

CHAPTER 3

Barthian Myths in Three Early Novels

BARTHIAN MYTHS? ISN'T THIS an oxymoron? Wasn't the father of neo-orthodoxy the great enemy of myth? To be sure, Karl Barth opposed a mythical interpretation of the gospel in the reductionist sense of the word. But this doesn't mean that he rejected myth in and of itself. And Updike for his part, while clearly loving myth, doesn't play it off against historical reality. Authentic religion connects us with reality, regardless of whether that reality is attested poetically or prosaically. Certainly, it was Barth's grasp of divine reality that Updike found so appealing in the theologian's approach to matters of faith. Asked by an interviewer once what elements of Barth's position attracted him to the theologian, Updike replied:

I think it was the frank supernaturalism and the particularity of his position, so unlike that of Tillich and the entire group of liberal theologians—and you scratch most ministers, at least in the East, and you find a liberal—whose view of these (biblical) events is not too different from that of an agnostic. But Barth was with resounding definiteness and learning saying what I needed to hear, which was that it really was so, that there was something within us that would not die, and that we live by faith alone—more or less; he doesn't just say that, but what he does say joined with my Lutheran heritage and enabled me to go on.¹

It really was so. The fact that Karl Barth understood the biblical witness to God's self-revelation in the history of Israel and Jesus Christ realistically, and not as metaphor, spoke to Updike and enabled him to go on. And there was a time in the writer's life when he wondered if he *could* go on. The threat of death began suffocating Updike's spirits to the point where Barth's

1. Plath, ed., *Conversations*, 102.

theology, and his theology alone, convinced him of the truth of the gospel and allowed him to breathe.²

However, it doesn't follow, as indicated earlier, that Barth's realistic understanding of revelation means that the theologian ignored or denigrated the poetry that is clearly part of the biblical witness to revelation. Karl Barth gladly recognized that the creation stories in Genesis, for example, are poetic in linguistic character, and certainly not empirically factual. Actually, Barth preferred to speak of "saga" rather than myth by way of indicating the kind of language the Bible uses when attesting the miracle of God's creation.³ The important thing is not to conflate the poetry into the prose, or vice versa. We simply need to recognize that "it really *was* so." God truly did draw near in Christ, truly did endure nail prints in torn flesh, and truly did appear alive again. In the words of Updike's famous poem on the resurrection:

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.⁴

It is not a question of either demonizing or idealizing myth but of simply recognizing the role that it plays in the biblical witness to God's self-revealing presence and redeeming action in Jesus Christ. This is what Barth was so helpful in driving home for Updike. But we mustn't suggest that John Updike therefore spent the rest of his life reading Karl Barth! It is just that, as the writer once told Dick Cavett in a television interview,

There was a time in my late twenties, early thirties when I was very frightened. Frightened of being alive, and somehow Barth eased

2. In his foreword to *Assorted Prose*, Updike writes, "The Barth article . . . was written in acknowledgment of a debt, for Barth's theology, at one point in my life, seemed alone to be supporting it [my life]" (ix).

3. In Barth's "Doctrine of Creation" (cf. *Church Dogmatics*, Volume III, part 1), the theologian distinguishes saga from history on the one hand and poetry on the other: "I am using saga in the sense of an intuitive and poetic picture of a pre-historical reality, of history which is enacted once and for all within the confines of time and space" (81). Barth recognized that the Bible "contains little pure 'history' and little pure saga, and little of both that can be unequivocally recognised as the one or the other. The two elements are usually mixed. In the Bible we usually have to reckon with history and saga" (81).

