

THE
JOHN UPDIKE REVIEW





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John Updike Review

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ESSAYS

- 1 Story into Novel: The Genesis of Updike's *Couples*
DONALD J. GREINER
- 11 "Nothing Real Succeeds": Domestic Dissolution in
John Updike's *The Maples Stories*
AVIS HEWITT
- 31 Motifs of Loss in *The Afterlife*
BRIAN DUFFY
- 51 An Ecobiographical Perspective: Reading Updike's
Toward the End of Time as an Eco-Novel
ARISTI TRENDEL

REVIEWS

- 61 The Art and Craft of Baseball
Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu
LEONARD CASSUTO
- 67 Updike, Time Present and Time Past
Critical Insights: John Updike
SYLVIE MATHÉ

PANEL

79 Updike Family Panel in Pennsylvania

JAMES PLATH

93 Contributors' Notes

Story into Novel: The Genesis of Updike's *Couples*

DONALD J. GREINER

We are all pilgrims, faltering toward divorce.

—JOHN UPDIKE, “The Music School”

In 1976, the year that *Marry Me*, with its meditation on infidelity, was published, John Updike allowed to be printed a little-known short story that has significant bearing on the development of his earlier novel *Couples* (1968). Titling the tale “Couples: A Short Story,” he limited the edition to 250 numbered, signed copies and 26 lettered, signed copies, thus all but guaranteeing that it would be unknown to most of his readership. The plot is basic, though the story is not: a couple moves to the suburbs, where they get involved with other young marrieds, only to find friendship developing into adultery, divorce, and eventual banishment. In the short foreword Updike wrote for this rare publication, he explains that he took notes for the story on the back of a proof sheet for *The Centaur* (1963), completed the tale on May 16, 1963, and sent it to the *New Yorker*. Given his close association with that venerable magazine, in which he had published 37 stories since 1954, one can imagine Updike’s surprise when, in August, the editors replied with a rejection notice. Now confirmed in his own doubts about the story, for faults that he identifies as sentimentality, vagueness, and, most of all, overcrowdedness, he set it aside. “Couples: A Short Story,” he concedes, needed what he calls “the space of the novel,” the very novel he began three years later—*Couples*—that, in 1968, became both his biggest seller and his most notorious book (“Couples: A Short Story” 8).¹ He did not reread “Couples” before beginning *Couples*, though he did

carry the village name of “Tarbox” from discarded story to finished novel. He also transferred a few images to the stories “Harv Is Plowing Now”—breaking surf likened to a typewriter carriage—and “When Everyone Was Pregnant”—a pregnant woman in a flowered dress who looks like a “voluptuous piece of wallpaper.” A number of details surfaced later in *Marry Me*, much of which he had written in the 1960s, but Updike abandoned the story for thirteen years. Then, nearly a decade after the success of *Couples*, he agreed to the limited edition of “Couples: A Short Story,” warts and all. In effect, he was clearing his desk of old material because by 1976 he had already departed from his family home, and divorce from his first wife was imminent. An examination of the story demonstrates how a master of lyrical prose and acute observation turned a failed tale into a successful and controversial novel.

Since the story is generally unavailable and thus little-known, an overview is in order. “Couples: A Short Story” is a flashback. The narrator, living alone and, we learn, divorced, recalls the time of six years ago when he and his then wife, Ann, moved from New York City to the “large garden” of Tarbox to live in what he soon realized was a new world of eroticism, “this incredible America where we managed, and controlled, and mattered” (“Couples” 13, 15). At first there are only two or three couples gathering at cocktail time to discuss the news and insignificant details of the day, but the “corporate identity” finally centers around six couples who transform Tarbox into a sexual paradise (16). The narrator and his wife are an integral part of this hermetic group, but as soon as they gravitate to one of the couples, Morton and Peggy Williams, the narrator intuitively senses an atmospheric change that will lead to forbidden desire: “I had this sharp sense then, filling my eyes with a pressure as if I were confronting an angel” (21). Longing for the angel to bless his transgression in the garden—just as in the novel *Couples* Piet Hanema hopes for a benediction from his appropriately named wife, Angela—the narrator seeks a religious aura in a guilt-free, earthbound playground. He does not find it—and neither will Piet. Halfway through the story, the narrator describes “[t]he last burst, the glowing death, of innocence” that sears him: he falls in love with Peggy, a love he admits to himself only when his wife gives birth to their third child (22). Betrayal of wife coupled with birth of baby: guilt blunts angelic blessings. Once the narrator insists on the paradox of his being both guilty and innocent, the reader familiar with *Couples* realizes that Updike has sketched in the narrator what will be admirably fleshed out in Piet: “I believe . . . that I was, among the six couples, the last innocent, and when I fell, all our furtive woes and suppressed miseries were free to swarm across the social field” (“Couples” 31).

Much of the prose in the story is enticingly lyrical, as it is in the novel, and the reader takes note of the narrator's—and later Piet's—desire to translate *fell*, as in the idea of a fortunate fall, into *free*. The new religion that Updike chronicles in *Couples* has its genesis in the religious connotation of the confession of the narrator of “Couples.” The narrator resorts to the word *sin* when he dislocates Morton Williams's finger in a touch football game, as Piet will dislocate Freddy Thorne's finger in the novel, but the source of his angst is deeper than a minor accident with phallic overtones (“Couples” 36). Now adrift, the narrator lives “without illusions, unless memories count” (40). Memories do indeed count, but not, for our purposes, the narrator's. Rather, Updike's memory of the highlights of the rejected story led him to rethink his material and then refashion it successfully in a novel. He refused to include “Couples: A Short Story” when he published *The Early Stories* in 2003, but he did not need to include it: he had already turned it into *Couples*.

Updike's original title for the novel was *Couples and Houses and Days*, in recognition of what he calls “its amplitude” (“Couples” 9). His point is that what was crowded in the discarded story—too many characters, too many adulterous liaisons in too small a space—had ample room to develop in a novel that turned out to be one of his longest, at 458 pages. Yet for all its awkwardness, the story held for Updike “tendernesses and exactitudes not duplicated” in his more successful accounts of suburban young marrieds trying to find their way in what the novel calls the post-pill paradise: “The simple party pleasures of the youngly married, the mathematics of a social ‘set’ or ‘group,’ the faces around the fire during the blizzard—none of this would return so directly, with such an innocent excitement of presentation” (“Couples” 9).

Given the tone of the tale, which Updike confesses is personal, it is significant that he wrote “Couples: A Short Story” in the early 1960s, while he was in the midst of what initiated readers call the Pennsylvania or Shillington stage of his career. Consider the chronology: By 1963, he had already established his reputation as a leading fiction writer of the postwar generation, an applauded chronicler of small-town, relatively poor, middle-class America. *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959), *Rabbit, Run* (1960), many of the stories in *The Same Door* (1959) and *Pigeon Feathers* (1962)—all exquisitely written fictions set in southeastern Pennsylvania—had been published. Soon to follow, with similar settings and language, were *The Centaur* (1963), *Of the Farm* (1965), and even *Assorted Prose* (1965), containing as it does the key Shillington memoir titled “The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood,” which was originally published in 1962. Although the different kinds of stories

that would comprise *The Music School* (1966)—such as “Leaves,” “The Music School,” and “Harv Is Plowing Now”—were beginning to appear, the point remains that Updike’s newly intense focus on the angst of sexual betrayal began not in 1968 with *Couples* but in 1963 with the rejected story that led to *Couples*.

Looking back in 1976, Updike recalls the tale as one of his “first attempts to write about suburban adultery, a subject that, if I have not exhausted it, has exhausted me” (“Couples” 9). Matters of the heart, however, are as inexhaustible as the art of fiction itself. In one of his book reviews, he explains his understanding of the intermingling of love and the novel: “The bourgeois novel is inherently erotic, just as the basic unit of bourgeois order—the family unit built upon the marriage contract—is erotic. Who loves whom? . . . If domestic stability and personal salvation are at issue, acts of sexual conquest and surrender are important” (“If at First You Do Succeed” 402). Yet notice how he links his immersion in the complexities of erotic adventuring to his commitment to the contradictions of small-town America: “But I have persisted, as I earlier persisted in describing the drab normalities of a Pennsylvania boyhood, with the conviction that there was something good to say for it [adultery], some sad magic that, but for me, might go unobserved” (“Couples” 9). *Rabbit, Run*, *Pigeon Feathers*, and *The Centaur* placed him on the literary map, but *Couples* made him famous. And it made him famous not only because of its eroticism and a *Time* magazine cover story (April 26, 1968) with a headline proclaiming “The Adulterous Society,” but also because of the cries of outrage emanating from his negative critics.

When a French interviewer commented that in France “*Couples* was received as a novel about the pill,” Updike replied, “It was by my fellow countrymen as well” (Plath 177). Published after court cases in the late 1950s rescued the fiction of D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller from the censoring eye of the U.S. Customs Service, *Couples* was nevertheless first read as an establishment author’s now legal foray into the once forbidden world of explicit sexuality. It was as if some critics turned a blind eye to the clearly depicted sex scenes in novels written by British and Continental authors, not to mention *Lolita*, in which pedophilia is never described but always present, but could not adjust to the fact that in *Couples* Updike, an American, refuses to tiptoe past the bedroom door. Two examples of the outcry will suffice. In the *New Republic*, Anatole Broyard dismissed Updike’s characterization of Piet, arguing that the reader cannot respond to scenes of clinically described sex that involve “a fornicator, not a lover” (Broyard 29). But Diana Trilling was clearly more incensed than Broyard. In a review in the *Atlantic Monthly* that Updike comically summarized as “a banshee cry of indignation” (Plath 25),

Trilling opined, "With nice economy the book is called *Couples*. It would have been more precise to have called it *Coupling*" (Trilling 129). I assume that Trilling and Broyard would not have expressed the same indignation toward "Couples: A Short Story"—if they had had access to it, which they did not—because the story quietly implies what the novel makes joyfully obvious.

In response to these and other alarmed howls, Updike told an interviewer in 1968 that, on the one hand, he "plotted *Couples* almost entirely in church" and, on the other hand, that he wanted to "take coitus out of the closet and off the altar and put it on the continuum of human behavior" (Plath 30, 34). The removal from the altar parallels the banishment from Eden when the narrator of "Couples: A Short Story" first welcomes the serpent of Genesis and then foreshadows Piet's dash toward freedom and the world. Shocked by his initial affair, the narrator yields to "sensations of freedom and elemental acceptance and new knowledge" ("Couples" 28). Guilt slithers into the garden, and friendships are betrayed, but a sexually adventuresome mistress who becomes a sexually uninhibited wife is more important to Updike's mid-twentieth-century American seekers than a church under the eye of a wrathful God. In 1976, the year he published "Couples: A Short Story," he explained, "It's the idea of an unchristian religion emerging, a religion of human interplay including sexual interplay" (Plath 87). He deftly unifies the new religion and the worship of sex in the novel when he gives two key statements to Georgene, one of Piet's mistresses: "*Welcome . . . to the post-pill paradise*" and "Haven't you heard, God's a woman? Nothing embarrasses Her" (*Couples* 52, 54, italics in the original). These joined observations, directed by the always prowling mistress to the often guilty man, nudge Piet to understand that to accept this woman is to seek the moment instead of the eternal. His realization—"All love is a betrayal, in that it flatters life. The loveless man is best armed. A jealous God" (*Couples* 48)—clarifies what is only hinted at in the story. Piet worries about embarrassing God, but Georgene merely takes off her clothes. The newly defined paradise of her body stares him in the face.

Yet I read *Couples* as primarily about friendship, bracketed on one side by religious uncertainty and on the other side by reckless freedom. This complexity is absent from the story that led to the novel, but not the meditation on friendship. As Updike remarks, "Couples' bares the muffled heart of *Couples*, the theme of friendship—of friendships and their inevitable, never-quite-complete betrayals" ("Couples" 10). The closed society of young marrieds in a gardenlike suburbia leads initially to sexual attraction and then to the competing urgencies of freedom to explore the erotic and of guilt once the erotic has been explored. Freddy

Thorne, the lethal prankster of Tarbox, summarizes the entanglements that form their social unit with a joke that is entirely serious: "We're a subversive cell. . . . Like in the catacombs. Only they were trying to break out of hedonism. We're trying to break back into it. It's not easy" (*Couples* 148). Freddy's reference to the catacombs and their atmosphere of wicked plots echoes the confession by the narrator of the short story: "I had my first premonition of couples as barricades of mystery, as gates closed on sinister catacombs tunnelled through past time" ("Couples" 18). No wonder Updike names his angst-ridden seducer Piet—for piety. Piet is the only religious observer in the novel, but he shoulders the guilt necessary for him to fall from the garden and embrace the world. Sexual ecstasy for him means loss of friendship. Unlike the novel, with its expansiveness reminiscent of a three-volume Victorian tome and its godlike, omniscient narrator whose often sardonic tone allows Updike the freedom of irony, the story is fenced in by Updike's choice of an unnamed first-person narrator, who nevertheless presages Piet's fall from grace to joy. Like Piet, the narrator of the story looks for reassurance among a tightly knit group of neighbors. He concedes that "we were playing at being adults," as if safe in a Romper Room sealed off from a threatening world: "I remember how the other young couples of the town looked to us. They looked like safeguards, echoes, reinforcements of our happiness. . . . We were folded in. Whether separately or together, it didn't matter, Ann and I would descend the stairs to receive our just portion of love" ("Couples" 15, 13, 17). The move away from folded-in safety is already previewed with the word *descend*, and thus Updike begins his first important, albeit failed, effort to write about the tangled world of adultery.

Late in "Couples: A Short Story," he offers a preview of what will be another major theme in the novel: the recognition of limits that exacerbate the longing for freedom. Trapped by what he calls "the vagueness of the desperate," the narrator faces the dispiriting truth that "we were all wedged in. Children, habit, and money blocked every would-be move, and in the atmosphere of increasing restriction, merely psychological events fed the ravenous hunger for gossip" ("Couples" 33). The gossip is, of course, about the other couples: which woman in the garden is the most sexually free, which man loves his angelic wife but longs for his welcoming mistress? Piet would feel at home in this story, which is clear when the novel recalls the unnamed narrator's comment: "The first breath of adultery is the freest; after it, constraints aping marriage develop" (*Couples* 456). And, finally, Updike previews the erotic journey from friendship to betrayal to banishment that takes the novel far beyond the lure of mere descriptions of adultery.

On the last page of the story, the narrator concedes that choosing his mistress wrenches him from safety to freedom, yet lands him in the same place—that is, as part of another couple—although “torn from my home and robbed of my children” (“Couples” 41). Updike knows that the leap away from Eden is finally a plunge toward extinction, and thus the narrator both describes adultery as an impotent weapon against oblivion, what he calls “my hopeless seminal rage against mortality,” and identifies his abstract enemy as his abstract friend: “His tortures are at bottom benevolent, for they prepare one for death” (40, 41). To accept the inevitability of death is to live *in* the world. To betray friendship is to gain freedom. To win the woman is to lose the home. The conclusion of the story foreshadows Piet’s fate in miniature. In 1968 Piet will echo what the narrator says in 1963: “At times I remember and foresee the world of couples eagerly, as a garden from which I have been banished but to which I am certain to return” (41). The end of the tale resonates with the emotional confession that what has been gained is the result of what has been lost. In this sense, too, the story is the incipient novel. One has to admire, then, Updike’s decision when he wrote *Couples* to flatten the tone of the conclusion following the account of the conflagration that consumes the church. The story’s narrator understands that “[w]e need a sacrifice” (“Couples” 38). In the eyes of the other couples in the novel, Piet is their sacrificial victim, their scapegoat, the man who must be expelled from the sullied Eden if they hope to cultivate the suburban garden. Early in the novel, Georgene foresees that Piet will emerge as the scapegoat for the tribe when she tells him, “[Y]ou sound as though you rather *want* to be sacrificed” (*Couples* 90, italics in the original). And sacrificed he is, in a fleshing out of the fate that the narrator of the story also faces, when the group closes ranks against the man who betrays the couplings. At the end of the novel, Updike reprises the key word *sacrifice*: “The couples, though they had quickly sealed themselves off from Piet’s company, from contamination by his failure, were yet haunted and chastened, as if his fall had been sacrificial” (*Couples* 456). Notice how unemotional Updike’s final description of Piet is in the last paragraph: “Now, though it has not been many years, the town scarcely remembers Piet. . . . The Hanemas live in Lexington, where, gradually, among people like themselves, they have been accepted, as another couple” (*Couples* 458). Updike understates the ending of the novel and thus makes it more effective than the emotionally wrought climax of the story.

The destruction of Piet’s church signals the retreat by the supernatural from the advance of the natural. Friendship emerges as the contemporary sacrament, but a sacrament eagerly redefined when sexuality shapes suburbia. Sex without

guilt is both the new freedom and the emerging religion. In this religion based on the union of friendship and eroticism, the primary social unit is not the church but the tribe, as Updike notes: “this is a coupling that occurs within the social network and does not harm it. It may harm the people in it, but the couples—the group—remain intact” (Plath 89). The cult of friendship requires that the bed-hopping adulterers not violate the sanctity of the group, of the ironic garden of eroticism that encloses them and keeps them away from the prying world. To break out of the garden by divorcing a spouse to marry a mistress results in banishment. The church burns, but in Updike’s world of depleted religion, the more resonant point is that Piet and his mistress Foxy, not to mention the narrator of the short story, are excommunicated because they violate the first commandment of the Tarbox sanctuary: Thou shall not allow individual sexual adventures to dilute the sanctity of the unit. Expulsion from the community is necessary because Piet and Foxy have become what Updike calls “socially unacceptable” to the group (Plath 90).

The tension between safety and freedom, between Eden and the world, all but paralyzes both the story’s narrator and Piet. As Updike says, “My characters are very fond of both,” yet this tension defines the dilemmas that the two men face (Plath 184). They seek the safety of the closed-off whole, the new sanctification that the coupling friends offer so long as they adhere to the rules of the game; but they long also for freedom from the guilt that is heightened by the desire to leap from angelic Angelas to earthy Foxys. To leap is to fall. Whether the fall is fortunate depends on the perception of the reader, but the couples shun the men not for committing adultery but for attempting to sanctify it by marriage. Marriage to “the other woman” violates the sacrament of sexualized friendship, which, in the emergent religion, is more important than sexual fidelity to a spouse. Guilt is absolved in the mutual couplings of the group. Caving in to guilt by breaking up one couple through divorce in order to form another couple through marriage is to revert to what the Tarbox friends see as an outdated commandment. Guilt always threatens the tribe with a potential dissolution that the couples cannot tolerate. Their insistence on group unity is a key to the novel that Updike first worked out in the short story when the narrator imagines the eager adulterers as “amounting to something, some single, complete, and enduring thing” and says, “Away from each other, we became afraid” (“Couples” 21, 36). The God-struck church means nothing to its members. They are too busy having sex in Freddy’s catacombs. It would have been galling to Anatole Broyard and Diana Trilling to read, if they

ever knew about it, Updike's comment nineteen years after the publication of the novel, and twenty-four years after he wrote the discarded story, that *Couples*

had behind it a general sense that all of the old institutions which used to keep people in their houses and in their marriages had broken down, and that what had grown up instead was a kind of intensity of camaraderie, which led often to adultery and to the breakup of these homes. But I wasn't thinking this was altogether bad; I was saying that a kind of institution had evolved out of the decay of the other institutions (Plath 194).²

Updike first gave shape to this new "institution" not in the novel that brought him fame and notoriety but in the story he wrote and then abandoned five years before the novel was published. His observation that the story was crowded, with too many characters enjoying too many couplings, is on the mark, yet the crowdedness also suggests his commitment to his subject, his decision to turn away—at least for the moment—from the material that had generated his canon at the beginning of his long and celebrated career: that of a small-town, Pennsylvania boyhood. Although never widely available, "Couples: A Short Story" is the first significant signpost in a series of signposts that includes "Leaves," "The Music School," and "Harv Is Plowing Now"—all tales of sexual transgression that led to *Couples*. The new institution Updike mentions resulted in his new reputation: the premier American chronicler of suburban adultery. That he did not forget "Couples: A Short Story" when he set it aside as a failure confirms that he knew, as early as 1963, that his fiction was taking a radically different direction—away from Shillington, away from Pennsylvania, away from boyhood.

NOTES

1. All citations are to the limited edition, referred to hereafter as "Couples." The foreword can also be found in *Hugging the Shore* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 853–56. The limited edition is still the only source for the story itself.

2. Updike's remarks to an interviewer in 1968 are instructive: "It seems to me these people do the best they can given the culture they come from. . . . This book [*Couples*] deals with the contemporary world—with people living in the atmosphere of economic affluence and the Cold War. . . . They don't believe in the importance of vocation but of varying degrees of 'friendship'" (Plath 20).

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“Nothing Real Succeeds”: Domestic Dissolution in John Updike’s *The Maples Stories*

AVIS HEWITT

In an addendum to the foreword of *Too Far to Go* (1979) as he updated it for *The Maples Stories* (2009), John Updike notes his delight at being told of the reissue of the book in its first hardbound edition in English after “a gratifying career in paperback” and translation into seven languages (*Maples* 12). The editors of the Everyman’s Library imprint at Knopf allowed Updike to add an eighteenth story, giving the new, expanded collection a recursive substantiality granted to none of his sixty books except Knopf-Everyman’s *Rabbit Angstrom* (1995), which brought together the four Rabbit novels, and *The Complete Henry Bech* (2001), which collected the three volumes of Bech stories. It is apt that this should be the case. While Rabbit and Bech were perhaps alter egos for Updike, Richard Maple often seems simply an ego, separated from his author not by socioeconomic class or religious sensibility as, respectively, the other two characters are, but by only the merest gossamer line. Though the nuanced issues that arise when we attempt to sort out fiction and autobiography fall outside the purview of this essay, we can be mindful of Jack De Bellis’s assertion that the Maples stories “represent the most candid demonstration of how Updike turned autobiographical material into art” (441).¹ Updike held as the central writerly responsibility this task: “to deliver the truth as it has come to him—to describe the details, conflicts, and puzzles of being a live human being” (“A Writer’s Duty” 213), and in this, his most evolved short story collection,² he has certainly done that.

Updike famously said, in a 1966 interview with Jane Howard, that his calling was to delineate the middle class: “My subject is the American Protestant small-town middle class. I like middles. It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules. Something quite intricate and fierce occurs in homes, and it seems to me without doubt worthwhile to examine what it is” (Plath 11). Richard and Joan Maple serve as his most sustained examination: the fictional record of their lives reaches from 1956 (“Snowing in Greenwich Village”) to 1994 (“Grandparenting”) and takes readers from flashbacks of courtship and early years of family life through the dissolution of their marriage and their reunion as a couple at the birth of their first grandchild after each has lived for years with a second spouse.

