



THE  
JOHN  
UPDIKE  
REVIEW

VOLUME 3 | NUMBER 1

SPRING 2014



The  
John Updike Review

VOLUME 3 | NUMBER 1

SPRING 2014

*The John Updike Review* is published twice a year by the University of Cincinnati and the John Updike Society and is based at the University of Cincinnati, Department of English and Comparative Literature, McMicken Hall, Room 248, PO Box 210069, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0069. Copyright © 2014 by the University of Cincinnati.

ISSN: 2160-097X

ISBN: 978-0-9845038-3-4

Designed by: Barbara Neely Bourgoyne

Copyedited by: Gary Kass

Cover photograph: © Dennis Stock / Magnum Photos

Colophon: John Updike self-portrait. Copyright © The Estate of John Updike

“Leaves” from *THE EARLY STORIES: 1953–1975* by John Updike, copyright © 2003 by John Updike. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

#### **SUBSCRIPTIONS**

To subscribe to *The John Updike Review*, simply join The John Updike Society (<http://blogs.iwu.edu/johnupdikesociety/>). Membership dues for the 2014 calendar year are \$25 for regular members and \$20 for retirees and students. Membership includes a subscription to our biannual journal as well as access to an online database of all published material from the first issue up to the latest. Login information will be provided via email after verification of your payment. By logging into *The John Updike Review* website archives, you can browse the journal's entire list of full-length articles, book reviews, biographical updates, and more.

Institutional subscriptions are \$60. Checks for institutional subscriptions should be made out to *The John Updike Review* and mailed to *The John Updike Review*/James Schiff, Editor/PO Box 210069/Cincinnati, OH 45221-0069.

#### **SUBMISSIONS**

All submissions are welcome. Email your submission using the submit function on the website ([www.updikereview.com](http://www.updikereview.com)) or send directly to [james.schiff@uc.edu](mailto:james.schiff@uc.edu). You may also mail a hard copy of your submission to *The John Updike Review*/James Schiff, Editor/PO Box 210069/Cincinnati, OH 45221-0069.

*The John Updike Review* is available electronically on our website and—for institutional subscriptions—through EBSCO.



# The John Updike Review

VOLUME 3 | NUMBER 1

## EDITOR

James Schiff, University of Cincinnati

## MANAGING EDITOR

Nicola Mason, University of Cincinnati

## EDITORIAL BOARD

Peter J. Bailey, St. Lawrence University

Marshall Boswell, Rhodes College

Jack De Bellis, Lehigh University, emeritus

Biljana Dojcinovic, University of Belgrade, Serbia

Donald J. Greiner, University of South Carolina, emeritus

Robert M. Luscher, University of Nebraska, Kearny

Sylvie Mathé, Aix-Marseilles Université

D. Quentin Miller, Suffolk University

Judie Newman, University of Nottingham

James Plath, Illinois Wesleyan University

William H. Pritchard, Amherst College

Derek Parker Royal, Executive Editor, *Philip Roth Studies*



# The John Updike Review

## ESSAYS

- 1 Updike Revised: The Authoritative Edition of *Gertrude and Claudius*  
DONALD J. GREINER
- 15 The Regulating Daughter in John Updike's Rabbit Novels  
SUE NORTON
- 31 "It Isn't So Bad": Acceptance of Aging in Updike's Fiction  
KAZUKO KASHIHARA
- 45 Two Neglected Female-centric Novels of Updike's Late Phase: *Gertrude and Claudius* and *Seek My Face*  
JAMES SCHIFF

## THREE WRITERS ON "LEAVES"

- 65 Editor's Note
- 67 Leaves  
JOHN UPDIKE
- 71 The Lace of Updike's "Leaves"  
DONALD J. GREINER
- 79 The Abstract-Personal Mode: An Extrapolation  
SARAH A. STRICKLEY

- 85 On “Leaves,” a Consideration of Happiness, Righteousness,  
and Grace (with Digressions)  
DAVID JAMES POISSANT

## REVIEWS

- 93 A Well-defended Life for Writing  
*Updike*  
JUDIE NEWMAN
- 101 Be True to Your School  
*John Updike’s Early Years*  
PETER J. BAILEY
- 107 Updike and His Critics  
*Becoming John Updike: Critical Reception, 1958–2010*  
BOB BATCHELOR
- 113 Contributors’ Notes

# Updike Revised: The Authoritative Edition of *Gertrude and Claudius*

DONALD J. GREINER

John Updike was an inveterate and meticulous reviser of his books. A theorist of postmodernism might argue that a text is always already unstable, just as an advocate of reader-response criticism would insist that readers create texts. Although Updike was not a theorist but an artist of the highest order, he thought of his publications as unfinished creations even when they were on the shelves of bookstores or in the hands of readers. To use a term normally associated with people who work with machinery, he “tinkered” with his texts. His desire to reach for the elusive goal of perfection was a sign of his professionalism.

This tendency—call it a need—to tinker extended not only to the books already published but also to those in the final stages of publication. Four examples illustrate the complexity of his revisions. The hurdles he jumped to get *Rabbit, Run* into print, for instance, are well known. Required by the lawyers of the Knopf firm to expurgate the erotic passages, Updike was forced to publish his most famous novel in a version he disliked. Four years after the first edition of *Rabbit, Run* appeared in 1960, Penguin asked permission to release the book in a paperback edition in the United Kingdom. Updike agreed, but only if the expurgated passages were reintegrated with the text. The copyright page of the Penguin paperback reads “revised edition.” As he explains in the foreword to the Modern Library edition of *The Poorhouse Fair/Rabbit, Run*, “I felt impelled to rework all proofs heavily and, after the book was published, to make further revisions for the Penguin edition printed in England four years later.”<sup>1</sup> Still not satisfied, he continued

to adjust an occasional word or phrase until the Everyman Library edition, *Rabbit Angstrom: The Four Novels*, appeared in 1995.

For *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) the attorneys did not require changes; the author himself did. In an episode reminiscent of F. Scott Fitzgerald's insistence that Scribner allow him to revise *The Great Gatsby* even though the book was already in galleys, Updike read the bound proof of *Witches* and asked to make changes throughout.<sup>2</sup> Because of the significant cost involved, publishers discourage authors from making substantive alterations to a typescript in proof stage, but Updike prevailed. The result is that what are now the scarce first bound proofs (in red wrappers) were called back from reviewers so that he could revise the novel, for which a second set of proofs (in salmon wrappers) had to be issued.<sup>3</sup> Updike's changes added approximately four pages to the original typescript. The point is that for *Witches* the attorneys did not require the changes; the author himself did. For *Telephone Poles and Other Poems* (1963) Updike examined the long galley sheets before the bound proof was available, and made so many substantive revisions that the published book is radically different from the galleys. One poem was removed, two others added, one retitled, and the order of the poems altered. More important, the section in the galleys titled "Notes," extending to four pages and containing Updike's comments about the poems, was deleted.<sup>4</sup> In a final example, after a contract was signed with Ballantine to print new paperback editions of his books, Updike welcomed the opportunity to make seemingly minor but important changes, usually substituting a word here and there. For example, when he learned that I planned to teach *Of the Farm*, he advised me to use not the Fawcett Crest paperback, first published in 1967, but the Ballantine edition that was to be released in 2004. As an illustration of his meticulous revising, in the Fawcett Crest, the narrator describes his second wife as "stupid," but in the Ballantine he calls her "simple-minded" (104 in both editions). The emendation is significant. Rather than disparage her intellect, he now criticizes her tendency to reduce complex family matters to black and white.

Unlike Henry James, who rewrote several of his masterpieces years after their original publication when he was preparing his New York Edition, Updike's usual method was to make substantive emendations before publication—as when lawyers required him to do so (*Rabbit, Run*) or after examining a bound proof (*The Witches of Eastwick*) or galleys (*Telephone Poles*)—and continuing to tinker after publication, either to restore expurgated segments (*Rabbit, Run*) or to alter words and phrases (*Of the Farm*). But he caused an unexpected textual problem in 2002 when he agreed to a Bulgarian translation of *Gertrude and Claudius*, eventually

producing the authoritative, although “foreign,” edition, which remained the definitive version of his Shakespeare novel for a decade.<sup>5</sup> In 2012 Random House finally incorporated the changes initially made in the Bulgarian translation when the firm published a new paperback edition. Thus, readers unversed in the Bulgarian language had to wait ten years to access the version Updike preferred. A discussion of his admiration for Shakespeare, his long involvement with the art of translation, and his special feeling for Bulgaria will establish the context for an account of his revisions to *Gertrude and Claudius*.

I

In 2002, Alexander Shurbanov contacted Updike about his plan to translate *Gertrude and Claudius* into Bulgarian.<sup>6</sup> The translation appeared in 2003. The Knopf edition of the novel had been warmly received when it was published in 2000. Reviewers pointed to both its humor and its scholarly underpinning. An unsigned notice in the *New Yorker* said: “Updike’s portrayal of Gertrude and Claudius’ thwarted affections is not just a deft literary exercise but an affecting—and funny—invocation of the abundant desires of what Hamlet called ‘this too too solid flesh’” (97). In the *New York Review of Books*, John Bayley commended Updike’s command of history: “Playing around with *Hamlet* is an old game and a fascinating one, as Tom Stoppard demonstrated in his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*; but Updike’s treatment has the advantage of historical weight and sobriety” (13). Shurbanov, a professor of English and American studies at the University of Sofia, is a distinguished Shakespearean scholar who has translated *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet* into Bulgarian.<sup>7</sup> Describing *Gertrude and Claudius* as “strikingly ingenious,” he originally wrote to Knopf to ask for clarification of some place names in the novel. Knopf forwarded the request to Updike, who, Shurbanov says, replied with “a nice explanatory letter,” a list of corrections of errors in the first American edition, and, most important, a series of emendations, notably a passage about Gertrude that he wanted to have added to the book, albeit in Bulgarian (e-mail message to Ward Briggs).<sup>8</sup>

Updike had long been attracted to Shakespeare’s unparalleled achievement, particularly after studying the plays at Harvard with the eminent Harry Levin. In a 1966 interview, he commented on the decline of the status of the classical hero in twentieth-century America: “The idea of a hero . . . is aristocratic. As aristocracies have faded, so have heroes. You cared about Oedipus and Hamlet because they were noble and you were a groundling. Now either nobody is a hero or everyone is. I vote for everyone” (Plath 10). This statement points to a primary reason why

years later he decided to focus not on the moody Prince in his prequel to *Hamlet* but on the troubled Queen who, for Updike, is the new hero. Although the novel was not published until 2000, he confirmed to another interviewer as early as 1959, when his career was just under way, that his goal was to model himself on Shakespeare: “a steady, abundant, and varied output, with the author himself completely invisible” (Plath 4).

Updike’s knowledge of Shakespeare and his era was that of an erudite non-specialist. In addition to the plays, he knew the circumstances of their making as well as the contemporaries who honored Shakespeare (John Heminges and Henry Condell) and those who, like Robert Greene, heaped scorn (*Due Considerations* 51–55). When, for example, the *Washington Post* requested a statement about which books “serve as comfort,” Updike singled out Shakespeare’s plays (*Due* 660–61). In a letter to the book review editor for the *Boston Herald*, who had asked about *Gertrude and Claudius*, he described Shakespeare as his collaborator, just as the playwright had “collaborated with the authors of old and foreign plots to make the bulk of his plays” (*Higher Gossip* 446). Translators are likewise collaborators. Daring to write a prequel to the world’s most famous drama, he in effect “translated” Gertrude, both revising the Queen as a life-filled woman and conveying his interpretation that the erotic relationship between Gertrude and her usurping brother-in-law is a love match: “I love Gertrude, and always have. Everything she says is to the point, and much of it is witty. . . . It wasn’t Shakespeare who saw her as ‘stewed in corruption,’ it was her fastidious son” (447).

Updike occasionally translated the work of other writers. He cites, for instance, a few Borges poems he “presumed, with assistance, to translate” (*Due* 640). The key phrase is “with assistance.” For the English-language edition of Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s *Stolen Apples*, he rendered ten of the Russian’s poems into English with the assistance of such professional translators as Albert C. Todd, Anthony Kahn, and Edward Keenan. In these circumstances, where the famous Updike was invited to translate the famous Yevtushenko, the standard procedure was followed: an expert in Russian supplied literal translations for Updike to reshape according to his own poetic instincts. As Kahn explains in his preface to *Stolen Apples*, “at times translating Yevtushenko meant yielding, as it did for Updike, to the public energy of the man and letting the curve ‘carry him into English combinations like nothing in our poetry since Whitman” (xxi). For his translations from Latin, Updike did not require such assistance. He studied Latin at Harvard with Eric Havlock, featured Horace in his undergraduate thesis, and published his translation of

Horace's Ode III.ii in *Commonweal* (June 7, 1957) before including it a year later in *The Carpentered Hen* (1958). Similarly, for the limited edition *Poemata humanistica decem: Renaissance Latin Poems with English Translations*, Updike published his version of Johannes Secundus' *Basium XVI* under the title "Kiss Sixteen."<sup>9</sup>

Spanish, Russian, Latin: three languages with a literary tradition well known in the United States. Updike became, however, particularly drawn to the literary culture of Bulgaria and to an author who wrote in a language that most of his readership would readily describe as "foreign." His interest in Bulgaria likely dated from 1964 when the U.S. Department of State sent him behind the Iron Curtain at the height of the Cold War as a representative of what was then called "cultural exchange." Artists as varied as Dave Brubeck and Robert Frost had preceded him. The program was well established, not to mention well funded, by the time Updike flew to the unfamiliar "closed" countries of Eastern Europe. By 1976, however, a decade after his tour, he was less than confident about the freedom of Soviet translators to publish versions of English-language poems that were faithful not to the political implications, which the translators seemed always compelled to uncover, but to the words and metaphors, the art. While he was satisfied with the Russian version of *The Centaur* (1963), hardly a political novel in the Soviet sense of the word, he was disturbed that two of the poems in *Midpoint* (1969)—"Poem for a Far Land" and "Washington"—were "brutalized into political statements favorable to Soviet doctrine" when recast into Russian. Confronted with "wanton distortions of these small poems," he concluded that "cultural exchange between the superpowers is not merely stalled but regressing" (*Hugging the Shore* 861).

For all his pessimism, however, Updike did not dismiss Bulgaria. Cultural exchange need not involve the murky politics of superpowers. Individual artists may salute each other from opposite sides of the world. The evidence suggests that he became enchanted with a Bulgarian poet during his visit to Sofia in 1964. The artistic results of his infatuation stretched over many years, from 1964 to 2002, and resulted in three key publications: the short story "The Bulgarian Poetess," the translation of four poems from the Bulgarian, and the revision of *Gertrude and Claudius*. Composed in 1964 upon his return to America, "The Bulgarian Poetess" is one of Updike's most admired stories. Originally published in the *New Yorker* (March 13, 1965) and then collected in *The Music School* (1966), the tale was honored with the annual O. Henry Award as the best American short story of 1965. "The Bulgarian Poetess" is also the first of the many stories featuring Updike's ironic alter ego Henry Bech. In *Bech: A Book* (1970) it is placed after two other

tales of Bech's travail resulting from his duties in the name of cultural exchange in the Soviet bloc: "Rich in Russia" and "Bech in Rumania." Yet it is clear from "The Bulgarian Poetess" that if Bech/Updike's mind was not initially stimulated during his visit to Sofia, his heart certainly was. Feeling "hounded by homage . . . by querulous translators" after he lands in the "other half of the world, the hostile, mysterious half," Bech fears that, like Alice, he has "passed through a mirror" (*Early Stories* 737, 739). And, indeed, one of the officials of the Union of Bulgarian Writers has "the tense, dented mouth of a hare" (741). Another official—"the whites of his eyes were distinctly red"—wears a tweed coat "in the British style" and is introduced to Bech as the translator into Bulgarian of *Alice in Wonderland*, which he describes as "a marvelous book. . . . It truly takes us into another dimension" (742). He now wants to translate Bech, who fears he has himself been transported to "another dimension" (740).

Bech's vertiginous gloom lifts when the Bulgarian poetess, Vera Glavanakova, enters the room. In his eyes, she is lovely, a beautifully dressed, blond, sophisticated woman who has no husband because she is, as the translator informs Bech, "too much for poetry to have married" (745). She is Bech's "central woman," the "prototype" of the female that remained "undisclosed" until he walked through the looking-glass into baffling Bulgaria (743). In his description of Vera, Updike alludes to the affirmative late poem by his fellow Pennsylvanian Wallace Stevens, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," in which Stevens celebrates the power of the imagination in the closing tercet:

Out of this same light, out of the *central* mind,  
 We make a dwelling in the evening air,  
 In which being there together is enough. (524; italics added)

All Vera and Bech will ever have together is art. Updike based Glavanakova on Blaga Dimitrova (1922–2003), who studied at the University of Sofia and the Gorky Institute in Moscow, published novels and volumes of poetry that were censored or condemned by the Communist government, became the first democratically elected vice president of Bulgaria in 1992, and was revered throughout the country.<sup>10</sup> For a writer like Bech, stymied by writer's block that stalls his career, Vera represents Art with a capital A, an elusive goal he seems cursed to chase. The inscription he writes for Vera in a jacketless copy of one of his novels that he has lifted from the United States Legation—"Dear Vera Glavanakova—It is a matter of earnest regret for me that you and I must live on opposite sides of the world"—reflects Updike's infatuation with Dimitrova (750). His translator Shur-

banov observes: "I find Updike's Bulgarian sketch remarkable, and it is obvious that Blaga did make quite an impression on him" (e-mail to Briggs).

Dimitrova became Updike's distant muse, a personification of the centrality of femininity and art, though after their meeting in 1964 their relationship was epistolary, conducted from "opposite sides of the world."<sup>11</sup> In 1986, twenty-two years after Updike met her, William Meredith, a former Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress and a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, edited an anthology titled *Poets of Bulgaria*. Although the Soviet bloc would not begin disintegrating until 1989, Updike put aside his skepticism about superpower cultural exchanges and agreed to a person-to-person exchange when he translated four of Dimitrova's poems for Meredith's volume. Once again, word-for-word transliterations were provided for Updike to re-form into poetry. The anthology is not well known, but it is an important document in the development of Updike's attachment to Blaga/Bulgaria, an attachment that contributed to his decision to emend *Gertrude and Claudius*. His choice and translation of Dimitrova's "Travelling Alone" are telling: "Until I reach the future / countless roads must be traversed. / Will you be waiting for me still? . . . / the whole hot country of me / will assimilate you" (*Poets of Bulgaria* 19). Equally suggestive are these lines from Updike's translation of "Pain": "You are leaving. / The day musters its smile. / Beyond you, possibility closes down" (20). In 1989 Updike wrote a blurb for the first English-language collection of Dimitrova's poems, *Because the Sea Is Black*: "It is surprising that Blaga Dimitrova has not yet had a volume of her poems in English, and you and your co-translator's delicate and direct renditions excellently convey her breathless, oblique, and resolutely personal voice."

Professor Shurbanov agrees with my point that Updike was so taken with Dimitrova that he conflated the Bulgarian poetess and Bulgaria: "I suspect Updike continued to have a soft spot for Bulgaria until he died. This must be mostly due to Blaga Dimitrova's irresistible charm" (email to Briggs). Correspondingly, Dimitrova began translating Updike's poems soon after his State Department duties were concluded. In a letter dated April 13, 1965, she expressed her admiration for his lyrics that deal with the cosmos, and on June 21, 1965, she reported that she was sending him a French translation of her own poems. Later, when Updike relayed the news that "The Bulgarian Poetess" had won the O. Henry Award, she replied on January 3, 1966, that the story brought her happiness. Separated by language, culture, politics, and distance, Dimitrova and Updike expressed a strong mutual attachment through a veil of letters and the art of translation.

Updike's death in 2009 prompted Shurbanov to write a reminiscence:

I mourn the death of John Updike. He was one of the greatest American writers, a representative of a strong generation. Updike made his mark primarily as an author concerned with ethics and as an exceptional stylist. His language is rich with cues leading to meanings beneath the surface. In terms of content, he was a writer who explained the lives of regular Americans through skillfully created psychological sketches of real life, free of excesses and perversions. (“Reminiscence of John Updike”)<sup>12</sup>

For all his praise of Updike’s art, however, Shurbanov’s primary focus in the tribute is Updike’s fondness for Bulgaria and Dimitrova. His remarks, written 45 years after Updike first met the poet, imply that Updike did not hesitate to cooperate with him in part because of his affection for Dimitrova, which he then “translated” into a long-held affection for Bulgaria. For Updike, she was the face of both art and the nation:

We know that Updike passed through Bulgaria and left literary traces of his meeting with Bulgarian reality. It’s a warm relationship that makes us happy and very flattered. In the story “The Bulgarian Poetess” he described his meeting with Blaga Dimitrova with such vivid detail that he creates a physical image of this talented and unquestionably beautiful woman. For a long time it was said that he was in love with Blaga. And no wonder—Blaga Dimitrova was captivating.

