





The
John Updike Review

VOLUME 2 | NUMBER 2

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JUR's First Emerging Writers Prize

I am pleased to announce that the *JUR*'s First Emerging Writers Prize, which includes publication in the journal and an award of \$1,000, will be shared by two recipients, Vidya Ravi and Jeffrey Ludwig, both graduate students. The panel of judges, a subset of the *JUR* editorial board, was split between these two very different essays, and the consensus was that the award should be shared.

A final-year doctoral student at the University of Cambridge, Vidya Ravi composed an analytical essay on *Couples*, titled "'Outdoors to Indoors, Detail to Detail': The Domestic Topography of John Updike's *Couples*." In this essay, "Ravi establishes convincingly," as one judge wrote, "the importance of domestic topography in understanding both Updike and the cultural history of America, the ways in which the domestic space configures affect and performativity, and the relation between domestic and narrative architecture. This is an essay which sparkles with original insights and should spark other scholars' explorations." Ravi is currently finishing her Ph.D. and will be starting a postdoctoral project at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland.

Jeffrey Ludwig is a graduate student in history at the University of Rochester, writing, for his dissertation, an intellectual biography of social critic Christopher Lasch. Ludwig's essay, "Roommates and Rivals: John Updike, Christopher Lasch, and a Harvard University Friendship," according to one judge, "is a well-researched, immensely readable biographical essay which sheds light on Updike's college years, his apprenticeship and emergence as a writer, and his arrival in the East. Ludwig provides a very good and substantial early contribution to Updike's biography." Currently residing in Rochester, Ludwig works as both a researcher in the City Historian's Office and a writing instructor at the Eastman School of Music.

Congratulations to both writers, thanks to all who submitted essays, and special thanks to our panel of judges: Peter Bailey, Biljana Dojcinovic, Don Greiner, Judie Newman, and Jim Plath. In the months to come, we look forward to receiving submissions for the Second Emerging Writers Prize.

JAMES SCHIFF, EDITOR

Roommates and Rivals: John Updike, Christopher Lasch, and a Harvard University Friendship

JEFFREY LUDWIG

I enjoy forming close friendships with people, because the ordinary superficial friendships which are deemed “proper” are so often unsatisfactory.

—CHRISTOPHER LASCH, letter to parents, 6 May 1954

I walked him to the corner, where he embraced me. He would have kissed me, had I not ducked my head. Roommates make such awkward farewells.

—JOHN UPDIKE, “One of My Generation”

Until recently, when university housing offices became interested in compatibility and matchmaking, few things in life were more arbitrary than the designation of one’s first college roommate. Before the advent of computer algorithms (semi)capable of measuring personalities, such couplings were determined by little more than raw chance. So went the great tradition on every college campus in late summer: hundreds of thousands of young people paired together by the whimsical lottery of human calculation and a shuffling of papers. Even from this jumbled scrum, however, circumstances occasionally conspired to thrust two young people together as freshman roommates who made an extraordinary match. In the autumn of 1950, that is what happened with John Updike and Christopher Lasch. The bond between freshman roommates can be ephemeral or lasting, but either way it leaves a trace on the linked duo. As Updike suggests in “The Christian

Roommates,” a short story about student life in 1950s-era Harvard, the rooming process “sorted” and catalogued the otherwise impersonal undergraduate mass: “That jostling conglomerate, so apparently secure and homogenous, broke down, under habitual exposure, into double individuals: roommates” (167).

During their four years at Harvard, 1950–1954, the young Updike and Lasch became precisely that: connected “double individuals.” Both were bright and ambitious, both aspired to write fiction, and both were products of households led by strong-willed, opinionated mothers. A friendship, variously intimate and contentious, flowered quickly; they lived rather like brothers, at once great rivals and great confidants—a complex love-hate situation. They competed constantly, striving to outperform and outwrite the other. Yet they also shared their vulnerable inner worlds with each other, swapping drafts of many of the things they wrote, including letters home, always pushing the other to scrutinize the content and prose. Lasch and Updike continually made each other better, as people but especially as writers, at a crucial moment in their formative years.¹ In Lasch’s case in particular, the relationship shaped the intellectual path he chose to follow for the rest of his life. Indeed, in this random pairing of roommates, alive with the petty squabbles and tender passions of teenagers, the silhouettes of their careers emerge.

The legacies of Updike and Lasch require little retelling here. In their separate spheres—Updike with his prodigious output of novels, essays, reviews, poetry, and short stories; Lasch with his unique brand of history as social criticism—these two men of letters illuminated the intellectual landscape of mid and late twentieth-century America. They rose to the top of their respective vocations, reshaping their fields and changing literary history in the process. Updike authored a wealth of stories and nearly two dozen novels that chronicled, among other themes, the pleasures and anxieties, the limits and promise, of American middle-class existence. His legacy is towering; as J. D. McClatchy observed in a tribute, “No writer since his beloved Nabokov had manipulated, massaged, and mastered English prose as John Updike did” (133).

Lasch too published widely, and for an eager public, on a number of subjects. A public intellectual *par excellence*, he expounded most famously on a “culture of narcissism” gripping the country in the late 1970s (writings that inspired Jimmy Carter’s “Crisis of Confidence” speech) and warned about the false promises yoked to the idea of progress and the deleterious effects of elites in American life. In short, Lasch demonstrated the potential of wedding history with social criticism, of diagnosing at their broadest level the social maladies afflicting the country, such as the rise of narcissistic selfhood, a collective “pathology” of the American

post-industrial turn. His dark writings, occasionally tempered with prescriptions for his country in the form of a reinvigorated democratic populism, attracted a number of colleagues and students. The words of one former student attest to his wide appeal: “Lasch committed himself for more than thirty productive years as a historian to showing how his vocation could actually help citizens think more critically about the present. He showed how important it was to write history for a wider public within a democracy” (Mattson 393). To a remarkable degree, he succeeded; *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), a dour jeremiad that “describes a way of life that is dying” (xv), became a best seller, establishing its author as a significant critical figure.²

Ultimately, Lasch and Updike stood apart in their generation for their uniqueness of thought, the suppleness of their minds and prose. They were artists, word-smiths, and innovative intellectuals of the first order. They were also profoundly American in their craft. Both were keenly interested in forging a better understanding of the temperament of their native land and the course of history taken by “the American Century.” Further tying the two together, both sincerely believed, as Updike put it, that “[t]he real America seemed to me ‘out there’ . . . Out there was where I belonged” (*Early Stories* x). In many ways, their dramatic ascents began at Harvard and in each other’s company.

The trip to Harvard might easily have eluded Christopher “Kit” Lasch (1932–1994). Born in Omaha, Nebraska, the son of progressive intellectual parents (his father was a newspaper editorialist, his mother a college professor), Lasch did most of his growing up in Barrington, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. During his senior year at a public high school, his skills in Latin earned him a scholarship to the University of Chicago—the Midwest’s premier college and its answer to the East’s Ivy League. Lasch, a classic overachiever, “never even considered it” (Fox 3). Like so many of the best and brightest from across the country, he designated Harvard his foremost choice. After all, it had been the lodestar for America’s most talented (and well connected) sons for generations. It was what the most ambitious parents wanted for their children. Competition was fierce (if tame by modern standards) for the limited number of berths, and Lasch did not have a backup school. “It never occurred to me that I wouldn’t get into Harvard or that I ought to apply to a backup,” he claimed in a late-life interview. Happily, he was admitted as part of the class of 1954; less happily, he received no financial aid, “which was a great disappointment to my father” (Fox 3). His family had to shoulder the entire cost of tuition, in addition to housing and Lasch’s generous allowance.

John Updike (1932–2009), from Shillington and later Plowville, Pennsylvania, came of age in the shadow of Mount Penn and the city of Reading. He immortalized these places in his tetralogy, *Rabbit Angstrom*, as Mount Judge and Brewer, respectively, the sites of Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom’s world. Updike’s father taught high school math, his mother labored to become a writer, and their only child, John, flourished as a gifted and funny intellect despite suffering from a stutter and psoriasis. He excelled in school, graduating as valedictorian, and gained a scholarship to attend Harvard. The financial aid was essential; where Lasch’s middle-class, professional parents could stretch their budget to send their son to Cambridge at full cost, the Updike family likely could not. Updike’s mother, Linda Grace Hoyer, was the catalyst behind his Harvard admission, a move that Updike, speaking to the *Houston Chronicle*, called “this great leap up out of Shillington.” Hoyer had nursed her own ambitions of becoming a writer for years, taking correspondence courses from her isolated farmhouse. She saw, said the *Chronicle*, “that many noted American writers had gone to Harvard. She aimed her son in that direction” (Plath 165).³

The Harvard that Lasch and Updike entered held out the promise of greater social mobility than ever before for students of their modest background. In the early days of the postwar education boom—with its infusion of money and high enrollments sponsored by the G.I. Bill—the administration began to peel back many of the university’s notorious elitist habits. Formal dress requirements were replaced by khakis and flannel shirts, while students clad in “Eisenhower jackets” filled Harvard Yard. Other changes struck deeper in the culture of a university long marked by its ministrations to privileged old-line families. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (class of 1938, professor at Harvard 1946–1961) noted that “the old Harvard of clubmen, gentleman’s C’s and acute social stratification was fading away. The invasion of middle westerners, public school graduates and the newer immigrants . . . was destroying the homogeneity that had spawned the old-style Harvard man” (120).

Of course, change moved slowly and often in illusory ways. Harvard’s proud history of three centuries as a bastion of intellectual and economic hegemony made it stubbornly resistant to the forces of leveling. Legacies, or “white-shoes,” as the prep academy-educated sons of distinguished alumni were called, still had places reserved for them. They also had pristine dormitories, exclusionary secret societies, and an intact sense of superiority and entitlement. Their Harvard mirrored the world in which they were raised: a closed system of connected families

with country club memberships and gated communities. John Hope Franklin, one of the first African Americans to take a Harvard Ph.D. in history (in 1941), constantly felt the snubs and slights of this moneyed subculture. After years of shabby treatment and casual racism on campus, he trained himself not to take offense at undergraduate condescension. "I did not so much mind the spoiled undergraduates," he claimed. "They were acting in the manner to which they had been raised—in Bronxville, the Hamptons, or the North Shore" (81).

Lasch, too, picked up on the rules of the separate worlds dividing undergraduates. In one of his first letters home, he told his parents that he and Updike had been assigned a room in Hollis Hall—a dormitory he perceived as the repository for all of Schlesinger's "middle westerners" and "public school graduates" who were gate-crashing at Harvard. "The rooms are cheaper than most of the other halls, and there are a number of scholarship students here," he wrote. "The rich boys live in Wigglesworth and Strous [sic] and are held in much contempt."⁴ The stuffy milieu of Harvard was perhaps not so much "fading away," as Schlesinger thought, but regrouping as a still substantial enclave. While Lasch and Updike detected some of the tensions roiling beneath the surface at Cambridge, their Harvard years were not given over to partisan struggle. Their academic workloads prevented them from paying too much attention to social flux. The institution's strenuous classical pedagogy also prepared Lasch and Updike well for the writer's craft. Harvard's "Old Liberal Arts tradition" kept students "taking courses in grammar, rhetoric, logic, music, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy" (Pfitzer 124), all subjects that contributed to the roommates' intellectual rounding. As Updike admitted, this rigor served him well. "Harvard did right by me," he told an interviewer. "I went there a pretty ignorant fresh kid and they filled me in on the English classics" (Plath 165).

Fun and leisure provided a distraction. The roommates relished having a new city to explore. Early in their freshman year, Lasch and Updike acquired bicycles and familiarized themselves with Cambridge as well as the surrounding New England countryside. A favorite destination was nearby Wellesley College, where Lasch enjoyed trolling for "the most decent girls" to be found in the area.⁵ There was also Boston, with the delights of Fenway Park (the two attended Red Sox games together as often as they could), theaters, and used bookstores.

The roommates had their share of fun on campus, too. Lasch and Updike enjoyed living in Hollis Hall as freshmen with the scholarship students and public school graduates. (They moved to Lowell House as sophomores and remained there through their junior year.) Two decades later, Updike fondly recalled roam-

ing the grounds in his poem “Apologies to Harvard” (1973): “there were cathedral fronts to know,” a “[v]ast village where the wise enjoy the young . . . beneath house-tower domes” (123, 121). A good portion of their time in the dormitory went to the usual college amusements. They lost countless hours playing cards, Lasch confessing on several occasions that he “frittered away the entire week at such pastimes as hearts.”⁶ They worked in tandem to meet girls, going so far at one point as to attend a Congregationalist youth mixer. Updike “left after the sermon, afraid more would follow,” Lasch reported.⁷ And then there were the parties. The roommates experienced their share of late boozy nights, one of which ended with a wayward member of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in their room until the wee hours of the morning.⁸ Needless to say, when the time came to square up housing arrangements for their sophomore year, Lasch had no hesitation about standing pat with Updike. “I can think of no one else in the dorm I would rather room with than Updike,” he assured his parents.⁹

If the delights of their newly independent life were not enough to shield Lasch and Updike from the intrusions of the outside world, they also had a carefully constructed Harvard bubble to insulate them. To the undergraduate at least, Cambridge appeared a self-contained community bound by tradition and impervious to the atmosphere of early Cold War America. Lasch certainly felt the sensation of being, as he described it, “far removed from the outside world.” Absorbed in his studies and his youthful indulgences, he heard only the faintest echoes of the Cold War din outside the school walls. “Life here is unreal,” he noted in 1954. “I live in the past [as a history major], and if I seem somewhat insensitive to the present, that must be why.”¹⁰ Lasch came to suspect that Cambridge was apolitical not only because of its distracted student population, but by design. While world leaders and aspiring politicians made obligatory stops to deliver speeches at the hallowed campus (Lasch saw Harry Truman and Adlai Stevenson, among others, pass through), most professors decoupled politics from scholarship. “The place, for some reason, seems slightly dull,” he complained in a letter home in September 1952, as the presidential election season—and World Series—was in full swing. “The noise of the campaign and of the pennant race is already becoming a mere murmur, and I do not welcome the diminishing of every sound. Everything is mute and muffled.”¹¹

In the same letter, though, Lasch admitted that Harvard’s sheltering tendency had its benefits and was “often a blessing.” It freed him from worries about money, politics, and the future (until his senior year, when he worried about getting a job), allowing him to concentrate on making new friends and completing his studies.

What he called the “dreamlike state” of Harvard, then, was an ideal setting in which to cultivate new types of relationships, namely intimate friendships with people like John Updike.¹² It was also a place for intellectual and personal maturation. College was the incubator that slowly, almost imperceptibly, transformed Lasch and Updike from children to adults.

Like Lasch, Updike was struck by the insular, cocoonlike quality of Harvard during his time there. In a 1968 interview he compared his college years to “the resentment a caterpillar must feel while his somatic cells are shifting all around to make him a butterfly” (Plath 23). He described the culture shock of his freshman year in “Apologies to Harvard”:

My parents' house had been a hothouse world
Of complicating, inward-feeding jokes.
Here, wit belonged to the dead; the wintry smiles
Of snowmen named Descartes and Marx and Milton (122)

In the poem, he credits his alma mater for promising “[t]o take me in, raw as I was, . . . / . . . for one quadrennium, / And spit me out, by God, a gentleman” (121). In the interview, Updike acknowledged finding Cambridge “idyllic enough . . . I remember the glow of the Fogg Museum windows, . . . the snowy Yard, and the smell of wet old magazines that arose from the cellar of the *Lampoon* [where he served as editor] . . . , and numerous pleasant revelations in classrooms” (Plath 23). Better yet were the friendships. Updike felt the unique conditions of college life pushing him irresistibly, rapidly, into new friendships. He described the sensation in “The Christian Roommates”: “The hours open up. There is more time. Experiments are made. . . . Conversations go on and on; and an almost rapacious desire for mutual discovery possesses acquaintances” (174). For Updike, Lasch stood at the center of this voyage of “mutual discovery,” just as Updike did for Lasch.

In his earliest letters home, mailed in September 1950, Lasch introduced his parents to his new world, taking stock of his surroundings. He documented the condition of his room (“slightly run-down” but “comfortable”), the view from his third-story window (a “peaceful” vista of Harvard Yard, which he found “beautiful in any kind of weather”), and his fellow inhabitant:

My roomie's name is John Updike, and he comes from Reading, PA. His father is a public schoolteacher. He was accompanied by his mother and an aunt, who drove him up, and this embarrassed him somewhat, but he is a very nice guy. He wants to be

either a writer or a cartoonist. His field seems to be humor writing, and he is thinking about going out for the Lampoon.¹³

It proved to be a propitious pairing.

In later years, the significance of rooming with Lasch inspired Updike to draft two short stories that suggest the importance of their friendship: “The Christian Roommates” (1963) and “One of My Generation” (1969). The latter piece in particular captures the flavor of their rivalry and admiration for each other. Written at a time when so many American campuses seethed with protest movements and radical energy, “One of My Generation” weighs Updike’s own college experience against this tumult, meeting head-on the students who “revile the ‘power structure’ and storm the Pentagon” (58). Looking into the “drug-begentled eyes” of the contemporary youth revolt, the narrator seeks to answer their accusatory question “And what of *your* generation?” (57–58). His answer is a study in contrasts, a fondly shared memory of the literary, apolitical education that Harvard provided in the 1950s.¹⁴

The hook in “One of My Generation” of meeting one’s roommate for the first time allowed Updike to fictitiously conjure some first, and lasting, impressions of Lasch. The story begins with the narrator, “nearly twenty Septembers ago,” bounding up the long stairs to his assigned dormitory room. There he discovers his roommate, “bent-necked and narrow-shouldered,” a complete stranger inhabiting “an island of light.” Amid “the bleakest sticks of institutional furniture” the young man sits, composing a poem. Ed Popper, Nebraskan-born (like Lasch), emerges as “a disciple of Robert Lowell—the early, Boston Lowell,” who, in the “rural isolation” of his upbringing, devoured every book he could get his hands on (57).¹⁵ Together, the roommates “train [their] mind[s] to climb, like a vine on a sunny wall, across the surface of a poem . . . , seeking the handhold crannies of pun, ambiguity, and buried allusion” until new understanding is revealed. They travel to previously uncharted literary territory; “this,” the narrator remembers, “was life lived on the nerve ends” (58).¹⁶

The friendship Lasch formed with Updike opened new worlds for him as well. At the moment of their meeting, Lasch, the future historian and social critic, and Updike, soon to become one of the great American novelists, shared a common fondness for writing fiction. This became their strongest bond. During their three years as roommates (Updike got married and moved off campus in the summer before their senior year), they collaborated and competed while striving to get their material published. This productive relationship of social affection and shared

enterprise caused Lasch to rethink the purpose of friendship. Nearing graduation in the spring of 1954, he summarized his new paradigm: "I enjoy forming close friendships with people, because the ordinary superficial friendships which are deemed 'proper' are so often unsatisfactory."¹⁷ In the future, this would be the only sort of friendship he sought out.

The friendship between Lasch and Updike was not limited to their mutual interest in writing; the two genuinely liked each other from the start. It helped that they had compatible personalities (bookish, introspective); similar backgrounds (they held the "rich boys" in "much contempt"; in "The Christian Roommates," Updike scoffs at the "dandified apathy" of the "private-school boys, launched by little Harvards like Andover and Groton" [173]); and a shared sense of humor, tilting toward dry, sardonic observations. Updike "is very funny," Lasch told his parents, "and he is the first person I've met who seems to appreciate my own humor." In short, Lasch summed up in the second letter he sent home, imitating the New England accent that he and Updike found comical, "John is 'tawps."¹⁸

The feeling was mutual, if the portraits Updike drew in "The Christian Roommates" are to be believed. In that story, which Updike later claimed held "[a]ll that I seem able to preserve of the Harvard experience" (Plath 23), he crafted a semi-autobiographical account of his college years. The tale showcases Harvard's exhaustive workload and its conformist pressures during the 1950s. Centered on the travails of Orson and Hub, the story also contains a number of ancillary characters drawn from their creator's college memories. Included among them are caricatures, a blend of fact and fiction, of Lasch and Updike as college freshmen. The duo of Dawson and Kern, roommates bent on becoming writers, are instantly recognizable as their progenitors. The Midwestern Dawson is "a disciple of Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway," which contrasts with his soft, "puppyish" features (165, 175). Kern, hailing from Pennsylvania, is "subtly vicious. A farm boy bent on urban sophistication, riddled with nervous ailments" (168). Though only bit players in "The Christian Roommates," Dawson and Kern nonetheless recur frequently to add levity to the story. They appear to get along well with each other, playfully interacting with their hallmates and speaking together in a private language of funny rhymes, inside jokes, and clever nicknames bestowed on the people around them. Like Lasch and Updike, Dawson and Kern "maintained between them a battery of running jokes" (168). They laugh deep into the night, "keeping each other awake with improvised parodies and musical comedies based on their teachers, their courses, or their fellow-freshmen" (168). Though friction

occasionally arises between Dawson and Kern, as with Lasch and Updike, good humor usually serves to smooth it out. Their “grinding laughter” upholds “the precarious peace the two roommates kept between themselves” (175).

Updike’s fictional account of the joking, singing friendship of Dawson and Kern imitates life. Lasch and Updike grew so close during their freshman year that they decided to spend some of their spring break together (a tradition they repeated). The roommates traveled to Updike’s hometown of Shillington, which Lasch described to his parents as “a beautiful country with broad fields and blue distant ridges.” By day they lounged in the fresh country air and sprawling acreage of Updike’s ancestral Plowville stone farmhouse; at night they cruised the streets of Shillington with Updike’s high school friends, “a rather disreputable lot,” as Lasch characterized them.¹⁹ They returned to Harvard at the end of the break closer than ever.

For all the good times they had, writing was the tie that truly bound Lasch and Updike together. The shared notion that “we were both equally conscious of wanting to be fiction writers,” as Lasch said in a 1993 interview, animated their friendship (Fox 3). Both arrived at Harvard with the design of honing their writing skills; both, having been brought up on the *New Yorker*, dabbled in poetry, light verse, and literary criticism. (Lasch was stunned to learn that his roommate’s ambition was more than a match for his own. It floored him that Updike—“more industrious than I”—already had a few of his pieces published).²⁰ They recognized this shared desire quickly, and, rather than set up as rivals, engaged in something of a writing partnership. The correspondence between Lasch and his parents suggests that the pair read almost everything the other wrote and even set aside entire nights and weekends for writing marathons—not for school assignments, but for their own pleasure. Their camaraderie was a source of inspiration for both young men; fueled by their shared drive, each began several novel-length projects in the other’s presence. Apparently, when the roommates were not keeping their hall awake at nights with the raucous laughter of improvised musical theater, they did so with the ceaseless clatter of their typewriter keys.

Lasch and Updike involved each other in most aspects of their writing, including Lasch’s history essays and Updike’s English papers. According to Sam Tanenhaus, who was granted an advance look at Updike’s still-sealed archive at Harvard, a “serious” core informed the relationship between roommates. Updike told his parents that he and Lasch “diligently read and criticized each other’s work,” in Tanenhaus’s words (“Roommates”). Beyond the classroom, the two even showed their private correspondence to each other. Indeed, something of

an open mail policy appears to have governed their freshman dormitory room. (This propensity slipped in their later college years, when both started dating and writing as many love letters as they did letters home.) “Knowing he [Updike] will read this,” Lasch playfully told his parents in one letter, “I better say now that his stuff is pretty good. He is trying out for the Lampoon.”²¹ It was not uncommon for Lasch to read Updike’s letters as well. “John is writing to his parents at the moment,” Lasch informed his own in a note that unblushingly described the contents of Updike’s letter with no sense of impropriety. In fact, Lasch reported being eager to “know what innovations he is putting into this one.”²² In another letter home, Lasch allowed the roommate reading over his shoulder to have his own say: “Updike is very unhappy about being left out of this letter. He states that it is all right; he really isn’t that important, and after all, it is of no concern whether or not I even have a roommate.”²³ As Lasch’s sarcasm makes clear, nothing could have been further from the truth.

