# Dentistry and Doubt

# John Updike

BURTON KNEW what the dentist would notice first: the clerical collar. People always did. The dentist was standing not quite facing the door, as if it had just occurred to him to turn away. His eyes, gray in a rosy, faintly mustached face, clung to Burton’s throat a moment too long for complete courtesy before lifting as he said, “Hello!” Shifting his feet, the dentist thrust out an unexpectedly soft hand.

He noticed next that Burton was an American. In Oxford Burton had acquired the habit of speaking softly, but susurration alone could not alter the proportionate emphasis of vowel over consonant, the slight drag at the end of each sentence, or any of the diphthongal peculiarities that betray Americans to the twittering English. As soon as Burton had returned the greeting, with an apology for being late (he did not blame the British buses, though they were at fault), he fancied he could hear the other man’s mind register: “U.S.A.… pioneer piety … RC? Can’t be; no black hat … nervous smile … rather heavy tartar on the incisors.”

He motioned Burton to the chair and turned to a sink, where he washed his hands without looking at them. He talked over his shoulder. “What part are you from?”

“Of the States?” Burton enjoyed saying “the States.” It sounded so aggregate, so ominous.

“Yes. Or are you Canadian?”

“No, I’m from Pennsylvania.” Burton had never had such a good view from a dentist’s chair. A great bay window gave on a small back yard. Black shapes of birds fluttered and jiggled among the twigs of two or three trees—willows, he guessed. Except for the birds, the trees were naked. A wet-wash sky hung, it seemed, a few feet behind the net of limbs. A brick wall looked the shade of rust, and patches of sky hinted at blue, but there was little color in any of it.

“Pennsylvania,” the dentist mused, the latter syllables of the word amplifying as he drew closer. “That’s in the East?”

“It’s a Middle Atlantic state. You know where New York City is?”

“Roughly.”

“It’s a little west of that, more or less. It’s an in-between sort of state.”

“I see.” The dentist leaned over him, and Burton received two wonderful surprises: when he opened his mouth the dentist said “Thank you”; and the dentist had something on his breath that, without being either, smelled sweet as candy and spicy as cloves. Peering in, he bumped a mirror across Burton’s teeth. An electric reflector like an eye doctor’s was strapped to his head. Outside, the big black birds did stunts among the twigs. The dentist’s eyes were not actually gray; screwed up, they seemed more brown, and then, as they flicked toward the tool tray, rather green. The man scraped at an eyetooth, but with such tact that Burton felt nothing. “There’s certainly one,” he said, turning to make a mark on a clean card.

Burton took the opportunity to rid himself of a remark he had been holding in suspension. “More than ninety percent of the world’s anthracite used to come from Pennsylvania.”

“Really?” the dentist said, obviously not believing him. He returned his hands, the tools in them, to in front of Burton’s chin. Burton opened his mouth. “Thank you,” the dentist said.

As he peered and picked and made notations, a measure of serenity returned to Burton. That morning, possibly because of the scheduled visit to a foreign dentist, the Devil had been very active. Skepticism had mingled with the heat and aroma of his bed; it had dripped from the cold ochre walls of his digs; it had been the substance of his dreams. His slippers, his bathrobe, his face in the mirror, his books—black books, brown ones, C. S. Lewis, Karl Barth, The Portable Medieval Reader, Raymond Tully, and Bertrand Russell lying together as nonchalantly as if they had been Belloc and Chesterton—stood witness to a futility that undercut all hope and theory. Even his toothbrush, which on good days presented itself as an acolyte of matinal devotion, today seemed an agent of atheistic hygiene, broadcasting the hideous fact of bacteria. Why had God created them, to breed madly and devour one another and cause trouble in the mouths and intestines of higher animals? The faucet’s merry gurgle had mocked Burton’s sudden prayer that the Devil’s voice be silenced.

The scent of candy and cloves lifted. The dentist, standing erect, was asking, “Do you take Novocain?”

Burton hesitated. He believed that one of the lazier modern assumptions was the identification of pain with evil. Indeed, insofar as pain warned us of corruption, it was necessary and good. On the other hand, relieving the pain of others was an obvious virtue—perhaps the most obvious virtue. And to court pain was as morbid as to chase pleasure. Yet to flee from pain was clearly cowardice.