Alice and Kenneth Hamilton, early enthusiasts of Updike’s work, promoted the Maples stories as the author’s depiction of the all-American couple. Updike himself tells us he took the couple’s surname from his boyhood in Shillington, “a small town shaded by Norway maples,” and the settings of his adulthood: “the New England of sugar maples and flame-bright swamp maples,” connoting “an arboreal innocence, a straightforward and cooling leafiness” (*Maples* 11). This innocence is a comfort to readers haunted by the erosions and betrayals that taint the Maples’ quotidian lives as we follow them through two decades and four children—a great deal of their prime invested in a union that finally dissolves, to some degree inexplicably. In terms of their socioeconomic status, they are winners. Even their given names strike the Hamiltons as signifying American bourgeois middle-class flourishing; they link the names *Richard* and *Joan* to Poor Richard, Ben Franklin’s dazzlingly successful almanac persona, and his wife Joan, who was Richard’s “faithful companion” for over twenty years. To the Hamiltons, the names connote America’s “prototype of married bliss” (55). But the ultimate fate of the Maple union was still unwritten when the Hamiltons made this assessment in 1970. The Maples, they write, “stand for the small-town existence at the center of the America Updike loves . . . a living emblem of American home life” (54–55). Albert Wilhelm finds the symbol of the maple tree less reassuring. He notes that the maple “produces a wood that is hard and durable but, like the Maples’ marital unity, easily split” (“Rebecca Cune” 10). And in the penultimate Maples story, split they do—after seventeen discrete narratives and twenty-two years.

Updike seems fond of the couple despite finding for them no felicitous ending: “Though the Maples stories trace the decline and fall of a marriage, they also illumine a history in many ways happy, of growing children and a million mundane moments shared. That a marriage ends is less than ideal; but all things end

under heaven, and if temporality is held to be invalidating, then nothing real succeeds" (*Maples* 11). The marriage is failed but happy, temporary but valid, and the collection is poignant, wrenching, a heartbreaker. Several critics have offered incisive explanations of the trouble with the Maples, the reason for the dissolution of their marriage; in particular, Jane Barnes reads the stories from the psychological vantage point of Updike's own childhood and biography. The back story this provides, she argues, can enrich our reading of the Maples if we credit Updike's fiction as a space in which he dealt with issues that had troubled him in his own life. Barnes concludes that the Maples' domestic dissolution stems from the author having solved and outgrown the familial dysfunctions that the stories portray.

Robert Luscher sees the collection as illuminating the "fault lines of a marriage, as well as the pressures arising from the era's changing mores" (13). Whether the fault lies in the evolving characters or the evolving times, the answer to Dickie Maple's "Why?" at the end of "Separating" seems to be the failed evolution of eros into agape or caritas—the transformation of concern with our own gratification into concern for the good of the beloved other. Updike uses an epigraph from Emerson to introduce his memoir, *Self-Consciousness*: "We are persuaded that a thread runs through all things: all worlds are strung on it, as beads: and men, and events, and life, come to us, only because of that thread" (vii). A thread that runs through *The Maples Stories*—composed over nearly four decades and consequently revealing a good deal more about the author's weltanschauung regarding marriage than any work composed during a single season of his career—is the privileging of "interested" love, the ego-driven love that wants notice and admiration and fervent esteem for the self, over the love that evolves into a charitable and disinterested love for another.

Luscher argues that "the Maples' marriage may be the book's true protagonist, more so than either Joan or Richard" and that their struggle is "to maintain their individual identities" (15). The title of the 1979 collection intimates that the distance from eros to caritas is too far to go, even though, as Richard reflects, the Maples have "come very far" in their marriage (*Maples* 56). Richard is riding on a tour bus in Rome at this point and may well think of his marriage as a bus that one hops somewhere along a route and then exits at a preferred destination. Even the new title, *The Maples Stories*, indicates not the story of one family named *Maple* but of separate people whose group identity matters less than each discrete identity. If Luscher is right, these tales are doomed to the dissolution they indeed depict. The Maples' struggle to maintain themselves individually bankrupts any riches initially offered by the marriage. The economics in play indicate all with-

drawals and no deposits. The paucity of common-cause moments makes the narratives harrowing in their quiet intensity.

Kristiaan Versluys nonetheless champions Updike's attention to this distracted individualism by which a marriage that should sustain its partners is instead starved into failure. Versluys establishes a reading of "Nakedness" that could be said to inform the entire collection: "The prose is baroque, unsparse, untidy, and full of dangling ends and seemingly unconnected *obiter dicta*" and has a "superabundance of meanings"; it is, in fact, "meaning-making in action." Versluys sees Updike providing "the mental and textual nature of reality in its full complexity," but the postmodern problem is that "this constant vacillation and interaction between interpretative schemes and epistemological paradigms" urges us to construe life as "a constant repositioning of the self within a discursive field of ever-shifting meanings" (41). How unlike a marriage vow and the hope of faithfulness over betrayal!

Meaning may well lie in the value of marrying in order to re-create and confront the familial dysfunction of one's formative years. In Barnes's reading, Richard Maple takes from the author a need to replicate, in order to resolve, the disorder of his parents' marriage. Like his mother, he finds himself united with "someone who is both 'better and less' than he. . . . [T]he effect of his wife's upper class is like that of his father's virtue, and in one of its manifestations (civic duty), is exactly the same. . . . He assumes [his mother's] suffering out of a desire to solve it, so that he might find an answer both of them can use" (82). The mother was "the first woman to be associated with art, [and] women and art will represent the mysteries he most wants to understand." Identification with the mother figure as "the larger spirit of his two parents" causes dissatisfaction in what increasingly seems a duty marriage (81). On the other hand, he develops a heightened appreciation for duty—and his own virtuously dutiful father—as he himself becomes a father provider in a constantly more demanding household. These conflicts in his sense of self prevent him from acting decisively to end his marriage but also fuel a passive-aggressive undermining of it. Richard seems to refuse to be an actively loving and enthusiastic participant much of the time and chooses instead the avocation and distraction of infidelity. He will neither leave Joan nor be faithful to her. In spite of this dishonorable conduct, William Pritchard praises "the fictional art of these tales" because it "shows the writer at his most inventively alive, bristling with implication, complication, and, indeed, love" (178).

This bristling love is not for Joan, but for the other woman. After having successfully re-created "the familiar unhappy pattern of his parents' marriage" and

“tak[ing] the unhappiness in marriage as an eternal truth,” the protagonist of these domestic dramas “suddenly, unexpectedly” finds the world “completely altered” because “[h]e falls in love.” Heretofore, Richard’s approach to coping with the unhappiness of ego needs unmet has been to “pursue what little pleasure one can find” and “wait for death.” Now “love . . . seems to offer a whole new resolution to his conflict” (Barnes 83). Evidence on this front comes from Updike’s other 1979 collection, *Problems and Other Stories*, and especially from one story in it, “Domestic Life in America,” in which the mistress offers a refreshing respite for the starving self and its emotional needs, contrasting dramatically with domesticity’s duties and demands. Precursors of this ultimate other woman can be found in *The Maples Stories*, but once Eleanor Dennis, over whose long legs Richard waxes lascivious in “The Taste of Metal,” and Marlene Brossman, with whom Richard dances too intensely in “The Red-Herring Theory,” are exchanged for Ruth, the true focus of his affections, the others serve only to divert attention. In “Gesturing,” Richard acknowledges, “Ruth was love, she was life, that was why he loved her” (200). This testimonial confirms Pritchard’s point. The text does bristle with errant eros. What is harder to explicate is the nature of Richard’s regard for Joan.³

In a 1963 review of Denis de Rougemont’s *Love in the Western World*, Updike argued, “Only in being loved do we find external corroboration of the supremely high valuation each ego secretly assigns itself”; moreover, we want “to choose that other being in whose existence our own is being confirmed and amplified” (*Assorted Prose* 299). But earlier in the review, he explains that “a man in love, confronting his own beloved, seems to be in the presence of *his own spirit*, his self translated into another mode of being, a Form of Light greeting him at the gate of salvation. A man in love ceases to fear death” (286). Somehow Ruth engenders a sense of gratuity, of the great giving that it is to be alive in the world, to drink in its pleasures—most of all, the exquisite pleasure of being loved.

In *The Maples Stories*, we sense a steady lack of gratuity, and in its place a scoreboard. In “Snowing in Greenwich Village,” the responsibilities of hospitality fall to Richard. He takes the coat of the couple’s guest, Rebecca. He pours the sherry and offers each woman a glass. In serving and tending to the needs of a visitor, he deviates from his usual role: “he was still so young-looking that people did not instinctively lay upon him hostile duties; . . . so that often it was his wife who poured the drinks, while he sprawled on the sofa in the attitude of a favored and wholly delightful guest” (15). “Wife-Wooing,” for all its lyricism, tells of Richard’s attempt to trade a sack of hamburgers for sex and devolves into his insulting thoughts about Joan’s aging looks the morning after; these thoughts register as revenge for

her having rejected his overtures the night before. "Giving Blood" provides fuel for contestation at almost every point: who is more experienced at blood donation, who inflated the "two square plastic sacks filled solidly fat" with blood first, who behaved more shamelessly at last night's party, who has enough money to pay for the couple's late, "illicit" lunch (47, 49). Already by this third story in the collection, the underlying competition involves the garnering of outside partners in a marriage where the two insiders do not, as Richard reports in "Separating," manage to "make each other happy enough, somehow" (182).

Even the imagery that overarches many of the stories bespeaks parity, rather than gratuity, as the *de facto* structure of the Maples' union. "Twin Beds in Rome" surely seems the proper sleeping arrangement for two people who, in the previous story, "Giving Blood," resemble fairy-tale siblings: "Richard felt like Hansel orphaned with Gretel; birds ate the bread crumbs behind them, and at last they timidly knocked on the witch's door, which said "BLOOD DONATION CENTER" (40). Wilhelm notes that this "trail-of-bread-crumbs motif" could be construed as a "forced maturation" that prevents retreat and necessitates the facing of challenges ("Trail" 71). But, in fact, they seem to face nothing: their aggressions only intensify. "Marching in Boston" finds Joan rejuvenated as she gives herself to the civil rights movement, a cause to which she responds deeply. Seeing her "like this[—]her posture was improving, her figure filling out, her skin growing lustrous, her very hair gaining body and sheen" makes Richard "jealous and irritable" (68, 69). Her preoccupation with social justice leaves him behind, even when she persuades him to participate in the Boston version of what she had experienced in an earlier Mississippi freedom march. Joan's pivotal position, flanked by her former analyst on one side and "a massive, doleful African wearing tribal scars [and] sneakers" on the other, goads Richard into depicting the scene to himself as Joan sandwiched "between her id and superego" (74, 75). Yet his disparagement does not prevent him from noting that she is "beautiful, . . . with far-seeing blue eyes and red lips parted in song" (76). Still, he cannot let it rest there. He must remind himself that she walks awkwardly, "swinging her arms, throwing her ballet slippers alternately outward in a confident splaying stride" (75). Because she loves the march and not Richard, he finds her unattractive even while admitting her beauty. At story's end, babbling in crude imitation of the speeches they have heard, he is "almost crying; a weird tenderness had crept over him in bed, as if he had indeed given birth . . . to . . . a voice crying for attention from the depths of oppression" (79). His focus appears to be shifting. He must find someone who will love and complete him.

After this point—only four stories in—he becomes almost relentlessly disdainful of Joan. One of the most humiliating episodes occurs in “The Taste of Metal,” which finds Richard preoccupied with the newness of Eleanor Dennis, who is both “long-legged” and separated from her husband. Her newness parallels the “molars capped and bridges shaped across the gaps” in his mouth after a day of intense dental work (83). A third newness is his recently purchased Corvair. Joan is old business; he cannot focus on her. He ignores her at a party and ignores her admonitions regarding drinking and driving *after* the party; in fact, he relegates her to the back seat so that Eleanor, “showing a wealth of knee,” can sit next to him in the front (85), and then, once he wrecks the car, he sends Joan for help in order to be alone with Eleanor. All evening he has drunk “a variety of liquids that tasted much the same” and finds after the wreck that he “was sobering, and an infinite drabness was dawning for him. Never again, never ever, would his car be new, would he chew on his own enamel, would [Eleanor] kick so high with her fine long legs” (83, 89).⁴ The clash between eros and thanatos ends in a stand-off with “the whirling blue light of the police car” breaking in upon the seduction scene. Richard’s need for sexuality as affirmation, his sense of Joan habitually denying him sufficiently eager and validating physical intimacy, and his willingness to “take his love to town”—an undercurrent of the Maples stories—influence the ways his saga as a “player” plays out. The next three stories—“Your Lover Just Called,” “Waiting Up,” and “Eros Rampant”—underscore his increasing restlessness and resentment regarding his domestic life. They also underscore Joan’s despair.

Peter Donahue argues that the Maples handle their growing discord by a means that exacerbates it: imbibing alcohol. He traces the statistics regarding its use in the mid-twentieth-century upper middle class and shows that the Maples—with their Ivy League educations and “the means to build a private tennis court, send their daughter to England, and drive European imports”—are in the group with the highest odds of being “moderate-to-heavy drinkers” (364). They use alcohol quite sparingly in the beginning—only sherry in “Snowing in Greenwich Village” and the merest mention of having “some hard stuff” if their guest prefers it (16)—but the plot of “The Taste of Metal” is based on Richard’s drunkenness, and the destruction of his Corvair ushers in the most dramatically destructive season of their marriage.

In “Your Lover Just Called,” Mack Dennis mixes martinis at the Maples’ after Richard volunteers for an unnecessary errand. He seems to be setting up Joan and Mack and, upon his return, indeed sees them kissing in the brightly lit kitchen. Donahue emphasizes Mack’s usurpation of Richard’s virility and “sovereignty” as

head of the household (364), but Richard, having answered the phone that day only to hear the caller hang up, has been tormenting Joan about having a lover and has cast Mack in the role merely to be combative. He speaks “with self-pleasing irony, . . . confident that he was being unjust, that there was no lover” (95). When the couple awake the next morning, “soured and dazed by hangovers” (99), Joan sees that he is pleased, rather than distraught, to accuse her again of infidelity. To Donald Greiner, the hypocrisy of Richard’s false accusations, just as his own lover begins ringing the phone, “keeps our sympathies with her” (*Other John Updike* 190). Joan is too fraught with the untenable nature of her position in this relationship to provide Richard much love, especially gratuitous love: “Go to her like a man and stop trying to maneuver me into something I don’t understand! I have no lover! . . . Stop trying to make me more interesting than I am! All I am is a beat-up housewife who wants to go play tennis with some other exhausted ladies!” (100). In the afternoon, they agree to take a nap together. Joan warns that there will be no sex: “Just a nap” (101). But after making her look pathetic in her own eyes—“It’s sad, to think of you without a lover”—he attempts to initiate an encounter after all: “You’re pretty interesting anyway. Here, and here, and here” (102). This expression of his appetite for physicality directly after stating that he has no sense of possessive erotic love for her anticipates the deeply eroding betrayals of the two ensuing stories. And just then, the only fitting ending for such a story occurs and saves Joan: Richard’s lover once more rings their phone.

“Waiting Up,” a nadir of sorts, finds Richard waiting for Joan to return home from a damage-control mission at the house of his mistress and her husband. He is so drunk that “the bourbon began to go down as easily as water, and he discovered himself standing in a room with no memory of walking through the doorway” (105–6). Such wandering symbolizes the absence of intentionality as he earlier set the now-exposed events in motion. Joan arrives and confesses, “I’m looped. *Don’t* give me any more bourbon” (108). But, descending into the darkness that is their current relationship, she soon says she could “believe in a little more bourbon” when they have so little left to believe in regarding one another (109). In this story, as with her back-seat driver role in “The Taste of Metal,” Joan seems forced into parenting her spouse, as if she had to meet with a family through whose window Richard has thrown a baseball. He indulges in careless conduct; she cleans up his mess. Hurt and frustrated, she asks, “Why didn’t you run off with her? Why don’t you run off with her now? *Do* something. I can’t *stand* another one of these love-ins, or teach-ins, or whatever they are” (109). Joan’s task

is to hold onto their place in the social fabric of the community while Richard gratifies himself where he will.

It must be noted how easily a relationship can begin to slide toward mayhem in a tightly knit milieu such as these tony young marrieds enjoy. In *Self-Consciousness*, Updike says he found himself thrilled by “a surge of belonging” that permeated his own young married life: “we joined committees and societies, belonged to a recorder group and a poker group, played volleyball and touch football in season, read plays aloud and went Greek-dancing and gave dinner parties and attended clambakes and concerts and costume balls” (51–52). He loved what he calls the “clubbiness” and confesses: “In Ipswich my impersonation of a normal person became as good as I could make it” (55, 54). In “Waiting Up,” Joan works to ensure that Richard retains the joys of group happiness treasured by the lonely only child, isolated on a Pennsylvania farm, who found a sense of belonging as an adult. Yet, as Greiner reminds us, this section of the story is not simply Updike reporting, but Updike critiquing his protagonist: “Ignoring rules diminishes life . . . especially when the stakes are the social fabric itself” (*Other* 190). This is a crucial point for the reader, given how easy it is to elide the personae of an admirable Updike and what often seems a reprehensible Richard. If, as Pritchard suggests, the collection bristles with love, it is Joan’s actions that bring it to the surface.

“Eros Rampant,” the story that follows the bleakness of “Waiting Up,” opens with the notion that “[t]he Maples’ house is full of love” (113) and proceeds to catalog the loves of all the Maples in an eclectic list of pets and toys and musical tastes and sports-team loyalties. The narrative then abruptly lights upon Esau and Esther, the sibling cats of the household who have over the years routinely waxed incestuous (reminiscent of the Hansel-and-Gretel motif) but find themselves in a new relational mode since Esther’s recent spaying. Their feline attempts to negotiate their domestic dynamics mirror the adult Maples’ own dynamics: “Esau, sentimentally allowed to continue unfixed, now must venture from the house in quest of the bliss that had once been purely domestic. . . . One feels, unexpectedly, that Esau still loves Esther, while she merely accepts him” (114). The feline segment segues into “Mr. Maple loves Mrs. Maple,” and we learn that he is “unable to take his eyes from her, . . . captive to the absurd persuasion that the curve of her solid haunch conceals, enwraps, a precarious treasure confided to his care.” The focus then shifts to Penelope Vogel, “a quaint little secretary at [Richard’s] office who is recovering from a disastrous affair with an Antiguan” (115). Penelope is attracted only to men who can boast some African ethnicity; Richard is “too

pale for her" (121). Doubly rejected, he discovers himself to be a cuckold on the home front. What he seems to have wished for in earlier stories suddenly comes true when Joan reveals a litany of men with whom she has had dalliances. The fact of her infidelities overwhelms him: "Love, a cloudy heavy ink, inundates him from within, suffuses his palms with tingling pressure as he steps close to her"; he is "enraptured" (122). Later, at a party, Richard finds her "newly treasurable and intrinsic to his own identity. . . . [H]e has grown taller, attenuated, more elegant and humane in his opinions, airier and more mobile" (125).

The denouement is a dream sequence in which Richard descends to the kitchen in the middle of the night to find Joan engaged in yoga exercises and willing to explain her betrayals. Confessing to an affair with Harry Saxon, about whom Richard had teased her cruelly in "Giving Blood," she tells him that she did it because Harry asked: "It's hard, when men ask. You mustn't insult their male natures. There's a harmony in everything" (126). At the point when she admits to sex with strangers who "come to the door to sell you septic tanks," Richard awakens "[t]errified," his chest "soaked," to find the kitchen uninhabited but filled with the drawings of his children, created with "fingers ardently bunched around a crayon, of houses, cars, cats, and flowers" (127–28). The scene echoes his sense, after Joan's confession, of "the bases of their marriage, . . . the elemental constituents. Woman. Man. House" (123).

"Plumbing" meditates upon the new home to which they have moved. The story, like five others here, was first collected in *Museums and Women*, but not in the section of that volume titled "The Maples." Its characters, like those of "Wife-Wooing," are nameless, but these stories are included because they "appear to take place in Richard Maple's mind" (*Maples* 12). Greiner argues that "Plumbing" gets at Updike's true subjects: "Encroaching age, pursuing death, the accretions in the pipes which will eventually burn out the pump—all these are part of Updike at his best as he confronts the erosions by time" (*Other* 180). The story offers a lyrical meditation on more than one house—the new one and the one the Maples have left, which "forgot [them] in a day" (133) but which still holds a wealth of domestic memories for Richard, from the 2 a.m. hiding of Easter eggs in a tuxedo after a party to moving from room to room to pray with his children as he tucked them in. A plumber at the new house shows him the results of "mineral accretions" in the pipes: "[T]his has built up over forty, fifty years. . . . Nothing you can do about it but dig it up and replace it" (138). In a sense, Richard is trying to understand his own interior "plumbing." He notes of the plumber, "He knows my plumbing; I merely own it" and realizes that while homeowners have "living

space and a view," they also possess "a maze, a history, an archaeology of pipes and cut-ins and traps and valves." The fragility of the human spirit in its effort to make connections and form community is like "an old lead joint" that requires "[s]ixteen distinct motions" to attach; an error in any one of them means you have "lost it and ruined the joint" and must "chip it away and begin again" (131).

"The Red-Herring Theory" chips away. Wilhelm compares it to "Snowing in Greenwich Village" to show the before and after of marital integrity. Amid "a profusion of cigarette butts and emptyish glasses" after hosting a party, the Maples make disparaging evaluations of their departed guests (141). In the talk of who danced too long with whom, Joan advances the theory that public flirtation is a red herring to cover private assignations with a different partner. Richard's disapproval of both Joan's notion and her excess drinking spills into the aesthetic displeasure he takes in her dress. It makes her look pregnant when she is sitting—"the front of her waist puffed up in a nostalgic simulation of childbearing"—though she looks "regal" when she stands, wielding a brandy bottle as if it were "a sceptre in her hand" (144, 143). As Wilhelm points out ("Trail" 71), Joan has devolved from being seated in her parents' old Hitchcock chair in "Snowing" to sitting in a canvas director's chair in "Red-Herring" (*Maples* 15, 141). In other words, she has gone from modeling her parents' venerable traditions to attempting to direct Richard's restless yearnings—from having parents to being a parent, and not just of her children. That stance, combined with the dominance suggested by the sceptre, leaves her in pursuit of power but still bereft of love.

