20], but his love of these material things is too great. He becomes their slave, and slaves cannot be judges” (Confessions 10.6). The substance of this slavery is lust, the compulsion repeatedly to fill oneself up with material objects through various modalities of experience, a compulsion that becomes an addictive, self-strengthening habit. “For my will was perverse and lust had grown from it, and when I gave in to lust habit was born, and when I did not resist the habit it became a necessity. These were the links in which together formed what I have called my chain, and it held me fast in the duress of servitude” (8.5). Thus out of pride in loving one’s own way, “a truant’s freedom” (3.3), taking sensible objects as objects of lust to be possessed so as to fill oneself up, “we are carried away by custom to our own undoing and it is hard to struggle against the stream” (1.16).

Harry Angstrom struggles rather less than most. “All I know,” he tells Ruth, “is what feels right. You feel right to me. Sometimes Janice used to. Sometimes nothing does” (Run, 281). Immediate feeling, or the prospect of it, dominates his motivations. The job of sorting out his relations with Ruth is blocked by the thought of consuming something immediately. As they discuss her pregnancy and its implications for them,
In fact he has hardly listened; it is too complicated and, compared to the vision of a sandwich, unreal. He stands up, he hopes with soldierly effect, and says, “That’s fair. I’ll work it out. What do you want at the store?” A sandwich and a glass of milk, and then undressing her, getting her out of that cotton dress harried into wrinkles and seeing that thickened waist calm in its pale cool skin. . . . If he can just once more bury himself in her he knows he’ll come up with his nerves all combed. (Run, 281–82)

When one is concerned most with the feel of a thing as a way of filling oneself up, then desire is notoriously labile. Not the identity and significance but the filling sensation of what one seeks is what matters. “Oh to close your eyes and just flicker out with your tongue for Cindy’s nipples as she swung them back and forth, back and forth, teasing” (Rich, 176).

Harry’s way of relating to the objects of his desire is to wish to possess them. He sees them as instruments for his satisfaction that he might own, not persons to be respected for their own nature. Janice is for him “his stubborn prize” (Rich, 455), Ruth in her coat is “like a great green fish, his prize” (Run, 70), Cindy is not his, but “What a package” (Rich, 237). The sight of Ruth’s bottom breaking the surface of a swimming pool “made him harden all over with a chill clench of ownership” (Run, 133).

Harry similarly seeks to fill himself up with, to own, visual sensations. In watching television he and Nelson “channel-hop, trying to find something to hold them” (Redux, 29). When he reads the comics in the newspaper, he thinks “God-dam ‘Apartment 3-G’: he feels he’s been living with those girls for years now, when is he going to see them with their clothes off? The artist keeps teasing him with bare shoulders in bathrooms, naked legs in the foreground with the crotch coming just at the panel edge, glimpses of bra straps being undone” (Redux, 323). Harry wants more, and he wants it to be his, and it matters more for its ability to fill his sensory consciousness than it matters for what it is. Too much definiteness is even a bad thing. “The tops of tits are almost the best part, nipples can be frightening” (Rich, 237).

These attitudes of Harry’s toward people and objects of sight extend to food as well. “He rattles around in the apartment, turning on all the lights and television, drinking ginger ale and leafing through old Lifes, grabbing anything to stuff into the emptiness” (Run, 212). The foods he prefers are all surface and sensation, providers of sensory excitement, not nourishment. “[A]s a kid Rabbit loved bland candy like Dots; sitting in the movies he used to plow through three nickel boxes of them, playing with them with his tongue and teeth, playing, playing, before giving himself the ecstasy of the bite” (Redux, 103). Some forty-five years or so later, eating a Planter’s Peanut Bar, “It is not so much the swallowing and ingesting he loves as the gritty-edgy feeling of the first corner in his mouth, the first right-angled fragment slowly dissolving” (Rest, 17–18). Even after his heart attack, he
takes a few macadamia nuts into his fingers. Nuggets, they are like small lightweight nuggets with a fur of salt. He especially loves the way, when he holds one in his mouth a few seconds and then gently works it between his crowned molars, it breaks into two halves, the surface of the fissure smooth to the tongue as glass, as baby skin. (Rest, 196–97)

When one seeks objects for the sake of their ability to surfeit the senses, then they never really fill you up, and you need more and more of them to continue to achieve the sensory effect. “What did his old basketball coach, Marty Tothero, tell him toward the end of his life, about how when you get old you eat and eat and it’s never the right food?” (Rest, 6).