Shurbanov concludes the reminiscence by recalling his “good fortune” to have corresponded with Updike about the translation. Significantly, he writes that “Updike himself initiated this correspondence, giving instructions, notes, and explanations. I was impressed by his simplicity and humility” (“Reminiscence”).

II

After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, Updike was more affirmative about the fate of his canon in the hands of translators from the former Soviet empire. The unprecedented result is that Shurbanov’s translation of *Gertrude and Claudius* became not just another opportunity to introduce Updike to Bulgarian readers but the definitive edition until the Random House reprint in 2012. For the project, Updike provided more than the “assistance” he normally benefited from when he was the translator. He became Shurbanov’s collaborator, just as he had earlier imagined Shakespeare collaborating with his own classical and medieval sources. He answered Shurbanov’s questions, used the opportunity to correct errors in the Knopf edition, and emended that edition by adding sentences that enhance his characterization of Gertrude. Shurbanov explains that Updike forwarded “a passage . . . that was missing in the original and that he wanted me to include in

the Bulgarian edition, thus making it, as he said, the first complete publication of his text ever. Needless to say, the Bulgarian publisher proudly advertised this precedence of his product" (e-mail to Briggs).

Updike wrote the novel to defend Gertrude against centuries of readers who have seen her as a scheming, incestuous, and grasping adulterer. He establishes his defense on the first page when he imagines the young Gertrude defying her father's command to marry for political alliance instead of for love. To Updike, she is "ample, serene, dewy, and sensible," hardly a Wicked Witch of the West (Knopf edition, 6). Despite her courage, however, she knows she will have to yield, and thus Updike writes his prequel to *Hamlet* as an account of an arranged marriage that leads to love but is broken by murder and a defensible affair. This is an unexpected interpretation, one that Shakespeare specialists might not sanction but that grounds both Updike's surprising reading of *Hamlet* and the novel that nudges readers to rethink the play. As he construes the motives that precipitate the regicide initiating Shakespeare's tragedy, he protects Gertrude. She soon senses that the husband she comes to love is distracted by the duties he must perform, seeing herself as "helpmate to a handsome blond king who with the years grew ever more admirable and remote, as if enlarging as he receded from her" (47). Adultery, it seems, has its rationale.

In Gertrude's eyes, "[k]ingship had gutted the private man even in a night-gown" (54). The progress of the prequel is now set inexorably toward the gloom of the play. Claudius sees her son as no more than a "foppish rude brat," her husband as no more than a pompous ruler, "his voice bloated with kingship" (72, 73). Lust, he concedes, will prompt him to murder. He tells Gertrude, "In my dreams, you were wanton, and I wore a crown," as if he were a future reader of *Hamlet* (88). Yet Updike casts himself in a twenty-first-century mock-heroic role, so that he becomes, as it were, Gertrude's knight, a courtly lover guarding his lady against the slander of wantonness. She may fear that she is an "eager slut" (130), but, in Updike's version, her sexual abandon in the arms of her husband's brother is all for love. She understands that "[a]rdor is a matter of spirit . . . more than of the body, for a woman" (131). The key word here is "spirit." In assigning this sentiment to Gertrude, Updike indirectly refers to Shakespeare's definition of lust in Sonnet 126: "Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame"—a line he had quoted in his 1993 essay "Lust" (*More Matter* 45). Updike clearly refuses to apply this judgment to the Gertrude of his novel. Her counsel to Ophelia confirms the wisdom of her gender: virginity is no more than "a man's abstraction, . . . which would debar us from the illuminations of love" (182). Gertrude refuses to be debarred.

In a letter dated August 29, 2002, Updike responded to Shurbanov's queries about the novel.<sup>13</sup> One concerned the Provençal that Updike quotes in the dedication. The dedication reads, "To Martha," Updike's wife, and is followed by an epigraph: *De dezir mos cors no fina / vas selba ren qu'ieu pus am.*" These lines, Updike explained, are by Jaufrè Rudel, a twelfth-century prince and troubadour. He found them in Frederick Goldin's *Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouveres*, where they are translated as, "My heart does not come to the end of desire for the one I love most." Martha Updike is the dedicatee, but the lines also reinforce his revision of Shakespeare's Gertrude as a woman who lives not for lust but for love. Updike's list of errata and emendations is dated April 4, 2002, five months before the letter, confirmation that he was already preparing for a new and corrected edition before he received Shurbanov's inquiry. The eight errata concern primarily errors in Danish place names and other typos; for example, on page 21, line 19, "posterns" is amended to "pasterns," and on page 22, line 3, "Spøttrup" becomes "Spøttrup." Most of the four emendations are also relatively minor; for example, on page 49, line 13, the word "whether" is added. But the last emendation is critical. It amplifies Updike's determination that Gertrude be seen as an erotic woman pledged to constancy, a woman who forsakes the lure of adultery for the warmth of the hearth. Equally notable is the placement of the addition, three pages from the end of the novel, as if he were providing a final instruction to the reader about how to understand the Queen and her actions. He requested that Shurbanov add three key sentences to the paragraph that concludes on page 208, line 7, in the Knopf edition. The addition, which can now be found in English in the Random House paperback edition, reads:

She was happier wed. Like a broad-beamed ship she lightly rode in the safety of harbor. Her venture into the defiance and protest of adultery had been, like his years of southern wandering, an excursion, an exploration of her nature that, its question settled, need never be resumed. (208)<sup>14</sup>

Updike's Gertrude and Claudius are now safely home and in love, but he and his readers know that a royal ghost is preparing to haunt the parapet as soon as the novel ends. Hamlet will then poison the romance.

Shurbanov appended seventy-eight notes to the end of his translation, notes not present in the Random House edition but that one suspects Updike's readers would have appreciated if they had been translated into English. Unlike the "Mythological Index" that Updike compiled for *The Centaur*, which guides the reader to the appearances of Greek mythic characters in that novel, Shurbanov's notes

primarily clarify for Bulgarian readers the esoteric, medieval Scandinavian proper names and place names that Updike uses with such skill in *Gertrude and Claudius*. For example, the translator explains that “Holsten (Holstein) is a medieval duchy under the Kingdom of Denmark but also under the Holy Roman Empire” and that “Cnut (or Canute) was a King of Denmark between 1017 and 1035. Under his rule Denmark became a powerful country—the Anglo-Scandinavian or North Sea Empire, consisting of Denmark, England, Norway, and parts of Sweden.” More important, Shurbanov explains several matters directly related to *Hamlet*:

The first quarto (a ¼ format of publication) of Shakespeare’s drama *Hamlet*, 1603, is . . . *Hamlet’s* first surviving edition. It is known as “the bad quarto” and is regarded as an unsatisfactory reconstruction of the author’s original. The text is different from the following editions of the play—the second quarto from 1604 and the folio of Shakespeare’s collected works from 1623.

Elsinore (Helsingør) is a port on the northeast coast of Zealand in Denmark. The Kronborg castle, although dating back to the 16th century, is related to the plot of *Hamlet*.

Wittenberg is an old university town in Saxony (Germany) on the river Elbe. It became famous for its connection to Martin Luther’s fight against the Roman Catholic Church. In 1517 Martin Luther pinned to the door of the church what later became known as *The Ninety-Five Theses*.<sup>15</sup>

The notes confirm the translator’s judgment that *Gertrude and Claudius* is a complex novel written for the initiated reader and that Bulgarian readers, likely unfamiliar with the historical context of *Hamlet*, would require clarification of Updike’s many allusions, allusions Updike assumes will be readily accessible to his English-language readers.

Writing to Updike on November 30, 2002, Shurbanov reported that he had included all the revisions in the translation. More important is his conclusion about Updike’s recasting of Shakespeare’s principals: “Let me say once again that, as a Shakespearean scholar, I found your fictional criticism of *Hamlet* very exciting indeed. . . .Your construction of Shakespeare’s characters, however unexpected at times, makes a lot of sense and opens new perspectives of looking at them.” Shurbanov echoed this comment in his message to me. Saying that he finds the prequel to *Hamlet* “fascinating,” he stressed Updike’s radical approach to the dark tragedy: “The novel interrogates many of our romantic assumptions about the play and I found it quite invigorating at that point” (e-mail message to the author).

His observation indirectly reflects the account Updike wrote in his “Special Message” for the Franklin Library edition of *Gertrude and Claudius* in which he pointedly names the usurping King and his Queen as “the villains of *Hamlet*” but absolves Gertrude of complicity in the murder that propels the play (*Due* 637). The slaying of Hamlet’s father is itself a prequel to the drama. Why then, Updike asks, does the Queen marry the slain King’s brother “with such unseemly haste?” (638). His answer is that, while Shakespeare appears to brand her with the deadly sin of lust, he himself reads her as embodying “queenly dignity, wifely loyalty, motherly concern,” and thus “a case for Claudius and Gertrude should be made.” His Gertrude is not a sex-driven schemer but an aristocratic “pawn in the hands of ambitious men” (639). Given his desire to “narrate the romance that preceded the tragedy” (640), he emended the original text to establish the Bulgarian edition by adding crucial sentences to emphasize his sympathetic portrait of the twice-married Queen. In short, Updike emended his own emendation of Shakespeare’s masterpiece. His remarks to Shurbanov stress the importance of the changes: once the alterations were included in the translation, the book would immediately become the authoritative edition. The irony—and surely Updike was aware of it—is that readers of the Knopf edition would have to wait years before the Bulgarian edition was translated into English. One suspects that had he been given the opportunity to collaborate on such a project, he would have once again revised.

## NOTES

1. For an enlightening study of Updike’s revisions to *Rabbit, Run*, see Waldron.
2. Normally, bound proof copies are printed in small quantities for distribution to potential reviewers prior to the official publication date.
3. The two sets of bound proof copies for *Memories of the Ford Administration* pose a different dilemma. Terms for the British publication of the novel were signed by Knopf and Andre Deutsch, Updike’s longtime British publisher, in January 1992. Deutsch composed the bound proofs in April of that year. Later in April, Deutsch and Knopf had a contractual disagreement, after which Knopf cancelled the deal. The result was that Deutsch destroyed all copies of the bound proof except seven that it failed to retrieve. Those seven copies are now collector’s items. Knopf then sold the British rights to Hamish Hamilton, which had to publish a second set of proofs.
4. Many of these notes surfaced thirty years later when Updike published *Collected Poems* in 1993.
5. For a definition of the occasionally tricky term *edition* as used in this essay, see Ahearn and Ahearn: “[A]n edition will stand until changed. There may be 20 printings of an edition before a change in the text is made that is significant enough to require a notation that it is a second edition” (98). Similarly, see the definition in Holman: “The entire number of bound copies of a book printed at any one time or times from a single typesetting or from plates or other modes of reproduction

made from a single typesetting” (148). The revisions Updike included in the Bulgarian translation are significant, and the bound copies, in Bulgarian, were printed from a single typesetting.

6. The standard Updike bibliography identifies only two books translated into Bulgarian: *The Centaur* and *Marry Me*. Subsequent research indicates at least eighteen additional books in Bulgarian, confirmation of Updike’s continuing popularity in that country: *Rabbit, Run*; *Rabbit Redux*; *Rabbit Is Rich*; *Rabbit at Rest*; *Your Lover Just Called*; *The Witches of Eastwick*; *The Widows of Eastwick*; *In the Beauty of the Lilies*; *Seek My Face*; *Brazil*; *Bech Is Back*; *A Month of Sundays*; *Roger’s Version*; *Problems*; *Toward the End of Time*; *Villages*; *Terrorist*; and *Gertrude and Claudius* (De Bellis and Broomfield, 867, 872).

7. His translation of *Hamlet* is, at this writing, the featured production at the National Theatre of Bulgaria. Shurbanov says: “I have taught these plays at the English Department of Sofia University for over four decades and have finally decided to offer my reading of the texts to the broader public at home” (e-mail message to the author, April 19, 2013).

8. Briggs, professor emeritus of classics and the humanities at the University of South Carolina, kindly shared Shurbanov’s message with me.

9. For a list of poetry translations by Updike, see De Bellis and Broomfield, 388–89. Updike’s poems from the Bulgarian are not included.

10. I am indebted to Biljana Dojcinovic of the University of Belgrade and to Ward Briggs for discussing Dimitrova with me.

11. The letters are housed in the Updike archive at Harvard, where they were being catalogued at the time of this writing and may not be quoted. According to the curator, the archive holds four letters from Dimitrova to Updike, the earliest dated April 13, 1965, and the latest dated January 3, 1966. There are no letters from Updike to Dimitrova because he did not generally keep copies of his correspondence.

12. The statement is in Bulgarian with Cyrillic characters. I used Google Translate to render it into rough English and then edited the statement for more accessible English.

13. Professor Shurbanov generously forwarded to me part of his correspondence with Updike.

14. The text in Bulgarian reads: Бракът я правеше по-щастлива. Като широк кораб тя плаваше леко в сигурността на пристана. Някогашното ѝ дръзване в предизвикателството и протеста на прелюбодеянието е било, както неговите години на южно скиталчество, един излет, една проверка на собствената ѝ природа, която, след като веднъж въпросът бе уреден, нямаше защо да се възобновява (Bulgarian edition, 213).

15. Mila Tasseva-Kurktchieva of the University of South Carolina generously provided the translations from the Bulgarian.

## WORKS CITED

- Ahearn, Allen, and Patricia Ahearn. *Book Collecting: A Comprehensive Guide*. New York: Putnam, 1995.
- Bayley, John. “It Happened at Elsinore.” Rev. of *Gertrude and Claudius*, by John Updike. *New York Review of Books* 23 March 2000: 13–15.
- De Bellis, Jack, and Michael Broomfield, ed. *John Updike: A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Materials, 1948–2007*. New Castle: Oak Knoll, 2007.
- Dimitrova, Blaga. *Because the Sea Is Black: Poems of Blaga Dimitrova*. Trans. Niko Boris and Heather McHugh. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1989.

- Rev. of *Gertrude and Claudius*, by John Updike. *New Yorker* 13 March 2000: 97.
- Goldin, Frederick, ed. and trans. *Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouveres*. New York: Doubleday, 1973.
- Holman, C. Hugh, ed. *A Handbook to Literature*, 4th ed. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1980.
- Kahn, Anthony. Translator's preface. *Stolen Apples*. By Yevgeny Yevtushenko. Trans. James Dickey and others. Garden City: Doubleday, 1971. xxi–xxii.
- Meredith, William, ed. *Poets of Bulgaria*. Trans. John Balaban, Roland Flint, and others. Greensboro: Unicorn, 1986.
- Plath, James, ed. *Conversations with John Updike*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994.
- Poemata Humanistica Decem: Renaissance Latin Poems with English Translations*. Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1986.
- Shurbanov, Alexander. Message to the author. 19 Apr. 2013. E-mail.
- . Message to Ward Briggs. 8 Apr. 2013. E-mail.
- . "Reminiscence of John Updike." [http://novinar.bg/news/aleksandar-shurbanov-ypdajk-dojde-v-balgariia-i-bлага-dimitrova-go-pleni\\_Mjg1OTsxMTE=.html](http://novinar.bg/news/aleksandar-shurbanov-ypdajk-dojde-v-balgariia-i-bлага-dimitrova-go-pleni_Mjg1OTsxMTE=.html). 24 April 2013.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Knopf, 1954.
- Updike, John. *Due Considerations: Essays and Criticism*. New York: Knopf, 2007.
- . *The Early Stories: 1953–1975*. New York: Knopf, 2003.
- . Foreword. *The Poorhouse Fair/Rabbit, Run*. New York: Modern Library, 1965.
- . *Gertrude and Claudius*. New York: Knopf, 2000.
- . *Gertrude and Claudius*. Trans. Alexander Shurbanov. Sofia: Prozorets, 2003.
- . *Gertrude and Claudius*. New York: Random House, 2012.
- . *Higher Gossip: Essays and Criticism*. New York: Knopf, 2011.
- . *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism*. New York: Knopf, 1983.
- . *More Matter: Essays and Criticism*. New York: Knopf, 1999.
- . *Of the Farm*. New York: Ballantine, 2004.
- . *Of the Farm*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1967.
- Waldron, Randall H. "Rabbit Revised." *American Literature* 56 (1984): 51–67.

# The Regulating Daughter in John Updike's Rabbit Novels

SUE NORTON

To demonstrate that the patriarchal nuclear family is not a naturally occurring phenomenon, scholars of various disciplines have endeavored to prove that gender inequality, upon which the patriarchal nuclear form depends, did not always exist. They have argued that it arose in response to certain conditions generated by the first agricultural revolution, and that matrilineal and matriarchal societies existed in prehistory, and, indeed, continue to exist in certain "primitive" cultures. In other words, they have tried to do what Friedrich Engels did in a book which, Michèle Barrett writes, "tackles the question of the origin of human society." As Barrett points out: "Although we all know that such attempts are doomed because unprovable, they remain of abiding interest" (29–30). And they remain of interest, in all likelihood, because we seek permission from antiquity to invent ourselves, and our family configurations, as we see fit.

Toward that end, some contemporary American fictions have sought to reinvent family and to question the privilege afforded to the patriarchal nuclear family over the past half-century. They do so in ways that plainly seek to extract the appearance of "nature" from *any* family form.

Anne Tyler, for instance, routinely repositions family borders. Her characters inhabit nuclear families only to break free of them or otherwise revise them. They are most likely to find hope or solace when they relinquish an idealized, nuclear version of family and opt instead to build their lives around new or extraneous family members. In *Saint Maybe* (1991), Ian Bedloe achieves tranquility after decades of restlessness by gradually incorporating his deceased brother's children

and stepchild into his own daily life. Macon Leary of *The Accidental Tourist* (1985) provides another example. After the random murder of his son and the ensuing failure of his marriage, he is eventually saved from the stifling insularity of his family of siblings by the radical otherness of the eccentric Muriel, whom he comes to love. In Tyler's work, individuals find comfort in alternative sensibilities and permeable family borders. Her characters derive their greatest rewards from inclusivity, rather than exclusivity.

Armistead Maupin also treats domestic themes in his nine-volume *Tales of the City* series. Maupin's characters decidedly eschew nuclear exclusivity, forming instead close family bonds engendered by common sensibilities. In stories that began appearing in 1974, his gay heroes and heroines flee conventionality in many respects. For them, the myth of the nuclear family feels all too real and far too constraining.

In the 1970s and 1980s, African American female writers, including Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, also reckoned with established paradigms of family. The nuclear form, while it may appear inevitable in the work of white male writers such as John Updike, appears more or less impossible in key novels by Morrison and Walker. Though a tantalizingly desirable ideal to certain of their characters at times, the black nuclear family is presented in their work as not readily viable, given the social context in which it would seek to exist. Instead, other forms of family predominate and flourish, as, not surprisingly, they do in the works of feminist writers of speculative fiction, such as Marge Piercy and Ursula K. Le Guin.

By contrast, Updike's Rabbit books—*Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990)—revert always to conventional family form. Though in other novels Updike might be said to write against the patriarchal nuclear family, the Rabbit novels represent his magnum opus of family. Because they span three decades (four, if we include the 2000 novella "Rabbit Remembered"), they offer his most sustained fictional comment on the family in modern America.

To say, however, that the Rabbit books revert always to conventional family form is not to say that they do so unproblematically. As various critics have argued, in the Rabbit series the social demands imposed by marriage and parenthood appear at times to deny the possibility of self-fulfillment, thereby threatening to implode the nuclear form and its "natural" pretensions. Certainly the title *Rabbit, Run* forms an imperative command that urges the hero to light out for the territory before his roles of husband and father ensnare him in a net of his own

making.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the “naturalness” of the nuclear family remains intact as an abiding ideological principle.

Indeed, Updike’s organizational strategies establish a preferred reading of the tetralogy as a whole, one that favors the familial and that seeks out and celebrates those fleeting moments when Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom discovers salvation in domesticity, despite his frequent impulses to flee or otherwise evade it. While it can be argued that Updike often focuses our attention on Harry’s individual longings in the face of institutional constraint, and in so doing elicits our sympathy for him, he nevertheless reminds us of the damage to others caused by Harry’s successive flights in *Rabbit, Run* and his various betrayals in the sequels.

When the characters of Tyler, Maupin, Morrison, or Walker avoid conventional family form, they tend to find some measure of lasting reward. Not so for Updike’s characters, who are more likely to incur disaster before returning to the roost. Even when Harry or his wife, Janice, neglect to protect the sanctity and inviolability of family, the texts themselves, with their recurring pattern of stray-and-return, seem to do so for them. The plots of the novels function to protect the family as a closed system, to keep it intact, even as they expose the nuclear form to criticism and often leave us to wonder why Harry and Janice remain married. A reading of all four novels reveals Harry as continually, in one way or another, grasping toward something. Throughout *Rabbit, Run* he quests for what he calls “it.” By *Rabbit Redux* he has embraced a staunch anti-communist patriotism to conceal the absence of “it,” only to seek its replacement in a counter-culture, makeshift family that includes a flower child to whom he acts as both father and lover. Wealth has seemingly replaced “it” in *Rabbit Is Rich*, and by *Rabbit at Rest* Harry has settled into a junk-food complacency that allows very little in the way of real desire.