We sense that they can go no lower in their inhospitable ways with one another. Fittingly, Updike now begins to weave the web of their disconnecting. With "Sublimating," they agree not to have sex, "since sex was the only sore point in their marriage" (151). But since sexuality is the central, affirming, embodied enactment of marriage, their pact merely shows us, if not the Maples themselves, that the heart has been cut out of their union. Updike symbolizes this by having Richard gnaw on the heart of a cabbage, remembering how "his grandmother used to 'snitz' cabbage into strings for sauerkraut and give him the leftover raw hearts for a snack." He remains true to his childhood treat even after his daughter calls him "nasty" for eating a food she finds unpleasant: "Stubbornly loyal, Richard cut and nibbled his slow way to the heart," an enactment of the attenuated moves of the Maples as, over decades, they eat the heart out of their marriage (153).

Richard's meditation as he consumes the outer layers of the cabbage approaches the level of his reverence for the female body: "[C]utting a slice from one pale cheek, he marvelled across the years at the miracle of the wound, at the tender

compaction of the leaves, each tuned to its curve as tightly as a guitar string. The taste was blander than his childhood memory of it, but the texture was delicious in his mouth" (152). The heart, by contrast, "burned on his tongue so sharply that his taste buds even in their adult dullness were not disappointed" (153). He no longer wants just the outer leaves but the burning heart of a female, as when, in "Twin Beds in Rome," Joan recounts an incident that aroused "a sexual stir" in her: "Of all the things she had ever told him, this remained in his mind the most revealing, the deepest glimpse she had ever permitted into the secret woman he could never reach and had at last wearied of trying to reach" (56). Marriage is defunct when one no longer cares to know one's partner better and more deeply.

Other elements of "Sublimating" serve to exacerbate the central cabbage/heart motif. The Maples' son John is building a guillotine during a school unit on revolution. The head—cabbage or no—is yet another essential organ that goes "under the blade" when this project is introduced. And, to his family's shock, we are told, Richard "began to prune some overweening yews by the front door and was unable to stop until each branch became a stump. The yews, a rare Japanese variety, had pink soft wood maddeningly like flesh. For days thereafter, the stumps bled amber." Updike purposely chooses a tree that doubles as a human entity: Richard's wife and children will be nearly mortally wounded, and bleed for more than "days," when he deserts them. Dickie admonishes him: "They'll never grow again, Dad. . . . You didn't leave any green. There can't be any photosynthesis." But for Richard it is acceptable that this family unit "never grow again"; he has already undercut the protests by announcing, "It was them or me" (155). Updike describes a similar crisis in *Self-Consciousness*. Allergic to the family cats and suffering from bouts of asthma, but unwilling to "drown or give away Willy and Pansy," he explains, "it seemed easier to get rid of me" (102, 101).

In "Nakedness," Richard continues to work toward his riddance. He and Joan, on holiday, see two young nudists happen upon the more conventional part of the beach and get chased back to their own section by a policeman. When Joan attempts to commiserate with the young people, she is rebuffed. The story is replete with Richard's allusions to nudity and works of art: "Boschian apparitions" (167); "Masaccio's *Expulsion from Paradise*" (168); the biblical story of "Susanna and the elders" (169); "Renoir's *Bathers*," "Manet's *Olympia* [and] Goya's *Maja*" (170); "Rodin's *Thinker*" (171); and "Michelangelo's slave," "Munch's madonna," and "Ingres's urn-bearer" (173). He also alludes to literary and popular culture: Edna Pontellier's nudity at the end of *The Awakening* (170); Rodin's remark "that a woman undressing was like the sun piercing through clouds" (169); a farmer in

“an old sociology text” who fathered eleven children despite having “never seen his wife’s body naked”; another book that described an African port as “the last city on the coast where a young woman could walk naked down the main street without attracting attention”; and “an old *Time* review” of a movie that showed Brigitte Bardot “from behind, bare from head to toe” (172).

But when Richard, “a strip-show audience of one,” watches Joan disrobing as they prepare for bed, she asks, “Don’t you have something better to do? Than watch me?” He answers with a “No” that then becomes hers: “‘No,’ Joan says, in complacent firm denial” (173). We know how unfavorably in his mind this compares to a memory of one of his lovers “who had slept beside a mirror” and whose nakedness “had been as calm and broad as that of Titian’s Venus, flooding him from within like a swallowed sun” (169, 170). But now the rebuffed Richard “feels thrilled, invaded. This nakedness is new to them” (173). Luscher finds the moment positive for the Maples: even though “they cannot emulate the unaffected nudity of the couple on the beach . . . Joan’s sexual refusal brings them closer to that state” because they have been “assaulted with the defamiliarized—yet not deeroticized” (Luscher 117). The moment recalls Richard’s focus on his wife’s body in “Wife-Wooing.” A significant difference, however, is that in that story he desires his wife, with her Joycean “smackwarm” thighs (*Maples* 29). In “Nakedness” he is at some level repulsed by her.

In what Luscher calls her “sympathetically liberal” compassion for the young people who escape down the beach at a run (116), Joan compares them to Adam and Eve covering their bodies in shame in Masaccio’s painting. But Joan is flaunting her Ivy League erudition, and Richard finds this off-putting: “Richard felt her heart in the fatty casing of her body plump up, pleased with this link, satisfied to have demonstrated once again to herself the relevance of a humanistic education to modern experience” (*Maples* 168). Just before she says no to sex, he again “feels her heart in the fatty casing of her body plump up” (173). This “plumping” seems to occur when she feels powerful—for having connected a moment of lived experience to a work of art and for having caught her husband’s interest by the manner in which she disrobed. In both cases, the win is what matters—not human desire. We suspect that Richard’s “thrill” in the bedroom is that their nakedness has shown them for the estranged pair that they are. Finally, he is armed with a sense of her intimate indifference sufficient for him to take his leave. She is inherently unable to love him as he wishes to be loved—lustily. The last five stories of the book find Richard going, going, gone. The Maples’ nakedness has confirmed their arrival at a dynamic wherein all possibility for intimate human flourishing

seems lost. Richard's memory of his old lover flaunting her nakedness contrasts painfully with Joan's guarded ways. He needs to experience eros with gratuity and largesse.

The story "Separating," says James Schiff, is "the rarest gem" in a volume that represents "Updike's finest work in short fiction" (121). Updike often makes the titles of his stories read in several ways at once. Here, Joan's punishment to Richard for separating from her is to insist that he tell each of their four children separately that he is deserting the family, a clear attempt to make his pain four times as acute. But the story is full of other sorts of separating as well. Richard's uncontrollable tears at the family's last dinner together create a wall that separates the perpetrator from his victims. His final task as head of the household, replacing the lock on a porch door, separates the life he lived in this house from his new life apart from his family. Dickie's "passionate" kiss when he asks his father "Why?" separates Richard from the "white face" of the mistress who waits for him on the other side of this marriage and family because "Richard had forgotten why" (191). As Joan supports him in his dissembling with the children about the real reason for the breakup (another woman) and assumes her familiar, matter-of-fact parenting role, we sense that even in abandoning her, Richard requires Joan's help. After breaking the news to three of the children, he hugs Joan, tells her she has been "great," and "realize[s] he did not feel separated" (186). With two environments from which to take his cue—the household that has fallen into a material disrepair that is analogous to the spiritual dilapidation of their marriage and the wider, "[b]rilliant" world that has "mocked the Maples' internal misery with solid sunlight"—Richard seems at some level to *choose* misery. He is wounded by their "string of gray dialogues . . . while the earth performed its annual stunt of renewal unnoticed beyond their closed windows," and maintains a "mood of purposeful desolation" (177, 178). Schiff finds Richard at this point "a wonderfully paradoxical presence—a man who, while selfishly shattering his family's home, displays a tender and deeply engaging love for those who live there" (126).⁵

Richard's evolving attitude toward Joan leaves readers grappling with Dickie's question "Why?" which concludes "Separating." The next story, "Gesturing," takes us from their separation to their divorce. It deals with Richard's "bachelor" interlude. Joan tells him: "I've decided to kick you out. I'm going to ask you to leave town" (195). He moves to the city, into an apartment that looks onto the Hancock Building, which, as Luscher notes, is Boston's "grand gesture of architectural vision" that, like the Maples' marriage, is "ill-fated" and so serves as a "central symbol" for a marriage dissolving. In its attempt to "harmonize contradictory elements," the

structure of the Maples' union suffers "unstable pieces of the façade . . . slipping off, revealing ugly substructures such as jealousy, hypocrisy, cruelty, and selfishness" (Luscher 118). During this interlude between wives, Richard enjoys shopping and cooking for himself—"He moved like a water bug, like a skipping stone, upon the glassy tense surface of his new life" (*Maples* 202)—and hosting "conjugal" visits from both his wife and his mistress. Both women prove burdensome in making him clean the ashtrays they dirty. Their contrasting modes as smokers seem to be overarching symbols of their personhood:

[H]e would smile at Ruth's messy morgue, or at Joan's nest of filters, discreet as white pebbles in a bowl of narcissi. When he chastised Ruth for stubbing out cigarettes still so long, she pointed out, of course, with her beautiful, unblinking assumption of her own primary worth, how much better it was for *her*, for her lungs, to kill the cigarette early . . . Yet Joan's compulsive economy, her discreet death wish, was as dearly familiar to him as her tiny repressed handwriting and the tight curls of her dark pubic hair, so Richard smiled emptying her ashtrays also. (200)

In the last scene of the story, two months into their separation, Joan comes down the stairs for a dinner date with Richard, and he sees her "dressed to go out, in the snug black dress with the scalloped neckline, and a collar of Mexican silver. He was wary. He must be wary. They had had it. They must have had it" (205). He desires her.

In "Divorcing: A Fragment," Joan is trying to be a good sport but says she is suicidal and sometimes thinks she should "jump in the river" (213). Richard reminds her, "You're healthy, you have the children, money, the house, friends"—everything she had before the separation, except Richard (215). He needs her to say what he has done wrong.

In the penultimate story, "Here Come the Maples," he needs her to say, "I do." In 1976, the Updikes "were issued one of Massachusetts' first no-fault divorces" (De Bellis 474). That meant they needed to speak no harm of one another, but merely to answer the judge's question of whether they believed their marriage had "suffered an irretrievable breakdown." Richard's response, "I do," is uninflected in the narration, but Joan's hesitant response is modified with "She did not believe that, Richard knew" (233). She is giving him the divorce as one more gift from the bounty of whatever sort of love it is she bears him. In preparing him for possible additional questions in this new era of "no-fault," Richard's lawyer asks him to cite a "specific cause of the breakdown." Richard comes up with this: "We had political differences. She used to make me go on peace marches," and adds, "we didn't get

along that well sexually” (232). The lawyer labels this “personal and emotional incompatibility,” but luckily Richard never has to use the phrase. Almost from the beginning, what he and Joan have “suffered” is the overarching “incompatibility” of infidelity. In “Giving Blood,” Richard’s guilty conscience leads him to attack Joan: “It’s your smugness that is really intolerable. Your knee-jerk liberalism I don’t mind. Your sexlessness I’ve learned to live with. But that wonderfully smug, New England—I suppose we needed it to get the country founded, but in the Age of Anxiety it really does gall” (39). By the end of the story, he retracts his remarks: “Hey. I didn’t mean that about your being sexless.” But when he tries to pay for their breakfast and finds “only a single worn dollar” in his wallet, he erupts: “I work like a bastard all week for you and those insatiable brats and at the end of it what do I have?” Joan opens her pocketbook and says, “We’ll both pay”—both for the breakfast and for his outraged resentments (50–51).

“Grandparenting” is a coda of sorts that pays tribute to Joan as she and Richard, each remarried, await the birth of their daughter Judith’s first baby, who will be named after both of his grandfathers. The fact that Joan must explain to Richard who the Leo of “Richard Leo Wysocki” is (252) tells us that she has stayed more closely involved with their children in the decade since their divorce. And the fact that Judith makes her father’s first name her son’s first name is evidence of the love that Richard retains among his children. In this story, Joan attempts to show Richard the domestic hospitality that their conjugal relationship had for many years entailed. Of course, as a connoisseur of women, he spots the ways in which she has aged: she is a “plump elderly woman” with “wiggly gray hair and [a] waistless figure” (241, 243). Still, as she explains what she has read about the womb, he admires the fact that “as always, she was groping for the big picture, searching for the hidden secret, in keeping with all those sermons she had had to sit through as a child. Life is a lesson, a text with a moral” (251). In fact, he feels disposed, as he drops Joan and her husband at their hotel, to kiss her good night, but “his neck didn’t turn as easily as it used to” (252).

Only a sentimentalist would read Richard/Updike’s final words about Joan Maple—“Nobody belongs to us, except in memory” (255)—as reminiscent of Ernest Hemingway’s tribute to Hadley Richardson, the first of his four wives, in *A Moveable Feast*—“I wished I had died before I ever loved anyone but her” (210)—because the text does not sustain it. In his youth, Richard had let his parents drive him to the courthouse to be married to Joan and spent “much of the journey [with] his coat over his head, hoping to get back to sleep” (220). This surely implies the metaphorical sleep of the unawakened consciousness, of his not yet hav-

ing come of age. When he does come of age, he finds himself sought after. Barnes writes that “the narrator is a timid, even a cowardly man. That he slowly, but surely has his way with women probably has less to do with a change in his personal charm and more with the unadmitted fact that the author’s fame made him desirable and gave him unexpected opportunities, ones which Updike passed on to his narrator.” She argues that his “cheerlessness about his adulteries seems . . . only explicable by something having been left out,” which she suspects is “the typical experience of a celebrity who suddenly finds himself in sexual demand” (94).

Updike’s extraordinarily productive career offers nothing that scrutinizes his second marriage in the way this collection scrutinizes his first. In fact, Mary Pennington Updike Weatherall admitted to Donald Greiner, “I’ve gotten used to being written about” (“John Updike” 112), and in his foreword to *The Early Stories*, Updike confesses, “Perhaps I could have made a go of the literary business without my first wife’s faith, forbearance, sensitivity, and good sense, but I cannot imagine how” (x). Jeffrey Eugenides, in an introduction to his selection of great love stories, notes: “A love story can never be about full possession. The happy marriage, the requited love, the desire that never dims—these are lucky eventualities but they aren’t love stories. Love stories depend on disappointment, on unequal births and feuding families, on matrimonial boredom and at least one cold heart” (xiii). No single answer emerges to Dickie’s passionate “*Why?*” Yet despite the erosions and betrayals of time, something real *does* succeed: “He saw through her words to what she was saying—that these lovers, however we love them, are not us, are not sacred as reality is sacred. We are reality. We have made children. We gave each other our young bodies. We promised to grow old together” (*Maples* 208). Updike’s prose, its lyricism and light, give Richard and Joan Maple the sacred reality of *literary* lives. “Nobody belongs to us, except in memory”—and in books.

NOTES

1. On the extent to which Richard Maple is a version of John Updike, De Bellis says, “If one reads Updike’s work biographically, the marital tensions spanning 1956–76 that led to the Updikes’ dissolving their marriage can be detected in many short stories about Richard and Joan Maple” (475). David Foster Wallace, referring to Updike’s late work, writes that Updike “has for years been constructing protagonists who are basically all the same guy . . . and who are all clearly stand-ins for the author himself” (53).

2. “Snowing in Greenwich Village” is from *The Same Door* (1959); “Wife-Wooing” from *Pigeon Feathers* (1962); “Giving Blood” and “Twin Beds in Rome” from *The Music School* (1966); “Marching Through Boston,” “The Taste of Metal,” “Your Lover Just Called,” “Eros Rampant,” “Plumbing,” and

“Sublimating” from *Museums and Women* (1972); and “Separating” and “Here Come the Maples” from *Problems* (1979). Uncollected before *Too Far to Go* were “Waiting Up,” “The Red-Herring Theory,” “Nakedness,” and “Gesturing”; “Divorcing: A Fragment” had never been published even as a magazine story. Neither “Wife-Wooing” nor “Plumbing” names the characters; it was Updike’s sense that these stories are about the Maples that led him to include them in the 1979 collection, a tie-in for a television movie. “Grandparenting” is from *The Afterlife* (1994) and marks the only post-1970s appearance of the Maples.

3. Robert Detweiler’s observation that “metaphors of the void permeate these tales” (171) fits with Updike’s own confession of “the irremediable grief in just living, in just going on” that he felt in his boyhood home (Plath 28). In the early years of his marriage, he experienced bouts of the void and of grief that become transformed in these stories into aggression toward Joan. To Jane Barnes, the Updikean protagonist suffers some lack that causes stasis: “his conflicts are so well-balanced that he is paralyzed” (84). Joan cannot solve his angst. As Barnes clearly implies, he did not fully *choose* his first wife since the subconscious purpose of their marriage was to reenact the angst-ridden union of his parents and put it to rights.

4. The “infinite drabness” that possesses Richard is what Tony Tanner calls “dread”: Updike’s prose “give[s] the impression of being a somewhat rococo version of fairly conventional naturalism, but at its best it is edged with dread”; indeed, “the basic dread in Updike’s work [is] the fear of death, the fact of decay and the inevitable collapse into nothingness” (275). In *Self-Consciousness* Updike speaks of “a grayness” that fell over his life in his twenties after a diagnosis of emphysema, “a certain desperation . . . an oppressive blanket of funk” as he realized “that in a few decades we would all be dead” (97). He recalls “gray moments, in which my spirit could scarcely breathe, . . . scattered over a period of years; to give myself brightness and air I read Karl Barth and fell in love with other men’s wives” (98). Not only loving women but also religion vouchsafed his spirit and his literary productivity: “In the morning light one can write breezily, without the slightest acceleration of one’s pulse, about what one cannot contemplate in the dark without turning in panic to God” (226). That central Updikean triptych—sex, religion, and art—from “The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood” represents what he sees as “the three great secret things”; George Hunt has argued that they “characterize the predominant subject matter, thematic concerns, and central questions found throughout his adult fiction” (2).

5. C. S. Lewis would likely deem his choice as “done under the influence of a soaring and iridescent Eros” in ways that “may involve breaking a wife’s heart, deceiving a husband, betraying a friend, polluting hospitality and deserting your children.” Lewis continues, “It has not pleased God that the distinction between a sin and a duty should turn on fine feelings” (92). In his memoirs and interviews, Updike attributes his religious perspective to having read “Chesterton, Eliot, Unamuno, Kierkegaard, [and] Karl Barth” (*Self-Consciousness* 230). He does not name Lewis—likely too much a moralist for Updike’s “faith, not works” Lutheran perspective. Certainly he disdains the presumption of “the author as preacher or his work as preachment” because the morality of a work comes not from delineating highly moral characters but from “polishing and shaping it to the point where it gives aesthetic delight.” In fact, Updike finds that the “social impulses” that drive the writer “to communicate, to share, to please, to influence” differ dramatically from the need to set an ethical example. For Updike, the religiosity of a writer’s life comes not from ethical choices as much as from paying “homage to what is,” rather than what should be; doing that work well serves as a “praise of

the Lord [and] gratitude for being here" ("A Writer's Duty"). He therefore provides no disclaimer with regard to his characters; he doesn't need to bring them to a bad end just because they do bad deeds. The Maples stories do not serve as a morality play. The closer Richard gets to deserting his family and forming a tie with a new woman, the more generous he becomes in evaluating the mother of his children and the more he still requires her help.

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Motifs of Loss in *The Afterlife*

BRIAN DUFFY

Although little time has passed since John Updike's death, one might risk the opinion that if posterity passes a favorable judgment on his fiction it will be due in large measure to his short stories (and, no doubt, the Rabbit tetralogy). Notwithstanding his proficiency in a variety of literary forms, Updike's stories, by virtue of their rootedness in the realities of middle-class, small-town and suburban American life, their imaginative encapsulation of the writer's own trajectory, and Updike's mastery of an enduring form, may well come to be seen—in contrast to the poignant verdict reached by Henry Bech on his own literary output—as the masterpieces of his oeuvre that ensure his reputation.¹

While writers are usually aware of their literary antecedents and heritage, Updike was exceptional in the depth of his reflection on literatures past and present; in this, there was something of the scholar in him. Where his own practice of the short-story form is concerned, one is struck by the section in *Hugging the Shore* that is devoted to what he calls "Tales." Here Updike considers, in addition to collections of Italian folktales and the creation tales of the Makiritare tribe of southern Venezuela, the work of Bruno Bettelheim on fairy tales and Claude Lévi-Strauss on myths. Updike's interest in such theoretical works on folk literature is intriguing, as the short story is the most obvious successor to the folktale, due to its relative brevity and ability to be consumed at a single sitting. A distinguishing and, indeed, essential feature of the folktale is the narrative motif. A motif is any element (a situation, action, object, image, experience, place, character type, and so forth) that recurs in a literary text and that, through its recurrence, is used to support a theme, or themes. A motif, then, is a concrete textual element, as op-

posed to the abstraction or generality of a theme. It may be understood, in this context, as a formal means to a thematic end. The eminent folklore scholar Stith Thompson remarks on “the great similarity in the content of stories of the most varied peoples. The same tale types and narrative motifs are found scattered over the world” (6). We should not be surprised, then, that John Updike, with his interest in folktales, should turn to the convention of the motif in his own short stories. Although literature has moved away from the rigid formal structure of folk narratives, Updike saw how older narrative modes could be adapted to serve the modern short story. In *The Afterlife and Other Stories* (1994), for example, one finds “Brother Grasshopper,” an elaboration on the fables of Aesop and La Fontaine, as well as variations of the Tristan and Isolde legend and the Bluebeard folktale.

