Chapter 3

ROGER'S VERSION
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Though many readers are aware of how Updike has chronicled America of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and the 1980s in his Rabbit Tetralogy, few have paid close attention to his other multi-volume work concerning America (a canonical American text), namely, The Scarlet Trilogy. In 1975 Updike published A Month of Sundays, a novel in diary-form in which a spiritually tormented and adulterous minister from Massachusetts is ordered to an Arizona motel for ministers-gone-astray; there he is urged to wrestle with his perverse soul and rub out his ‘stain’. Updike later referred to that novel as ‘Dimmesdale’s Version’ of The Scarlet Letter. In 1986 Updike published Roger’s Version, an unreliable first person narrative in which a Harvard professor, a crusty old doctor of divinity named Roger Lambert, manipulates and feeds upon the life of a youthful, pious computer science graduate student named Dale Kohler. In 1988 Updike published the epistolary S.A Novel, in which an angry North Shore housewife, with a strong predilection for vitamin A, rebels against her Puritan heritage and patriarchal society by travelling to a desert ashram in Arizona. In these three novels, each told from the perspective of a contemporary version of one of Hawthorne’s three protagonists in The Scarlet Letter – Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth, and Hester Prynne – Updike has expanded, updated, satirized and rewritten Hawthorne’s text, creating his own Scarlet Letter trilogy. Though these novels with the notable exception of Roger’s Version may appear to be lighter, fairer and less substantial than the best of Updike’s Rabbit novels, The Centaur, or The Coup; initial readings are deceiving, particularly since these novels are trickier and more multi-layered than the more conventionally realistic Rabbit tetralogy. Roger’s Version is one of the most exceptional volumes in Updike’s oeuvre. In fact, all the three novels reveal a more post-modern Updike, one who experiments with alternative
narrative modes, such as the diary and the epistolary novel, in creating texts that are highly reflexive. In addition, they disclose an increasingly erudite Updike who has mastered and integrated into his novels, a wealth of difficult information from such disciplines as computer science, particle physics, evolution theory, cosmology, ecclesiology, early Christian heresy, Hinduism and Buddhism.

The novel opens and continues in first person narrative by an old divinity professor, Roger Lambert, who, from his ideas and principles indicates that he is a follower of Barthian religious codes. He has been happy at the divinity school where he and his colleagues teach the innocent religious fervents who mistake these astray religious scholars as religious fanatics. That may be the reason why he he sometimes remembers his days in active ministry with a sort of bitter nostalgia:

The hours are bearable, the surroundings handsome, my colleagues harmless and witty, habituated as they are to the shadows. To master a few dead languages, to parade sequential moments of the obdurately enigmatic early history of Christianity before classrooms of the hopeful, the deluded, and the docile – there are more fraudulent ways to earn a living. I consider my years spent in the active ministry. . .if not exactly wasted as a kind of pre-existence, the thought of which depresses me. . . I am a depressive. It is very important for my mental well-being that I keep my thoughts directed away from areas of contemplation that might entangle me and pull me down.

(Roger’s Version, 3-4)

It is clear that religious faith requires ‘contemplation’, a quality that Roger avoids, as existence without religious faith makes one as depressive as Roger. God’s grace can do wonders; a divine honour which the professor no longer enjoys.
When the novel opens, Roger Lambert, who is used to smoking pipe, is already sitting in his office, when strides a raw, young evangelical computer programmer from the Mid-West, Dale Kohler, bringing two unwelcome messages – Verna, Roger Lambert’s half-niece has moved into the area with her illegitimate child; and Dale has hit on a scientific proof of the existence of God. It is clear that Roger dismisses his visitor who fervently asserts his own scientifically theological claim. Moreover, Dale wants Roger’s help in obtaining a grant to finance his research. Roger despises these ‘youthful learners’ who keep probing facts as well as philosophies in order to chase the solution. In the meanwhile, the government and private sector grant becomes their nurturing support and reason of their hanging about in the university campus. According to Roger, these no-fledging students spend years and years in the campus:

You may see them in a university town, these people who settle in a casual uniform and cunning ingenuousness of the youthful learner as though it is a permanent, and paying, profession. Some grow grey hair and great bushy tails of ill-fed progeny while still innocently pursuing knowledge.

*(Roger’s Version, 5)*

At another instance he accuses these hermits for ‘using God as a gimmick for a grant. This whole generation has grown up that thinks of nothing but grants. An academic welfare class.’

*(Roger’s Version, 44)*

It may be taken as a feeling of jealousy on the part of the professor who is no longer an innocent or a faithful slave of God. He believes that religious faith can only be supported by true faith whereas modern science which talks about gravity, force, bond, evolution from cells, etc. cannot claim to be capable enough to rise to the level of spirituality. Besides, Roger also suffers from lack of tolerance before the
spontaneity of anxious and pious Christians such as Dale Kohler. Through the presentation of his thoughts it is clear that this intolerance has been troubling him since he lost his faith. His intolerance is one of the outward symptoms of his depression. Even praying for his own self or for any person is beyond his tolerance. To the professor, the present generation Christians have a kind of historical innocence that knocks him out of his mind. It is strange that a youthful computer whiz knew the ultimate details of the universe which led to facts and proofs about the presence of God everywhere around mankind. His depth of knowledge, zeal and willing faith captured Roger’s attention beyond expression. Somewhere deep inside himself, he had to confess that the thrilling spirit of the young project fellow made him jealous as he perceived Dale’s robust religious self among his dislikes.

Besides, Dale had been one of the acquaintances of his step-sister, Edna’s daughter – Verna. After so many years Dale had come just as a spade to dig out Roger’s not very happy and prestigious past – his father’s affair brewing since when he was in his mother’s womb, his father’s divorce, remarriage and nurturing Edna with the new wife, and Roger’s visiting his father only during vacation. It meant a life full of humiliation, lack of a parent and his loss, even when he was present in the world but not for Roger; the first as well as the legitimate child. Instead, he was always there for his mistress turned wife and their daughter, Edna. All this led to a psychological competition for the preference that Edna was given by the father. For Roger, Edna was no more than an animal whose adolescence smell emitted an ‘animal aroma’ and who had trespassed his happy familial life. He always wanted to repay this animal with his own animal instincts and now Dale had come to remind him of his duty as a maternal uncle of Verna, who, after an affair with a black man had his baby and consequently, her parents turned her out. Roger, a faithless Christian, devoid
of patience and generosity could not expect himself to shower fatherly affection upon a girl whose mother was never entrapped by him and her birth was responsible for shattering his childhood.