4. Updike, "Seven Stanzas at Easter," in *Collected Poems 1953-1993*, 20-21.

away the fear and enabled me to go on living. It's as simple and as complex as that. . . . the voice of the man aside from what he is saying . . . very comforting, kind of fatherly, gravelly, omniscient. Amused, even? He's a funny, a funny theologian. They're not all funny.⁵

John Updike's love for Karl Barth finds obvious expression in such full-blown Barthian characters as the Reverend Thomas Marshfield, the adulterous minister who serves as the protagonist and epistolarian of *A Month of Sundays*: "I became a Barthian, in reaction against my father's liberalism, a smiling fumbling shadow of German Pietism, of Hegel's and Schleiermacher's, and Ritschl's polywebbed attempt to have it all ways . . ." ⁶ and Professor Lambert, the cuckolded theologian who serves as the protagonist and narrator of *Roger's Version*:

I took down my old copy (of Barth's *The Word of God and the Word of Man*), a paperbound Torchbook read almost to pieces, its binding glue dried out and its margins marked again and again by the pencil of a young man who thought that here, definitively and forever, he had found the path, the voice, the style, and the method to save within himself and to present to others the Christian faith⁷

While Barth's name looms large in such novels, his spirit looms even larger in three earlier novels composed while Updike's religious crisis was at its height. *Rabbit, Run* (1960) and *The Centaur* (1963) both explore Barth's covenant theology of grace in its vertical dimension while *Of the Farm* explores Barth's understanding of the covenant in its horizontal dimension. This chapter will attempt to draw out these Barthian motifs by way of illustrating the interplay between John Updike and Karl Barth.

5. "The Dick Cavett Show: A Conversation with John Updike," December 1978. Updike, incidentally, cites with appreciation Barth's expectation of the novelist: "I expect the contemporary novelist to show me man as he always is in the man of today, my contemporary—and vice versa, to show me my contemporary in man as he always is. . . . The novel should have no plans for educating me, but should leave me to reflect (or not) on the basis of the portrait with which I am presented" (Updike, *More Matter*, 834). Theologians are not all funny and neither are critics, it would seem, especially those who complain that Updike's novels don't sufficiently "educate us."

6. Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 24.

7. Updike, *Roger's Version*, 40.

I

Rabbit, Run

The motions of Grace, the hardness of heart;
external circumstances.

—PASCAL, PENSEE 507

UPDIKE'S EPIGRAPH FROM PASCAL is fleshed out in *Rabbit, Run* in the tale of an ex-high school basketball star whose days of glory have been tarnished by the slow yet relentless grinding of time. Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom is now in his mid-twenties and saddled with an unimaginative job and an even less imaginative wife who, pregnant for the second time, has taken to drink and TV. Feeling trapped by this inglorious net of external circumstances, Rabbit bolts for freedom, displaying at once the rodentine characteristics of his nickname and the Pascalian "hardness of heart" of Updike's epigram. While thoroughly animalistic in his ways, Rabbit is nevertheless pricked by spiritual urgencies. The motions of grace may have a difficult time penetrating his hard heart, but penetrate it they do even as the rays of the sun continue to strike the retina of the blind.

These invisible yet constantly pressing spiritual motions constitute the novel's deepest theme as announced by the epigraph. The theme is verbalized at one point during a spirited exchange between two clergymen: Fritz Kruppenbach, the Lutheran pastor representing Rabbit's side of the family, and the Reverend Jack Eccles, the Episcopal priest representing Rabbit's wife's side.

In both name and outlook, Kruppenbach recalls the early Karl Barth who stormed upon the theological scene in the 1920s with his thundering proclamation of the revelation of God that has broken into the world vertically from above in Jesus Christ. This utterly transcendent message gives rise to the enduring perplexity of the clergy person who is constantly dealing with something ultimately far more overpowering than the potentially solvable problems of daily life:

Obviously the people have no real need of our observations upon morality and culture, or even of our disquisitions upon religion, worship, and the possible existence of other worlds. All these things belong, indeed, to their life and are bound up, whether they

know it or not, with their life's one need. But these things are not that need.⁸

The one great need that people have is God. This, Barth declares, is what, or rather who, we are ever hungering and thirsting for in and through all our material, emotional, and sexual yearnings: "When they come to us for help they do not really want to learn more about living; they want to learn more about what is on the farther edge of living—God."⁹

Yet it is precisely *God* that the clergy have so much trouble speaking about, either on account of embarrassed softness (Eccles) or clumsy hardness (Kruppenbach).¹⁰ The *word* of course can easily be uttered. But the truth or divine reality indicated by this word can only be communicated by God himself in the transcendent act of breaking through to us in God's own self-revealing power.