Critics have identified Updike’s use of motifs in his earliest stories. Robert Detweiler sees a bed motif contributing to the theme of adultery in the first Maples story, “Snowing in Greenwich Village” (13–14)² and identifies motifs in “The Doctor’s Wife” (58), “The Music School” (94–95), and another Maples story, “Giving Blood” (91–92). It is, in fact, in the Maples stories that critics have most often detected Updike’s recourse to motifs. Robert Luscher notes that “most” of the Maples stories “contain recurrent motifs,” highlighting, among others, “Richard’s illnesses” and “images of voids” (108–09). Albert Wilhelm devotes a short article to Updike’s deployment of the “trail-of-bread-crumbs motif” from the Hansel and Gretel tale in two Maples stories, “Giving Blood” and “Here Come the Maples,” analyzing its role in the central metaphor of the Maples’ life together as a journey, where reversing the trajectory of their marriage is no longer possible and they “can solve their problems . . . only by walking on into the woods” (73). Peter Donahue considers the contribution of the martini motif to the theme of Richard Maple’s virility in “Your Lover Just Called,” although he does not use the term *motif* in his discussion (364). James Schiff highlights “recurring motifs” in “Separating,” particularly those of walls, windows and doors, indicating the obstacles and thresholds to be negotiated by Richard in leaving his family (122–23). And Detweiler and Luscher each identify dominant motifs in the motif-rich Maples story “Gesturing,” notably those of physical gestures, mirrors, and the marriage vows etched into the glass of Richard’s apartment window.³

In the context of a discussion of motifs, “Gesturing” is instructive, as the story exemplifies a recurring formal feature of Updike’s fiction, to which the author himself alluded. Speaking about his understanding of the specific competence of narrative, Updike rejected the dominance of “psychological insights” in favor of what he called “[t]he author’s deepest pride, as I have experienced it,” namely “his

ability to keep an organized mass of images moving forward” (Plath 44). Updike’s intention here was to privilege the formal features of narrative over content and themes, and motifs clearly have a place in his “organized mass of images” (some of his motifs, indeed, are also images). In the same interview, he underlined the importance of “pattern” in narrative (45), and he used the same term in another interview when discussing the influence of myth on his fiction. Myth is part of the patterning that constitutes what Updike called the “music that has its formal side” in his work. These formal features—myth, motifs, images, metaphors, and symbols—are what he terms the “secrets” (52), the hidden “organized mass of images” inserted into his narratives that accord them shape, movement, and direction. As we will see, Updike’s images and motifs do indeed create patterns in his narratives; such is the case in “Gesturing,” where time, emplotment, and the chronology of events are attenuated, yielding to the configuring narrative force of an essentially achronic network of motifs and images.

This essay will consider how Updike’s motifs support the theme of loss in three stories from *The Afterlife*: “Short Easter,” “The Journey to the Dead,” and “The Other Side of the Street.” In Updike’s short-story output, *The Afterlife* marks the beginning of what could be termed Late Updike. There is a new alertness to death: the central concern of the collection is alluded to in its title, and many of the stories explore how men moving into their sixties confront their mortality and the attendant anxieties of aging, decline, and loss. These characters have become conscious, as has the protagonist of “Playing with Dynamite,” that they are “[l]iving now in death’s immediate neighborhood” (*Afterlife* 253).

Fogel, the protagonist of “Short Easter,” is typical of several male characters in the collection who find that life after sixty offers less attractive excitations than those of earlier years: “In the daily rub he discovered all sorts of fresh reasons for irritation” (93). The story’s title hints at thematic possibilities: the sensation of the diminishing time of a life, and the complex metaphorical play of death and rebirth at Easter. There is no literal death in the story; Fogel does, however, experience aging as a form of withdrawal from life, and the story ends with a metaphorical death. As for loss, it comes to Fogel as a slow diminishment—in “[h]is body’s accumulating failures” (94), his “absent-mindedness” (97), and his inability to tolerate the “pure intimidation” that, he concludes, is “the aim of eighty-five percent of all human behavior” (94). This bitter reflection is occasioned by a display of young-male bravado that obliges Fogel to concede defeat in a macho test of will that he and another driver engage in. That Fogel’s adversary here is a young man

is an important detail, as it sets up the deployment of a motif that contributes to and develops the themes of loss and death in the story.

The young man embodies the potential and power to flirt with and appeal to women; the motif employed by Updike is the female voice, the thematic associations of which are established in a scene witnessed by Fogel a few months prior to Easter Sunday. On a flight from New York to Boston, “a young man and woman, both about thirty, who evidently had not known each other before taking seats side by side,” sit across the aisle from Fogel. Their conversation develops into a flirtation, as they employ their seductive wiles to attract each other. These male and female performances are captured in their hand movements, but above all in their voices, particularly that of the young woman. Her voice does “a penetrating dance, tireless and insistent, though her voice was high and light,” as if, Fogel imagines, she is “testing her powers.” He notes her “soft quick giggle, a captivating titter, a kind of shimmer of shyness in which she wrapped her unrelenting verbal assault upon her seatmate.” The ethereal dance of her voice, “throwing her words out in a feathery way, as if to soften their impact,” accord it a quality that lodges it firmly in Fogel’s consciousness (95). The text goes on to record the young man’s self-consciously virile but physically graceless response before returning to focus on Fogel’s awareness of “the feathery, questioning, giggling, excited voice” of the young woman (96). And with this first recurrence of the properties of a woman’s voice, the motif is set in motion.

The woman’s voice triggers a memory for Fogel of how he “had been talked to, in the course of his life, by a woman in a voice exactly like this,” a woman, we learn, who had been his mistress: “It had been a bath, her voice, in which he grew weightless, an iridescent bubbly uplifting in which floated always a question, the lilting teasing female question, to which his maleness, clumsy and slow to comprehend though it was, was the only answer” (96). Note how carefully Updike, in describing the voice of Fogel’s mistress, elaborates on the properties attributed to the voice of the young woman on the plane, reinforcing those properties as essential traits of a particular kind of female voice: “high,” “light,” “soft,” “shimmer,” “feathery,” and “questioning,” used to describe the first voice, are rendered as “bubbly,” “uplifting,” “floated,” “lilting,” and “question” in relation to the second voice; the “tireless and insistent” quality of the first becomes the perpetual interrogation and expectancy of the second.

The female voice is thus established as a motif that supports several connected themes: first, a certain power that women have over men, due to the magnetism of their charms; second, the female need to receive a reassuring response to the

anxious question posed by male insufficiency; third, men's inability to provide a satisfactory response beyond the fact of their lumpen, heavy presence; and, finally, the theme of loss—we learn that the affair between Fogel and his mistress came to “an unhappy end” some twenty years earlier. The ending of the affair, we are led to understand, marked for Fogel his exclusion from a vital stimulation and pleasure of life, captured in the scene of the passengers leaving the plane: “Fogel forgot to look, as he had been intending, at the young woman, to check out her height, her hips, her face full on, her lovely long lively hands, to see if they were truly ringless.” Fogel has the eyes and intentions of a covetous and competitive male, but this “elderly man” is no longer a player in the game of seduction, a loss expressed through the motif of the female voice: his failure to “check out” the young woman means that she “remained with him only as a voice, the perennial voice of flirtation” (96).

The motif of the female voice is used to develop the theme—through Fogel's relationship with his wife—of the mismatch between the expectations and needs of men and women. The text notes that “this woman's powers were long established” (97) as his wife harangues Fogel, as passive here as he had been with his mistress, into helping her do some early spring garden work: “This monologue, he recognized, was a matured version, hardened into jagged edges and points that prodded and hurt, of the young woman's feathery, immersing discourse across the airplane aisle—a version of that female insistence upon getting male attention.” The young woman's voice has become transmuted, in Fogel's perception, into the perennial female “monologue” of power over and dissatisfaction with men. Fogel, we infer, has never been able to provide an adequate answer to female questioning, and must now “[m]eekly, draggingly” do as he is told (98). Women's dissatisfaction with men has increased female power, just as men's offering of their mere passive presence has led to a loss of male influence and authority.⁴

The motif traces Fogel's decline and accumulating losses. When his affair comes to an end, his former mistress declines to invite him and his family to an Easter-egg hunt her family organizes annually. Viewing a home movie of that event some months later at the home of friends, Fogel is haunted by his own absence: “he was not in it; no matter how the camera panned and skidded from group to group, Fogel was invisible.” There is an existential unease in Fogel's anxious search for a sign of his presence in the home movie, confirmed by his perception of his former mistress's face in the film, “her lips moving to frame a gay feathery voice that was inaudible” (99). Here is the moment of final exclusion from the alluring world of female enchantment, which, for Fogel, a virile man of barely

forty years at the time, constitutes an unbearable loss: his former mistress's inaudible voice cuts him off from "the perennial voice of flirtation." His sensitivity to his own invisibility bespeaks a man experiencing exclusion and absence as a form of existential death. Fogel's sense of loss in this scene is echoed structurally—and comically—in his attendance twenty years later at another Easter party; now it is mostly widows who come up to speak to him. The voice motif is employed yet again to underline that the female voice to which the aging Fogel is exposed still contains a demand for male attention, but stripped now of all flirtation: one elderly woman "pressed her wrinkled face upward toward him. . . , and launched her voice into an insistent sweet sing-song." And Fogel is still suffering from an existential disquiet about invisibility: "He regretted that no movie camera . . . was at work recording the fact that he was here, at this party: that he had been invited" (100). Fogel is still alive, but thinly; documentary evidence and the witness of others are needed to counter a sense of a diminishing presence in his own life.

The motif has an important final function in transforming Fogel's existential insubstantiality into a metaphorical death. Unable to resist his tiredness on this Easter Sunday, he goes up to his son's old bedroom to sleep, accompanied by what has become the soundtrack of his life—a woman's voice: "his wife could be heard chattering on the telephone to one of her myriad of woman friends" (101). Fogel's sleep (itself a metaphorical death, a parallel to the death of Christ) produces an unsettling dream, his emergence from which is rendered as a rebirth, his own Easter "resurrection." But he awakens into the "dusky" light of evening, feeling ragged and disoriented. He instinctively seeks the sound to which his male existence has become attuned: "He listened for his wife's voice from their bedroom and heard nothing. He was frightened. He lay half curled up on the narrow bed like a fetus that has lost flexibility. A curve of terror chilled his abdomen." Fogel's experience of an Easter rebirth is less a resurrection than a passage into death: what he experiences is "the weight, the atrocious weight, of coming again to life," rendered explicitly as a fall. The existential anguish of earlier phases of his life returns to him in the absence of the female voice, the Sirens' song of seduction and flirtation, the voice that had always tried to draw him out of his male torpor and passivity: "Everything seemed still in place, yet something was immensely missing" (102).

The motif of the female voice is but one of several employed by Updike in the story. It is significant that the opening scene presents a memory of childhood happiness for Fogel, occasioned by "a magical peep into a big sugar egg." The contents of the egg are carefully noted: "a thatch-roofed cottage, a rabbit wearing a vest, a fringe of purple flowers, a receding path and paper mountains—all

bathed in an unexpectedly brilliant light. . . . There must have been a hole in the egg besides the one he peeped into, a kind of skylight, admitting to this miniature world a celestial illumination" (92). All of these elements will return in the story to provide a contrast with the losses and defeats of adult life. The purple flowers will split into two motifs. The color returns in the "glistening purple dress" (99) worn by his former mistress in the home movie from which Fogel is absent and recurs mockingly in the "purplish dress" (100) worn by the elderly woman at the second Easter party. The flowers recur in forsythia and azaleas, both of which mature into purple, which ties them to another motif, that of nature's life cycle, and thus of Fogel's own life cycle, thereby reinforcing the themes of life's inevitable movement toward death and of Fogel's growing sense of his mortality.

If the sugar-egg motifs split, they also combine, as color and scenery, in the "lavender mountains" in a televised golf tournament (100-01); another tournament that Fogel watches presents a scene of spring renewal and vigor: there are "trees in tender first leaf and azaleas in lurid bloom" and "[y]oung blond men" playing golf. Here is the life—renewing, virile—to which Fogel no longer belongs: he is slumped in his chair, tired, aching, feeling the weight of "a crushing accumulation" (101). The rabbit returns in the closing rebirth scene, when Fogel, to allay his dread upon waking, seeks comfort in the familiar. But the celestial illumination of the sugar egg has become a tenebrous room, and the "stuffed rabbit wearing a vest" that he sees cannot allay the sense of "something . . . immensely missing" (102). Similarly, the "skylight" that facilitates the illumination of the egg recurs in the scene with the elderly woman, in whom is combined the various motifs that indicate the retreat of pleasure from Fogel's life: in her purple dress, speaking in her insistent sing-song voice, she pushes "her wrinkled face upward toward him as if straining to see through a besmirched skylight" (100). Finally, the elements that constitute the illuminated and idealized domestic scene in the sugar egg are recalled in the domestic scene of Fogel's dream by way of the "busy lit stage of his subconscious" (101), the presence of his parents, and Fogel himself clutching his teddy bear. The sugar egg and the dream constitute a structural framing of the story whose meaning is clear: the way Fogel "fell through into wakefulness" (102) is less a resurrection than a reminder of his symbolic expulsion from an Edenic paradise, his own version of the original Fall into a degraded life, where the final phase of the journey to death has begun.

In "Short Easter" Updike invents a number of motifs to support the themes of his story. In "The Journey to the Dead," however, the provenance of the motifs em-

ployed is quite different, reminding us again of Updike's awareness of literary tradition: the narrative is determined by the ready-made motifs of a long-established myth, at the heart of which is the familiar motif of the journey to the underworld.⁵ That much is discernible from a careful reading of the story. Of greater interest is the manner in which Updike goes beyond merely associating his story with a well-known myth from Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid* for purposes of thematic resonance: in "The Journey to the Dead," he does nothing less than construct an entire narrative upon a series of interrelated motifs. The story's structure is determined by two encounters with what is depicted as an underworld, the first rendered as journey and arrival, the second as descent and visit. Updike, in fact, splits his essential motif in two, into journey and underworld. And, here again, he goes beyond merely attaching his story to a ready-made motif: he augments the individual elements of the dominant motif with an extensive network of motifs of his own. The journey motif is supplemented by motifs of departure, thresholds, and passages, and the underworld motif by motifs of descent and death. This network of interrelated motifs furnishes the story with a structural framework, a kind of scaffolding, within which the narrative is constructed.

The plot concerns the renewed acquaintance of old college friends Marty Fredericks and Arlene Quint. Arlene is now suffering from cancer, and one day asks Fredericks to drive her to hospital. He subsequently visits her in her apartment on several occasions and makes a final visit to her in the hospital after she has a stroke. While the story develops a number of themes relating to Fredericks's and Arlene's failed marriages, their former spouses, and their friendship in earlier years, the central theme is the attitude of the living toward the dying and death. Both the journey and underworld motifs support the theme of segregated worlds in which the living keep their distance from the dying, as if the latter, already claimed by death, are no longer of the living but have become unwelcome *memento mori*.

The theme of segregated worlds is facilitated particularly by the motif of the underworld and is set in motion by Fredericks's renewed contact with Arlene at a party in Boston. The underworld is not evoked explicitly in this scene, as Fredericks does not yet know that Arlene has "had a cancer scare" (56), but the way is paved for its use as motif by a description of Arlene's relationship to space; height and descent are evoked in terms that have a metaphorical resonance, which increases as these motifs recur. Thus, the party takes place in the elevated space of an artist's loft, in which Arlene "sat up on a table swinging her plump legs," like "a little girl perched up on a high wall" (55, 56). Beside her, "space fell away through a big steel-mullioned industrial window onto the lights of the city," and the text

emphasizes that “nothing . . . looked higher” than the loft (55). The progress of Arlene’s illness is subsequently depicted as a movement of descent toward death, indicated by the continuation of the spatial motif when Fredericks visits her at home: “Her apartment was . . . not so high as the artist’s loft” (64). The text, indeed, gestures toward its own functioning by using the same metaphorical parameters of the spatial motifs to record the state of Arlene’s health in this middle phase: “She had ups and downs, but the trend seemed down” (68). And when her stroke brings her to hospital for the final descent into death, Fredericks arrives at her room after having “rode down in an elevator” from a parking structure (71). Arlene’s spatial descent is complete: from the heights of apparent good health and “happiness” (56), she has descended, via the way station of temporary release of an apparent remission, to the underworld of the dying.

If the underworld is not represented in an explicit manner in the early scene in the artist’s loft, it is nonetheless suggested: from the loft’s elevated perch can be seen the otherworld of down below. The lights, colors, and implied darkness suggest the atmosphere of a different and harsher world: “the lights of the city, amber and platinum and blurred dabs of neon red, . . . the streets and brick rows streaming beneath them like the lights of an airport during takeoff” (55). It is to this world that the characters must inevitably descend, which they do when Fredericks drives Arlene to hospital. The descent of evening and the amber and red, now conflated, recur in the “great blocks of shadow and orange glare as the sun sank over the Fens.” As Fredericks sets out to pick up Arlene at her apartment, it is “dark enough to use his headlights” (57). Their arrival at the hospital develops and strengthens the idea of the underworld, again through the motif of the glare of lights: “As he gently pulled up at the entrance, Fredericks had the impression of bustling all-hours brightness that an airport gives . . . [Arlene’s] face was turned toward the light pouring through the glass doors of the hospital lobby” (59).

The underworld is finally explicitly evoked when Fredericks, “a classics major,” recalls his college reading of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* and their lurid descriptions of an otherworld peopled by the dead. He remembers from these texts how “the dead stare mutely,” are “wordless” and “angry,” and listen “with fixed eyes and a countenance of stone” to the living (62). Updike’s motif of the underworld is fully realized as Fredericks arrives at the hospital to visit Arlene for the last time:

He rode down in an elevator whose interior was painted red, and followed yellow arrows through murky corridors of cement and tile. . . . He threaded his way through corridors milling with pale spectres—white-clad nurses in thick-soled shoes, doctors with cotton lab coats flapping, unconscious patients pushed on gurneys like boats

with IV poles for masts, stricken visitors clinging to one another in family clumps and looking lost and pasty in the harsh fluorescent light. . . . Though the hospital was twelve stories tall, it all felt underground, mazelike. (71)

Apart from the obvious signs of the underworld of the dying (“pale spectres,” “unconscious patients,” “underground”), one notes the recurring motifs of darkness, artificial lights and colors (the latter two often merging); beyond these, the “boats,” “masts” and “flapping” coats recall Odysseus sailing to Hades. And when Fredericks finally reaches Arlene in her hospital room, the motifs associated with Homer’s and Virgil’s dead are duly transferred to her: her “eyes burned at him from within a startled, stony fury. She could not speak” (72).

Throughout the story, an invisible barrier has separated Fredericks and Arlene—she belongs to the dying, and he to the living. Early on, he quickly suppresses any idea of becoming romantically involved with her: “The disease figured in his mind as another reason to let Arlene alone. She was taken” (56). Fredericks visits Arlene over the summer, but only to have her recall their shared past and to be warmed by the “sun of youth [that] dappled their reminiscences” (66), a return to an enchanting past that is Fredericks’s way of seeking to suspend his own inevitable journey to death. The theme of the living’s avoidance of the dying is played out in the final scene as Fredericks, “shamed by the shining unblinking fury of Arlene’s eyes,” promises, “insincerely, to come again, and, like heroes before him, fled” (73).

The other element of the dominant motif, that of the journey, exerts its influence on the story in structural terms, as Fredericks makes his two journeys to the underworld of the hospital. The second journey, as discussed above, focuses on a visit to the underworld, while the first is rendered as an epic struggle to reach one’s destination. Yet the journey motif is merely the foundation of a much more complex construction in which Updike elaborates a network of complementary motifs relating to departure, thresholds, and passages. The landscape of the journey to the hospital and the eventual arrival there is twice associated with airports as sites of journeying and departure, and Arlene herself on the first journey to the hospital is presented as an emigrant, “carrying a little suitcase” and associated with her grandparents who “had emigrated from Macedonia” (57). As for the journey to the hospital itself, it is filled with difficulties, if not as arduous as the journey to Hades. Darkness has descended, and Fredericks “inche[s] through the rush-hour traffic” to Arlene’s apartment (57). Together they drive to the hos-

pital: "The rush hour was at its worst, as darkness deepened, and there were many stops and starts." There is everywhere a sense of obstacle and struggle: "a cross street, a principal artery, was jammed solid" (58). They finally reach the hospital, which resembles "a railroad terminal in the old days—a constant grand liveliness of comings and goings," the point of departure for the great final journey (59).

Of equal significance as the journey motif are the extensive descriptions of Fredericks's car. As he drives Arlene to the hospital, the car is figured as both antechamber to the underworld and as Odysseus's raft. As antechamber, it is where Fredericks is acutely aware of "the immense motions, the revolutions of mortality, taking place inside [Arlene], next to him in the shuddering, cold, slashed cave of the car" (58). Like Odysseus's raft after the battering of Poseidon's storm, it is "decrepit," with "its left fender dented, its canvas top slashed," and is "rusty and old" (57, 58). And, like the raft, it finally disintegrates: on Fredericks's arrival for his second visit to the hospital, we learn that the car "had fallen apart, its body so rusted he could see the asphalt skimming by beneath his feet" (71). Through these references and recurrences, the car, as the vehicle that transports Arlene, becomes a motif of decline, disintegration, and death.

The final cluster of journey-related motifs emphasizes the crossing of thresholds and the traversing of passages, reinforcing the notion of a barrier between the worlds of the living and the dying. Arriving at the hospital after her wearisome journey, Arlene turns to face "the light pouring through the glass doors of the hospital lobby" (59); she leaves Fredericks's world of the living and "passed through the glass doors and did not look back" (60). When Fredericks arrives for his second and final visit to Arlene in hospital, he enters the otherworld of the dying by "push[ing] through the glass doors" (71). Earlier, he wonders why his elderly neighbors "do not seem to inhabit a world much different" from his own, although they stand "in death's very gateway" (62). And Arlene's view through the window of her apartment of "a strip of old-fashioned park" and "a stone foot-bridge arched over a marshy creek" (64) is transmuted into the view from her hospital room of "a great ugly iron bridge spotted with red rustproofing paint and crawling with cars" (72). Here, Updike carefully gathers together the resonances of several of his motifs in a final *über*-motif—the rusted metal of the decaying car, the red of the garish streets, the seedy Boschian atmosphere of down below, and the crossing of the final passage to the world of the dead. Fredericks and Arlene recognize their separate destinies: he will flee his mortality and return to life, and she will cross the bridge on her final journey to death.⁶

There would be no need to proceed to a discussion of “The Other Side of the Street” were it not for the fact that the function of the story’s dominant motif differs from those of the other two stories. In “Short Easter” Updike creates and deploys a number of interrelated motifs to support his themes, while in “The Journey to the Dead” he exploits and augments a familiar motif from classical mythology in a manner that influences the narrative’s structure as well as its themes. In “The Other Side of the Street” the dominant motif—a garden swing—is again his own, but it functions as more than simple support to the story’s themes: it is also the recurring expression of a binarism at the heart of the story. One might speculate that this binarism was instrumental in determining both the shape and movement of the story, that it was one of the story’s founding ideas; it certainly accords the story its defining imagery and central metaphor.

The protagonist, Rentschler, returns to Hayesville in his native Pennsylvania, brought back by the death of his mother to a state where he “hadn’t lived . . . for forty years.” Rentschler’s return confronts him with the inevitable consequences of a long absence: so much seems “alien,” and the topography of his childhood is no longer to be found. He notices, too, as he tidies up his mother’s affairs, that he has lost the “regional manner,” most visible in the Hayesville way of “going that extra mile” in word and deed (136, 137).

