

## Updike's Hidden Warning for an Unsustainable American Society

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### Introduction

No critic of John Updike's literary works, as far as I have ascertained, has attempted to address the fact that a majority of his short story output happened simultaneous to events seminal to what is now termed environmentalism. For example, Alice and Kenneth Hamilton have explored the elements of Christian theology in Updike's stories, as have many others.<sup>1</sup> Others, such as George Hunt, examine Updike's works for what they have to say about sexual themes or art.<sup>2</sup>

However, looking back at American history, it is recognizable that Updike wrote his short stories during a period of time critical for the formation of the environmental movement in the United States. For example, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published in 1962. Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* came out in 1968. The first Earth Day was held in 1972. Was John Updike aware of these events? Did he have any views on them? Did he think about the issues and debates of the day which were then giving rise to the birth of modern environmentalism? And if he did have any opinions, were these expressed in his fiction?

Close examination of some of Updike's short stories written in the 1960s reveals that Updike was profoundly impacted as an artist by both development (of roads, houses, factories, etc.) and by the messages of environmentalists, but Updike refuses to articulate his views in any way which could be seen as pleading for consideration for a greener society or appealing to people to change their wasteful ways. He takes a clinical view, almost a social scientist's perspective, in three short stories I will examine: "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, a Dying Cat, a Traded Car" (1961); "The Indian" (1961); and "The Orphaned Swimming Pool" (1969), and in the last one, even goes so far as to identify the natural resource whose scarcity will first present an insurmountable obstacle to further economic growth. His scenario is stark, bitter (because it is unapologetically apocalyptic), and compelling, leaving no room for people to choose to be green; he offers only a kind of vigorous investigation into root causes and their ultimate consequences. Updike's position, though it can be seen as depressing, is quite sophisticated, and prefigures more recent work by anthropologists and archaeologists whose focus has been on the innate inability of human cultures to achieve

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1 Alice and Kenneth Hamilton, *The Elements of John Updike*, (n.p.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970).

2 George W. Hunt, S.J., *John Updike and the three great secret things: Sex, Religion, and Art*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980).

“sustainability” and the role of evolutionary biology in our predicament.

Perhaps because the normal fossil fuel-dependent American lifestyle of suburbs and cars (which also happens to be the lifestyle of most critics who produce literary criticism) doesn't differ significantly from the suburban milieu of Updike's characters, the stunningly atypical nature of this lifestyle (particularly in terms of per capita energy consumption) in human history, even as a setting for a story, doesn't register as significant among a wide swath of the reading public. Yet Updike himself was enough of a social scientist to be fully aware of the highly aberrational quality of the material circumstances into which he was born, and indeed (throughout the three stories I selected) he gave fuller and fuller voice to his concerns as the logical outcome of the chosen American lifestyle path became, at least to him, clearer and clearer.

### Updike's Material Circumstances

Updike's material circumstances, as are those of all Americans of his generation, are extraordinary, for between 1920 and 1960 the general trend of economic growth rate decline in America, a constant both before and after these years, was suspended.<sup>3</sup> For forty years the American economy boomed as it had not done before (at least not in recorded economic data) or since. This period of increasing growth rates “roughly corresponds to the development of modern heavy industry and the general integration of the sciences, engineering and education with production, along with the compelling and disruptive events of the great depression and World War II”<sup>4</sup>. The greatest factor in this growth was the energy unleashed by putting fossil fuels to work in powering the machines that powered industry and transportation. More oil was discovered in the U.S. each year than in the previous one (until the peak occurred in 1970)<sup>5</sup>, and “quality of life” peaked for all time in 1960 (as calculated by one M.I.T. scientist in 1971)<sup>6</sup>, putting Updike in a unparalleled position to survey American growth and prosperity as they unfolded richly, uniquely, and without precedent before or since (though perhaps not many people knew it at the time) before him.

In 1930 (Updike was born in 1932), domestic consumption of oil was about 3 million barrels per day. By 1980 it was about 20 million barrels per day.<sup>7</sup> Thus Updike's birth roughly coincides with the 1920 date given for the start of the industrial boom era, and Updike's peak productive years of 1960-1975 roughly correlate with the end of this period of increasing—and aberrational-- economic growth rates, which were in turn due to industrialization powered by oil.

However, in 1970, (coinciding roughly with Updike's own productive peak years of mid-life),

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3 “Growth Rate Trend of U.S. Economic Activity” (<http://www.synapse9.com/drgnp.htm>)

4 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

5 Deffeyes, Kenneths, Hubbert's peak: *The Impending World Oil Shortage* (Princeton: Princeton L. Press, 2001) p. 1.

6 Forrester, Jay World Dynamics. Forrester was calculating variables such as pollution, population, etc. p. 70. World Dynamics Jay W. Forrester 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge, MA Wright-Allen Press, 1973

7 These figures are readily obtainable from a number of locations. One is the U.S. Dept of Energy website: <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/aer/txt/ptb0501.html>

American oil production reached what is now called Hubbert's peak. . (Hubbert's peak refers to L. Marion Hubbert's prediction in 1949 that the U.S. oil production would reach its peak in 1972.) That is, since then, American oil production began to decline, while prior to this time (from the year when petroleum production had begun in the late 1900s) production had been rising every year. The finite capacity of domestic petroleum resources implied some sort of limit to economic expansion: "the cupboard was bare", to paraphrase the famous Mother Goose Nursery Rhyme "Old Mother Hubbard". This was a shock to many people who had thought that American wealth and resources were unlimited. As Lester Thurow wrote: "Waiting in line to buy a basic commodity like gasoline is something that no American had ever experienced. Shock and irritation were high, but those lines were like the first small heart attack-an indication of mortality. Maybe the American economy was growing old and becoming vulnerable. Maybe the American dream of an ever rising standard of living was over. Small may be beautiful, but if that phrase meant a lower standard of living, then the average American considered it a nightmare".<sup>8</sup> As a response to its oil production shortfall, America made up for its petroleum energy deficit by importing oil, and because world oil production was still increasing, the sense of imminent crisis eased.