The main reason it’s never the right food, just as it’s never the right woman or the right television program, is that there is in Harry’s character, as Derek Wright has noted “a general failure to differentiate between distinct orders of experience.” Objects are, for Harry, objects of, for, his possessive sensory consciousness—objects, that is, of lust:

It matters very little to his free-floating lust, as it matters little to his animal-namesake’s promiscuous, voracious appetite, that the sexual impulse was awakened by another woman [Lucy Eccles, not Janice]. Harry “loves” all women; Janice, Ruth, Lucy Eccles, the waitress in the restaurant, the nurse in the hospital... “Innocent” in the sense of indiscriminating and unchoosing, Harry’s appetite effects [an] entropic merging of differences, [a] rubbing out of identities.20

“We are carried away by custom to our own undoing and it is hard to struggle against the stream.”

One senses the world, and feeds on it, before one either knows its natures or turns within and above toward the nature of God. A longing for the continual suffusion of our senses is a primordial feature of our embodied condition and an ever-present possible mode of human being in the world. It is a mode of being that is encouraged, just as other possible modes of being are blocked, by friends and flatterers who tempt us to continue in this way that is already so easy and alluring. Seeking not to change, “I was pleased,” Augustine tells us, “with my own condition and anxious to be pleasing in the eyes of men” (Confessions 2.1).

Those among whom his lot fell were usually not chaste lovers of God. They were, at first, children, with whom Augustine “enjoyed playing games” (1.9), “[f]or I liked to score a fine win at sport” (1.10). The sense of winning, of being seen to be a master of experience in the eyes of others, reinforces the tendency to consume experience, to seek spectacle and satiety.

Among older children at school Augustine “kept company with [the ‘Wreckers’] and there were times when I found their friendship a pleasure,” despite their “outbursts of violence” and their hazings of newcomers (Confessions 3:3). Their behavior was able to influence his sense of himself and of his possible manners of
life: "I lived amongst them, feeling a perverse sense of shame because I was not like them" (3.3). His resistance to their ways is difficult and far from complete. Among grownups he "fell in with a set of sensualists," the Manichaeans, "men with glib tongues who ranted and raved and had the snares of the devil in their mouths" (3.6). When "the world is drunk with the invisible wine of its own perverted, earthbound will" (2.3), then it is, as Augustine says, difficult to live differently from one's fellows and under their disapprobation.

Harry Angstrom finds this difficulty insuperable. His sense of himself and his own possibilities is massively shaped by what he thinks other people think about him. When he first runs from Janice, he seeks shelter and advice from his old basketball coach, Marty Tothero, who introduces him to his friends as "my finest boy, a wonderful basketball player, Harry Angstrom, you probably remember his name from the papers, he twice set a county record" (Run, 53). Tothero legitimates for Harry his flight from Janice and his affair with Ruth, to whom Tothero has introduced him. As he later drifts through the affair Harry is willing to put up with Reverend Eccles because, in talking with him, "[h]e feels flattered; Eccles has this knack" (Run, 99). When Janice ten years later runs off with Charlie Stavros, Harry thinks about what the affair means by thinking about what the world thinks of it, imagining it reported in headlines in the Brewer Vat: "Linotyper's Wife Lays Local Salesman. Verity Employee Named Cuckold of the Week" (Redux, 72, 96). In thinking about that affair yet ten years later, and having regained possession of Janice, Harry thinks, "[a] man fucks your wife, it puts a new value on her, within limits" (Rich, 12). Dominated as he is by the pursuit of sensory experience, the world's opinion, no matter how founded, matters more to him, as it is reflected to him in glances or fantasy or tone of voice, than does conscience. He buys his house in Penn Park partly out of envy of Webb Murkett's sunken living room. In his late forties Harry takes his cues largely from the behavior of his golfing companions, and their wives, at the Flying Eagle Country Club, as that behavior itself refracts the ways of the public culture: "now both sexes have watched enough beer commercials on television to know that this is how to act, jolly and loud, on weekends, in the bar, beside the barbecue grill, on beaches and sundecks and mountainsides" (Rich, 60). Later his Jewish golf friends in Florida "usually make him feel good about himself. With them he is a big Swede, . . . a comical pet gentile, a big pale uncircumcised hunk of the American dream" (Rest, 57). In retirement Harry has become "more clothes-conscious than before," as he dresses explicitly to achieve the look that those around him affect (Rest, 245). These experiences of direction by the actions and reactions of others accumulate for a lifetime, until they seem to Harry to be the stuff of human life itself:

Fact is, it has come to Rabbit this late in life, you don't have a way, except what other people tell you. Your mother first, and poor Pop, then the Lutheran minister, that tough old heinie Fritz Kruppenbach, you had to respect him though, he said what he believed, and then all those schoolteachers, Marty Tothero and the rest, trying to
give you an angle to work from, and now all these talk-show hosts. Your life derives, and has to give. (Rest, 451)

When one’s consciousness is dominated by sensory experience, then what one takes from the actions and reactions of others, and from the public, media culture, is “an angle to work from,” one that becomes the line of one’s life.

Perhaps in reaction to a sense of dependence on sensory experience and on the reactions and judgments of others it is easy to wish to hide oneself as a consumer of sensory experience. Where one doesn’t really believe in the value of what one consumes, but simply seeks intensities, shame is likely to ensue. Since one doesn’t know how others will react to one’s pursuits of sensory experiences, one may well fear their reactions and prefer instead privacy and darkness. This preference helps to account for the attraction to the theater that Augustine notes in his younger self.

The action of the *Confessions* in the moment of its writing is that of unburdening, the overcoming of shame and the wish to hide oneself, from others and ultimately from God. Against this action of unburdening, which requires considerable effort, Augustine sees as the main counterforce a standing wish or temptation of the human mind to hide itself in its consumptions of experience. “In its blind inertia, in its abject shame, [the human mind] loves to lie concealed, yet it wishes that nothing should be concealed from it” (10.23). For dependent, embodied subjectivities concealment has overwhelming charms.

Harry regularly succumbs to them. Spectatorship tending toward voyeurism is a signature of his personality. At twenty-six “Rabbit Angstrom, coming up the alley in a business suit, stops and watches” boys playing basketball (Run, 9). He remembers as a child climbing to the tops of telephone poles “where you could hear the wires sing. Their song was a terrifying motionless whisper... Listening to the wires as if you could hear what people were saying, what all that secret adult world was about” (20). As he lies in Marty Tothero’s bed above the Sunshine Athletic Association the “clangor of the body shop comes up softly. Its noise comforts him, tells him he is hidden and safe.” (48). In conversation with Eccles he is wary of revealing too much of himself. “The more he tells, the more he loses. He’s safe inside his own skin, he doesn’t want to come out” (118). Though uneasy and too frightened to act himself, he watches Jill suck Skeeter:

A most delicate slipping slivery sound touches up the silence now; but Rabbit cannot precisely see. He needs to see. The driftwood lamp is beside him. Not turning his head, he gropes and switches it on. Nice. (Redux, 261)

Harry “likes... domestic peace. Women circling with dutiful footsteps above him and the summer night like a lake lapping at the windows” as he reads *Consumer Reports* alone and fantasizes that the model on the cover is a prostitute or one of “the girls in blue movies” (Rich, 81). He “has always loved that feeling, of being inside
when it rains. Shingles in the attic, pieces of glass no thicker than cardboard keeping him dry. Things that touch and yet not” (117). Privacy, safety, and concealment enable him to consume sensory experience without fear of discovery. He repeatedly spies on Ruth’s farm, hoping for a glimpse of his possible daughter, though when someone calls “Hey,” “Rather than face who it is, he runs” (113). He goes through the Murketts’ medicine cabinet (285) and bedside table, in astonished rapture at the photos he finds of Webb and Cindy naked and having sex. As Uncle Sam in the Mt. Judge July 4 parade, Harry feels “as if he has been lifted up to survey all human history,” above it all, safe (Rest, 371).