The dentist, not hinting by his voice whether he had been waiting for an answer several seconds or no time at all, asked, “Does your dentist at home give you Novocain?”

Ever since Burton was a little boy in crusty dungarees, Dr. Gribling had given him Novocain. “Yes.” The answer sounded abrupt, impolite. Burton added, “He says my nerves are exceptionally large.” It was a pompous thing to say.

“We’ll do the eyetooth, straight off,” the dentist said.

Burton’s heart beat like a wasp in a jar as the dentist moved across the room, performed an unseeable rite by the sink, and returned with a full hypodermic. A drop of fluid, by some miracle of adhesion, clung trembling to the needle’s tip. Burton opened his mouth while the dentist’s back was still turned. When at last the man pivoted, his instrument tilting up, a tension beneath his mustache indicated surprise and perhaps amusement at finding things in such readiness. “Open a little wider, please,” he said. “Thank you.” The needle moved closer. It was under Burton’s nose and out of focus. “Now, this might hurt a little.” What a kind thing to say! The sharp prick and the consequent slow, filling ache drove Burton’s eyes up, and he saw the tops of the bare willow trees, the frightened white sky, and the black birds. As he watched, one bird joined another on the topmost twig, and then a third joined these two and the twig became radically cresent, and all three birds flapped off to where his eyes could not follow them.

“There,” the dentist sighed, in a zephyr of candy and cloves.

Waiting for the Novocain to take effect, Burton and the dentist made conversation.

“And what brings you to Oxford?” the dentist began.

“I’m doing graduate work.”

“Oh? What sort?”

“I’m doing a thesis on a man called Richard Hooker.”

“Oh?” The dentist sounded as incredulous as he had about Pennsylvania’s anthracite.

Richard Hooker—“pious, peaceable, primitive,” in Walton’s phrase—loomed so large in Burton’s world that to doubt Hooker’s existence was in effect to doubt the existence of Burton’s world. But he added the explanatory “An English divine” without the least bit of curtness or condescension. The lesson of humility was one that had come rather easily to Burton. He recognized, however, that in his very thinking of his own humility he was guilty of pride, and his immediate recognition of it as pride was foundation for further, subtler egotism.

He would have harried the sin to its source had not the dentist said, “A divine is a church writer?”

“That’s right.”

“Could you quote me something he wrote?”

Burton had expected, and was prepared to answer, several questions (“When did he live?” “From 1554 to 1600.” “What is the man’s claim to fame?” “He attempted to reconcile Christian—that is, Thomist—political theory with the actual state of things under the Tudor monarchy; he didn’t really succeed, but he did anticipate a fair amount of modern political thought.” “What is your thesis?” “Mostly an attempt to get at reasons for Hooker’s failure to come to grips with Renaissance Platonism”), but he was unprepared for this one. Scraps and phrases—“visible Church,” “law eternal,” “very slender ability,” “Popish superstition,” the odd word “scrupulosity”—came to mind, but no rounded utterance formed itself. “I can’t think of anything right now,” he apologized, touching his fingers to his collar and, as still sometimes happened, being taken aback by the hard, unbroken edge they met.

The dentist did not seem disappointed. “Feel numb yet?” he asked.

Burton tested and said, “Yes.”

The dentist swung the drilling apparatus into place and Burton opened his mouth. “Thank you.” The Novocain had taken. The drilling at the tooth seemed vastly distant, and it hurt no more than the explosion of a star, or the death of an elephant in India, or, Burton realized, the whipping of a child right next door. Pain. The problem presented itself. He slipped into the familiar arguments he used with himself. Creation is His seeking to make souls out of matter. Morally, matter, per se, is neutral—with form imposed upon it, good, but in any case its basic nature is competitive. No two things can occupy the same place at the same time. Hence, pain. But we must act with non-material motives. What was His journey on earth but a flouting of competitive values? And then there is the Devil. But with the Devil the whole cosmos became confused, and Burton’s attention, by default, rested on the black birds. They kept falling out of the sky and the treetops, but he noticed few ascending.