Dale Kohler attacks Roger’s chilled faith from many angles. Each question, inquiry or information, be it related to Verna or to Dale’s own project was no less than an almost deadly blow on Roger’s Godless microcosm. Moreover his tactical and convincing points justified his deserving of the grant. Achievement of uniformity by the galaxies in terms of radiation, just the right amount of smoothness in the galaxies in spite of inhomogenities in the primal fireball, precise balance of initial time to achieve current expansion rate of the Big Bang, just the favourable amount of strong force which binds the automatic nuclei together and gives the sun its nuclear reaction chain, the apt weak force to bring about the supernova and the resulting heavy elements to constitute earth and creatures. Yellow stars like the sun which are balanced on knife edge between the inward pull of gravity and outward push of thermonuclear reaction – all these are terrifically finely adjusted constants that have to be just what they are. When a person, after knowing all this accuracy but not finding the concrete power regulating it all time round, becomes horrifically bewildered and he has to say what Dale said:

The sun. Yellow stars like the sun, to give off so much steady heat for ten billion years or so, are balanced like on a knife edge between the inward pull of gravity and the outward push of thermonuclear reaction. If the gravitational coupling constant were any bigger, they’d balloon and all be blue giant; any smaller, they’d shrivel and be red dwarves. . .these terrifically finely adjusted constants that have to be just what they are. . .and there’s no intrinsic reason
for those constants to be what they are except to say God made them that way.

(Roger’s Version, 14)

According to Dale, when the adjustment of constants went beyond the understanding of modern science, the scientists, to keep their old atheist materialism, try to get around assuming that such circumstances may be more of chance, probability or improbability. Instead of surrendering and accepting that God is the Creator, they propose many crazy theories and blame religious people for stretching the facts and making excuses which refute the factors of scientific findings.

As Roger sticks to his spiritual concept of faith, he can’t accept that exploration of any kind could lead to exploration of God. According to him, God is no such thing to be found or an image behind frosted glass that is cleared through aptness of constants. At times, when Roger Lambert saw the religious fervour of Dale Kohler, he hated him for it. Provoked, he also finds himself talking about the ever-existing ‘God who reveals himself to human heart and laughs at its pride’. He could not help dredging beliefs he had once arrived at long, before he lost his faith.

Besides religious debates, the novel also provides knowledge about regretful issues like racialism and gives us glimpses of contempt towards Blacks when Roger mentions that the university area is ‘safe from racism’ and, that he was ‘surprised’ that Verna went ahead and got involved with a black man and had his baby’.

(Roger’s Version, 5)

Americans’ restriction for interracial relation is no less than a taboo. Discrimination is followed at multiple societal levels. Such a racist society where black children are denied useful and vocational education, or else the schools have made the education so expensive that blacks sometimes cannot afford it. Moreover, if black teachers look for a job they are offered low wages which they have to accept due to the denial of
white children for black teachers and the unavailability of schools for black children, being the main discouraging factor. In this way it becomes for the Black, a question of one choice or no choice. We also smell the sense of insecurity on the part of Americans from British and Europeans. Dale points out that best brains working on real implications are over in England, which means that Americans, apart from internal conflicts over trivial matters like racialism, are doubtful that they have the second grade brains that are incapable of protecting the nation financially, morally, spiritually as well as physically.

Initially, Updike is quite confident of his zealous student, Dale and equips him with rich theological artillery that hits Roger like thunderbolts. Over and again Roger experiences a depressing effect which is projected in a sort of anger and rudeness due to the relations, sexual and intellectual, among himself, his second wife, Esther, his niece Verna and Dale and Updike takes up his chance to make up the novel’s plot. Roger’s cold and godless soul not only astonishes Dale but it has also been a pinching pain for his second and younger wife, Esther who met him 14 years ago when he was in active ministry. After all, Roger had followed the steps of his father in abandoning his first wife, the generous but biologically inactive Lillian for Esther, though the new couple has been leading a seemingly aloof life, as disgrace-turned-remorse never stops chasing them. Esther’s commenting on him and making it sure that ‘at least he used to’ believe in God sometime, taking pleasure in arguing with him while favouring young zealous souls for whom God is more than just an idea, seeking amusement in seeing how Roger defends his style of nonsense against somebody else’s style. Her ‘snake-like-glide’ interest in Dale’s project as well as his physique and a desire to see him visit her house, rouses our curiosity. There is a lot of fun to be had with this situation because right here starts the loosely paralleling of The Scarlet
Letter – an ardent young preacher (Dale/Dimmesdale) commits adultery with the sensuous wife (Esther/Hester) of a sour, cynical older man (Roger Lambert/Roger Chillingworth), who gradually undermines the younger man’s spirits. Roger believes that his wife, Esther now, ‘never fails to let him feel her disgust’. She says:

You know what I think. . . I think it’s nonsense. But I’m amused to see you so vigorously defending your own style of nonsense against somebody else’s style. All these emperors without clothes, you all have turfs to defend. This boy comes in and offers to prove God’s existence and you. . . obviously wish him dead, gone, out of the church. To you he’s a heretic.

(Roger’s Version, 44)

Then Roger also accepts that she should not be blamed because ‘emotions change and the chemistry of impulses with them’. Esther is undoubtedly longing for a partner of her age group. Her saying that she ‘hasn’t been around a brainstorm for years’ clearly translates her physical thirst and the subsequent storm she is undergoing. The joke is that we are getting ‘Roger’s version’ of the entire events. We see how grating naive piety can be, especially on someone who has made his peace with the world and the flesh, who knows that virtue is a straw to the sexual-fire in the blood.

But there are also arguments in Roger’s Version, and earnest ones. Dale is convinced that a number of physical coincidences and improbabilities, individually striking and collectively mind-boggling, rule out randomness as a cosmological principle. But despite his breathlessness and occasional lapses into crude numerology, he does manage to suggest plausibly that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in Roger’s modern, secularised Protestantism.

An important thing that Dr. Lambert points out for himself is his habit of ‘spying’. This very word is the backbone of the novel, as everything is, as seen by
silent Roger from behind curtains. As he confesses that ‘secret glimpses of life proceeding unaware of his watching have always excited him’. It is one of his most innate and oldest habits which are attributed to almost all stages of his life. He used to stealthily approach his parishioners’ place, he used to glimpse his wife inside the house when he returned home after work and he spied on the neighbours and their evening routine through the window. Updike’s Roger is compared to America which likes to spy on its neighbouring as well as distant nations to whom afterwards it approaches as a so-called well-wisher; America regards it her right to send spies and detectives to other countries and possess herself with the secrets of each political body.