Despite the slow withering of Harry’s lust for transcendence, Updike manages to sustain his identity as a quest hero. The grail, however, takes on a shape that reflects, more than any other aspect of the narrative, the containment ethos of the nuclear family, for what Harry wishes to possess turns out to be not glory or grace, but a daughter. Other biological ties are, to be sure, crucial to his psychological and social well-being. But what becomes increasingly clear over the course of the series is that Harry has a deep need to symbolically reclaim the daughter he and Janice lost to his delinquency and her alcoholism when she inadvertently drowned the infant Rebecca June in the bath. No matter how murky the relationship between Harry and Janice becomes in the subsequent years, Updike does not

allow Harry, who intuitively tries to resist living a life of cliché, to “throw the baby out with the bathwater.” Thus Harry’s lust for transcendence, his quest for “it,” is ultimately rendered ironic: though he seemingly wishes to evade his family, his focus on the recovery of his daughter, who reappears in the guise of several other characters, manifests his subconscious wish to contain his family.

Updike told an interviewer that “general academic criticism has tended to belittle the novel and the short story as a means of expression. In some ways it suggests that authors don’t know what they’re saying, and they’re all captive to this and that power group” (Singh 77). If we respect his claim to authorial intent, we must conclude that the Rabbit novels do precisely what Updike wanted them to do: though they query the ability of the nuclear family to nourish and sustain its members, they ultimately vindicate it.

We can see this vindication in the very structure of each of the Rabbit novels as, one after another, they suggest an enclosed, patriarchal, nuclear family. Harry is the (often reluctant) head of household, and therefore receives the most narrative attention. Janice and the couple’s son, Nelson, receive secondary treatment, and Harry and Janice’s parents, friends, and lovers are peripherally examined for their impact on the central “unit.” Eventually grandchildren become relevant. Updike is in many respects a traditional novelist, so such an approach comes as no surprise. His methods of storytelling have long been compared to nineteenth-century modes of realistic narrative discourse.<sup>2</sup> Kristiaan Versluys persuasively refines this comparison to suggest that though Updike’s modes of realism and naturalism are conventional to a degree, his fiction “stands closer to the teachings of poststructuralism than the denominator of realism seems to suggest” (33) and, in high modernist style, resists finite interpretations. True to realism, the treatment of time in the Rabbit novels is linear, the point of view is third-person omniscient, characterization tends toward the naturalistic (thus the name Rabbit), and the language, though evocative, is not especially self-referential. But true to modernism, it is hard to say with certainty whether Rabbit is a hero or antihero: the ways to read him are as multiple as his yearnings and prone to double back on themselves, thus endlessly postponing our judgment of him.<sup>3</sup> While Updike’s questing protagonist may think he wants to be free of family, what he really wants is a greater degree of freedom *within* family.

This rendition of the nuclear family as a site of both sustenance and confinement goes to the heart of Updike’s thematic paradox, and also to the heart of a school of thought in family therapy called family systems theory, which ascribes inherently paradoxical qualities to the nuclear family. Still flourishing, it achieved

prominence in the 1950s as a variety of therapy that fosters coping rather than resistance, adaptation rather than revolt.<sup>4</sup> In *The Daughter's Dilemma: Family Process and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel* (1991), Paula Marantz Cohen uses family systems theory as a critical tool in reading representations of family in Victorian and pre-Victorian fiction. Cohen argues that “we still tend to think of nineteenth-century England as the site of an ideal model of family life and to still shape our expectations of family on what we imagine that model to have been like” (11). She analyzes the positioning of the daughter figure in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fictions and how the daughter, often through illness, performs a “regulating function” in keeping a fragmenting nuclear family together. Cohen’s basic argument is this:

The family in Western society began conspicuously to change its structure from a porous, extended network of relations to a more restricted, “nuclear” unit of relations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries . . . It achieved temporary stability as a relatively closed, affective system in the nineteenth century. The novel evolved in parallel fashion. It moved away from its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century origins in the loosely stitched accounts of picaresque adventure to become the intricate, psychologically resonant narrative form that I refer to as the domestic novel, which we associate with the genre’s maturity in the nineteenth century. By the same token, both the family and the novel have, since the end of the nineteenth century, revealed difficulty in supporting their legacy of closure. Just as modern literature has progressively defined itself through either a dramatic disregard for nineteenth-century literary conventions or a parodic attachment to them, so the family, from the turn of the century to the present, has exhibited escalating tendencies in these two directions. Reactions against nuclearity are reflected in rising statistics on divorce and alternative life-style arrangements, while attempts to bolster nuclearity are evident in the high incidence of illnesses like anorexia nervosa that seem designed to maintain family closure at all costs. (3–4)

My reasons for quoting extensively from Cohen’s analysis are threefold. First, as noted earlier, Updike, like all twentieth-century novelists, wrote under the influence of nineteenth-century realism. Moreover, the plots of the Rabbit novels depend upon the central, though curiously absent, figure of the daughter. Finally, the Rabbit novels present a nuclear family striving to maintain its closure in a way that is illuminated by family systems theory. Regarding closure, Cohen writes:

In both the nuclear family and the domestic novel we are dealing, then, with closed systems that achieved relative stability in the nineteenth century and are now experiencing visible strain and disruption. Of course, these systems, even during their heyday,

were never more than relatively closed. Families must always interact to some degree with an external society; novels depend upon readers and are subject to individual values, tastes, and interpretive approaches. Yet the ideology of closure in the nineteenth century was a driving force in the development and elaboration of the form in which families and novels defined themselves. Families were seen as retreats from a hostile external world and, hence, the definition of sex roles, the requirements of etiquette, the rearing of children, and so forth, evolved to enforce that separation. Novels were expected to tie up loose ends, both structural and thematic, and so most novels tended to end with a well-deserved marriage or with a death that either glorified or appropriately degraded its subject. (4)

Rabbit often regards family as a retreat from a hostile external world but still feels compelled to interact with that world. The same can be said of Janice and the adult Nelson. All three experience ambivalent feelings for their families of origin, as well as for the families they create. Each of them has extramarital affairs. But they continue to conceive of family, essentially, as a closed and private space. When they must incorporate grandparents into their household configurations, as happens on several levels in *Rabbit Is Rich*, the arrangement is regarded as a sign of inadequacy that must be corrected. But nuclearity, once reestablished, again feels constrictive. Harry, Janice, and Nelson move through this vicious circle several times over. Their predicament reflects the paradox upon which family systems theory is founded. In Cohen's words, the theory

recognizes that closed systems are ultimately pathogenic, and yet it tries to heal the pathologies of closed systems. This paradox springs from a fundamental premise of family systems thinking, namely that sick families are merely well families writ large—families trying too hard and exaggerating those very saving techniques that the nuclear family needs to define itself. (5)

Theorist-practitioners in the field operate according to this premise for the reason that as a culture we are still linked to a nineteenth-century ideology of closure even as that ideology is being revised. Family systems therapists as well as novelists therefore persist in trying to accommodate the desire for closure.

The Angstrom family, especially Harry, lives within the paradox of the nuclear family, which is both sustaining and imprisoning. John Ruskin aptly epitomized the notions of family that the nineteenth century bequeathed to the twentieth. For Ruskin, the family's home is

the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. (158–59)

The family, thus idealized, keeps its members safe within the home, and keeps potential threats to their safety without. But as Cohen observes, “the logic of the nuclear family, . . . if consistently enforced, would never release its members” (16). She continues:

Ruskin’s concept of the family, which was echoed throughout so much of the literature of the nineteenth century, envisions the closed system of family as a source of social and individual well-being, as a site not of sickness but of health. Indeed, if it did not provide some of the solace and support that it promised—if it were not, in short, functional for its time—it could hardly have held sway as it did. Even today, we see that individuals may resist medical attention and cling to their symptoms as a means of keeping an otherwise disintegrating family intact. The benefits they gain from maintaining family closure seem to outweigh the suffering and debilitation they pay for them. (16–17)

Systems theory treats the family as a whole. It regards the family not as a compilation of individuals, but as an organism, and it treats the individual within the context of that organism. Thus it was at odds from the start with psychoanalysis, “which essentially saw the individual as an isolated entity and focused on unconscious drives and traumas of childhood” (Cohen 13).<sup>5</sup>

Despite the modern expectations of marriage that, in Updike’s mimetic representation, saturate their world, Harry and Janice enact a venturing-out dynamic over the course of thirty years.<sup>6</sup> They, and later Nelson, cross over the boundary of marital fidelity and otherwise escape the nucleus numerous times, but always return to their “rightful” positions within the primary family. Society at large beckons, but the immediate family reclaims its own.

Sometimes that reclamation is achieved through the regulatory behavior of one family member. According to family systems theory, when one member suffers from a mental or psychosomatic illness—anorexia, alcoholism, or schizophrenia, for instance—the organism as a whole must be examined to determine if the symptomatic individual is subconsciously endeavoring to establish equilib-

rium and closure for the group. By localizing illness, the afflicted member forces the ailing or fragmenting family to unite in concern.<sup>7</sup>

Though there is no suggestion in the Rabbit novels that Updike was aware of family systems theory, his treatment of family rests upon a similar, though subterranean, acknowledgment of the need for a regulatory member. Certainly, reading the novels through the lens of family systems theory helps to bring their ideological position into relief. In each novel, we can discern an ethos of containment inscribed onto Harry and Janice's actions and sentiments. In *Rabbit Is Rich*, for example, while on an outing with his friends from the country club, Harry recalls his parents' emphasis on family unity and thinks:

They should have belonged to a club. Living embattled, Mom feuding with the neighbors, Pop and his union hating the men who owned the printing plant where he worked his life away, both of them scorning the few kin that tried to keep in touch, the four of them, Pop and Mom and Hassy and Mim, against the world and a certain guilt attached to any reaching up and outside for a friend. (*Rabbit Omnibus* 456)

Clearly, in the understanding of family that Harry inherits, blood relationships are meant to be closed, immediate, private, and impenetrable. This is perhaps most strongly implied by the first chapter of *Rabbit Redux*, whose title, "Pop/Mom/Moon," suggests the contrast between "outer" space and an "inner" domain. The chapter hints at the possibility of far-flung galaxies, humankind's uneasy sense of centrality in the universe, the alienating repercussions of new technologies, and the ideological stakes involved in the space race. It situates a single American family in the midst of the Communist threat and an ever-expanding universe. As Lawrence R. Broer observes:

On the same day that Apollo 11 lifts off for the moon, Harry comes home to find his wife absent [because she's having an affair] and his teenage son talking about the rocket launch. The news on television about space travel matches the journey that Angstrom must suffer into the new loneliness of his heart. He must cope with jealousy, fear, lust, and defeat just as the television screen shows the first Americans walking on the moon. (26)

Updike's juxtaposition of outer space and inner space implies that something is amiss in the American home. Both Harry and Janice know by the close of the novel that it is time to reunite. Their family must be contained.

Yet, while Harry and Janice have internalized the ideal of the inviolability of family, they nevertheless come to expect that there will be yearnings for external

consolation. In *Rabbit Is Rich*, Harry looks back on Janice's affair and concludes that it made her "a niftier person" (471). And Janice accepts Harry's desires for other women, asking him how much he had wanted to go to bed with a young woman who had waited on him in a store, "[t]rying to find a topic he'll enjoy" (645).

While their recognition of their extramarital longings ironically indicates their empathy for each other, these and other violations of the nuclear ideal are carried out at a price. Updike is swift to exact that price and thereby demonstrate how such violations can make individuals and their communities suffer. But he is especially apt to show how individuals can suffer in order to mend the fabric, thus enacting the regulating function identified by family systems theory.

In *Rabbit, Run*, for instance, Harry returns to Janice after she accidentally drowns their baby, and the Angstrom and Springer families collect around them in their grief, momentarily united. In *Rabbit Redux* Harry's mother suffers a long and painful death, leading Harry to sit by her bedside for hours at a time. In the same novel, Harry's lover Jill dies when the Angstrom house, in a scene rife with symbolism, burns to the ground, and Janice returns to the marriage.<sup>8</sup> In *Rabbit Is Rich*, Nelson impregnates his fiancée, Pru, has an affair with her best friend, drops out of college, and smashes three cars. He succeeds in getting his parents' attention, and Harry allows him to work in the family's car lot. In *Rabbit at Rest*, Nelson has developed a cocaine addiction; his son, Roy, falls asleep so often he nearly always needs to be carried in the arms of adults; and his daughter, Judy, fakes her own near drowning in order to give Harry the opportunity to "save" her. When Harry, estranged from the family, is dying, Nelson and Janice race to his bedside. In his final moments, the three of them are together, with no "outsiders" present.

These and other regulatory behaviors and illnesses of the Angstrom family abound. Visible suffering on the part of one family member creates group cohesion on the part of the others. Thus, Updike simultaneously offers a critique of nuclearity and reinforces it.

More than any other factor, the partly absent/partly present daughter figure in all four novels localizes Harry's underlying craving for indissoluble blood ties, while at the same time indicating his suppressed desire to allow outsiders to penetrate the nucleus of family. Ironically, the original daughter figure, the infant Rebecca June, is only briefly a member of the family. More often, the lost daughter appears in the symbolic guise of other girl children and operates as a unifying trope around which the family can coalesce. In *Rabbit, Run*, Rebecca June, whom

Harry privately refers to as June, dies by drowning. In *Rabbit Redux*, Harry takes in the runaway Jill, in whom he seeks both a lover and a child, and who dies by fire.<sup>9</sup> In *Rabbit Is Rich*, he “saves” his granddaughter, Judy, from drowning and suffers a heart attack in consequence. Updike links all three characters by their four-letter names beginning with “J” and connects the rescued Judy to the drowned June by the image of water.

All along, though, the real and living daughter is Ruth and Harry’s daughter, Annabelle, and it is with her that Harry most wishes to connect. In *Rabbit, Run* he pleads with Ruth not to have an abortion. In *Rabbit Redux* he presses her with questions about whether her daughter is his. In *Rabbit Is Rich* he goes to great lengths to track Annabelle down. In *Rabbit at Rest* he deduces that she is his nurse in the hospital. His yearning for her, over thirty years, is never abated. He is, in fact, obsessed by her. But the social conventions of the nuclear family prohibit Harry from ever enclosing this daughter in the Angstrom family circle. His abiding awe of heredity and genetics, most fully explored in *Rabbit at Rest*, impel Harry toward Annabelle, the pull of “nature.” But Harry’s socially enforced commitment to an exclusive family unit built upon the contract of marriage and the ethos of containment forbid him access to her. The phantom daughter device allows Updike to collide the primal and the social. He can cast doubt upon the “natural” state of nuclearity by revealing its socially determined, rule-bound qualities, but also acknowledge the pull of “natural” blood ties by emphasizing Harry’s desire for Annabelle.

An episode in *Rabbit Redux* reflects this contrast. When Harry confesses he has had a chance meeting with Ruth, Janice replies, “I can’t believe you never tried to get in touch with her after you came back to me. At least to see what she did about her . . . pregnancy” (ellipsis in original). Harry responds, “I felt I *shouldn’t*” but “sees now, in his wife’s dark and judging eyes, that the rules were more complicated, that there were some rules by which he should have. There were rules beneath the surface rules that also mattered. She should have explained this when she took him back” (*Omnibus* 218). Social conventions, then, keep Harry from any sustained attempt at the integration of his lost biological daughter. Updike conflates the natural and the social more strikingly in *Rabbit Is Rich*, when Harry tells Janice he thinks he has spotted his daughter in the car lot. Janice’s vehement response is inconsistent with her earlier attitude:

“You’re telling me you’re still thinking of this bag you fucked twenty years ago and now you and she have a darling little *baby*. . . You are crazy,” she shouts. “You *always* want what you don’t have instead of what you *do*. Getting all cute and smiley in the

face thinking about this *girl* that doesn't exist while your *real* son, that you had with your *wife*, is waiting at home right now . . . I don't know *why* you're such an unnatural father. . . . One thing definite, I don't want to hear any more about your darling illegitimate daughter. It's a disgusting idea." (459)

Janice's distinction between the "real" offspring, Nelson, and the "illegitimate" offspring, Harry's possible daughter, emphasizes the culturally dictated, contained nature of nuclearity, which can, at least semantically, render a particular offspring unlawful. The moment is an ugly one, and Harry regrets telling her. Momentarily swept away by the twentieth-century ideal of a companionate marriage, "[h]e had mistaken the two of them for one and entrusted to her this ghost of his alone" (459). Not until "Rabbit Remembered," when Janice confronts Annabelle in the fullness of her adulthood, does Annabelle stand a chance of incorporation into the Angstrom family, but by then Harry is long gone.

Updike's approach to nuclearity is, to say the least, complex. He does not shrink from revealing its social constructedness. He exposes its psychic cost in numerous ways, afflicting some characters with this or that ailment and killing others. But he does not renounce it. On a certain level, it appears to be Updike himself, at least as much as Harry, who needs this regulating daughter. She provides a central tension for the plot, to be sure, but she also provides a locus for both the transcendence and the grounding required by the text's protagonist. Updike, it would seem, wants to offer both a way out of the constrictions of family and a way back into the consolations of family. By granting Harry a lost daughter to search for, he can allow his hero the fluidity he badly desires and offer him a kind of grace through kinship. The possible daughter provides the allure of the unknown (the virgin territory required by American quest heroes) and an affirmation of natural blood ties (the salvation within biological/conventional family required by this particular American writer).

Whether Updike can be said to mythologize women to achieve his ends is a subject for another discussion.<sup>10</sup> But certainly he makes sacrificial lambs of girls. June, Jill, Judy, and Annabelle serve to focus the attentions of his questing protagonist, for the Angstrom family and the narrative. Even by their absences and shadow presences, these girls regulate the actions of the other characters. They do so in ways that Nelson apparently cannot. At twelve years old Nelson may, to Harry's irritation, resemble a girl, but by *Rabbit Is Rich* he has become, according to Harry, "one more pushy man in the world" (553). Girls, however, provide Harry, and indeed the text itself, with equilibrium. A daughter can offer Harry the complementarity he seeks. Where Nelson is whiny, demanding, and accusatory,

a daughter would, in Harry's imagination, have eyes like "pale blue little mirrors," thus reflecting him (585). Nelson certainly *is* pushy in *Rabbit Is Rich*, while Annabelle is nurturing, warm, and inviting—with Updike going so far as to make her a nurse, an updated "angel in the house." The contrast with the other daughter figures is striking. They suffer physical disasters (drowning, fire), while she ministers to the physically unwell. In her therapeutic status as insider/outsider, she provides Harry with the emotional salve he yearns for, while the other daughter figures act as regulatory agents for the larger family.

Applying family systems theory, Cohen argues that the sick daughter of today (often anorexic) "carries the symptoms for the family, which is generally fraught with multiple covert tensions." She maintains that "the daughter is logically the most prone to occupy the symptomatic role since she is stereotypically conditioned, by reason of age and sex, to be most accommodating to others' needs. . . . [S]he is specifically conditioned to the needs of the father, the individual who, by choosing his wife, is responsible for bringing the family into being in the first place" (24).

Updike, as if recognizing the need in a family such as Harry's for such a figure, gives to Harry and to the text itself the figures of June, Jill, and Judy. They fill the regulating role as, in a patriarchal, nuclear system, only a daughter can (though Nelson with his car smashing and cocaine habit certainly tries). They are twentieth-century variations on a nineteenth-century theme. Like the heroines of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century domestic novels, June, Jill, and Judy "serve a double regulating function: within the family systems depicted in the novels, they balance the values and behavioral tendencies of other family members; within the fictional systems that *are* the novels, they are the characters most suited to the enactment of balance and closure that the genre favors" (Cohen 26). In addition, in a gesture that covertly recognizes the paradoxical nature of the nuclear family—its need for both insularity and external interaction—Updike brings in a figure who is both an accommodating insider and a biological outsider: the half-daughter Annabelle.

By this plot maneuver, his commitment to family closure never wavers, even as he flirts with the prospect of more permeable arrangements. Each Rabbit novel except the first, which concludes with Harry's desertion, ends in affirmation of the contained family. *Rabbit Redux* puts Harry and Janice in the Safe Haven Motel after their house has burned, and ends: "He. She. Sleeps. O.K.?" (414). *Rabbit Is Rich* concludes with Pru handing Harry the newborn Judy: "Through all this she has pushed to be here, in his lap, his hands, a real presence hardly weighing any-

thing but alive. Fortune's hostage, heart's desire, a granddaughter. His. Another nail in his coffin. His." (700). *Rabbit at Rest*, as earlier mentioned, ends with Janice and Nelson distraught at Harry's deathbed, where Harry tries to tell Nelson "you have a sister" (512, italics in original).

When Nelson eventually learns of Annabelle in the final installment, "Rabbit Remembered," he wages a battle royal with Janice and her new husband, Ronnie Harrison, to allow Annabelle the family embrace he believes she deserves and that he himself so badly desires. Like his father, Nelson intuits salvation and self-revelation in blood ties. Once he knows of Annabelle's existence, he can barely contemplate life without her. He projects attributes onto her, to be sure, but he also recognizes her real strength, her vulnerability, and her separateness as an individual.