The true heart of the friendship, however, beat with the shared love of writing fiction. Lasch described reading over Updike’s shoulder when his roommate was writing well: “Updike keeps plowing ahead on his novel. He has written about ninety pages. Some of it is very good. All of his ideas strike me as very good.”²⁴ The pair devoted whole weekends to trying their hand at crafting short stories and verse, often establishing a theme for the event. On one such occasion in the winter of 1951, they locked themselves in their room to consider the movies’ “moonlight and magnolias” depiction of the plantation South. “Last weekend was the best,” Lasch told his parents, reveling in “the mood of careless joy I was in” and the “white-hot inspiration” he enjoyed. Still breathless from the endeavor, he crowed in full detail about his and Updike’s writing collaboration:

These literary outbursts are most confined to weekends. Last weekend we burst out in a flurry of creation . . . We wrote a series of articles on the Old South in the Western movie, after having seen one. Then Saturday night Updike prevailed upon me to write a story and I did. It was lousy but it seemed to clear the way for Sunday’s work. I was greatly flattered when Updike praised the poetry.²⁵

Articles, stories, poems—these became the typical fare of Lasch and Updike’s impromptu writing workshops.

Regardless of the topic of their weekend writing marathons, Lasch and Updike maintained a fairly constant routine: they sat at their desks and cranked out pieces, exchanged copies for a bull session of criticism, and finally, fingers crossed, they sent their work to potential publishers. Although they often met with dis-

couraging results from the national magazines, they continued to write despite the growing piles of rejection slips. The two kept at it as late as the spring of their junior year, their last semester together. They continued to shop their work, Lasch complained to his parents, “[b]ut no one is selling very fast. I really wish I knew how it could be done.”²⁶ They found out soon enough: Updike with literary magazines—including the *New Yorker*, which he joined shortly after graduation—and Lasch with an array of historical journals.

A symbiotic relationship, one of mutual advantage, permeated the friendship between the budding writers. Each played off the ideas and styles of the other, and developed in the process. Tanenhaus describes “Lasch pushing Updike to be less glib” and Updike returning the favor by “prodding . . . Lasch to write with more color and verve” (“Roommates”). While it is debatable how much “glibness” Updike excised from his work, Lasch certainly took his roommate’s advice to heart. “I was reading everything he wrote,” Lasch remembered in his 1993 interview, in which he also acknowledged that his roommate’s literary gifts “must have been getting through to me” (Fox 3). Although Lasch carried a sterling reputation as a student throughout high school, he occasionally bristled at assigned work, preferring creative writing to nonfiction. He prefaced a 1947 report on Horace Greeley with a letter of complaint to his teacher. “To be frank, I disapprove of the ‘project’ system,” he wrote, adding that tedious assignments “may be correctly labeled as an effort to lay out a program for the lower-than-average student.”²⁷ Living in close proximity with Updike seems to have helped impress upon Lasch the importance of suffusing all manner of writing with a love for good prose.

Lasch’s senior thesis, “Imperialism and the Independents,” certainly glowed with literary flair. For entire sections, Lasch allowed his imagination to embellish scenes out of history, depicted in vivid detail. Consider, for example, the verbiage he reserved for Theodore Roosevelt. In Lasch’s thesis, Roosevelt’s life of poses and postures unfolds in a series of grainy pictures:

Here he is a bearded student, arms folded across his naked barrel chest, waiting for a boxing bout at Harvard. Here he wears the cowboy’s leather jacket, bandana and ten-gallon hat, leans against a cow-pony . . . Now he is colonel of the Rough Riders, his face in profile looking out to battle, binoculars in hand, silhouetted against the sky. Again he appears in riding clothes, ready this time for a winter gallop—boots, gloves, hat, crop and fur-collared coat. As a big-game hunter he wears pith helmet and carries cartridges at his belt. At his side, the trusty rifle; at his feet, the slain lion. There is one last picture but in this one he appears in no familiar role. The actor is stripped of grease-paint and footlights. Brutally unmasked, he is an old man. His hair has turned

altogether white and nearly blind eyes are shut tight. He holds his tiny grand-daughter in his arms, massive-jowled and tender. He is alone. The adoring audiences have all gone home, and even the baby peers out from behind the shadow of his face with frightened eyes.²⁸

In passages such as these, Lasch acted more like a muralist than a scholar. Nevertheless, his affinity for dramatics, his touch with flourishes, and his very élan—indicative of a youthful confidence that at times lent itself to fanciful overwriting—breathed life into the project. It was exactly the sort of writing that vaulted Lasch to celebrity a decade later with novelistic nonfiction like *The New Radicalism in America* (1965). To some extent, he had Updike to thank for showing him the way.

In the spare time they invented for themselves, Lasch and Updike collaborated on a number of side projects. The roommates coauthored several plays, poetry, and even a television pilot—anything, in short, that had a chance of finding its way into print (or on the airwaves). Lasch thought the two of them more than capable of writing musical theater together and lamented Updike's reluctance to entertain the prospect. "If only he would write a musical with me," Lasch grumbled to his parents. "We would make a great combination, with his brilliance and my capacity for drudgery."²⁹ Alas, it never happened. Nor did their combined efforts reach an audience beyond their dormitory. (One exception was a play written by the two in September 1952 that was performed by a Cambridge Congregational youth group; in Lasch's words, they "dashed off" the "awfully funny" script in a single afternoon. Unfortunately, it appears that the play has not survived.)³⁰ Nonetheless, their labors bore fruit, especially for Lasch. The relationship clued him in to the possibilities of collaborative friendships and exposed his prose to one of the greatest literary minds of his generation.

For all the collegiality between Lasch and Updike, stirrings of animosity were unavoidable between aspiring writers in such close quarters. Lasch, who occasionally fell into bouts of sullenness, was not above sniping at his roommate. In several letters (probably kept hidden from his roommate) reflective of this mood, Lasch bristled to his parents that Updike's "stuff lacks perception and doesn't go very deep . . . he has more of the hack in him than the profound artist."³¹ Lasch also looked down on his roommate's program of study, deeming the English courses Updike took far less rigorous than his history requirements. Coasting along with an undemanding major, Updike was constantly "loafing," or so Lasch griped numerous times.³² "It seems to me he is losing sight of his initial purpose in being

here," Lasch smirked to his parents. "His mother seems to think so, too," he added (further evidence of the roommates' open mail policy). "She thinks he has been taking easy courses, which he has." In the same letter, Lasch discussed what he saw as another problem with Updike, his burgeoning relationship with Mary Pennington: "I am a bit worried about Updike. He is courting a girl whom he met in his Fine Arts course. He began spending all his time up at Fogg Museum, where she used to study . . . There is nothing immoral about this except that it eats up all his time."³³

The worst, for Lasch, came when Updike was elected to Phi Beta Kappa during their junior year and he was not. "If he really is a better student than I am, then I fear for myself," Lasch complained in a letter home after hearing this news. "His seems a pedantic and lazy mind, and one limited to a very small area of knowledge."³⁴ Lasch's real beef no doubt continued to revolve around Updike's workload, which permitted him more free time for literary efforts. "The spectacle of Updike's easy schedule constantly calls attention to my own," he moaned to his parents. "None of his courses seem to demand any work, and all he does is write his novel." In contrast, Lasch noted, "I, who ought to be learning how to write, toil over history and philosophy. About the only thing I can hope for now, I guess, is to wind up a teacher of history at some second rate school for girls."³⁵

Updike got his licks in, too. "The Christian Roommates," for instance, includes a number of unflattering depictions of Lasch as Dawson. Updike portrays him, not entirely inaccurately, as possessing "a sulky, slouching bearing . . . and a terrible temper." In contrast to Kern's Updike-esque "urban sophistication" on the page, Dawson writes in "a stern, plain style" (167).³⁶ Dawson, the dormitory atheist, is also the hall's killjoy. Disdainful of Harvard's social life, "the merriment of others often spilled him into a bad temper" (170). Updike heaped further literary derision onto his former roommate in "One of My Generation." In that story, Popper, whose poetry is denounced as "compacted backward phrasing," is the one whose "stuff lacks perception." "His poems, of which I was to read many," the narrator continues, "usually struck me as instances of misapplied force, like screws hammered into wood" (57).

Perhaps the greatest bone of contention between Lasch and Updike, however, came during their senior year, when they were living apart. Both were nominated for Harvard's prestigious Bowdoin Prize, awarded annually to the best senior theses. Lasch won in the English language category for his "Imperialism and the Independents," which argued that in the 1890s a small group of Brahmin reformers, heirs of the abolitionists who fought slavery, bungled their one great chance to

strangle American imperialism in its crib. Updike finished second in the category with his entry, “Non-Horatian Elements in Herrick’s Echoes of Horace,” an analysis of the Christian side of the seventeenth-century English poet Robert Herrick. Lasch received five hundred dollars and high honors; Updike took three hundred dollars and the ignominy of having been bested—if “One of My Generation” is to be taken as a guide—by a wielder of “misapplied force.”³⁷

Even though Updike lost the contest for the Bowdoin prize, he won the longer-term competition as a writer. While Lasch went on to enjoy an enviable post-Harvard career, writing several historical works of seminal importance, Updike’s career was positively magisterial. True, there is an apples-and-oranges quality to comparing historical social criticism with literature and literary criticism, but in terms of sheer output, Updike carried the day. One suspects that Lasch perceived this growing disparity even before graduation. In addition to recognizing Updike’s talents during their time as roommates, Lasch witnessed the growing stack of work Updike contributed to the *Harvard Lampoon* and *Harvard Advocate* (an undergraduate literary magazine). It was agonizing, but Lasch eventually acknowledged Updike as the superior writer. It may have been the greatest favor Updike ever did for him. The realization, Lasch later told an interviewer, that Updike “was a lot better at this than I was” dissuaded him from the novelist’s calling (Fox 3). Convinced that his talents might be put to better use elsewhere, Lasch gave himself over to history. After flirting briefly with the notion of becoming a journalist, he buckled down with his historical studies and applied to several graduate programs during his senior year. He accepted an offer to attend Columbia University starting in the fall of 1954.

When Lasch and Updike graduated (both of them *summa cum laude*—“a rarity in those pre-inflation days,” as one Harvard instructor put it)³⁸ in the class of 1954, they said goodbye to Cambridge and to each other. Though they had lived apart during their final year at Harvard—Updike moved off campus with his wife, Mary Updike (née Pennington)—the two had made an effort to take meals together regularly and stay in each other’s lives. But, they thought, it could not last. Lasch was off to New York City and Columbia University to train as a professional scholar; Updike planned to move to Oxford, England, to enroll in the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art and hone his skills as a cartoonist. Little could they know that fate would shortly thrust them together one more time.

Lasch was disappointed in Columbia. He complained of ennui from the outset, noting that his graduate studies shrouded him “in a kind of intellectual mist in

which . . . the sound of my own mental footsteps is muffled.”³⁹ Worse, for him, the training he received—which he later described as “a kind of hazing” (Fox 5)—required a steady diet of monograph reading, orals preparation, and writing of historiographical summaries. The routine quickly wore him down. By comparison, his undergraduate life in Cambridge seemed simple and enjoyable. “It is plain to me now,” he wrote, “that people at Harvard . . . do nothing but have fun all the time, and that every place else in the world is just a place to work in.”⁴⁰ So much did he detest his new setting that he reimagined Harvard as something of a paradise. In the early going at Columbia, he clung wistfully to his fleeting glory days and foresaw how he would remember them: “I can see it: the beery songs, the stories about the good old days, a fire blazing away no doubt and a sense of the past, of old times never to be recaptured; it is almost too much for words.”⁴¹

His newfound fondness for Harvard extended to old friendships as well. Within a few weeks of moving to New York, Lasch reconnected with Updike. The pair commiserated through airmail over their shared discomfort with their new surroundings. Updike vented about the dullness of English politics, as well as his inability to grasp the rules of cricket; he implored Lasch to send him the latest news about the baseball pennant races (information which was apparently difficult to come by in Oxford). In return, Lasch found a sympathetic audience for his many complaints about the deprivations of graduate student life. Updike reassured Lasch that his difficulties simply required adjustment and accommodation to a new department. He urged his former roommate to endure and encouraged him to keep up a correspondence.⁴²

The two reveled in their successes as well. By the end of his first year in the program, in the spring of 1955, Lasch boasted that he had gained a fellowship. His grades were mostly A's, and he was starting to attract the attention of several distinguished faculty sponsors for his work. Updike appeared to be further ahead of the game, outshining him yet again. He reported to Lasch that he had become a father, writing in detail how his newborn daughter spent every hour of her day. He had leapt forward professionally, too. Within his first few months of residency in England, Updike informed Lasch that he had entered into an arrangement with the *New Yorker*, a move brimming with potential.⁴³ The editors accepted a poem of Updike's in the summer of 1955 and planned to bring out a short story of his in the fall. Even better, as Lasch soon learned, Updike returned to the U.S. with a job offer from the prestigious magazine in hand. By mid-1955, the Updikes had settled in New York City, becoming neighbors, of sorts, of Lasch. (They lived about twenty blocks apart, along a nearly straight shot on Riverside Drive—the

Updikes on Riverside and West 85th Street and Lasch in Columbia's John Jay Hall, near Riverside and West 116th Street).

Living so many blocks apart prevented the wounds of their old rivalry from reopening. Living in separate intellectual worlds helped as well. Nevertheless, the distance did not prevent them from reacquainting socially. Updike, thrilled to be back in the land where baseball is the national pastime, hounded Lasch to attend Yankees games with him. Lasch became a regular dinner guest at the Updikes' table and often took the downtown train to their apartment for cocktails, parties, and quiet evenings of conversation. He even allowed them to play matchmaker in the fall of 1955, letting them arrange a blind date with the "only eligible young lady they know" at a dinner party at their home. Lasch regarded the affair with good humor. John and Mary "stood by with the air of elderly chaperones," he recounted amusedly. "When it was time for the young folks to go, Updike, in a very grandfatherly way, proposed to walk us to the subway, but at the door he evidently thought better of it, relented, and allowed us to walk the two blocks unescorted. It was quite an adventure."⁴⁴ Sarcasm aside, for the two young ex-roommates living in New York City together, such events must have seemed like an adventure indeed.

The adventure wore a little thin for Lasch when Updike found quick success as a writer. His ascent at the *New Yorker* went to his head, or so Lasch thought, as he contrasted his friend's increasingly comfortable lifestyle with his own Spartan graduate student existence. "The Updikes have become very ceremonial," he chided late in 1955. "They invite you to dinner weeks in advance, and if you had a hat in hand they would relieve you of it at the door, and make a big point of doing so."⁴⁵ In his more vindictive moments, Lasch took pleasure in the occasional hiccups in Updike's rise to literary fame. "I saw the Updikes last night," he noted wryly in the fall of 1955. "They don't like New York. Updike seems a little disillusioned with the *New Yorker*—it isn't as much like *The Lampoon* as he had expected."⁴⁶ Lasch even welcomed petty gossip about his prodigious erstwhile roommate. In a letter from his future sister-in-law, Gwen Commager, he received word that Updike's face had "completely changed from a sort of flattened suspicious one . . . into a big beaked and impressive bird of prey's."⁴⁷

While Lasch may have snickered at such private accounts, Updike landed a few veiled jabs himself. He concluded "One of My Generation" with another scene that imitated life, one in which the former roommates reunited: "For a time, I would see him [Popper] in New York, where he was always about to be interviewed for a job with some textbook publisher or news magazine." Lasch held down a number of jobs, some in publishing, to help finance his graduate educa-

tion. The narrator continues, “My wife and I had him several times to dinner. The last time, we discussed Proust . . . And, to our consternation, he couldn’t stop ranting; he drank all our brandy, smashed a lampshade, and left at two in the morning, still spewing abhorrence of Charlus.” As the narrator bids Popper a last goodbye (no further invitations are to be forthcoming, apparently), he recounts a painful scene: “I walked him to the corner, where he embraced me. He would have kissed me, had I not ducked my head. Roommates make such awkward farewells” (58).⁴⁸

Both Lasch and Updike left New York in 1957 for Massachusetts, the former for adjunct work in Williamstown and the latter for Ipswich, where he would make his home (until moving to nearby Beverly Farms in 1982 by way of Boston and Georgetown). The letters between them dropped to a low ebb but they still shared a certain affinity, a closeness of mind, as they struggled to deal with an America that seemed to be lurching toward decline. As Sam Tanenhaus observes:

The roommates’ rivalry reached a kind of antiphonal climax in the tour de force each wrote about the 1970s: Mr. Lasch’s best-selling polemic *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), which deplored the “sense of inner emptiness” that underlay the exhibitionism of the “me-decade,” and Updike’s Pulitzer Prize winner *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), which presented a lush if also dark picture of the same years. (“Roommates”)

One can discern a larger conjunction in the thinking of the former roommates. The Rabbit books are intimately concerned with the potential, limitations, and psychological motivations of Middle America that also came to deeply interest Lasch. Harry Angstrom can be read as an everyman for America’s blue-collar, lower middle class, and Updike’s conclusions about the fate of such a figure are decidedly less hopeful than Lasch’s. For Lasch, as outlined in *The True and Only Heaven* (1991), resuscitating a lower-middle-class, petit-bourgeois radicalism is a potential way to save American democracy from the spiritually empty bureaucracies of corporate capitalism and an overly therapeutic state.

But while readers of the Rabbit novels were treated to mostly ambivalent conclusions, Updike also produced short stories that were more appreciative of middle-class life. “My subject,” he once stated, “is the American Protestant small-town middle class. I like middles” (Plath 11). Updike marveled at the rich material and social culture available in the suburbs and suddenly sweeping the country—the affordable luxury items, the bright-colored packaging of household staples, the conventions and gatherings that brought people together, the rituals and rites

of passage marking daily life. He carved a career out of rhapsodic admiration for the oft-overlooked commonplace, striving, as he put it, “to give the mundane its beautiful due” (*Early Stories* xv). In this way, Updike asserted in his memoirs, “I saw myself as a literary spy within average, public-school, supermarket America. It was there I felt comfortable (*Self-Consciousness* 53). Despite his comfort and appreciation for the trappings of Middle America, Updike always retained some of the ambivalence evident in the Rabbit series. He found himself troubled by “the despair of the daily,” telling an interviewer: “One suspects that it’s good to be alive, that there is much more beauty around us than we ever notice, that existence is charged with goodness. Yet . . . , life still, day by day, often seems monotonous and long. Our goals, once we reach them, bore us” (Plath 11). Taking notice of life’s neglected beauty offered meaningful comfort from this daily despair.

Lasch shared many of these concerns, though with little of Updike’s interest in celebrating the material culture of Middle America. If Updike wanted to show the beauty of the middle-class mundane, Lasch suggested that a major intellectual and aesthetic transformation was needed to make the mundane more deserving of admiration. A withering critic of consumer capitalism, Lasch worried that the assembly lines of mass production yielded a bitter harvest, one hardly worthy to be enamored. He increasingly came to believe that “the democratization of consumption” is no democracy at all, but rather the purveyor of “an insufficiently demanding ideal” (*True and Only Heaven* 80) that strips Middle America of skill (the ability to make things with one’s own hands) and will (political resolve and imagination). He feared that the Harry Angstroms of the world, reduced to soulless work and at the mercy of a capricious market, are at risk of having their very humanity drained. The only way the Rabbit prototype can regain freedom and dignity is by an assertion of independence. “Democracy works best when men and women do things for themselves, with the help of their friends and neighbors,” Lasch wrote in his final book. Only by acquiring what Lasch called “[d]emocratic habits,” by which he meant “self-reliance, responsibility, initiative,” can someone like Rabbit restore order, dignity, and beauty to his life (*Revolt of the Elites* 7). This would be Rabbit as Updike never imagined him (in fact, as the inverse): a petit-bourgeois populist.

Here lay a potential for Middle America that Lasch could venerate, even build a political vision around. It is this class’s capacity for resistance against the prevailing trends of modern society, trends usually connected with the idea of “progress,” that appealed to Lasch in the first place. While under attack from the dominant

forces of history, the Harry Angstroms of the country—"the ordinary American," to borrow Lasch's phrase (*True* 37)—are not docile Rabbits. Instead, Lasch found that "the conscience of the lower middle class," with its skepticism toward concentrated power and "its understanding that everything has its price," already contains "the materials . . . to put together a coherent challenge to the reigning orthodoxy" (*True* 17). All that is needed is to awaken this conscience fully, into a democratic populism that might provide the antidote to Updike's "despair of the daily." Lasch and Updike, far from ordinary themselves, paid close attention to this segment of their countrymen, in whom they had so much invested. Anxiously, hopefully, fretfully, they peered out at Middle America, looking for beauty and looking for answers.

As Updike recognized, his overlapping intellectual interests with Lasch, while widely divergent, were a sort of kindred bond between them, one that endured through the years. For all their differences, both were keenly aware that beneath the American dream hangs a dark underbelly. Their constant outpouring of books and essays, and the coincidence that both, for a time, published with the house of Alfred Knopf, reinforced their connectedness. And so, when Knopf himself sent Updike an advance copy of a new Lasch book in the spring of 1965—the first of three Lasch would publish with Knopf—it occasioned a moment of reflection. Updike relayed his thoughts to Knopf, no doubt aware that they would be forwarded to Lasch. Recalling his college years with Lasch, he said: "Kit was then, as I suppose he is now, a remarkably serious, intelligent and charming person, and though I have not seen much of him in the past ten years, I am pleased that we are, in a sense, roommates again."⁴⁹

NOTES

1. Sam Tanenhaus, who was granted an advance look at the Updike archives currently being processed into a collection at Harvard University, describes the relationship between the roommates as "reciprocal" ("Roommates"). I have seen only the Lasch correspondence, housed at the University of Rochester, but this assessment strikes me as exactly right.

2. For more on the jeremiad quality of *The Culture of Narcissism*, see Brown, 163–67. Using a Freudian conceptual framework, Lasch diagnosed his country as having a massive personality disorder: "Every age develops its own peculiar forms of pathology, which express in exaggerated form its underlying character structure" (41). The type of self dominant in Lasch's time was narcissistic. In a culture of mass consumption, the narcissist is a byproduct of the self-indulgence and feel-good therapy promoted at the expense of self-reliance. The narcissistic personality, marked by ardent self-preoccupation rather than the social good, had, Lasch worried, grafted itself deeply upon American life.

3. See De Bellis, 196–99, and Tanenhaus, “Write, Rewrite.”

4. Christopher Lasch (hereafter CL) to Robert and Zora Lasch (hereafter “parents”), 23 Sept. 1950, Christopher Lasch Papers (hereafter CLP), Box 0, Folder 2, Department of Rare Books, Special Collections and Preservation, Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester, Rochester, New York.

5. CL to parents, 18 Oct. 1950, CLP, Box 0, Folder 2.

6. CL to parents 6 Nov. 1950, CLP 0:2.

7. CL to parents, 2 Oct., 1951, CLP 0:3.

8. CL to parents, 29 Oct. 1950, CLP 0:2.

9. CL to parents, 17 Mar. 1951, CLP 0:5.

10. CL to Naomi Dagen, 15 Jan. 1954, CLP 0:34.

11. CL to parents, 19 Sept. 1952, CLP 0:8.

12. Ibid.

13. CL to parents, 19 Sept. 1950, CLP 0:2. Updike “considered himself a cartoonist when he entered Harvard, not a writer” (Jack De Bellis, letter to author, 1 July 2011) and chose Harvard over Cornell because the former boasted the *Lampoon* (De Bellis 196).

14. A word on extracting factual accounts from Updike’s fiction: I realize the danger in reading Updike’s short stories literally, as a primary source of personal history, since they are spiced as much with the author’s imagination as they are with facts. Nonetheless it seems to me that Updike’s work in particular can be carefully gleaned for autobiographical truth. As Sam Tanenhaus notes: “Not only was he among the most prolific writers of his time, but he was also among the most autobiographical, recasting the details of his life in an outpouring of fiction, poetry, essays and criticism” (“Write, Rewrite” C1). It is this deliberate blending of autobiography and fiction that lends stories like “The Christian Roommates” and “One of My Generation” some of the weight of nonfiction.

15. While Popper has many Laschian characteristics, it is possible that Updike created him as a composite of Lasch and their freshman year hallmate Edward French. In their sophomore and junior years Updike and Lasch lived in a dormitory triple with a young man named Reginald Hannaford, who might also have factored into Updike’s semifictionalized account. Adam Begley, currently at work on a biography of Updike, believes Popper is a composite of two of Updike’s English-major college friends, Charles Neuhauser and David Chandler (Begley, letter to author, 4 July 2011). While he has strong evidence to support this claim—Chandler identified himself as “Popper” to Begley—I find compelling linkages to Lasch in the character: his Nebraskan roots, his overwrought writing style, the fact that he is the narrator’s roommate, etc. In short, though I concede that Popper is not purely derived from Lasch, I believe Lasch informs the character.