The shape and dynamics of the story emerge from the configuration of physical space suggested in the title: Rentschler’s childhood home on Chestnut Street was one of a group of houses facing those on the other side of the street. The different worlds represented by Rentschler’s house and that of his playmate Wilma Anna Emmelfoss across the street set up a fundamental binarism: two sides of the street; two family homes; two worlds of contrasting social status, values and aesthetic sensibilities; two potentials for childhood happiness; and, in Rentschler’s childhood experience, two spaces in reciprocal relation—his view of his family home was influenced by the example and experience of Wilma Anna’s. The story evolves on two temporal lines, one in the present as Rentschler encounters the notary public who lives in the house beside Wilma Anna’s, and one in the past as he recalls the two worlds he inhabited as a child. These lines converge thematically at story’s end as Rentschler, forty years on, looks once again on what has been developed as the dominant motif: a treasured garden swing in Wilma Anna’s back yard.

The contrasting meanings of the two sides of the street are communicated in their binary spatial relationship, with Updike again exploiting the metaphorical

resonances of up and down: “Rentschler had lived on the low side of the street, with his family’s yard sloping down to the truck garden and the chicken house” (138). This location develops social and aesthetic resonances as Rentschler recalls the unattractive back garden of his family home, with its stump for beheading chickens and “musty stench of chicken dung” (137). To reach the houses on the other side of the street, one had to ascend “long flights of steps.” Here, too, the spatial relationship is not merely physical: “The elevated houses across the street had seemed to be more alive than his, more packed with blessings” (138). So begins the comparison of these contrasting worlds. Rentschler’s house seemed sad and defeated, “lonely” (143); the family eventually had to leave their home and Hayesville when Rentschler’s father lost his job to a returning veteran in 1945. Climbing the steps to Wilma Anna’s house as a child, Rentschler entered another world: the furniture and ornaments were expensive and elegant, neatly arranged and harmoniously integrated; at Christmas, with its decorations and presents, “the parlor seemed a magical cave” (139). But it is above all the gardens that articulate the contrasting aesthetics and social status of these opposing worlds. If the defining feature of the Rentschler garden was the chicken house, at the Emmelfosses’ it was one of the “magical pleasures” to be found in this world: “a double garden swing in a kind of bower of hollyhocks and morning glories” (138).

In its next appearance, the swing becomes a motif that captures and emphasizes the binarism represented by Rentschler’s and Wilma Anna’s opposing worlds:

From that lonely house he would cross Chestnut Street and come play with Wilma Anna. In her back yard there was an enchanted, luxurious plaything, a white wooden swing, two facing seats suspended in a frame upon which morning glories had been encouraged to grow. She in her starchy little dress would swing forward as he swung back, and then backward as he swung toward her, her face in the sun-dapple utterly solemn and dimly expectant . . . (143–44)

There is an impressive economy here in the deployment of the motif. The swing becomes a symbol of the happiness and enchantment brought into Rentschler’s life; it brings together the children of binary genders who play together; it hints at the budding intimacy of these young solitaries; and the “two facing seats” echo the two facing houses on either side of the street. The back-and-forth movement of the swing also captures the essential movement of Rentschler’s childhood, his arrivals in and departures from these two houses, the poles of his existence that constituted a kind of force field, irresistibly drawing him to the magic of one and inevitably pulling him back by duty to the other. Finally, the movement of the

swing mirrors the movement of the text as the latter enacts the reciprocity of opposing but interacting worlds, and is suggestive, too, of what may well have been Updike's formative idea and defining metaphor: the oscillating movement of a pendulum.

As the story moves toward its conclusion, the swing is accorded new and important meanings. Its status as something of a sacred object is reinforced when Georgene, the notary public, tells Rentschler, to his amazement, that Wilma Anna still lives in her house and has "just had that garden swing painted again. She cares for it like it's a real antique" (145). Wilma Anna's preservation of this sacred object serves, in Rentschler's mind, to embalm his childhood experiences in her house as an idyllic period of supreme happiness. In the fading light the swing, seen from Georgene's house, glows enough to be visible, "a patch of white in the darkness, and a blurred white framework around it" (146), like the light of a distant star traveling through time into Rentschler's present.

The garden swing motif has now been set up to achieve its final effect as the temporal lines of past and present converge. The chicken house and the swing are the totemic objects of the two family gardens, now seen by Rentschler as the spaces that encapsulated the contrasting worlds of his childhood. He gazes upon the swing, recalling once again its "swinging back and forth, back and forth," and then enters Georgene's garden, where he is engulfed by an overwhelming sense of loss:

These secret yards, straight and narrow, had been the essence of the happiness on this side of the street . . . Rentschler inhaled Hayesville happiness; he saw his entire life, past and to come, as an errant encircling of this forgotten center. His childhood backyard . . . had been comparatively sad and disorderly. His family had not quite had the Hayesville secret. It was right that they had been forced to move. (146)

The motif of the swing gathers its final significance as it triggers, along with the garden, Rentschler's mournful epiphany; and it is indeed an epiphany, and not simply a momentary jag of nostalgia. The returning "pioneer," back from the west in his native Pennsylvania where up until now he has felt himself "an alien" (145), has finally returned home, but it is his recognition that this has always been home that has him conceive of his "entire life" as an exclusion and displacement. Here is another story in *The Afterlife* that ends with something "immensely missing." But Rentschler's loss is greater than Fogel's in "Short Easter": Fogel is moving slowly, but not tragically, into decline and death; Rentschler's epiphany is that his whole life has been spent in exile, a punishment and banishment initiated by his original expulsion from home. The word *errant* is powerful here: Rentschler has

led a life of wandering, straying from the glowing, pure white center of harmony and happiness. In his loss, he can feel “nothing but wonder” for “Wilma Anna’s majestically rooted life” at the center of the world, at home (147).

The story concludes, as if to motion toward its own binary operation, with a final oscillation. As Rentschler leaves Georgene’s house, he feels “dismissed,” echoing his childhood expulsion from this world when his family had to leave Hayesville. In a reaction of self-consolation, he wills an antidote to this lifelong exclusion: “Stepping into the glittery November chill, he was dazzled to see the house on the other side of the street ablaze; the porch light and front-room lamps were lit up as if to welcome a visitor, a visitor, it seemed clear to him, long expected and much beloved” (147). In a conflation of the two temporal lines of the story, the motif of the garden swing exercises its final influence on the text: the pendulum swings one last time from one side of the street to the other as the child who had always to return to his “lonely” house and the adult who is condemned to a life of displacement converge to fantasize a magical, belated admission to paradise, a return to the family home across the street that would resemble the world on the other side of the street.

These three stories invite one to reflect on the theme of loss in Updike, and lead one to conclude that the most profound articulation of loss in his short fiction is that occasioned by the anguish of mortality.⁷ One of the “intrinsic stresses in the human condition” that Updike highlighted in a 1971 interview was that “you foresee your own death” (Plath 61). Awareness of mortality, indeed, is a theme that links Early and Late Updike. In “Pigeon Feathers,” (1960), 14-year-old David Kern is visited and subsequently terrified by the premonition of his death, and manages to overcome his distress only through a consoling little narrative he constructs in which God, “who had lavished such craft” upon the pigeons David has just killed, “would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever” (*The Early Stories*, 33). Thus released into immortality, David is free to project himself into his future. The protagonists of the three stories from *The Afterlife* can have no such illusions: if they project themselves into the future, they see only death. Fogel and Fredericks, in particular, are explicitly troubled by the anticipation of death. The only way to escape this vision is to look the other way, to the past, where life was untainted by intimations of mortality. Only life can counter death, even if offered in the evanescent textures of memory.

It is not surprising that death should be the ultimate expression of loss in an author who, in his early years, was sufficiently troubled by his mortality to write

“Pigeon Feathers.” Yet one senses in Updike an even greater anguish, one that goes beyond the understanding of death as the end of a life. Again, it is instructive to consider the affinities between “Pigeon Feathers” and *The Afterlife*. One finds in both a contextualization of death that gestures toward a greater existential dread. David Kern is bothered by “the insulting gulf of time that existed before he was born” (14) and is terrified by a “vision of death” in which he sees himself in a kind of grave, where “you will be forever, . . . and in time no one will remember you, and you will never be called by any angel” (17). Here, time expands beyond the limitations of a life to embrace nonexistence before and after the time of a life, a horrifying temporal expansion expressed in the culmination of David’s vision of death: he imagines what seems like the fossilization of his body “[a]s strata of rock shift,” absorbing him into the vaster, annihilating movements of geological time. Death is perceived as an “extinction,” an ultimate negation that threatens not only the meaning of a life but of death as well: the meanings of both are nullified in the vision of massive cosmic motions in which “the sun expires, and unaltering darkness reigns” (17). The existential anguish the young Updike expressed in “Pigeon Feathers” is a fear about the value of human existence itself. Is life but a pinprick of light in cosmic time, an experience after which we are condemned to “everlasting darkness” (21), where no one, not even the angels, will come to rescue us from an absolute “oblivion” (18)?

We have seen how Updike returned to the theme of mortality in the stories of *The Afterlife*. But he also returned to the theme of death as oblivion in the collection’s pivotal story about death, “A Sandstone Farmhouse.” The commanding metaphors of the story are accumulation and removal. The sandstone farmhouse accumulated the evidence of human occupancy as the generations passed through it, and particularly so in the time of the protagonist’s mother, who “had trouble throwing anything away” (104). This hoarding, however, is not due to indolence or negligence: “Joey recognized in this accumulation a superstition he had to fight within himself—the belief that everything has . . . a worth which might, at any moment, be called into account. It was a way of advertising that one’s own life was infinitely precious” (115). As he cleans out his mother’s house after her death, Joey sifts through the carefully preserved testaments to the family’s “precious” lives: college notebooks, Christmas cards, photo albums, valentines. But the story resonates with the threat of ultimate oblivion—if there is accumulation, there is also removal. Joey realizes that “[h]e was the last of his line” to have used his father’s tools, “sacred” objects that seem now like “runes no one else could decipher.” Stones and things endure in this story, like these “antique implements worn like

prehistoric artifacts,” but people perish and disappear (126). Joey cannot identify the “stiffly posed ancestors” he looks at in his mother’s photo albums because he had never bothered to take up her repeated offers “to teach him their names and exact relation to him.” Joey should be the repository of the history of the previous generations of his family; the one to ensure their continued existence in memory and time. But time has brought only oblivion, and now “his ancestors floated free and nameless,” as if they had never existed (130). The lives in this story are also caught up in an engulfing temporal extension: the time of the story expands outward beyond the life of Joey’s mother to previous generations, then to the early-nineteenth-century builders of “these Pennsylvania farmhouses” (106), and extending far beyond human memory, back through the geological periods to the “huge moraines” deposited by “the last ice age’s most southerly advance” (107). The temporality of this story may not terrify in the manner of David Kern’s death vision, no doubt because Joey has lived long enough to have learned that time is loss lived, yet this is a story whose images and metaphors—such as the young mother “running toward . . . her death” (129)—inscribe death within life, contrast human mortality with imperishable matter, and threaten ephemeral human lives with an ultimate forgetting.

In young David Kern’s vision of death, one is pinned into one’s grave, “blind and silent” (17), consigned to an “unaltering darkness.” Another writer, to whose work Updike was often unsympathetic, shared this Updikean vision of the “human condition”: the stricken Pozzo, he too blind, saw, in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, how cosmic time engulfs human time and portends the obliteration of human meaning: “They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more” (83).

NOTES

1. At the end of “His Oeuvre,” Bech surveys with disgust his seven titles “stashed in boxes” after a public reading at which yet another ex-lover has turned up. He concludes that these women come “to mock his books” and to impress upon him that “We, *we* are your masterpieces” (509).

2. Detweiler uses the terms interchangeably, however, when he observes that “the adultery motif accompanies [the protagonists’ dialogue] through the repeated references to beds” (13). He then goes on to record these bed references, but it becomes clear that the bed is the motif that supports the theme of adultery.

3. To the motifs mentioned by Detweiler and Luscher should be added the motif generated by the pattern of the floor of Richard’s apartment, the “black and white tile, like the floor in a Vermeer.” The sentence in which this phrase occurs, as if to alert us to the formal modalities of the story, has Richard’s glance move from the apartment floor to the skyscraper opposite his building, where he

sees the pattern echoed by way of the “black plywood” in the façade (replacing fallen panes) and the windows that mirror cloud and sky (*Early Stories* 801). This motif of contrasts paves the way for a series of oppositions between his wife and lover in the story’s extensive network of motifs, metaphors and images.

4. In scenes where men and women are together in this story, the men are static spectators of dynamic women—from the lively young woman on the plane and Fogel’s energetic wife to the women at an Easter-egg hunt who are “swooping about after their children” (99).

5. As scholars have long noted, Updike drew extensively on myth in his fiction. See, for example, “Classical Literature” and “Myth” in De Bellis, *The John Updike Encyclopedia*.

6. After writing this article, I became aware of Sylvie Mathé’s excellent article on “The Journey to the Dead.” Whereas my own piece seeks to examine the origins and deployments of various Updike motifs in several stories from *The Afterlife*, Mathé’s article focuses uniquely on “The Journey to the Dead.” She thus explores in greater detail how the story “se constitue à partir d’une élaboration métaphorique de l’image centrale du voyage au pays des morts” (“is constructed by way of a metaphorical elaboration of the central image of the journey to the abode of the dead”; 30). Mathé’s discussion extends to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the myth of the Gorgon, whose gaze turns the beholder to stone. She links the Gorgon myth to Arlene’s stroke: when Arlene breaks the taboo of evoking the dead by recalling in her conversations with Fredericks the “whole vast kingdom of the dead” that constitutes their past (70), she is struck dumb (the effect of her stroke). Fredericks, seeing the mute fury in Arlene’s eyes and realizing how “[t]he dead hate us, and we hate the dead” (73), flees, because “croiser le regard d’Arlene, c’est aussi rencontrer la Gorgone et risquer d’être pétrifié à son tour” (“to meet Arlene’s gaze would also be to meet the Gorgon and to risk that he, too, be turned to stone”; 43 [translations are mine]).

7. The theme of loss in Updike’s short fiction has often been highlighted by scholars. Donald Greiner notes that “Updike’s stories are more often than not about loss” (xviii), while Robert Luscher proposes that “[t]he majority of Updike’s stories focus on loss and the ongoing struggle against time’s diminishment” (x).

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An Ecobiographical Perspective: Reading Updike's *Toward the End of Time* as an Eco-Novel

ARISTI TRENDEL

In his 1962 autobiographical essay “The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood,” John Updike establishes his personal connection to nature with a dogwood tree which, planted in honor of his birth, measures his days. This event is hopefully commemorated in his 1981 poem “Planting Trees”:

The dogwood
planted to mark my birth flowers each April,
a soundless explosion. We tell its story
time after time: the drizzling day,
the fragile sapling that had to be staked. (*Facing Nature* 36)

Updike intertwines man and nature throughout his fiction in various ways. The lovers in *Brazil* flee into the jungle for shelter, while in *Of the Farm* and in several short stories, the character of the mother appears as part and parcel of nature. Particularly in his short fiction, Updike confers a mother goddess dimension to this character. In spite of the ambivalence that characterizes the author's treatment of nature, which inspires both love and dread—especially in his work set in the countryside, where the sandstone farmhouse, the birthplace of Updike's mother, looms large¹—his poetic sensibility and gift for detail have rendered nature in a way that can restore our admiration of and faith in creation. *Toward the End of Time* (1997), Updike's millennium novel, where the theme of man's relation

to nature comes back in force, could be a case in point. However, in this novel, Updike's pastoral attachment and anti-pastoral detachment take an eco-turn. In 1971, Larry E. Taylor was the first to analyze pastoralism and anti-pastoralism as components of Updike's work, and later critics and reviewers have focused on Updike's attention to nature, but the ecology facet has not yet been explored. The author's work, a chronicle of America, could not have been unaffected by the environmental ferment of the times, all the more so as Updike did express some environment-friendly views.²

These views found literary expression in the apocalyptic dimension of Updike's millennium novel, which divided reviewers.³ "Apocalypse," as Lawrence Buell points out, "is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (285). Updike endowed his end-of-the-century novel with an environmentalist vision, the modern expression of his sensibility to nature. To this end, he deployed a pastoral design through which he attempted to redefine man's broken bond to nature. Writing the self between the bleakness of dystopia and the greenness of utopia creates a middle ground in this first-person narrative, in accordance with Updike's appreciation for what he calls in "The Dogwood Tree" the "middleness" of life, which embraces the material and spiritual dimensions of ordinary existence (*Assorted Prose* 186). I will argue that in spite of the ambiguities and ironies that surround and complexify Updike's narrator-diarist, he does become, indirectly, the vehicle of eco-concerns.

Toward the End of Time takes the form of a diary. The narrator, a 66-year-old retired investment consultant, writes out his life in four seasons, in a semi-re-gained paradise against a background of environmental disaster. If Updike's 1968 novel *Couples* is set against the background of a nuclear family breaking up, *Toward the End of Time* is set against the background of a whole society breaking up, ravaged by the ruthless pursuit of power on a global level. It is America's age of lead in the year 2020, a figure rendered symbolic by the 20/20 standard of visual acuity in an eye exam. The association of the eye with the narrating "I" evokes clarity of vision and, as we shall see, Emerson's idea of the "transparent eye-ball".⁴

The novel is built like a portrait with a divided landscape in the background, part urban and part natural, which is in a state of chaotic flux that seems to have little to do with the sitter, whose life, at first sight, flows undisturbed by the dramatic changes that are going on. The decline of America in *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) and *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996) attains a post-apocalyptic pitch in *Toward the End of Time* as Updike uses the conventions of science fiction to hit home. A

Sino-American war has turned the former superpower into an underdeveloped country that seeks relief from a now affluent Mexico, and transformed parts of the land into a radioactive dump that is peopling the environment with new forms of life. Some critics have emphasized the heterogeneity of the futuristic background and the rest of the narrative. However, the view of John Parks, for example, that the post-apocalyptic elements dispersed throughout the novel do not play a major role in the narrative, except to dislocate it from contemporary history to a post-historical situation, is only partly accurate. The end of America's hegemonic, prosperous time, subsumed within the title, affects the narrator's musings and deepens his sense of doom. The post-apocalyptic trappings in the background of the narrative point to an environmental alarm, excluding the appropriation of nature for aesthetic uses only. As Buell summarizes Aldo Leopold's essay "The Conservation Esthetic," "the cultivation of a noncomplacent bonding to nature at the aesthetic level is one of the paths to developing mature environmental concern" (Buell 121). It is precisely this narrative path that Updike takes, through an eco-centric repossession of the pastoral. Leo Marx's prediction that the "wholly new conception of the precariousness of our relations with nature is bound to bring forth new versions of pastoral" (Marx 66) seems to come true in *Toward the End of Time* as Updike's design allies pastoral, anti-pastoral and mock-pastoral patterns in a sort of eco-biography.

FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE AND LOCOCENTRISM

While the futurist setting facilitates a reading of *Toward the End of Time* as a simple environmental statement, the locus of events in this plotless novel is unmistakably pastoral—to wit, American pastoral. Haskells Crossing in semi-rural Massachusetts carries intertextual echoes of Thoreau and Hawthorne and accommodates the American Adam marveling in his garden. Like the green oasis in a world of chaos that is represented in Virgil's First Eclogue, it seems to be the last Edenic garden, in sharp contrast to the rest of the country. Unlike Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, in which the whole land is infected, *Toward the End of Time* offers an ultimate sanctuary in Haskells Crossing. This idyllic enclave shelters the protagonist Ben Turnbull's retirement and inspires a cure through the nature-writing of the self. The yearning for an existence closer to nature, the psychic root of all pastoralism, is stated right at the outset: "I once enjoyed the resources of faxing and e-mail, but when I retired I cut the wires, so to speak. I wanted to get back to nature and my own human basics before saying good-bye to everything" (*Toward* 5).

If this return to nature is celebrated through the creation of a man-nature bond, neither the act of writing nor the “I” is celebrated as well. At the autorepresentational level, the diary is undermined: “What is wrong with me, that I want to leave a trace, by scribbling these disjunct and jumpy notes concerning my idle existence? Spoiling paper—no worse and no better than scribbling on a bridge pad” (25–26). Likewise, the intrusive narrator is destabilized, as the “I” does not remain a constant element in the narrative but is subject to vacillation and change. Turnbull, like a chameleon, disappears into various identities; he becomes an ancient Egyptian, St. Mark, a ninth-century Irish monk, and a Nazi guard. Such occurrences are accounted for by Updike’s introduction of quantum physics into the narrative, as Turnbull’s theorizing about the many-worlds theory turns into fantasy. The narrative movement away from a fixed identity points to the breakdown of individuality and of the authority of a superintending consciousness. The paradoxical effacement of the “I” through the proliferation of arbitrary identities suggests the possibility of a more ecocentric state of being, confirmed by the assertion in the text of the interrelatedness of man and nature. Thus Updike puts the literary form of the diary at the service of nature.

THE MAN-NATURE BOND

It is naturally not the first time that Updike knowledgeably and lovingly depicted nature in his prose. David Foster Wallace quantified the space Updike gave to various topics in the novel and found that the “[t]otal number of pages about flora around Turnbull’s home, plus fauna, weather and how his ocean view looks in different seasons” amounts to 86 (1). Updike’s eco-diarist is first and foremost a keen observer of the natural world. Although Updike relies on the accoutrements of the future to make his environmental point, his description of the landscape leaves no room for the pastoral accoutrements of his predecessors, such as Thoreau or Edward Abbey, or for “the aesthetics of the not-there,” as Buell phrases it (68). Nor does he rely on the aesthetics of relinquishment. There is no Thoreauvian simplicity, reduced material wants, rustic habitation, self-sufficiency or self-improvement through a disciplined life led in solitude. Turnbull is no hardy person voluntarily turning away from progress; rather, he escapes the collapse of progress, being materially able to do so. He does not even run to the woods for refuge, as does the protagonist of Updike’s early story “The Hermit,” a parodic rewriting of *Walden*. Turnbull’s “woods” are a comfortable retirement that allows for community feeling and companionship, a natural coming of age after having won his battle in ruthless financial warfare. Moreover, his retreat is symbiotic with

the ethic of consumerist capitalism that is characteristic of American culture; his sexual consumerism is especially provocative.

To establish the man-nature bond, Updike also does not rely on the likeability of his narrator, who shocked some of the reviewers, as they mistook his lack of virtues for a lack of artistic merit. It seems that the interrelatedness of man and nature is not incompatible with “a man without qualities” as long as he is endowed with a poet’s eye for the natural world. The author’s pastoralization of an American landscape after a “global holocaust” (206) is the only hope (yet generator of many tropes) in this otherwise crepuscular novel, as Turnbull becomes part and parcel of nature, its kith and kin.