At first, Nelson makes much of their genetic link, "imagining her skin as half his, thinking, *My sister. Mine.*" (*Licks of Love* 258). He becomes driven to possess Annabelle in some fashion, imagining that she will complete him. He likens the two of them to the children in the wall mural at a diner, "a boy and a girl wearing old-fashioned German outfits, pigtails and lederhosen, holding hands, lost," like Hansel and Gretel (255). But later, as if to acknowledge the too-tight constriction of enclosed genetic ties, Updike has Nelson squirm and seek escape when, on the eve of the new millennium, Janice becomes emotional at the sight of Nelson alongside Pru, Billy Fosnacht, and Annabelle: "The teariness . . . blurs her survey of the four adult children, her son among them, and the mother of her grandchildren, all so touching, dressed up to greet this particular calendrical doom, with Harry and Fred and Mother and little Becky all squeezed inside them somehow, the DNA" (340). As she makes fretful chatter about the encroaching New Year, Nelson "sees into [her] as into a dark well at whose bottom his own head in silhouette glimmers in a disk of reflected sky" (341). Embarrassed, he ushers the foursome out the door of what has been, in turn, the Springer, the Angstrom, and the Harrison home.

Ambivalence toward restrictive family form runs through the five fictions in a theme as deep as Nelson's imagined well and prompting as much reflected light. True to Updike's penchant for modernist multiplicity, the novella concludes with Nelson reintegrated into his own nuclear family with Pru while simultaneously affirming his relationship with Annabelle, promising to give her away at the altar if she marries Billy. Annabelle's manifold psychic purposes for both her father and her half-brother are seemingly endless and, perhaps by design, can be endlessly interpreted. In Kathleen Verduin's aptly chosen analogy from the field of genetics, Updike's mythologizing of women, along with the myth of self, "both run like a double helix through his work" (61).

And it is partly owing to the fact that Updike's meanings double and redouble upon themselves that Kerry Ahearn's observation, though made before the appearance of *Rabbit at Rest*, still rings true:

The sacred and romanticized image of the nuclear family provides Updike with a myth in which to root his fiction most successfully, connecting the individual, familial, and social. In his created world, men must struggle mightily and live intensely, but are not prompted to do so by the secure family. In adultery they strive, but cannot live. Rabbit is his best exemplar of the ordinary man questing, and (Mim, Thelma, Jill, and even Ruth sees it) he is a family man. (81)

It is, therefore, no accident that the object of this ordinary man's quest turns out to be a part, yet not a full part, of what he has been evading: family. With the Rabbit series, Updike limns a complex debate about family life in late twentieth-century America. In doing so, he ratifies a form that is thought to be traditional, is reliant upon the covenant of marriage, is focused on biological relationships, and yet is mired in paradoxical impulses. He may inscribe a critique of nuclearity onto the Angstroms, but certainly not a disavowal of it.

For ultimately, the Rabbit series reinvests in the notion of an intact nuclear family, surviving against all odds and regardless of the psychic cost exacted from its members. Because the themes and plots never shrink from exploring the ways in which nuclearity is threatened by contemporary life—the commonplaceness of adultery, the discomfort of gender roles, the threat to religious faith posed by technology, and so on—the nuclear form comes across as nearly primal in its tenaciousness. Yet Updike's treatment is far from reductive: paradoxically, his characters must suppress their natural instincts, which are judged *unnatural* by the socially determined standards of the nuclear family, in order to maintain an enclosed family structure—a structure that, again paradoxically, is offered by society as the natural model of social organization. In Updike's hands, the nuclear holds within it an implied nobler reality. As in a hit song from Rabbit's middle-aged years, it is strong; it is invincible.

#### NOTES

1. For discussions of Updike's metaphorical use of nets, see Greiner, 56, and Donner, 25.
2. See, for instance, Alter, 45; Burr, quoting Leslie Fiedler, 7; Detweiler, 167; Greiner, xiii; and Searles, 2172.
3. Boswell observes that readers of *Rabbit, Run* are intentionally "left holding th[e] ball," not knowing whether "to nail Rabbit down for fleeing his social responsibilities" or "to congratulate him for heeding his inner call" (51).

4. Important works on family systems theory include Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), and N. J. Ackerman, *A Theory of Family Systems* (New York: Gardner, 1984).

5. Paul C. Rosenblatt also makes this point: "In Western thought, explanations of what goes on in people's lives, even in the context of their families, typically are couched in terms of individual psychology. Understanding is considered to have been achieved when there are plausible words about individual motivations, intentions, needs, feelings, and thoughts. If family members have a place in an explanation, it is typically as a cause of individual dispositions. Family systems theory, by contrast, provides an understanding of the family. It focuses both on the mutual interplay of family member dispositions and on supraindividual family properties" (33).

6. In *Rabbit, Run* Harry moves in with Ruth. In *Rabbit Redux* Janice moves in with Charlie Stavros and Harry takes Jill and Skeeter into his home. Janice comes under the influence of Charlie's political ideas, and Harry comes under the influence of Skeeter's. Harry also has a sexual encounter with Peggy Fosnacht. In *Rabbit Is Rich* he and Janice swap partners while on vacation with friends, and Nelson mirrors their behavior by sleeping with the close friend of his pregnant fiancée. Janice, in a bid for more outside contact, begins taking real estate courses. United in their wish to stop living intergenerationally, she and Harry move out of her mother's house and into their own. In *Rabbit at Rest*, Harry is in the midst of a long-standing affair with Thelma and even sleeps with his daughter-in-law.

7. See Cohen, 12–25.

8. Kerry Ahearn's analysis of Harry's makeshift family in *Rabbit Redux* relates well to the ideas inherent in family systems theory. He argues, for instance, that the "contradictions in [the relationships between Harry, Jill, Nelson, and Skeeter] make for a volatile family, but the fact that hypocritical characters such as Janice . . . make the conventional 'moral' condemnations reminds us that the family group is neither 'good' nor 'bad,' and that any family's stasis contains the explanation of its destruction" (69).

9. For a discussion of Updike's willingness to sacrifice female lives so his hero can "move," see Gordon, 17–23. Gordon also treats the theme of the "moving boy" in the work of Faulkner and Dreiser.

10. Stacey Olster argues that it is Harry, not Updike, who suffers from a mythologizing tendency: Harry pursues women to achieve transcendence, but Updike "undermines his efforts at every turn," revealing the "inevitable failure to which mythologizing impulses are doomed" (109). Margaret Morganroth Gullette argues that Updike endows Harry with a longing for a daughter in order to heal the split in his work "between man and the entire female part of creation: it images father-and-daughter genetic involvement as a transformation of the father into a woman" (78). Mary O'Connell maintains that "even though Rabbit enjoys privileges that he is unwilling to surrender, he is nevertheless described by Updike as being, in many ways, more confined than the women by gender identity" (8). Kathleen Verduin does not dispute Updike's mythologizing of women, but credits it with allowing highly conscious authorial introspection and the interrogation of western notions of femininity.

#### WORKS CITED

Ahearn, Kerry. "Family and Adultery: Images and Ideas in Updike's Rabbit Novels." *Twentieth Century Literature* 34 (1988): 62–83.

- Alter, Robert. "Updike, Malamud, and the Fire This Time." *John Updike: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. David Thornburn and Howard Eiland. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1979. 39–49.
- Barrett, Michèle. Introduction to *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, by Friedrich Engels. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.
- Boswell, Marshall. "Updike, Religion, and the Novel of Moral Debate." *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike*. Ed. Stacey Olster. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. 43–57.
- Broer, Lawrence R., ed. *Rabbit Tales: Poetry and Politics in John Updike's Rabbit Novels*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1998.
- Burr, Richard Wesley. *Puer Aeternus: An Examination of John Updike's Rabbit, Run*. Zurich: Juris-Verlag, 1974.
- Cohen, Paula Marantz. *The Daughter's Dilemma: Family Process and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1991.
- Detweiler, Robert. *John Updike*. New York: Twayne, 1972.
- Donner, Dean. "Rabbit Angstrom's Unseen World." *John Updike: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. David Thornburn and Howard Eiland. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1979. 17–34.
- Gordon, Mary. *Good Boys and Dead Girls*. London: Bloomsbury, 1991.
- Greiner, Donald J. *John Updike's Novels*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1984.
- Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. *Safe at Last in the Middle Years: The Invention of the Midlife Progress Novel*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1988.
- O'Connell, Mary. *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma: Masculinity in the Rabbit Novels*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1996.
- Olster, Stacey. "Unadorned Woman: Beauty's Home Image." *New Essays on Rabbit, Run*. Ed. Stanley Trachtenberg. Cambridge UP, 1993. 95–117.
- Rosenblatt, Paul C. *Metaphors of Family Systems Theory: Toward New Constructions*. New York and London: Guilford, 1994.
- Ruskin, John. "Of Queen's Gardens." 1865. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Dinah Birch. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 158–59.
- Searles, George J. Biographical entry on John Updike. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, vol. 2. Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1994. 2171–2172.
- Singh, Sukhbir. "'Back on to the Life Wagon': An Interview with John Updike." *Irish Journal of American Studies* 5 (Dec. 1996): 77–91.
- Updike, John. *Licks of Love: Short Stories and a Sequel, "Rabbit Remembered."* Penguin, 2000.
- . *A Rabbit Omnibus: Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit Is Rich*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1990.
- . *Rabbit at Rest*. New York: Knopf, 1990.
- Verduin, Kathleen. "Updike, Women, and Mythologized Sexuality." *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike*. Ed. Stacey Olster. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. 61–75.
- Versluys, Kristiaan. "'Nakedness' or Realism in Updike's Early Short Stories." *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike*. Ed. Stacey Olster. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. 29–42.

# “It Isn’t So Bad”: Acceptance of Aging in Updike’s Fiction

KAZUKO KASHIHARA

I

In an article titled “Old and Overscheduled: No, You Can’t Just Dodder,” *New York Times* science writer Henry Fountain describes the busy lifestyle of today’s retirees. Many elderly people have bustling lives, participating in everything from cooking lessons to skydiving. While this is apparently their choice, in fact they are only following the demands of society. Fountain, describing what one gerontologist has called the “busy ethic,” cites “a continuance of the work ethic that defines many people’s careers. Older people feel compelled to say they are keeping busy” (1, 16). This leads to a paradox in our modern industrialized society, where aging—physical decline and the deterioration of mental prowess—is generally viewed in a negative light.

In novels too, aging has long been pessimistically described and the aged portrayed as alienated from other people. In *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Nick Carraway, who has just turned thirty, foresees “the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair” (142). In *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), Hemingway depicts Santiago as having lost touch with his livelihood and living a life of misery, detested by the other fishermen as if he were a symbol of misfortune. The protagonist of *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, the 1970 novel by Saul Bellow, fights against the younger generation until eventually realizing that it is impossible to resist the tide of time. In yet another example, the young prefect in John Updike’s *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959) thinks of the elderly inmates of the poorhouse as “powerless old people [with] complete

material deprivation,” as “old-fashioned, and . . . ignorant” (56, 102). All of these novels suggest that aging is an uncomfortable experience.

The predicament of old age comes not only from physical and mental decline but also from the social values of a materialistic society. Historian David E. Stannard writes: “To live willingly . . . in a society that degrades and denigrates the social worth of the aged because of their limited ability to engage in the production and consumption activities that are the central criteria for that society’s evaluation of social worth . . . is one of the most difficult chores one will ever encounter” (13). American society, like many other modern industrialized societies, seems to place considerable value on youth, and a person’s worth is judged by the degree and style of his or her production and consumption. Consequently, older people who have retired from productive activities are likely to be pushed to the margins.

Such a view of the aged did not always exist in America. Sociologist Karen A. Conner writes that from the colonial period to the early nineteenth century, the elderly were respected for their experience and wisdom. However, between the 1830s and the Civil War, the sources of knowledge shifted to science and the scientific method. Since modern, scientific ways of thinking were the province of the young and a product of their education, the advice and counsel of the elderly was sought less often and their authority increasingly called into question. By the late nineteenth century, mandatory retirement was common in most occupations, and the social position of the elderly had noticeably deteriorated (24–30). In the twentieth century, as industry evolved and technology became dominant, fewer positions were available for the elderly. Having declined physically and mentally, they were expected to disengage from activities in the workplace where productivity and efficiency are highly valued.

Historian David Hackett Fischer writes: “A cult of youth developed in America during the nineteenth century and grew rapidly in the twentieth. It became most extreme in the 1960’s” (132). Citing a survey conducted in the mid 1950s, he writes that “only a little more than a third of people over sixty thought of themselves as old” (133). This trend has continued into the twenty-first century. Americans adhere to youth so stubbornly that the term *gerontophobia* has been coined to describe their fear of aging.

But is being old really a plight? Is aging just an uncomfortable experience? In most of John Updike’s works, aging is not presented as the worst scenario in life. On the whole, as his ideas evolved through the years, Updike saw aging positively. The subject of aging in Updike’s works has been neglected. Although a number of critics have discussed death in his works, none has fully discussed aging.<sup>1</sup> This

essay will examine Updike's changing ideas on aging as reflected in works written in his twenties, fifties, and seventies, with the purpose of clarifying the idea of aging that Updike finally attained in his later years.

## II

As James Schiff states, "The world of *The Poorhouse Fair* is set between two value systems: a dying past, marked by spiritual belief and individual craftsmanship; and an emerging future, in which the values of homogeneity, physical comfort, and progressive socialism dominate" (18). The two value systems represent different ideas about how to maintain individual dignity. The elderly inmates of the poorhouse no longer have the ability to produce and consume and have no choice but to live on the margin of society. When the young prefect, Stephen Conner, places nametags on their chairs, they are offended, thinking he is trying to increase his control over them and curtail their freedom. Conner, though, says, "Part of my policy has been . . . to give the residents here some sense of ownership" (18). Conner thinks that in order for the inmates to maintain their dignity, it is necessary for them to possess their own things. The inmates, however, do not want to possess money or material things, as shown by their protests against the identification tags.

Updike's ideal of individual dignity is represented in the episodes involving Mrs. Mortis's handmade quilts. Although an antique dealer offers twice her asking price for the quilts, Mrs. Mortis does not sell them at once. She prefers to converse with her customers. Eventually she gives one of her quilts to a poor young couple who are eager to acquire it, and then sells the rest to the dealer. Mrs. Mortis thinks more of those who recognize the value of her quilts and use them for themselves than those who buy them to resell at a high price. The same can be said of Tommy Franklin, who makes miniature baskets and animals out of peachstones. For him, children are better customers for his creations than adults, since they "sensed in them the childlike emotion Tommy Franklin had felt making them . . . [and] were especially pleased by . . . the hole gingerly widened to make an actual handle free in space, where Franklin in working had himself experienced most satisfaction" (158). Both Mrs. Mortis and Tommy Franklin want to give the things they have cherishingly made to those who understand their value. Unlike Conner, who is preoccupied by worldly cares, Mrs. Mortis and Tommy Franklin maintain their dignity by having what they treasure recognized by others.

Although Conner, a rationalist who makes much of efficiency and order, has materially improved the home, the inmates are dissatisfied with him and feel that they are not being treated with dignity as individual human beings. It is obvious

that Conner is much more efficient as a manager of the poorhouse than the former prefect, Mendelssohn. He has turned unused acres into fields to cultivate crops, tidied the outbuildings that were crammed with refuse, and built a fire escape. Thanks to his innovations, the home now has one of the highest ratings in the northeastern sector. However, Mendelssohn seems to have felt an affection toward the inmates that Conner does not possess. He often spoke kindly to them and prayed with them, and they still miss him and talk about him. Conner, an atheist and humanist, asserts that heaven is to be found on this earth and never tries to understand the Christian mindset of the elderly inmates. Their dissatisfactions are revealed in a letter from "an anonymous towns person" that arrives on the morning of the fair. The letter (full of misspellings and likely written by one of the inmates) blames Conner for depriving the inmates of their right to a "final Reward" (190). This reward may involve keeping their dignity and living their lives according to their own will, not that of others. It is the final reward of the aged who have no property or relatives to depend upon. Both Mrs. Mortis's quilt sewing and Tommy Franklin's peachstone work are, however small, activities that enable them to keep their individual dignity. The fair held at the poorhouse once a year is an opportunity for them to display their work and realize their dignity.

The elderly here are not in the predicament that Stannard describes. Although they do not have income or social status, let alone power and strength, they accept their condition and live their lives without despair. In the final scene, John Hook, an inmate who has had a disagreement with Conner but who cares about him, considers improving their relationship. During an incident in which stones were thrown at him, Conner has mistaken Hook for the ringleader, and he punishes him by prohibiting his smoking a cigar, Hook's favorite pastime. Nevertheless, Hook considers Conner's bruised heart and worries about him. The following passage concludes the novel:

His encounter with Conner had commenced to trouble him. The young man had been grievously stricken. The weakness on his face after his henchman had stolen the cigar was troubling to recall; an intimacy had been there Hook must reward with help. A small word would perhaps set things right. As a teacher, Hook's flaw had been over-conscientiousness; there was nowhere he would not meddle. He stood motionless, half in moonlight, groping after the fitful shadow of the advice he must impart to Conner, as a bond between them and a testament to endure his dying in the world. What was it? (198)

This passage shows Hook's mature character. Updike, who lived with his grandparents during his childhood, understood the positive aspects of being old. As a young author in his twenties, however, he did not know how one managed to age in such a positive way. The last sentence of the novel, a question that mirrors its opening sentence ("What's this?"), suggests the author's own questions about aging.

Updike thus successfully depicts being old as something other than a predicament. Even though they may lose the abilities to produce and consume that measure a person's worth in a materialistic society, the elderly are enriched by a wealth of life experiences and can enhance their well-being by affirming their self-dignity. Donald Greiner writes that "not the finality of dead ends but the motions of life shape the novel" (12), and that "Hook's dying . . . will not be a tragedy but it will be a loss." Updike in his twenties, Greiner says, recognizes that "permanence is not a condition of this world" and that even death is not a tragedy but a natural course for us to accept (24).

*Rabbit, Run* (1960), another novel Updike wrote in his twenties, has a few elderly characters. Rabbit's father and father-in-law are not yet old enough to retire, and his former coach, Tothero, is full of appetite and lust, still eager to enjoy his life although he is left paralyzed from strokes in the latter half of the novel. Mrs. Smith, the only truly old figure, is affectionately described. While walking in her garden with Rabbit, she reminisces about the good old days. When Rabbit agrees with her opinions, she cries with pleasure, "Exactly! Exactly! . . . You and I, we think alike. Don't we? Now *don't we?*" (141–42). Mrs. Smith's invitation to Rabbit's son, Nelson, to accept a piece of old candy suggests the author's idea of the elderly: "They're old but good like a lot of old things in this world" (223).

Updike's description of Mrs. Smith is the opposite of ageism. Indeed, it recalls the conception of age during the colonial period. Although the young Rabbit is not interested in Mrs. Smith's reminiscences, he politely listens to her. Even toward Tothero, whom he suspects is addled, Rabbit shows a deferential manner. In contrast to Hemingway's young fishermen, who express contempt for Santiago, and Mr. Sammler's nephew and niece, who slight their uncle as old-fashioned, Rabbit treats his elders with respect. He sees the past experiences behind their deteriorated figures and treats them accordingly. Updike's view of the elderly, formed by having grown up with his grandparents, is that they have wisdom that the young have not yet attained.

The idea of aging is introduced late in the novel when Rabbit dwells on what it means to grow old. With his wife, Janice, in the hospital after their daughter is

born, Rabbit lives alone with Nelson for several days. Playing with his son and recollecting his own childhood, he suddenly feels the truth:

[T]he thing that has left his life has left irrevocably; no search would recover it. No flight would reach it. It was here, beneath the town, in these smells and these voices, forever behind him. The fullness ends when we give Nature her ransom, when we make children for her. Then she is through with us, and we become, first inside, and then outside, junk. Flower stalks. (226)

Here Rabbit perceives the inevitability of aging and his role in this world: to extend the chain of life through reproduction. He senses that his role goes beyond one person's experience; he recognizes himself as present in eternal time, extending from the past to the future. This perception is at the core of the worldview that Updike arrived at in his later years; it might be said to be the origin of that view. However, the young Rabbit (and perhaps the young Updike as well) does not grasp the true meaning of the idea and cannot connect his perception with his quest. He is seeking something brilliant such as his self-realization as a star basketball player in his high-school days. At that time, he was his unique self, not captured by anything, and able to think of himself as the center of the universe. But it is impossible to realize the same glory in the larger society as he did in the game. Although he recognizes the existence of a truth that rules the world, the young Rabbit does not comprehend what it is because he is captured by his past glory. As he cannot connect the truth he feels to what he seeks, he can neither find his place in the world nor the significance of his existence.

In these two early works, elderly characters do not encounter aging as a predicament; instead, aging is an inevitable process related to some sense of truth. The young author's depiction of aging indicates a positive attitude that does not touch on the vicissitudes of growing old since he himself is far from old age.