16. Updike included a slightly revised version of “One of My Generation” in *Museums and Women and Other Stories* (1972) and sent Lasch a copy of the book with a long inscription (called to my attention by Jack De Bellis, for which I am grateful). The inscription, however, directed Lasch to a different story, “The Invention of the Horse Collar,” which Updike suggested was inspired by a Harvard political science course they had taken together. In pointing to this story, Updike may have been trying to avoid drawing attention to his depiction of Lasch in “One of My Generation.”

17. CL to parents, 6 May 1954, CLP 0:12.

18. CL to parents, 19 Sept. 1950, CLP 0:2.

19. CL to parents, 9 Apr. 1951, CLP 0:5.

20. CL to parents, 26 Sept. 1950, CLP 0:2.
21. CL to parents, 1 Oct. 1950, CLP 0:2.
22. CL to parents, 19 Sept. 1950, CLP 0:2.
23. CL to parents, 23 Oct. 1950, CLP 0:2.
24. CL to parents, 14 Oct. 1951, CLP 0:3.
25. CL to parents, 7 Feb. 1951, CLP 0:5.
26. CL to parents, 15 Feb. 1953, CLP 0:10.
27. Lasch, "Horace Greeley, Printer-Editor-Crusader," CLP 69:11.
28. Lasch, "Imperialism and the Independents," CLP 58:30, 60.
29. CL to parents, 22 Sept. 1952, CLP 0:8.
30. Ibid.
31. CL to parents, 26 Sept. 1950, CLP 0:2.
32. CL to parents, 6 Nov. 1950, CLP 0:2.
33. CL to parents, 2 Feb. 1952, CLP 0:8. By the end of the month, Lasch's position had softened: "Updike brought [to a Harvard dance] his lady love, whose name, as I may have mentioned, is Mary Pennington. I must admit that his judgment is infallible. She is a charming girl." CL to parents, 24 Feb. 1952, CLP 0:8.
34. CL to parents, 12 Apr. 1953, CLP 0:10.
35. CL to parents, 9 Oct. 1951, CLP 0:5. In *Memories of the Ford Administration* (1992), Updike created just such a character: Alfred Clayton, who teaches history at the all-female Wayward Junior College.
36. This last barb later became apropos. When the writing guide that Lasch prepared for his graduate students was commercially published in 2002, it was titled *Plain Style*.
37. See Tanenhaus, "Roommates," and Briggs, 14. While I have not seen any sources to confirm this, Adam Begley has suggested to me that placing second to Lasch rankled Updike. The evidence of the tensions underlying this friendship gives me no reason to think otherwise. Adam Begley, telephone interview, 20 Nov. 2010.
38. Donald Meyer, "A Tribute to Christopher Lasch," CLP 68:14.
39. CL to Naomi Dagen, 20 Nov. 1954, CLP 0:36.
40. CL to Paula Budlong, 26 Oct. 1954, CLP 0:28a.
41. CL to Paula Budlong, 9 Mar. 1955, CLP 0:28b.
42. John Updike to CL, 23 Sept. 1954, CLP 1:8.
43. Updike to CL, 16 May 1955, 10 Nov. 1954, CLP 1:8.
44. CL to Paula Budlong, 19 Oct. 1955, CLP 0:28.
45. CL to Paula Budlong, 23 Oct. 1955, CLP 0:28.
46. CL to Paula Budlong, 29 Sept. 1955, CLP 0:28c.
47. Gwen Commager to CL, undated, CLP 1:3.
48. I draw from the 1969 version of "One of My Generation" in the *New Yorker* rather than the version in *Museums and Women* (1972), where Updike changed the wording to "Roommates make such gauche hellos and goodbyes" (179). I think that in Lasch and Updike's case, "awkward" is a more accurate description than "gauche."
49. Alfred Knopf to CL, 18 May 1965, CLP 9:27. The book was Lasch's *The New Radicalism in America*.

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“Outdoors to Indoors, Detail to Detail”: The Domestic Topography of John Updike’s *Couples*

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Let me tell you about houses. Everything outs.

—Piet Hanema in *Couples*

Yi-Fu Tuan, in a 2004 essay titled “Cultural Geography,” observes that traditionally, the cultural geographer’s interest in suburbia “stopped at the front door, just as it got more interesting.” He wonders: “What was life really like behind the curtains? How was the furniture arranged? Did a set of encyclopedia stand at an honored place in the living room? Who fixed the furnace and who cooked the meal? Who had the last word in family disputes?” (729). Domestic topography, Tuan argues, is as important as other spaces—cityscapes, suburbia, and vast hinterlands—in understanding the cultural history of the American landscape. But how to enter “the front door”? In the early years of cultural geography, he admits, “I would not have gone behind the facades—as the novelist John Updike . . . had done—to reveal the kinds of toothpaste and magazines sold in a drugstore or have gathered data on the type of small talk and human drama that occurred there.” It is through reading the novels and short stories of writers such as Updike that one can explore the complexities of indoor spaces. Tuan, as a geographer, is able to see that “[f]ocusing on small, individual objects, . . . or on interior space, . . . is not a retreat into the inconsequential. Rather it is—or it can be—a strategy to be more penetrating” (729).

As Tuan attests, Updike's fictional houses are richly multivalent. Setting many of his novels and short stories in the interior of houses, Updike explores the textures and nuances of the domestic landscape as a way of narrating the lives lived within. For instance, the hero of his Rabbit novels, Harry Angstrom, runs past houses "covered with composition shingling varying in color from bruise to dung" (*Rabbit, Run* 8); the characters of *The Poorhouse Fair* are sent roaming between walls that seem to be "stuffed with oyster shells or fragments of plaster" (78). Piet Hanema of *Couples* lives in "a graceful eighteenth-century farmhouse" with "its rectangular low rooms, its baseboards and chair rails molded and beaded by hand, the slender mullions of the windows whose older panes were flecked with oblong bubbles and tinged with lavender" (5). Houses in Updike's fiction function as more than settings for the plot. Furthermore, they are not just objective correlates of the thoughts and emotions of the characters. Rather, houses, and, in particular, domestic topography—architectural design, furniture, composition of walls, interior décor—have cognitive and affective functions.

The poetics of Updike's domestic topographies are lost on more than a few readers. J.A. Ward sees Updike's precision and attention as superfluous, saying his "graces, refinements, and subtleties with language and his economies with scene and character rarely do service to lives more worthy than the creatures of lame domestic melodrama" (27). Although Ward is appreciative of Updike's prose, he pronounces the overall effect "disappointing" (28). Gore Vidal implies that Updike's descriptions of interiors and their objects are influenced by the "proto-Ralph Lauren house impersonation" of the social elite that the *New Yorker* tried to impose on its writers. Reviewing Updike's 1996 novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, he writes: "Then we're off to a description of lots and lots of things in the house including a Tiffany-glass chandelier, with scalloped edges. Updike never quite knows what to do with his lists of random objects or physical human characteristics" (6).

I would suggest that Updike knows exactly what to do with these "random objects." Updike's writings convey his fascination with interior spaces. In an essay titled "Fictional Houses," he declares: "Writing American fiction forces us to think about our virtually unthinkable mass architecture, with its murky manufactured substances (Celotex? polyurethane?) and the hodgepodge styles decreed by forgotten developers. The ordinarily ersatz comes to border on the monstrous" (49). We can see this in *Rabbit Redux*, where the "Martian . . . synthetic" upholstery and "green ashes" of the perennial television set coat Rabbit in an alien, catatonic haze (61, 59). Several critics have commented on the centrality of the

setting in Updike's works. Jack de Bellis sees his houses as "physically and psychologically constrictive spaces" (415). Judie Newman connects suburban and domestic topography with the conformist aesthetics that Updike writes about in *Couples* (8). D. Quentin Miller explores several of the Olinger stories as a way of understanding what Updike called his "subjective geography" and how "precise, unvarnished . . . [d]etails are the core substance of Updike's artistry" (15). While it is evident that setting plays an important role, it would be useful to see how language and setting work with and through each other, how the textures of Updike's topographies create not so much a sense of place as a sense of material excess, and how language reflects and reinforces the building of his fictional houses.

William H. Pritchard observes in Updike's writing "the boldness that lies in unrepentantly making language a display of self, rather than hiding that self behind more modest appearances" (19). In a reading of the 1965 novel *Of the Farm*, Pritchard further illuminates this boldness: "This is lyrical but also witty writing, characterized—as usual in a passage of Updike observation—by an easy intimacy with the names and appearances of things." He interprets the fact that Updike's writing is more than simply descriptive and lyrical as "a consequence of the style's playful consciousness of its own extravagance" (109). I will extend Pritchard's analysis to look at the richness of detail that makes up Updike's settings and, in particular, the fictional houses in his 1968 novel, *Couples*.

Couples narrates the physical space of the house—the interior design, the texture of the walls, arrangement of rooms—as a generative topography. Updike said the novel

was originally entitled *Couples and Houses and Days* and was all about our entry into other people's homes, as guests and lovers, and ultimately about one couple's escape from the "low-ceilinged colonial room whose woodwork was painted the shade of off-white commercially called eggshell," in which they are seen on page one, naked and captive and struggling to be hatched. ("Fictional Houses" 49)

Images of entrapment and encasing, as if in a box, recur throughout the novel, which is set in the fictional town of Tarbox. Domestic space is not a home, but rather takes the form of a container imprisoning its inhabitants in what they imagine as an "idyllic retreat," but in reality is "sadly suburban" (*Couples* 309).

I will, in this article, trace three ways in which Updike's fictional houses function in the novel. First, I suggest that the space of the house assumes human agency. Updike presents interior décor not as a means of entering his characters' thoughts, but to highlight the surrender of voice and agency to the material environment.

Second, I hold that the house configures affect and performativity, particularly in relation to the sexual impulse. The novel details the layout of interior settings as a way of forming a distinction between the real and dreamlike aspects of human identity. As the characters move through different parts of the house, they assume different sexual personas: love-struck adolescents; chaste, prelapsarian mythic figures; actors performing sultry romantic tragedies; asexual buffoons; and even beasts in heedless heat. Finally, I explore the construction of a house as an act of storytelling. Piet Hanema, the architect protagonist of the novel, says, "Let me tell you about houses. Everything outs," meaning that shoddy construction eventually makes itself known (85). Updike explores the notion of house construction as narrative embodiment, and the form of the "novel itself [as] a kind of dwelling, whose spaces open and constrict, foster display or concealment, and resonate from room to room" ("Fictional Houses" 50). Piet builds a house for his lover, Foxy, and thereby attempts to create an alternate narrative of their relationship. However, as they move from "outdoors to indoors, detail to detail" (*Couples* 186), architectural affects are superimposed on their corporeal selves, determining their story and Updike's telling of it.

Couples follows the life of play and parties, marriages and extramarital affairs of a group of sophisticates living in Tarbox, an affluent residential community located in an exurban setting in coastal Massachusetts. Unencumbered by the frustrations and setbacks that afflict the real world, Tarbox is affectionately nicknamed "the post-pill paradise" by its inhabitants, who, as Newman argues, are not individual beings but a collective, conformist body. The houses of this "picture-window world" (Newman 18) do not symbolize the cumulative history of inherited tradition, routine, or the making of a home. Rather, they are embellished, tastefully decorated containers with cozy, shielded nooks and crannies into which the residents, in pairs, sometimes in threesomes, secretly as well as in plain sight, retire for play and for pleasure. The outside world does not seep in, as if "things" (including, perhaps, work and industry, marriage and family, life and death), as Walter Benjamin notes of the interior life in nineteenth-century Paris, "are freed from the drudgery of being useful" (9). Benjamin, in reading the affects and effects of the interior within the modernizing city, uses the term *phantasmagoria* for viewing and experiencing the visual spectacles of the bourgeois interior. The inhabitant of the late-nineteenth-century interior, he says, was overwhelmed by an urge to retreat into a burrow: "To live in these interiors was to have woven a dense fabric about oneself, to have secluded oneself within a spider's web . . . From this cavern one does not like to stir" (216). The interior offers stability and comfort

to the inhabitant when it manifests a visible imprint of the body, a sign that the inhabitant has fashioned, as Tuan suggests, place out of space. This imprint survives even once the inhabitant's physical presence is removed. It is an indelible mark that will wait for its owner to return back home to familiarity and comfort.

The function and order of the Benjaminian interior can be applied to the domestic landscape that is portrayed in *Couples*. Updike constructs luxurious, velveteen interiors so vivid that these spaces, rather than offering a cozy "retreat," threaten to subsume human voice and agency. We can see how this image of suffocation as opposed to a Benjaminian seclusion operates in Updike's description of Harold and Marcia Smith's house:

The foyer was floored in flagstones; on the right an open stairway went down to a basement level where the three children . . . slept and the laundry was done and the cars were parked. Above this, on the main level, were the kitchen, the dining room, the master bedroom, a polished hall where hung reproductions of etchings by Rembrandt, Dürer, Piranesi, and Picasso. To the left of the foyer a dramatically long living room opened up, with a shaggy cerulean rug and two facing white sofas and symmetrical hi-fi speakers and a Baldwin grand and at the far end an elevated fireplace with a great copper hood. The house bespoke money in the service of taste. (122)

This passage melds two voices: a narrative voice that maps the space of the interior, and a more detached voice that records an inventory of the house's material value as social and aesthetic capital. This latter is a parody of the language of interior design magazines. The self-consciously unimaginative alliteration—"The foyer was floored in flagstones"—the "open[ing] up" of the living room, the close-up details of décor and furnishings, and the presentation of the room in a way that reads like a catalogue rather than a description suggest that Updike is not merely confirming the social standing of the house's owners, but also exposing that the house is a cardboard cutout of a Ralph Lauren home collections set. The décor—grand piano, fleecy rug, pristine sofas—forms the foreground of the scene, and the absence of the house's residents is barely registered. At this point, the characters appear, but are so artfully camouflaged within the embellishments of the house that they seem to be extensions of the furniture:

In the summer evenings he would drive back from the station through the livelong light hovering above the tawny marshes . . . and find his little wife . . . waiting on the longer of the sofas, which was not precisely white but rather a rough Iranian wool bleached to the pallor of sand mixed with ash. A record, Glenn Gould or Dino Lupati

[sic] playing Bach or Schumann, would be sending forth clear vines of sound from the invisible root within the hi-fi closet. A pitcher of martinis would have been mixed and held chilled within the refrigerator toward this precious moment of his daily homecoming; the tinge of green in the vermouth was intensified by the leafy green, green upon green, ivy and alder and hemlock and holly, crowding through their walls of sliding plate glass. Outdoors on the sparkling lawn, sparkling in the lowering light . . . Jonathan . . . would be playing catch with Julia[.] Henrietta . . . would run toward Harold barefoot through the cerulean rug . . . , and the ball would fall short and lie crescented by sunlight, . . . while the children noiselessly argued which would retrieve it . . . , and his entire household, even the stray milk butterfly perched on the copper fireplace hood, felt about to spring into bliss, like a tightly wound music box. (122–23)

Here we see how Harold and Marcia, as tastefully decorated as their “dramatically long living room,” fulfill their roles as material objects—the husband wafts in from an invisible city in the same way the “clear vines of sound” emanate from the hidden hi-fi; the “little wife” on the sofa sits waiting like the pitcher of martinis. There is a sense that the scene is not part of a narrative but is a snapshot of a “precious moment” held chilled like the martinis. The actions of Harold driving back home, Marcia pouring the drinks, and their children playing catch are left in suspended animation, and this results in a mounting tension in the reader, who expects a culminating action (perhaps of violence, having gathered from the flash of one wife’s arm with its “purplish oval blue that might have been a bruise” [25] that domestic abuse is not an anomalous practice in Tarbox). The suspense is heightened by the butterfly “perched” on the brink of flight on the fireplace hood.¹ The scene is as well rehearsed but also as charged as the “tightly wound music box” (123). The narration changes from past tense to the iterative modal tense—“he *would* drive back,” “martinis *would have been* mixed,” the children “*would be playing* catch”—imparting both an assumption of what Harold will find when he returns home and a frozen-in-time expectation. The expectation is of what *should* take place in the house, because nothing has changed since the Smiths’ “*douze années très heureuses*” of marriage (126). Gérard Genette’s idea of how the modal shifts in tense work in Proust can be seen to obtain in this case. Iterative narration, Genette suggests, “compresses a past into an easily digestible single memory” (157).

In the passage above, the tense gives the scene the quality of being scripted, homogenizing the behavior of one family and reducing it to an “easily digestible” collective body. The characters lose agency and become anonymous figures in a house that turns into a stage set waiting for the reader’s attention. Children oxymorically “noiselessly argue.” The children are seen but their cries heard by neither

their parents nor the reader, which is unsurprising given that children are banished to the basement. To extrapolate from Neil Leach's understanding that highly visual art and architecture function as "a successful defense mechanism by providing an aesthetic cocoon from the harsher aspects of . . . reality" (15), the use of the modal tense imparts the sense that the aestheticized space of the Updikean house has an anesthetizing effect on the inhabitants.

The repetition of the word *sparkling* emphasizes the illusory, cinematic nature of the scene. In this house, the Smiths "allowed [a] coolness to characterize their marriage"—not coldness, but coolness, as exemplified by the martinis ("the coolness was delicious"); aspirins and call girls are "taken" behind literal and figurative closed doors; and the "little wife" may have started an affair with another man (123). The repetition of the word *green* suggests that within the house, there is a conscious effort to reproduce nature in artificial ways. The overabundance of bushes planted in the garden is allowed to filter through the "walls of sliding plate glass," and the foliage imparts its color to the martinis. Nature filters through and is aestheticized in and by the house. Sound emanates from the "invisible root" in the hi-fi cabinet and is heard synesthetically through the visual presence of the grand piano. The rug so luxuriant that the children have to run "through" it is "cerulean" in imitation of the summer sky. It is not only the house that is aestheticized, but nature itself has been transformed by the house—the blueness of the sky replicated, intensified, and brought to the living room floor so that it is not merely blue but "cerulean," and the many shades of green of the ivy, alder, hemlock, and holly (all decorative, but either spiky or fatal) bequeath to the martinis their "verdant" shade but not their thorns and poison.

The house is designed to optimize and streamline space in order to harness nature's beauty for pleasurable consumption. Landscape critic J. B. Jackson writes in a 1953 essay that the new house in the prototypical suburb "is consciously planned to 'capture' the sun, the breezes, the view, to filter the air, the heat, the light—even the distances, through the picture window, transforming them and making them acceptable to every one" (35). The desirable qualities of the outside are artificially generated within the space of the house so that the inhabitants do not feel the need or the desire to expand or project their imagination outwards. Benjamin as well refers to the architectural design that seeks to replicate nature within the space of the house. The "living room," he writes, is a "box in the theater of the world," "the *étui* of the private individual" (9). In these settings, "[o]ne sought tirelessly, through technical devices, to make panoramas the scenes of a perfect imitation of nature" (5).

In *Couples*, the house operates as a phantasmagoric panorama. It is an idyllic retreat ensconced within and at the same time protected from a “whitewash-splattered” actuality (377). Tarbox’s residents aspire toward a version of social utopia that emanates from the Eden re-created within the house. Designed for entertainment and pleasure, the house incarnates in its inhabitants longings that run counter to society, conventions, and even time, thereby leading to a simulation of perfection. By inhabiting the house, the characters adopt roles associated with and prescribed by their environment. “[L]ike nymphs and satyrs in a grove,” as *Time’s* anonymous reviewer described them (“View from the Catacombs” 67), the couples reenact the play of mythological creatures in the garden. The space of routine and domesticity where children are taken care of, meals cooked, and families constructed is concealed so that, as Benjamin notes of the panoramic interiors, “things are freed from the drudgery of being useful.” There are moments in the novel when the reader is reminded that the couples are not suspended in an idyllic world of innocence but are in fact whimsical, irresponsible adults. Daily responsibility and routine interrupt their playtime:

. . . this chronic sadness of late Sunday afternoon, when the couples had exhausted their game, basketball or beachgoing or tennis or touch football, and saw an evening weighing upon them, an evening without a game, an evening spent among flickering lamps and cranky children . . . , an evening when marriages closed in upon themselves like flowers from which the sun is withdrawn, an evening giving like a smeared window on Monday and the long week when they must perform again their impersonations of working men, . . . of mothers and housekeepers, of adults who are not the world’s guests but its hosts. (73–74)

The couples undergo a transformation when they cross the boundary between reality and impersonation. In the imagined house of leisure, or the garden, they assume the role of adults “at play,” and when they move into the lived-in house of reality, they transfigure into children “playing house.”

The boundary between reality and impersonation takes physical form in the layout and design of Updike’s fictional houses. As the characters move between different parts of the house, their way of feeling, and in particular their sexual presence, undergoes a reconfiguration. This layering can be seen when Piet and another of his lovers, Georgene Thorne, meet furtively: “A powdery blue sky the color of a hymnal. Sunshine broken into code by puffs and schooners of cumulus. The Thornes’ sunporch—the tarpaper deck-roof of their garage, sheltered from

the wind by feathery tall larches, entered by sliding glass doors from the bedroom—cupped warmth” (46–47).

The sunporch lies sheltered from the rest of the world, protected by trees and glass doors. The sky is the color of the “powder-blue Pilgrim hymnals” that Piet has previously encountered in church (18), registering the illicitness of the act of entering this forbidden garden and also absorbing nature and religion into Tarbox’s world of whirlwind adultery. Sunshine is encoded, and the tarpaper texture of the roof separates this space from the real world. Their imagined house makes their “glistening skin” feel like “velvet” and “sheer silver” (51), transforming them from middle-aged adulterers into young, fabulous creatures. They imagine that their tryst has the innocence of pastoral simplicity—bits of larch needles and dirt stick to their bodies and hair as they lie encased “beneath the span of sky and tree-tops and birdsong.” They appear to be, as “they lay together beneath the whispering trees, Hansel and Gretel abandoned. Shed needles from the larches had collected in streaks and puddles on the tarpaper and formed rusty ochre drifts along the wooden balustrade and the grooved aluminum base of the sliding glass doors” (49). Updike names them Hansel and Gretel in order to liken this imagined space to a gingerbread house (and also to suggest the incestuousness of Tarbox’s adulterous network). He describes the Thornes’ house as “a gambrel-roof late-Victorian, with gingerbread eaves and brackets” and “[u]nbreakable as a brothel” (53). A gingerbread house is an innocent childhood pleasure, and a brothel, on the other hand, is a house of carnal gratification. Essentially, both spaces are paradises for pleasure-seekers of different sorts. The satirical juxtaposition of a child’s dream house and a licentious house of prostitution highlights the fact that the lived-in house of everyday routine rarely touches the characters. This is the house that lies behind the “windows . . . painted shut” (12).

Updike maneuvers his characters between states of make-believe and reality while simultaneously leading the reader to question which state entails impersonation and which reality. Larry Taylor sees this as a movement between satire and pathos. “When the dream of the pastoral idyl is employed as a fatuously sought lie,” he observes, “those characters tend to become absurd, laughable, pitiable grotesques” (18). As Piet leaves the sunporch after the lovemaking, the imagined house exposes itself to him as a space where the affairs of the everyday are conducted. He sees “rooms children lived in and left littered with breakfast crumbs as they fled down the driveway to the school bus, the *Globe* still spread open to the funnies on the floor” (53). Stripping the adulterous couple of the innocence they

had assumed while lovemaking, the lived-in house shows them in a vulgar light: “He admired and yet was slightly scandalized that she could walk so easily, naked, through doors, past her children’s toys, her husband’s books, down stairs, under a shelf of cleansing agents, into her polished kitchen, to the side door” (56).