Also, a quick glance on the changing American culture, the shift in perception of life by Roger as he passes through the streets and avenues, makes it clear that there is still air of distastefulness for the once immigrants on the part of the Americans or the new England settlers. Chinese, Indians, Vietnamese or Japanese if not given brilliant opportunity in job sectors, they do not hesitate in spicing up Americans’ appetite with spicy, insinuating cuisine. They open restaurants and make it their staple business for which they become known. Still, Americans alienate these people saying that Americans, who had once sailed across the seas eastward or westward to suck-in the world’s wealth, also brought such impurities (immigrants) along with the pure inflow. These are for them remnants of an old adventure, yet Americans praise them for their global mixingness, for their partaking of and amplifying the energy of American shop-fronts.

Domestically, we find the same harping tune of adultery, remarriage and betrayal, not only on the part of the husband but sometimes it is also the wife who
brings upon the doom in the relations. Roger’s neighbour, Mrs. Ellicott gets such a description of her life:

In her prime she had had a peculiar knack of driving her husbands to suicide; at least two had done away with themselves, leaving her their real estate and furniture, so that her present holdings were like layers of sedimentary rock compacted by the pressure of the years, the shifts of the economy over the last decades all traceable in the composition of her portfolio.

*(Roger’s Version, 32)*

Moreover, the same problem of frequently changing sexual partners, longingness for trust, love and satisfaction overwhelms this American literary piece also. Updike is always in an attempt to write about the adversity so that the otherwise happiness could be valued and that’s why, he wants to ‘describe American life, as it’s seen by its losers, in the American style’. Children craving for fatherly love and sketching their father’s image in other men who casually visit their mothers just as Verna’s illegitimate child, Paula calls every adult male as ‘Da’ assuming him her own ‘Dad’. It may be taken as an accusing signal for men who don’t care about their responsibilities after making their partners pregnant and abandoning them. ‘Ba’ ‘Da’ is a symbol which Paula uses for pronouncing ‘Bad’.

We also come across some of the discursive strands interwoven in the novel. Roger Lambert is a professor of divinity and is a somewhat dilettantish disciple of Karl Barth who insisted on the utter separateness of the Divine and the human, and the dependence of the latter on the former. Updike is well able to evoke the ethos of an academic theology department, and to have sly fun with its professional rivalries, pretentions and jargon.
Then there is the discourse of domesticity, the faithful rendering of small quotidian activities such as cooking meal, fixing a drink, changing a baby, driving a car, the social dynamics of the nuclear family. Roger’s son, Richie, sitting where his mother was arranging for supper and T.V. was placed in the same room. There is lot of physical description – of trees, houses, furniture, clouds and the whole mesh of culture and nature that makes a suburb or a city. There are also extended topographical passages in the novel that trace Roger’s movement from the relatively affluent and commodious residential streets around the university to a run-down housing project where Verna lives, thus negotiating the project’s decaying environment which reflects his uneasy consciousness of social and economic divisions in American society.

David Lodge, in his review, expresses the concern that the most unusual discourse in this novel is opened right in the beginning. It is a discourse of science – mathematics, physics, biology and computing. Dale Kohler, a fundamentalist Christian, is convinced that the more science discovers about the mathematical equations underlying the Universe, the more unavoidable becomes the conclusion that they are not the result of chance. The pair debates the issue in a series of set pieces that cover cosmology, evolution and the relation of body to mind. There are fascinating and important issues – a rising tide of Christian fundamentalism in America today – and it is heartening to see a literary novelist taking them on board. Updike is not content to give us a more impressionistic whiff of physics, maths and biology. He makes Dale speak with the passion and particularity of the true enthusiast.

(David Lodge, 1986)

Dale has a detailed discussion about cosmic and physical phenomena and Prof. Lambert comments on ‘biological’ elements. We view a heated discussion
where Dale gets a chance to present the certainty of God’s role in the evolution of life as against the assertion of Darwin. To avoid confusion, Dale, very clearly starts with the very beginning of the thread of ‘the primodial soup’ where flashes of lightening once brew up into amino acids then proteins and finally strings of DNA inside a cell or a creature. By giving the example of this chain containing life sustaining biological elements in sequential progression, Dale wants to bring home some other point. For this he begins with a number of examples such as theory of primitive earth’s atmosphere being a reducing one (based on nitrogen and hydrogen and devoid of free Oxygen), whereas the primitive rusty rocks prove the presence of Oxygen. Secondly, the amount of information needed to make even the simplest virus-like piece come to life, was so great that the fact of it being assembled by chance, is out of question. These examples support Dale as evidence whenever he raises the topic of ‘primodial soup’ and some additional problems that the young scientists ignore such as the ‘energy factor’ which is needed to keep the system going. Then, there are enzymes which are base products for making proteins and the resultant DNA. If the blind passive nature is capable of generating energy, then how come the laboratories since 1954 have been mixing up these electrified soups but coming up with no results at all. The only result is that the unshaken faith on scientific power shakes out, human pride shatters when a mess of unrelated polymers comes out of complex reactions. In spite of all these points, Roger did not fail to relate the universal process as very natural and not under supervision of a super natural power. Dale refutes his ideas by blaming him for sounding like neo-Darwinists who talk grandly like trends and tendencies and the imperfections of the fossil records. Such scientists tend to ignore the fact that these records of dead creatures appear and disappear. Their ignorance is clear from
the point that these gaps are not just gaps; they are humongous huge holes which cannot be filled with limited human knowledge.

Dale boldly questioned the mystery of development from the unicellular organisms to the multi-cellular ones asserting his surety about some anonymous power directing their growth, form and shape. The argument did nothing much except add a little confusion to Roger and his decision that the project to prove God’s existence could take them nowhere except several centuries back to the age of ignorance and the bewildered primitive man who kept making stories about the tricks that gods were playing in the heaven. He also mocks Dale at trying to befool the age of modern science to cave-man’s cosmology and of tying God to human ignorance. He just wants this idea to be jerked off; he wanted the mission of curiosity for the whereabouts of God to be turned down, God to be freed from being studied about and contemplated for. Roger tries his best to avoid God into oblivion. This was Roger’s virtual blow which contained its passion in it. He cared about freeing God from cavity of human reason, feelings, emotions as well as thinking, even if this freedom would lead to the death of Almighty’s existence. Dale’s counter attack is again a significant one as he explains it wisely:

. . .modern man. . .surrounded by an airtight atheist explanation of natural reality. . .astronomers. . .biologists are staring something in the face they’re not letting you in on, because they don’t want to believe it themselves. . .you can take or leave it, because that’s the freedom God gave us, but intellectually don’t be intimidated. Intellectually you don’t owe the Devil a thing. . .the Devil is doubt. . .makes us reject the gifts God gives us, suicide is the second cause of death among teenagers, secondly only to automobile accidents. . .