III

Thirty years later, Updike in his late fifties wrote *Rabbit at Rest* (1990). In this fourth Rabbit novel, Rabbit faces his own aging and is afflicted by an acute fear of death and isolation. Updike described the novel as "a depressed book about a depressed man, written by a depressed man" ("Why Rabbit Had to Go" 24). Indeed, *Rabbit at Rest* is full of depressing subjects such as aging, the premonition of death, and isolation from family and friends. Rabbit notices "the tolerant, careful tone [Janice] has lately adopted" when talking to him, "as if he's prematurely senile" (4).

Although he wants to protest being treated as an old man, he cannot help recognizing his physical and mental decline.

Rabbit's consciousness of aging invokes the fear of approaching death, and this premonition appears throughout the novel, beginning with the first lines:

Standing amid the tan, excited post-Christmas crowd at the Southwest Florida Regional Airport, Rabbit Angstrom has a funny sudden feeling that what he has come to meet, what's floating in unseen about to land, is not his son Nelson and daughter-in-law Pru and their two children but something more ominous and intimately his: his own death, shaped vaguely like an airplane. The sensation chills him above and beyond the terminal air-conditioning. (3)

Rabbit repeatedly thinks of the Pan Am plane that has recently exploded over Scotland and imagines himself in the carnage, as if he had been one of the passengers. When he has a heart attack and is put in the hospital's intensive cardiac-care unit, Rabbit's death turns from premonition to reality. He realizes that death is just in front of him and nearly chokes with fear: "[D]eath is not a domesticated pet of life but a beast that . . . will swallow him, it is truly there under him, vast as a planet at night, gigantic and totally his. His death. The burning intensifies in his sore throat and he feels all but suffocated by terror" (176). He looks to his golf partners—older, Jewish men—for support, calling to them in his heart: "*Help me, guys. Tell me how you've got on top of sex and death so they don't bother you*" (71). They offer jokes and platitudes, having "sensed his silent cry for help, for consolation," but they cannot answer the question that he most wants answered (72).

Rabbit's aging in this novel is quite different from that of the inmates in *The Poorhouse Fair*. Although he is affluent and able to consume more commodities than the elderly people living in the poorhouse, Rabbit is more mentally unstable and nearly demoralized by his fear of death. His fearfulness is reinforced by the suspicion that his whole life has been a wasted effort. He is haunted by the thought that he has led a meaningless life and that he has not yet found the opportunity to realize his full self. If he dies now, his life will have been worthless.

It is a boating accident that saves the depressed Rabbit. When his sailboat capsizes, he rescues his granddaughter, Judy, although he himself has a heart attack. The episode has a great influence on Rabbit. Having saved a life, he is convinced that his existence is not "a silly thing it will be a relief to discard," but meaningful (104). Moreover, the life he has saved is that of the granddaughter who has inherited his genes. On the final page of *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), Rabbit, holding

baby Judy in his arms, is impressed by the fact that this wonderful thing is his. Then suddenly the thought of his death passes through his mind: "Fortune's hostage, heart's desire, a granddaughter. His. Another nail in his coffin. His" (467). The connection he makes between his granddaughter's birth and his own death comes from his recognition that his genes will survive him. His life is meaningful because he is part of the chain of life. In *Rabbit at Rest*, he not only saves Judy's life but prevents the chain of life from breaking, convincing him of the significance of his existence. In due course, the reader learns that Judy was not in danger of drowning but was hiding under the tipped sail to tease her grandfather, and that his conviction that he saved her is false. However, what is important is not the facts of the accident but how Rabbit is affected by it. He recovers his selfhood, and his conviction that his life is not meaningless is firm enough to withstand Judy's words every time she tells him the truth.

After this episode, Rabbit is visited by a more severe trial. He is deprived of the two things to which he has a strong attachment: his job as a car dealer and his house in Penn Park. When his sexual encounter with Pru becomes known and he runs away to Florida, Janice does not follow him as he expected, and he finds himself living alone in their condominium in the off-season. Firmly convinced of the significance of his existence, his fear of death decreases but does not disappear. He has survived a heart attack, and death no longer holds the horror of the unknown; Rabbit's fears are now of something concrete and familiar. At the end of the novel, after a second heart attack, he dies, saying to Nelson that "it isn't so bad" (512).

In contrast to the ideal of aging presented by Updike in his twenties, the author in his fifties portrays old age as a predicament, though different from the predicament that Stannard describes. Harry Angstrom in *Rabbit at Rest* is an affluent elderly citizen, able to afford almost everything he wants. Spiritually, however, he is unstable and demoralized by his terror of death. The predicament of aging comes also to those who are economically advantaged and maintain their social worth as consumers. However, as Rabbit's experiences convey, it is possible to overcome the predicament and relieve one's fear of death by believing in the significance of one's existence. Rabbit's belief in his significance is connected to the truth he vaguely felt thirty years ago, that man fulfills his role in the world by producing offspring.

#### IV

More than fifteen years after *Rabbit at Rest*, Updike in his seventies expressed the state of mind of the aged in a number of his short stories. In "The Apparition," written in 2007, Henry Milford, in his seventies, is on a tour of temples in India

with his wife, Jean. He meets Lorena Billings, a fellow tourist in her forties, and feels a mild sexual desire for her. Diligent in everything, Jean takes notes on the tour guide's explanations, as does Lorena's husband, and they compare notebooks in a kind of competition with each other. Left out, Milford and Lorena draw close. Unlike the Milfords, the Billingses seem to be very rich. Milford is old enough to be Lorena's father, but he feels that "age differences, and differences of wealth and class, were compressed to insignificance by the felt presence of the alien subcontinent all around them" (*My Father's Tears* 230–31).

Milford sees Lorena as an apparition. He is drawn by her urban chicness and slightly accented English, but it is her figure that attracts him most:

Physically [his wife] and the apparition were both, Milford supposed, his "type"—women of medium height with a certain solid amplitude, not fat but sufficiently wide in the hips to signal a flair for childbirth; women whose frontal presentation makes men want to give them babies. His and Jean's babies were themselves of baby-making age, and even, in the case of their two older daughters, beyond it. Yet the primordial instinct was still alive in him: he wanted to make this apparition the mother of his child. (233–34)

Although the plot seems likely to develop into Updike's usual course of adultery, in fact it does not. "He did not want to draw too close to Lorena. At his age, he preferred to observe at a safe distance, to embrace her with a wry sideways attention" (237). At the farewell party for the tour, Milford is struck dumb by the sight of Lorena in a sari. Yet when Lorena asks, "Do you and Jean ever get to New York?" he answers in the negative (242). It is clear that he wants to escape from her.

On his last night in India, Milford, lying in bed beside his sleeping wife and thinking of Lorena, recollects a Hindu rite he saw on the tour. In a celebration of the sexuality of the Hindu god and goddess, a group of priests carried a bronze statue of Parvati out of her sanctuary to stay until morning with her consort, Lord Shiva. The statue was carried in a palanquin, accompanied by a procession of priests singing and playing drums and trumpets. The story ends:

Sleepless on the verge of departure, Milford saw that this had been truth, earthly and transcendent truth, one body's adoration of another, hidden Shivas and Parvatis united amid the squalor and confusion of happenstance, of karma. He rejoiced to be tasting lust's folly once more, though the dark shape he was lying upon, fitted to him exactly, was that of his body in its grave. (243)

Milford sees that male and female adoration of the other's body is the fundamental principle that has made the human race subsist. As it has been continuously

repeated from ancient times, he exists now and so do his children. Milford now understands the truth that the young Rabbit vaguely feels in *Rabbit, Run*. The final sentence of the story indicates that Milford does not fear death. He is delighted to find that he is able to feel desire for a beautiful woman, even as he nears his end.

v

Thus aging in this late Updike story is not presented as a predicament. Though conscious of his physical decline, the elderly protagonist has a stable mind. Like Harry Angstrom in *Rabbit at Rest*, Henry Milford is convinced of the significance of his existence in the great stream of time. By being sexually active and fathering children, he has become a link in the eternal chain of life. There is no need for him to affirm his dignity through tasks such as Mrs. Mortis's quilt sewing in *The Poorhouse Fair*. He realizes that this is the world that God created and that he is a part of it.

Milford's tour guide explains:

“Unlike Buddhism and Catholic Christianity, . . . Hinduism does not exalt celibate monks. It teaches that life has stages, and each stage is holy. It says that sexuality is part of life, and business also—a man earns a living for his family, and thus fulfills his duty to society. In the last stage of life he is permitted to leave his family and business and become a seeker after God and life's ultimate meaning. But the middle stages, the worldly stages, are holy also. Thus Hinduism allows for life's full expression, where Buddhism teaches renunciation and detachment. Hinduism is the oldest of religions still widely practiced, and also the most modern, in that nothing is alien to it.” (240)

There is a similarity between this idea of Hinduism and Updike's Lutheran view of the world. In his essay “What Is Goodness? The Influence of Updike's Lutheran Roots,” Darrell Jodock writes: “The Lutheran tradition underscores and affirms the *presence and activity of God in the world*” (italics in original). He adds, quoting Martin Luther's words: “The Lutheran understanding of the world is based on the metaphor of incarnation. Just as in Jesus the divine joined the human without overwhelming or displacing the human, so God is able routinely to work ‘in, with, and under’ any other aspect of the created world” (123). He continues:

For [Luther], too, God was unlike humans, but God's immanent activity received greater emphasis. The power of God was “essentially present at all places, even the tiniest tree leaf” (*Luther's Works*, 37:57). Anything could be a “mask” of God. Just as the body and blood of Christ were really present “in, with, and under” the bread and

wine in the Eucharist, so God was present “in, with, and under” anything in the world. Christ, who partook of the omnipresence of the divine, could even be bodily present “in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope” (*Luther’s Works*, 37:342). The whole world was sacramental. (133)

In Lutheranism as well as Hinduism, everything in the world is holy. In several interviews, Updike revealed that, having been brought up in a Lutheran family, he regarded himself as Lutheran, and stated that “Lutheranism is comparatively world-accepting” (Plath 94). And he wrote in his memoirs:

[D]own-dirty sex and the bloody mess of war and the desperate effort of faith all belonged to a dark necessary underside of reality that I felt should not be merely ignored, or risen above, or disdained. These shameful things were intrinsic to life, and though I myself was somewhat squeamish about sex and violence and religion, . . . they must be faced, it seemed to me, and even embraced. (*Self-Consciousness* 135)

This acceptance of reality derived from his view that the whole world, even the incomplete and degenerate parts, are approved by the Deity. Therefore, aging and death must be accepted as creations of God. Updike’s unique conception of aging originated not only from his early experiences but also from this worldview.

How can we overcome the fear of death? Updike’s answer is suggested in the last story he wrote, “The Full Glass” (2008). The title refers to one of the habits that the anonymous narrator has recently acquired: “At night, having brushed my teeth and flossed . . . and about to take my pills, *I like to have the water glass already full.*” Although this habit is trivial, it gives him “a small but distinct pleasure” because it is connected to happy memories of his childhood (*My Father’s Tears* 277, italics in original). The narrator, in his late seventies, once lived with his grandparents, like the author himself. Now that he has reached the age that they were at that time, he has come to realize the answer to a question he had as a child.

I would look at [my grandfather] and wonder how he could stay sane, being so close to his death. But actually, it turns out, Nature drips a little anesthetic into your veins each day that makes you think another day is as good as a year, and another year as long as a lifetime. The routines of living—the tooth-brushing and pill-taking, the flossing and the water glass . . . —wear you down. (289)

It seems that it is not necessary for us to overcome the fear of death since that fear disappears in a natural manner. That is why Henry Milford is not afraid of death in the final scene of “The Apparition.”

As sociologists and historians such as Stannard point out, the tendency to show disrespect toward the aged is rooted in how they are treated in modern materialistic society. Nevertheless, Updike indicates that, even in an ageist society, the elderly need not feel the burden of growing old. Even in his twenties, Updike showed that aging is not the worst scenario for those who establish a self-worth that is not dependent upon economic productivity or social privilege. In the first Rabbit novel, the young protagonist senses that aging is man's destiny and that producing offspring makes him a link in the endless chain of life. In *Rabbit at Rest*, the aging character realizes through relating with his granddaughter that his genes will be perpetuated through his descendants, and that gives significance to his existence. In the stories of Updike's later years, the protagonists are undisturbed by aging and the approach of death. Updike reveals that establishing one's dignity and confirming the significance of one's existence are possible deterrents to the predicament of aging.

Although it is difficult for those aged who lack social privilege and status to confirm their significance in a materialistic society, it is possible, in Updike's worldview. Since everything is approved by God, one's own existence must also be approved. Therefore each person can be convinced of the significance of his or her life and accept the difficult conditions of old age. Updike already held a prototype of this view in his twenties. It could be the something that the young Rabbit wants to find and which the Reverend Eccles is extremely curious about in *Rabbit, Run*. Over the following decades, the author developed this prototype into a firmly established view. Based on this view, he conveys the idea in his later stories that aging can be accepted even in an ageist society.

#### NOTE

1. For discussions of death, see Boswell 189–202; Schiff 56–65; and Newman 203–06, among others. Margaret Morganroth Gullette examines aging in *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), saying that Rabbit in his middle years is content with life and has lost his fear of death, and concluding that Updike describes middle age favorably (59–84). However, since her essay was written before *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) was published, she did not discuss Updike's view of aging in his later years, nor have other critics.

#### WORKS CITED

- Boswell, Marshall. *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy: Mastered Irony in Motion*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2001.
- Conner, Karen A. *Aging America: Issues Facing an Aging Society*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1992.

- Fischer, David Hackett. *Growing Old in America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925. London: Penguin, 1994.
- Fountain, Henry. "Old and Overscheduled: No, You Can't Just Dodder." *New York Times*, Week in Review section, 15 May 2005: 1, 16.
- Greiner, Donald J. *John Updike's Novels*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1984.
- Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. *Safe at Last in the Middle Years: The Invention of the Midlife Progress Novel*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1988.
- Jodock, Darrell. "What Is Goodness? The Influence of Updike's Lutheran Roots." *John Updike and Religion: The Sense of the Sacred and the Motions of Grace*. Ed. James Yerkes. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999. 119–44.
- Newman, Judie. "Rabbit at Rest: The Return of the Work Ethic." *Rabbit Tales: Poetry and Politics in John Updike's Rabbit Novels*. Ed. Lawrence R. Broer. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1998. 189–206.
- Plath, James, ed. *Conversations with John Updike*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994.
- Schiff, James A. *John Updike Revisited*. New York: Twayne, 1998.
- Stannard, David E. "Growing Up and Growing Old: Dilemmas of Aging in Bureaucratic America." *Aging and the Elderly: Humanistic Perspectives in Gerontology*. Ed. Stuart F. Spicker, et al. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1978. 9–20.
- Updike, John. *My Father's Tears and Other Stories*. New York: Knopf, 2009.
- . *The Poorhouse Fair*. 1959. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1991.
- . *Rabbit at Rest*. New York: Knopf, 1990.
- . *Rabbit Is Rich*. New York: Knopf, 1981.
- . *Rabbit, Run*. 1960. New York: Knopf, 1987.
- . *Self-Consciousness*. New York: Knopf, 1989.
- . "Why Rabbit Had to Go." *New York Times Book Review* 5 Aug. 1990: 1, 24–25.



# Two Neglected Female-centric Novels of Updike's Late Phase: *Gertrude and Claudius* and *Seek My Face*

JAMES SCHIFF

For many critics, John Updike's last major work of fiction was *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), published nearly twenty-five years ago. Exceptions could be made for *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), which Michiko Kakutani called his "most ambitious novel" and "arguably his finest" ("Seeking Salvation" B1), or *Terrorist* (2006), which generated considerable, albeit polarized, attention. Other works from this late phase, such as *Memories of the Ford Administration* (1992), *Toward the End of Time* (1997), and a handful of short stories, also have their champions. Yet it is no great leap to argue that most of the writing, particularly novels, that Updike published between 1991 and 2009, the year of his death at age seventy-six, is considered, for now, minor. This is hardly surprising; as Updike observed, "of American novelists, only Henry James continued in old age to advance his art; most, indeed, wrote their best novels first, or virtually first" ("Why Write?" 39). Saul Bellow (1915–2005), at peak form as a novelist between his mid-thirties and late fifties, serves as a good example. Though Bellow continued to write until his death at eighty-nine, we remember *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) and *Herzog* (1964), written when he was in his prime and clicking on all cylinders, but not the works that came later, such as *The Dean's December* (1982) and *The Actual* (1997). The same will likely be true for Updike: we will remember the Rabbit novels, but not, say, *Brazil* (1994) or *Villages* (2004).

What is striking, though, about the final two decades of Updike's life, in contrast to Bellow's final thirty years, is that Updike was not slowing down. His health and energy were good, and he was as productive and prolific as ever, publishing more than twenty volumes after *Rabbit at Rest*. A critical study focusing on these years is needed. While it may conclude that these writings were indeed minor, a case will likely be made for a hidden gem. More valuable, though, will be the opportunity to gain a better understanding of how this work fits within Updike's oeuvre. We have learned how *Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Couples* (1968), *A Month of Sundays* (1975), *The Coup* (1978), and *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981) serve as continuations, departures, or important steps forward. The same, however, cannot yet be said of the later volumes.

The task here is to chip away at this large accumulation of late work by focusing on two neglected novels, *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000) and *Seek My Face* (2002), which have received very little scholarly interest. Both stand as departures in the masculine-centric Updike canon by featuring a female protagonist. Across Updike's expansive oeuvre, one is continually watching the world through a male lens. Although Updike early on generated credible female characters, such as Ruth Leonard and Janice Angstrom, they are more often observed than observing. The observing woman, with extended interiority, does not emerge—i.e., Updike does not construct a novel around a female protagonist—until *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984). Subsequently, and over the final quarter-century of his life, his female characters, including Janice in the remaining Rabbit installments, become not only increasingly articulate and capable, but assume a more central role, serving as protagonists in three of his final five novels. That Updike waited so long to write about the world as seen through the lens of a woman is not surprising, nor is it unusual that, as an ambitious novelist eager to expand his range, he would eventually turn to writing about female interiority. What is curious, though, is why the female perspective became so appealing to Updike in his later years.

Even more pressing is the question of whether Updike saw and wrote differently through the lens of a woman. Such a question, however, is not easy to answer. Comparing Harry Angstrom of the Rabbit novels to Hope Chafetz of *Seek My Face* is to compare a young or middle-aged character, conceived by the author in his twenties, to an elderly character invented by a man of nearly seventy. The differences have as much or more to do with age as gender; they also reflect large cultural changes occurring between 1960 and 2002, as well as differences in the characters' social class and professions. It is true, though, that while Updike's male-centered novels typically depict men within marriage or vacillating

between wife and lover, his female-centric novels, with the exception of *Gertrude and Claudius*, depict women who are either alone, their ties to men severed, or primarily in the company of other women. In *The Witches of Eastwick*, the three central women have eliminated their husbands, reducing them to dust in a jar, a dried herb, and a plastic placemat; in *Seek My Face* and *The Widows of Eastwick* (2008), the men have mostly died. As Updike in his later years moved toward a female sensibility, the novels increasingly are about living alone, women bonding with other women, and women as survivors. In contrast to his Rabbit novels, in which Harry stands at the center of family, culture, and America, his female-centric novels enabled him to write from a slightly more marginal perspective. As Updike explained in interviews and essays, with aging he felt less vital, more peripheral, so it is intriguing to observe how simultaneously he gravitated toward a female sensibility.

It is also worth noting that the female protagonists of *Gertrude and Claudius* and *Seek My Face* are recreations of characters that existed either in history or literary history: Gertrude is a reconsideration of Queen Gertrude in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*; Hope Chafetz derives from twentieth-century painter Lee Krasner. Recall too that in *S.* (1988) Updike retold the story of another female character from literary history, Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, and Essie/Alma of *In the Beauty of the Lilies* was modeled after Doris Day. When Updike began to foreground women in his fiction, he opted to create characters not from scratch, so to speak, but rather to appropriate preexisting women, as if he needed assistance or a leg up. The women he employed as models were strong and famous, a far cry from the male everyman that he so often featured in his fiction. In addition, most of these women, in spite of their talents and capabilities, were overshadowed or rendered relatively silent by the more famous and powerful men who surrounded them. Updike provided them with a voice as well as agency.

To contextualize, it is important to remember that Updike, like Bellow and Philip Roth, received considerable criticism throughout his career for his depiction of women. In 1976 Mary Allen argued that Updike "appears not to be fully aware of the extent to which he demeans the female character" (78) and pointed to how often his women, almost none of whom hold meaningful jobs, are described by his male characters as "dumb" and "stupid" (79). While Stacey Olster and others have adeptly responded to Allen's charges, and while female writers from Anne and Katie Roiphe to Margaret Atwood and Joyce Carol Oates have praised Updike's writing, the author has been cast by some as a misogynist, either uninterested in or incapable of capturing female interiority. With this in mind,

the response to *Gertrude and Claudius* and *Seek My Face* is instructive. Kakutani, unrelenting in her attacks on Updike's earlier female-centered novels, wrote that with *Gertrude* "he has succeeded in creating one of his most sympathetic and persuasive female characters yet," calling *Gertrude* "a genuinely compelling character, a woman who is, by turns, vulnerable and outspoken, daring and naive" ("Run, Gerutha, Run" B1, B8). Others agreed, and similar comments were made about *Hope*.<sup>1</sup> For those questioning Updike's ability to understand and depict a woman's life from inside and out, *Gertrude* and *Hope* provide an affirmation of his achievement. They also cast doubt on earlier criticism of his female characters. Was Updike unable to create complicated, believable female characters at earlier stages of his career, or is it simply that he was not creating the kind of female characters that some critics wanted? Such questions, however interesting, belong to a wider-ranging discussion of Updike and gender. While gender plays a significant role in these two novels, it is not the sole focus.