The house not only configures sexual roles but also determines physical attraction between the couples by polishing or disfiguring its inhabitants. For instance, Janet Appleby and Harold Smith first make love, “half-pillowed in dirty clothes” (135), in the laundry room:

Harold opened for her the door that entered from the lawn the lower level of the house, where the children slept and the laundry was done. The laundry room smelled of cement and soap and, this morning, sourly, of unwashed clothes heaped around the dryer. The gardening and carpentry tools and shelves of paint and grass seed and lime were ranged along the other wall, which reeked of gasoline from the power mower. Amid these fragrances Janet took a stance . . . (132–33)

Updike uses different sense perceptions in the description of this space. The Smiths’ house is split into two levels. The earlier description of the main level is written to appeal to the ocular, auditory, and even tactile sense: the “shaggy cerulean rug,” “clear vines of sound,” “rough Iranian wool bleached to the pallor of sand mixed with ash,” “chilled” and “verdant martinis.” Here, Janet’s appearance complements the opulence and splendor of the living room:

[S]he was wonderfully dressed: in a poppy-orange silk blouse . . . and white calf-length boots she pulled off to reveal bare feet. Seeing her pose thus clothed in his long living room (on the shaggy cerulean rug her toes were rosy from the cold, the insteps and sides of her feet lilac white, her heels and the joints of her toes dusted with pollen), Harold felt his entire frame relax and sweeten. (158)

In contrast, the lower level stimulates the olfactory sense: it smells of gasoline, cement, soap, and sweat from the dirty clothes. This is also the space where the children are kept. The lower level disfigures its inhabitants. Here, Janet is described in less attractive terms: “He kissed her gaping mouth, the rutted powder of her cheeks, the shying trembling bulges of her shut eyes” (134). When she undoes her bra, her breasts are “tumbled like laundry” from a basket. The dusting of “pollen” is here “rutted powder”; the color of her skin, later described as “lilac,” is here “seaweed green.” The interior décor of Updike’s houses appropriates agency to determine physical and emotional affect. At the same time, it acts as an entrapping force, as Janet and Harold feel confined to perceiving and exhibiting certain

characteristics in different spaces of the house. By molding behavior and emotions, the house holds its inhabitants in a state of blissful release from adult responsibilities.

The motif of encasing runs through the novel. Parties and gatherings in the Smiths' house are bounded by a "wall of books [that] absorbed their smoke and conversation" as the snow is "sealing them in" (154–55). Similar screens are imagined in the other couples' houses. A pivotal point in the novel is the metamorphosis of a dilapidated "spook house" (65) into a home for Piet and his mistress Foxy. "You need spaces you can close," he tells her (225). Piet had studied for the vocation of architect but thinks of himself as a builder. He takes pleasure in building tight, solid structures that afford him a sense of safety and intimacy. His own house has an attic like "a vaulted jewel box or an Aladdin's cave" and a "solid freshly poured basement," and the revolving motion of the sun makes it seem "like the cabin of a ship on a curving course" (5). There is a sense of being sealed inside four walls. The pouring of cement in a basement can be seen as a reference to Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Cask of Amontillado," which recounts a murder by entombment in a catacomb, and the "curving course" of a ship's cabin alludes to another of Poe's stories of confinement, "The Pit and the Pendulum." The motif of the wall suggests that in Tarbox there is a muddled notion of whether the walls of a house ought to protect or detain its inhabitants. At one of the parties, during a discussion about "walls squeezing in," the couples confuse two of Poe's stories with each other, "The Pit and the Pendulum" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" (30).

Updike is possibly using this confusion as a way to not only reinforce the theme that the couples unwittingly are being squeezed in by the walls of Tarbox, but also as an ironic play on the affective agency of the house itself. Interestingly, both of Poe's stories alluded to here, "The Pit" and "Usher," are, in essence, about the transformative effect of interior space upon human behavior. As Poe's narrators exhibit paranoia and anxiety, they start to distrust the very walls that trap their physical and mental selves. They leave traces of their minds on their physical space and, as a corollary, space begins to stand for consciousness. For instance, the fissure in Usher's house is a metaphor for the owner's neurosis. Benjamin even calls Poe "the first physiognomist of the domestic interior" (9), referring to how Poe's characters leave traces of their psyches on their physical environment. Updike's reference to "Usher" also foretells the burning and collapse of the Congregational church at the end of the novel and, symbolically, of the couples themselves, as they disperse in order to make way for the younger generation.

The allusion to Poe is elaborated in Piet's reconstruction of Foxy's house. Piet imagines himself putting up "wall[s] of virgin plaster," and thereby sealing himself and his mistress in this house (196). He transforms an incomplete, raw house into a fully formed, snug burrow that bears his imprint, and, as Newman points out, "satisfies [his] deep-seated Oedipal desire for security" (23). As the house goes through a physical transformation, the lovers consummate their relationship. Piet's courtship of Foxy is crystallized by their haptic experience of the house during the process of its transformation: "He had been shy and circumspect with Foxy, a hired man in her house, and had not intended to desire her. But she had moved with him through the redesign of this old wreck, outdoors to indoors, detail to detail, with a flirting breezy eagerness that had oddly confounded him with the naked wood, where she touched it (186)." The contrast between the solidity and strength of "the naked wood" and the whimsical temporality suggested by "flirting" and "breezy" impart the sense that the couple, through their joint construction of the house, are being sealed in with the casing. By means of a metonymic touch of its surfaces, they use their own bodies to fill and complete the unfinished house. Foxy writes to Piet: "My whole house breathes of you—the smell of planed wood is you, and the salt wind is you, and the rumped sheets whose scent is sweetest and subtlest—of us—is you" and "Yours is to build and blessed lover you have built wonderfully in me. I breathe your name . . ." (261, 265).

There is a play here between the senses pertaining to the house and those that pertain to the body. The appurtenances of the house smell to Foxy of her lover, and she senses that her house "breathes of" him. Piet's physical body is absorbed into the material space, so that his scent is evoked not through memory, but rather through the anthropomorphic house. Similarly, the house has been assimilated into Foxy's body, and the significance here is that the characters, in an urge to leave a mark on their physical dwelling, bear the imprint of the house on their corporeal selves. While lovemaking, Piet feels that Foxy's body is "unsupple," composed of "smooth planes," and suggestive of "wood, patient pale widths waiting for the sander, intricate joints finished with steel wool and oil, rounded pieces fitted with dowels, solid yet soft with that placid suspended semblance of life wood retains" (334). Her body is the raw new house, "waiting for the sander" and built and smoothed down by Piet, the builder.

In the process of finishing the house, he gains a sense of satisfaction by visualizing Foxy "as protected and claimed by sentinels he had posted: steel columns standing slim and strong in the basement, plaster surfaces of a staring blankness, alert doors cleverly planed to hang lightly in old frames slumped from plumb, a re-

secured skylight, now of double thickness and freshly flashed, above her sleeping head" (196). Updike here portrays multiple layers of building so that the physical construction of the house complements the simultaneous fashioning of a mythic narrative. Piet imagines that he is constructing an Arcadian palace. The columns and walls are "sentinels" and the columns are also likened to infantrymen in steel armor; the view outside as Foxy sleeps, "her long body latent, ripening in unconsciousness," is pastoral: "The sea sparkled dark in the twisting channels. [The] lighthouse trembled in the distance and heat. High summer's hay smell lay thick upon the slope, full of goldenrod and field mice, down to the marsh" (196). Foxy's body lying "latent" performs the same function as the house, being reconstructed, or "ripened," for Piet's occupancy. The implication is that Piet is mythologizing himself and his lover and reconstructing Foxy's virginity as he is constructing the house. Piet establishes a sense of "essential propriety" over her body as well as the house (196). The "redesign" of the house mirrors Piet's own transformation from employee to lover. Piet romanticizes himself as a laborer granted admission into the company of the "tall and choice" (13) mistress of the house. Traditional pastoral romance regards the house as the site of repression, and the flight to the woods or the moors as symbolic of breaking out of imprisonment. Piet and Foxy, on the other hand, find meaning and attraction for each other within the space of the house. In this parody of a pastoral romance, Updike gives the material environment rather than the characters agency in determining their affair.

Intertwined with Piet's construction of the house is the construction of himself as the hero of an unconventional story, a story with a different ending. His recurring dreams of a greenhouse and shattered glass coalesce into his realization that nothing fractures the tightly sealed suburban world where illicit pleasures punctuate the mundanity of everyday life. Toward the end of the novel, as his marriage as well as his affairs with other women collapse, Piet bemoans that not even the ugliness of reality, including divorce, death, and abortion, makes much difference, leaves any mark in all the houses he has built. He "could hardly believe that the world—the one-o'clock mist, the familiar geography of Tarbox—could reconstitute itself after such a shattering" as his wife's pained response to his infidelity (404). The novel's ending—the fire and collapse of the village church—is, as some critics point out, not completely effective. David Lodge contends that the fire functions simply as a "device by which Updike displaces the catastrophe of his story from the human characters to the inanimate church" and that this creates a "purely aesthetic climax where we have been led to expect a moral one" (92). But whether there is, or ought to be, a moral message to the novel is doubtful, as

Updike himself admits that in novels, “verdicts don’t usually get handed down” (Plath 48). The collapse of the church is more than a symbol of the disintegration of the “magic circle” of couples, serving also as a reminder that the couples of Tarbox have “made a church of each other” (*Couples* 7). Just as a new church is built to replace the “tragic structure” (444), couples and houses find their replacements.

The closing scene seems, especially in light of Updike’s later musings on how he as a writer constructs fictional houses, not entirely inappropriate. Updike meditates in “Fictional Houses” on his architectural methods both as a builder of houses for his characters and as an artist composing the novel as a house. He remembers his fictional houses—“composition shingling” and “floor plans of split-level homes”—with “a workman’s simple pride” (48, 49). He concludes, “Every novelist becomes, to a degree, an architect—castles in air!—and a novel itself, of course, is a kind of dwelling” (50). There is perhaps an artistic unity considering that Piet’s role as builder and Updike’s as writer converge as the novel, after displaying and concealing, closes. Trying to remember the Poe story he is thinking of, Harold Smith avows, “There is a story, of walls squeezing in” (30). The walls have now squeezed in; they are about to be torn down, as the readers exit Updike’s fictional house.

NOTE

1. J. B. Jackson, Gaston Bachelard, and Tuan point to the symbolic significance of the fireplace or the hearth in the making of home. Ironically, the fireplace in Updike is either an inutile decorative piece, as in *Couples*, or the harsh glare of the television set, as in the Rabbit novels.

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John Updike: The Artist as Reluctant Critic

DONALD J. GREINER

Writing criticism is to writing fiction and poetry as hugging the shore is to sailing in the open sea.

—JOHN UPDIKE, *Hugging the Shore*

[R]eviewing relieves some ill feelings about being reviewed.

—JOHN UPDIKE, accepting the Elmer Holmes Bobst Award for Fiction

John Updike's death on January 27, 2009, prompted keenly felt testimonials to his stature as the most celebrated American writer after the Faulkner-Hemingway era. The author of 64 volumes, with posthumous books yet to be published, he displayed his remarkable skill and breadth in novels, short stories, poems, essays, and children's tales, not to mention a closet drama and a memoir. Confirmation of his unprecedented accomplishment came from many voices. Ian McEwan's summary was on the mark: Updike, "whose literary schemes and pretty conceits touched at points on the Shakespearean, is gone . . . We are coming to the end of the golden age of the American novel in the twentieth century's second half" (4). A half-dozen years earlier, in their essay-reviews of *The Early Stories*, Lorrie Moore and Cynthia Ozick defined Updike's eminence in American literary history. Moore: "It is quite possible that by dint of both quality and quantity he is American literature's greatest short-story writer" (16). Ozick: "John Updike: the name is graven. It stands, by now, alongside Cather, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, those older masters who lay claim to territory previously untrafficked" (8).

Of all the testimonials, Adam Gopnik said it best, calling Updike “the first American writer since Henry James to get himself fully expressed.” Gopnik’s shrewd appraisal brings to mind the term “man of letters,” one that is readily applied to James and Updike as great authors who also wrote brilliant essays about other writers, theories of fiction, and art. Pointing to Updike’s essays as “just the ivy on the drystone wall of his short stories,” Gopnik added: “Those reviews alone would have been enough to make a major career” (36, 35). Even Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* once saluted Updike the essayist in a review of *Hugging the Shore*, saying he had “established himself as a major and enduring critical voice; indeed, as the preeminent critic of his generation” and calling him “this country’s one all-around man of letters” (C14).¹

Updike often felt uneasy about donning the mantle of man of letters, but a discussion of his accomplishment, his rules and reasons for writing reviews, and his marginalia in a novel he reviewed for the *New Yorker*—which have recently come to light and which allow us, as it were, to peer over his shoulder while he is taking notes for a review—will show how he developed as a critic and why he earned such widespread acclaim.² Updike’s primary goal as an artist was, of course, to create, to make something enduringly new, “to give the mundane its beautiful due” (*Early Stories* xv), but his secondary goal was to teach by way of sharing what he had read, what he had seen, what he had learned.

I

In 2000, William H. Pritchard published an insightful overview of Updike’s career in a book whose title affirmed the acclaim: *Updike: America’s Man of Letters*. Grouping Updike with his “three major predecessors,” Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Dean Howells, and Edmund Wilson, Pritchard pointed out that these giants of commentary and analysis, unlike the expatriates Henry James, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot, stayed home and focused on America (3). A decade later, in a review of Updike’s posthumously published *Higher Gossip*, Benjamin Schwarz also conjured up Wilson’s prodigious ghost when he remarked that Updike’s lengthy volumes of essays “secured [him] a place among America’s few great men of letters (since Edmund Wilson’s death, only Gore Vidal and Updike can be added to the pantheon)” (101–02). One can understand why. Excluding his two books of art criticism (with a third recently published), Updike’s seven volumes of essays, from *Assorted Prose* in 1965 to *Higher Gossip* in 2011, total 4,603 pages of text, an impressive achievement by any measure.

He began as an essayist when he “gratuitously volunteered to be a critic” in

1960, primarily for the *New Yorker*, though one should not forget that he supplemented his income by “volunteering” elsewhere (*Picked-Up Pieces* xv).³ Later he also wrote criticism for the *New York Review of Books* and other journals, and thus his commentary spanned the half century following the deaths of Hemingway in 1961 and Faulkner in 1962. Yet, however worthy he was to be elevated to the title of man of letters, Updike distrusted the crown. Comparing critic to artist, he disparaged the professional commentator as an empty vessel: “How much better to do a great thing worthily than to do many things well enough! ‘Man of letters’ is not, to me, a term of much praise; it suggests the uniform yet lightweight solidity of a mannequin . . . A mannequin’s eyes are dead; there is nobody home; men of letters live in limbo” (*Odd Jobs* xxi)—that is, in another country only proximate to the lively worlds of fiction writer and poet. The titles of Updike’s collections of commentary, such as *Picked-Up Pieces* and *Odd Jobs*, are always self-mocking, as if to insist on his position as the ever-alert but never fully committed amateur. He was clearly aware of the inimical impact reviewers can have on those blessed with an expansive imagination that leads not to mere popularity or impressive sales but to art. Thus the tone of his comments, not afraid to point out weakness, but constantly concerned to celebrate strength: “In this present age of excessive information and of cheerful inaccuracy, where six shrewd or at least intimidatingly verbal critics exist for every creative spirit, the writer has no clearer moral duty than to keep his imagination his own” (*Odd* 136).⁴

Although Updike occasionally used the term “critic” when referring to his essay-reviews, as when he wittily confessed that by the 1990s he came close to becoming a “Critic at Large” for the *New Yorker* (*More Matter* xx), he also took pains to distinguish “critic” from “reviewer”: “A critic I understand to be someone who devotes a major part of his life and publication to the appreciation and analysis of an art; I, instead, am merely willing now and then to read a book and give my opinion of it in public” (*More* 810). Once again, his tone is disarming, though “my opinion of it” eventually resulted in thousands of pages. Yet he concedes the dangers, the worries, the hesitations that a writer who is foremost an artist faces if he publicly comments on other authors’ books to the extent that he did. The drawback is that creativity can be smothered under the weight of judgment, an accumulating overload that builds pound by pound when the artist reviews week by week. Hence, he forged “an alter ego, a kind of sage younger brother, urbane and proper,” that allowed him to step outside his primary role as artist (*Odd* xx). He even cites “a corruption of one’s inner ear” to suggest the danger of the “too comfortable cadences and phrases of the critical voice,” and continues: “It is almost

impossible to go wrong, in writing a review, and to avoid the tone of being wonderfully right; whereas any creative endeavor launches itself in the teeth of its certainly going wrong in some aspect, and of being judged wrong by others." In other words, the critic takes few chances, but chances define the artist. Writing fiction, as opposed to essay-reviews, is "[a]n imitation of Creation . . . with some . . . religious feeling implied" (*More* 810–11). The reviewer, even one as perspicacious and prolific as Updike, is always earthbound.

Late in his career, he recalled his stint as an office boy at the *Reading* (Pa.) *Eagle* in order to account for his massive collections of criticism, calling them the "end-products of an adolescent yearning to become a professional writer" (*Due Considerations* xvii). The point is that his need to see himself in print was paramount *before* he left Shillington, Pennsylvania, and high school for Cambridge and Harvard in 1950. To a large extent, he wrote so much material in high school that he *was* his school newspaper, *Chatterbox*; just as later he was a prolific cartoonist, writer, and editor of the *Harvard Lampoon*. Learning at the *Eagle* office how print and paper became articles and news, "the boy I was sought to work his way into publication and a wider distribution than was afforded by what the scowling elders of his community called an 'honest' job" (xviii). Updike was inexperienced when he began reviewing for the *New Yorker* in 1960, but he knew that commenting regularly on books by other writers was not only a way of staying in print but also a means of keeping up, albeit unsystematically, with what he calls the "world of letters" (xix).

The threat to the artist, subtle though it may be, of writing criticism was always in the back of his mind, as confirmed when a critic as esteemed as Malcolm Cowley warned him against devoting significant time to thoughts about and reactions to books besides his own, "but I brashly believed that I could protect the frail creator inside me from the bullying critic" (*Due* xix). This apparently innocuous statement is important. He wrote it in 2007 when he was 75 years old. Note the adjective *bullying*. Updike did not often "bully" in his criticism, but he was indeed bullied. He never forgot the pain; thus the generally calm tone of his commentaries, which even he describes as "their customary geniality" (xix). During his first weeks as a critic, William Shawn, editor of the *New Yorker*, taught him that an effective review was expansive, more an essay than a page or two of comment stunted by an imposed word count, and therefore a means of elevating what Updike saw as the generally poor quality of reviewing. He learned that writing about books for Shawn could be similar to creating a short story: intriguing beginning, interesting middle, convincing conclusion. Significantly, he also learned that re-

viewing was “safe” since, as a judge of someone else’s book, he was protected from judgment (xix). The primary danger was to himself as an artist: “Evidently I can read anything in English and muster up an opinion about it. I am not sure, however, the stunt is good for me” (*Picked* xvi).

Although writing essay-reviews provided a safety zone for Updike, he nevertheless soon felt the sting of negative responses to *Assorted Prose*, his first collection. Walter Sullivan’s reaction was an early example of the bullying that dogged Updike’s long career: “Skillfully written as these are, they appear to go nowhere: they tell us nothing. This is to me the paradox of Updike’s major work: he writes so well, and achieves so little” (712). Why should he have cared what Sullivan and his other, more vociferous negative critics wrote about him? The answer may be that at this point in his career he had enjoyed a never-faltering upward curve of success. First, his family (particularly his mother), his teachers, and his classmates (who elected him senior class president) agreed he was special. Second, he was graduated summa cum laude from Harvard, where he served as editor of the *Lampoon*. Third, and most important, his early books were publicly applauded. *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959) won the Rosenthal Award; *Rabbit, Run* (1960), written with support from the Guggenheim Foundation, put him on the literary map; *The Centaur* (1963) won the National Book Award. With so much acclaim accorded so promptly, his expectations for always shining in the spotlight were unrealistic. He was blindsided by the unanticipated disparagement of his art. Although he could have ignored the naysayers, he retaliated. By the time of *Picked-Up Pieces*, published in 1975, ten years after *Assorted Prose*, Updike was so well established as one of the leading writers of his generation that he took the initiative, called out his “bullies,” and formulated what he called his “rules” for reviewing. The rules were first intimated in a 1968 interview with Charles Thomas Samuels when he began publicly to strike back: “I think it good for an author, baffled by obtuse reviews of himself, to discover what a recalcitrant art reviewing is, how hard it is to keep the plot straight in summary, let alone to sort out one’s honest responses” (Plath 29). The charge of obtuseness, aimed at his carping critics, led in 1975 to the rules shaped, Updike wrote, “intaglio-fashion by youthful traumas at the receiving end of critical opinions”:

1. Try to understand what the author wished to do, and do not blame him for not achieving what he did not attempt.
2. Give enough direct quotation . . . so the review’s reader can form his own impression, can get his own taste.

3. Confirm your description of the book with quotation from the book . . .
4. Go easy on plot summary, and do not give away the ending. . . .
5. If the book is judged deficient, cite a successful example along the same lines, from the author's *oeuvre* or elsewhere. Try to understand the failure. Sure it's his and not yours? (*Picked* xvi–xvii)

These are the precepts of a distinguished artist who has been burned. Tilted in favor not of the critic but of the author of the book under review, Updike's rules indicate that the so-called "failure" of a novel is often the failure of the evaluator. Yet the five rules are benign, illustrating the geniality he liked to bring to his criticism. Much more pungent is the broadside he leveled against his tormentors in another rule he describes as "a vaguer sixth":

Do not accept for review a book you are predisposed to dislike . . . Do not imagine yourself a caretaker of any tradition, an enforcer of any party standards, a warrior in any ideological battle, a corrections officer of any kind. Never, never (John Aldridge, Norman Podhoretz) try to put the author "in his place," making of him a pawn in a contest with other reviewers. Review the book, not the reputation. . . . Better to praise and share than blame and ban. (*Picked* xvii)

For Updike to call out Aldridge and Podhoretz, critics who routinely castigated his work, is to underscore his frustration with, if not anger toward, dismissive mandarins to whom he normally would not be in a position to respond. The riposte demonstrates his growing confidence as a critic.

Read as a whole, Updike's collections of nonfiction prose are more than periodic commentary; they confirm his concern for the art of the novel. Still, much of the onus is on the person who seeks an opinion of a book: "For a book to be great in a reader's life it is not enough for the book to be great; the reader must be ready" (*Picked* 162). Updike was ready. His sympathy with the author, born of attacks he took personally, led to his insistence that the reader meet the book being reviewed on *its* terms, not on ideological or political terms. For "reader" here, read "reviewer." Of all his stipulations for insightful criticism, however, the most important one is found not in his list of rules but in his discussion of Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*. As if emboldened by his singling out of Aldridge and Podhoretz, he extends the roll call of critics who seek to politicize or destroy both the art and the artist: "If a harsh Providence were to obliterate, say, Alfred Kazin, Richard Gilman, Stanley Kauffmann, and Irving Howe, tomorrow new critics would arise with the same worthy intelligence, the same complacently agonized

humanism, the same inability to read a book except as a disappointing version of one they might have written" (*Picked* 305, emphasis added).

His argument is, of course, that these eminences did *not* write the book. They merely wrote about what they might have written had they been artists enough to create rather than criticize. In 1971 Updike even took his complaints to his alter ego Henry Bech in what has become his best-known dismissal of Aldridge, Podhoretz, and company. His comment to Bech was so widely publicized that he was asked about it seven years later when interviewed on "The Dick Cavett Show" (PBS, December 14–15, 1978). In "Bech Meets Me," Updike answers Bech's leading question, "How do you find reviews?" as follows: "Humiliating. It isn't merely that the reviewers are so much cleverer than I, and could write such superior fictions if they deigned to; it's that even the on-cheering ones have read a different book than the one you wrote. All the little congruences and arabesques you prepared with such delicate anticipatory pleasure are gobbled up as if by pigs at a pastry cart" (*Picked* 12). Updike did not slow down his offensive when he spoke to Frank Gado: "Critics really are often disappointed that the book they have to review is not the book they would have written if they had had the same topic" (Gado 105). And he lashed out yet again when he accepted an invitation from *Esquire* to recall the negative reviews of his fiction that he found especially discouraging. He did not hesitate to name names, highlighting Aldridge (on *Of the Farm*), Alfred Chester (on *Pigeon Feathers*), and Podhoretz (on *The Centaur*): "The reviewers all seemed to my tender sense of it to be intent not so much on dismissing the book as on annihilating its author, who in some unwitting ideological fashion had given them deep offense." Faced with shrill attacks on the author rather than discussion of the book, the writer gets worn down to the point where he has to decide "whether he intends to go on existing" as an artist. Assailed by critics whom there is no way to please—Updike also names Dorothy Rabinowitz—the artist can only conclude that their opinions are no more than "a purely animal noise, marking an invasion of territory" (*Odd* 847–48). His sarcasm is telling: carping critics fear successful writers. Cleverness undermines commentary.