Like Hawthorne in the Berkshires, Turnbull in *Haskells Crossing* describes the events of nature in minute detail and attempts to record every impression, shifting from images of nature to images of man and mixing myth, reality, and fantasy. Like Thoreau, he is engaged in reading the landscape, pondering on it and finding a process of mapping the world and locating a dislocated self. Nature opens for him the doors of perception: “I am conscious of . . . how poorly I have observed the world” (188). Enthralled, he jots down an old poem about spring he listens to on the radio; in a burst of creativity, he picks up a laurel floret and poses it on his desk to be described. Branches instead of wires tie him now to life, as the extended metaphor of “branching out” rules the text, linking quantum physics and nature. Turnbull frequently appears in the postures of investigation, meditation, and bafflement before the mysteries of nature, swaying between egocentrism and ecocentrism.

The novel follows a seasonal ordering, a favored organizing principle in environmental texts. Turnbull’s diary is a “journal dedicated to the year’s passing” (266). The excursion format—which is also environmentally oriented, evoking the Horatian and Virgilian love of rural retirement, the pastoral *otium*—is dominant. Turnbull is constantly strolling in his garden, rambling through the woods, exploring; he has a field day in the natural world daily. The diary entries order and record nature both as the perceiver encounters it but also as nature manifests itself; the diarist effaces himself to the point of becoming a recording device. The accuracy of the observations directs the reader not to the narrator but to nature.

The lilac buds are two-pronged, showing the first unsheathing of leaves. Each sharp forsythia bud reveals a gleam of yellow. The daylilies are now well up—clusters of scimitar shapes. The peonies are a red inch out of the ground. A lone daffodil blows its golden one-note above the sagging crocuses in the driveway circle. The dead lawn shows a green blush. It is all up with winter and its low-ceilinged safety. (122)

The basic premise of ecology, the interrelatedness between man and nature, is not only suggested in the text by seasonality but also by nature's personhood, as the line between human and nonhuman is blurred. The seme of transformation in the narrator's name ushers the reader into a universe of metamorphoses, with a doe behind every female figure, spanning the three aspects of femininity: maiden, Venus, and crone. Always, in the center of the narrative, the deer is being transformed into a woman and vice versa. "[T]he bond between the human and nonhuman estates is expressed through the imagery of relationship" Buell notes, and has been revived by "modern ecologism" (180). Turnbull finds himself entangled with the fate of the deer that is crucial to the narrative: "Oh, horrible! I tossed and turned . . . , feeling those deer tracks outside as a love letter I could not answer" (24).

Lyrical pathos in the personification of nature is also attained through identification. "[Y]ou're overidentifying," Turnbull's wife, Gloria, tells him as he vainly tries to save the deer and the trees in their garden from her efforts at maintenance (161). His amorous relationship to the deer is the quintessence of his companionship with the fauna: "On this scorched planet we human beings are not yet quite alone; there is still other life. Squirrels, rats, deer, . . . Insects, of course, in their undismayable selfless multitudes" (32). If there is a "figure in the carpet" in the novel, it could be this vision of humankind as belonging to a partnership of creatures within an animate environment. The episode of the cherished doe hunted down by a deer slayer employed by Gloria raises questions about our moral accountability toward nonhuman creatures. Turnbull, the doe's green knight, lists the abuses suffered by the landscape and depicts his wife as a killer and predator in the ecosystem. Underpinning his attitude is the environmental insight that all species are entitled to existence as a matter of biotic right, which in turn shapes the notion that the abuse of nature is wrong, that nature has an intrinsic value. This relation to nature, which moves toward the ethics of care, challenges the idea of a dichotomy between man and nature. The pastoral ideal of a withdrawal into and bonding with nature thus becomes coextensive with an environmental ethic.

It is no surprise that Updike, whose work has religious leanings, sacralizes nature. The sacralization of nature in a novel within the apocalyptic tradition is all the more important as spiritual and physical disaster loom large in the narrative. David Malone has explored the mythic patterns that bring out a transcendent dimension in the narrative. Updike draws from a variety of mythic traditions that reinforce the pastoral theme and connection to nature. Malone notes that Gloria, the "queen of tilth," as the narrator calls her (140), is a Demeter figure (Malone

87). Turnbull describes himself as “*Homo naturalis*, man unscathed, Adam before the covenant,” while he desperately scribbles his daily entries to himself (257). The seasonal progression from Thanksgiving to Thanksgiving draws the year into a symbolic circle, and bracketing the narrative with religious feasts points to liturgical time. Nature seems to restore the spiritual dimension in a world of disarray, disorder, and distress, which the narrator describes in a biblical tone: “The altars are slighted; the temples fall into mossy ruin” (300). The accuracy and minuteness of his observations of nature makes the things he singles out seem microcosmic. The dazzling plethora of details reveals that “even on the perfectly ordinary and clearly visible level, creation carries on with an intricacy unfathomable and apparently uncalled for,” as Annie Dillard says (131). It is precisely this miracle of creation that saves the young David Kern from the terror of death in another early Updike story, “Pigeon Feathers,” when he closely observes the beauty of a dead pigeon’s feather.

DEATH IN ARCADIA

However, as the title of the novel indicates, death’s progress presides over Updike’s pastoral design. The *Et in Arcadia Ego* motif that seventeenth-century artists used in their pastoral paintings permeates the narrative. The announced end is multi-leveled, involving an individual, a country, and the universe. In *Toward the End of Time*, the bell tolls for all. Entropy and the Big Bang/Big Crunch cosmology inform and shape the narrator’s musings. Right after the deer’s slaughter, a voice from millions of years in the future speculates that the universe has reached a point of equilibrium in its expansion from the Big Bang and has now begun to collapse. Like *The Centaur*, *Toward the End of Time* has the tonalities of a pastoral elegy reinforced by an environmental jeremiad. After the war with China, America is left in a shambles and drifting to its death. The narrator, diminished by the indignities of age and disease, progresses from semi-impotence to impotence. Contrary to *Silent Spring*, which portrays catastrophic disruptions of physical health, Turnbull’s cancer appears as a result of natural decline, establishing an additional link between man and nature.

The interrelatedness between nature and man is asserted in a more ambivalent way as well. Nature the healer is also nature the killer. The benignity of nature is coupled with its malignity: “I had looked down once again into the dismal basement of life, where in ill-lit corners spiders brainlessly entrap segmented insects, consume them bit by bit, leave a fuzzy egg sac, and die. . . . [D]id they perish of starvation, having spun a web in vain, or of old age, in the natural course of things,

after years of drawing upon Medicare and Social Security?” (198–99). Like Tayo in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, Turnbull alternately sees the world as pristine eco-design and as monstrous design. Another metaphor spanning the narrative involves the comparison of man to a moth. The image of “mistakenly hatched” moths in the novel’s final sentence evokes Turnbull’s forthcoming death: “In the early dark they flip and flutter a foot or two above the asphalt, as if trapped in a narrow wedge of space-time beneath the obliterating imminence of winter” (334). Closure in the narrative is provided by the narrator’s looming death. Man’s symbiotic integration with the natural world highlights his predicament; nature becomes a mirror reminder of human finitude. The stock literary contrast between the happiness of life in the natural world and the chaotic life of the city can only widen in this novel, yet life in nature appears closer to death.

OPTICAL ILLUSIONS

In *Toward the End of Time*, anti-pastoralism no longer relies on the antithesis between city and country that spans Updike’s short fiction and is most salient in one of his early novels, *Of the Farm* (1965). The pastoral elements can no longer be contrasted with sophisticated urbanism, as in his previous work. What is contrasted for the first time in Updike’s fiction is an egalitarian, genuine bond to nature, with the catastrophic outcome of human dominance over nature pictured in the background of the narrative. The “city upon a hill”—suggested by Turnbull’s habit of referring to his house as “the hill”—is created by the elected people, the wealthy middle class to which the narrator belongs but also relentlessly observes. Updike, who often described himself as a literary spy within middle class America, endows Turnbull with an insider-outsider quality. Narratorial irony colors a smug, idle portrait of the happy few, the people upon the hill, disrespectful of nature, careless and domineering. Their pastoral *otium* takes the form of excellence at sports, particularly golf. The Edenic garden is defiled by Gloria’s materialistic priorities and procrustean and destructive acts: “You can’t be sentimental if you’re going to maintain a property. Here’s your choice: let everything go to wrack and ruin so the value of the place drops to next to nothing, or else put this *very* unhappy crabapple out of its misery” (161).

Authorial irony provides a mock-pastoral finishing touch. Turnbull is Updike’s sardonic version of one of “the dazzled farm-boys,” as the writer once described himself (in spite of the ambivalent presentation of nature in his fiction).⁵ Turnbull as green knight is an ineffectual Don Quixote. The pathetic fallacy attributed to

him is denounced by Gloria as downright fallacious. This belated *naturmensch* becomes a caricature of Chiron when he corrupts the youths squatting on his estate by teaching them how to establish themselves as efficient and respectable criminals. These young swains are strays, but also extortionists and murderers who finally thrive on their mentor's teachings. As for the milkmaids, they are either hardened or apprentice prostitutes. Turnbull, a Pan among the nymphs, frolics in an overflow of libido until disease acts as a repressive force.

The reader is placed before an optical illusion, as Updike's pastoral design branches out into a tentative environmentalism that deals with nature not as a shelter from the complexity of modern life but as involved in an ongoing process of complexification. Updike maintains the ambiguity in his narrator until the end. This unlovable, wealthy capitalist develops an eco-consciousness through close observation of nature and diary writing. It is precisely this doubleness that prevents the book from turning into a *roman à thèse*, a novel with a message, set out to illustrate its author's militant idea. If Leo Marx was right to say that the pastoral ideal, particularly as manifested in environmentalism, offers a political alternative to contemporary industrial society and its social and ecological pathologies, then Updike's attempt at an eco-novel (a label that can only be reductive for the purposes of this essay) could be enlisted in the environmentalism cause without sacrificing its artistic aspirations. In any case, Updike's literary imagination has contributed to the representation of an eco-ideal, as the author thoroughly understood his times.

NOTES

1. See Trendel, diss.
2. "The challenges ahead? A fury against liberal civilization by the world's poor, who have nothing to lose; a ruinous further depletion of the world's natural assets; a global warming that will change world climate and with it world geopolitics. The American idea, promulgated in a land of plenty, must prepare to sustain itself in a world of scarcity" (*Higher Gossip* 476).
3. In *The New York Times*, Margaret Atwood admired the apocalyptic dimension in the novel and acclaimed Updike for his creation of "a Thoreau run through the meat grinder of the 20th century," while in a scathing review for the *New York Observer*, David Foster Wallace found the "postmillennial elements . . . sketchy and tangential."
4. Eye metaphors are not infrequent in Updike's prose. One of his early short stories, "The Persistence of Desire," is a good case in point.
5. Speaking of the first-person-plural voice of the *New Yorker's* "Talk of the Town" section, Updike wrote: "Who, after all, could that indefatigably fascinated, perpetually peripatetic 'we' be but a collection of dazzled farm-boys?" (*Assorted Prose* vii).

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The Art and Craft of Baseball

LEONARD CASSUTO

Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu, by John Updike. New York: Library of America, 2010.

As part of his extended and graceful literary valedictory, John Updike presided over a small compilation of his writings on Ted Williams. One of the last acts of his life was to write the book's introduction, which he completed the month he died.

Updike didn't write much altogether on Williams, just one essay that appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1960, another in *Sport* magazine in 1986, and a brief obituary of Williams for the *New York Times Magazine* in 2002. Of these, the first, "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu," is by far the best known, and it gives this slender volume its title. Updike stitched the latter two pieces together into one seamless essay, "Ted Williams, 1918–2002," for this brief collection, whose publication was timed to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Williams's last game.

"Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu," Updike's account of that final game, is a baseball writing classic that has been noticed by virtually every sportswriter who ever ventured a claim on literature. Charles McGrath, in the *New York Times*, calls it "probably the most celebrated baseball essay ever." It was also notably influential. Baseball had inspired more than a little purple prose over the years, but Updike's lyricism evoked poetry instead. Roger Angell, who would begin his long run as baseball writer for the *New Yorker* two years after Updike's brief turn, credits Updike for his own sportswriting tone, as well as the useful goad "to try for a good sentence now and then."

Reviewing such an essay makes one feel rather like a Victorian literature specialist might if he or she were assigned to review *Great Expectations*. Brace yourself

for this assessment: The book is really great. But another definition of “review” is to see again. What makes Updike’s famous essay—the heart of this little book, really, with no disrespect to the lagniappe that follows it—stand up so well?

The answer lies, I think, in the connection between the two men. In Ted Williams, John Updike found one of his ideal subjects.

The overarching ambition of Ted Williams was to be recognized as the greatest hitter of a baseball who ever lived. His dedication to that goal was unceasing, even monomaniacal. More than one writer has noted Williams’s consuming interest in what might be called “hitting fitness.” He did fingertip pushups after games with his feet on a chair, constantly squeezed tennis balls, worked his forearms with heavy weights, and practiced his swing in the middle of the night in hotel rooms on the road—among other things. Years before video, he studied pitchers obsessively and reviewed his own at-bats with critical acuity. Riffle through any of the Ted Williams biographies and stories of the tightly focused fanaticism of “The Kid” abound.

The results of Williams’s efforts etched many lines in baseball’s sacred scripture, the record book. In a career that ran from 1939 to 1960, twice interrupted for military service that cost him over four seasons altogether, Williams set records that have withstood even the steroid-aided assaults that have lately toppled lesser statistical edifices. I’ll leave the quantitative recitations to the numbers geeks (lots of baseball fans, including me, restrain only with difficulty our love of stats), and will mention only one of these records: In a game that centers on the attempt by the hitter to reach base when he comes to bat, Ted Williams got on base a greater percentage of the time than anyone. Ever. He wasn’t the greatest fielder (and in this respect he was notably the inferior of his contemporary Joe DiMaggio, to whom he was often compared), and his base running reminded no one of Jackie Robinson. His early Boston Red Sox teams challenged for but won no championships; in his last decade they were mainly mediocre. And his relations with the newspaper reporters who covered him were fractious and often bitter. But Ted Williams achieved his own goal. He was, to use his own oft-repeated words, Teddy Ballgame, “the best fucking hitter in the major fucking leagues.”

Williams’s pride frequently got lost amid the discussions of his petulance, especially while he played. Though Williams mellowed as he aged, his acerbity was on constant display in his playing days along with his exquisite skills. (He refused, for example, to tip his cap to the fans after his home runs.) But his pride comes through clearly in Updike’s account—and it’s mixed with joy, integrity, and also something more. David Halberstam, no mean sportswriter himself, recalled Wil-

liams's "unwavering absolutely true purist's love for the game and the people who played it the right way." Again, one well-known example, recounted by Updike and countless others, will suffice. Williams entered the last day of the 1941 season with a batting average of .39955, which rounds up to .400. If he had sat out the double-header scheduled for that day, he would have finished the year with the first .400 average in a decade. The Red Sox manager, Joe Cronin, offered him the chance to sit to protect his average—the games were, after all, meaningless in the standings. But Williams refused. He played both games, got six hits in eight times at bat, and finished at .406. No major league baseball player has hit .400 these seventy-odd years since.

Updike identified with Williams's loving pride in his craft, coupled with the obsessive devotion to performing as well as possible each workday. "There was," he wrote, "something very pure and uncontrived" about Williams's hitting (44). He was one of the "players who always *care*; who care, that is to say, about themselves and their art" (13). The same might be said of Updike's devotion to his writing.

When craft is practiced so thoughtfully that it transcends itself and becomes art, it gains not only an aesthetic but also an ethical dimension: it models correct living. The ancient Greeks called this *techné*, a word that draws craft and art together.

The same thread draws John Updike and Ted Williams together. For both, craft practiced at a high level becomes art—and to create such art cultivates what is moral as well as beautiful. Decades after watching Ted Williams play, an older John Updike, when asked to define what is beautiful, remarked that it is, "from one perspective, simply what we need—a meal to the hungry, a bed to the weary, another body to the lusty. From a different perspective, appreciation of beauty is empathy with a creator." If the job of the artist is to create beauty, then, it's a special job that creates a special bond between the maker and the receiver. That bond existed between Updike and millions of his readers, and also between Updike and Williams—but in this case with Updike as the viewer.

It's also a lonely job. Baseball, observed Updike, with "its immense and tranquil field sparsely settled with poised men in white, its dispassionate mathematics, [is] best suited to accommodate, and be ornamented by, a loner." Writing is another "essentially lonely" pastime, and it's hard not to argue that a blank page is another kind of "immense and tranquil field" that the professional must face each day (14).

"For me," Updike wrote, "Williams is the classic ballplayer of the game on a hot August weekday, before a small crowd, when the only thing at stake is the tissue-thin difference between a thing done well and a thing done ill" (13). The

true artist, in other words, creates not for the sake of recognition but because it's the good and right thing to do. Such "rigorous pride of craftsmanship" defines a hero (14).

A novelist who writes frequent book reviews and other occasional prose—any examples come to mind?—might devote himself to maintaining the same "tissue-thin difference" between indifferent hackwork and artistic aspiration. Not merely for the sake of completeness have Updike's essays and reviews been collected into books. (Together they run thousands of pages. The latest and perhaps last batch, *Higher Gossip*, appeared posthumously last year.) We read Updike's reviews for the same reason that he watched Ted Williams play: because each essay shows an artist at work, using each occasion to try to make something worth saving. Updike was just starting his career at the time when Williams was ending his. At age twenty-eight, awaiting the publication of *Rabbit, Run*, he saw through the prism of baseball, in the performance of one special player, his own aesthetic and his own writer's credo rendered in a different medium.

The final day of Ted Williams's playing career embodied his virtues in microcosm. The Red Sox were out of the pennant race, and a small crowd showed up at Fenway Park on September 28, 1960. It would be the last time that Williams would hit on the home field of the one team that he had played for his entire career. "It was for our last look," wrote Updike, "that ten thousand of us had come" (22). After a small pregame ceremony in Williams's honor, the game proceeded uneventfully through seven innings. In the eighth inning Williams came to bat with the Sox down 4-2. No one was on base. "The air was soggy," Updike wrote, yet it contained "a density of expectation" (32). That last time at bat, Williams swung, and connected. "It was in the books while it was still in the sky": a home run (33).

Most great athletes stay too long and taint our memories of their greatest glory. Think of Willie Mays, who kept playing even after he couldn't run anymore, or Michael Jordan, who walked away on top not once but twice, but still couldn't resist a third humbling return to the court. Or especially Muhammad Ali, who has paid a terrible price for lingering in the ring to prove that he was "the greatest" when he no longer was. Sometimes it's the money that keeps them from leaving. Nor should we discount the love of the game. But the adoration that athletes receive for their sublime mastery has to matter too. The great ones have to know that once they retire from the game, it's unlikely that they will ever again feel the warmth of love bestowed upon them by strangers.

Unlike so many star players, Ted Williams knew when to walk away. In his final turn on baseball's stage, he maintained the "intensity of competence" that

drew Updike to him in the first place (14). Williams completed his own great story before the young writer's eyes with "a perfect fusion of expectation, intention, and execution" (34). His final at-bat underscored his whole career as something special: a literal work of art—and vice versa.

No wonder, then, that John Updike rarely wrote a word about baseball that was not about Ted Williams. In truth, Updike wasn't a baseball writer so much as a Ted Williams writer, and his Ted Williams writing was art criticism barely cloaked in sportswriter's garb. Williams thus takes his place alongside Rabbit Angstrom; both were characters who gave Updike an outlet to talk about compelling and vital aspects of being human. Rabbit is ordinary in Updike's eyes and Williams noble, but each exemplifies his type. In Ted Williams, John Updike found what he wanted to say about baseball, but more important, about the art of doing things proudly and well.

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Updike, Time Present and Time Past

SYLVIE MATHÉ

Critical Insights: John Updike, edited by Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr. Pasadena: Salem Press, 2012.

Critical Insights: John Updike, edited by Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr., is a beautiful object to behold, the cover graced by a photo of Updike, at the midpoint of his life, against a golden background. The elegant layout on off-white paper tempts the reader with the sensuous pleasure of holding and feeling a real book rather than an electronic version. Updike, who loved “[t]he book-making process—fussing with the type, the sample pages, the running heads, the dust jacket, the flap copy, the cover cloth” (*More Matter* 758–59), no doubt would have happily reacted to this artifact worthy of his careful craft.

Turning to the table of contents, the reader discovers a hybrid critical anthology, gathering together reprints of landmark “historical” pieces and more recent studies, as well as half a dozen newly commissioned essays. While any new critical volume devoted to Updike is a cause for celebration, particularly one with so many familiar and valued Updike critics, this project, at least initially, seems peculiar. Unlike Stacey Olster’s *Cambridge Companion to John Updike* (2006), which contains all original material, or Jack De Bellis’s *John Updike: The Critical Responses to the “Rabbit” Saga* (2005), which almost exclusively contains reprints and focuses on one dimension of the writer’s work, this volume mingles past and present criticism according to a strategy that is not immediately discernible. Rodgers indicates in his foreword that the volume is “designed to add a wide-ranging survey of both Updike’s work and the critical response to it” (vii), yet we are not

told what governed his editorial selections, or how precisely his volume contributes to Updike studies.

The book is divided into four sections of unequal length: “Career, Life, and Influence” contains two new biographical essays and a tribute from the *Paris Review*; “Critical Contexts” consists of four new essays; “Critical Readings,” comprising the bulk of the volume, presents thirteen previously published essays; and “Resources” provides a chronology and bibliography. This format appears to be standard in Salem Press’s *Critical Insights* series, though the terminology and structure seem odd. For example, the only distinction I can see between “Critical Contexts” and “Critical Readings” is that the former section contains new essays and the latter reprinted essays. That said, the good news is that the contributors Rodgers has selected belong for the most part to the pantheon of Updike scholars (William Pritchard, James Schiff, Marshall Boswell, et al.), along with a handful of eminent novelists and critics, such as Joyce Carol Oates, Hermione Lee, and Adam Gopnik. The task facing the editor in choosing what to include must have been Cornelian—as Rodgers notes, “John Updike’s critics have been nearly as prolific as their subject” (vii)—and one is curious to know what principles and strategies guided his selections. If one reflects on Updike scholarship published over the last five decades, it becomes immediately obvious that many significant names are not included in this anthology: Donald Greiner, Robert Detweiler, Dilvo Ristoff, Robert Luscher, Mary O’Connell, Stacey Olster, Quentin Miller, and Sanford Pinsker, to name but a few. Surveying the massive landscape of past production only to land here and there on a crest can leave the scholar intent on covering the whole terrain frustrated. Further, some transatlantic perspectives might have been welcome: Judie Newman, Kristiaan Versluys, or Erik Kielland-Lund, among other English-speaking critics from European shores.