The novel illustrates Barth's analysis of our situation vis-à-vis God's gracious being and redemptive action by showing a friendly hound of heaven pursuing Rabbit in the person of the Reverend Jack Eccles. The affable clergyman arranges for a game of golf with the mixed-up young Harry

8. Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 188. The address was originally delivered in Germany in 1922.

9. *Ibid.*, 189.

10. Something of the hardness and certainly the singleness of mind of Kruppenbach's own real life Barthian model may be glimpsed in an anecdote that James Luther Adams recounts in his preface to William Kimmel and Geoffrey Clive's *Dimensions of Faith*, 7. In 1936 Adams attended in Switzerland an international conference of students and faculties of Protestant theology, a conference in which Karl Barth was a participant. The first paper, presented by a theologian from the University of Geneva, dealt with the concept of religious experience, and it employed the language of psychology as well as of Christian theology. Before the speaker was well under way, however, Barth suddenly arose in the audience, interrupted the speaker, and addressed the chairman. "I shall not wait any longer. I want to ask the speaker a question now," he said, thereby of course throwing the meeting into an uproar of consent and dissent. The chairman replied that is customary for questions to be withheld until a paper is finished, but with questionable judgment the theologian reading the paper agreed to accept the question immediately. Barth thereby made a frontal attack: "Is the speaker reading to us a paper on Christian theology or on the psychology of religious experience? If the paper is on the psychology of religion, why should we here listen to it? This is a conference of Christian theologians; only the Word of God, not talk about psychology and religious experience, is appropriate here." Needless to say, heated debate followed. But the point is that Karl Barth (one of the few major German theologians of the day, incidentally, who unequivocally opposed the German Christians and their religiously rationalized embrace of fascism) was more of a soulmate for Kruppenbach than might first meet the eye.

Angstrom and, once on the green, tries to understand what makes Rabbit run:

“Harry,” he asks, sweetly, yet boldly, “why have you left her? You’re obviously deeply involved with her.”

“I told ya. There is this thing that wasn’t there.”

“What thing? Have you ever seen it? Are you sure it exists?”

“Well if you’re not sure it exists don’t ask me. It’s right up your alley. If you don’t know nobody does.”¹¹

Eccles, his very name recalling the worldly wisdom of Ecclesiastes, doesn’t know, he can’t know this “thing” that Rabbit is talking about. Such knowledge requires wisdom from on high, and so Eccles seeks out Kruppenbach, who stands there on Mt. Judge armed with Karl Barth’s searing, transcendent gospel (or at least a rough popularization of it). The meeting between the two clergymen begins with Eccles offering Kruppenbach a balanced and insightful but naturally all too this-worldly account of why Rabbit has fled his wife and forsaken adult responsibilities:

“Do you think,” Kruppenbach at last interrupts, “do you think this is your job, to meddle in these people’s lives? I know what they teach you at seminary now: this psychology and that. But I don’t agree with it. You think now your job is to be an unpaid doctor, to run around and plug up holes and make everything smooth. I don’t think that. I don’t think that’s your job.”¹²

Eccles naturally doesn’t want to hear Kruppenbach tell him what his real job consists of any more than the worldly ecclesiastics of the roaring twenties wanted to hear Barth telling them what the real task of the ministry consists of. Nevertheless, Kruppenbach/Karl Barth tells anyway:

“If Gott wants to end misery He’ll declare the Kingdom now. . . . How big do you think your little friends look among the billions that God sees? In Bombay now they die in the streets every minute. You say role. I say you don’t know what your role is or you’d be home locked in prayer. There is your role: to make yourself an exemplar of faith. There is where comfort comes from; faith, not what little finagling a body can do here and there; stirring the bucket. In running back and forth you run from the duty given you by God, to make your faith powerful. . . . When on Sunday

11. Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 133.