As the celebrity culture of the 1990s began to infect most of the media, Updike found that magazine editors sought not "the obliquities and tenuosities of fiction" but "the dirt, the poop, the nitty-gritty" (*More* xix). His humor is clear, but his alarm is serious. In the early 1960s, William Shawn had counseled Updike that a meaningful critical appraisal was, at least for the *New Yorker*, kin to the essay as opposed to the "notice." Shawn's guidance led indirectly to Updike's rules, but by

the 1990s he sensed that the cult of the celebrity pushed editors to invite artists to write not stories and poems but “introductions, reviews, and personal essays, preferably indiscreet” (*More* xix). In other words, the kind of ideologically based, loudly proclaimed personal attacks perfected by the “pigs at a pastry cart” became the preferred tone. Updike ignored the tone. For him, any invitation to publish, no matter the source, was an opportunity first to make, to create, and second to probe the self to find something of value that might otherwise have remained uncovered. It was *not* an opportunity to rip apart a book, castigate an artist, demolish a career, advance an ideology, or demonstrate one’s cleverness.

Given his experience as an artist whose work was acerbically dismissed by the same gathering of judges, Updike insisted on the obligation of the critic to “heed the author’s exact expressions and to condemn him, if he must be condemned, out of his own mouth” (*Hugging the Shore* xv). He kept tweaking his rules throughout his five decades as a man of letters. Part of his goal was subtly to educate his readers as to the context of the review and thereby instruct them in how to distinguish an illuminating opinion from a polemic. Yet a more significant, though equally subtle, goal was to confront and thus teach other critics. In this sense, his precepts were a means of counterattacking his naysayers. That he preferred to remain hidden behind the comic tone of a mock interview with Henry Bech did not blunt his need to name his targets in print. Always insisting on his amateur status as an observer paddling, as it were, close to the shore, he smiled at himself when he took up his pen as public commentator despite the pressure to expose “the nitty-gritty” and “the poop.” For example, he sheepishly reports that he read 34,869 pages in order to write the essay-reviews collected in the 878-page *Hugging the Shore*, but he acknowledges the seriousness of his obligation: “Of some [essay-reviews] I am proud enough, as work completed and self-education achieved. Of none am I ashamed” (*Hugging* xvii).

To review is to learn, to engage other minds, to explore different cultures, but a substantive essay can often excuse readers from perusing the book itself. This paradox led to his career-long realization of the downside of writing the essays that earned him the reputation of man of letters. Rather than pander to the contemporary appetite for celebrity dirt and Aldridge-like acidity, Updike published what he liked to call “gossip of a higher sort” (*Hugging* xvii)—thus the title of his posthumous collection *Higher Gossip*. It was one thing for him to insist that his commentary be well written and well thought-out, but another entirely to admit that, despite the energy and skill he brought to his criticism, readers on the whole prefer glancing through “higher gossip” than committing to books: “therein lies

the beguilement and the nagging unease of the trade.” Worse, while the artist willingly muffles “the voice of a wise and presentable man” in order to engage the messy, endless multiplicity of life, “[t]he critic comes to us in suit and tie. . . . He is *right*. A pox on him, as Goethe said. . . . An artist mediates between the world and minds; a critic merely between minds” (*Hugging* xviii; emphasis in original). Updike’s sarcasm, his need to stress that professional critics luxuriate in “the tone of being wonderfully right” whereas artists must struggle with accident and uncertainty, was a tactic of both his counterattack and his public presentation of “John Updike,” the genial amateur; but it also indicates a troubling debate with himself, an admission of his fifty-year worry that the extraordinary volume of his criticism might take the edge off the very creativity that spurred him to become an artist in the first place. Updike was never comfortable, even when hugging the shore.

II

The point is not that Updike infrequently expressed a reservation or wrote a negative word but that until late in his career he rarely bullied to the extent that he subsequently felt the need to apologize. Three examples with radically different tones will suffice. First, he readily picked what he called “nits” in books he otherwise applauded, as in his comments about *Onward and Upward*, Linda H. Davis’s 1987 biography of Katharine S. White (*Odd* 777). White was an editor with the *New Yorker* for more than three decades and a person Updike knew through his association with the magazine. The specificity of his review suggests that he evaluated the biography through the lens of his knowledge of its subject and would have been quick to attack beyond the “nits” had such a response been called for. For instance, he points out that Davis misstates the particulars of White’s first pregnancy and locates the Algonquin Hotel in the wrong city block, and that “[a]n occasion is described as dinner that I remember as lunch, having been there” (*Odd* 777). Second, he was uneasy about expressing his reaction to Martin Amis’s *Night Train* (1997), as the first sentence of his review indicates: “I wanted very much to like this book, and the fact that I wound up hating it amounts to a painful personal failure” (*More* 363). Updike sets his “failure” in the context of his approval of both Amis’s other fiction and “his spirited criticism,” with the result that, for Updike at least, *Night Train* is a disappointing, jolting bump in an otherwise smooth road. Third, he did not hesitate to repudiate James Gould Cozzens’s 1968 novel *Morning Noon and Night* in an essay published during his early years as critic for the *New Yorker*. Here is the opening salvo: “Beginning, forty years ago, with a style of

sober purity, James Gould Cozzens has purposefully evolved a prose unique in its mannered ugliness." *Morning Noon and Night* is, for Updike, "a four-hundred-page-long after-dinner speech" (*Picked* 416, 417). His unrelenting negative reaction stems from his regret that Cozzens, a venerable and distinguished author, has abandoned his once "pure" style. Similar regret is not evident in some of Updike's late essays. The unforeseen result is an apology.

Early in his career, when he was what he called "[a]n aspiring American writer myself" and absorbing the blows from those who sought to bury his art, Updike ironically remarked that he began by reviewing primarily novels in translation because he "clearly could not be trusted to clip the tender new shoots of my competitors" (*Picked* xv). The word *competitors* is revealing. Once he became a renowned artist he did indeed begin, despite the mask of informal commentator, to focus a critical eye on his American peers. Explaining that he could not read a book without pencil in hand to write judgments and opinions in the margins, he says he learned from experience that an essay is not going well when "there are no symptomatic sentences to underline, no private index scrawled on the endpapers for use in the judicial summing-up ahead" (*Hugging* xix). Luckily for us, sentence underlinings and private index are preserved in Updike's own copy, which has recently surfaced, of Denis Johnson's *The Name of the World*, thus offering the unusual opportunity of indirectly watching Updike the critic at work as he wrote notes in the margins of Johnson's novel to prepare the review that first appeared in the *New Yorker* (July 24, 2000) before being collected in *Due Considerations*.

What is unexpected in the review of *The Name of the World* is Updike's disparaging tone leveled at an American "competitor." As Christopher Carduff correctly observes in the foreword to *Higher Gossip*, "only sometimes" does Updike go for "the hot and salty drop of blood" (xv). But Updike's response to *The Name of the World* slices out more than a drop. Reading it, one wonders what happened to his customary geniality, his carefully molded persona as the erudite amateur bringing news to the educated reader. He ended up bullying Johnson as he was bullied, not with the venom of an Aldridge or Podhoretz, a Chester or Rabinowitz, but bullying nonetheless. To his credit, he recognized—and did so publicly—the radical change in his approach. In the preface to *Due Considerations*, published seven years after the Johnson bloodletting, he speculated whether the cordial judgments he brought to foreign writers did not harden when he picked up a book by a contemporary American. Uncovering "little easy praise and much testy quibbling" in his essays about his peers, he offered a surprising self-appraisal that amounts to an embarrassed public apology:

Why did I so humorlessly resist the cartoonish brio of Don DeLillo's Bruce Wayne-like protagonist's oft-interrupted limo ride westward on Forty-seventh Street? Why was I such a rudely squirming student in the classrooms of Denis Johnson's and Norman Rush's teacher-heroes, and sympathized so stingily with their romantic and spiritual dilemmas?" (*Due* xx)

Deciding that his familiarity with American issues and scenes bred not only contempt but also a "possessive pickiness," he confessed that in some of the essays collected in *Due Considerations* he had strayed from the very rules for reviewing he had articulated at the dawn of his long reign as eminent observer of the world of books. In short, he had nudged aside his "sage younger brother" and asserted his authority when he could have just as easily declined to review the books in question. One can imagine his chagrin when realizing that, with his humorless comments about Johnson and others, he had become a latter-day Podhoretz: "Having begun my side career as a critic determined to model decent manners, I wound up as ill-tempered as the next" (*Due* xx). Yet only to a degree: he more frequently adhered to his precepts, finding it necessary to judge the judgment when he neglected the rules of the game. A case in point is his harsh dismissal of *The Name of the World*.

When the *New Yorker* assigned Johnson's novel to Updike, the editors sent him the limited edition, in a slipcase, signed by the author.⁵ The jacket copy is overloaded with superlatives: "a mesmerizing portrait of a professor [Michael Reed] at a Midwestern university who has been patient in his grief after an accident takes the lives of his wife and child." Reed is "a dead man walking . . . although he observes with a mordant clarity the lives whirling vigorously around him." The copy concludes with a whirlwind of praise: "Elegant and incisively observed, . . . poignant yet unsentimental, replete with the visionary imaginative detail for which his work is known." The back cover extends the hype with unsigned blurbs about the author from three major publications: "an amazingly talented writer" (*Newsday*); "one of the country's most essential and uniquely gifted novelists" (*Mirabella*); "an utterly brilliant and original talent" (*Philadelphia Inquirer*).

Updike was unimpressed. Given the enviable authority he had in both selecting the jacket art and writing most of the jacket copy for his own books, I wonder whether he reacted against the onslaught of overwrought rhetoric even before he picked up a pencil to write his notes. He begins his comments by praising specific word sequences, but is soon turned off. The marginalia total 125 words and eventually reveal his dismay. The first notation appears on page 5 of this short book (129 pages): the single word "nice" beside the phrase "since the days when Ted

MacKey's big beige globe had known what it was talking about." The next remarks show Updike taking care to understand the details of Mike Reed's life: "hero cherubic, past fifty" and widowed "nearly 4 years" (7, 8). Circling "stick figures," a description of Reed's faculty colleagues, he then writes those two words in the margin (10). Similarly, he jots down "sorrowful concentricity" from "The anonymous drawing was just a lot of sorrowful concentricity"; "ha" beside "the halls seem narrow and proportioned for some earlier, elongated race of academics"; and "skirl" from "skirl of their blades" (14, 18, 21). As yet, he gives no indication that the review will be unambiguously negative.

Affirming his commitment to quoting passages he approves of, Updike notes "nice" next to "The deep snow in the fields had collapsed into dimples that had become, at last, here and there, craters with soaked gray pasture at their bottoms" (23)—the very description he will feature in his review. Further, he writes "good" beside "that sense of the child as a sort of antenna stuck in the middle of an infinite expanse of possibilities" (28). He underlines "She had the smashed sinuses of an English bulldog" (78), which he copies on the back endpaper as part of his "private index," and which he then lauds as "smashing" in the review. But though he uses the margins to describe Reed's response to women as "nice grave yet light & onflowing nicely felt tone" (43), the first hints of his growing disapproval surface when he notices the name of Reed's love interest, "Flower Cannon," an affectation Updike disparages in the review (35). By the time he has read a third of the novel, his frustration begins to direct his response. For example, next to Johnson's description of a woman as resembling California—"You're long and your variousness sweeps down to the Pacific Ocean"—Updike writes "fanciful & over-poetic" (42). He is irked that Johnson fails to specify the novel's location: "the Sioux—what state is this?" He dismisses "Do you want to know how a loser stinks? Put your nose in your armpit" with one word: "unlikely?" (68). When Updike reaches page 75, he is clearly eager to escape the ordeal: "seems to be ending—but pages to go."

The negative observations pile up. Beside "She came toward me carrying her message from a vanished god," Updike writes, "meaning?" (108). Three pages later, he complains, "a lot of griping to give all this a tone of meaning." Two pages further: "love of enigmatic brief statements." Twelve pages from the end: "doesn't quite have us with him." Although he uses the margins of the final ten pages to cite plot points, his jottings near the end summarize the experience of a critic appalled by the novel he agreed to review: "a degree of disorganization not explained by facts." These various but increasingly acerbic marginalia became the germ of the

review. In his essay, entitled “Dog’s Tears,” Updike singles out Johnson’s “eerie clarity of description” (*Due* 263), but he does not mask his tone. The “rudely squirming” and “ill-tempered” critic he confesses to becoming in the preface to *Due Considerations* shapes his attack, beginning with complaints that events in *The Name of the World* “flirt with predictability” and that the name “Flower Cannon” is “symbolically double-barrelled.” Worse, “Johnson loses us in the later pages,” and Flower, “though lovingly sculpted, . . . melts away” (263). Although Updike adheres to his rule of supplying the reader with ample selections of prose from the novel being dissected, his dislike is finally so visceral as to overwhelm his general goal of displaying manners when commenting on a “competitor’s” fiction. Even the phrase “the name of the world,” which the hero writes out for Flower when she asks for a handwritten keepsake, is disparaged: “It gives the novel a title but not, for me, a meaning” (264). And still he is not through. The final forty pages of *The Name of the World* “are a relative muddle, full of effortful enigmas and presumably pregnant pauses” (265). It’s as if the critic’s disapproval has morphed into undisguised distaste for the very essay he was assigned to write. Insisting that by the end of the book “the decay of rhetoric sets in,” he concludes with a kill shot utterly unexpected from a critic who started his career with the goal of being genial instead of John Aldridge:

This novel about anomic grief thirsts for tears; the hero winds up crying into a bathtub, “a tiny flood of my own tears, enough to fill a shot glass.” He then supplements the tears by turning on the faucet, and bathes “until my bath was cold.” Through a possible short circuit of my own, this bathos left me cold. (265)

“Possible short circuit of my own,” which plays off a phrase Updike employs earlier in his review, is clearly ironic.

Updike does not denigrate the author, but he does demolish the book. Taken as an example of his five decades of criticism, the sharp rejection of *The Name of the World* is unusual, but less so during his final years as an Olympian authority. I point to two more late revelations of his testiness to illustrate that the unambiguously negative evaluation of Johnson’s novel was not an anomaly as Updike drifted away from the rules originally codified in 1975. In a review that led to a public feud with Tom Wolfe, he dismisses that writer’s *A Man in Full* (1998) by saying it “amounts to entertainment, not literature, even literature in a modest aspirant form” (*More* 324).⁶ Commenting on Andrew Sean Greer’s *The Story of a Marriage* (2008), he praises Greer’s earlier *The Confessions of Max Tivoli* before skewering *Marriage*

with a series of blunt, sarcastic appraisals: “Greer is a prose writer who works on the edge of the overcooked, and there is nothing wrong with that—better than raw”; and “A bit too artfully, Greer spices up the narrative” (*Higher Gossip* 171). Updike saves the knockout blow for the last paragraph of the essay, where his summation obliterates any lingering curiosity readers might have about Greer’s book: “*The Story of a Marriage* is a sentimental, overwritten, overcalculated novel that nevertheless proves moving in the end” (172). Updike knows that pulling his punch with that last clause will not persuade readers to buy the novel.

When Updike died in 2009, there was no question that he had earned and, more important, retained the status of, in Kakutani’s words, “the preeminent critic of his generation” despite his suspicion of the term *critic*. He reviewed often, widely, and well, and his analyses were nearly always in the service not of ideology or critical one-upmanship but of the writing of better fiction. Reading through his lengthy volumes of commentary, however, it becomes clear that he feared the commitment to criticism could harm his duty to art. Stung—so much so that he went public with his pain—by caustic attacks on his writing, primarily from a small group of widely known, unappeasable commentators, he declared his intention “to model decent manners,” to give the author his due, to question his own judgment if he found himself judging. For the most part he succeeded, and admirably so; but particularly in his last decade he now and then ignored his rules and wrote essays in the very tone that they were formulated to prevent. John Updike was indeed the artist as reluctant critic, but he was always, and foremost, the artist.

NOTES

1. Kakutani’s assessment is remarkable, given her oft-expressed skepticism about Updike’s canon, of which he was keenly aware. Reviewing the reviewer, he once ironically described Kakutani to me as “every writer’s friend.”

2. For additional discussions of Updike the essayist, see Greiner, 201–39; Schiff, “Updike Ignored”; and Pritchard, 229–52.

3. After Updike’s visit to the University of Cincinnati in 2001, James Schiff mused, “Why does he do so much of it [public readings]? . . . he surely does not need the money,” and Updike responded, “I may not need the money, but I *feel* I need it” (Schiff, *Updike in Cincinnati*, xviii, xxxi). Updike’s comment stems from the circumstances of his youth; born in 1932, he grew up relatively poor during the Great Depression.

4. Although I focus on Updike’s long career of writing essay-reviews, he also published dozens of insightful essays that serve as introductions to new editions of books by such masters as Edith Wharton, Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John O’Hara, and Henry David Thoreau. The tone of these essays is scholarly. The introductions confirm Updike’s wide reading in the canon of the authors whose books he agreed to “introduce.” See, for example, his introductions/

forewords to O'Hara's *Appointment in Samarra* (reprinted in *Odd Jobs*); Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (in *More Matter*); and Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, Fitzgerald's *The Rich Boy*, and Thoreau's *Walden* (all in *Due Considerations*).

5. Updike's annotated copy of *The Name of the World* is in my collection.

6. For a discussion of the dispute between Updike and Wolfe, see Arthur, 187–208.

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John Updike's Narrative "Secrets": Hidden Ekphrasis in "Made in Heaven"

BRIAN DUFFY

Some twenty-five years after he wrote his short story "Gesturing," John Updike responded to a question about his decision, as editor of *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*, to include this story in the collection rather than one of several others of his that qualified for selection. Updike explained that he selected the story because it contained "a certain music of imagery" (Schiff 25). In his introduction to the collection Updike notes that "Gesturing" "seemed . . . to offer the most graceful weave, mingling the image of a defenestrating skyscraper with those from a somewhat gaily collapsing marriage" (*Best* xxii). The metaphor of weaving is apt, as Updike in this story creates a web of images, linking the black-and-white tile pattern of an apartment floor to a similar pattern in a skyscraper façade—black plywood sheets (replacing fallen glass) juxtaposed with the remaining reflecting panes—an imagery of contrast reinforced by the repeated use of the colors black and white, facilitating the comparison by Richard Maple of wife Joan with lover Ruth. Another layer of the weave consists of motifs of mirrors, ice, and diamonds, and then metaphors of height and depth. The meanings of the story are constructed upon the blend and balance of these formal elements, to the extent that the story's themes are more at the service of its formal devices than the reverse.

As early as the late 1960s Updike was referring in interviews to the importance he attached to the formal properties of narrative. In what is a profound insight into the practice of his art, he stated that "narratives should not be *primarily* packages for psychological insights"; for him, "[t]he author's deepest pride . . . is not

in his incidental wisdom but in his ability to keep an organized mass of images moving forward” (Plath 44). Form, then, is granted equal status with content, as is structure and design with authorial omniscience and instruction. In the same interview he underlined the value of “pattern” in narrative (45), going so far as to assert, in a slightly later interview, “I cannot imagine being a writer without wanting somehow to play, to take these patterns, to insert these secrets into my books, and to spin out this music that has its formal side” (52). Updike was speaking specifically about myth here, but it is clear that these formal resources embraced the patterns created by motifs, images, metaphors, and symbols, the configuring features that accord shape and direction to his fiction. This formal patterning is sometimes openly acknowledged in his stories (as in the myth of the descent to the underworld in “The Journey to the Dead”), and is sometimes discernible with careful reading (the motif of the female voice in “Short Easter”).¹ Elsewhere, however, it is likely that readers often fail to detect the patterns created by Updike’s play with formal features. In such cases he becomes the victim of his own subtlety—in his nondidactic art, his “secrets” are liable to remain so. In a recent contribution to Updike scholarship, the writer Ann Beattie observes: “I am struck by how often . . . [Updike] undercuts his own facility. How often he seems to wish that what we see is the story, not its figures of speech, not its clever and astute literary contrivances” (10).

The subject of this essay is what might well be termed formal “secrets” at the heart of one of Updike’s later short stories, “Made in Heaven,” from the collection *Trust Me* (1987).² The story is exemplary in its demonstration of Updike’s use of formal features to initiate and develop themes. Yet the patterning is so subtly embedded in the narrative, and the story so strong in its depiction of the married life of a Christian couple, that it seems likely that even a careful reading might not disclose that the character of Jeanette, wife of protagonist Brad Schaeffer, is constructed according to two “hidden” patterning devices, namely an ekphrasis of the Virgin Mary and the Pygmalion myth. Ekphrasis—to quote James A. W. Heffernan, the scholar who has done much to bring about the renewal of interest in this field of inquiry—is “[t]he literary representation of visual art” (“Ekphrasis,” 297), or, in a later refinement of this definition, “the verbal representation of visual representation” (*Museum* 3). The latter “representation” is important here: Heffernan insists, “What ekphrasis represents in words . . . must itself be *representational*” (*Museum* 4; italics in original).³ This essay proposes that Updike’s character Jeanette is a verbal (and narrative) representation of centuries-long visual representation of the Virgin Mary in Christian art. It will become clear that

the meanings attached to Jeanette through the model of the Virgin extend well beyond those communicated through art alone; what Marina Warner calls “the myth and the cult of the Virgin Mary” have been established through, *inter alia*, the Gospels, the celebration of Christian rites, papal pronouncements of dogma, theological debate and contestation, and the reports of visionaries. Yet Updike’s portrait of Jeanette remains an ekphrasis because she is rendered as “the verbal representation of visual representation,” as if, that is, she were an image—a painting, statue, or icon—of the Virgin.

Typically, the subject of ekphrastic analysis is a single artwork, yet Heffernan’s definitions clearly allow more than a single-artwork source, an inference taken up by Tamar Yacobi, who asserts that there is no good theoretical reason to restrict ekphrasis to a unique artwork. She argues for the “neglected” form of the “art model as source.” The art model is a composite, “a generalized visual image” (601). Yacobi notes that “[r]eaders, if anything, are often more familiar with art models than with the details of specific artworks.” Updike’s Jeanette, based on a composite image of Mary rather than on any single piece of art, is consistent with Yacobi’s notion of a “multiple visual source chosen for verbal (re)modeling” (603). Indeed, the very ubiquity of Marian imagery obviates the need for a single-artwork source for Updike’s ekphrasis, and facilitates his exploitation of the variety of associations and roles attached to the Virgin. That said, there is compelling evidence in the story to suggest that Updike was influenced by Byzantine iconography of the Virgin, which source might be explained by the Byzantines’ early and intense devotion to the Virgin.⁴ As Warner notes, “[t]he earliest feasts of the Virgin were instituted in the fifth century in Byzantium” (66), where, she records, “the entire fabric of the Marian cult [had] its official beginnings” (67).

As for the Pygmalion myth, its most important influence on the story is in Updike’s use of the motif of the male creation of a female ideal, and of the creator’s subsequent adoration of his creation. In the myth, the sculptor Pygmalion creates an ivory statue of his ideal of woman; he falls in love with his creation, touches and caresses it, and covers it in fine clothes and beautiful jewels. He prays to the goddess Venus that she grant him a wife like his ivory-statue ideal, a wish granted when Venus brings the statue to life. The Pygmalion myth informs Updike’s central plot and theme, reinforced by the deployment of precise textual details from the myth.⁵ However, it is the Marian ekphrasis that exercises the greater formal influence on the story, and which operates well beyond the happy ending of the myth, where a child is born to Pygmalion and Galatea. While the discussion to

follow will note occasional important textual echoes of the myth, the influence of the motif of a male's passion for his created female ideal should be self-evident and need no further illustration. For this reason, the essay will be concerned primarily with the presence and function of the Marian ekphrasis, through which Jeanette is rendered as Brad's creation, and which is the story's formal means to explore the themes of Christian faith, personal belief, male idealization of women, patriarchal possessiveness, and feminist resistance.

"Made in Heaven" follows the chronology of a Christian marriage, beginning with the first meeting of Brad and Jeanette, and following them through courtship, married life, old age, and, finally, Jeanette's illness and death. The opening scene establishes the theme of Brad's instrumental view of Jeanette and lays a foundation for the Marian ekphrasis. The nature of Brad's interest in Jeanette is announced unambiguously in the opening line: "Brad Schaeffer was attracted to Jeanette Henderson by her Christianity"; he is drawn to her on hearing her exclaim, "Why, the salvation of my soul!" as she is hemmed in by "Rodney Gelb, the office Romeo" (*Trust Me* 190). In fending off the latter, figured as devilish tempter—his "overbearing, beetle-browed face," his "giving off heat through his back serge suit"—Jeanette proclaims her essential value in response to Rodney's question about what matters to her. Businessman Brad's first comment to Jeanette is a pragmatic "question of a more serious order": "Are you Catholic?" He feels "relief" to learn that she is a Methodist: "He was free to love her. In Boston, an aspiring man did not love Catholics" (191). No longer threatened by her potential Catholicism, Brad's initial appreciation of Jeanette is to find her Christian faith "lovely" (192). If her religious belief elicits such a condescending response, it is because religion matters little to Brad—the imminent collapse of capitalism in 1930s America would, in his view, "take with it what churches were left" (191). Their subsequent courtship is founded on Brad's judicious attraction to Jeanette as an acceptable potential wife for an ambitious man in Boston's anti-Catholic business circles.