Yet, calls to acknowledge the limits to potential population growth, to economic expansion, and to what Americans call "progress," if not to embrace them, were indeed making themselves heard. In 1949 (when Updike was 17), L. Marion Hubbert had predicted that the U.S. oil production would reach its peak in 1972. Although his prediction was greeted with skepticism, there were probably some people who realized the American economic miracle was on shaky ground. Also, as the 1960s began, more people began to view the effects of industrialism with doubt and more people began to pay attention to data extrapolating population growth, and the concomitant growth of industrialization and its negative effects such as pollution, decades into the future. Environmentalism was born. The first Earth Day was held in 1972.

One of the early attempts to sound a warning came from M.I.I. professor Jay W. Forrester with his book *World Dynamics* (1973). *World Dynamics* is an attempt to "set forth a dynamic model which interrelates population, capital investment, geographical space, natural resources, pollution, and food production."<sup>9</sup> Using a computer to model variables on earth (population, capital investment, natural resources, agricultural capacity, and pollution), Forrester discovered the model had a tendency to predict that human population would "overshoot and collapse"<sup>10</sup>

The warnings in Forrester's book went, of course, unheeded, but environmentalism continued to be popular in a limited sort of way, although industrialization continued without abate through the 1970s and 1980s. America imported more and more oil each year to make up for its energy shortfall. Meanwhile, as the 1980s progressed, environmental problems came into sharper focus: global warming became widely understood as perhaps the first environmental threat that threatens all life on Earth in a systematic way (as opposed to the vaguer and more localized problem of "pollution"

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8 Lester Thurow, *Dangerous Currents* (Random House, 1983), pp. 34-36.

9 Jay Forester, *World Dynamics*, (Cambridge, MA: Wright-Allen Press, 1973) p. 1.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

decried in the 1970s). A more systematic approach to environmental and sustainability studies came into being as academics began to try to understand in more detail how exactly the complex forces inherent in the natural world would precipitate global collapse of populations.

To that end, in 1988, Joseph Tainter published *The Collapse of Complex Societies*. While Forrester had used a computer program which plugged in variables such as “population”, “natural resources” and “effects of pollution”, and extrapolated future results to find the point where population overwhelmed supporting structures and “collapsed”, Tainter undertook a systematic study of past complex civilizations which had already collapsed in order to investigate exactly WHY societies collapsed. Tainter’s findings centered on four concepts:<sup>11</sup>

1. human societies are problem-solving organizations;
2. sociopolitical systems require energy for their maintenance;
3. increased complexity carries with it increased costs per capita; and
4. investment in sociopolitical complexity as a problem-solving response often reaches a point of declining marginal returns.

Tainter writes, “to the extent that collapse is due to declining marginal returns, it is an *economizing* process. It occurs when it becomes necessary to restore marginal return on organizational investment to a more favorable level.”<sup>12</sup> In a society in collapse, social units (these may be individuals, families, villages, etc., that together comprise the larger society) find that it is no longer in their interest to support the government that they have heretofore supported. The society simply decomposes as units fall away and seek to fend for themselves. The central governmental unit is, meanwhile, in too much disarray (the culmination of a process that has been happening all along and which is symptomatic of the problem) to do much about the new independent initiatives which the social units are taking. “Social units that comprise a (collapsing) complex society perceive increased advantage to a strategy of independence, and begin to pursue their own immediate goals rather than the long-term goals of the hierarchy.”<sup>13</sup>

Tainter raises the issue of the sustainability of modern Western civilization. Our society has evolved to an unprecedentedly high degree of complexity, which requires ever higher inputs of energy, and without “new inputs of energy”<sup>14</sup> Tainter sees global collapse of modern civilization to be a certainty, adding, “although collapse is an economic adjustment, it can nevertheless be devastating where much of the population does not have the opportunity or the ability to produce primary food resources. Many contemporary societies, particularly those that are highly industrialized, obviously fall into this class.”<sup>15</sup>

In a later essay entitled “Complexity, Problem Solving, and Sustainable Societies” (1996) Tainter acknowledges fossil fuels and the industrialization which they powered as a profound aberration in

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11 Joseph Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 194.