*(Roger’s Version, 80)*
Surprisingly, Roger gives an astonishing interpretation of the word ‘doubt’ as deduced by him and as the word been taken up by religious scholars all over the world, who define ‘devil as the absence of doubt’. (Roger Version, 81) Excessive faith is leading people into suicide bombing and setting up extermination camps. ‘Faith’ as a weapon in the hands of religious leaders who use it to push the fervent followers ‘go out and kill’. Updike has tried to give a clear explanation for blameless souls who are modified to become terrorists when they themselves don’t know what they are groomed for. It must have been in Updike’s mind how innocent children like Ahmad Ashmaway in Terrorist are taken advantage of, snapped away from familial and social ties and chiselled into destructors by their so-called role models – their preachers.

For Dale, evolution does not mean knowing everything about life and its elements. It is about knowing more about it so that its miracles may be unravelled and God’s marvels may be appreciated, just as the human eye or the trilobite eye, which had been so sophistically created in accordance with the laws of refraction that were not known until the seventeenth century. Several other examples such as jawbones of reptiles evolving into mammalian ear, difference in the qualities and uses of the same organ in aquatic and land animals and the birds in flight – all could not have come about by accident or through a set of random errors piled one on the top of the other. Roger declines the crippled faith which stands on facts and proofs. He believes that spiritual faith helps in the acknowledgement of God as different religions in his name were spread like fire in the forest. Moreover, wonders of nature have always roused the curiosity of man. So, if God is so purposive, then what about the deformity, disease, pain and suffering that engulf the Mankind. That’s why people turn to Him only when they are hopeless. Here, Roger is reluctantly revealing the fact that the
students come to the divinity school, eager to get fused with spirituality and God’s grace but their innocent will and hope is turned into hopelessness due to a guidance which is devoid of faith. Another point driven home is the selfish nature of Mankind which approaches God only when it is grief-stricken and hopeless. Roger strongly supports the notion that God is all about faith and faith is abstract belief and not a handful of evidences.

At the point of sparing any money to Verna for her self-maintenance, Roger is reminded of Buddha’s non-attachment according to which ‘Desire is the origin of every problem.’ Verna’s non-attachment with the embarrassing elements of her life could have saved her from falling into the pit of shame. He also remembers Jesus’ Doctrine ‘Do unto Others’ to spend the money for the welfare of the needy. Calvinism marked out material property as an outward sign of human prosperity which means that art of giving away is an inner richness of the soul. But Roger sees the American public of 1980s has turned to rust due to the false guidance of communication and technology. Scholarships and grants by the educational system never give them chance to strive and struggle for food in their lives. They remain as dependent as infants even in their fourth decade. As far as Jesus’ Doctrine is concerned, Updike gives a wonderful example of Roger’s first wife Lillian who is an embodiment of generosity in herself. Updike masters the art of bringing two opposite poles together so as to give them time and a kind of self-experience and a chance to realise that they are a mismatch. Though, one of them still has the capacity and desire to continue with the relation, yet the other partner has a tendency to hurt the former. Roger, like Owen in Villages, abandons his first wife for another woman, though not after a sexual sojourn as Owen. Phyllis was gifted with an inhibition whereas Lillian is unable to reproduce children. So, she extended her love to the wandering students, bereft
parishes, relatives, etc. Her lamb-like innocence gave Lambert ample opportunity to carry out his affair with Esther. But the morality was still struggling with the shamelessness that they both exhibited before the parish and scandalized it. That is the reason why the couple had been living a Bohemian life.

Roger heartlessly thinks of making fun of Dale's efforts for proving God's existence, so, he talks to one of the authorities from grants commission and thereby makes an amusing publicity of the matter. Lambert knew that the committee was less than convinced for sanctioning the grant for computer theology. At the same time, he felt jealous of Dale who could reach heights of acclaim with his project or at least attract comments and criticism which could bring him a considerable profile in the world of theology. On his side, Dale is also equipped with religious knowledge and comments sharply at Roger's glamorous attitude. In his opinion real prayer and kindness is accepted by God only when done quietly without making fuss about it.

Verna represents that part of civilization which is blamed for propagating the human race in its every form, gender and colour. In such an extremely racist American world, where blacks are accused for everything, even a white is not spared if she has a black man's progeny. Here the concept of blaming a female also arises as nobody takes pain to talk about a father's responsibility. The mother is simply accused of being immoral first, then illogical for trying to raise a 'brown' race. Even Verna, after showing such courage 'to have produced a biracial baby', submits as naturally as possible to accept that she is 'not normal'. 'Updike sounds to be suggesting that the saintly Hester (The Scarlet Letter) operates as a mythical predecessor for contemporary females (Verna) who turn to volunteer for work or work for little pay?' Or more precisely for little 'reverence', here. (Searles, 1994)
But as far as Roger is concerned, neither the fact of Verna being a disgraceful girl, devirginated by a black man, nor the taboos could restrain him from finding Edna’s image in Verna. Somewhere, the instinct to avenge for his pitiable mother and for himself is functioning, as ravishing the fruit of his disloyal father’s granddaughter, could satisfy his wild emotions, to some extent. On her side, Verna has the measure of Roger and his darksome longings, slyly suggesting, to his own surprise and retrospective fascination, that his interest in her mother was more than half-brotherly when he and Edna were children, long years back in the splendidly named mid-Western town of Chagrin Falls. Verna feels that her uncle Roger would sound sweeter and more sympathetic when he talks about God. It makes a person feels softer towards other people and an angelic character adds upon them. Verna longs for a supportive soul who could treat her better than ‘let me do something nice for somebody’ purpose. But to her disappointment, her raunchy, erotic presence acts upon Roger as a memento mori, and in one of his more cheerfully chilling insights he assured her that ‘its helped him get ready for death’. Roger’s conscience rests easy in the matter of his fascination with Verna, since his wife Esther, as assumed by him, has been conducting a ravenously carnal affair with none other than Dale Kohler. In the moments of their great fall, Verna resembled a spirit entangled in this demanding world and submits to them compromisingly and Roger himself symbolised the great fallen, valueless slaveaway from God’s grace and had ‘no further depth to fall’:

Lying there with Verna, gazing upward, I saw how much majesty resides in our continuing to love and honour God even as He inflicts blows upon us – as much as resides in the silence He maintains so that we may enjoy and explore our human freedom. This was my proof of His existence, I saw – the distance
to the impalpable ceiling, the immense distance measuring our abasement. So
great a fall proves great heights. Sweet certainty invaded me.