#### GERTRUDE AND CLAUDIUS

Of the two novels at hand, *Gertrude and Claudius* was reviewed more favorably; in fact, its reviews were among the most positive for any Updike novel published after *Rabbit at Rest*. The *New York Times Book Review* named it, along with Roth's *The Human Stain* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, one of the five major works of fiction of the year 2000. But while Roth and Smith's novels have since garnered considerable critical scholarship and are frequently taught in college classrooms, *Gertrude and Claudius* has been relatively forgotten. Some of the neglect stems, perhaps, from the novel's derivative nature, depending for its plot and characters on Shakespeare; as reflected in its reviews, it was seen as delightful but minor. Yet the neglect is also due to a declining interest among academics in Updike's works.<sup>2</sup>

The most significant aspect of *Gertrude and Claudius* is its intertextual dialogue with *Hamlet*, yet another canonical text (along with *The Scarlet Letter*, the Tristan and Isolde legend, and myriad myths and stories) the author has retold. As Updike once admitted, "I have almost always begun a book with another book in mind" (Salgas 179). Humor, generated by a deflation of the mythic dimensions of the earlier text, frequently colors his retellings, yet Updike's acts of literary revision have more substantive and complex aims. The prefigurative text allowed him to expand the possibilities of his narrative, providing him with a structure upon which he could challenge aspects of the earlier story, fill in gaps, explain mysteries, and suggest cultural differences between the worlds from which the texts emerge. Though Updike has often been narrowly cast as a realist, his writings were always

intertextually layered, suggesting that his work may have as much in common with modernism and postmodernism.

The impetus for his prequel to *Hamlet*, according to the author, was to address questions Shakespeare left unanswered: “[H]ow long had [Gertrude and Claudius] known each other? Why *did* she remarry so quickly? And, of course, to what extent did she participate in her husband’s murder?” (Reilly 222).<sup>3</sup> Presenting events largely from Gertrude’s perspective, Updike worked from the earliest iterations of the Hamlet story: Saxo Grammaticus’s “Amleth” and Francois de Belleforest’s *The Hystorie of Hamblet*.<sup>4</sup> As T. S. Eliot noted, “*Hamlet* is a stratification . . . represent[ing] the efforts of a series of men, each making what he could out of the work of his predecessors” (46). Its compositional history reveals its layering: “Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is a revision of a dramatic treatment (*Ur-Hamlet*) of a retelling (Belleforest) of a literary treatment (Saxo) of a Scandinavian legend” (Hansen 67). The compositional process, however, does not conclude with Shakespeare. For novelists, poets, and playwrights, *Hamlet* continues to be a vital and evolving work, with Updike joining a list of prominent literary figures, from Goethe and Sterne to Stoppard and Atwood, who appropriated and retold the Hamlet story.

Working from Saxo’s “Amleth,” Updike skipped over early scenes of heroic combat to begin with a domestic situation, in which a sixteen-year-old Zealand maiden, Gerutha/Geruthe/Gertrude, is offered by her father, King Rorik, as plunder to an older Jute warrior, the soon-to-be King Horwendil/Horvendile/Hamlet.<sup>5</sup> Updike launches his novel at this critical point of conflict in Gertrude’s early life, though one which both Saxo and Belleforest ignored. The independent, sensual Gertrude objects to the proposed marriage, viewing her betrothed as crude and “unsubtle” (3). The novel’s central tensions—between obedience and resistance to patriarchy, marrying for love versus duty—are framed in the opening scene, and the subsequent marriage will lead to the fall of the Danish royal family.

By writing “the romance that preceded the tragedy” (Updike, “Special Message” 640), Updike transfers the reader’s sympathy from son (Hamlet) to mother (Gertrude) and alters our understanding of the play’s major characters, events, and themes. Shakespeare’s brooding, introspective drama about a son’s inability to avenge the death of his father becomes an elegant, playful, and comic courtly romance about a middle-aged woman’s psychological and sexual awakening. By shifting the perspective, Updike overturns commonly held assumptions about *Hamlet*.

First, the marriage between Gertrude and King Hamlet, traditionally perceived as a loving, sacred union by their only offspring and, perhaps, a majority of readers, becomes an arranged match without love or romance. Despite his inherent

goodness, the king proves inattentive and dull. Surrounded by and subservient to men, Gertrude feels trapped: "I was my father's daughter, and became the wife of a distracted husband and the mother of a distant son. When, tell, do I serve the person I carry within, the spirit that I cannot stop from hearing, that sought expression with my first bloody cry . . . ?" (94).

Updike's second major alteration to *Hamlet* is his depiction of the hasty marriage between Gertrude and Claudius, which has been commonly viewed with suspicion and the possible taint of adultery, incest, and treachery. Far from shameful and inappropriate, the marriage in *Gertrude and Claudius* is the culmination of a protracted affair which has liberated the queen, enabling her to discover her "essential value" (138). Married for years to a man she does not love, Gertrude is stirred by Claudius, who "disclose[s] to her . . . a self laid up within her inner crevices and for forty-seven years merely latent, asleep. . . . Protest had been lurking in her, and recklessness, and treachery, and these emerged in the sweat and contention of adulterous coupling" (129).

To Updike's contemporary American sensibility, the marriage fueled by passion and choice is clearly superior to the one arranged by royal parents. This hardly differs from Updike's previous ideas about marriage, though in writing through a female lens, he enlarges the notion, suggesting that marriage over time becomes as stale, flat, and lifeless for women as it is for men. While Shakespeare, as Stephen Greenblatt notes, "is the supreme poet of courtship," he is "curiously restrained in his depictions of what it is actually like to be married"; with the exception of the Macbeths, he provides very little of married life or "spousal intimacy" (32, 33). In contrast, Updike's fictional territory is marriage, rendered in considerable domestic detail, and so he fills in a gap by creating a credible, albeit comic vision of what these two marriages, one dull and the other passionate, could have been like.

Updike's third significant change to the Hamlet story involves his depiction of the prince. Shakespeare's Hamlet, possessing one of the most complex sensibilities of Western tradition, dominates the play, which feels at times as if it is taking place within his head. However, when he is seen, as in Updike's novel, through the eyes of others who are negotiating their own problems, he becomes insignificant. Updike's Hamlet is stripped of lines, mocked, and transformed into a sour, self-indulgent, arrested adolescent who is away at school "learning how to *doubt*" (80). Updike's distaste for Hamlet leads him, in an afterword, to quote William Kerrigan's summary of G. Wilson Knight's assessment: "Putting aside the murder being covered up, Claudius seems a capable king, Gertrude a noble queen, Ophelia a treasure of sweetness, Polonius a tedious but not evil counsellor, Laertes a ge-

neric young man. Hamlet pulls them all into death" (212). Alerting his readers to the dangers inherent in subscribing to Hamlet's perspective, Updike provides clever correctives throughout the novel. The only problem is that his humor also threatens the story's credibility; each joke about the prince, while amusing and revealing, renders Hamlet increasingly cartoonish.

The most significant thematic change to the play emerges through Updike's treatment of love and sexuality. Shakespeare's Hamlet speaks scornfully of human sexuality and urges his mother toward abstinence, telling her to "go not to my uncle's bed," and accusing her of "liv[ing] / In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed" (III.iv 159, 92–93). According to Harold Bloom, Hamlet cruelly "consigns Ophelia to a life of pious chastity," which feeds her madness and leads to her suicide, all the while revealing his essential inability to love: "Despite his passion in the graveyard, we have every reason to doubt his capacity to love anyone, even Ophelia" (41, 43). In contrast, Updike's protagonists typically gravitate toward the body and its needs; sexuality, which can take on a spiritual dimension, provides revitalization and renewal. Adultery can heighten that experience because it must overcome social obstacles and take place furtively. In *Gertrude and Claudius*, the queen's sexual desire emerges as a healthy impulse, one that liberates as well as empowers.

Gertrude's sexuality is hardly a new subject. In her landmark essay "The Character of Hamlet's Mother," Carolyn Heilbrun answered Shakespearean critics such as A. C. Bradley, Harley Granville-Barker, and J. Dover Wilson, who, she believed, misunderstood Gertrude because they could not accept her sexuality: "[T]hose critics . . . have traditionally seen her as well-meaning but shallow and feminine, in the pejorative sense of the word: incapable of any sustained rational process, superficial and flighty" (10). For Heilbrun, those critics failed to acknowledge Gertrude's passion: "Unable to explain her marriage to Claudius as the act of any but a weak-minded vacillating woman, they fail to see Gertrude for the strong-minded, intelligent, succinct, and, apart from this passion, sensible woman that she is" (11). An important feminist text, Heilbrun's essay treats Gertrude's lust as a flaw, though one that is more than offset by her strengths: "Gertrude, if she is lustful, is also intelligent, penetrating, and gifted with a remarkable talent for concise and pithy speech" (17). While Updike offers similar praise for Gertrude's abilities as a speaker, he values and celebrates her not in spite of but because of her lust. Hardly a flaw in Updike's world, lust is a natural impulse that can transform and revitalize. Perhaps surprisingly to some, Updike in *Gertrude and Claudius* composes a validation of female sexuality and a celebration of a woman's sexual awakening.

Although guilty of adultery, Updike's Gertrude is not an accomplice to mur-

der. In a revealing scene in which the queen is introduced to falconry, Claudius explains how the female falcon is trained to hunt by its handler: at first, its eyes are sewn shut “for her own protection; otherwise she will be frantic with the possibilities of freedom that she sees about her. . . . For her to become a partner to men, she must be constrained” (64). The falconer trains her “until she at last will succumb and accept his glove as her natural resting place” (65). The objective is to turn her into a killer who can partner with men, though if the training is unsuccessful, “she reverts to an untamed state, . . . hurling herself into an upside-down fury” (66). Much like the falcon, Gertrude has few options, yet she resists complete subservience, does not become man’s killing partner (Claudius alone kills the king), and does not hurl herself into a fury. Unaware of the murder, she behaves with dignity, courage, and strength.

As *Gertrude and Claudius* moves toward its conclusion, it becomes less the story of a woman’s sexual awakening and more the ironic tale of a man’s naivete. Once the adulterous relationship turns into a conventional marriage, Updike shifts his focus from the queen to Claudius, whose coronation endows him with new confidence. Sensing an increasing kinship with his nephew, Claudius is optimistic about the future. In contrast to the novel’s first two sections, the third, which moves closer to the point at which Shakespeare’s play begins, has less action and development. With the proximity of Shakespeare’s text, Updike has fewer options as a storyteller, and the narrative loses momentum. The saving grace is the novel’s shrewd send-off, in which we are left to contemplate the new king’s future: “The era of Claudius had dawned; it would shine in Denmark’s annals. He might, with moderation of his carousals, last another decade on the throne. Hamlet would be the perfect age of forty when the crown descended. . . . He had gotten away with it. All would be well” (210). The experience of reading these lines is not unlike that of watching a documentary about JFK that concludes with his warm welcome at Dallas’s Love Field on a sunny day in 1963.

What is most important about this novel, beyond its persuasive literary criticism of *Hamlet*, is its extended depiction of a wise, capable woman who is both central to the story and observable from within. While Updike’s novels typically feature a male protagonist being pulled between two women or “two moral imperatives,” in *Gertrude and Claudius*, as Laura Elena Savu points out, the “pattern is reversed, for it is a woman (Gertrude) who must make a choice between two men” (29). Through Gertrude, the Hamlet story is radically altered; her adultery is not a morally reprehensible act but an oppressed woman’s assertion of her independence. In a novel that is to some degree both a paean to middle-aged love

and sex and a feminist *Hamlet*, Gertrude emerges as an honorable adulterer—a more sympathetic Edna Pontellier, a less tragic Anna Karenina. What is surprising about Updike's version of the story is how well Gertrude and Claudius come off in spite of their collaborative deception and his role as a murderer. Although their fate is sealed by Shakespeare's text, Updike redeems the two lovers, bestowing legitimacy upon their union while limning Gertrude as passionate, clever, strong-willed, and resourceful.

Perhaps to its detriment, *Gertrude and Claudius* is considerably more dependent upon its prefigurative text than, say, *S.* is reliant upon *The Scarlet Letter*. When reading *S.*, one inhabits the world of Updike's novel and generally forgets about Hawthorne; when reading *Gertrude and Claudius*, one is always mindful of Shakespeare. Yet Updike's prequel to *Hamlet* is skillfully conceived, eloquent and compelling, possibly the most accomplished of his final five novels. Worthy of further exploration is how Updike's close engagement with Shakespeare affected not only this novel but also his subsequent writing. Surely, Updike's depiction in *Rabbit Remembered*, published less than a year later, of Nelson Angstrom emerging from the shadow of his deceased and somewhat ghostlike father, Harry, was influenced by the father-son dynamic of *Hamlet*. Yet what finally seems most noteworthy about *Gertrude and Claudius* is how little attention Updike pays to Hamlet or Hamlet Sr.; instead, the author, then in his sixties and increasingly comfortable with exploring female interiority, concentrates on the play's mother and lover. Of the many female characters conceived throughout his career, Gertrude is perhaps his most mature and vital creation.

#### SEEK MY FACE

Unlike *Gertrude and Claudius*, which is fueled by a furtive adulterous relationship, regicide, and considerable humor and irony, *Seek My Face* is a quiet, static novel with little action or drama. Structured as a single unbroken scene, the novel is essentially a conversation, more precisely an interview, between two women, an aging painter, Hope Chafetz, and a young journalist, Kathryn D'Angelo, which takes place entirely in Hope's rustic Vermont home. Though the seventy-nine-year-old painter has lived a rich life, as recounted through memories and conversation, there is little action in the present: lunch, a bathroom break, a studio tour, and a short walk outdoors. Further, Hope is at peace with the world. Having married several famous men and established herself as an accomplished artist, the twice-widowed, once-divorced Hope has few regrets and, compared to other Updike protagonists, is mostly free of tension and conflict.

It is no surprise, then, that critics did not take to the novel. Ron Charles found “the considerable constraints of its static setting” stifling, such that even the “moving moments are cramped in a structure that doesn’t give them much air to breathe” (15); Kakutani argued that “it’s impossible for the reader to find a single believable character” (“Roman à Clef” B6); and Anthony Quinn described the book as “rambling, costive and savourless” (8). Though some of these claims align in part with my own initial reading of the novel, *Seek My Face* is more like *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959) than, say, *Rabbit, Run*; that is, it is peculiar and somewhat resistant to common readerly expectations regarding action, drama, and conflict.

While *Seek My Face* is not one of Updike’s stronger novels, it is instructive to see how many good reviewers misread it. For anyone knowledgeable about twentieth-century American art, it is readily apparent that Hope is modeled after Lee Krasner; that her first husband, Zack McCoy, derives from Jackson Pollock; and that various other artists in the novel are inspired by or are composites of such well-known figures as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Updike even prefaced the novel by acknowledging a Pollock biography and an abstract expressionist anthology, and he explained in an interview that the novel was “an attempt to show the moment of American ascendancy in the visual arts, or in the pictorial arts, to see the abstract expressionist moment in the mid-forties and up to the mid-fifties . . . through a woman’s eyes” (Zanganeh 6). Given this historical component, critics such as John Russell, John Banville, and Kakutani focused on the similarities and differences between Updike’s characters and their real-life counterparts. Because Updike borrowed heavily from yet intentionally distorted the historical record—E. L. Doctorow did something similar in *Ragtime* (1975)—some critics were confused. As Banville wrote, “while Krasner was the daughter of Jewish immigrants from Ukraine, Hope is a child of Pennsylvania Dutch Quakers. Why Pennsylvania, why Quakers? The question, like so many of the questions this odd book raises, is hard to answer” (10).<sup>6</sup> Other critics, like Kakutani, were more prone to dismiss: “His appropriation of real-life characters, incidents and details . . . is so blatant and gratuitous that the reader can only wonder why a writer this talented—and in the past so tirelessly inventive—would have taken on such a derivative project” (B1).

Updike was clearly not interested in creating an accurate historical narrative. Consider, for instance, that Hope first marries one of the greatest artists of the twentieth century, then weds another artist who embodies the major art movements of the ’30s and ’60s, and follows this with a third marriage to a prominent art collector. This succession of husbands suggests artistic playfulness rather than exact-

ing realism. There is also something ludicrous about Hope's second husband, Guy Holloway, whose work is depicted as an amalgam of the styles of Johns, Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, and Claes Oldenburg, among others. Though Kakutani described Guy as "a completely phony creation" (B6), Updike told interviewer Rosemary Herbert that he meant him to be "a sort of joke. The idea that one rather bland man would create all of these pop modes amuses me" (Herbert 46).

The seeds for a particularly fruitful way of approaching *Seek My Face* can be found in the 2002 Herbert interview and a 2009 essay by Marta Cerezo Moreno, "Narrative Chromaticism of Youth and Age in John Updike's *Seek My Face*." In the interview, Updike spoke of writing in "a verbal style that would be the equivalent of Pollock's dribble" and referred to the novel as "[m]y own small canvas: A day in the life of a painter" (45). Herbert, quoting Updike on his method for creating characters, says that Kathryn developed from "'something vague' to a sharper image, like a photograph," and that Guy was constructed "like a collage," becoming "a catch-all person' who represents 'the granddaddies of pop art in this country'" (46). Building upon the notion that American visual art is central not only to the content of *Seek My Face* but also to its form, Moreno argues that Hope's "recollections are so profoundly shaped by her vision of art and pictorial representation that her narrative progressively acquires the texture of her own last canvases" (176). To put it another way, Hope's words and thoughts are delivered as visual images that reflect her painterly eye, as in this description of Zack:

He was beautiful . . . ; his face had these lovely low-relief episodes of muscle, even in his forehead, the two diagonal high places up from the deep creases where his eyebrows frowned in, he was always frowning; as his hair thinned more and more, he looked less and less as if he had *ever* had hair, it was the most natural and becoming baldness I ever saw. . . . And the rest of him . . . You can't do a beautiful person item by item, there's the unity, there was a *swing* to his body, a *thrust* I guess we can say without getting too Freudian, that used to take my breath away when he wasn't aware I was looking at him. (54-55)

Page after page of *Seek My Face* is filled with similar description. Images are sometimes compared to a painting: through a window Hope notices "a blue-gray haze behind the cauliflower tops, a pattern of agitated streaks and tatters like the mounting flakes in a Jarl Anders painting turned sideways" (135). Hope herself is described as if a figure in a painting: "her belly bulges but her breasts and buttocks are sunken, she has become beneath her clothes a naked witch by Schongauer, . . . or Rembrandt's dreamy Saskia" (8).

Readers familiar with Updike's style expect lushly visual writing and frequent allusions to artists. Yet *Seek My Face* goes a step further. As Moreno explains: "In the front parlor of Hope's house, . . . both women facing each other during the interview[,] . . . the narrative takes on a pictorial nature as it is burdened with form and color, arranged side by side and representing Hope and Kathryn as adjacent bodies" (178). The achievement of *Seek My Face* is that Updike—who admired the quiet domestic images of Vermeer, had ambitions of becoming a cartoonist and attended art school, copiously reviewed art exhibitions, and strove to create verbal images of a painterly quality—composed a novel that attempts, through language, to *be* a painting.<sup>7</sup> Despite Updike's reference to Pollock's dribbles, *Seek My Face* limns a more representational canvas, its central subject the image of two women sitting across from one another in a rustic New England home:

[Kathryn's] face presses a few inches deeper into the space between Hope and herself, she in the soft old sunroom chair and Hope in her hard rocker . . . The unkind clarity of the morning light . . . strips the interviewer's face of beauty and shows it to be horsy and humorless . . . Kathryn glances down into the sheets of paper balanced on her black lap . . . as the interview tape unwinds in the little machine, a Sony of two tones of gray, its purr tinny in the silence, on the low table between them, not a table but an old wooden sea-chest . . . (13)

The women remain in these fixed positions for most of the text, though the light and mood change with the day. In contrast to fiction that depends upon action and movement, *Seek My Face* is relatively still, like a painting.