12 Ibid., p. 198.

13 Ibid., p. 121.

14 Ibid., p. 215.

15 Ibid., p. 209.

human history: “what set industrialism apart from all the previous history of our species was its reliance on abundant, concentrated, high-quality energy.”<sup>16</sup> Tainter uses this essay to warn readers and listeners (it was first given as a plenary address at the Third International Meeting of the International Society for Ecological Economics) that the consequences of ignoring “where we are in history”<sup>17</sup> would constitute a “great failure of the practical application of ecological economics”.<sup>18</sup>

The basic methodology (calculating the marginal rate of return (of investments in energy – and resource capture)) on each further technological development in a society) which Tainter applied in his examination of the collapse of different societies was also used by Cornell anthropologist David Price to consider physical and motile transformations of species as they adapted to improve their own energy-capturing strategies over eons (geological time). Price, a research associate at Cornell University’s Population and Development Program, examines energy-capturing strategies of species over the history of evolution in his article “Energy and Human Evolution”<sup>19</sup>. Each innovation (first photosynthesis, then mobility of the organism itself, then the ability to use energy extrasomatically) allowed further improvements in energy-capturing strategies (passively receiving sunlight, grazing, hunting, mining for coal, drilling for oil, etc.)

Human beings are seen as the most evolutionarily advanced species because their strategies for energy capture are so technologically advanced, and largely extrasomatic. But Price sees us also as slaves engaged in the laborious process of releasing energy, wherever, and in whatever form, we find it. As long as excess energy is stored, Price argues, the Second Law of Thermodynamics (“energy flows from areas of greater concentration to areas of lesser concentration, and local processes run down”<sup>20</sup>) that it must be released. Therefore, Price writes, “the human species may be seen as having evolved in the service of entropy, and it cannot be expected to outlast the dense accumulations of energy that have helped define its niche. Human beings like to believe they are in control of their destiny, but when the history of life on Earth is seen in perspective, the evolution of *Homo sapiens* is merely a transient episode that acts to redress the planet’s energy balance.”<sup>21</sup>

Price sees the development of single-celled life forms as the start. These life forms died, their collected energy was stored underground where it became what we now call fossil fuels. Also, the life forms evolved into autotrophs and then heterotrophs. Whereas Tainter saw the process of energy collection and social complexity as evolving over decades and centuries for a given society, Price sees energy capture and biological specialization and complexity for an organism or group of organisms as evolving over eons. Humans are at the very end of the evolutionary chain, and are able

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16 Joseph Tainter, “Complexity, Problem Solving, and Sustainable Societies”, from *Getting Down to Earth: Practical Applications of Ecological Economics*, Washington, D.C, Island Press, 1996). p. 10 (My page numbers refer to the version of this essay published on the World Wide Web.)

17 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

18 *Ibid.*.

19 David Price “Energy and Human Evolution”, from *Population and Environment: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, Volume 16, Number 4, March 1995, pp. 301-319. (My page numbers refer to the World Wide Web version published on the Internet.)

20 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

(unlike other creatures) to use energy extrasomatically, that is, outside the body. Price sees us as not at all in control of our collective destiny as a species: “We are caught up, as organic beings, in the natural processes through which the earth accepts energy from the sun and then releases it.”<sup>22</sup>

Price claims that we are not going to be able to maintain any sort of control in the “spiraling collapse”<sup>23</sup> that he sees as much more likely than “a world population held constant, in balance”.<sup>24</sup> Price asserts that although “the notion of balance in nature is an integral part of traditional western cosmology....science has found no such balance. According to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, energy flows from areas of greater concentration to areas of lesser concentration, and local processes run down. Living organisms may accumulate energy temporarily but in the fullness of time, entropy prevails. While the tissue of life that coats the planet Earth has been storing up energy for over three billion years, it cannot do so indefinitely. Sooner or later, energy that accumulates must be released. This is the bioenergetic context in which *Homo sapiens* evolved, and it accounts for both the wild growth of human population and its imminent collapse.”<sup>25</sup>

Price concludes: “The short tenure of the human species marks a turning point in the history of life on Earth. Before the appearance of *Homo sapiens* energy was being sequestered more rapidly than it was being dissipated. Then human beings evolved, with the capacity to dissipate much of the energy that had been sequestered, partially redressing the planet’s energy balance. The evolution of a species like *Homo sapiens* may be an integral part of the life process, anywhere in the universe it happens to occur. As life develops, autotrophs expand and make a place for heterotrophs. If organic energy is sequestered in substantial reserves, as geological processes are bound to do, then the appearance of a species that can release it is all but assured. Such a species, evolved in the service of entropy, quickly returns its planet to a lower energy level. In an evolutionary instant, it explodes and is gone.”<sup>26</sup>

Price’s assertion that we are “caught up, as organic beings, in the natural processes through which the earth accepts energy from the sun and then releases it” strikes me as just the place where art steps in to respond to mankind’s plight. The sentence, in its context in a scientific article, has a bland, matter-of-factness to it. Yet if we imagine it as a sentence penned by a poet such as John Updike (and it seems to me to be a sentence which he could have come up with easily), then the sentence takes on a sort of tragi-comic irony enveloping all our experience and shading all our activities; suddenly human lives, so meaningful and full of joy and sorrow, are seen as no more than the universe’s way of releasing stored energy. The sentence provides a view of man’s life as fated, from its origins in a way, for example, that curiously echos the fate decreed by the God after the Fall of Man in Genesis: “in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return to the ground”.<sup>27</sup> We are living organisms fated to capture and release stored energy in whatever form we encounter it

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22 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

27 Genesis, Chapter 3, verse 19.

until we die.