(Roger’s Version, 281)

In this way, for Roger, God’s majesty lies in the stirring up of thoughts, turning on of
the body and the revival of body juices beyond time and relation. For him, God is
sublime but his love is an attempt to reach mankind, translate and transform itself into
its baser form and whenever God wants to love his creature; his love dawns upon the
creature as sex, satisfaction and science.

All outdoor trips by Updike’s protagonist serve as sources for surveying
America of the 80s. All the buildings show signs of care and maintenance that was
once given to them generously but later left unattended to. Railroads, clusters of
millsand rusted sheds are some of the remnants of growing capitalism. America, with
the passage of time, never lagged behind in recognising the need of the hour; cheap
labour, forgetting one business and switching on to the other and thus leaving the
previous place and sources to decay. Updike has dealt with this topic quite
comprehensively in his *In the Beauty of the Lilies* where he sketches the same pathetic
view of rusted machinery, abandoned chemical factories and greenery free river banks
where some time ago, mineral extraction refineries had been set up. There he also
talks about how the white residential areas are gradually being overtaken by the
Blacks and the power which seems to be slipping into the latter’s hands.

Tertullian argued in *De resurrection carneae* that soul is at par with the flesh in
extracting and enjoying the nature, world and its pleasures to the full extent. He wrote
it when he left orthodoxy. Therefore, according to him, flesh should be equally
punished as it plays an important role in committing sins. Though Roger thinks that
‘resurrection of faith is the most emphatic doctrine’ yet, Tertullian says that ‘flesh
cannot be dispensed-with by the soul’. By its means, all the sense organs, as psychoanalytic theory puts it, link the effects to the faculty of speech, which depends on a physical organ, tongue. God has knitted the soul with the flesh so tightly that their separation can be done with death. It is a contract that human beings have never signed and if it has been done, then it happened without consultation. Wavering faith has made America step into the twilight of their religious belief. Roger Lambert is quite confused with the fact that the soul is body’s master. He feels sick to think that someday souls and bodies will have to restrain from worldly pleasure but still the idea of eternal survival lifts up the heart. Even the idea of everlastingness sounded ridiculous to Lambert. In this case, he preferred to refer to this doctrine as believed by the heathens. According to them, the flesh is accused of being unclean, guilty and troublesome. Here Tertullian and Barth seem to agree that man is flesh and by nature ought to perish.

Sexual meetings of Dale and Esther appear in the novel at places where Roger is scanning through pages where Tertullian makes his sensible questions about the possibility of continuing worldly pleasures in afterlife. Moreover, disease, decay, pain and suffering go hand-in-hand with the worldly life. Tertullian felt that heart-breaking force which was required to wish for the untimely death, thereby, a permanent break from base desires and yearning for fulfilment, but at such a time the pagan desire to live forever, overcomes all the religions and faith.

In the present time, faith is the only material which is lacking in the technologically advanced countries as science has replaced this faith with material. Even if this materialism is taken seriously and used up for good purpose it can work wonders just as theism adds marvellous beauty to human nature. A godly person believes that faith does not offer him any chance to raise questions but science is a
base power so it just has the capability to ask a lot in the way of facts and proofs. Current materialism wants confidence of human beings, their emotions and moral sensations.

Any sign of weariness or hopelessness on Dale’s side revived Roger’s courage and he managed to see the image of fervent students of theology losing their faith quite soon. Deterioration and confusion at any step in the course of the study, signals Dale’s stability turn into wavering faith, lowers the jealousy for Dale’s zeal, in Roger’s heart.

Moreover, Dale’s hands tracing circuits and connection in air is an indication of growing hollowness in his faith and vagueness of his aim. His thread which tied him to his belief is losing its grip and the falcon is moving away from its falconer. (W.B. Yeats, The Second Coming) We smell the upcoming failure and pitiable inability of Dale Kohler to prove God’s existence through a computer programme. He tries to organise his points and taking help of psychopharmacology, brain anatomisation, synapses, and study of brain with the help of computer, he concluded that brain is a material and mind is something which can be applied on any brain, provided the brain is to be modified with habit making. In this way, brain is the hardware and mind is the function of brain, i.e. software. But the point is, even a latest computer technology, no matter how advanced it is, or how many computers are linked to together to make the software as self-conscious or self-generated as ‘life’ itself, but still one can’t get the sensation, emotion, will or self-reference. Life and God’s marvels can never be proved on trivial things such as computer’s screen. They just have to be accepted as God’s gifts to nature and willing surrender by mankind is a signal of acceptance of his sublimity. Dale says that even if anyone dares to achieve some similarity between the so-called computer programme which can be applied to
so many hardware and the enzymes, proteins and acids getting assembled in the primordial soup to generate life all by itself, then one has to build a computer which can re-programme itself or has the ability to commit suicide if it gets bored with itself and depressed. Here also the material and key to success is faith and this faith when takes the right path, becomes theism.

Desires and thoughts are such abstract generations which rise in neurons that stimulate the muscles of a body and make them move. Desires are the essence of our life and the most obvious fact of our existence. But here we find Dale fighting against materialism which asks us to ignore our desires and it also defines human consciousness as an illusion. It is all the matter of arbitrariness of certainty or uncertainty, possibility or impossibility and belief or disbelief. Existence of abstractions in religious matters and incidents makes it difficult for science to believe in them. Whatever seems impossible and absurd to the material world, is sometimes very close to God. For science, reality is always uncertain and is dependent upon observation, so that, facts may generate belief.

Furthermore, the arguments of professor Lambert that the material world does not care for ideas, values, morals, thoughts and desires, not even for prayers and wishes. But Dale’s constant struggle to defend the question of faith takes him to present an example of Christ where Christ gives the manifestation of the power of faith that it could move mountains; determination and resolution can change the material world.