12. *Ibid.*, 169.

morning then, when we go before their faces, we must walk up not worn out with misery but full of Christ, hot”—he clenches his hairy fists—“with Christ, on fire: burn them with the force of our belief. This is why they come; why else would they pay us? Anything else we can do and say anyone can do and say. They have doctors and lawyers for that. It’s all in the Book—a thief with faith is worth all the Pharisees. Make no mistake. Now I’m serious. Make no mistake. There is nothing but Christ for us. All the rest, all this decency and busyness, is nothing. It is Devil’s work.”¹³

Kruppenbach’s words would seem to be a risible parody of Barth, and indeed there are parodic elements here, rich with humor. Still, Kruppenbach/Karl Barth is “serious. Make no mistake.” However outrageously insensitive and theologically one-sided Kruppenbach may be, he is pinpointing the secret need underlying all other human needs that makes Rabbit run. Here is Barth himself expressing the matter shorn of the entertaining parody:

The people do not need us to help them with the appurtenances of their daily life. They look after those things without advice from us and with more wisdom than we usually credit them with. But they are aware that their daily life and all the questions which are factors in it are affected by a great What? Why? Whence? Whither? which stands like a minus sign before the whole parenthesis and changes to a new question all the questions inside—even those which may have already been answered. They have no answer for this question of questions, but are naïve enough to assume that others may have. So they thrust us into our anomalous profession and put us into their pulpits and professorial chairs, that we may tell them about God and give them the answer to their ultimate question. . . . It is evident that [the people] do not need us to help them live, but seem to need us to help them die: for their whole life is lived in the shadow of death.¹⁴

Considered thematically as a whole, *Rabbit, Run* seeks to understand what makes Rabbit run from his wife and child, run into the arms of a prostitute, run back and forth between the two women, run until the poor bunny hardly knows where he is running any more, let alone why. What makes Rabbit run? Death, says Updike/Barth. This is the fundamental concern for thinking animals. And God and God alone can satisfy this grave concern. As another unsettled character conceded centuries ago: “Thou hast made

13. *Ibid.*, 170.

14. Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 187–88.

us for thyself, Lord: and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”¹⁵ What both the Eccleses of the church and the worldly wise beyond the church’s walls don’t understand is that, in the end, faced with the end, neither worldly wisdom nor worldly pleasure, nothing worldly at all in fact, can still our restless hearts. Only God’s covenant of grace fulfilled in Christ and made real by the motions of the Spirit can still the storm that rages within. As long as that ultimate storm is not stilled, our hearts will remain restless, and, like Rabbit, we will go on running.

II

The Centaur

Heaven is the creation inconceivable to man, earth the creation conceivable to him. He himself is the creature on the boundary between heaven and earth.

Karl Barth

Barth’s anthropological statement, taken from the theologian’s exposition of the Apostles’ Creed in *Dogmatics in Outline*, serves as the theme-announcing epigraph for *The Centaur*. We are creatures of the earth, dust through and through; and yet by virtue of the miracle of grace we are also citizens of heaven. *The Centaur’s* protagonist, George Caldwell, dramatizes the centaur-like creature whose life straddles the boundary between heaven and earth. A high school science teacher by profession, and no spiritual athlete by temperament, Caldwell’s utterly earthly heart remains open nevertheless to the motions of grace. One night, car trouble having stranded George and his son, Peter, in a flea-bitten, downtown hotel, George gets into bed:

. . . after his body stopped rustling the sheets, there was a pause, and he said, “Don’t worry about your old man, Peter. In God we trust.”¹⁶

Caldwell’s trust in God may not dissolve the problems of earthly existence; indeed, Caldwell remains almost as harried and anxiety-ridden as Rabbit

15. The unsettled character of course was Augustine (354–430), and the words come from his *Confessions*, 21.

16. Updike, *The Centaur*, 168.

ever was. Yet there is this difference: George Caldwell's earthly life is lived in the light of the watchful, caring eye of heaven. Through this vale of unending tears, Caldwell realizes that God is nevertheless his trustworthy partner. Earthly griefs and torments can and do break upon him, but they can't destroy this man who lives in the awareness of God's indestructible covenant of grace.