From the outset, then, Jeanette is divested of personal qualities in favor of her as image and ideal, confirmed by the first descriptions of her, which strongly suggest an image of artificial representation:

The flush the party punch had put in her cheeks helped him to see for the first time the something highly polished about her compact figure, an impression of an object finely made . . . She was lightly sweating. The excited blush of her cheeks made the

blue of her eyes look icy. . . . The contrast between her blue eyes and rosy, glazed skin had become almost garish. (190–92)

These lines have a triple function: first, to present Jeanette through Brad's eyes—they are preceded by the words "He looked over" (190)—as his construction; second, to render this vision as an image by portraying her in terms more resonant of artificial representation than of a real person—"an object finely made," with the shining, "glazed" surface of a statue or painting, and "icy," slightly nonhuman eyes; and third, to lay the foundation for an association with the Virgin through this language of representation and through the rosiness of the cheeks and the emphasized blue of the eyes. Roses are the symbol of the Virgin: Warner notes that, to indicate the purity of the Virgin and her immunity from the putrefaction of death, "roses spring up in her empty tomb in paintings of the Assumption" (99). Warner records also that "blue is the colour of the Virgin, 'the sapphire,' as Dante wrote, who turns all of heaven blue" (xx).⁶

The opening scene and early stages of the courtship also allow the figure of Jeanette to take on the countenance of a very specific ekphrasis, that of a Byzantine icon of the Virgin. As elsewhere in a story filled, at first sight, with oblique references, Updike offers clues to the formal device he employs: Brad and Jeanette begin to attend together the "Greek Revival clapboard church" with "Ionic columns" that Brad had been attending (193, 194), located in a part of Boston where they feel "the east wind," which blows through streets resonant in his mind of "old quarters in Europe" (193, 194). We learn that Jeanette had been attending a Copley Methodist church, "with its tall domed bell tower and its Byzantine gold-leaf ceiling" (193). The textual detail of the gold leaf acknowledges the centrality of gold in Byzantine art, a feature already associated with Jeanette in her first appearance in the story: As she speaks to Rodney, the text records the "lighted windows" of the building opposite, which then become the "golden windows" that function as a backdrop to Jeanette's figure as Brad moves over to speak to her (190, 191). This initial image of Jeanette framed against a golden background conforms to the typical Byzantine representation of the Virgin, as two examples will serve to illustrate.

The church of St. Sophia (also called Hagia Sophia) in Constantinople (formerly Byzantium, now Istanbul) was considered, as Robin Cormack describes it, "the Byzantine 'ideal' church." After the periods of iconoclasm (727–787 and 815–843) in which icon veneration was rejected and icons destroyed, it was determined that St. Sophia would become "the showpiece monument" of the new

iconophile period (117). To that end, a mosaic image of the Virgin was commissioned and inaugurated in 867. Located high in the half-dome of the apse of St. Sophia, “[a]gainst the clear gold background symbolizing heavenly light, Mary sits on a backless throne with the Christ child on her lap” (120). Cormack also discusses a recurring Byzantine iconic type, the *Hodigitria* (“she who shows the way”), an image of Mary holding and pointing to the Christ Child. One representation of this scene, described by Cormack as “the most important icon venerated by the Orthodox community” (109), is rare among Byzantine icons in having an individual title, *The Triumph of Orthodoxy*. Cormack notes: “The icon declares the importance of icons in the Orthodox church by representing their veneration by those who fought for Orthodoxy during the period of iconoclasm” (29). The icon that these defenders of the faith venerate within the icon is a *Hodigitria* scene. The figures, including the Virgin, who occupies the most elevated position in the image, “are surrounded by divine light, symbolized by the gold ground of the background” (31).

Where the character of Jeanette is concerned, the textual association with Byzantine gold leaf, her pictorial framing against a backdrop of “golden windows,” and the Byzantine gold-leaf symbolism of heavenly light—in a story called “Made in Heaven” by a writer with an avowed predilection for formal patterning—are unlikely to be a coincidence. On the contrary: through the ekphrasis of a Byzantine icon of the Virgin, Updike has specific meanings and values at his disposal for the development of the theme of a woman transformed into an ideal and a religious image.⁷

The consequences of this depersonalization create the story’s narrative dynamic: Jeanette becomes, first, Brad’s cherished and venerated possession, and, second, his ideal of Christian faith through which his idiosyncratic belief finds vicarious expression. Brad’s construction of Jeanette is consistent with what Warner identifies as “the powerful undertow of misogyny in Christianity” (225). One expression of this has been “Christian patriarchy’s idea of woman,” to which the cult of the Virgin has contributed: “it is this very cult of the Virgin’s ‘femininity,’ expressed by her sweetness, submissiveness, and passivity that permits her to survive, a goddess in a patriarchal society” (235, 191). Patriarchy was also a characteristic of Byzantine culture: Cormack speaks of “the gender of power” in describing “the prominence of men in establishing the beliefs and values of this Christian society” (215). Brad displays his patriarchal tendencies initially in the form of physical possessiveness: “Involuntarily his arm encircled her waist at crossings, and he could not let go even when they had safely crossed the street” (192). In church,

Jeanette's "reverence made him . . . want to turn and hug her and lift her up with a shout of pride and animal gladness" (193), echoing Pygmalion's touching and caressing of his statue. It is at moments such as these that Jeanette "seemed most intimately his" (194).

This physical possessiveness, however, is but a manifestation of the greater intrusion Brad commits in taking over Jeanette's very life and being, in both its public and private spheres. "It was his idea, to accompany her" to church during their courtship (192), a gesture she "resisted, at first," for fear it would be "distracting" (193). Wherever Jeanette is, in this early phase of their life together, so is Brad, as in her family home where he "greedily inhaled" the world of her childhood (192). Unknown to him, however, his possessiveness "was rending something precious to her, invading a fragile feminine space" (193). But such delicacies of personality and intimacy are lost in Brad's exhilaration at the possession of his object of desire. As if Jeanette were a transportable icon to be viewed and venerated from different perspectives, and particularly so in church, "he liked seeing her in new settings, in the new light each placed her in." In this framing of Brad's contemplation of Jeanette, she is "like a figure etched on a city scene," where "[h]er smiling face gleamed" in the light. Brad's Jeanette slowly crystallizes into the object and image into which he is unwittingly fixing her: "Brad would sometimes clown or feign clumsiness just to crack her composed expression" (192).

If Jeanette as possession becomes an object, Jeanette as ideal becomes a devotional exemplar to which Brad attaches himself in an unconscious endeavor to assuage an existential solitude and to corroborate his own shallow faith. He "assumed religion was already as dead as Marx and Mencken claimed," and, although unfailingly attending church on a weekly basis, he is "[p]erhaps . . . still an unbeliever" during his courtship of Jeanette (191, 194). It is only in a moment of existential anxiety while on the deck of his wartime aircraft carrier that Brad finds his form of faith. Frightened by "the devastating impression the black firmament of spattered stars" makes on him as he apprehends the vastness of the cosmos, he rationalizes himself into an instrumental faith:

How little, little to the point of nothingness, he was beneath those stars! Even the great ship . . . was reduced to the size of a pinpoint in such a perspective. And yet it was he who was witnessing the stars; they knew nothing of themselves, so in this dimension he was greater than they. As far as he could reason, religion begins with this strangeness, this standstill; faith tips the balance in favor of the pinpoint. So, though he had never had Jeanette's smiling intuitions or sensations of certainty, he became in his mind a believer. (195)

This is a self-serving rationalization: Brad's discovery of belief is one in which he consciously contrives to reverse the balance of power between himself and the celestial vastness, while remaining existentially anxious enough to need the support of a belief in God. Jeanette's "intuitions," on the other hand, are a richer terrain for the flourishing of true faith, and it will only be through her genuine belief that Brad's contrived belief will be vicariously sustained. Just as he attended church in the early days to be with her and "basked in her gravity" (193), now he feels "empowered by her fineness, her faith" as he stands beside her (196), and "misse[s] her" when, well into their marriage, she stops accompanying him to the ten o'clock Sunday morning service he prefers: "He felt naked, as when alone on the deck" of his aircraft carrier years earlier (198).

It is in Jeanette as earthly focus of Brad's belief that the Virgin Mary ekphrasis receives its full expression. Brad's veneration of Jeanette intensifies the presentation of her as icon or statued image: he admires "[h]er composure, the finished neatness of her figure" (193), sits in church with Jeanette "at his side, compact and still and exquisite" (194), observes how her body's physical changes over time add to "that polished, glossy quality that had first enchanted him" (196), and notes how she returns home "shiny-faced" from her church service (198). But it is also through familiar religious metaphors of space that Jeanette is powerfully aligned with Mary. Updike once noted that he "tend[s] to see everything poised between heaven and hell" (Plath 20). "Made in Heaven" employs the same commanding metaphors, using motifs of elevation and height, descent and fall, to trace the shifting fortunes of its characters.⁸ Jeanette is associated throughout with the pole of elevation. Her voice "lift[s] up the words of the hymns" and is "lifted in song" (193, 196), while Brad feels that "[s]he would lift him up," just as he wants to "lift her up" in church (194, 193).

This elevation represents the orientation of Jeanette toward heaven, and allows us to appreciate the title of Updike's story.⁹ The Virgin Mary, upon her Assumption, became Queen of Heaven; as living being on earth and as heavenly queen, Warner notes, she "occupies the principal mediating position, as a creature belonging both to earth and heaven" (xxii). Jeanette, too, is of earth and heaven, and Updike accords her a personal intermediary space, symbolic both of her elevated status and of her belonging to two distinct realms. When Brad and Jeanette marry, they move to what will be their lifetime home, "full of corridors for vanished servants and with even a cupola. Narrow stairs wound up to a small round room that became Jeanette's 'retreat'" (195). Her exclusive occupancy of the cupola sym-

bolically elevates her above her earthly abode and locates her in an intermediary realm between heaven and earth.

The cupola as symbol of Jeanette's omnipresence has two important values exploited by the story. First, it accentuates the Byzantine dimension of the Marian ekphrasis through its association with the original and defining feature of Byzantine religious architecture, the domed church, thus opening up the figure of Jeanette to various meanings of Byzantine iconography.¹⁰ Hugh Honour and John Fleming note the shift in the Byzantine world in the sixth and seventh centuries from the veneration of "an image that was an aid to thought or prayer [to] one that was in itself an object of veneration," leading to the demand for "[s]mall portable pictures" of venerated figures, or to what came to be known as icons. This move away from the symbolism of images to more lifelike representations led Byzantine painters to adopt "a more naturalistic style," inviting believers to "a face-to-face meeting with the holy persons depicted" (323). Cormack records an increase in the number of Byzantine texts produced in the centuries after the period of iconoclasm that "coincides with an extension of the expressive devices in icons." One such text speaks of icons as "living painting," while another considers "icons as appearing to our eyes as living beings which seem to speak graciously with their mouths" (154). Jeanette's condition is encapsulated in this Byzantine notion of a double ontology through the representation of her as both flesh-and-blood woman and nonearthy ideal. Her interjacent and omnipresent conditions are reinforced through the frequently recurring motif of her voice, which, along with its connotation of elevation, is represented as being at once earthly and celestial, as if emerging from both worlds at the same time: it is described variously as "frail" (193), "small" (196), "delicate" (203), and "distant" (205).¹¹ In the same vein, the rarity of Jeanette's utterances is used tellingly to bolster the Marian ekphrasis: the Virgin's "silence in the Gospels" (Warner 190) is transferred to Jeanette. When Brad ascends one day to her cupola and is troubled by her being "so quiet," he asks, "Do you feel all right?" to which she replies: "I like being quiet. I always have. You know that" (201).

The second important value of the cupola as intermediary space and symbol of Jeanette's omnipresence is one that Warner identifies as central to the enduring power of the Virgin. Because "she belongs in both realms," the "most evident function of the Virgin today is intercession . . . Mediation has been the most constant theme of her cult" (285, xxiii). Brad's shallow-rooted faith cannot grow all the way up to God, but it flourishes in feeding off the nourishing presence of Jeanette's

faith. Practical-minded Brad, with a limited capacity to direct his belief at an ethereal and divine absence, puts his faith instead in the pious being who inhabits his own earthly realm, transforming Jeanette into the repository and object of his faith. As their married life develops, it is less God that Brad worships at church than Jeanette, whose “Christianity, as he imagined it, was, like water sealed into an underground cistern, unchangingly pure” (196), recalling the “absolute purity” of the Virgin (Warner 225). Here is the metaphorical sense of Brad’s constant physical holding of Jeanette: If he clings to her because she is the revered ideal, it is also because she has become his earthly intercessor, his access to God, and, ultimately, his bridge to heaven and salvation. As Cormack notes of the “functional” aim of the Byzantine icon: “They received the prayers and veneration that passed through them to the ‘other’ world that they symbolized, and they were expected to reflect the powers of God” (2).¹² And although, as Warner records, “God is the only source of salvation,” it is “the intercession of the Virgin with her almighty son [that] brings about this salvation” (286, 323). Jeanette would indeed “lift [Brad] up.”

Jeanette’s intercessionary role in Brad’s instrumental faith has its concomitant in the role played by the church. At Brad’s suggestion they become Episcopalians; the church is “handier” to their house, but, more importantly for Brad, “his associates and clients tended to be Episcopalians, and . . . this church held more of the sort of people they should get to know” (195). If the expression of Jeanette’s genuine faith remains “shy” and silent (193), Brad’s becomes active and visible: “He himself taught Sunday school, passed the plate, sat on the vestry, read the lesson. It was like an extension of his business life” (196). Brad loves the trappings and pyrotechnic displays of the “High Church” ceremonies, “the incense, the robed teams of acolytes,” and Communion, about which “he harbor[s] an inner image, a kind of religious fantasy, of the wafer and wine turning, with a muffled explosion, to pure light in the digestive system” (205). Brad confuses faith with the business of faith, spending “hours at the church, politicking, smoothing ruffled feathers” (197–98).¹³ With his faith safely invested in Jeanette, materialist and capitalist Brad can afford to use church services to admire “the look of the congregation,” these well-turned-out and expensively dressed men and women (195). He loves especially, in his patriarchal manner, to look at his own living icon, his Jeanette “in her black silk dress and the strand of real pearls, each costing as much as a refrigerator, with which he had paid tribute to their twentieth anniversary. Money gently glimmered on her fingers and ears” (196). Just as gold in Byzantine iconography “declares the preciousness of the works and therefore the commitment of the

patrons,” and “elevates the human figures from the real into the heavenly world beyond” (Cormack 25), and just as Pygmalion “dresses [his statue] up and puts diamond rings on its fingers, gives it a necklace . . . and pearl earrings” (Ovid 351), so Brad “pa[ys] tribute” to his anniversary, but also to his own earthly and heavenly queen, in whom he has deposed his faith and entrusted his salvation.

The depiction of Brad’s greatest triumph—the public display of his pearl-laden icon—is followed immediately by the beginning of his fall; here is Brad—enacting the scene depicted on the Updike-designed dust jacket of *Trust Me*¹⁴—as a heedless Icarus unaware of the dangers he is courting. Leaving church with Jeanette on Sunday mornings, “his arm involuntarily crept around her waist, and he would let go only to shake the minister’s overworked hand” (196). But “one Sunday” Jeanette rebels, objecting to being “paw[ed]” and “steered” through the crowd. Brad, in his incomprehension, can only plead his enduring love for her. Her retort reveals her awareness of the dualism—as woman and idealized image—at the heart of Brad’s apprehension of her: “Are you sure it’s me you love or just some idea you have of me?” This “finicking distinction” puzzles Brad: “She was positing a ‘real’ her, a person apart from the one he was married to. But who would this be, unless it was the woman who took a cup of tea and went up the winding stairs to her cupola at odd hours?” Brad has indeed substituted the “real” person of Jeanette with his “idea” of her, and it is the “real” Jeanette who disappears up to her “retreat,” where she can be her true self, safe from Brad’s false image of her. She continues her challenge: “Did it ever occur to you . . . that you love me because it suits you? That for you it’s an exercise in male power?” In his incomprehension at the terms of Jeanette’s accusation, and in the manner in which he explains to himself “their mysterious lapse of harmony”—he puts it down to her “change of life” (197)—Brad confirms what the story invites us to see: that by intruding too far into his wife’s life, and in fossilizing her as his religious ideal, he has perpetuated the patriarchal ideal of women, one deeply rooted, as we have seen, in the Christian ideal of the Virgin.

The text suggests that this scene takes place on the verge of the Sixties, the decade of cultural upheaval in America, the beginning of the great challenges to the conservative social and cultural order. Brad wonders “if their sons, who had become more or less anti-establishment, and incidentally anti-church, had infected her with their rebellion” (198). Jeanette’s challenge to Brad is indeed a feminist-inspired rebellion against his male idealization of her. But her contestation can also be understood, in a story constructed upon a Byzantine Marian ekphrasis, as her

own iconoclastic rebellion. Iconoclasts, Cormack explains, “denied the holiness of icons and rejected icon veneration” (87). Jeanette seeks to elude the prison-house of Brad’s idea of her, to destroy his stultifying veneration of the image he has created of her, and to recuperate and preserve the private “feminine space” of her personhood and identity.

This scene of contestation should signal the end of the ekphrasis. That it continues is an indication of Brad’s continuing dependence on his idealized Jeanette, the only Jeanette he has allowed to exist. The years pass, and Brad, “[i]n his loneliness” in retirement, “would visit Jeanette in her cupola”:

[E]verything seemed to halt when he climbed the last, pie-slice-shaped steps, so the room had the burnished silence of a clock that has just stopped ticking. She sat lit from all sides, surrounded by windows, her soft brown hair scarcely touched by gray and the wrinkles of her face none of them deep, so that her head seemed her youthful head softened by a webbed veil. . . . [S]he did not seem to be doing anything—so deeply engaged in gazing out a window . . . that she did not even turn her head at his entrance. Her motionlessness slightly frightened him. (200–01)

Here is the apogee of the Marian ekphrasis. The “silence” is at once that of a sacred space—“He thought of [the cupola] as her meditation room” (202)—and a mute image. Jeanette is as motionless as an icon, “lit” by the light of the “windows” like a mosaic in the dome of a Byzantine church. Her “youthful” appearance indicates the fixed, eternally young image that has remained unchanged in Brad’s mind since he first met her, one consistent with the obligatory representation of the Virgin as youthful: Warner notes that “the Virgin’s youth became the visible sign of her purity” (302) and that the “ideal” she represents is that of “a fixed immutable absolute” (334). The likening of Jeanette’s hair to a “webbed veil” is a final corroboration of the ekphrasis: here is the Holy Veil of the Virgin, the *maphorion*, which became, as Warner points out, the “abiding signature” of the representation of the Virgin (291).¹⁵

In the narrative of Brad and Jeanette’s life together, the cupola scene signals their separation from each other. It is a separation in a physical sense, through Jeanette’s self-isolation, but also spiritually, although Brad will not be aware of this until a late stage of Jeanette’s terminal illness, in the final scene of the couple together. Dying in hospital, Jeanette shocks Brad in no longer wishing to receive visits from their minister and in refusing to take Communion, telling him it seems “an awful lot of bother” to continue to believe. He asks when she lost her belief,

and she replies: "Since you took it from me. You moved right in. It didn't seem necessary, for the *two* of us to keep it up." Brad finally pays the price for his several sins: for his insincere and misdirected belief, for his possessive intrusion into Jeanette's life, for his appropriation of her faith, and for imprisoning her in a false identity and ideal. Jeanette's feminist rebellion is complete: "He lifted his eyes and saw her as enviably serene, having wrought this vengeance" (206).

This final scene, too, is rendered as a Marian ekphrasis, through the recurrence of what have become the motifs associated with Jeanette as icon: "the compact, highly finished impression" that her features continue to make on Brad, and "[t]he blue of her challenging eyes and the fevered flush of her cheeks" (205). Recalling the cupola, the text emphasizes the "wall of steel-rimmed windows" that can be seen from Jeanette's hospital room; in a continuing echo of the Byzantine Virgin, they become "rectangles of gold" when the lights are turned on in the evening (204, 206).

But the Marian ekphrasis in this final scene is most evident in its resemblance to a Byzantine *Koimisis* (the Falling Asleep of the Virgin Mary), or Dormition scene. The end of Mary's life posed a problem for the Christian churches, for, as Warner records, "nowhere in the Bible is the death of the Virgin mentioned"—a silence that "invited story-telling" to explain the meaning of the Virgin's death (81). The dogma of the Assumption (proclaimed in 1950) was the response to the conundrum. As Warner notes, the doctrine "skirt[s] the question of Mary's death" (253): needing to preserve the perfection of the Virgin, it proclaims that "the all-pure Virgin was spared the dissolution of the grave" and that she avoided the separation of body and soul by "ascend[ing] body and soul into heaven" (xxiii, 89). Byzantine belief, on the other hand—continued into current Orthodox Church teaching—asserts that Mary died the natural death of a normal mortal being, and that she lay in her tomb for three days before being resurrected, after which her body and soul were reunited in heaven. On August 15 the Catholic Church celebrates the Assumption, and the Orthodox Church celebrates the Dormition. The *Koimisis* icon, which became one of the most popular in the Byzantine world, features the Virgin in a supine position. Updike's final scene is true to this composition, not only in having Jeanette lie on her back in her hospital bed, but also in the crucial meaning attached to the scene: Jeanette's death is that of a mortal human being, one who suffers, in her cancer, the "bodily decay" spared the Virgin (Warner xxiii). Through this final Byzantine Marian ekphrasis, the story preserves Jeanette's double ontology: she will die as herself and on her own terms, as a flesh-and-blood woman, but will die for Brad still preserved in the idealized image in

which he has immobilized her. For Brad, despite Jeanette's deathbed renunciation of faith, has invested too much in this image to relinquish it:

Though she had asked that there be absolutely no religious service, Brad and the young minister arranged one, following the oldest-fashioned, wholly impersonal rite. . . . He continued to go to the ten o'clock service . . . But it was sheer inert motion; there were no falcon flights of his mind anymore, no small, true voice at his side. There was nothing. He wished he could think otherwise, but he had believed in her all those years and could not stop now. (206–07)

Jeanette's death signals the end of Brad's ascent to and contact with heaven and the divine. Jeanette is associated throughout with elevation; with her death, Brad will be forever denied his "falcon flights." Brad's reaction to Jeanette's renunciation of faith is true to a story and collection informed by motifs and metaphors of height and descent: "'You mean you don't believe?' In his inner ear he felt all the height of space concealed beneath the floor, down and down" (206). We may understand Brad's impending fall as a punishment for the sin of insincere, instrumental belief: he rationalized his belief into existence, conceived of it as a barrier to the terrors of existential nothingness, and sustained it through paying tribute to his human ideal, rather than to God.¹⁶

It is probably not a coincidence that "Made in Heaven" and Updike's autobiographical meditation "On Being a Self Forever" from his memoir *Self-Consciousness* date from the same period (mid to late 1980s). Both texts reflect explicitly on the nature of religious belief, suggesting a late-middle-age stocktaking by Updike on the importance of faith in his life. For Updike, a definitive tension was engendered by the simultaneous and competing emotions of joy in the fact of existence and terror in the knowledge that it must end. It was the latter emotion that prevailed in his early adult life and would persist as he grew older, if in attenuated form. Enduring the terrors of inevitable nothingness led Updike to conclude that "[b]eing human cannot be borne alone" (*Self-Consciousness* 233), so he "decided" he would believe "the Christian religion I had been born into" (230). Religion, he saw, "enables us to ignore nothingness" (228) and helps "put us at ease in this world." But the "pragmatic undercurrent" of this journey to belief "troubles" Updike, and, in identifying the flaws of such rationalizations, he employs the term that describes Brad's coming to faith, for which he is punished at the end of the story: "Pragmatic belief becomes cynical belief" (232–33). Cancer causes Jeanette's

physical death, but Brad, in his self-serving, instrumental belief, is responsible for the death of what the story shows to have been most precious to Jeanette: her private spiritual self, her faith.