We, of course, all have our favorite critical pieces and remember fondly those volumes or individual essays that illuminated our reading, gave us pause, and made us think “That’s it!” Nicholson Baker’s singular *U and I* (1991), exploring how fragments of Updike’s sentences live with us, provided one such illumination, as did Philip Stevick’s outstanding “The Full Range of Updike’s Prose” (1993). These two widely diverging critical responses to Updike’s work are among many that have resonated over the years. More recently, Anne Roiphe’s love letter to Harry Angstrom in *For Rabbit, With Love and Squalor* (2000) arouses another kind of wonder by considering the performative dimension of the Rabbit novels and the existential effect that a fictional character can have on the reader. The fact that Harry, “radiant” and “sad” (*Rabbit Is Rich* 419), not only prompts scholars to

write critical studies but readers to compose love letters stands as testimony to the vital power of fiction. It would have been pleasing to see the work of Baker, Stevick, and Roiphe contained in this volume; however, Rodgers has for the most part given us an assortment of riches, and we should welcome the chorus of voices that within these pages examines the work of Updike.

The volume opens with Rodgers's recap of the writer's career, focusing on *The Early Stories: 1953–1975* (2003) and the final works, especially *Endpoint and Other Poems* (2009). The stress on short fiction and, to a lesser degree, the poems, allows Rodgers to approach the more autobiographical, intimate part of Updike's writing. Updike called his stories "the heart of my literary life . . . More closely than my novels, more circumstantially than my poems, these efforts of a few thousand words each hold my life's incidents, predicaments, crises, joys" (*More Matter* 762). Introducing Updike's life and career through the prism of his early short fiction and his late poems steers the reader to the heart of the writer's self and art; we see the arc that extends from the earliest Pennsylvania story, "Ace in the Hole" (1953), to the last poem, "Fine Point 12/22/08." If, as Updike writes in the foreword to *The Early Stories*, "[a]rt hopes to sidestep mortality with feats of attention, of harmony, of illuminating connection" (xiv), his repeated enactments of these feats have assuredly earned him the immortality he yearned for and strove for—"my life, forever" (*Endpoint* 29).

The other two pieces in the first section, "Career, Life, and Influence," are Debra Shostak's brief outline of the writer's life and Robert Roper's 2012 *Paris Review* tribute. Although the latter piece feels a bit oddly placed in this section, Roper's witty characterization of Updike's style, "a mandarin, sesquipedalian style too rich for some" (26), and of "Updike country—the region where suburban plotting meets knicker-dropping" (27), captures the essence of what he calls the writer's *travails*, a combination of "sex-microscopy" and of "the bringing into language (and therefore into existence) of formerly ignored realities, never-quite-grasped emotional states" (29). Roper goes on to remark that Updike's lukewarm reception abroad may be linked to "the bluff chauvinism at the heart of his project," that of "reflecting the American moment to Americans" (29). But if his Americanness is what cost him a wider popularity abroad, it may also be what makes him "in dark ages" a star "to steer by, as well, to show us home" (30).

The "Critical Contexts" section that follows features new essays on a range of topics by leading Updike scholars: Derek Parker Royal, James Plath, James Schiff, and Jack De Bellis. Royal's "Gentile on My Mind: Updike, Bech, and the Limits of Ethnic Representation" examines the Bech stories as "an exercise in narratively

performing the other” (33), “an act of ethnic passing” that leaves the writer open to “accusations of ethnic insensitivity, caricature, and even appropriation” (34). Addressing the critical assessments that read Bech as “parody” and “stock literary fixture” (Ruth Wisse), as nothing more than “Updike in American-Jewish drag” (Cynthia Ozick), or as a narrative dream of comeuppance (Sanford Pinsker), Royal argues that “[t]hrough the character of Henry Bech, Updike is attempting to illustrate, in an almost metafictional manner, the limits of representation.” What the guise of the Jewish writer provides the Gentile writer is a means of “representing the *act* of representation, and doing so . . . within the context of Jewish ethnicity” (35, 36, 38). Focusing on the comic vein prevalent in these stories, Royal thus underscores “the function of performance, and its limits, in the act of taking on the guise of another (or an other) subject” (39). Drawing on examples from the Bech stories, Royal convincingly demonstrates that “Updike’s game is certainly not limited to mere ethnic slumming” and that, “by contextualizing the very act of representation,” he works out a self-critical reflection on the role and responsibilities of the writer (46). While Royal stresses the metafictional stakes involved in this performance of the other, he leaves open the question of the ethical dimension of this act of ethnic passing, an “othering” that ignores what Homi K. Bhabha calls “the irremovable strangeness of being different.”

The next essay, “Shaping Graces: John Updike, Middleness, and the American Experience,” by James Plath, fits appropriately within the “Critical Contexts” section by providing an enlightening overview of Updike’s formative years, from the “Depression mentality” that bathed his childhood to the Cold War that became the cornerstone of his adult vision of the world. Like his character and semi-persona Rabbit, Updike belonged to “the Silent Generation” (55), which found itself profoundly unsettled when the violent turmoil of the sixties shattered the surface placidity of what Robert Lowell called the “tranquillized Fifties.” While Updike became the chronicler of these changing times—recording not only the political, sexual, and ethnic upheavals of the nation but also the invasive pop culture that infiltrated the American consciousness—he nevertheless remained faithful to the “middleness” that lay at the core of his experience and that he made it his vocation to “transcribe.” Thus, beyond the forays into foreign lands, futuristic and historical times, and various fictional experiments that Updike, “prone to follow his own drummer,” undertook as challenges, middle-class domestic life remained his major source of inspiration, infused with “the essences of the culture and historical events that his characters experience” (61).

Approaching Updike from a comparative angle, James Schiff comes up with one of the most original contributions in this volume. Discarding more obvious choices among possible subjects of comparison, such as Proust, Joyce, and Nabokov, Schiff focuses on William Dean Howells, the late-nineteenth-century novelist and “Dean of American letters.” Why Howells? Beyond the fact that the two writers “share a good deal”—humble roots, an informal apprenticeship to an ambitious parent, enormous critical and popular success, an oeuvre steeped in realism—Howells proves “instructive . . . in revealing the effects of *time*—namely, what time can do to a literary reputation” (66). Examining Howells’s “decreasing cultural relevance” and decline as a prominent writer, Schiff argues that the similarities between the two writers are “more superficial than deep.” He points, for instance, to Updike’s greater range and versatility, and to his verbal facility and literary style, which resist the transparency and plainness of Howellsian realism. He contrasts Howells’s “sexual prudishness and timidity” with Updike’s “graphic frankness about . . . the body” (75). Schiff traces how Frank Norris, H. L. Mencken, and Sinclair Lewis attacked Howells for his conformity, piousness, and lack of vitality, leading to Howells’s disappearance from the literary horizon with “the emergence of naturalism and later modernism” (72). A “page of printed prose,” Updike writes, “should bring to its mimesis something extra, a kind of supernatural as it were, to lend everything roundness—a fine excess that corresponds with the intricacy and opacity of the real world.” Yet Howells’s novels fail to reach beyond what Updike calls “plain realism” (Schiff quoting Updike 75–76). In contrast, Updike’s Whitmanesque vision and language lift the tangible and everyday, as Kristiaan Versluys writes, “into the realm of the transcendental by the magic of language” (Schiff quoting Versluys 76). Moreover, as Schiff reminds us, Updike’s technique ranges widely beyond realism to “include myth, fantasy, abstraction, montage, and magical realism” (77) and his intellectual curiosity led him to tackle a stunning variety of subjects, whether scientific, artistic, or theological. Finally, just as Toni Morrison cautions that “[i]t would be irresponsible and unjustified to invest Hemingway with the thoughts of his characters” (*Playing in the Dark* 85), Schiff questions the charges of racism and sexism that, if applicable to Updike’s most famous creation, *Rabbit*, one should be wary of transferring to the writer. In the intensity of the hostility of some readers, Schiff sees signs of a strength and vitality that speak to the impact of Updike’s works and the likely longevity of his critical fortune.

Jack De Bellis, “the dean of Updike bibliographers” (viii), rounds off the section with an essay on the critical reception of a selection of Updike’s novels: his

first, *The Poorhouse Fair*; his most controversial, *Couples*; his most famous, the Rabbit series; and a sampling of his more experimental works: *The Centaur*, *The Witches of Eastwick*, *S.*, *Brazil*, *Toward the End of Time*, and *Seek My Face*. De Bellis proceeds in synecdochal fashion, striving to give us the part for the whole in dealing with the criticism of Updike's novels. Given the shortness of his essay (15 pages) and the plethora of critical studies generated by these novels, De Bellis's project verges on the tour de force. The Rabbit saga, as might be expected, gets pride of place, while the synthesis of the reception of the more experimental works is of necessity more hurried. A welcome note at the end of the essay refers scholars to *John Updike: A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Materials, 1948–2007*, which De Bellis and Michael Broomfield published in 2007.

While the volume's second section is mostly successful in providing new perspectives on Updike's work, the third section, "Critical Readings," is problematic. First, the distinction between "Contexts" and "Readings" is not apparent. Of the volume's two studies of the Bech series, for instance, one appears in "Critical Contexts" and the other in "Critical Readings," though what places one in the former rather than the latter is not clear. The blame, however, should be with the press and series editor rather than the volume editor. If the governing logic is that "Contexts" consists of new essays while "Readings" is devoted to reprints, the headings should reflect that. As it is, the offerings in the "Critical Readings" section are a rather motley group. Though the section includes some excellent and important essays and reviews, its organization and structure are difficult to discern. There seems to be an attempt to chronologically follow Updike's oeuvre, but even that effort is not fully sustained. The section opens with an excerpt from William H. Pritchard's masterful study, *Updike: America's Man of Letters* (2000), one of the most inspiring books on Updike. The excerpt, from the beginning of chapter 3, "The Pennsylvania Thing," focuses on *Pigeon Feathers* and *The Centaur*. With an exemplary mixture of sensitivity and insight, Pritchard examines those early writings, taking us back to the heart of Updike country, the place which remained throughout his lifetime the locus of "truth" and the alpha and omega of his universe.

Pritchard's essay is followed by an equally stirring examination of the early writing by Updike's fellow novelist Joyce Carol Oates. "Updike's American Comedies" (1975) targets the "incarnational" dimension of Updike's world (145) and "the pagan-classical-artistic-'immoral' side of [his] imagination" (148) in a study that covers *The Centaur*, *Olinger Stories*, *Couples*, *Museums and Women*, *Of the Farm*, the first two Rabbit novels, *Bech: A Book*, and *A Month of Sundays*. Addressing one of the standard criticisms leveled at Updike, that he is obsessed with the mun-

dane and fails to cover a larger canvas, Oates pays homage to his “special value,” “his willingness to be disarmed of perspective” (159), and his “ego-less ability to glance without judgment on all sides of a melodramatic event” and to accept “the comic ironies and inadequacies of ordinary life” (158, 160). Anger and revolt may not be his mode, but what his American comedies bestow is the elegance of detachment and the gift of humor in the face of disaster.

Following these strong contributions from Pritchard and Oates, Rodgers includes a chapter on the Maples from one of the earliest studies of Updike’s work, Alice and Kenneth Hamilton’s *The Elements of John Updike* (1970). Focusing on the first seven of what would eventually be eighteen stories depicting the marriage of Joan and Richard Maple, this comparatively long essay (32 pages) seems an odd selection when more recent essays cover the majority of the Maples stories.

The four essays that follow are devoted to the Rabbit novels. Matthew Wilson’s “The Rabbit Tetralogy: From Solitude to Society to Solitude Again” (1991) examines the Rabbit sequence as a paradigm of how postwar American novel sequences reveal the Emersonian tension and complex interplay between solitude and society, while incorporating an increasing awareness of history. Particularly engaging is Hermione Lee’s 1990 review of *Rabbit at Rest*, which offers a British outlook on the most American of fictional characters, Harry Angstrom. Quoting the epitaph Updike supplied for Rabbit at the request of a British television interviewer, “Here lies an American man” (223), Lee interrogates the Americanness, the “Babbitry” (225) of this character who impersonates Uncle Sam at a Fourth of July parade. Showing Rabbit to be both inside and outside the system, glutted on it and alienated by it, Lee writes: “Updike has it both ways. Harry is Uncle Sam, but he’s also Ishmael. He is all too American and he is alienatedly un-American. He fits in with that long line of Hs, from Huck to Holden to Humbert to Herzog, who carry the freight of American history but are outside of it, looking on” (227). The difference, though, lies in his lack of charisma, as Lee asks: “Who likes Rabbit, apart from his author?” Lee’s answer calls to mind Anne Roiphe’s love letter to Harry: “What redeems Rabbit is that, inside his brutish exterior, he is tender, feminine, and empathetic” (228). What further redeems him is the “virtuoso operation” by which Updike achieves “this elaborate, even perverse match of dumb subject and lyrical, fastidious text” (229). The novel gives us, and this is no mean compliment, “the most metaphorical prose writing in American fiction, except for Melville’s. And like Melville’s, Updike’s metaphors are born of that old American transcendentalist desire that the things of this world should stand for something, and not be mere junk” (230). Lee’s penetrating review further asserts

that Updike “can ‘do’ the strangeness of American places better [than] . . . David Lynch or Sam Shepard or Nathanael West or Don DeLillo” (231); his verisimilitude, she points out, “hovers on the borders of the surreal” (232).

Peter J. Bailey’s “Granting the Individual Soul Its Due,” from his *Rabbit (Un)-Redeemed: The Drama of Belief in John Updike’s Fiction* (2006), investigates the question of American individualism in the Rabbit tetralogy. Instinctually echoing Emerson in his assertion of the primacy of the self, Harry elevates egocentricity to “egotheism” by fusing it with religious belief. Referring to other works such as *Self-Consciousness* and *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, Bailey concludes with the “unresolved debate over the value of human self-consciousness” (245) that lies at the core of these texts, which celebrate the individual while echoing the anxiety voiced by Emerson in “Experience”: “The individual is always mistaken” (244).

In the final piece on Rabbit, “Inside America,” excerpted from his *John Updike’s Rabbit Tetralogy: Mastered Irony in Motion* (2001), Marshall Boswell makes the case that “the Rabbit books are really one book,” Updike’s best, and “the one book that will unquestionably outlive him” (248). Not only does this meganovel document a half-century of American life and history, but the Rabbit novels serve as “conduits for Updike’s holistic ethical and religious vision” (249). Boswell underlines how “the Rabbit novels reveal in rich detail the full spectrum of Updike’s views on Christianity, sexuality, postwar America, money, science, technology, racism, immortality, death, birth, divorce, adultery, gender, class, and so on” (249). These views, however, are not monologically expounded but always presented, as Updike insists in his introduction to *Rabbit Angstrom: The Four Novels*, in terms of an “unresolvable tension intrinsic to being human” (250). Hence the concept of “mastered irony” in Boswell’s study: “The final truth imprinted by the book is the truth of ambiguity, whereby dialectical disunities are left unreconciled” (255). Of course, as Boswell reminds us, quoting Milan Kundera: “Irony irritates . . . because it denies us our certainties by unmasking the world as an ambiguity” (255–56). So it is with Updike, a master of irony.

The section then turns from the Rabbit series to Updike’s other multivolume works: his *Scarlet Letter* trilogy and his three collections of stories about Henry Bech. James Schiff’s “Updike’s *Scarlet Letter* Trilogy: Recasting an American Myth” (1992) brought critical recognition to what at the time was an undervalued ensemble of novels. Placing Updike in “The School of Hawthorne,” Schiff reveals the ambivalence and complexity of the project: while endeavoring “to align himself with a tradition of American ‘masters,’ . . . Updike also parodies and deromanticizes Hawthorne’s text, calling into question its authority and moral

stance" (261). Updike's novels—*A Month of Sundays*, *Roger's Version*, and *S.*—recast the three protagonists of Hawthorne's canonical novel, showing them caught in "the 'mythic' American situation," as "individuals struggling within themselves and against their communities in an effort to shake off the past and reinvent the world" (263). *A Month of Sundays* (1975) self-consciously enacts Arthur Dimmesdale's story in the form of a parodic diary in which sex, transgression, and writing become a prankster minister's salvation. By contrast, *Roger's Version* (1986) portrays a highly sophisticated battle between Roger Lambert, a Barthian professor of theology for whom God is the "Wholly Other," and Dale Kohler, a computer science graduate student "intent on proving God's existence" by making him appear on a computer screen. Cerebral, complex, and erudite in theology and science, the novel also takes up the theme of voyeurism, making the contemporary Roger a ghoulish Roger Chillingworth, who can penetrate into the lives and thoughts of others in order to manipulate them. *S.* (1988), the final volume, is a satirical epistolary novel: Sarah Worth, a Hester Prynne avatar, is a pilgrim of modern times in search of a new life in the wilderness, namely an ashram in the Arizona desert. Looking for a transfiguring experience, Sarah falls prey to a fraudulent guru, a con man whose hypocrisy and materialism mirror her own. Schiff's pioneering reading underlines the elements of comedy and satire in Updike's rewriting of *The Scarlet Letter*. Shunning the gloom of its model and "refusing to punish immoral behavior," Updike "attempts to undo the traditional body-soul division in Hawthorne" (274) and joyously celebrates the exhilaration of the flesh.

Though not always treated as a trilogy, the Bech stories were published in three collections: *Bech: A Book* (1970), *Bech Is Back* (1982), and *Bech at Bay* (1998). In "Going South: *Bech at Bay* and Before," Rodgers briefly reviews the sequence, which he calls Updike's "self-conscious act of literary *chutzpah*," with Bech presented as "a deracinated, well-known but blocked, New York Jewish-American writer" (279). If Bech is "fun," as Updike explained in an interview, allowing him "to write without holding back, without compensating for the character's mind" (279), clearly this fun is communicable, giving way to what Rodgers describes as "some of the finest and funniest writing of Updike's career" (277). While providing good commentary, this review-essay, which first appeared in 1999, comes about two hundred pages after Derek Parker Royal's newly commissioned essay on the Bech stories. If chronology is one of the volume's guiding factors, one wonders why the newer essays do not come later in the text.

The two subsequent essays examine more recent works from Updike's oeuvre: the novels *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996) and *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000). In

his review of *Lilies*, A. O. Scott pinpoints the limits of Updike's historical imagination and the fact that "his novelistic method is ill suited to the formal demands of historical fiction" (287). Yet where the novel succeeds, he argues, is on the familiar ground of the American small-town, middle-class life that is Updike territory, depicted "with Proustian lushness and Balzacian precision" (290–91). With "In Desire's Grip: Gender, Politics, and Intertextual Games in Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius*" (2003), Laura Elena Savu joins the chorus of feminist readings of Updike (Mary O'Connell, Mary Gordon, Sally Robinson). Savu shows how Updike dialogically appropriates Shakespeare's figures to fashion his prequel to *Hamlet* and, in so doing, "expands Gertrude's role in the play of events and relegates Hamlet . . . to a minor role" (297). The romance between the eponymous heroes becomes a full-fledged erotic passion and the source of "a transforming experience for Gertrude" (307), even though, on the masculine side, "the power to love and the love of power" are shown to be "at odds with each other" (315). Drawing on Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, Savu concludes with a discussion of the "liberationist vision" that the novel proposes in terms of Gertrude's self-knowledge and "the affirmation of her integrated self" (317). Contrary to his three-sided rewriting of *The Scarlet Letter*, Updike's refashioning of *Hamlet* toys with a vindication of feminist values that comes as a belated answer to the patriarchal dilemma.

The final essays in this section, David Heddendorf's "The Modesty of John Updike" and Adam Gopnik's "A Fan's Notes: On Updike's Long Game," provide a fitting and strong conclusion to the volume. (The fourth section, "Resources," comprises only a chronology, bibliography, and other back matter.) More beltristic in nature than the academic essays that dominate the volume, Heddendorf's and Gopnik's essays bring an awareness of important aspects of Updike's literary identity, including his modesty, humor, and numinous style. Both essays were published in 2008, a year before Updike's death, and both stand among the finer tributes written to the author, celebrating his many gifts, achievements, and individual spirit. Gopnik concludes by praising Updike for his "stubborn graceful adherence to craft," his "intimation of the numinous in the ordinary," and his "ability to get himself expressed fully, unimpeded, and for the desire, even in the face of time, to set down, for readers still unborn, all the sweetness of our common life" (340).

There is much to admire and value in this volume, particularly the newly commissioned essays and final tributes. Rodgers deserves credit for these selections as well as for reprinting some excellent scholarship. That said, the collection suffers, perhaps, from not being novel enough. One closes the volume desiring new

approaches to reading Updike as well as new essays on those many neglected works written in multiple genres. The scant crop of new essays, comprising about a fourth of the volume, feels like bait that leaves the reader hungry for more. So there we are. There is room for more, though one senses that with Updike criticism this will always be the case. Perhaps we simply need to be patient, acknowledge that this collective effort will take time, and that this latest installment stands as one more fine contribution to the ongoing parade of critical writings dedicated to the oeuvre of John Updike.

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Updike Family Panel in Pennsylvania

JAMES PLATH

This panel discussion took place during the first conference of The John Updike Society, held at Alvernia University in Reading, Pennsylvania, on October 1–3, 2010. The panel featured John Updike’s first wife, Mary Weatherall, and three of their children: Elizabeth Cobblah, Miranda Updike, and Michael Updike (David Updike would speak at the same university a week later). James Plath, president of the Society, moderated the discussion, which convened at 10 a.m. on October 1 in the Bernardine Franciscan Conference Center.

PLATH: We’re especially delighted to have with us Mary Weatherall, who was John Updike’s first wife, and three of his four children: Elizabeth Cobblah, Michael Updike, and Miranda Updike. It doesn’t get any better . . . unless David were here.

MICHAEL: Well . . . maybe not.

PLATH: And the first revelation bubbles to the surface! Can each of you talk briefly about your earliest or most prominent memory of your father-slash-former husband, as a writer?

MICHAEL: I remember mostly the wizard stories he told us. They were formulaic, with some little animal having a problem and traveling through the woods, and then it would get participatory. If the animal was on a third day of travel, he’d knock three times and we’d rap on the bed louder each time. Then he would get out of bed and do this squeaky, annoying wizard voice, and always the refrain was, “I just got back from a vacation in Florida,” and “Why are you bothering me?”

Even as a child you could tell that sometimes he'd get the plot into a corner and not quite be able to get out of it. And the wizard's solution would be to turn the animal over and there was a switch, indicating skunk smell or porcupine quills, that was set the wrong way. And then he'd call it the end. That's my first memory.