Throughout the novel George's faith is tested: everything from the threat of cancer to the peril of small-town gossip. The school secretary tries to slander Caldwell's name after he notices her popping out of the office of Olinger High's lecherous principal, the Zeus-like Zimmerman, looking, as Caldwell later described it to his son, "loved up." Responding to the secretary's concern about Caldwell's trustworthiness, Zimmerman attempts to reassure her:

"The matter of trust has never come up between us."

"But now?"

"I trust him."¹⁷

In terms of the natural story line, the secretary is asking the principal of Olinger High to dismiss one of his most popular teachers. At the mythological level she is asking Zeus to kick the wise and gentle centaur off Mount Olympus. Theologically, she is asking the God of Israel and Father of Jesus Christ to tear up the covenant of grace. The request is bound to founder upon the rocks of reality:

"You overestimate my omnipotence. The man has been teaching for fifteen years. He has friends. He has tenure."

"But he really is incompetent, isn't he?"

"Is he? Competence is not so easy to define. He stays in the room with them, which is the most important thing. Furthermore, he's faithful to me. He's faithful."

"Why are you sticking up for him? He could destroy us both now."

"Come, come, my little bird. Human beings are harder to destroy than that."¹⁸

Updike doesn't preach. He tells realistic stories with symbolic overtones that quietly invite us to enter the discussion. Here we are encouraged to consider the goodness of God whose partnership with us in the Christ-shaped

17. *Ibid.*, 216.

18. *Ibid.*

covenant of grace may not solve our earthly problems. Yet within our blood-soaked world, it gives us a place to stand.

“Only goodness lives,” the story concludes. “But it does live.”¹⁹
Toward the end of the novel, Peter Caldwell

remembered walking on some church errand with his father down a dangerous street in Passaic. It was a Saturday and the men from the sulphur works were getting drunk. From within the double doors of a saloon there welled a poisonous laughter that seemed to distill all the cruelty and blasphemy in the world, and he wondered how such a noise could have a place under the sky of his father’s God . . .²⁰

Then Peter recalled

. . . his father turning and listening in his backwards collar to the laughter from the saloon and then smiling down to his son, “All joy belongs to the Lord.”

The boy, we are told, takes the comment to heart, sensing that his father is voicing faith’s deepest conviction concerning the creature’s relationship with his Creator and the Creator’s relationship with the creature:

It was half a joke but the boy took it to heart. All joy belongs to the Lord. Wherever in the faith and confusion and misery, a soul felt joy, there the Lord came and claimed it as his own; into barrooms and brothels and classrooms and alleys slippery with spittle, no matter how dark and scabbed and remote, in China or Africa or Brazil, wherever a moment of joy was felt, there the Lord stole and added to His enduring domain . . .²¹

III

Of the Farm

Consequently, when, in all honesty, I’ve recognized that man is a being in whom existence precedes essence, that he is a free being who, in various circumstances, can want only his freedom, I have at the same time recognized that I can want only the freedom of others.