This view of life as an essentially meaningless quest without any clear purpose but to get up and repeat the same routine of eating (and working, to provide for food) the next day, also brings famous lines from Shakespeare's play "Macbeth" to mind (and Updike used these lines in his story "Tomorrow and tomorrow and so forth" (1955)). And we know that Updike was haunted by existential worries at one point in his youth:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
 To the last syllable of recorded time/  
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
 The way to dusty death.  
 Out, out, brief candle!  
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
 And then is heard no more.  
 It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury  
 Signifying nothing".<sup>28</sup>

These lines give a tragic cast to all lived experience as "a petty pace", our lives merely a wearisome routine: "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow". Both this phrase and the expression "The last syllable of recorded time" also brings up the idea of human life as but one brief interlude in a long progression of geological time.

A scientist such as David Price, does not, of course, assert that life is meaningless (or meaningful, either, for that matter). In the context of his work, there are no existentially troubling or tragic-comic overtones to the conclusions of his research on the human role in energy expenditure and entropy. So it is left to an artist to point these out and to use them as conundrums central to his work, "problems that have no solutions"<sup>29</sup>. In the context of Updike's life, on the East Coast of America, first in Pennsylvania, then at Harvard, then New York City, then Massachusetts, between the years of 1930 up until 1975, energy release (or entropy) was proceeding, as I have noted already, at a rapid, even (within recorded human history) unprecedented rate. The energy being put to use was petroleum. The extrasomatic means favored for the entropy-seeking release was the internal combustion engine used to power cars and trucks.

Cars and trucks are important, of course, because Price makes one crucial distinction between our modern methods of harnessing the energy of fossil fuels and the harnessing of wood/solar/hydro-power energy which our ancestors employed for eons. The use of fossil fuels which contain so much

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28 William Shakespeare, "Macbeth" Act V, scene 5, lines 19-28.

29 Updike said this in an interview.

available stored energy, yet which humans did not use during the thousands of years over which we evolved, effectively, Price asserts, makes us an introduced species on our own planet.<sup>30</sup> Price says that it is this point which spells disaster for us in the near future, as fossil fuels are used up. Native species can develop a state of equilibrium where their numbers are balanced by the limits of their environment. But introduced species, which is what we became when we started to use fossil fuels, according to Price, go through a rapid proliferation and then a rapid die-off when the energy source is consumed. Like lightening, fossil fuel energy streaked across the sky of human culture and produced a complex effect (as Tainter writes, “fossil fuels made industrialism, and all that flowed from it (such as science, transportation, medicine, employment, consumerism, high-technology war, and contemporary politics) a system of problem solving that was sustainable for several generations”<sup>31</sup>). And let us not forget that magazine publishing, which is where most of Updike’s short story output was first directed, fit into this problem-solving system too. The culture demanded it.

### Hidden Warnings in Updike’s Stories

It is Updike’s artistic genius to capture and convey some of the mystery of this problem-solving (that is, culture-making) process. His work is both responding to the existential problem-solving demands of readers and created out of the problems which arose from the human response to its situation in the universe in this particular time and place. As Updike says, “I wish to describe merely the Novel as a product of private enterprise, for which a market is created when the state, the tribe, or church, withdraws itself from the emotional sector of an individual’s life.”<sup>32</sup> Updike says “the Novel”, but he could as easily have said “the short story”. Many critics have noted the conditions (the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution) when the novel reached the summit of its form. But it is my intention to examine some of Updike’s short stories as a product of his time, a time when fossil fuels were being used at an unprecedented rate.

#### 2-1. “The Orphaned Swimming Pool” (1962): Apocalyptic Warning

Updike’s story “The Orphaned Swimming Pool” (1969) (written two years prior to the U.S. peak of oil production, and at a time when the rate of oil production was already noticeably slowing down) is, I think, his single best treatment of the “proliferation and die-off” pattern that Price describes as occurring when a species is suddenly able to tap a new and significant, but ultimately limited, source of energy. A married couple, Linda and Brad Turner, build a swimming pool in their backyard. For a couple of years they are happy, swimming in their pool and having pool parties together, but then Brad has an affair and destroys his marriage. Linda and the children flee to her parents in Ohio and Brad moves in with his mistress in New York City. After their departure, the pool rapidly becomes a popular spot for all citizens of the town to swim in. Updike provides details which recall fervid

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30 Price, p. 7.

31 Tainter, op.cit., “Complexity, Problem Solving and Sustainable Societies”, p. 10.

32 Hunt, *The Three Secret Things*, p. 210.

growth and proliferation: "That July was the hottest in twenty-seven years.....People brought their own lawn furniture in station wagons and set it up. Teen-age offspring and Swiss au-pair girls were established as lifeguards. A nylon rope with flotation corks, meant to divide the wading end from the diving end of the pool, was found coiled in the garage and reinstalled.....When people, that July, said, "Meet you at the pool," they did not mean the public pool past the shopping center, or the country club pool near the first tee. They meant the Turner's."<sup>33</sup>