After a thrilling discussion, Roger manages to convince Dale about the sublimity of God that is not so simple as ‘to be tucked into odd bits of astronomy and nuclear physics.’ A convinced Dale confesses the existence of a sort of anger which indicates break-up of some Divine connection within himself. He came to a
conclusion that even natural calamities are indignant messages of God to his people and that’s why sometimes atheists turn so religious and self-righteous. A person has to put above him an apostle of righteousness to whom he could turn to in adverse times. God is too generous to humiliate His creatures by making them bend before Him if they do not want to. Instead, He presides in every human heart, so that people could be loyal to themselves without being aware of His presence. He makes His proud slaves accept His benevolence through themselves.

A meeting with Grants Committee reveals the weak stand which religion suffers in technologically advanced America. Dale partly loses his enthusiasm when the first member asks him about whether reliability on cosmic constants will prove worthy as these numbers and tables keep changing every few hundred years due to new discoveries in the universe. Dale asserted about the remarkable, delicate balance of fundamental forces in the Big Bang and the forces which produced a perpetual chain of sustained and stable reactions to evolve life; questions are raised as to how could such a study be carried out only with the help of cosmic constants without spiritual elements like subjectivity, moral law within heart and abstract elements like God’s blessings. Another member was also full of doubts about the ability of God to mould and pat the clay to make creatures. Verses related to creationist doctrine don’t explain how matter took form. In the first chapter of Genesis, verse 20 subjunctives are found which indicate God’s permission or blessing for life but nowhere his powerful hand has been mentioned to control it. An objection was placed at his trying to carry out his research with the aid of creationist doctrine as it was quite worn out area and the situation of other researchers who have already taken up this field, is equally pitiable. Dale’s reconfirmation that he is all for science and has not much to do with creationist doctrine, pacified some of the members with
the novelty of this sort of project. An enthusiastic discussion revolving around digits, constants, multiples, numerical coincidences, equations of temperature and radiation landed on some sort of satisfaction on the part of the committee. In addition to that, Rebecca Abram, a member of Grants committee, marked his research as ‘charming’ in an age when everybody is crazy about ‘Black’ or ‘Women’ studies – the area, Americans are mostly obsessed with. She also sensitized the scope of studies about genders saying that women are tired of being studied. She also argued that the world should move on to study something else except patriarchy. Through this discourse it is implied that everywhere in America ‘racism’ and ‘gender’ are areas of interest and research whereas faith and religion hardly find any place.

After seeking the Grant and advancing in his work, Dale comes to know from a blonde graduate student that plants and animals have special visual, olfactory and courtship abilities which signify an entirely angelic conversation that is invisible to human beings. This revelation disturbs Dale as his conscience throbs him with the standard item of Christian faith that there are realms of knowledge beyond us; God’s ways that are not ours. These extra ordinary abilities of animals and plants seem to insult him inspite of being the most rational part of God’s creation. Then he is reminded of the human’s restricted ability ‘that the eye is the soul’s window’ and one has to ‘trust its information to be complete.’ According to this standardization, human beings have the right just to praise God for his marvellous creation and no right to explore His identity. With this feeling developing gradually within him, Dale, along with the pressure of his work as well as the inabilityof his computer to withstand the gigantic numbers, dreadfulness and fear touch him and his hands hesitate as he realizes that he is really trying to unfold the identity of the unidentifiable –The Almighty – The All Maker – The All Creator. It is the human being and other
creatures that survive and ask for identity and the most blessed identity of creatures is – ‘The Believers’. In this way it is not God who needs to be identified. Each step of Dale’s research leads him towards nothingness as the data of his computer is ‘a paltry of number of objects that exist on the Earth or in the Universe’. He divides the Bohr atomic radius by the Hubble cosmological radius and is thunderstruck at the result – 666, the number of the Beast in the Book of Apocalypse. All these results were indicating the divine rejection for his studies. Since receiving the grant, his moral consciousness has been nipping him more. The probable futility and the feeling of guilt at tres-passing into others vicinity such as Roger’s house, his wife (as imagined by Roger) and at some other times daring to attempt what God does not permit – identifying him as a character controlling the world – eventually collapse him.

Even during the climax of his studies he has that dreadful feeling as he hopes to view a face on the screen as an evidence for God’s presence. But at the same time Dale feels its hatred for himself and a fear overcomes him as he anticipates a revenge on its part. In the end he observes a hand on the screen which looks faded when produced as a hard copy.

Lately we see how history repeats itself and Esther this time becomes the passive part of it. Her charming ability of performing sexual stunts and being younger than Lillian were some of the reasons which attracted Roger towards her. Moreover, giving Roger a child to run the family name after her illicit affair cost her the wrath of the Church and society and now she finds herself at such a turn of life where Verna, younger than Esther herself, was ready to become the second Esther. However, in Roger’s mind, Esther’s affair with Dale seemed easy going and enjoyable to her as it never marked her insecurity but now she smelled another competitor ready to pull out Roger from her life and her fury and doubt over the matter confirmed the hollowness
of Roger’s imaginations. These nibbling assumptions were the guilt-turned-haunts that Roger was paying for the wrong he did to Lillian. Unlike Owen, Roger did not have to live with a third self in his house as Lillian seemed to be less spiteful and more compromising than Phyllis but the sense of distrust, insecurity and humiliation of being husband of other man’s mistress was not less than God’s wrath.

Here conclusion of Tillich for human beings making up the loss of one person with another is that ‘creatures are not only religious but also social’ which indicates that in American society replacement of relations and partners is taken as a sign of socialism. In the end Tillich places the salvation of Westerners from Barbarism in the hands of socialism.

Some passages are just a cold rebuke that technologically advanced Americans want to gratify desires but are unable to shoulder the responsibility of consequences. These passages also clarify that deadly measures are taken to avoid the unwelcome guests to this world.

Gradually Dale comes to realise the fatality of proving God’s existence through computer stuff. The fatal blow and the true realisation of his hollow and faithless theory dawned upon him when Roger threw him into an alleged talk with Mr. Myron in a thanks giving party given by Lambert in May as the academic session is on the verge of completion. Actually science and religion are lines moving in opposite directions and Roger failed to clarify this logic before Dale. He thought that Mr. Myron would be a good spokesperson for him and would be able to disprove Dale’s theory in language appropriate for him to understand. This was exactly what happened when Myron says:

nobody denies the Big Bang has a few wrinkles we don’t comprehend yet, we may never comprehend for that matter. . . even the oldest star clusters show
traces of the heavy elements. . .strange because there’s no older generation of stars to have cooked them up and . . .the particle mechanics of the Big Bang could only have supplied Helium and Hydrogen. . .the three dimensions of space. . .can’t be pried apart either. . why don’t we live in two, four or twenty-four. . .you need three dimensions to make a knot. . .in space-time. . .without time you don’t have anything. . .there wouldn’t be any casualty. . .without casualty, no universe. . .