To some degree, painting functions in *Seek My Face* as whaling does in *Moby-Dick*: it is pervasive, with Updike approaching it from many angles, exploring its history, conflicts, major figures, styles, and theories. Central to his exploration is the theoretical notion of "push and pull" as explained by his character Hermann Hochmann (modeled after the painter Hans Hofmann): "[W]hen you put a single line on a piece of paper there is no telling what its direction is. But if you put a shorter line under it, the longer line *moves*, and the shorter one goes in the opposite direction. . . . [T]he piece of paper had now become a universe, in motion. . . . The two lines moving in different directions had tension between them, and that made them a living thing (35–36)." "Push and pull" is not limited to the canvas; it extends to human relationships and to virtually every aspect of life, observable in the planes of Zack's face as well as in the conversation between Hope and Kathryn. Described as an "aggressive intruder," Kathryn is an "inquisitor" who needs to be resisted, yet simultaneously Hope finds herself drawn to and "trying

to charm the lithe black-clad stranger" (5, 13, 8). Conflict and tension, parry and thrust, exist between these two women as they seek to discover truths about the past. Initially, Hope wishes to keep the details of her life confidential, yet she becomes increasingly eager to confess. Their conversation is guided by the same principles that Hochmann identifies in a work of art: for something to come to life, there must be tension, a push and pull between lines or objects.

Art figures not only formally and theoretically in *Seek My Face* but also theologically; as Hope says, "[T]o make art was the highest and purest of human activities, the closest approach to God" (38). Hope's maiden name, Ouderkerk, according to Thomas M. Dicken, suggests the Dutch "ouder kerk," or older church, with art as the older or parent church (81). Updike views the activity of looking and then striving to capture what one sees as a means of approaching God. When Kathryn says that an old boyfriend had told her "there's really no place for God in the universe," Hope responds: "In us, dear. The place is in us" (207). Abstract expressionism, in particular, offers a mode for getting onto canvas the interior self that stands as a reflection of God; as Hope explains, "That was the thing, back then, that everybody talked about—getting the *self* out, getting it on canvas" (44). Art becomes the mediator between self and world, self and God.

Art also serves to capture and make permanent the flux of temporal reality. As the novel demonstrates, the past, which Hope is continually striving to recall and which Kathryn seeks to reconstruct, is ambiguous as well as contested. When Kathryn asks about "the historical moment . . . when everything came together," Hope responds: "Most people had no idea anything wonderful was happening. They didn't know there was a moment" (12, 16). The novel portrays the gap between how we experience reality and actual history. Hope's recollection of World War II is personal and cultural rather than historical: "[N]obody mentioned the war. . . . All we talked about was painting and who was fucking who" (21). Hope often discerns a difference between her recollection and Kathryn's reconstruction: "Why is this young person reciting Hope's own life to her? And not getting it quite right" (21). Because the past is not fully knowable, art provides a means of preservation, whether through words on a page or the application of paint: "The hardened paint carried a glimpse forward into a radiant forever, along with the groping, stabbing movement of the painter's hand and eye" (24).

Art, however, as Hope states repeatedly, "was a man's world" (16). As a young artist, Hope was taught by men during an era, "which the war had reinforced, of women *serv*ing men" (85). As in *Gertrude and Claudius*, female captivity and subservience are pervasive: Zack, who "hid [Hope] as a painter upstairs like the

mad Mrs. Rochester,” argues: “A woman’s place . . . is behind a broom or on her back” (12, 119). When Zack dies, however, Hope begins to paint again and “felt for the first time this masculine thing about scale the guys were always talking about” (150–51). As artists, Hope explains, women are “too timid and respectful, . . . and easily distracted,” and “aren’t good at irony” (193, 185). Ultimately, she concludes that men and women see differently. One finds a greater “frontality” in the work of men because “[w]omen fear danger from a greater variety of directions than men”; however, men have their own limits in that they “see what’s in front of them but not always all the rest” (252, 255).

Updike would seem to agree. In an essay on the male body he states: “Any accounting of male-female differences must include the male’s superior recklessness, a drive . . . to test the limits, to see what the traffic will bear” (“Disposable Rocket” 31). With this in mind, one notices that *Seek My Face* feels relatively tame, presentable, and good-mannered compared to, say, the Rabbit novels or *Roger’s Version* (1986). Regarding sexual desire, for example, I’m not sure there’s anything in *Seek My Face* equivalent to Roger’s pornographic fantasies or the scene in *Rabbit Is Rich* in which Harry tries to imagine the pubic hair of a woman who may be his daughter. It’s not that *Seek My Face* is less sexually graphic; in one scene, Hope visualizes erect penises (74), and there is a detailed description of Hope performing fellatio on Guy (188). The distinction has more to do with Hope, as a grandmother, having her libido under control, while Harry is continually stirred by sexual desire and seduction. When writing through a male lens, Updike tends to be more sexually aggressive and bold. Accordingly, the Rabbit novels tend to spill over in their expansiveness as they stretch across the Pennsylvania landscape; in contrast, *Seek My Face* feels restrained and concise, a domestic novel that hesitates to move outside.

What one also notices about *Seek My Face*, as well as Updike’s other female-centric novels, is how often he links his female protagonists to art and conversation. Hope as well as all three witches in *The Witches of Eastwick* are artists: Alexandra is a sculptor, Jane a musician, and Sukie a writer. Although Updike has depicted male artists, he seems steadfast in associating art with women, as suggested, for instance, by the title and subject of his 1962 short story “Museums and Women,” in which he writes: “Both words hum. Both suggest radiance, antiquity, mystery, and duty” (433). In Updike’s more female-dominated novels, he also displays a particularly strong interest in voices and talk. *Seek My Face* in its entirety is a conversation between two women, and in *Witches*, much of which takes place over the telephone, talk is pervasive and “has a physical presence . . . , it literally hangs in the air . . . Talk is also the central activity of the witches” (Schiff, *John Updike*

Revisited 76). Though a handful of Updike's male characters are memorable speakers—Freddy Thorne of *Couples* and Daryl Van Horne of *Witches* come to mind—talk seems a defining element of so many of his females.

While *Seek My Face* celebrates art and the artistic impulse, it also, like *Gertrude and Claudius*, ends with death just beyond the novel's final pages. Hope, of course, knows that her own death is near. Neither she nor Kathryn, however, is aware, as the reader is, of another looming threat; the novel is set in April 2001, and Kathryn lives "on Liberty Street, near the World Trade Center," which she tells Hope is "a very safe area" (129). *Seek My Face* falls under the shadow of 9/11, just as *Gertrude and Claudius* is set immediately prior to the violent conclusion of *Hamlet*. In each, we observe the calm before the storm. Irony is at work here, yet more importantly, the allusion to 9/11 keeps death, which is always present in Updike's writing, in play.

The ending of *Seek My Face* returns to Hope's chair, where the novel began, though this time she is sitting alone, surrounded by the objects in her house and remembering an exchange, seventy-five years earlier, with her grandfather. At that time the chair had been his, and on that occasion she discovered two coins he had planted for her between the chair's cushions. In the years following, Hope continued to search "faithfully" between the cushions for additional coins, but not always with success. Now, all these years later, she considers looking again, but the effort of doing so, at her age and with her pains, seems too much; moreover, "she is afraid of finding nothing" (276). This concluding passage, like the novel's title, reminds us of how Hope's life and art have comprised a continual search: for God, transcendence, beauty, personal revelation. In a mostly hopeful novel, signaled literally by the protagonist's name, this final line hints not only at fear and death, but the possibility that there is nothing to find.

## CONCLUSION

*Gertrude and Claudius* and *Seek My Face* demonstrate Updike's continuing effort to stretch his writing imaginatively. Although these novels are not among his finest, those who have argued that the author was simply rewriting himself throughout his career, particularly in his later work, were not paying attention. *Seek My Face* stands as a single unbroken scene of a conversation between two women and explores the male world of painting from a woman's perspective, pushing language to a more visual place. In *Gertrude and Claudius* Updike composes a feminist retelling of *Hamlet* that offers the neglected queen a voice and a past while

challenging major elements of the canonical story. In both novels he extends his range of characters. While some critics will always view his work narrowly, believing him capable of creating only Rabbit Angstroms or New England and Jewish offshoots of the highly sexualized white male who struggles within conventional domesticity, Updike's was a more versatile talent. Gertrude and Hope could hardly be more different from Rabbit; they are mature women who possess a range of resources that enable them to survive, even thrive, in a patriarchy.

These two protagonists are seen at different stages of life: middle-aged Gertrude is in the midst of a passionate affair; Hope is nearing the end of her life, with husbands and lovers gone. Yet there are similarities: both women, overshadowed by the men in their lives, were forced to become enormously resourceful; both took at least one lover, had more than one husband, and survived the sudden death of a spouse. Hope is an older version of Gertrude as well as an older, female version of Updike. As the author explained: "Hope and I have made the same rough pilgrimage from Pennsylvania to New York to New England. We both tried to make of art a spiritual quest for a kind of holiness that the real world doesn't offer in too many corners" (Herbert 46). Hope is also a version of Updike's mother, Linda Grace Hoyer Updike—not so much in personality, but in her status as a solitary artist, living alone in a rustic house, her work and career overshadowed by a male whom she had loved and cared for (in Updike's mother's case, her son). While these novels pale beside Updike's most accomplished productions, they are hardly the work of an author who was losing his artistic powers, nor do they suggest a writer duplicating his earlier fiction. Instead, they are singular, engaging fictions about lively, articulate, strong women that push and challenge our understanding of Updike's talents and capabilities as a writer.

#### NOTES

1. John Duvall wrote that "one must turn to *Seek My Face* to find Updike's fullest exploration of female subjectivity" and referred to Hope as "a more complex representation of the desiring woman than Gertrude" (173, 175). Ann Patchett called Hope "an inspired character for her consistently compassionate and intelligent insights into art and the men who made it" (8). In contrast, Kakutani, in spite of her appreciation of Gertrude, argued that Updike "never manages to make [Hope] a coherent human being" ("Roman à Clef" B6).

2. Updike continues to be the subject of considerable academic interest, perhaps more than most of his peers, with new books and essays on his work appearing annually. That said, his writings after *Rabbit at Rest* have received very little critical attention, and his work in general, in recent years, has generated less interest than that of, say, Roth and Toni Morrison.

3. Updike initiates the affair before rather than after King Hamlet's death. Not all retellings of *Hamlet* from Gertrude's perspective have taken this position. In Lillie Buffum Chace Wyman's 1924

novel *Gertrude of Denmark*, Gertrude remains innocent of adultery, and her decision to remarry is made in order to provide for her son—by retaining the title of queen, she can “insure her own and her son’s future safety and dignity” (23). In contrast, Updike depicts adultery as an oppressed woman’s assertion of her independence. As for the king’s murder, Updike explained: “I saw [Claudius] as being in an almost impossible bind” (Reilly 223). Threatened with exile, separation from his queen, and confiscation of his lands, Updike’s Claudius has little recourse other than to kill his brother; it is depicted almost as an act of self-defense. Gertrude, who knows nothing about the murder, is guilty only of adultery. By comparison, Margaret Atwood, in her comic, three-page dramatic monologue “Gertrude Talks Back,” generates the most aggressive portrayal of the queen. In responding to Hamlet’s accusation that Claudius murdered his father, Atwood’s Gertrude states: “It wasn’t Claudius, darling. / It was me” (19).

4. Arising from oral versions of the Hamlet story circulating in Northern Europe, Saxo’s “Amleth,” composed in Latin c. 1200, takes up a mere twenty pages. Compared to Shakespeare’s psychologically sophisticated drama, it is a simple, spare tale, folkloric in its traditions, of obsessive revenge. Belleforest’s version, composed in French and published in 1570, turns the old northern saga into “a Renaissance text, with explanations, political and religious reservations, and moralizing, some of which matter is reflected in [Shakespeare’s] play” (Welsh 4). It is unlikely that Shakespeare saw Saxo’s text, and he may not have seen Belleforest’s either. Following Belleforest’s version and preceding Shakespeare’s is the missing *Ur-Hamlet*, produced on a London stage in 1589 and thought to be the work of Thomas Kyd.

5. The names of Updike’s characters evolve during his three-part novel. As he notes in a foreword, in Part I they are taken from Saxo, in Part II from Belleforest, and in Part III from Shakespeare. Updike elsewhere explained: “The old names helped me retell the legend in a layered way to indicate its deep roots in Viking mythology and in Viking habits. This is a story of deceit and revenge of a kind that even in Shakespeare’s day was unusually brutal, but it was very much a part with the old Viking way of doing things. The earlier names, I thought, gave a touch of the archaic, and also demonstrated that I was trying to take the story back to its origins” (Schiff, *Updike in Cincinnati* 127). The evolving names provide a textual experience for the reader in which the characters and their more familiar names gradually come into focus.

6. Updike’s personal background in Berks County, Pennsylvania, surely accounts for the geographical switch; as for the change from Jew to Quaker, as Thomas M. Dicken points out, Hope’s “religion of inwardness permeates the novel” (81).

7. Brian Duffy discusses how ekphrasis, which James A. W. Heffernan described as the “literary representation of visual art,” figures in Updike’s 1984 short story “Made in Heaven.” Duffy proposes that the character Jeanette in the story “is a verbal (and narrative) representation of centuries-long visual representation of the Virgin Mary in Christian art” (60).

## WORKS CITED

- Allen, Mary. “John Updike’s Love of ‘Dull Bovine Beauty.’” *John Updike*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea, 1987. 69–95.
- Atwood, Margaret. “Gertrude Talks Back.” *Good Bones and Simple Murders*. New York: Doubleday, 2001. 16–19.

- Banville, John. "Action Figure." Rev. of *Seek My Face*, by John Updike. *New York Times Book Review* 17 Nov. 2002: 10.
- Belleforest, Francois de. *Histoires tragiques. The Sources of Hamlet*, by Israel Gollancz. 1926. London: Cass, 1967.
- Bloom, Harold. *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*. New York: Riverhead, 2003.
- Charles, Ron. "A Splattering of Art History: The Wife of a Famous Drip Painter Tells All—Too Much." Rev. of *Seek My Face*, by John Updike. *Christian Science Monitor* 5 Dec. 2002: 15.
- Dicken, Thomas M. "God and Pigment: John Updike on the Conversation of Meaning." *Religion & Literature* 36.3 (Autumn 2004): 69–87.
- Duffy, Brian. "John Updike's Narrative 'Secrets': Hidden Ekphrasis in 'Made in Heaven.'" *John Updike Review* 2.2 (Spring 2013): 59–76.
- Duvall, John N. "U(pdike) & P(ostmodernism)." *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike*. Ed. Stacy Olster. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. 162–77.
- Eliot, T. S. "Hamlet." *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*. Ed. Frank Kermode. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1975. 45–49.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "With Dirge in Marriage." Rev. of *Gertrude and Claudius*, by John Updike. *New Republic* 21 Feb. 2000: 32–38.
- Hansen, William F. *Saxo Grammaticus & the Life of Hamlet*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1983.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn. "The Character of Hamlet's Mother." 1957. *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women*. New York: Columbia UP, 1990. 9–17.
- Herbert, Rosemary. "Mixed Media." *Boston Herald North Shore Sunday* 19 Nov. 2002: 45–46.
- Kakutani, Michiko. "Roman à Clef Sketches Jackson Pollock's Downward Spiral." Rev. of *Seek My Face*, by John Updike. *New York Times* 12 Nov. 2002: B1, B6.
- . "Run, Gerutha, Run: Elsinore, Aye, Has Gone Suburban." Rev. of *Gertrude and Claudius*, by John Updike. *New York Times* 8 Feb. 2000: B1, B8.
- . "Seeking Salvation on the Silver Screen." Rev. of *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, by John Updike. *New York Times* 12 Jan. 1996: B1, B11.
- Moreno, Marta Cerezo. "Narrative Chromaticism of Youth and Age in John Updike's *Seek My Face*." *Journal of Aging, Humanities, and the Arts* 3 (2009): 175–98.
- Patchett, Ann. "Brushes with Greatness." Rev. of *Seek My Face*, by John Updike. *Washington Post Book World* 17 Nov. 2002: 8.
- Quinn, Anthony. "Splashes of Mortality." Rev. of *Seek My Face*, by John Updike. *Daily Telegraph* 22 Apr. 2003: Books 8.
- Reilly, Charlie. "An Interview with John Updike." *Contemporary Literature* 43.2 (Summer 2002): 217–48.
- Salgas, Jean-Pierre. "Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, and the American Experience." 1986. *Conversations with John Updike*. Ed. James Plath. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994. 176–80.
- Savu, Laura Elena. "In Desire's Grip: Gender, Politics, and Intertextual Games in Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius*." *Papers on Language and Literature* (Winter 2003): 22–48.
- Schiff, James. *John Updike Revisited*. New York: Twayne, 1998.
- . *Updike in Cincinnati*. Athens: Ohio UP, 2007.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Ed. A. R. Braunuller. New York: Penguin, 2001.
- Updike, John. "The Disposable Rocket." *More Matter*. New York: Knopf, 1999. 30–33.
- . *Gertrude and Claudius*. New York: Knopf, 2000.

- . “Museums and Women.” *Collected Early Stories*. Ed. Christopher Carduff. New York: Library of America, 2013. 433–43.
- . *Seek My Face*. 2002. New York: Random House, 2007.
- . “A ‘Special Message’ for the Franklin Library’s Signed First Edition Society edition of *Gertrude and Claudius*.” *Due Considerations*. New York: Knopf, 2007. 637–40.
- . “Why Write?” In *Picked-Up Pieces*. New York: Knopf, 1976. 29–39.
- Welsh, Alexander. *Hamlet in His Modern Guises*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001.
- Wyman, Lillie Buffum Chace. *Gertrude of Denmark*. Boston: Marshall Jones, 1924.
- Zanganeh, Lila Azam. “Updike Redux.” Interview. *Guernica*. 15 Nov. 2010. 1–13. [http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/updike\\_11\\_15\\_10/](http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/updike_11_15_10/)



---

## Three Writers on “Leaves”

---

This issue marks the launch of “Three Writers,” a new section in the *JUR* which provides space for three invited writers to compose responses to a single Updike story, novel, poem, or essay. The hope is that this section will bring attention to more of Updike’s writings, particularly works that have been neglected. In addition, “Three Writers” provides a forum in which critics, scholars, novelists, short story writers, and editors are pulled together in a collective effort to better understand an individual work. From its beginnings, the *JUR* has sought to hear not simply from Updike scholars and literary critics but a range of readers and writers. In his own literary criticism, Updike was more belletristic than scholarly, and an understanding of his oeuvre benefits from both approaches.

The first writing to be considered is a short story, “Leaves,” composed in autumn 1962 though not published, at the author’s request, due to its personal nature and depiction of a marriage in crisis, until 1964. Proposed as our inaugural subject by the journal’s good friend, Updike scholar Donald Greiner, “Leaves” seems as fine a place to start as any, perhaps better given that the story is not frequently anthologized or discussed. A challenging albeit brief tale, “Leaves,” composed the same year our cover photo was shot, may surprise readers less familiar with the range of Updike’s short fiction. For their willingness to make sense of and share their thoughts about this story along with Don, I’m grateful to Sarah Strickley and Jamie Poissant, two young and promising fiction writers. I am also grateful to Random House for granting permission to the *JUR* to reprint “Leaves” in its entirety.

Though I have no particular strategy or long-range plan for this section of the journal, I am comforted by the fact that there will never be a shortage of material. Given the scope of Updike’s oeuvre and the *JUR*’s hope of eventually publishing two issues per year, there’s clearly sufficient material to sustain us for half a millennium.

JAMES SCHIFF, EDITOR

---



# Leaves

JOHN UPDIKE

The grape leaves outside my window are curiously beautiful. “Curiously” because it comes upon me as strange, after the long darkness of self-absorption and fear and shame in which I have been living, that things are beautiful, that independent of our catastrophes they continue to maintain the casual precision, the effortless abundance of inventive “effect,” which are the hallmark and specialty of Nature. Nature: this morning it seems to me very clear that Nature may be defined as that which exists without guilt. Our bodies are in Nature; our shoes, their laces, the little plastic tips of the laces—everything around us and about us is in Nature, and yet something holds us away from it, like the upward push of water that keeps us from touching the sandy bottom, ribbed and glimmering with crescental fragments of oyster shell, so clear to our eyes.

A blue jay lights on a twig outside my window. Momentarily sturdy, he stands astraddle, his dingy rump toward me, his head alertly frozen in silhouette, the predatory curve of his beak stamped on a sky almost white above the misting tawny marsh. See him? I do, and, snapping the chain of my thought, I have reached through glass and seized him and stamped him on this page. Now he is gone. And yet, there, a few lines above, he still is, “astraddle,” his rump “dingy,” his head “alertly frozen.” A curious trick, possibly useless, but mine.

The grape leaves where they are not in each other’s shadows are golden. Flat leaves, they take the sun flatly, and turn the absolute light, sum of the spectrum and source of all life, into the crayon yellow with which children render it. Here and there, wilt transmutes this lent radiance into a glowing orange, and the green of the still-tender leaves—for green persists long into autumn, if we look—strains

from the sunlight a fine-veined chartreuse. The shadows these leaves cast upon each other, though vagrant and nervous in the wind that sends friendly scavenging rattles scurrying across the roof, are yet quite various and definite, containing innumerable barbaric suggestions of scimitars, flanged spears, prongs, and menacing helmets. The net effect, however, is innocent of menace. On the contrary, its intricate simultaneous suggestion of shelter and openness, warmth and breeze, invites me outward; my eyes venture into the leaves beyond. I am surrounded by leaves. The oak's are lobed paws of tenacious rust; the elm's, scant feathers of a feminine yellow; the sumac's, a savage, toothed blush. I am upheld in a serene and burning universe of leaves. Yet something plucks me back, returns me to that inner darkness where guilt is the sun.