The dentist changed his drill. “Thank you.” There were things Burton could comprehend. And then there were things he could not, such as God’s aeons-long wait as life struggled up from the atom and the algae. With what emotion did He watch all those preposterous, earnest beasts labor up out of the swamp and aimlessly perish on the long and crooked road to Man? And the stars, so far off, the comedy of waste spaces—theologians had always said infinite, but could they have meant that infinite? Once, Burton had asked his father if he believed in purgatory. “Of course I do,” he had snapped, jabbing toward the floor with his pipestem. “This is purgatory.” Remembering the incident so depressed Burton that when the drill broke through the shell of anesthetic and bit his nerve, it came in the shape of an answer, and he greeted the pain with something like ecstasy.

“There,” the dentist said. “Would you care to wash out, please?” He swung the drilling apparatus over to one side, so Burton could see it wouldn’t be used any more. He was so kind.

“There seem to be a lot of birds in your back yard,” Burton said to him.

“We have a feeding station,” the dentist said, grinding the silver for the filling in a thick glass cup.

“What are those black birds?”

“Starlings. A greedy bird. They take everything they can away from the wren.”

For the first time, Burton noticed some smaller shapes among the branches, quicker, but less numerous and less purposeful than the black birds. He watched one in particular, swivelling on his perch, now a formless blob, like a big bud, the next moment in vivid profile, like a Picasso ceramic. As he watched the bird, his mind emptied itself, and nothing, not even the squeaking of the silver, disturbed it.

When he again became conscious, it was of the objects on the tray before him as things in which an unlimited excitement inhered; the tweezers, the picks, the drill burrs, the celluloid container of cotton, the tiny cotton balls, the metal cup where a flame could burn, the enamelled bowl beside him with its dribble of water, the tiled walls, the window frame, the shapes beyond the window—all travelled to his senses burdened with delight and power. The sensation was one that Burton had frequently enjoyed in his childhood and more and more rarely as he aged. His urge to laugh, or to do something with the objects, was repressed, and even the smile he gave the dentist was lost, for the man was concerned with keeping a dab of silver on the end of a golf-club-shaped tool.

Burton received the silver. He thought of the world as being, like all music, founded on tension. The tree pushing up, gravity pulling down, the bird desiring to fill the air, the air compelled to crush the bird. His head brimmed with irrelevant recollections: a rubber Donald Duck he had owned, and abused, as an infant; the grape arbor in his parents’ back yard; the touching strange naked look his father wore when he worked in the garden without wearing his clergyman’s collar; Shibe Park in sunlight; Max Beerbohm’s sentence about there always being a slight shock in seeing an envelope of one’s own after it has gone through the post.

The dentist coughed. It was the sound not of a man who has to cough but of one who has done his job, and can cough if he pleases. “Would you like to wash out, please?” He gestured toward a glass filled with pink fluid, which up to this time Burton had ignored. Burton took some of the liquid into his mouth (it was good, but not as good as the dentist’s breath), sloshed it around, and, as silently as possible, spat it into the murmuring basin. “I’m afraid three or four trips are called for,” the dentist said, studying his card.

“Fine.”

The dentist’s mustache stretched fractionally. “Miss Leviston will give you the appointments.” One by one, he dropped the drill burrs into a compartmented drawer. “Do you have any idea why your teeth should be so, ah, indifferent?”

Burton concentrated. He yearned to thank the man, to bless him even, but since he was not prepared to do that, he would show his gratitude by giving everything the dentist said his closest attention. “I believe Pennsylvania has one of the worst dental records of any state.”

“Really? And why should that be?”

“I don’t know. We eat sugar doughnuts and sticky buns. I think the Southern states have the best teeth. They eat fish, or turnip tops, or something with lots of calcium in it.”

“I see.” The dentist moved aside so Burton could climb out of the chair. “Until next time, then.”

Burton supposed they would not shake hands twice in one visit. Near the doorway, he turned. “Oh, Doctor, uh …”

“Merritt,” the dentist said.

“I just thought of a quotation from Hooker. It’s very short.”

“Yes?”

“ ‘I grant we are apt, prone, and ready, to forsake God; but is God as ready to forsake us? Our minds are changeable; is His so likewise?’ ”

Dr. Merritt smiled. The two men stood in the same position they had hesitated in when Burton entered the room. Burton smiled. Outside the window, the wrens and the starlings, mixed indistinguishably, engaged in maneuvers that seemed essentially playful.