More and more people use the pool. "Restrictions on admission were difficult to enforce tactfully"<sup>34</sup>, is a marvelously dry and understated restatement of the dilemma facing population and immigration-control advocates. The list of people using the pool has a certain "global" quality to it, mirroring the spread and intermingling of peoples since fossil fuels were employed to power jet travel: "A visiting Methodist bishop, two Taiwanese economists, an entire girls' softball team from Darien, an eminent Canadian poet, the archery champion of Hartford, the six members of a black rock group called The Good Intentions, an ex-mistress of Aly Khan, the lavender-haired mother-in-law of a Nixon adviser not quite of Cabinet rank, an infant of six weeks, a man who was killed the next day on the Merritt Parkway, a Filipino who could stay on the pool bottom for eighty seconds, two Texans who kept cigars in their mouths and hats on their heads, three telephone linemen, four expatriate Czechs, a student Maoist from Wesleyan, and the postman all swam, as guests, in the Turners' pool, though not all at once."<sup>35</sup> The proliferative phase also encompasses reproduction: "After the daytime crowd ebbed.....there was a tide of evening activity, trysts (Mrs. Kleefield and the Nicholson boy, most notoriously) and what some called, overdramatically, orgies."<sup>36</sup> After the proliferative phase, the die-off happens rapidly: "August drew in, with cloudy days. Children grew bored with swimming. Roscoe Chace went on vacation to Italy; the pump broke down, and no one repaired it. Dead dragonflies accumulated on the surface of the pool. Small deluded toads hopped in and swam around and around hopelessly."<sup>37</sup>

Then Updike gives us a vision of the aftermath of the apocalypse, the result of the die-off, in the sentences that follow. Linda, at last returned from Minneapolis with the children to the deserted house and pool, surveys the damage from a window overlooking the pool. "The grass around (the pool) was green from splashing, save where a long-lying towel has smothered a rectangle and left it brown. Aluminum furniture she didn't recognize lay strewn and broken. She counted a dozen bottles beneath the glass-topped table. The nylon divider had parted, and its two halves floated independently. The blue plastic beneath the colorless water tried to make a cheerful, otherworldly statement, but Linda saw that the pool in truth had no bottom, it held bottomless loss, it was one huge blue tear. Thank God no one had drowned in it. Except her."<sup>38</sup> In this scene, Linda surveys the

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33 Updike, *The Early Stories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003) p. 444.

34 Ibid..

35 Ibid..

36 Ibid..

37 Ibid., p. 445.

38 Ibid..

wreckage of the pool area as a God, from a distance and in the future, might survey blue planet Earth strewn with the wreckage of a petroleum-dependent culture that simply collapsed when the energy ran out: empty and ruined convenience stores, falling-down skyscrapers, cracked, deserted superhighways, nuclear-bombed-out cities. "One huge blue tear", indeed.

The story links this proliferation and die-off event with petroleum energy. The first sentence of the story even alludes to the concepts of energy and entropy (which happens when energy is released): "Marriages, like chemical unions, release upon dissolution packets of the energy locked up in their bonding."<sup>39</sup> Cars and trucks, the heroic liberators of the entropy of oil, also figure strongly in this story: "One Saturday early in August, the morning found an unknown car with New York plates parked in the driveway. But cars of all sorts were so common-the parking tangle frequently extended into the road-that nothing much was thought of it..."<sup>40</sup>

The Turners' marriage provides the narrative thread which parallels the rise and fall of the pool, and in each crucial development in the story of the marital breakup, cars or trucks appear, linking petroleum energy to the whole catastrophe. Besides the "unknown car with New York plates" of Brad's lover, the bulldozers which build the pool appear: "one bulldozer sank into the mud and had to be pulled free by another"<sup>41</sup>, and the cars of the proliferating guests appear: "people brought their own lawn furniture in station wagons"; "the parking tangle extended into the road". Note, too, that vaguely annoying or unpleasant things are linked to these cars and trucks: one bulldozer was stuck, a parking tangle extended into the road; Updike uses these unpleasant associations to undercut the accepted American belief that cars are good. But cars are not simply unpleasant here. Reliance on them is downright dangerous: Brad and his mistress drive to Brad's house one evening and are trapped in the house all the following day. Because Brad is in the middle of getting a divorce, he must not be seen with another woman. The pool visitors see the car and wonder whose it could be. Brad and his mistress thus must hide inside the house.

Updike's description of Brad and his mistress hiding in their house all day "like fugitives in a cave, feeding on love and ice water, tiptoeing barefoot to the depleted cupboards, which they, arriving late last night, had hoped to stock in the morning, not foreseeing the onslaught of interlopers that would pin them in"<sup>42</sup>, provides some details about how Updike views the precarious and undesirable situation of modern man. First, Updike implies that there is a certain lack of foresight in our rush to use all available petroleum energy, basing our economy and material necessities on something transient and finite. When petroleum energy is gone, what kind of predicament might we find ourselves in? Like Brad, modern man will be trapped in a place (a modern city, a suburb, a town), "pinned" in by cement and with no trucks to stock the depleted shelves of the grocery stores. Updike's vision here is along similar lines to Tainter's warning that "collapse can be devastating where much of the population does not have the opportunity or the ability to produce primary foodstuffs."<sup>43</sup>

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39 Ibid., p. 442.

40 Ibid., p. 444.

41 Ibid., p. 442.

42 bid., p. 445.