MIRANDA: I'm thinking more about his writing process and where he was—how he had an office at our house and how relaxed he was when writing. There were always lots of us around—four kids, and at any given time there might have been a bunch of our friends there as well. As he was typing away he was very relaxed and didn't get annoyed if interrupted. He was very good at multitasking and was always happy to see us—our little heads poking into his office and stealing rubber bands or sharpening pencils. He was very open to that, incorporating his family life into his work life.

ELIZABETH: As the eldest, even I got wise old wizard stories and they were delightful. But I have a distinct memory—I don't know if it's my earliest—of the sound of his typewriter, lickety-split. He was a very rapid typist, and he had his little office upstairs. Another memory I have is sitting with him in church. He is responsible for my kind of faith, I guess. He got us to Sunday school. Mom, being the minister's daughter, really didn't care about Sunday school much; she didn't emphasize that. But it was his Christian faith that he passed to me, in a way. I remember him jotting notes on his program during services, and you learned that he was always thinking about what he was going to write next. Another image I have is of him sitting around the house with his proofs on his lap—long sheets of proofs—with all the hubbub going on around him, just sitting there working on his proofs in the rocking chair.

MARY: Well, my first memory of John as a writer was in college when we took a fine arts course together and I saw what a good writer he was on a term paper. Later on, he typed up my thesis for me—which I thought was a great act of generosity, since he was also taking many courses and on the *Lampoon* and, at the time, very busy. Then shortly after that in the summer we exchanged letters while he was working at the *Reading Eagle*. He talked a lot about the rejection slips he was getting from the *New Yorker* and how miserable it made him, and how hard he was working. He was thinking about writing every minute of the day. It never stopped, after that. Eventually, he got some positive replies, and it was very exciting for him—for all of us, actually.

PLATH: Mary, do you remember at what point you both realized that he wasn't just a writer, but that he was a writer with a capital "W"?

MARY: I think as soon as he got a book published, that was the first, for him, and having so many stories accepted by the *New Yorker*, also. It was very important to him.

PLATH: Many of us here are familiar with that well-known detail about John writing three pages of polished prose per day. Can you add anything else to that? Anything about his work habits? You said something about him having a home office and being very calm. Is there anything else you can tell us about his work?

ELIZABETH: Well, even though he was very present in our lives growing up, he would often be off in thought, so he would have this distracted response to a simple question like—oh, I don't know, What time are we leaving?—and he would take his time to getting around to the answer because he was deep in thought. I think he was always thinking about the life of his fiction or poetry. Whatever was going on in his office was also going on in his head, all the time.

MIRANDA: About that three pages, I'm not sure if he actually wrote three pages. I know he *said* he did. He definitely had one deep, heavy chunk of hard time that he spent writing, usually in the morning—not early morning, either. He slept late-ish, at least when we were growing up, and he would stop after lunch and take us to the beach or something. So it was a short workday. Yet he was always thinking about writing and had clearly committed himself to a certain period of time during the course of the day for his writing.

MICHAEL: There was always a book in his hand, along with a pencil, and on these trips to the beach he'd be laying there on the sand reading or writing. That was just sort of something he was doing all the time while walking through the rest of his life, attentively or inattentively. It was just there. I don't know where I'm going with this, but he was able to manage all the social niceties while also managing this never-ending job of being a writer.

PLATH: Let's talk about some of those social niceties and diversions. How did he divert himself from the writing regimen and from filling his head so full of ideas? What did he enjoy for recreation? Did you, for example, take family vacations?

MICHAEL: There was the nine-hour trip we made to Pennsylvania every summer, for a week, and the trips to Vermont, where my mother's parents had a house up on a mountain. Expo 67 I think we did. Then later, when there was a little more money, we'd go to Martha's Vineyard. Ipswich, Massachusetts, is notorious for greenhead flies, which render the outdoors uninhabitable for a month every summer, so we'd go to Martha's Vineyard, usually for July or August, and he'd set up his little writing station in an outbuilding or upstairs in a quiet place in whatever house we rented. He kept his routine pretty much there, but then the beach came, and the cocktail parties, and golf with various writers and friends on the Vineyard. If he did any hobnobbing with fellow writers, it was always on the Vineyard. He'd play poker with Lillian Hellman and saw friends like Robert Crichton.

MIRANDA: He liked to go to movies and to take us bowling, and on rainy days he would often take all of us kids to a greasy clam food place called Woodman's, in Essex, and . . . what else?

ELIZABETH: Ski trips in the winter, volleyball on Sunday afternoons with his buddies. He was very active, physically, very socially animated, much loved by his social peers in Ipswich. He played poker a couple times a month.

MARY: He had to learn games. He had to learn to swim in college, and to ski, because our children wanted to ski. He played basketball a bit with his friends in mud season in Ipswich, which was between winter and spring, and touch football. He also learned how to play tennis. What was amazing to me was that, for somebody who hadn't taken sports very seriously at school, he all of a sudden in his early adulthood began pursuing all kinds of physical activities with great enthusiasm and quite a lot of ability too.

MICHAEL: I think the only sport he came into adulthood with was roofball, which I had never heard of but which was learned, apparently, on the streets of Shillington. He taught us all how to play roofball. I don't know if it still exists as a playground game or not.

PLATH: Can you describe it, Michael?

MICHAEL: You have a roof . . . and you just line up the kids for a game of elimination. It's played on the low roof of a shed or garage. The kids face the roof and



Roofball in Shillington, circa summer 1944; Updike reputed to be second child in line.
Photograph by Thelma Lewis, courtesy of Silcox-Lewis Collection.

form a line away from it. The first child serves the ball volleyball-style onto the roof and runs to the back of the line. The ball needs to hit the roof at least once. As it descends, the second child hits it volleyball-style back up to the roof, and so it goes like this down the line. Failure to get the ball on the roof means you're eliminated. This continues until there's a single winner.

PLATH: I think the most extreme thing I've done for any of my kids is playing the part of the king in the *Sleeping Beauty* ballet because my daughter was Little Aurora. Do you remember your father doing anything extreme that way, like you're thinking, Boy, he's really doing this for me?

MIRANDA: Not really, though maybe the wise old wizard stories functioned that way.

MICHAEL: Yeah, and the way he would mow the lawn in circular paths back and forth so we could run across it. But he was more of a home father than not. Most fathers would come home around five-thirty or six, but he was around the house essentially from one in the afternoon until the next morning at nine, when he would get up and go off for his four hours of writing for the day.

ELIZABETH: He took me to my flute lessons, and I think he took our brother David to his guitar lessons. He was available in the afternoon.

MARY: In a nice way.

ELIZABETH: Even though Mom was also available.

MARY: He didn't think of himself as being musical but he learned how to play the recorder, and we both played recorder in a group for several years. He also wrote reviews of the local classical concerts for the town newspaper and was quite good at it.

PLATH: Was he free of household chores, or did you divide up the work? He writes domestic fiction, but how much of a domestic was he?

MARY: He didn't wash dishes. He didn't cook very often.

ELIZABETH: Grocery shop?

MARY: He *would* grocery shop. And the first thing he did when we moved into a new house was not to help unpack the car. Instead, he got out a saw and cut a mailbox in our front door so he could be sure to get his news from the *New Yorker*.

ELIZABETH: He was very handy with little repair jobs around the house. Things like a door not closing properly would bug him enough that he'd get out his plane and make it a good tight fit. He taught me how to glaze windows. He also taught me that if you have a cracked window, how to take it out and replace it, which entailed cleaning the little trough and knowing how to run the putty knife over the corners. Things bugged him about the house, particularly things that didn't work properly, so that was kind of cool.

PLATH: This question is for Mary. This conference celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Rabbit, Run*. John had received a Guggenheim [fellowship] to help him complete the novel, and I was wondering if you could talk about what your life was like as a couple while this second novel was being written. Does anything stand out?

MARY: Well, nothing much changed, except Miranda hadn't been born and Michael was very young, perhaps a year old, I think. The others were also young,

maybe five and three. We had our hands full. I think that everything was going smoothly, but we were both very busy.

PLATH: Did he share chapters or drafts in progress?

MARY: Well, not so much with novels, but with short stories. When he finished a short story, I would read it and I would be able to say what I thought about it. Then he would send it to the *New Yorker*. When it came back, if there were editorial changes, he always wanted to know whether they were good or whether the original, his first version, was better. That's the sort of thing I was doing. Also little things . . . about whether he was repeating himself, or whether characters were saying appropriate things to each other.

PLATH: Appropriate things meaning, Does this character sound like the person upon whom it's based?

MARY: No, not so much that, but the consistent personality of the fictional character.

PLATH: As for the children, I was wondering something about the later writing, particularly *Couples*. When was it that each of you realized your father had written what some people were calling a dirty book? How did you feel about that?

MIRANDA: For starters, it took a long time for me to figure out that he was a famous person. I mean, he was a writer and the next-door neighbor was a lawyer, or something like that, but he was just our father. He did what he did, and that was that. It wasn't important for a long time, and maybe it still isn't. I would have been seven or so when *Couples* appeared, and because of that novel we went to England for a year. We were wealthy enough after *Couples* to go and spend a year abroad, and that was big for us. So I guess it sort of sneaked into my consciousness that it was a racy book, and a lot of the characters were based on people from our community.

MICHAEL: We had to get out of the town we lived in when the book came out. So that was in my fourth grade year, and we stayed in lovely Cumberland Terrace, Regent's Park, and I remember always watching the *New York Times* best-seller list, because *Couples* was second for so many weeks, behind *Airport*. I think he was No. 1 for maybe one or two weeks, so he just made it, but he was No. 2 forever. We came back from England and bought a much bigger house as well, and then a few years

later Liz decided she wanted private school, so the rest of us all realized private school was an option. That's when we realized, I *think*, that he was doing all right.

ELIZABETH: I was more concerned with the painting of a nude man in our dining room than I was with his books. When the Girl Scouts were coming for dinner, I asked if that painting could *please* be removed. So when it came to the racy book thing, I was pretty naive and a slow bloomer. I think I didn't fully grasp that until college, really, and I still have not read *Couples*. Have you guys read *Couples*?

MICHAEL: I did climb that mountain, and it wasn't as bad as I suspected it was going to be. It was nice to have my mother to say, "Oh, that's Mrs. Thompson," or, "That was a rumor." It's always been dismissed as the best seller he had to write to get wealthy, but I thought there's a lot in there that's really good. I enjoyed it more than I thought I would.

MARY: I read it once, and I think I'll not read it again. But there *were* some good parts, and the characters derived from reality but were always mixed up with another character from reality.

PLATH: So they were composites.

MARY: They were very composite, and he worked hard at it. Sometimes it carried the day, and other times people recognized themselves in spite of it. But he did it very well. I don't think anybody was totally offended or surprised.

MICHAEL: As you read, especially the early short stories, you really get a sense for the history of Ipswich and what is happening. For instance, there was an incident where a car smashed into the house across the street, which I barely understood at age four. But then I read about it later [in "The Corner"] and learned that the axle had broken, that the driver was a young guy, and that he had almost run over my sister. When I read that, I read it as all being fact in a way, and I think I'm correct in saying that it is very factually based . . . but not all of it.

ELIZABETH: When I recognize people I know in his work, it can be a little bit distracting from the main story. Yet I marvel at his ability to really nail a certain character—townspeople, friends included. So yeah, it's both a distraction and a source of awe for me.

MICHAEL: There's a pretty damning account of my grandmother [Linda Grace Hoyer Updike] in *Of the Farm*, and it's just amazing how much he nailed it. He knew exactly her conniving, manipulative ways, and he just lived with it and wrote about it.

PLATH: Have you read *The Centaur*? I remember his father Wesley's remark about that book and how "the kid got me right."

MICHAEL: Yeah, I've never understood why my father didn't respect *his* father more, and I think he got it right in *The Centaur*. We saw our grandfather as just a lovable and gregarious person, and my grandfather always looked at himself as a failure because he ended up as a schoolteacher and barely made a go of it. But I love *The Centaur* and I love the depiction of my grandfather. It really displays his charm and why he was valued in this very community that we're in.

MIRANDA: I agree with Michael. It was the very first book I ever read of my father's, so it was a long time ago, and though it's very fuzzy I remember the car scene well—the car breaking down in the winter, and the main character being very embarrassed by his father. I just don't understand what his problem was with his father.

ELIZABETH: Well, *The Centaur* was the one book of my father's I was ever asked to read by a teacher, and that was in the eleventh grade, I think. I loved it. While I haven't read it since, I do intend to reread it. And yes, we *adored* our grandfather Wesley. He was a saint in our eyes.

PLATH: There's a tour [during the conference] for John Updike Society members to Plowville, and I was wondering if you could talk about your family vacations there and your memories of the farmhouse.

MARY: The house was very small, but they managed to squeeze us in when we arrived. It was wonderful being there. It's a lovely old house. The barn was absolutely beautiful, the landscape lovely, and I missed going there after John and I were separated. The kids loved it too.

MIRANDA: I would like to add that our grandparents would accommodate us, when we came, by sleeping in the barn while we all slept in the house. But all of us kids wanted to be with *them*, so we all piled into the barn to sleep, which

meant that my mother and father had the house to themselves. It was a very old-fashioned kind of visit—crickets chirping, fireflies buzzing. We'd catch fireflies at night, and we'd eat corn on the cob and fresh peaches—it was really nice. We'd also take long walks in the early morning with our grandfather and his collies, his dogs.

ELIZABETH: Well, when you come from New England, one thing you notice about this area is the stone, the stone constructions and the use of sandstone in the buildings. We were admiring, yesterday, just driving into Berks County and seeing those familiar sandstone houses. Some of them have become quite decrepit and others abandoned, but the sandstone is what I associate with this area.

MICHAEL: I'm going to "out" you a little bit, Liz, and talk about your early college visit to Mom-mom's farm. Correct me as I go, but you thought you were being helpful by going out and weeding the garden on a Sunday, and my grandmother, being a strict Lutheran, didn't agree with working on the Sabbath. So as punishment, she declined to report that you had been crying the entire time [following a confrontation]. She let you cry while my mother thought that everything was fine. That's the kind of manipulation that you see from the grandmother in *Of the Farm*.

MIRANDA: Yes, our grandmother had a short fuse and was very focused on our father when we went to visit. The rest of us would have to work around that, but she had a sharp tongue and was quick to scold.

ELIZABETH: She also outlived our other three grandparents, so we had, I think, the privilege of knowing her into our adulthood. She mellowed and softened over the years, and it was sad when she died in 1989.

PLATH: Could you talk a bit more about Wesley Updike?

MIRANDA: First of all, he was just so charming. He would meet strangers as we'd go into town or people he knew and he would always compliment them. He would find some way of giving them a compliment, making them feel like a wonderful person, and he did that with us. He gave us all sorts of nicknames, although I'm drawing a blank on them.

MICHAEL: My father drove from Plowville to Shillington with my grandfather every day, and he would sometimes joke, though often at my grandfather's ex-

pense. For instance, he would describe, for laughs, lurching the car ahead two feet as his father was getting into the car in front of a group of high school kids. My grandfather was of the personality that he would let it go.

PLATH: What books by your father speak to you most, or which books do you identify with? Any standouts or favorites?

MARY: Well, I'm partial to the early short stories, probably because I know them so well. It was all very exciting as, one by one, they were accepted, and then later collected and reviewed, which verified our feeling about their success.

PLATH: Have any of you seen yourselves in those short stories? If so, what was your reaction?

ELIZABETH: I'm touched but also a little unnerved. His observations are just so keen, and he had a way of being a little harsh while loving at the same time. So it's an awkward thing. But what I love about his writing, really—and I don't have a favorite, I'm not particularly well-read when it comes to his writing—are his observations, and the combination of his playfulness and reverence, which comes through in his poems. So yes, that combination of playfulness and reverence.

MIRANDA: He began giving me the books when I was nineteen or so, and I started most of them. I gravitate toward the thinner books, although I do like *In the Beauty of the Lilies*. *Seek My Face* is a book in which I saw a lot of my grandmother, and the descriptions were just beautiful. There's one description of this older woman who lives alone and makes herself a cup of tea; she reuses the teabag, then puts it on the corner of the sink where it looked like a little purse. That reminded me exactly of my grandmother's purse, and it kept sticking in my head. I would agree with Elizabeth that his descriptions are just wonderful.

MICHAEL: I think the question was about standout novels. *The Poorhouse Fair* I read, and, to be honest, just didn't quite get. There are lovely parts in it, but I think what bothered me is that it's more dialogue, which leads to a discussion Miranda and I have had about his dialogue. Are the people too smart? Is the dialogue too polished? A lot of us say things that go nowhere. We say things that sound flat and silly. When you're writing about fictional people, his dialogue is very crisp and the people are smart, intelligent. But what I think is preferable is the description

and the many different details, such as Miranda described, like the purse, and that bit from *Couples* where he's coming down to a house that's being renovated and describes the [unconnected pipes under the] kitchen sink, which [had been left] "open like a cry." That makes perfect sense, I thought, that's wonderful! So it's all peppered with little fine details.

PLATH: Do you recognize yourself or others in the short stories, Michael?

MICHAEL: Yeah. I can read all the short stories and see my siblings in most of them. I'm not in too many of the novels that I know of. In *Marry Me* I think I'm a young child. The family [in the books] ranges from five to three, so I think my brother is the one who disappears a lot in these books. I'm sort of the limbo in between, and I think my divorce was informed by his divorce, where I was trying to do something different, such as hold onto my kids more at the time than he did. So there was this commentary in his short stories about that which I don't think he fully understood or appreciated.

ELIZABETH: I was getting ready to marry my husband, a man from Ghana, West Africa, and my dad thought I needed to read *The Coup*. I confess, however, that I have not yet read *The Coup*, but I will.

PLATH: All of you turned out to be artistic in some way, whether writing, painting, or sculpting. Could you talk about the influence of your parents?

ELIZABETH: Dad drew—we both drew—you know, cats and little scenes of babies being fed, landscapes and vases with flowers, that sort of thing. Cartoons, birthday cards. Our birthday cards from our father were almost always hand-drawn. Up until he died, he was even giving hand-drawn caricatures of grandchildren in birthday cards, that sort of thing.

MIRANDA: I think our parents' lifestyle encouraged us to become artists just by seeing that we didn't have to go to a real job. You could make a living free-flowing, intertwining with your family life, and I think we all liked that idea.

ELIZABETH: It was a trial-and-error sort of thing. They had expectations but they were not that explicit. They were permissive and inventive and creative, and they had a faith in us, I think, as creative beings. Mom took a leap of faith in marrying

my father in the first place when he was only—what?—twenty and still in college, and I think the two of them transferred that faith to us—a faith in life, art, God, everything.

PLATH: We now have time for just a few questions from the audience.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Well, first of all, thank you for sharing all these personal stories about your father and family. It sounds as if you had such affection for your grandfather, and I'm wondering, did you see your grandparents more than the one week in summer when you came here to visit?

MARY: Oh, yes. They came to visit us in Ipswich several times, and they came to France when we were there in the winter of . . .

ELIZABETH: '62.

MARY: Yes, '62, and they baby-sat for the children while John and I went to Italy for a week. That was, I thought, very brave and heroic of them. They had to drive a car in France, and they were very good babysitters.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Can I ask, what was your reaction to *Self-Consciousness*, his memoir?

ELIZABETH: I personally feel it's a gift to his progeny. I've been using it as a resource, and, yes, a love letter, really.

MICHAEL: I loved *Self-Consciousness*. It has so many beautiful descriptions of Shillington and his childhood here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Is it true that John Updike did not like Frank Sinatra, and if so, what singers and musicians did he like?

MIRANDA: He liked Bing Crosby.

MICHAEL: Boy, you stumped the panel. I will say, however, that I lived with my father my senior year in high school, which was 1976, I think, and he loved the Captain & Tennille.

MARY: We actually met Frank Sinatra in New York, courtesy of Bennett Cerf, who was entertaining us at dinner at a restaurant, and John seemed very pleased to meet Frank Sinatra, even though *I* never knew that he didn't like him.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: My other question about music, given Rabbit's listening tastes, is whether he liked disco. Did he like Donna Summer?

MIRANDA: I don't think he did, but I could be wrong. He liked the Beatles, jazz, and classical music. . . . What else?

ELIZABETH: The Supremes.

MIRANDA: Motown! He liked Motown.

PLATH: And on that note, we shall conclude. Thank you to all of our panelists.

Contributors' Notes

LEONARD CASSUTO is a professor of English at Fordham University. An award-winning journalist and author of “The Graduate Adviser” column for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, he has written or edited seven books, including *The Cambridge Companion to Baseball* (2011). www.lcassuto.com

BRIAN DUFFY is a lecturer in English Literature in Dublin City University, Ireland. His doctoral thesis was on the French texts of Samuel Beckett’s novel trilogy. He is the author of *Morality, Identity and Narrative in the Fiction of Richard Ford* (Rodopi, 2008). He has published articles on John Banville, Martin Amis, John Updike, and Albert Camus, as well as on Beckett and Ford.

DONALD J. GREINER teaches American literature at the University of South Carolina, where he has held the chair of Carolina Distinguished Professor of English and served as Interim Provost, Associate Provost, and Dean of Undergraduate Studies. He has published three books and dozens of articles on Updike, as well as books on Robert Frost, Stephen Crane, John Hawkes, Frederick Busch, and James Dickey. He is an Executive Editor of *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*.

AVIS HEWITT teaches American literature at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan. She has published essays on Updike’s “Pigeon Feathers” and *Self-Consciousness*, as well as on Mary McCarthy, Denise Levertov, and Flannery O’Connor. Having served for six years as editor of *Cheers! The Flannery O’Connor Society Newsletter*, she co-edited, with Robert Donahoo, *Flannery O’Connor in the Age of Terrorism: Essays on Violence and Grace* (Tennessee 2010) and has an article forthcoming in *A Political Companion to Flannery O’Connor* (Kentucky).

SYLVIE MATHÉ is Professor of American Literature at Aix-Marseille Université (France). She is a graduate of the École normale supérieure in Paris, and she has previously taught at the University of Oxford, Yale University, Wellesley College, and MIT. She is the author of *John Updike: La nostalgie de l'Amérique* (Paris: Berlin, 2002).

JAMES PLATH has been involved in Updike criticism and scholarship since the 1980s, when he wrote his dissertation on “The Painterly Aspects of John Updike’s Fiction” at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. A founder and current president of The John Updike Society, he edited *Conversations with John Updike* (Mississippi 1994) and is currently at work on a volume titled “Native Son: John Updike’s Pennsylvania Interviews.”

ARISTI TRENDEL is an associate professor at Maine University, le Mans, France. She has published articles on American writers (John Updike, Philip Roth, Flannery O’Connor, Henry James, Jeffrey Eugenides) in American and French journals. She is the author of two books of fiction and a forthcoming novel.



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