19. Ibid., 297.

20. Ibid., 296.

21. Ibid.

—SARTRE

The well-known words of the French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre supply the epigraph for *Of the Farm*. Updike thus signals his intention to turn the spotlight from our vertical relationship with God to the horizontal relationship with our neighbor. He develops the theme, however, not along Sartre's philosophical lines but in accord with Karl Barth's christologically grounded understanding of our humanity as created by God.²² "In God we trust," George Caldwell said in *The Centaur*. *Of the Farm* now asks whether God can be trusted to know not only the liberating secret of our relationship with God, but the truth concerning our relationships with one another. Updike had earlier attempted to popularize Barth's theological understanding of the relationship between men and women in an essay only to have the essay rejected by *The New Yorker*. *Of the Farm* was subsequently written, he tells us, as a way of publicizing the essay's contents.²³

Updike's original essay, suitably transmuted and condensed, appears in the novel in the form of a sermon that Joey Robinson hears on the morning of the third day of his weekend visit to the family farm. To this homecoming visit Joey has brought along his newly acquired second wife Peggy, his stepson Richard and, not least, his unresolved guilt and pain from shattered relationships in the past. Returning to his roots, Joey hopes to set these relationships right again.

The core of the problem involves Joey's relationship with his wife. The male-female relationship reaches its crowning intensification, for both Barth and Joey Robinson, in the husband-wife relationship. This is the great opportunity but also the great challenge posed by the horizontal dimension of the covenant. Updike's fictional minister trains his Barthian-inspired sermon on this challenge and opportunity.

The minister takes for his text the classic biblical passage that summons us to live together in community and not in isolation: "And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make an help

22. Cf. Gollwitzer, ed., *Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics*. Updike appears to have had especially in mind the section "Man and Woman" (194–229), which includes selected passages from Barth's discussion of the relationship between Man and Woman under the rubric "Freedom in Fellowship" in his *Church Dogmatics*, Volume III, Part 4, 116–240.

23. Thus claims the Catholic critic George Hunt, whose sleuthing work, reported in his book *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things*, unearthed the origins of the novel (21). In a personal letter to Hunt, Updike is quoted as saying, "I wrote the sermon first as an essay no one would print, and then wrote the novel as a mounting for it" (83).

meet for him.”²⁴ Exalted vision! Yet the moment steps are taken to realize the vision, the sexual challenge rears its awkward head: “And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead; and the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.”²⁵ Displaying his Barthian colors, the minister doesn’t flinch from trying to understand whatever theological light the Bible might be attempting to throw on sexual politics here:

[Eve] was taken out of Adam. She was made after Adam. And she was made while Adam slept. What do these assertions tell us about men and women today? First, is not Woman’s problem that she was taken out of Man, and is therefore a subspecies, less than equal to Man, a part of the whole?

Second, she was made after Adam. Think of God as a workman who learns as he goes. Man is the rougher and more ambitious artifact; Woman the finer and more efficient.²⁶

The minister’s observations trigger polite laughter from the pews—and that was years ago. Today his chauvinistic-sounding remarks would no doubt draw howls of outrage from people who are in no mood to joke about such matters. Indeed, the unguarded exegesis of the text displayed by the minister here is enough to make almost all of us wince (though Updike himself, in responding to my query about this sermon, didn’t think “the minister’s attempt to explicate Genesis had anything in it to apologize for, actually”). But clumsy or not, the sermon catches at something real. An abstract notion of equality today threatens to flatten out the sexual patterns of God’s good creation, leaving us with a bleak and soulless vision of sexual ambiguity. Granted, the sexual differences here have traditionally been, and indeed continue to be, shamelessly exploited. Still, as the Catholics say, *Abusus non tollit usum*. Misuse does not negate right use. The differences between the sexes are intrinsically good and not bad; and the complementary needs and strengths that open up deepen and enrich our life together. Updike’s fictional minister develops these themes, however clumsily, after the fashion of Barth’s discussion in his ethics of creation:

24. Updike, *Of the Farm*, 149.

25. *Ibid.*, 151.

26. *Ibid.*, 151–52.

“Karl Barth, the great theologian of our friendly rivals the Reformed Church, says of Woman: ‘Successfully or otherwise, she is in her whole existence an appeal to the kindness of Man.’ An appeal to the kindness of Man. ‘For kindness,’ he goes on to say, ‘belongs originally to his particular responsibility as a man.’”²⁷

Kindness and appeal to kindness: these ethical concepts naturally need to be distinguished from cultural categories. What is called for here is not a patriarchal culture in which the initiative of kindhearted males becomes confused with culturally conditioned expressions of male dominance while the appeal of women to the kindness of men is confused with unhealthy expressions of female subservience. Granted, it’s hard for most of us to avoid confusing cultural patterns with ethical directives. Nevertheless, ethics and not culture is what the novel—and the Bible—is speaking about here.