But, transcending simple allegory, Updike also reaches back in time to present Brad and his mistress, cloaked in their shame, as Adam and Eve, another pair of lovers who acted without foresight and then tried to hide, naked, from view. Many allusions in this story are biblical and, especially, refer to the Fall of Man, reinforcing Brad and his mistress as Adam and Eve figures. Thus “the Turners’ side yard looked infernal”<sup>44</sup> during the construction of the pool, but “a heavenly blue”<sup>45</sup> afterwards; in the lull after Linda leaves but before the uninvited guests begin their carousing, the unused pool “looked poisonous and ashamed”<sup>45</sup>, and so “the postman, stuffing overdue notices and unanswered solicitations into the mailbox, averted his eyes”<sup>46</sup>. The biblical references put the situation into moral-historical perspective. Thus Updike doesn’t believe that the blame is all ours; acting without too much foresight is something born to us, a part of our nature. In this sense, Updike also shares something of David Price’s more evolutionary view, which sees us as “caught up” and “not in control”. The name “Turner” represents Updike’s effort to allude to evolutionary “turns” or changes and therefore partially excuse us from blame for our predicament. Or, to put it another way, had not Adam and Eve eaten the apple, their children or someone else would have, and then the resulting culture would have belonged to them instead. Once created, the apple was fated to be eaten. (More scientifically speaking, it was fated to have its energy released by another living organism if necessary) The Second Law of Thermodynamics demanded it.

The fact that human and environmental tragedy -seen respectively as the dissolution of the Turners’ marriage, and the wreckage of the pool area-- ensues from this situation is besides the point. We are very tiny, very minor actors in a huge material drama, an exchange of energy, being played out in geological time among huge entities: the solar system, the sun, the universe. Linda’s sense of being erased and “drowned” (“Thank God no one had drowned in it. Except her”) is Updike’s way of articulating our puny -and even fatal-unimportance in the vast cosmos. Updike feels the human situation to be so unbearable that he must allude, in his description of Linda’s appearance (“a fine-boned blond with dry blue eyes and lips usually held parted and crinkled as if about to ask a worrisome, or whimsical, question”<sup>47</sup>) to the question of why we are here, if it is only to satisfy the requirements of physical laws over which we have no control. Yet, he has no answers, as when Linda returns from Minneapolis, “her lips looked drier and more quizzical than ever, still trying to frame that troubling question.”<sup>48</sup>

That other species might evolve after us is also a point not neglected by Updike: in the last sentence, “...the (Turner’s house) was sold, to a family with toddling infants, who for safety’s sake have not only drained the pool but sealed it over with iron pipes and a heavy mesh, and put warning signs around, as around a chained dog”<sup>49</sup> His word “warning” and the bleak image of iron pipes and

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43 Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, p. 209.

44 *Ibid.*, *The Early Stories*, p. 442.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 445.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 443.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 443.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 442.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 445.

a chained dog finally completes his message: he has warned us of the logical outcome of our petroleum-based industrial society in this story, but he knows that he cannot change our fate. “Warning signs” are meaningless to “toddling infants” who can’t read, and who naively believe that the “Good Intentions” (the name of the black rock group who uses the Turner’s pool) of their society will mean good results for everyone, for all time.

### “The Indian” (1962): Unsettling Vision

“The Indian” (1962), presents a different, but related vision of the end of modern Western industrial society. While “The Orphaned Swimming Pool” is about energy, entropy, earth and sun and man caught up in these, an unknowing victim of the universe’s desire to redress energy imbalances, “The Indian”, written seven years earlier, has a more historically centered locus. Physics and astronomy are nowhere to be seen; this story is based more on history, economics and anthropology. The culture of modern America (as manifested in a New England town) is seen in perspective to be ephemeral, clueless, and above all (to use Joseph Tainter’s phrase) not “aware of where we are in history”.

“The Indian” can be termed a “prose poem” more than a traditional short story with a plot. The story first provides a brief (and fictional, although devastatingly realistic) sketch of the history of Tarbox, Updike’s fictional village in Massachusetts. From the first sentence on, the focus is on economic upheaval and change: “The town, in New England, of Tarbox, restrained from embracing the sea by a margin of tawny salt marshes, locates its downtown four miles inland up the Musquenomee River, which ceases to be tidal at the waterfall of the old hosiery mill, now given over to the manufacture of plastic toys.”<sup>50</sup> The loss of natural resources and changes in occupations and ways of life are the main focus. The “economy”: is all “(Early settlers in 1634) furling their sails and slowly rowed, each boat equipped with four oarlocks, in search of firm land, through marshes that must appear, now that their grass is no longer harvested by men driving horses shod in great wooden discs, much the same today as they did then-though undoubtedly the natural abundance of ducks, cranes, otter, and deer has been somewhat diminished.”<sup>51</sup> There was the “handmaid-lace industry”, “which reached its peak just before the American Revolution”, only to be “destroyed by the Industrial Revolution”;<sup>52</sup> “the textile mills, never numerous, were finally emptied by the industrialization of the South.”<sup>53</sup> Now, “small enterprises”, “electronic in the main” are staving off “decisive depression.”<sup>54</sup> Details concern economic changes; jobs, resources used, businesses and industries which have come and gone.

Almost every sentence is constructed (in some cases contorted) so that the information

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49 Ibid..

50 Ibid., p. 573.

51 Ibid..

52 Ibid., p. 574.

53 Ibid..

54 Ibid..

imparted ends up by referring to changes brought by man in pursuit of a earning a living: the clammers who “exploit the sole vein of profit left in the name of old Musquenomee”, a “shadowy chief” whose body is rumored to be buried “supposedly upright, somewhere in the woods on the side of Far Hill where even now no houses have intruded, though the tract is rumored to have been sold to a developer”.<sup>55</sup> The church is mentioned once, as a subject whose photograph is now “postcards purchasable at all four local drugstores”.<sup>56</sup> Updike’s message must be that the white settlers, by focusing relentlessly on accruing economic advantage, have distorted or contorted their relationship with the land.