(Roger’s Version, 298 & 302)

It does not mean that the present situation of the universe or the earlier one was or is ever suitable enough to sustain life. Mr. Myron is not in favour of singing praises about the consistency of Big Bang’s resultant elements, forces and reliability of masses. Heavenly power is unlimited and should not be restricted to Big Bang only, but the cosmic history long before Big Bang as well as the microscopic organisms through their adjustments and signals emitted by them, deduce that ‘the Universe existed to produce their little puddle and them!’ But this again confines us to our little world. To achieve the ultimate satisfaction is what human craves for, it depends which level they are able to put themselves at. In a country, whose foremost craze is technology, restless souls wander about, groping blindly, in search of faith and most of the time, deriving satisfaction in peaceful meditation sessions of Buddhism and obsessive remembrance of God in Sufism. In this way, no American follows hard and fast rules or strict paths of his or her forefathers. Everyone tries to seek satisfaction in his own way. But returning again to cosmology, Mr. Myron assures the majesty of God in creating something or everything from nothing.

But returning to what one might think of as Updike’s reality principle: the primacy of libido. As manipulated version of Roger’s imagination suggests to him
that whatever the faith of a person is but it gets contaminated with fallen desires of a God’s disciple and such carnal affair of Dale with someone or Roger’s own wife for instance, could be responsible for the blurred focus of Dale, thus his certainty falters; he de-subsilates. As an arrogant evangelical know-it-all, Dale had certain piquancy, even a perverse charm. But magnificent obsessions do not thrive in the worldly, cosy atmosphere of Updike’s fiction; they are undercut by his ubiquitous mild irony. For all the high-voltage philosophizing in Roger’s version, it is this irony — ostensibly Roger’s, since he is the narrator, but recognizably Updike’s that poses the book’s most intriguing problem. It lends to Updike’s most intellectual novel, an anti-intellectual flavour. He is clearly fascinated by the questions they suggest. But within the novel, those questions never come to seem urgent or threatening; his tone defuses them.

It is true that neither God himself nor faith for him should ever be underestimated. That’s why, even when everything comes to an end, faith never dies and as Updike has manifested in his novel ‘In the Beauty of the Lilies’, their particles continue to exist in any form, though remaining dormant through coming generations. And Roger rightly says that ‘what we think we believe, is a minor part of what we do believe’ – which means that belief in its true sense is always with us, while our conscience picks only whatever it perceives as belief in its seemingly relevant sense.

As discussed earlier, in America, sex is an outlet for fear, a spiritual satisfaction sometimes and escapism; but the more rampant ideology is that sex is itself God in loving stage. Whenever two fleshy bodies are adoringly copulating, it becomes easier for them to countdown the completion of worldly responsibilities and face death more bravely. This becomes clear when Roger is not guilty of having
getting laid down with his niece, Verna; instead he feels he is relieved of the burden of the fear of death.

In the after word by John Banville we deduce the puzzle as ‘America’s twin obsessions’ and, it might be ventured, the main driving forces behind it are technology and religion. The two are not as mutually opposed as might seem the case. American Protestantism – the Republic’s creed-of-choice – is a hard-headed insistence on ecstatic certainties, nothing at all like the quietest and largely jaded version of it that is now-a-days practiced in fewer and fewer and smaller and smaller pockets of rotting old Europe, while American technology has a decidedly evangelical cast to it – think of Space Race of the 1960s, or the messianic ambition of Reagan’s Stat Wars endeavour. The ghost in America’s machine is the Holy Ghost.

The literary figure which epitomises a synthesis of these two national drives is the devout humanist Benjamin Franklin, harnessing God’s thunderbolt to light his country and enlighten his countrymen. Franklin and Updike are both American patriots with a hankering for and knowledge of old Europe, both are fascinated by the worldly yet in dream; and both have more than a passing interest in the third of America’s enthusiastic pursuits, namely sex.

The university in question is one of American institutions, and Roger, being a part of its divinity department and the mere mention of it conjures the spirit of Emerson whose essay *The Divinity School Address* might be considered America’s unofficial Declaration of Religious Independence. But if Emerson abandoned the ministry because, as he airily informed his congregation, it simply did not suit the temper of his thought to continue in it, Roger has forsaken the pulpit for the lecture hall out of a more Manichaean impulse.  

(John Banville, afterword)
Roger is a keen student of early Church Fathers, relishing the cut-and-thrust of their doctrinal squabbles, but his wife, the splendidly mordant Esther, sees through to a bleaker source of his enjoyment:

‘He thinks they’re funny. . . with him all those men arguing and killing each other over these ridiculous distinctions are just a cruel joke. . .

*(Roger’s Version*, 202)

With this observation, as with so much else in the book, it’s significant that we are hearing it at second hand, for this is Roger’s ‘version’ of how his wife thinks and what she says – and more alarmingly, what she does. Roger’s hatred of Dale exists before Dale’s involvement with Esther. Esther and Dale’s adulterous relationship, then, is related only tangentially to Roger’s desire to destroy Dale. In fact, Roger writes the affair between his wife and Dale so that it is but one element in a seduction plot. (John N. Duvall, 1991)

Yet out of his own mouth too he reveals the darkness in his heart. Walking through an unsavoury neighbourhood of autumnal Boston he comes upon a ginkgo tree ‘with its gonglike golden colour’ and muses that ‘there are so few things which, contemplated, do not like flimsy trapdoors open under the weight of our attention into the bottomless pit below’. *(Roger’s Version*, 74)

For Roger, the bottomless pit is not Hell, exactly, but a more refined form of perdition. His is a kind of anti-theology. As a follower of the uncompromising Christian thinker Karl Barth – ‘A Barthian all the way’ – he considers belief in the kind of personal God conceived by latter-day wishy-washy liberal theological to be next to blasphemous: God, he insists, should not be reduced to the petty yearnings and demands of human subjectivity. God by His apparent absence is always with us, and
he quotes with high approval Barth’s scornful challenges: ‘What manner of God is He who has to be proved?’