Male initiative in kindness! According to Barth, this is man’s special responsibility. When the man rebels against his calling by refusing to show kindness to the woman, he becomes weak, however strong he may pretend to be by way of compensatory psychological tactics:

The tyrant need not be cruel or bad-tempered. There are quiet, gentle, amiable, easy-going tyrants who suit women only too well, and it is an open question in which form the male tyrant is worse and more dangerous. The distinctive characteristic of the tyrannical as opposed to the strong man is that he does not serve the order but makes the order serve himself.²⁸

Female appeal to the kindness of man! This is the woman’s special calling. And when she rebels and refuses to let her whole existence be an appeal to man’s kindness, she becomes immature, however much she may compensate for her immaturity by employing aggressive confrontational tactics. As Barth notes, the woman is quite capable of playing on her side

. . . the counterpart which the tyrant expects to see and which is necessary to the success of her own performance. She discovers in advance what is expected of her and fulfills it to the letter. She finds it convenient to make things as convenient as possible for him. She also finds it attractive—and the clever tyrant will certainly support this view—to be his pliable kitten, his flattering mirror. In pleasing

27. *Ibid.*, 153.

28. Gollwitzer, ed., *Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics*, 224.

him she thus pleases herself. And she, too, will play her part all the more craftily because it is only a part.²⁹

These ethical moves and countermoves, strategies and subterfuges, are dramatized in the encounters and conversations that fuel *Of the Farm*. Joey, to give but one example, recalls an incident with Peggy during an illicit weekend spent together before Joey left his first wife, Joan. He remembers Peggy saying:

“Don’t come again. I’m getting worse at saying goodbye. I’m sorry, I’m no good at this. I wanted to be a nice simple mistress for you but I’m not big enough. I’m too possessive. Go back and be nice to Joan, I’ve messed us all up by falling in love.”³⁰

Peggy here craftily plays up to Joey’s weakness through her compliance. But there is no real appeal to Joey’s kindness if only because there is no kindness to appeal to. Peggy’s moral protestations instead simply give Joey a good conscience and help buck up his resolve to dispatch his wife and children. Joey remembers:

And when I first—prematurely—offered to leave Joan for her, she cried. Oh no! Your children! I could never make it up to you!³¹

How nice, we may think. A mistress with feelings! A home wrecker who actually cares! However, it is all a charade in which Peggy and Joey rationalize their moral failings. Joey is cruel to Joan and his children whom he readily sacrifices for Peggy, while Peggy feigns a guilty, conscience-struck spirit, thereby intensifying Joey’s anguish but also making him proud of a woman who feels so morally anguished. All this in turn merely solidifies Joey’s resolve to sacrifice Joan for Peggy. Joey in truth is a weak man, and Peggy is an immature woman, and all the psychological game-playing cannot alter the fact that the right relationship between men and women has been contradicted in their lives with—literally as well as figuratively—heartbreaking results.³²

29. *Ibid.*, 225.

30. Updike, *Of the Farm*, 87.

31. *Ibid.*, 88.

32. The heart that actually breaks in this story is that of Joey’s mother who suffers a heart attack on their way home from church. Cf. *ibid.*, 157–62.

What remains unbreakable is the partnership between the sexes as willed by God and sealed in Christ's blood. As the minister in *Of the Farm* concludes in good Barthian fashion:

Kindness differs from righteousness as the grasses from the stars. Both are infinite. Without conscious confession of God, there can be no righteousness. But kindness needs no belief. It is implicit in the nature of Creation, in the very curves and amplitude of God's fashioning.³³

SAMPLE

33. Ibid., 154.