After relating the economic history of Tarbox, Updike describes the downtown in its current form. Here also, the changes brought by man’s economic activities are noted: “a new Woolworth’s with a noble facade of corrugated laminated Fiberglas has been erected on the site of a burned-out tenement”<sup>57</sup>; Tarbox does not have “that staring stretch of blank shop windows which desolates the larger mill towns to the north and west”<sup>58</sup>; The narrator notes that “the explosive thrust of superhighways through the land has sprinkled on the town a cosmopolitan garnish”.<sup>59</sup> In the last section describing Tarbox, Updike relates the story of “a foolish young matron, nostalgic for Vassar” who “opened a combination paperback bookstore and art gallery”.<sup>60</sup>

Updike nestles a truly shocking observation in relation to the above bookstore in the sentence which follows it: “Indeed, the whole street is laid open to an accusatory chorus of brightly packaged titles by Freud, Camus, and those others through whose masterworks our civilization moves toward its doom.”<sup>61</sup> It is surprising that no critics I have read seem to have investigated this melancholy sentence as a thread running through Updike’s oeuvre, nor has this sentence seem to have been taken seriously at all even in its context in this story. However, Updike means what he says here. And what he is saying here is the same message that is captured more specifically and pointedly in “The Orphaned Swimming Pool”: our “Western” lifestyle is not sustainable because it relies on using natural resources faster than they can be replenished.

“The Indian”, written eight years prior to “The Orphaned Swimming Pool”, shows Updike’s intense awareness of the transience of the strategies which Western culture has adopted to support itself economically. Thus, the second half of the story sets Western economic culture in opposition to the hunter-gatherer economic culture practiced by people in more ancient times. This opposition is captured by the mysterious presence, in Tarbox’s downtown, of an “Indian”, a man whose “cheekbones, his never-faded skin, the delicate little jut of his scowl, the way his vertically lined face takes the light, the lusterless black of his hair are all so profoundly Indian that the imagination, surprised by his silhouette as he sits on the hydrant gazing across at the changing face of the liquor

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55 Ibid.,

56 Ibid.,

57 Ibid., p. 575.

58 Ibid.,

59 Ibid.,

60 Ibid.,

61 Ibid.,

store, effortlessly plants a feather at the back of his head".<sup>62</sup> White residents of the town feel uncomfortable around this mysterious person, characterized indirectly with the term "savage"<sup>62</sup>: his economic means of sustenance is not clear; his name is not entirely reliably known, yet he knows everyone by name; he always sits in the window of the news store or against the telephone pole outside the drugstore and watches the world go by yet doesn't seem to participate in it himself. Even his age is not reliably known ("he is surely older than forty and younger than sixty"<sup>63</sup>), and the story ends mysteriously as an elderly female resident of Tarbox asserts that the Indian "had been loitering in the center of the town when she was a tiny girl in gingham. And he is no older now than he was then."<sup>64</sup>

The story's middle section echoes a technique used in the first chapter of Melville's *Moby Dick*, as the reader, addressed as "you", is brought into the fray: "Even though you are a young mutual fund analyst newly bought into a neo-saltbox on the beach road and downtown on a Saturday morning to rent a wallpaper steamer, he (i.e: the Indian) smiles if he catches your eye, lifts his hand lightly, and says, "Good morning, Mr.--, "supplying your name."<sup>65</sup> *Moby Dick*, also about Western culture's disastrous pattern of consuming all natural resources which sustain it, ends with the utter destruction of everyone save one ("then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago"<sup>66</sup>), and this apocalyptic notion is, I believe, embedded within "The Indian" in its oblique narrational reference to *Moby Dick*, as well as openly stated.

This message is also encoded in the opposition between the mysterious presence of the Indian and the ordinary citizens of Tarbox. The Indian serves to undercut the cheerful optimism of the white citizens of Tarbox; he makes them uncomfortable with his knowingness and his lack of interest in sharing their way of life. The character of the Indian therefore both reinforces and underlines the temporal, transient nature of the White Man's economy. His presence is the longer, more enduring, more inscrutable. Implicit is Updike's message that our modern Western economy must be a transient phase in the world's history, that hunter-gatherer ways will prevail again of necessity one day.

Petroleum is also implicated since the narrator is seen in a car ("You find that you must drive down to the beach once a week or it is like a week without love"<sup>67</sup>; "An appalling snicker materializes in the darkness on the front seat beside you as you drive your babysitter, dear Mrs. Knowlton, home to her shuttered house on a back road."<sup>68</sup>) Updike clearly assumes his readers belong to the technologically petroleum-dependent Western economic system; they have cars, babysitters, and such. By using the pronoun "you" here, he implicates us as the ones with the most to lose in the decline he presents here, and therefore implicitly warns us, trying to shake our

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62 Ibid., p. 576.