Harry’s wish to hide himself in his consumptions of sensory experience further underlies his passivity in his relations with others. Janice complains that he simply lets her affair with Charlie continue (Redux, 193). His father chides him for his inaction: “Your mother always says you let people push you around. . . . I’m beginning to see she may be right” (210). When Janice asks him what they might do as Nelson seeks to come home with Melanie, his best suggestion is, “Ride with the punches?” (Rich, 48). Fusing his relations with people with his consumptions of visual experience, Harry finds that Janice is for him “a channel that can’t be switched” (Rest, 170). When in the hospital after his first heart attack, he finds that he likes being taken care of by anonymous others:

His collapse twenty-six hours ago did have its blissful aspect: his sense, beginning as he lay helpless and jellyfishlike under a sky of red, of being in the hands of others, of being the blind, pained, focal point of a world of concern and expertise, at some depth was a coming back home, after a life of ill-advised journeying. (162–63)

He finds himself unable to follow his doctor’s advice to take an interest in something. “Harry tries to care but has trouble. Ever since Schmidt retired. Get interested is the advice, but in truth you are interested in less and less. It’s nature’s way” (477).

Consistently, Harry’s passivity, wish for concealment, and voyeurism lead him to envision his own death and even to long for it. On top of the telephone pole “it always tempted you to fall, to let the hard spikes in your palms go and feel the space on your back, feel it take your feet and ride up your spine as you fell” (Run, 20). On top of Mt. Judge “he used to wonder if you jumped would you die or be cushioned on those green heads [of trees] as on the clouds of a dream” (107). Throughout his last year he courts his own death, as he would rather die, achieving ultimate concealment, the final consumption, and release from the demons of sensory addiction, than take reasonable care for his bodily health. To Nelson, in dying “Rabbit thinks he should maybe say more, the kid looks wildly expectant, but enough. Maybe. Enough” (Rest, 512). Better concealment than the demands of human relationship; better death as a final evasion of those demands than life. Thus do men “fall back upon what they are able to do and find contentment in this way” (Confessions 10.23).
When addictiveness to sensory experience, susceptibility to the influences of others, voyeurism, and wishes for concealment are inherent possibilities for us as embodied intelligences, then so too is the destruction of our identity or personality. The soul or self is dissipated, broken apart, in its submissions to the temptations of eye and ear and touch. “Truly it is by continence that we are made as one and regain that unity of self which we lost by falling apart in the search for a variety of pleasures” (Confessions 10.29). Augustine’s image of the risk run in searching for pleasure is one of the fracturing or breaking apart of the soul, to the point that it is unable any longer to play its role in guiding perception and action and is hence no longer even identifiable. The will has in it a tendency toward self-disintegration that is the essence of evil, “that which falls away from essence and tends to non-being. . . . [that which] tends to make that which is cease to be.” Rather than being metaphysically fixed in its identity as a substance, embodied soul admits of being undone by perversity of will. What we are is in part a function of what we do.

This is the thought that figures at the heart of Augustine’s depiction of his loss of himself in sensuality as a young man. “I ran,” he tells us, “wild with lust” (Confessions 2.1), therein making himself into something other than himself. “My inner self was a house divided against itself” (8.8). The soul is ‘wrenched in two’ by sensuality and truth “and suffers great trials” (8.11).

The plot of the Confessions is then the story of Augustine’s progressive simultaneous discovery and realization of himself as a more stably ensouled creature of God manifesting its ensoulement in its continence. Thought, ultimately thought of God, is the characteristic and appropriate activity for embodied intelligence, and Augustine construes the nature of thought as a kind of collection or assembly of the self’s contents into a unity that is an achievement, not a metaphysical fact. “This is the derivation of the word cogitare, which means to think or to collect one’s thoughts. For in Latin the word cogo, meaning I assemble or I collect, is related to cogito, which means I think” (10.11). To confess, recalling one’s past and revealing it before God and humanity, is to recollect oneself, forging identity and wholeness out of disintegration.