(Roger’s Version, 219)

The book’s particular blasphemous bent on finding a proof for the existence of the deity is obviously, Dale Kohler, ‘his eyes in their deep bony sockets, an uncanny, sheepish, unutterly cold, pale blue’ working as a research assistant on a ‘special graphics project’ at the Cube, the university’s Computer Research Centre.

Roger’s Version is unusual in the Updike oeuvre for the levels of lubricous disgust, the author allows his narrator to indulge in. Roger Lambert in his own version of himself, is cold, manipulative, predatory and voyeuristic; Verna merrily accuses him of being ‘evil’, the Reverend Thomas Marshfield, the womanising protagonist of Updike’s 1975 novel, A Month of Sundays. Having been caught with, not his hand but a more potent part of his anatomy in the parish honey pot, Marshfield, a frolicsome Paul Tillich to Roger’s forbidding Karl Barth, is banished to the desert for thirty days to meditate on his many sins. Unrepentant and in a prose style, as fancy as Humbert’s, he sets out most clearly and unequivocally Updike’s the novelist’s affirmative attitude to adultery:

Wherein does the modern American man recover his sense of worth, not as dogged bread-winner and economic integer, but as romantic minister and phallic knight, as personage, embodiment and hero? In adultery. And wherein does the American woman, coded into mindlessness by household slavery and the stupefying companionship of greedy infants, recover her powers of decision, of daring, of discrimination—her dignity, in short? In adultery.

(A Month of Sundays, 46)

Roger’s saliva tingly detailed descriptions of Esther and Dale—conscious references here, surely, to Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne, unfaithful wife of the creepily
complaisant Roger Chillingworth, and her lover Arthur Dimmesdale – in the toils of
love, as pictured in his imagination, come as close to plain obscenity as anything in
Updike ever has. The opulent exactness of the writing lifts these passages high above
the fevered scribbling of the pornographer. The pretext for Dale’s repeated presence
in the Lambert home is that he has been hired to coach the couple’s educationally
slow son Richie in mathematics whereas in the mind of Roger it is the lessons of a
wholly other kind that are administered on a stained mattress up in the attic, as Esther,
another of Updike’s marvellous women, with her cigarettes and her sweet vermouth
and her pert and lovingly lingered-over bottom, initiates Dale in the arts of grown-up
passion.

The mystery in the heart of Roger’s Version is whether or not we are to credit
Roger’s ‘version’. Updike does not give his protagonist the gift, if such it would be in
the circumstances, of second sight, and therefore, if Esther and Dale are in reality
having an affair that Roger believes them to be having then, as analyzed earlier, the
descriptions of their love-making must be the product of Roger’s imaginings, and not
a true version of the real thing. But does Roger believe they are having an affair? Is it
not that he is simply diverting himself with what in the old days the priests would
have designated dirty thoughts? Strangely, the ambiguity at the heart of the narrative
is what Roger’s version is all about, and much of its peculiar, unsettling power.
Nowhere else in his work does Updike effect so convincing a chemical wedding
between, on one side, his fascination with the fetid underworld of sexual transgression
and, on the other, his almost boyish enthusiasm for technological know-how as
represented by Dale Kohler in his computational quest for God. Software and
hardware, indeed. Roger’s Version is Updike’s darkest and most disturbing
masterpiece, a meditation on the world, the flesh and the Godhead in which the devil,
too, gets his due. For us, in our slough of past lapsarian despond, Roger’s is the version that gets it just right.

It is often claimed, particularly by those who want to emphasise the positive relations between science and religion, that western science could only have risen in the context of three great monotheisms; Judaism, Christianity and Islam. What was essential to the rise of western science was belief that the world is fundamentally ordered and reliable. It seems clear that, of different kinds of religious beliefs about creation, the conviction found in Hebrew scriptures that the world is ‘good’ in itself – the work of one God, a creation who does not keep changing the rules – is very favourable to a belief in an ordered world.

In an essay on Science and Religion, it was expressed about divine belief that God brought the world out of nothing as an act of free creation, which is a the main line of Christian Doctrine of creation, implies (a) that the world is not itself part of God, and is not therefore itself Holy, and (b) that God could have created a different world. Hence, in order to discover what harmonious, faithful and ordered work did do – a plausible task for natural theology and philosophy – it is both permissible and necessary to ‘put the world to the test’ in Francis Bacon’s memorable phrase-conduct experiments. (www.counterbalance.orgReligion and Science)

In the novel, Roger Lambert thinks through Updike:

Whenever theology touches science, it gets burned. In the 16th Century astronomy, in the 17th microbiology, in the 18th geology and palaeontology, in the 19th Darwin’s biology all grotesquely extended the world-frame and sent churchmen scurrying for cover in even smaller, more shadowy nooks, little gloomy ambiguous caves in the psyche where even now neurology is cruelly
harrying them, gouging them out of from the multi-folded brain like wood lice from under the lumber pile.

(Roger’s Version, 32)

Pope John Paul II wrote in 1988:

By encouraging openness between the Church and the scientific communities, we are not envisioning a disciplinary unity between theology and science like that which exists within a given scientific field or within theology proper. As dialogue and common searching continue, there will be towards mutual understanding and a gradual uncovering of common concerns which will provide the basis for future research and discussion. Exactly what form that will take, must be left to the future. What is important, as we have already stressed, is that the dialogue should continue and grow in depth and scope. In the process, we must overcome every regressive tendency to a unilateral reductionism, to fear and to self-imposed isolation.

(John Paul II, A Message to the Revd. George V. Coyne, Vatican City: Vatican State Observatory, 1988)

Near the end of the novel, Roger is brooding gloomily. He uses a phrase that may go some way towards explaining why Updike wrote Roger’s Version and, at the same time, why it feels a bit bloodless. Roger refers to ‘our Godless freedoms that become, with daily use, so oddly trivial.’ This remark immediately brings to mind, another, a well known adage about the literature of contemporary Europe: ‘In the West, everything goes and nothing matters; in the East, nothing goes and everything matters.’ It is difficult to manage a more civilized, tolerant, humane sensibility than Updike’s, which surely has much to do with his having steeped in an exceptionally rich, free society during its long golden age. But this achievement provokes some
troubling questions. What if the price of Updike’s marvellous, inexhaustible irony is weightlessness? What if the fruit of our indubitably precious breed is a certain moral and aesthetic lightness of being? What if the absence of illusions, religious or political, entails in the long run an absence of intellectual passion? Updike has long been one of America’s foremost fictional wizards. But in Roger's Version, the literary equivalent of the law of gravity catches up with it. (The Boston Phoenix, 40)
Works Cited


