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Seven Stanzas at Easter

Abstract

"Updike's task in this poem is to convince readers in our scientific age that, unnatural though it be, resurrection has happened."

Posting about the poem *Seven Stanzas at Easter* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/seven-stanzas-at-easter/>

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in things

April 14, 2020

Seven Stanzas at Easter

Dave Schelhaas

During the 1950's, John Updike worshipped at a Lutheran church in Marblehead, MA, a church similar in some respects to the Lutheran church of his youth in Pennsylvania. When the congregation sponsored a Religious Arts Festival and offered a \$100 prize for the best artwork, Updike submitted the poem "Seven Stanzas at Easter." He won and received the \$100 which he promptly gave back to the church and over the years "Seven Stanzas at Easter" has become a much-loved poem.

*Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.*

*It was not as the flowers,
each soft Spring recurrent;
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as His flesh: ours.*

*The same hinged thumbs and toes,
the same valved heart
that—pierced—died, withered, paused, and then
regathered out of enduring Might
new strength to enclose.*

*Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.*

*The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.*

*And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
make it a real angel,
weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom.*

*Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by remonstrance.*

—John Updike

I was drawn as a reader to the short stories of Updike before I encountered his poetry, and it was the richness of his prose along with the frequent religious content that drew me. My favorite Updike piece to this day is the short story "Pigeon Feathers." It ends with a boy (a thinly disguised young Updike) burying some pigeons he had shot. You will

see in this quotation, the character's certainty (and Updike's hope?) that when he dies, God will raise him from the dead:

As he fitted the last two, still pliant, on the top, and stood up, crusty coverings were lifted from him, and with a feminine, slipping sensation along his nerves that seemed to give the air hands, he was robed in this certainty: that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever.

In response to questions about his faith, Updike has said, "I have been a churchgoer in three Protestant denominations—Lutheran, Congregational, Episcopal—and the Christian faith has given me comfort in my life and, I would like to think, courage in my work. For it tells us that truth is holy, and truth-telling a noble and useful profession; that the reality around us is created and worth celebrating; that men and women are radically imperfect and radically valuable" (Yerkes 4). Serious readers will agree, based on his personal statements as well as his fiction and poetry, that Updike was a believer.

The two great theological heroes of his life were Karl Barth and Soren Kierkegaard. In 1959 while he was going through a spiritual crisis, "he got through it by clinging to the stern neo-orthodoxy of Swiss theologian Karl Barth." In his autobiographical poem *Midpoint*, Updike quotes Karl Barth's assertion that "a drowning man cannot pull himself out by his own hair." In an interview about the poem he said that he believed this meant "[t]here is no help from within—without the supernatural, the natural is a pit of horror. I believe that all problems are basically insoluble and faith is a leap out of despair" (Hunt 17).

Updike writes that he fell in love with Kierkegaard, the Danish Christian existentialist, in his early twenties. He read the naturalistic existentialists at that time also, but they "didn't seem to solve any problems the way Kierkegaard's approach did" (Hunt 12).

Now, understanding more about Updike, what do we need to unpack in this poem? Let's start with the title. Why *seven* stanzas? Perhaps it's simply how many stanzas it took to say what he wanted to say, but it's more likely that knowing *seven* represents completeness, he uses that number in his title to suggest the completion of Christ's work in his resurrection.

And why that irksome *if* in line one? Is Updike revealing his doubt that the resurrection occurred? I don't think so. More likely he recognizes he is writing in a secular age where many clerics and church members are explaining away the supernatural elements of their Christianity and therefore also the very possibility of resurrection. All of stanza four

is devoted to chastising the liberal church for its attempt to reduce the resurrection to something explainable, something natural.

Updike's task in this poem is to convince readers in our scientific age that, unnatural though it be, resurrection has happened. A dominant feature of the poem is its use of scientific language as a way of establishing what happened when Christ arose and what will happen when we are resurrected: "molecules will reknit," "amino acids rekindle." Just as he had before he died, the resurrected Christ will have a "hinged thumb," "valved heart," and so forth. If this is not the case, the "church will fall."

I have always been puzzled by that angel in stanza six "weighty with Max Planck quanta." What in the world does this mean? My friend, physicist John Zwart, says, "the idea of light quanta (or photons as they came to be called) fundamentally changed our understanding of the creation . . . Planck's ad hoc assumption that the energy of light was not a continuously variable quantity, but instead came in integer multiples of hf. . . became one of the fundamentals that physicists and other science folk use to understand the creation."

Zwart concludes, "I expect that Updike is expanding on his 'make it a real angel' by stating that the angelic light is *real* light as we currently understand it." (I thank you, John, for helping me to understand this puzzling line.)

Updike ends stanza four with "Let us walk through the door," thus urging us to enter into the world of faith, the world of those who believe in the resurrection. Stanza five, beginning with "The stone is rolled back. . ." reveals the open door of stanza four.

At the same time, the stone continues the theme of realism. After insisting that it is a real stone, Updike asks that it also be seen as the vast rock of materiality that "will eclipse for each of us/the wide light of day." In other words, all of us are going to die and this death as well as a gravestone or some other material substance is going to eclipse for us "the wide light of day." But, in the day of resurrection we shall walk through the door that Christ opened into eternal life.

In the last stanza we find two words with the same Latin root, *monstrum*: "monstrous" and "remonstrance." Here, it seems to me that Updike, like the metaphysical poets of old is making a complex pun. The first meaning of "monstrous" is "large, huge, enormous." The common meaning of "monstrance" is (from the Roman Catholic Church) "a receptacle in which the consecrated Host [body of Christ] is exposed for adoration." Taking these words as they are used in the last stanza, we might paraphrase them by saying, "Let us not diminish the enormity of the Biblical account of the resurrection, for if we do we might in the day of resurrection be deeply shamed, by the

reappearance of the living host, Jesus Christ. If we have doubted the reality of the resurrection, we might be filled with remonstrance, that is, shame and regret, when we see the little communion wafer next to the life-sized Christ (the monstrance eclipsed by Re-monstrance).

“Seven Stanzas at Easter” is not an especially lyrical poem, though Updike is capable of marvelous lyricism. Rather, it is down-to-earth in its tone and language (except for one marvelous pun). Updike does not intend to charm us with flights of eloquence, great swaths of words that roll over us like ocean waves. Nope. His language here is scientific, prosaic, as down to earth as hinged toes.

Works Cited

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