In Harry Angstrom, not surprisingly, disintegration predominates. This disintegration is a function of a failure to think or to recollect himself, a failure that is due to his powerful wish instead to feel, to be natural or part of nature. Harry thinks of leaving high school and becoming an adult not as a process of forging an identity through rational recollection or self-command but as something more like an inevitable loss of self into nature:

You climb up through the little grades and then get to the top and everybody cheers; with the sweat in your eyebrows you can’t see very well and the noise swirls around you and lifts you up, and then you’re out, not forgotten at first, just out, and it feels good and cool and free. You’re out, and sort of melt, and keep lifting, until you become like to these kids just one more piece of the sky of adults that hangs over them in the town. (Run, 11)
George W. Hunt has perceptively noted that “the strong possibility of confusing Nature with Nothingness” lies at the heart of “the thematic debate that arises continually throughout Updike’s fiction. There that ‘possibility’ or temptation becomes actual.”\(^{22}\) Hunt traces Updike’s dramatization of this possibility to his interest in Karl Barth’s theology of evil, and behind Barth lies Augustine.

Harry’s disintegration into the natural and sensual continues throughout his life. His will not to think makes him other and less than he might otherwise be. After turning off the radio, “[i]nto the silence that results he refuses to let thoughts come. He doesn’t want to think, he wants to fall asleep and wake up, pillowed by sand” \((Run, 37)\). “Why can’t you,” Ruth asks him, “make up your mind what you want to do?” \((280)\). Jill admonishes him that

your problem is that you’ve never been given a chance to formulate your views. Because of the competitive American context, you’ve had to convert everything into action too rapidly. Your life has no reflective content; it’s all instinct, and when your instincts let you down, you have nothing to trust. That’s what makes you cynical. \((Redux, 202)\)

Mim finds that Harry is unable to tend his own garden \((321)\). Harry “loves Nature, though he can name almost nothing in it” \((Rich, 139)\). “I never was too good at thinking things through,” he admits to Ruth \((449)\). Without reflectiveness, without the sustenances of reciprocal respect, without welding his personality to an occupation, there is not, it seems, much there but a tendency toward nonbeing.

When one is prone to addiction to the sensible, to distraction by flattery, to a wish to hide oneself in one’s consumptions of sensible experience, and to the undoing of one’s very identity through the refusal of thought, then conversion to integrity of soul, continence, and thoughtfulness will present itself as requiring a transfiguration of one’s mode of being. Prescriptions about conduct that are generalized out of a prior mode of being will not be enough. Such prescriptions might sketch the conditions of maximum comfort or intensity or safety in one’s consumptions of experience, but they would not point to the inauguration of a new mode of being. Indicators of the possibility and value of such a transfiguration must, it seems, come from outside our own experience and powers. Human identity and integrity cannot be fully achieved by a man, it seems, “by his own strength.”\(^{23}\) This is the thought—that our lives stand in need of transfiguration, radical reversal of orientation, if we are to achieve integrity of soul—that Augustine expresses as our need for grace:

For, whatever powers [a man] has, “did they not come to him by gift?” \([1 \text{ Cor. } 4:7]\). By the gift of grace he is not only shown how to see you, who are always the same, but is also given the strength to hold you. By your grace, too, if he is far from you and cannot see you, he is enabled to walk upon the path that leads him closer to you, so that he may see you and hold you... What is man to do in his plight? “Who is to set him free from a nature thus doomed to death? Nothing else than the grace of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” \((8.21)\)
Against the background of the ontological account of the soul’s tendency to undo itself in habitual sensuality one of the most moving features of the Confessions is Augustine’s transcription of the ways in which grace presented itself to him so as to enable his conversion. Not only is the person of Jesus as the intercessor and bearer of grace presented in the Bible, there are also the manifold smaller and more immediate motions of grace in the writings, bearings, and actions of other people. Augustine notes in particular Cicero’s Hortensius, a book that, in its recommendation to study philosophy, “altered my outlook on life . . . and provided me with new hopes and aspirations” (3.4), his mother Monica, “‘sent down [as] your help from above’ [Ps. 143:7],” who “wept to you for me” (3.2), the influence of Academic Skepticism, which helped to break his attachment to Manicheanism (5.14), the preaching of Ambrose, whose eloquence brought “his meaning, which I tried to ignore, . . . into my mind together with his words, which I admired so much” (5.14), Simplicianus’s telling of the story of the conversion of Victorinus (8.1–4), and finally “the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house” saying, “‘Take it and read, take it and read,’” which he receives as a command “to open my book of Scripture and read the first passage on which my eyes should fall” (8.12), therein completing his conversion. The soul here finds its helps in various vehicles of godliness that surround it in ordinary life, if it but attends to them aright.