The story's use of the Pygmalion myth and Marian ekphrasis prompts one to consider the patterns that they create. The myth gives density to the theme of creating and falling in love with an idealized image, yet the myth and story move in opposite directions: The myth's conceit is that an idealized image is brought to life as a flesh-and-blood woman, while Updike reverses this movement, replacing a flesh-and-blood woman with an idealized image. This latter movement is also the transformation at the heart of the cult of the Virgin, hence the greater influence in "Made in Heaven" of the ekphrasis as a formal means of patterning. Mary and Jeanette have parallel trajectories, based on their status as "an image of the ideal" (Warner 338). Both are innocent young women whose fate it is to be transformed by men into an idealized image.¹⁷

Ann Beattie reminds us that "Updike is as familiar with religion and mythology as he is with psychology," and that "[h]is work is highly visual" (5). The balancing of these influences is apparent in "Made in Heaven": religion, mythology, and art give formal shape to the story, while psychology defers to their structural and thematic patterns. These formal patterns, sometimes secret, go a long way toward explaining the exceptional density and richness of Updike's short stories.¹⁸

NOTES

1. See Mathé, "Voyage au pays des morts," and Duffy, "Motifs of Loss in *The Afterlife*."
2. The story has been discussed by two critics: Donald J. Greiner briefly notes its concerns "with the paradoxes of faith and with the relationship between personal hope and cultural health" (257), while Robert M. Luscher offers an incisive short analysis.
3. The unfamiliarity of the term *ekphrasis* does not mean, as Heffernan points out, that "scarcely anyone is writing about the literary representation of visual art; it simply means that scarcely anyone is using the word *ekphrasis* to do so" ("Ekphrasis," 297). Heffernan's justification for employing the term is that "*ekphrasis* designates a literary mode, and it is difficult if not impossible to talk about a literary mode unless we can agree on what to name it" (298). There is an added justification for using the word in a discussion of Updike's work: Updike wrote extensively about art, and the influence and presence of art in his fiction has often been noted. In a 1976 interview Updike himself said: "I am a sort of frustrated painter, or rather I have painted a bit and was told I have a very good sense of composition. So maybe I see the book as a canvas with things disposed in it" (Plath 91–92). Ekphrasis could prove to be a useful concept in Updikean criticism.
4. Carole Sherr, a Pennsylvania friend of Updike's mother, recalled to me a trip with Updike and others to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., to visit the "Treasures of Tutankhamun"

exhibition in late 1976 or early 1977. While there, Sherr said, Updike went out of his way to have her view a Fra Angelico painting of the Madonna, on view in the gallery at the time.

5. A hint, or perhaps a confirmation, that Updike draws on the Pygmalion myth in “Made in Heaven” is to be found in another story in *Trust Me*, “Pygmalion,” in which a husband molds his second wife in the image of his first.

6. Botticelli, Lochner, and Schongauer all painted scenes of the Madonna in a rose garden or bower. Botticelli’s *The Virgin Adoring the Sleeping Christ Child* (1490) features the Virgin clothed in a rose-colored dress (repeated in the color of the roses) under a blue cloak.

7. The argument that “Made in Heaven” draws on the Virgin Mary as a model for Brad’s idealization of his wife might run up against the objection that Brad and Jeanette are Protestants. From the Reformation to the present, many Protestants have been wary of what they have seen as excessive Catholic devotion to the Virgin. To which objection one might point out, first, that the Marian model is that of the artist Updike and not of the character Brad; nowhere in the story is Jeanette seen by Brad as Mary. In any case, not all Protestant churches were hostile to the Virgin, and Updike himself noted in an interview that the Lutheran church in which he was raised is “a little closer to Catholicism than Calvinism.” By “Calvinism,” Updike meant “the New England Puritan ethos” with which, he said, “I don’t feel much affinity” (Plath 94). Second, even within the fictional world of the story, the Marian ekphrasis is not incongruous, as Brad and Jeanette become Episcopalians. The Episcopal Church in the United States is part of the Anglican Communion, which has long revered Mary. In 2005 the Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission wrote: “Our Agreed Statement concerning the Blessed Virgin Mary as pattern of grace and hope is a powerful reflection of our efforts to seek out what we hold in common and celebrates important aspects of our common heritage” (*Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* 2).

8. These motifs and metaphors are everywhere to be found in the stories of *Trust Me*. See Duffy, “Loss of Trust as Disconnection in John Updike’s *Trust Me*.”

9. There is another resonance to the title. “Made” is a homophone of “maid.” One of the *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of “maid” is “A virgin; spec. the Virgin Mary.” This identification of the Virgin as maid has its origin in the scene of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel appears to a virgin named Mary to tell her that she is to conceive “and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS” (Luke 1:31). Warner describes what follows: “Mary, hearing this, acquiesces in her destiny with the famous words, her fiat: ‘Behold the handmaid of the lord, be it unto me according to thy word’ (Luke 1:38)” (9).

10. Recall, too, the “tall domed bell tower” of Jeanette’s Methodist church (193). The dome was “used extensively in Byzantine architecture as a manifold symbol of the cosmos, the heavens, death and resurrection” (Honour and Fleming 315).

11. The heavenly connotations of Jeanette’s voice are also suggested by its repeated association with crystal: “crystal-clear” (190), “crystalline” (193, 205). In *Self-Consciousness* Updike notes: “The Bible in fact says very little about Heaven, aside from the extensive measurements in Ezekiel and the glimpses of the crystalline city with streets of gold in Revelation 21” (214).

12. One of the most prevalent Byzantine iconic types of composition is a *Deisis*. The Greek word *deisis* means “prayer” or “intercession.” In a *Deisis* composition, the Virgin and St. John the Baptist are placed on either side of Christ in poses of intercession.

13. Jeanette and Brad represent, to an extent, the opposing elements that constitute the doctrinal differences between Protestantism and Catholicism over the Protestant theology of *sola fide*, accord-

ing to which faith alone, and not good works, can lead to God's pardon. Jeanette possesses true faith, while Brad busies himself with church- and religion-influenced "good works" and activities.

14. Designed by Updike, the dust jacket of the Knopf hardback edition of *Trust Me* features a reproduction of Bernard Picart's *The Fall of Icarus* (1731).

15. A photograph of the Virgin's head in the mosaic icon in St. Sophia is striking with regard to this description of Jeanette. The spaces between the tesserae create intersecting lines that give the impression of a spider's web. Moreover, the dominant color of the Virgin's veil in this icon is brown, like Jeanette's hair in this scene (Cormack 104). In the color reproductions of icons in Cormack's book, brown is by far the dominant color of the Virgin's veil (e.g., 178, 182, 189, 209, 212, 213), an interesting feature given the dominance of blue in representations of the Virgin.

16. A peer-review reader of this essay brought to my attention a short commentary by Updike on "Made in Heaven" of which I was unaware. In her 1987 *New American Short Stories* anthology, Gloria Norris asked writers to select a story of theirs "published in the last three years, that they felt deeply attached to or that represented their best work" (1). In his commentary on "Made in Heaven" (which was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1985), Updike records his attempt to do "several things rather new for me" (25), most notably "to show a marriage over the years, developing, as long marriages do, its secret and final revenge, its redressing of a long-sustained imbalance." He also emphasizes (again) his interest in the technical challenges of narrative, remarking that it "is not easy, for a short story, to contain time and to display its abyss." His remarks neither confirm nor refute the reading of the story proposed in this essay. Although Updike refers to the cupola and to "one of my favorite subjects, the mystery of churchgoing" (26), there is not, as one might expect, a word about the Virgin. Yet we may recall Updike's fondness for inserting "secret" patterns into his stories, as well as Ann Beattie's observation that Updike "undercuts his own facility" by not advertising his fiction's "clever and astute literary contrivances" (10).

17. Updike sprinkles his ekphrastic topping throughout the story. Some of it falls as snow, with which Jeanette is associated: In the opening scene of the beginning of Brad's attraction to Jeanette, it is twice noted that it is snowing outside (190, 191); sitting with Jeanette on a love seat they once bought "during a blizzard," Brad is reminded that "[h]is love for her always returned full force when it snowed" (202); and when Brad visits Jeanette in hospital, it begins "to spit snow" outside (206). This motif could refer to one of the Virgin's titles, "Our Lady of the Snow," or it could be a reference to the nativity scene, of which snow is one element—though Warner notes that the snow, like other "circumstantial detail" of the scene, is not in the biblical account but is part of the "collective inheritance of western fantasy" (14). Then there are Brad and Jeanette's two sons: one dies aged "well over thirty," approximately the same age as Jesus at his death, while the other is a carpenter (199), the implied trade of Jesus in the Bible (Mark 6:3).

18. But have we discovered all of Updike's formal secrets? Jeanette's death recalls the death at the end of Poe's allegorical tale "The Oval Portrait": A young woman marries an artist, whose greatest desire, seeing a potential image rather than a person, is to paint her. Weeks pass as the artist strives to capture his wife on canvas, while she begins to weaken in the "dark high turret-chamber" where she sits for him. Consumed and blinded by his vision, the artist sees nothing but the image he is creating. Day and night he toils,

and turned his eyes from the canvas rarely, even to regard the countenance of his wife. And he *would* not see that the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her

who sat beside him. . . . and then the [final] tint was placed; and, for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous . . . , and crying with a loud voice "This is indeed *Life* itself!" turned suddenly to regard his beloved: — *She was dead!*" (225)

Here is another tale of a woman sacrificed to her idealized image.

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Autobiography, Updike, and the “Self-Serving Corruptions of Fiction”

PETER J. BAILEY

The year 1975 seemed an apt cut-off; it was the one and only full year of my life when I lived alone. My marriage, of twenty-two years, to a barefoot, Unitarian, brunette Radcliffe graduate was ending, but all of these stories carry its provenance. 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.

—JOHN UPDIKE, foreword to *The Early Stories, 1953–1975*

In “On Autobiographical Fiction,” Jonathan Franzen offers what he terms an “important paradox”: “[T]he greater the autobiographical content of a fiction writer’s work, the *smaller* its superficial resemblance to the writer’s actual life. The deeper the writer digs for meaning, the more the random particulars of the writer’s life become *impediments* to deliberate dreaming” (129, italics in original). Kafka, Franzen’s favorite deliberate dreamer, might agree; Joyce, Woolf, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Raymond Carver, and John Updike might recognize that Franzen is, as he often does, positing a theory to legitimize the sort of fiction he himself has produced. Carver, in fact, is far less dogmatic in describing autobiographical fiction, though he recognizes the risks involved:

Of course, you have to know what you’re doing when you turn your life’s stories into fiction. You have to be immensely daring, very skilled and imaginative and willing to tell everything on yourself. . . . But unless you’re a special kind of writer, and a very talented one, it’s dangerous to try and write volume after volume on the Story of My Life. A great danger, or at least a great temptation, for many writers is to become too

autobiographical in their approach to their fiction. A little autobiography and a lot of imagination are best. (201)

Reviewing Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*, Updike made his strongest case for autobiography as an essential element of literary fiction: he wrote that Roth "should be commended for facing the fact that a fiction writer's life is his basic instrument of perception—that only the imagery we have personally gathered and unconsciously internalized possesses the color, warmth, intimate contour, and weight of authenticity the discriminating fiction-reader demands" (*More Matter* 293). In his memoirs, Updike had more disparaging things to say about the effect of an author's appropriation of his life for his fiction. Having described at length his hometown of Shillington, Pennsylvania, he writes:

Nothing I have described here has importance except to me, and to those few thousands who thanks to chance also live or have lived in Shillington; they will see that I haven't described it very well, for I haven't described *their* town—only mine, . . . a few scraps preserved by memory and used more than once, used to the point of vanishing like the wishing hide in the fairy tale, used up and wished away in the self-serving corruptions of fiction. (*Self-Consciousness* 40)

Updike's uncharacteristic irritability here, I would speculate, is partly a product of his discomfort with the genre of memoir, its want of literary or insulating irony to secrete himself in; he also seems to be voicing displeasure with the way in which fiction, like the using up of wishes in a fairy tale, depletes the medium—life—that comprises it.

I assume that one of the central tasks for Updike criticism after the publication of the initial biographies will be to bring greater precision to the notion of Updike as an autobiographical writer of fiction, and my purpose here is to make a contribution to that effort, albeit one that necessarily begs the question of where autobiography ends and fiction begins in the texts I'm considering. Because Updike was so clearly an autobiographical writer of fiction, though an occasionally unenthusiastic practitioner, I want to contrast his unequivocal comfort with appropriating his childhood experiences for fiction with what seems to me a quite different attitude toward fictions that offer literarily shaped versions of his marriage, divorce, and remarriage: *Marry Me*, *Toward the End of Time*, *Villages*, and *The Maples Stories*. I have chosen to concentrate on these books because their autobiographical content (as I will argue) apparently made Updike more uncomfortable than that of *Couples*, *Of the Farm*, and *Memories of the Ford Administra-*

tion—novels that also deal with infidelity and divorce, but whose protagonists are more substantially fictionalized and, to this reader's eye, less distinctly resembling Updike. To use a phrase Updike employs in acknowledging his relationship to some of the characters in his late stories, the protagonists of *Marry Me*, *Toward the End of Time*, *Villages*, and *The Maples Stories* all seem markedly "alter-egoistic" (*Due Considerations* 644). My purpose is to consider whether, if these divorce-centered texts comprise what Carver terms "volume after volume on the Story of My Life," their accumulation in any sense constitutes what Updike called "the self-serving corruptions of fiction." What I propose to do in moving back and forth between Updike's fiction and nonfiction is to document the complex interweave of fiction and autobiography that makes up a substantial portion of his literary output, to point out his unusual reticence in addressing these domestic fictional texts, and then to contrast the divergent autobiographical visions of *Toward the End of Time* and *Villages*.

We begin with an assertion that no reader of Updike will find controversial: the central emotional incident of Updike's largely untroubled childhood was his mother's relocation of the family from Shillington to the "old Hoyer farm" in Plowville, Pennsylvania, in 1945. Even if we're reluctant to speculate about the psychic effects this dislocation had on the 13-year-old Updike, there's nothing debatable about the fact that no other event of his childhood provoked from him so many pages of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. *The Centaur* and *Of the Farm* have what their protagonists perceive as this betrayal as their dramatic crux; it is invoked in more stories (in *Olinger Stories* and *The Afterlife and Other Stories* in particular) than any other Updike experience. E. B. White's columns in *Harper's Magazine* about life on a Maine farm, Updike claimed, "gave my mother the necessary courage to buy eighty rundown acres of Pennsylvania loam and turned me overnight into a rural creature, clad in muddy shoes, a cloak of loneliness, and a clinging aura of apples" (*Picked-Up Pieces* 435). Updike revisited *Of the Farm's* familial disputants in "A Sandstone Farmhouse": "This was the mother Joey had loved, the mother before they moved, before she betrayed him with the farm and its sandstone house" (*Afterlife* 129). As the protagonist of "The Brown Chest" demonstrates, it wasn't only the farm and house that seemed a betrayal: "Country space frightened him, much as the coal bin and the dark triangles under the attic eaves had—spaces that didn't have enough to do with people. Fields that were plowed one day in the spring and harvested one day in the fall, woods where dead trees were allowed to

topple and slowly rot without anyone noticing" (*Afterlife* 227). Much of the power of "Pigeon Feathers," Updike's best-known fictional treatment of the relocation, derives from its evocation of David Kern's resentment at his mother for banishing him from his beloved Olinger environs. Feeling stranded in a place that has too little to do with people and too much to do with nature's brutal processes of destruction and renewal, David also suffers intense guilt over his feelings of bitterness. In a 1968 interview, Updike forthrightly admitted where the Olinger stories came from: "There is, true, a submerged thread connecting certain of the fictions, and I guess the submerged thread is the autobiography." Then, in a much-quoted passage, he added, "The trauma or message that I acquired in Olinger had to do with suppressed pain, with the amount of sacrifice I suppose that middle-class life demands, and by that I guess I mean civilized life" (Plath 27, 28).

The inescapable interpenetrations of fiction and autobiography are neatly invoked here by Updike's slip in citing Olinger for Shillington as the place where he learned this American middle-class lesson, but more important to my thesis is the implication that the pain and sacrifice embodied in the stories were *witnessed* by the writer/protagonist rather than enacted by him. His stance vis-à-vis the adults around him is reflected in their response to his walking home from a game with classmates in the story "In Football Season": "The hour or more behind me, which I had spent so wastefully, in walking when a trolley would have been swifter, and so wickedly, in blasphemy and lust, was past and forgiven me; it had been necessary; it was permitted." The adult narrator admits, "Now I peek into windows and open doors and do not find that air of permission. It has fled the world" (*Early Stories* 125).¹ Updike's ethically uncomplicated relationship to his fiction fled the world as well, I'm suggesting, when he began to write narratives in which his "alter-egoistic" protagonists are complicit in acts that are not so unambiguously permitted—acts for which they bear personal responsibility.

Thus we move on to Updike in Massachusetts. Here he experienced a second emotional crux—his divorce and remarriage—that is nearly as central to his later fiction as the Plowville move was to his early stories and novels. Because Updike was—understandably—reluctant to address in interviews or essays this more recent personal drama, which had ramifications for others in addition to himself, we have only a small fraction of the evidence of its significance in his life that exists about the relocation to the farm of decades earlier. The forthcoming biographies will undoubtedly provide some illumination of this particular life-art nexus; for the moment, however, we have only Updike's fictionalizations of this highly personal subject: primarily, as I argue above, *Marry Me*, *Toward the End of Time*, *Villages*,

and *The Maples Stories*. Before the biographers publish their arguments elucidating the intersections between these fictions and Updike's lived experience in Ipswich and Beverly Farms, Massachusetts, I want to use this essay expressly *not* to speculate about which narratives most accurately depict the actual circumstances of Updike's divorce and remarriage—that seems more like a *People* magazine project than literary criticism. These four texts, I would argue, stranded Updike uncomfortably between his most fervently embraced aesthetic doctrines. "My art is Christian," he explained in a 1976 interview, "only in that my faith urges me to tell the truth, however painful and inconvenient, and holds out the hope that the truth—reality—is good. Good or no, only the truth is useful" (Plath 104). He offers the same argument in *Self-Consciousness*, adding that "only truth, however harsh, is holy." He then proceeds to articulate the view of art's purpose that so distinctly complicates the reader's reception of texts like *Marry Me*, *Toward the End of Time*, *Villages*, and *The Maples Stories*: "The fabricated truth of poetry and fiction makes a shelter in which I feel safe, sheltered within interlaced plausibilities in the image of a real world for which I am not to blame. Such writing is in essence pure" (231). I'm contending that these works were fabricated insufficiently to provide the same shelter Updike knew in crafting the Rabbit novels, the *Scarlet Letter* trilogy, and the Henry Bech books; *Toward the End of Time*, *Villages*, and *The Maples Stories* were harder for him to own because they depict an at least partially real world, one for which he—or his fictional self-projection—was, in part, to blame.

In *Villages* (2004), Updike neatly divides the protagonist Owen Mackenzie's life among three places: Willow, Pennsylvania; Middle Falls, Connecticut; and Haskells Crossing, Massachusetts. It came as no surprise to critics, who all but unanimously designated this novel as among Updike's most autobiographical, that these three villages correspond to Shillington/Plowville, Ipswich, and Beverly Farms, the towns where Updike lived most of his life. Correspondence is not equivalence, of course, and the novel's emblemization of these villages necessarily hones them into subjective concepts in Owen's mind, constituting, at their most nuanced, metaphoric distillations of the villages Updike called home. The art/life convergences are nonetheless intriguing.

Willow is *Villages'* fictionalized version of the childhood home in Shillington that Updike, throughout *Self-Consciousness*, describes as a place "out of harm's way" (33):

Willow during the war, as Owen went from eight to twelve, was like a prairie village brushed by black clouds that sweep low overhead but do not discharge their tornado,

though at the Scheherazade [the local movie theatre] there were newsreels of airplanes turning cities into fields of fire and of GIs storming sandy island beaches strafed by fanatical Japanese who had to be burned out of their caves with flamethrowers like nests of insects. (*Villages* 24)

The Shillington boy had his war sympathies finely etched, and he personally served the war effort as a flattener of cans for the third-grade scrap drive. The narrator of *Villages* sums up this aspect of Willow by asserting, “That mailmen walked and trolley cars clanged through the storm seemed to confirm the Hollywood, comic-strip version of American reality: we were as safe, and as lovingly regarded from on high, as the tiny, unaging figures in a shaken snow globe” (42–43). Willow, then, turns out to be another embodiment of the nostalgically yearned-after home that Clyde Behn (departing an oculist’s office with his pupils dilated) has left and returned to in the Olinger story “The Persistence of Desire”: “The maples, macadam, shadows, houses, cars were to his violated eyes as brilliant as a scene remembered; he became a child again in this town, where life was a distant adventure, a rumor, an always imminent joy” (*Early* 90).

We’ve noticed that “In Football Season” dramatizes Updike’s adolescent experience of having his town forgive his “blasphemy and lust” because “it had been necessary; it was permitted.” What Middle Falls offers Owen is exponentially amplified permission—specifically, permission for concupiscence. Whereas Owen is fully aware that his mother had found in Willow no release for her desperate impulses toward personal freedom, he learns too that “the women of the ’sixties and ’seventies were less constrained. Fresh on the Pill, barred by early marriage and motherhood from the wild party—love-beads and bell-bottoms, crash pads and rock concerts, acid and pot—that they could hear on the other side of the generational wall, the women of Middle Falls were restless, wry, and lovable” (55). Through Middle Falls, Updike was clearly revisiting the sexual openness he ascribed to Tarbox in *Couples*; accordingly, *Couples* and *Villages* both have jacket covers with paintings depicting women in luxurious undress. Six of *Villages*’ fourteen chapters are titled “Village Sex,” in which Updike seems to be striving to outdo *Couples* in his graphically precise evocations of the lustfulness of Owen and the libidiously needy housewives of Middle Falls. Owen’s success with women leads him to gratifying encounters on the road at computer conferences, but it is in Middle Falls that he first recognizes women’s attraction to him, understanding that if he doesn’t scruple overmuch about his marital commitments, permission will be generously granted.

Late in the novel, the narrator observes that whatever Owen has learned about the geography of Middle Falls was solely because of the routes he took to meet women for assignations (308–09). Whereas *Couples* devotes a good deal of description to the marshes and geography of coastal Massachusetts, the reader of *Villages* sees so little of Middle Falls, Connecticut, in the course of Owen's sexual meanderings that it might as well be Willow, Pennsylvania, or Winesburg, Ohio. Haskells Crossing, however, Owen's final residence, differs from his previous two homes in his nearly complete obliviousness to it: this village provides him with no significant landmarks, offering him nowhere he wants to go: "Though Owen has lived, driving and walking, in Haskells Crossing longer than at any other address, it remains unmapped in his mind, or mapped as vaguely as the Americas were in the sixteenth century, a set of named harbors and approximate coastlines enclosing wild hopes of El Dorado as well as many infidel savages to be exterminated" (309). Phyllis, Owen's first wife, whom he marries while studying at MIT and whose clerical father will surely prompt Updike's biographers to invoke her resemblance to Mary Pennington Updike, "had hoisted him up into Cambridge and the snob life of the mind," but his second wife, Julia, has hoisted him into "the life of bourgeois repose" (317)—a hoisting for which he expresses little gratitude. Neither *Villages* nor *Toward the End of Time*—whose protagonist, Ben Turnbull, also lives in a town named Haskells Crossing—depicts the village positively: the protagonists have very similar well-appointed but secluded homes, with long driveways to discourage visitors. Nor does either novel dramatize late-life marriage in positive terms: the protagonists' wealthy wives are more interested in gardens and charitable causes than in their husbands. The couples entering their dotage together become a source to each other not of consolation and commiseration but bleak self-confrontation. Owen's "fulfillment with Julia, his arrival at a harbor of safe uxoriousness and well-heeled retirement, is a strain to maintain, as his restless dissatisfaction with Phyllis had not been" (312). We're told early on that "[t]he villages he has lived in have been sites of instruction" (41), but the one that deprives him of ego gratification and available, complaisant females offers instruction in demoralization and desolation. That, in brief, is the trajectory of *Villages*.