63 Ibid., p. 577.

64 Ibid., p. 578.

65 Ibid., p. 576.

66 Herman Melville *Moby Dick*, p. 822.

67 Updike, op. cit., p. 577.

68 Ibid., p. 577.

complacency as the Indian shakes the complacency of the Tarbox citizens. Yet, the second-person singular narrator also functions to define, in a basic way, the narrator doing the speaking, who seems to be a resident of Tarbox who has a car and children and loves natural beauty (at least this much is known about him). He is clearly not an Indian; his circle of acquaintances is made up of people like the “chunky Irish dictator of the School Building Needs Committee”. In short, the author must be a part of the system he is calling into question. Therefore we could say this story is subversive, indeed radical.<sup>69</sup>

### “Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, a Dying Cat, a Traded Car” (1961): Troubling Intimations

Finally, I would like to consider an even earlier story, in which we can see Updike setting the foundations for his later radical and subversive environmental vision. In 1961, at the age of 29, John Updike wrote the important story “Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, a Dying Cat, a Traded Car”. The story is divided into four sections. The first one tells of a corner near the narrator’s house which was “recently widened so that cars going back and forth to the summer colony on the point would not be troubled to slow down.... The bulldozers, huge and yellow and loud, appeared on the street and began to gnaw, it seemed, at the corner of our house. My third child, a boy not yet two, came running from the window in tearful panic. After I tried to soothe him with an explanation, he followed me through the house sobbing and wailing “‘Sheen!, ’Sheen!”<sup>70</sup>

The narrator, a writer named David Kern, takes steps to recognize his own implicit role in this environmental destruction: he uses the pronoun “we” to include himself therein: “We in America have from the beginning been cleaving and baring the earth, attacking, reforming the immensity of nature we were given. We have explored, on behalf of all mankind, this paradox: the more matter is outwardly mastered, the more it overwhelms us in our hearts.”<sup>71</sup> The narrator is then glad to notice that people are walking and wearing paths away on the cliffs created by the bulldozers. He goes on to write, “Evidence-gaping right-of ways, acres mercilessly scraped, bleeding mountains full of muddy fill-surrounds us of a war that is incapable of ceasing, and it is good to know that there are now enough of us to exert a counterforce. If craters were to appear in our landscape tomorrow, the next day there would be usable paths threading down the blasted sides.”<sup>72</sup> The narrator is comforted to see that the foot-high cliff produced by the bulldozers had been worn away by children’s feet (“children’s feet, mostly, for mostly children walk in our town—had worn the sharpness away and molded a little ramp by which ascent was easier<sup>73</sup>). Humans—the “counterforce” against the

69 (“In a special edition of *The Blue Cloud Quarterly* (Vol. 17, no. 1), Updike published both “The Indian” and a commentary in which he says that Tarbox is ‘the arena of the Decline of the West’. Among other things, the Indian suggests America’s original man waiting in the shabby downtown areas for the current world to collapse and thereby ‘restore to him—primitive man—his primal inheritance.’) from *The Other John Updike*, (Athens, Ohio: U. of South Carolina Press) by Donald Greiner, p. 138.

70 Updike, op. cit., p. 102.

71 Ibid., p. 103.

72 Ibid..

73 Ibid.

“sheens”, are in a strange position: we can regret and dislike the “sheens”, yet we drive them and use them. Are we in control or are they?

The answer is, of course, neither and Updike recognizes this, although David Kern, the narrator, may not. We truly are, again in the words of David Price writing 37 years later “organic beings caught up in the processes in which the earth accepts energy from the sun.” In 1961, Updike’s words (“a war that is incapable of ceasing”) convey the same idea of that there is something not of our choosing in the process of liberating the energy from fossil fuels. Yet, in “Packed Dirt....” Updike may be bemoaning the fact that one of the most important resources available during his lifetime happens to be petroleum: an energy source that is finite, that has a short history relative to man’s tenancy on the earth, that has a high thermodynamic efficiency, and that demands harnessing through extrasomatic means (i.e. we can’t eat it directly but must employ frightening and unpleasant machines). By mentioning “those feet of statues of saints which have lost their toes to centuries of kisses” (p. 103) he invokes the long eons when humans used only lower efficiency biomass energy (agriculture and wood) and reminds us that for a long time in human history, people could not rely on technology to solve their problems, but turned to “statues of saints”, (i.e. religion) with more humane if perhaps less utilitarian results: hand-carved statues and footpaths.

### **Conclusion: synthesis**

In “The Orphaned Swimming Pool”, Updike was to develop this thesis of mild regret into a real warning: petroleum dependency will be dangerous because it will trap us in a mode of life and economic system which we will not be able to maintain when the petroleum energy is gone. “The Orphaned Swimming Pool” also differs from the earlier two stories in that the main character is not David Kern, the first-person singular narrator of “Packed Dirt” or “you” (the unnamed white citizen of Tarbox who has children and a car and loves nature), but instead, Updike uses characters who reside in the more alien third-person singular form: Brad and Linda Turner. There is therefore more distance between him and the characters. By this, Updike is most probably expressing his alienation from American energy policy. The results and the ramifications of this policy, he seems to be saying, are no longer excusable as mere by-products of our unthinking human nature. Any rational person (i.e. not the “toddling infants” he sees as comprising the vast majority of people) must feel alienated from the short-sighted political decisions made to increase dependence on petroleum energy when the outcome, only two years before Hubbert’s peak in America and thirty some years before its predicted peak worldwide (in 2005 or 2006), must have been abundantly clear to policy makers. Yet, Updike hardly wishes to hammer his point home again and again. These stories number only three; so many of his other stories touch on other topics. It is strange to say that the environmental apocalypse so many environmentalists have predicted may be only rather a minor thematic point with Updike, yet it seems so. Yet he did not completely neglect it either.