In Harry Angstrom’s experience grace presents itself as a possibility that is sensed or felt—in trees or grass, or in women, or in the look of flowerpot-red Brewer from the top of Mt. Judge—but not as a possibility that is grasped or articulated into his life. He is, as it were, stopped or struck, but never moved, by the possibility of a grace that might lend his life shape and meaning. “His feeling that there is an unseen world is instinctive, and more of his actions than anyone suspects constitute transactions with it” (Run, 217). He fitfully perceives but does not really grasp the invisible in the visible. His experiences of grace are more interruptive than accumulative. Jill’s breast “had been soft enough in his mouth, quite soft enough, and abundant, as grace is abundant, that we do not measure, but take as a presence, that abounds” (Redux, 301). In Voyager Two’s “feeble but true transmissions across billions of miles . . . Harry feels a fine excessiveness, . . . a grace of sorts that chimes with the excessive beauty of this crystalline late-summer day” (Rest, 412), but he never integrates these intermittent feelings, never quite responds to their dim messages.

Harry’s feelings for other persons are similarly rich but obscure as they remain rooted in sensation rather than in the joint development of a way of life. He experiences moments of sensory enchantment by Charlie (“he loves this savvy Greek, dainty of heart beneath his coat of summer checks” [Rich, 223]), Nelson (“Nelson’s hair makes a whorl in the back that Harry knows so well his throat goes dry, something caught in it” [242]), and Judy as a newborn (“the tiny stitchless seam of the closed eyelid aslant, lips bubbled forward beneath the whorled nose as if in delicate disdain” [467]). He notices how Janice keeps up her shape as she ages. “At least she hasn’t let herself go to fat like some of the women her age in the
class" (Rest, 312). But, as is especially evident in his relations with Janice, these moments of sensory affection soon shade off into either pride of possession or antagonism. Instead of being articulated into mutuality, they amount to grace presented but refused. It’s easier for Harry just to feel them and then to let the feeling pass. “Harry has no taste for the dark, tangled, visceral aspect of Christianity, the going through quality of it, the passage into death and suffering that redeems and inverts these things, like an umbrella blowing inside out” (Run, 219). He dimly senses but refuses what Augustine claims, the conversion from sensuality into godliness and integrity of soul.

Throughout comparison with Augustine, Harry Angstrom emerges, it seems, as a passive failure in humanity, overmastered by an addiction to sensory experience, with motivations shaped by flattery and envy rather than independent judgment, cravenly hiding himself as a consumer from judgment, dissipating his very identity in his consumptions, and refusing the possibility of grace. But are things really as simple as all that? And is Augustine’s conversion really quite so complete and convincing in contrast with Harry’s failure?

Harry does on occasion act, even displaying a kind of concern for others that at least momentarily outweighs his demand for self-satiety. “When you get children growing under you, you try to rise to the occasion” (Rest, 139). He reassures Judy that she did not cause his heart attack but instead saved his life, and he promises that “Grandma and I will take good care of your daddy and all of you” (264). He confronts Nelson about hitting Pru, about his cocaine habit, and about his stealing from the business in order to support it. While such moments often stem from anger or passing affection and are not integrated into a way of life, they nonetheless evince a capability of human feeling and action that has not altogether been lost.

Above all, Harry is alive. As a human subject he intensely notices and recalls the looks and feels of objects: the Norway maple outside his window in Florida, the copper beech tree outside his bedroom window in the Springer’s house, “a few dead leaves shed by the weeping cherry, and the flower stalks of the violet hosta dying back” (Rest, 395). These moments in Harry’s mind of lyrical sensory experience recall a kind of archaic, childhood experience of wonder at the world in the dawning of one’s own consciousness of objects and of one’s awareness of oneself as conscious. The recurrence of such moments throughout his life suggests that it is in or in relation to such sensory moments that human subjectivity exists at all. Without their surprises and lingering intensities we would not be alive or would not be what we are.