I'm addressing *Villages* not because I believe it to be among Updike's most successful novels but because it exemplifies his late-career penchant for returning to territory he had visited earlier, as if in validation of a couplet he included in "Endpoint." His life, he noted there, was "A life poured into words—apparent waste / intended to preserve the thing consumed" (8). The impulse to write in order to

“preserve the thing consumed” had, from *The Poorhouse Fair* and “The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother’s Thimble, and Fanning Island,” been a major literary intention of Updike’s, but as he neared the end of his life, that need clearly became more urgent, with story after story (“His Mother Inside Him,” “Lunch Hour,” “My Father on the Verge of Disgrace,” “How Was It, Really?” “The Walk with Elizanne,” “The Road Home,” “My Father’s Tears”) and numerous poems unapologetically re-creating what was and is no more. In “Lunch Hour,” David Kern, the protagonist of “Pigeon Feathers” and “Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car,” now forty years on, reflects on what so many of these stories seek to achieve: “The basic treasure of his life was buried back there, in the town of Olinger, and he kept hoping to uncover it” (*Licks of Love* 16). Updike readdressed this impulse in “Endpoint”:

The town forgave me for existing; it
included me in Christmas carols, songfests
(though I sang poorly) at the Shillington,
the local movie house. My father stood,
in back, too restless to sit, but everybody
knew his name, and mine. In turn I knew
my Granddad in the overalled town crew.
I’ve written these before, these modest facts,

but their meaning has no bottom in my mind.
The fragments in their jiggled scope collide
to form more sacred windows. (27)

Describing young Owen on a Sunday walk through Willow with his parents, the narrator of *Villages* says: “Owen’s heart always lifted, and the weight fell off his legs, when he and his parents would come into this downtown, which he walked through every school day, and which he could reconstruct store by store, house by house, in his mind’s eye sixty years afterwards” (30). It isn’t as if Owen’s childhood is completely without shadow; he and his mother keep secrets from his father: “Her unhappiness was the main secret, though what exactly she was unhappy about [Owen] could not quite guess. . . . It was as if just being a woman by itself was enough to cause unhappiness” (31). Given the restrictions the novel shows being imposed upon women in the 1940s, there’s more than sufficient cause for her unhappiness. However, because Owen becomes an early computer programmer who cofounds a successful company, his mother’s unhappiness cannot be ascribed to the source to which Updike often attributed his own mother’s

despondency: her inability to launch a literary career for herself and escape the constraints of small-town, rural America, which alternately stifled and consoled her. In “My Mother at Her Desk,” one of the poems comprising the “Endpoint” sequence, Updike writes:

My mother knew non-publication's shame,
obscurity's abyss, where blind hands flog
typewriter keys in hopes of raising up
the magic combination that will sell.
Instead, brown envelopes return, bent double
in letter slots to flop on the foyer floor,
or else abandoned flat within the tin
of the rural mailbox, as insects whirr.

In an acknowledgment one assumes was not easy to write, Updike adds: “Mine was to be the magic gift instead, / propelled to confidence by mother-love” (*Endpoint* 12–13).

By the time Mrs. Updike moved the family to the Plowville farm, one of the secrets shared between mother and son was the literary future they agreed John would have. It's difficult to know how amusing she found his frequent question upon returning from their rural mailbox bearing no confirmation of his life to come: “Where's my public?” (*Self* 47). Conceivably, young Updike was getting his own back for the central psychic betrayal of his childhood: his mother's relocation of the family from Shillington to Plowville.

“I loved Shillington,” Updike writes in *Self-Consciousness*, “not as one loves Capri or New York, because they are special, but as one loves one's own body and consciousness, because they are synonymous with being. . . . If there was a meaning to existence, I was closest to it here” (30). His recurrent affirmation of the ordinariness of the town that spawned him generates a contrarian perception of the place implicit in mother and son's vision of Updike's future—a perception largely absent from *Villages*. Significantly, in *Self-Consciousness* it is his father's life he seeks to vindicate via his imagined future:

All those years in Shillington, I had waited to be admired, waited patiently, for there was considerable pleasure in the waiting, the lying low, the keeping (in one of my grandfather's favorite phrases) “out of harm's way”—pleasure in the shyness, the malicious slyness, the burrowing in New York magazines and English mystery novels for the secret passageway out, the path of avoidance and vindication. I hid a certain determined defiance. I would not teach, I would not farm, I would not (deep down)

conform. I would “show” them, I would avenge all the slights and abasements visited upon my father—the miserly salary, the subtle tyranny of his overlords at the high school, the disrespect of his students, . . . Shillington, in a sense, was where I waited in ambush to take my revenge. (32–33)

Updike translated this familial tension into “the self-serving corruptions of fiction” in the early story “Flight,” in which Allen Dow and his mother secretly conspire on the revenge that will be his Olinger-transcending future. Allen’s mother perceives his adolescent desire to have friends and be admired in school as a betrayal of their shared vision: “She feared my wish to be ordinary; once she did respond to my protest that I was learning to fly, by crying with red-faced ferocity, ‘You’ll never learn, you’ll stick and die in the dirt just like I’m doing. Why should you be better than your mother?’” (*Early* 53). Their filial cabal is rendered still more ragged by the entrance into Allen’s life of Molly Bingaman, whom his mother curtly dismisses: “Don’t go with little women, Allen. It puts you too close to the ground” (61). In *Self-Consciousness*, Updike describes the relationship which seems to have inspired the one between Allen and Molly: his first girlfriend, Nora, he comments, “did for me all that a woman does for a man, and I regretted that my nagging specialness harried almost every date and shared hour with awareness of our imminent and necessary parting. I was never allowed to relax into her; the perfect girl for me would take me away from Shillington, not pull me down into it. My avenging mission beckoned” (37).²

Because the form that the young Updike’s “avenging mission” was assumed to take was necessarily going to be literary, this element tends to be omitted when a protagonist like Owen, who becomes a computer programmer, chooses an alternate route to a position of power and influence in the world. In *Villages*, Elsie is a rural girl whom Owen meets when his mother’s relocation of the family lands him in a country school. He is attracted to her, but guardedly so: “He was too smart, too anxious to avoid wasting his one life” (62). His mother offers no objection to Elsie; instead, given his upwardly mobile aspirations, it is Owen who recognizes the inescapability of social distinctions: “he loved her, as far as he could shake the embarrassment of her not being a Willow girl. She was only, in her swinging skirts and white bobby socks, an imitation, a feed merchant’s daughter” (63). After barely managing not to have sex with Elsie, Owen escapes to New England, where, with Phyllis, an MIT classmate, he risks abandoning the charmed life of perpetual adolescence he knew in Pennsylvania.

Phyllis may, as Updike’s biographers are likely to demonstrate, resemble Mary Pennington Updike, but in many ways—save that she’s a math major—she re-

sembles Joan Maple, especially in her husband's deference to her, even more. "Owen saw her as a creature above him, in advance of him, moving easily in [MIT's] realms of enlightenment" (84), the narrator notes, and the "quick leaps to her talk" make Owen "feel . . . dark, a little thick-blooded, slightly slow and heavy" (82). In describing Phyllis's impact on Owen, Updike may have let his fabricator's mask drop slightly more than usual:

Always Phyllis was to harbor, as she and Owen travelled together in the thorny common world, memories of an Arcadia populated by that rarefied troop of exalted spirits, whether mathematicians or poets, Spenser or Cantor, Hilbert or Keats, to whom Cambridge in its soul was dedicated. Such a dedication does not guarantee the storms of creativity that are posthumously honored, but it curses all tamer weather as secondary, and makes the real world a rather anticlimactic insubstantial place of exile. (99)

This passage implies not only what is achievable if "the storms of creativity" of a writer like Updike are added to the mix; it also suggests how foundational an element of his past Owen will sacrifice in divorcing Phyllis.

In the "At War with My Skin" chapter of *Self-Consciousness*, Updike offers a very practical explanation for moving from New York to Ipswich in 1957:

Why did I move, with my family, all the way to Ipswich, Massachusetts? Because this ancient Puritan town happened to have one of the great beaches of the Northeast, in whose dunes I could, like a sin-soaked anchorite of old repairing to the desert, bake and cure myself [of psoriasis symptoms].

. . . If Shillington gave me my life, Ipswich was where I took possession of it, the place where in my own sense of myself I ceased to be a radically defective person. I brought to the town, at the age of twenty-five, a number of tics and inabilities that seventeen years of life there pretty much eased away. (48–49)

Updike's befriending by Ipswich neighbors compensated for a familial deprivation: "The sisters and brothers I had never had were now on the phone or at the back door; the 'gang' I had seen slide by like an alligator [in Shillington] was, at last, all here" (52). Updike comments: "An illusion of eternal comfort reposes in clubbiness—an assurance that members of tribes and villages have extended to one another for millennia, the assurance that no earthly adventure, from puberty to death, is unprecedented or incapable of being shared and that one's life is thoroughly witnessed and therefore not wasted" (55). As for Owen, "[o]n the sidewalks of Middle Falls he enjoyed a buoying sense of being known, of being upheld by watching eyes, as when he was a child in Willow, . . . pedaling his rusty

Schwinn to the quarry: not exactly a celebrity but *somebody*, in the way that small enough towns make everybody somebody" (*Villages* 141).

Updike was fairly circumspect about the specific sources of the "tics and inabilities" that were eased away in Massachusetts, but he did admit that "[a]ll sorts of squeamishness were teased and goaded out of me in Ipswich, by women who seemed gorgeous and men who seemed knowledgeable and staunch" (*Self* 51). For Owen, the men of Middle Falls don't count for much. Once settled there with Phyllis, he becomes a libertine and sexual experimenter; he marvels about his first mistress: "He could hardly contain the wonder of it—this well-cared-for woman, in such expensive and amusing clothes, taking such risks to perform for him acts that Phyllis performed reluctantly, ironically, looking to one side, in her own safe home, with all society's sanctions backing his thrusts" (*Villages* 157). The narrator explains: "Polymorphous life beckoned. The dark gods were in fashion. Everyone was sinning, including the government. [Owen] resolved in his heart to become a seducer" (186).

Like Piet Hanema's, Owen's libido is fueled by his underlying conviction of unbelonging. In Middle Falls, he finds,

[t]here was an ethos expressed by these dormered rooftops, these innumerable golden windows admitting views of stuffed bookshelves, of faded Oriental rugs, . . . of bathrooms papered in *New Yorker* covers, of narrow, unmade student beds: he could admire it, marry into it, but never make it his own. Tall and wiry, he had a smile quick to expose the crooked, sensitive teeth of a boy reared far from this self-cherishing village." (111)

In Ipswich, the Updikes learned "how to stroke a backhand, mix a martini, use a wallpaper steamer, [and] do the Twist. . . . Old as we must have looked to our children, we were still taking lessons, in how to be grown-up" (*Self* 55). Similarly, Owen, as his marriage disintegrates, is said to have "begun his delayed adulthood. Leaving Phyllis in their mid-forties was the first adult action of his life" (*Villages* 277).

By the novel's end, "[p]icturing himself in Middle Falls, he cannot imagine what drove him into so many hazardous passes and contorted positions: he was a puppet whose strings old age has snapped" (320). He thinks of his life with Julia:

From the perspective of Middle Falls . . . Haskells Crossing seemed a fairy-tale abstraction, an ideally remote and obscure site for their new life together. . . . Their relationship is loving but haunted. He thinks of Phyllis every day, though her image seldom troubles to invade his dreams; there is instead a generic oneiric wife-figure who, on his awaking, Owen is not certain had been Julia or Phyllis or yet another female. (304)

This elision of female characters is reminiscent of a coincidence in the naming of the characters in *Marry Me* and *The Maples Stories*: In *Marry Me*, Jerry Conant opts to remain with his wife, Ruth; in *The Maples Stories*, Richard leaves his wife for a woman named Ruth. Owen and Julia's relationship is haunted because Phyllis, setting out on an errand to get Owen out of his commitment to Julia, dies in an auto accident. In *Marry Me*, anxiety over the potential for divorce seems to contribute to Jerry's wife, Ruth, totaling her car. I gladly leave it to Updike's biographers to unravel the art-versus-life complexities in these texts.³

It seems indicative of Updike's conflict between literature as self-disclosure and self-protection that all four of the autobiographical narratives considered here arrived either with disavowals of autobiographical connection or with substantially less prefatory material supporting them than normally accompanied Updike's publications. From *Marry Me* forward, the majority of Updike's books were first published by the Franklin Library in signed limited editions prefaced by a "Special Message" from Updike to readers. Updike devotes part of the message for *Toward the End of Time* (1997) to insisting that the novel's protagonist, Ben Turnbull, is not John Updike. A few of the reasons why Updike needed to make this distinction are that Turnbull's town of Haskells Crossing resembles Beverly Farms; his luxurious house with ocean view and long, winding driveway seems identical to Updike's; and, like Updike, he has left a wife and four children in order to remarry. To distinguish Turnbull from himself, Updike points out that the novel takes place twenty-three years in the future; that Turnbull is a product of the Berkshires rather than Berks County and is a retired investment counselor rather than a writer; and that his own health is better than that of his protagonist, who undergoes treatment for prostate cancer. Closing his rebuttal, Updike writes: "All these differences put me to considerable trouble of invention and kept me interested; autobiography strikes me as one of the dullest of genres, which begs and fudges most of the issues that properly concern an avid student of humanity" (*More* 834). We avid students of humanity understand Updike's point that autobiographers (the author of *Self-Consciousness* included) often omit or white-wash the elements of their lives in which readers are most interested; nonetheless, for the novelist to criticize another genre for begging and fudging seems at the very least self-incriminatory, given Updike's fictionalizing of his childhood experience of dislocation in so many of his stories and novels. Updike more accurately described the relationship between autobiography and fiction when he wrote: "The autobiography of a writer of fiction is generally superfluous, since he has

already, in rearrangement and disguise, written out the material of his life many times” (*Picked* 485). I would argue that Updike’s admission that the writer “has already . . . written out the material of his life many times” applies not only to the Olinger stories but to *Marry Me*, *Toward the End of Time*, *Villages*, and *The Maples Stories* as well. Not, however, that the reader is likely to gather that from his comments about these works.

The “Special Message” in the Franklin Library’s First Edition Society printing of *Marry Me* commences with Updike professing doubts about the sturdiness of a bookcase he has constructed. Although the placing of books on its shelves will conceal the imperfect joints, he is clearly dissatisfied with the job, and he proceeds explicitly to liken *Marry Me* to substandard carpentry. He indicates that although the novel’s first draft was written between *The Centaur* (1963) and *Of the Farm* (1965) and a chapter of it appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1968, it was, for reasons undisclosed, not ready for publication until 1976. Updike makes a half-effort at accounting for the protraction of the novel’s completion—highly unusual in his career, matched only by his difficulties in finishing a novel about James Buchanan—by arguing that novels need to “come out of the creator like toothpaste from a tube, generating their music of self-reflexive allusion as they flow.” The sentences that follow could be among the most evasive he ever published:

To elicit and clarify this music . . . some carpentry seemed needed in this case; but to specify its details would be to obstruct the perspective that you, gentle First Edition reader, establish as you pick up and open this volume. A novel imitates reality in, among other aspects, a certain opacity, a proud opacity. It must come on not wearing its meaning on the sleeve of an introduction but embodying its meaning, or, rather, meaning its existence. Even its imperfections it must wear proudly, as honorable scars.

In a few closing sentences to mitigate the remarkably equivocal impression he has left about this novel, Updike settles for affirming not that he is content with *Marry Me*—or with the bookcase—but only that it “is finished. It is” (*Hugging the Shore* 857). Of course, no reader could expect an author to explain that a novel which fictionalizes his marriage couldn’t be published until that marriage had been terminated; nonetheless, it is somewhat gratifying to see that even Updike could write awkwardly when he was obliged to write what he didn’t mean.

Published in 2004, *Villages* arrived with no limited first edition and therefore lacked a “special” message or any other kind.⁴ The jacket copy, written in the same wry, urbane voice that had introduced Updike’s novels for years, describes *Villages* as “a bildungsroman [that] follows its hero, Owen Mackenzie, from his birth in

the semi-rural Pennsylvania town of Willow to his retirement in the rather geriatric community of Haskells Crossing, Massachusetts.” As far as I’ve been able to determine, Updike never explained why he gave Ben Turnbull and Owen Mackenzie the same late-life town and depicted it in both *Toward the End of Time* and *Villages* as a site of geriatric seclusion and symbolic incarceration. But then, the jacket copy, if he wrote it, is the only Updike comment on *Villages* I’ve been able to locate. By glossing *Villages*’ plot with passages from *Self-Consciousness*, I have sought to demonstrate how closely the outline of Mackenzie’s life parallels Updike’s. Was it because the Shillington–Ipswich–Beverly Farms progression of Updike’s life was reproduced so precisely by Mackenzie’s passage through Willow, Middle Falls, and Haskells Crossing that Updike remained uncharacteristically silent about *Villages*? Was he self-conscious about the fact that, in writing *Villages*, he was reprising a book project he’d begun as a sophomore at Harvard, a novel about Shillington titled “Willow,” which he had abandoned two-thirds of the way through (Plath 165–66)? His biographers will have to answer these questions; I’m attempting to do a little advance work for them in pointing out the unusualness of Updike’s unforthcoming public stance toward this text.

Updike’s meager foreword to *The Maples Stories* (2009) acknowledges, without suggesting why, that Richard and Joan talk “more easily than any other characters the author has acted as agent for.” Updike then provides a strangely anthropological insight into his text: “A tribe segregated in a valley develops an accent, then a dialect, and then a language all its own; so does a couple. Let this collection preserve one particular dead tongue, no easier to parse than Latin” (11–12). Although Updike often acknowledged that his stories tended to be more autobiographical than his novels,⁵ he never invoked the Maples stories as an instance, and in 267 pages of interviews in *Conversations with John Updike*, he alludes to Richard and Joan Maple only once. He did discuss them in a brief essay called “Recurrent Characters,” but there is something oddly bloodless in his assertion that the couple “still have life in them, and that life is part of the author’s own. Joan and Richard Maple perform a duet whose basic pattern survives nearly forty years; the duet usually ends on a suspended note, of unfulfillment amid a kind of pale beauty, a hovering grace note faithful to the wry Fifties romanticism that set their tone” (*Due* 648). Who would guess that the relationship characterized here culminates in anything as concrete as divorce?

The contrast between this abstract evocation of the Maples’ marital melodizing and Updike’s breezy remarks about the story “Personal Archaeology” (for *The Best American Short Stories 2001*) is striking:

My hero's inexplicably Germanic name, "Fritz," holds the "F" that, some time ago, in a lazy code, I began to foist upon short-story heroes who were conspicuously alter-egoistic. The device created a sort of brother, not a twin but close in age and outlook to me and, though freed from any obligation to plead my case, able to shoulder, with brotherly good humor, some of my circumstances. A certain Frankness, we could say, was thus attained. (*Due* 644)

"A certain Frankness" clearly emerges in Updike's description of his F-surnamed alter egos, but he was remarkably reticent about his narratives that feature first wives named Ruth Conant, Perdita Turnbull, Phyllis Mackenzie, and Joan Maple and second wives named Gloria Turnbull, Julia Mackenzie, and Ruth Maple. As Robert M. Luscher argues persuasively, "However thin the veil between fiction and life, [the Maples stories are] not a public airing of dirty laundry; rather, Updike uses the contours of his own life to create a study of the evolution of a prototypical marriage subtly affected by the sociopolitical changes sweeping the modern era" (109). Do *Toward the End of Time* and *Villages* represent an inordinate re-mining of the Maples and *Marry Me* material, a "Story of My Life" revisited by Updike to excess? No one who approaches *Toward the End of Time* and *Villages* with a recent reading of *Self-Consciousness* in mind will deny that a nostalgic refiguring of Updike's biography permeates the novels, and the similarities between the protagonists' first wives (Perdita Turnbull and Phyllis Mackenzie), and between their second wives (Gloria Turnbull and Julia Mackenzie), would seem to substantiate the most ambitious of autobiographical analyses.

But then, *Toward the End of Time* is a darkly dystopian novel set in a world that Updike wouldn't live to see and which culminates in a fate that is, for its protagonist, nearly more terrible than death: prostate cancer and impotency. Its dramatizations of the many-worlds theory, as Judie Newman demonstrates, move Ben Turnbull far from Updike territory into other cultures and other eras, providing "a comprehensive investigation of human cultural development and evolution that locates hope for the future in the marginal and the ordinary" (53–54). The prevailing of the ordinary is a markedly Updikean notion, as Newman shows; subjecting Turnbull to transformations into culturally disparate alter egos seems antithetical to Updike's insistence throughout *Self-Consciousness* and the Rabbit novels of the primacy and irreducibility of the self, of the individual ego. The desolate mood of *Toward the End of Time's* depiction of aging is established in Turnbull's response to the first snow of the year on the novel's first page: "I looked into myself for a trace of childhood exhilaration at the sight and found none, just a quickened awareness of being behind in my chores and an unfocused dread of

time itself, time that churns the seasons and that had brought me this new offering, this heavy new radiant day like a fresh meal brightly served in a hospital to a patient with a dwindling appetite.” The work’s opening gloom is mitigated by the more distinctly Updikean question, “And yet does the appetite for new days ever really cease?” (3).

In *Toward the End of Time*’s autobiographical companion novel, *Villages* (the two of them recalling the early pairing of *Rabbit, Run* and *The Centaur*), Updike uses the villages in which Owen Mackenzie has lived as a pretext for the protagonist’s fond recollections of his lifelong sexual initiation. Time, for Owen, is not a ticking clock with which he is obsessed, but a medium conferring new physical pleasures and sexual conquests. As in *Couples*, so here: the graphic evocations of Owen’s largely pleasurable, ever-deepening erotic involvements testify to Updike’s notion that “the truth—reality—is good. Good or no, only the truth is useful.” Overall, *Villages*’ “truthful” depiction of a life devoted to sensual indulgence is remarkably nostalgic and highly positive, and although Owen comes to view with retrospective incomprehension the deceptions and contortions he went through to sustain his many affairs, the narrative emphasizes the pleasure of the experiences rather than his subsequent regrets about them. Owen’s sexual exploits are terminated not by cancer but by Julia’s agreeing to marry him and fulfill his needs, thereby redeeming him from his reputation as Middle Falls’ most sexually available male. Although he and Ben Turnbull articulate some of the same objections to living in Haskells Crossing in their not dissimilar houses with their not dissimilar wives, *Villages* is a more serene book, one that contests the incessant bleakness of *Toward the End of Time* with the positive take on his life that Updike occasionally, gratefully affirmed. The death of Owen’s mother (the circumstances of which are not unfamiliar to Updike’s readers) epiphanizes his perception of the life he has lived: “His mother died neatly, quickly, of heart failure, in her little country house, having exerted herself with an unusual spurt of housework. Her old Hoover burned out its engine as her body lay beside it on the clean carpet. All four of the adults Owen had lived with as a boy died tidily, out of sight, as if to spare him unpleasantness and preserve his charmed, only-child sense of life” (*Villages* 311).

One novel projects a relentlessly grim future presided over by an overbearing wife; the other looks back fondly on a gratifying past in which the protagonist had his way with women. Ben Turnbull’s sense of life is cursed by a dystopian present and a medical incapacitation; compare Owen Mackenzie’s “charmed, only-child sense of life.” Describing his creation of his protagonists, Updike told an inter-

viewer: “Once I’ve coined a name, . . . I feel utterly hidden behind that mask, and what I remember and what I imagine become indistinguishable” (Plath 27).

NOTES

1. “In Football Season” is particularly apposite to my argument because it makes no effort to fictionalize its narrator. For what he believed in 1961 to be the last of his Olinger stories, Updike seems to be acknowledging how much those stories owe to Shillington and his childhood there.

2. In a biographical study remarkably helpful to my argument here, Jack De Bellis suggests that the Molly Bingaman/Nora character was modeled on Updike’s first girlfriend, Shillingtonian Nancy Wolf (95–96).

3. In an essay titled “My Life in Cars,” Updike acknowledges that a scene from one of the Maples stories, “The Taste of Metal,” was drawn from a collision he had with a utility pole in his Corvair, though he neglects to mention whether there was a female passenger in the car—not his wife—as there is in the story (*Due* 88).

4. The final Franklin Library limited first edition was *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000). Alfred A. Knopf discontinued its boxed first editions of Updike with *Just Looking* (1989), and Easton Press terminated its limited editions of Updike with *Licks of Love: Short Stories and a Sequel* (2000).

5. For example: “The short stories are probably the most me, the most autobiographical, . . . the least fantastical. . . . [T]he novels almost always are in some large part fantastic” (Plath 195).

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