Yet Harry, again, does not actively make a human life with others over a period of time. It’s too much trouble; its intensities, unlike those of food or sex, require too much of one. Family life “was for him like a bush in some neglected corner of the back yard that gets overgrown, a lilac bush or privet some bindweed has invaded from underneath with leaves so similar and tendrils so tightly entwining it gives the gardener a headache in the sun to try to separate bad growth from good”
Harry will not readily suffer such headaches. Yet he remains humanly alive, not transfigured into some chaste, disembodied, and unrecognizable intelligence. We find ourselves having the sort of “Yes, but” experience or judgment of Harry’s failures that is, Updike suggests, proper to any rich exploration of human reality’s seerries, music, and tension.

Despite its different shape, Augustine’s development too is not free from ambiguities that make our, and his, judgment of it uncertain. Is the conversion that Augustine claims for himself quite as complete and convincing as Augustine might wish to suggest but perhaps can’t help doubting? Do we, for example, accept his claim that after his conversion “I no longer desired a wife or placed any hope in this world but stood firmly upon the rule of faith” (Confessions 8.12)?

Augustine does not always seem quite so sure, as though the text of the Confessions betrayed more knowledge of the ambiguities of human life than its official moral theology would allow. Augustine tends to disappear as a character after his conversion (book 8) and a short denouement (book 9) recounting his return to Africa and Monica’s life and death. After book 9 the text cycles away into a general philosophical examination of the temptations of the senses (10.30–35) and an interpretation of Genesis (book 11–13). Once the conversion that results in the withdrawal of all hope from the world is accomplished, there is, this disappearance suggests, no human life left to narrate, so that the thought hidden in this disappearance is that human life itself requires both attraction to sensory experience and placing hope in the world.

The postconversion catalogue of temptations of the senses further suggests that they may not disappear even after conversion. “What excuse can I make for myself when often, as I sit at home, I cannot turn my eyes from the sight of a lizard catching flies or a spider entangling them as they fly into her web?” (10.35). The eye and ear and hand continue, it seems, to make their demands felt within embodied intelligence, according to their own law, not God’s.

Augustine even betrays a certain anxiety about his own claim to know himself as having accomplished his conversion. “I cannot prove to [my readers] that my confessions are true,” he notes, though he claims, “I shall be believed by those whose ears are opened to me by charity” (10.3). But who are they? Are they easy to recognize within the ways of the world? And how will they express their belief in his confessions, as they continue to go about the daily businesses of their lives? “Can they really know me?” (10.3). And if there is doubt about this—doubt about how his life and his confession will be received, even by those who approach his book with charity—then perhaps too there is doubt in Augustine about his own claims to conversion: “there are some things in man which even his own spirit within him does not know” (10.5), perhaps even the most important things. If God’s law is, as Augustine insists (3.7), flexible, even nearly inscrutable, in how it engages with the changing temporal conditions and experiences of embodied, acculturated creatures, then it is not so easy to know what an accomplished conversion to a life of praise and faithfulness is.
Being haunted by ambiguities that inhibit any final judgment on the meaning of a life emerges then as part of what it is to live as an embodied consciousness, torn between aspirations, even commands, toward elevation, purity, integrity, and faithfulness and sensuous desire that is a necessary feature of embodied conscious life. "Such is the confusion of this fallen world, where sins lie intermixed with the seeds of being." Hence dramatizations of how we live with this enduring tear in our nature—dramatizations such as we find in *Confessions* and the Rabbit tetralogy—may be as much philosophical thought about, as much acknowledgment of, our condition as it is possible for us to have. What fuller mode of thought about our doubleness could there be?

**NOTES**


11. Ibid., 125.


13. Ibid., 1.


20. Ibid., 38–39.


24. Cf. Updike’s comments on how his work says “Yes, but” to various issues and to the murky itineraries of the characters who explore them: “One Big Interview,” 502–3.