The events need to be sorted out. I am told I behaved wantonly, and it will take time to integrate this unanimous impression with the unqualified righteousness with which our own acts, however admittedly miscalculated, invest themselves. And once the events are sorted out—the actions given motivations, the actors assigned psychologies, the miscalculations tabulated, the abnormalities named, the whole furious and careless growth pruned by explanation and rooted in history and returned, as it were, to Nature—what then? Is not such a return spurious? Can our spirits really enter Time's haven of mortality and sink composedly among the mulching leaves? No: we stand at the intersection of two kingdoms, and there is no advance and no retreat, only a sharpening of the edge where we stand.

I remember most sharply the black of my wife's dress as she left our house to get her divorce. The dress was a soft black sheath, with a scalloped neckline, and Helen always looked handsome in it; it flattered her pallor. This morning she looked especially handsome, her face utterly white with fatigue. Yet her body, that natural thing, ignored our catastrophe, and her shape and gestures were incongruously usual. She kissed me lightly in leaving, and we both felt the humor of this trip's being insufficiently unlike any other of her trips to Boston—to Symphony, to Bonwit's. The same search for the car keys, the same harassed instructions to the baby-sitter, the same little dip and thrust of her head as she settled behind the wheel of her car. And I, satisfied at last, divorced, studied my children with the eyes of one who had left them, examined my house as one does a set of snapshots from an irretrievable time, drove through the turning landscape as a man in asbestos cuts through a fire, met my wife-to-be—weeping yet smiling, stunned yet brave—and felt, unstopably, to my horror, the inner darkness burst my skin and engulf us both and drown our love. The natural world, where our love had existed, ceased to exist.

My heart shied back; it shies back still. I retreated. As I drove back, the leaves of the trees along the road stated their shapes to me. There is no more story to tell. By telephone I plucked my wife back; I clasped the black of her dress to me, and braced for the pain.

It does not stop coming. The pain does not stop coming. Almost every day, a new installment arrives by mail or face or phone. Every time the telephone rings, I expect it to uncoil some new convolution of consequence. I have come to hide in this cottage, but even here, there is a telephone, and the scraping sounds of wind and branch and unseen animals are charged with its electric silence. At any moment, it may explode, and the curious beauty of the leaves will be eclipsed again.

In nervousness, I rise, and walk across the floor. A spider like a white asterisk hangs in air in front of my face. I look at the ceiling and cannot see where its thread is attached. The ceiling is smooth plasterboard. The spider hesitates. It feels a huge alien presence. Its exquisite white legs spread warily, and of its own dead weight it twirls on its invisible thread. I catch myself in the quaint and antique pose of the fabulist seeking to draw a lesson from a spider, and become self-conscious. I dismiss self-consciousness and do earnestly attend to this minute articulated star hung so pointedly before my face; and am unable to read the lesson. The spider and I inhabit contiguous but incompatible cosmoses. Across the gulf we feel only fear. The telephone remains silent. The spider reconsiders its spinning. The wind continues to stir the sunlight. In walking in and out of this cottage, I have tracked the floor with a few dead leaves, pressed flat like scraps of dark paper.

And what are these pages but leaves? Why do I produce them but to thrust, by some subjective photosynthesis, my guilt into Nature, where there is no guilt? Now the marsh, level as a carpet, is streaked with faint green amid the shades of brown—russet, ochre, tan, *marron*—and on the far side, where the land lifts above tide level, evergreens stab upward sullenly. Beyond them, there is a low blue hill; in this coastal region, the hills are almost too modest to bear names. But I *see* it; for the first time in months I see it. I see it as a child, fingers gripping and neck straining, glimpses of the roof of a house over a cruelly high wall. Under my window, the lawn is lank and green and mixed with leaves shed from a small elm, and I remember how, the first night I came to this cottage, thinking I was leaving my life behind me, I went to bed alone and read, in the way one reads stray books in a borrowed house, a few pages of an old edition of *Leaves of Grass*. And my sleep was a loop, so that in awaking I seemed still in the book, and the light-struck sky quivering through the stripped branches of the young elm seemed another page

of Whitman, and I was entirely open, and lost, like a woman in passion, and free, and in love, without a shadow in any corner of my being. It was a beautiful awakening, but by the next night I had returned to my house.

The precise barbaric shadows on the grape leaves have shifted. The angle of illumination has altered. I imagine warmth leaning against the door, and open the door to let it in; sunlight falls flat at my feet like a penitent.

# The Lace of Updike's "Leaves"

DONALD J. GREINER

Unreal, give back to us what once you gave:  
The imagination that we spurned and crave.

—Wallace Stevens, "To the One of Fictive Music"

John Updike has long been included in the pantheon of America's short story masters. Though Diane Johnson noted the "dwindling audience" for short fiction, she also observed that "in the hands of the greatest short story writers, the form has the weight and complexity of a novel, complete and resonant—one thinks of Mavis Gallant, Alice Munro, Hemingway, Updike, Cheever" (26). Lorrie Moore went even further: "It is quite possible that by dint of both quality and quantity [Updike] is American literature's greatest short-story writer" (16). Success came early. "Friends from Philadelphia," Updike's first professional story, was written when he was newly graduated from Harvard and published in the *New Yorker* (October 30, 1954) when he was twenty-two. By age thirty he had published two collections of short fiction—*The Same Door* (1959) and *Pigeon Feathers* (1962)—not to mention a volume of poems and two novels. Most of the tales in the two collections focus on boyhood and adolescence in a small town or on young marriage. Written in a lyrical, often image-filled prose style that both attracted and puzzled critics, these stories are also generally traditional in form and characterization. Yet despite his success, Updike took a different tack in 1962 and 1963 when he wrote "Leaves," "Harv Is Plowing Now," and "The Music School."

As indicated in the Library of America's *Collected Early Stories* (2013), these three stories were completed and submitted to the *New Yorker* within roughly the span of a year: "Leaves" was submitted on October 19, 1962; "Harv Is Plowing Now"

on October 2, 1963; and “The Music School” on November 1, 1963. First publishing the three stories in the *New Yorker* before collecting them in *The Music School* (1966), Updike separated them when he organized *The Early Stories, 1953–1975* (2003). He placed “The Music School” in the section titled “Family Life,” and “Leaves” and “Harv Is Plowing Now” in “The Two Iseults.” The title of the latter section refers to wife and mistress, a tension that informs his short fiction after *Pigeon Feathers*. A key point is that Updike situated the three tales in *The Early Stories* between the section titled “Olinger Stories,” the fictional locale of his tales of growing up in Shillington, Pennsylvania, and “Tarbox Tales,” the fictional locale of his tales about suburban living in Ipswich, Massachusetts.

One other story is relevant to the context of the composition of “Leaves.” On May 16, 1963, Updike finished a story he called “Couples.” While complete in itself, “Couples” became a trial run for *Couples* (1968), his best-selling novel about adultery. Both “Couples” and *Couples* probe the pleasures, pressures, guilt, and fear of infidelity, the sexual freedom of affluent young marrieds eagerly shedding their inhibitions in what a character in the novel dubs “the post-pill paradise” (52). Updike omitted “Couples” from *The Music School* and *The Early Stories*, refusing to publish it until 1976 when he agreed to a limited edition of 276 signed copies titled “Couples: A Short Story.” Despite his judgment of the story as a failure, “Couples” joins “Leaves,” “Harv Is Plowing Now,” and “The Music School” in confirming that even while he was being celebrated for the achievement of *Pigeon Feathers*, with its lovely, nostalgic accounts of boyhood, he was already redirecting his short fiction toward both a new subject matter and a new style. The key word is “both.” The new style had been displayed earlier in “Wife-wooing,” completed on January 11, 1960, collected in *Pigeon Feathers*, and honored by inclusion in *Prize Stories 1961: The O. Henry Awards*; but in “Wife-wooing” the husband still desires the wife, the family is still intact, and the plot concludes with closure. “Leaves,” “Harv Is Plowing Now,” “The Music School,” and “Couples,” on the other hand, focus not on spouse and family but on mistress and betrayal. The redirection was a sea change in the Updike canon. “Leaves” first signaled the change. Covering only four pages in *The Early Stories*, it packs a startling emotional punch.

It is significant that Updike chose the second stanza of Wallace Stevens’ poem “To the One of Fictive Music” as the epigraph for *The Music School*:

Now, of the music summoned by the birth  
That separates us from the wind and sea,  
Yet leaves us in them, until earth becomes,

By being so much of the things we are,  
Gross effigy and simulacrum, none  
Gives motion to perfection more serene  
Than yours, out of our imperfections wrought,  
Most rare, or ever of more kindred air  
In the laborious weaving that you wear. (87)

The poem is a celebration of art—"fictive" art—and a plea that humanity engage the imagination as the only means of approaching reality. The paradox that Stevens describes is that birth both separates us from nature and leaves us in it. Only in art, created by the fertile imagination, may humanity close the gap. As Stevens explains in the famous essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," "The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real" (6). The active imagination must always adhere to reality if it is to fashion meaningful expression. Fantasy will not do. Updike's conceit in "Leaves" is that the narrator has internalized Stevens's poem. The story is the narrator's effort to apply the lesson to his sense of unease as he attempts to understand his separation from the natural world and his loss of domestic harmony. The only way to do so, he realizes, is through art.

Updike's radical departure from the stories of boyhood and nostalgia in *The Same Door* and *Pigeon Feathers* to the innovation of *The Music School* caught commentators off guard. Expecting traditional tales with character development, clearly paced action, and closure, some reviewers complained that Updike's new approach was little more than an overload of pretty language. Bernard Bergonzi, for example, attacked the prose of these unexpected stories as too narcissistic, and Updike as too eager to "preen himself on his verbal wizardry" (28). Robie Macauley's reaction was even harsher, dismissing "Leaves" as "the fanciest Japanese calligraphy . . . more suitable for framing than reading." Macauley was so unreceptive to Updike's innovation that he described "Leaves" not as a story but as an "informal essay" or "musings," adding: "And when Mr. Updike muses, the amount of fine lace he can produce is incredible" (4). A decade later, Updike defended "Leaves" in print, one of several times during his career that he reacted publicly to negative criticism. Invited by Rust Hills, a former *Esquire* editor, to contribute a favorite story to an anthology, *Writer's Choice*, and write a short commentary about it, Updike chose not the widely admired "Pigeon Feathers" or one of his award-winning stories but "Leaves." In his commentary, which he later included in one of his own collections of criticism, he targeted both the naysayers in general and the unnamed Macauley in particular when he wrote that the story

is in a mode of mine, the abstract-personal, not a favorite with my critics. One of them, reviewing *The Music School*, expressed impatience with my lace-making, so-called. Well, if “Leaves” is lace, it is taut and symmetrical lace, with scarce a loose thread. It was written, in 1962, after long silence, swiftly, unerringly as a sleepwalker walks. No memory of any revision mars my backwards impression of it. The way the leaves become the pages, the way the bird becomes his description, the way the bright and multiform world of nature is felt rubbing against the dark world of the trapped ego—all strike me as beautiful, and of the order of artistic “happiness” that is given rather than attained. (*Hugging the Shore* 853)

Updike’s defense of “Leaves” echoes Stevens’s “To the One of Fictive Music.” Both writers point to art as the only way of reconciling the “bright . . . world of nature” and the “dark world” of humanity.

In a superb discussion of Updike’s prose style, Scott Dill remarks that the “sensuous style verges on its own caricature” in “Leaves,” but continues: “However unnecessarily effulgent these arboreal adjectives may be, Updike’s sensuous prose brings to bear the difference between the writer’s moral sense of failure and the indifferent beauty of the natural world” (407). The window next to the narrator’s desk in “Leaves” confirms the chasm between humanity and nature, but it is also an invitation to reduce the gulf if only the narrator will look through it clearly enough to write “Leaves” out of the darkness of his guilt and fear generated by the possibility of irredeemable loss. In this story, Updike lavishes unusually lyrical, lush prose on the subject of betrayal. The narrator is stuck between wife and mistress, just as the blue jay he sees through the window becomes stuck between its actual self and the narrator’s artistic rendering of it. Both narrator and blue jay are predators—the narrator of his wife’s happiness, the bird of its territory. Adultery precipitates guilt, which causes stasis, but the stasis is only physical. The narrator must learn that perception is always active. His goal is to turn his guilt into the guiltlessness of nature and thereby forgive himself. He does not succeed. Yet his inability to absolve himself results in the success of his art. One of Updike’s most beautiful short fictions, “Leaves” emerges from failure.

The story is unusual in the Updike canon up to 1962 because there is no external action in the traditional sense of plot developing to a conclusion. Turning away from, say, the form of “Pigeon Feathers,” in which action results in epiphany, Updike experiments in “Leaves” with the notion that acute seeing *is* action, which in turn leads to art. The sole consolation the narrator has is not an epiphany or a climax resulting in closure but the solace of language and imagination. Updike emphasizes that seeing is not enough. What is required is *perceiving*, being acutely

aware of the minute distinctions in the common, everyday natural scene on the far side of the window. Although the narrator seems passive, trapped in stasis, as he sits at the desk, Updike shows him to be active as he apprehends, rather than merely glimpses, the immensity of the leaves and the specifics of the bird. In his grief, guilt, and fear, he honors what Updike in his foreword to *The Early Stories* calls the “mundane” and thus gives it “its beautiful due” (xv). In “Leaves,” perception is creative. It is not “lace.”

Updike’s description of his new method as the “abstract-personal” suggests the absence of beginning, middle, and end that most readers expect in a short story. “Leaves” is a lyrical meditation, a tale in which the narrator’s ability to turn guilt into art is the action. Caught in “the long darkness of self-absorption and fear and shame in which I have been living,” the narrator looks at the grape leaves near the window and perceives “that things are beautiful, that independent of our catastrophes they continue to maintain the casual precision, the effortless abundance of inventive ‘effect,’ which are the hallmark and specialty of Nature” (67).<sup>\*</sup> The word “our” is significant because in writing “Leaves” the narrator embraces the reader as among those who need to know what he learns: that we cannot shift our guilt onto nature, but we can transform it into beauty. He explains: “Nature may be defined as that which exists without guilt. Our bodies are in Nature; . . . and yet something holds us away from it” (67). Nature is always the nonhuman other.

When the “blue jay lights on a twig outside [the] window,” the narrator engages his imagination: “he stands astraddle, his dingy rump toward me, his head alertly frozen in silhouette.” In a direct appeal to the reader, the narrator demonstrates how focused sight becomes the action of art: “See him? I do” (67). Breaking free from the passivity of merely pondering fear and shame, he has imaginatively “reached through glass and seized him and stamped him on this page. Now he is gone. And yet, there, a few lines above, he still is, ‘astraddle,’ his rump ‘dingy,’ his head ‘alertly frozen’” (67). Once his focus shifts toward an imaginative projection of the blue jay, the narrator begins to perceive not generic leaves but the individual quality of each leaf. He again appeals to the reader—“if we look”—and realizes that the leaves are not uniform but “golden,” “crayon yellow,” “glowing orange,” “green,” and “fine-veined chartreuse,” but only if we look. And when we look, we find that the variations of the leaves resemble “innumerable barbaric

<sup>\*</sup> Page references are to the text of “Leaves” as reprinted in this issue of *The John Updike Review*, which is the text used in both *The Early Stories, 1953–1975* (New York: Knopf, 2003) and *Collected Early Stories* (New York: Library of America, 2013).

suggestions of scimitars, flanged spears, prongs, and menacing helmets” (67–68). Yet there is no menace in the leaves, only a “suggestion of shelter and openness” that “invites [the narrator] outward” from his shame to look at all the leaves that surround him: “The oak’s are lobed paws of tenacious rust; the elm’s, scant feathers of a feminine yellow; the sumac’s, a savage, toothed blush” (68).

He is “upheld” by the kaleidoscope of the leaves and his artistic rendering of them, but nevertheless pulled back to his egotistical “inner darkness where guilt is the sun” (68). An artist of language, he understands that the leaves are both the foliage of the trees and the pages of his art, just as Walt Whitman, whose poetry he recalls, turned leaves of grass into the leaves of his book. Thus despite his wantonness, his miscalculated behavior, he would like to divert his shame to the realm that exists without guilt. He cannot do so. Aware that the leaves of his pages are not a sentimental account of nature’s otherness soothing humanity’s wounds, he explains to himself and to the reader the impossibility of such a hope. The turning point in “Leaves” is the two rhetorical questions he asks in order to answer them: “Is not such a return spurious? Can our spirits really enter Time’s haven of mortality and sink composedly among the mulching leaves? No: we stand at the intersection of two kingdoms, and there is no advance and no retreat, only a sharpening of the edge where we stand” (68). The two kingdoms are not only life and death but also humanity and nature. There is no absolution except in death. Yet while the human and the natural are forever separated, as signified by the window, the narrator can shape the leaves of his pages into an expression of the imagination. Art transcends death.

Newly aware of his position on the edge, he remembers “the black of [his] wife’s dress” that she wore to their divorce proceedings. But Updike’s point is that his experience with the leaves has taught the narrator that black, the negation of the range of colors he has perceived in the variations of the trees, has its own variety: “a soft black sheath, with a scalloped neckline” (68). Faced with the finality of divorce, he remembers how he “studied” his children, “examined” his house with a clearer sight, and rejected the mistress to reclaim the wife who, in her grief, has become “the black of her dress” (68–69). He suspects that the return of the wife means “[t]here is no more story to tell,” as if defeat is the conclusion of his story. But “Leaves” does have more to tell. Having now betrayed both wife and mistress, the narrator confesses that “[t]he pain does not stop coming” (69). Updike extends the tale in order to confirm the lesson that pain, like guilt, can be shaped into art.

Fearing that guilt and pain will eclipse his new awareness of the “beauty of the leaves,” the narrator notices a spider as it “twirls on its invisible thread” (69), an image that, if read negatively, recalls the narrator’s sense of being trapped in a web of his own making. But for the narrator, adopting the “pose of the fabulist seeking to draw a lesson from a spider,” the spider is another fabulist, an artist of its private world (69). The lesson the spider offers with its patient design and intricate art may be unreadable because nature and humanity “inhabit contiguous but incompatible cosmoses,” but the narrator can refashion the unreadable into the readable pages of his fiction. Having “tracked the floor with a few dead leaves, pressed flat like scraps of dark paper,” he fears he has now lost his ability to see and thus to write (69). Yet if he is unable to write, he can create new pages about the inability to write and thereby offer this story to the reader. The energy of the imagination, the “fictive music,” restores order. Looking outside once more, focusing on the never-ending variety of nature, he composes his perception into the final pages, his own leaves. For Updike, the renewal of nature catalyzes the renewal of art. Staring at the marsh, the narrator perceives “faint green amid the shades of brown—russet, ochre, tan, *marron*,” and “a low blue hill” (69). The pain does not stop coming, but he affirms the necessity of looking through the window: “But I *see* it; for the first time in months I see it. I see it as a child” (69; italics in original). His “angle of illumination has altered,” and we join him in understanding that what we perceive is determined by how we see it. We can surrender to pain and guilt, or we can write a story about pain and guilt. Updike invokes the imagination in the final sentence: “I imagine warmth leaning against the door, and open the door to let it in; sunlight falls flat at my feet like a penitent” (70). In his commentary on the story, Updike writes: “The last image, the final knot of lace, is an assertion of transcendental faith scaled, it seems to me, nicely to the mundane” (*Hugging* 853). He “scales” his art to the mundane; Stevens “adheres” his imagination to reality. Both create fictive music.

My discussion of “Leaves” is not meant to suggest that Updike abandoned the traditional form of the short story for the innovation of lyrical meditation—or, in his words, the “abstract-personal”—during the remainder of his long career after 1962. He continued to shape the majority of his stories with the conventions of plot and character for which he received additional awards, including O. Henry Awards for “The Bulgarian Poetess,” “Separating,” and “A Sandstone Farmhouse” in 1966, 1976, and 1991, respectively. Yet he still experimented with variations on the mode of fiction that his detractors denigrated as “lace” in stories such as “Plumb-

ing" (1970), "When Everyone Was Pregnant" (1971), and "The Egg Race" (1976). "Leaves," an unusually brief story of linguistic beauty and emotional intensity, is the first of Updike's experiments in which he applied lacelike language to the lure of adultery. In doing so, he advanced the art of the tale.

#### WORKS CITED

- Bergonzi, Bernard. "Updike, Dennis, and Others." Rev. of *The Music School*, by John Updike; *A House in Order*, by Nigel Dennis; *La Chamade*, by Françoise Sagan; and *Any God Will Do*, by Richard Condon. *New York Review of Books* 9 Feb. 1967: 28–29.
- Dill, Scott. "Affection for the Affected World: John Updike on Emotion, Sense, and Style." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 54:4 (2013): 395–409.
- Hills, Rust, ed. *Writer's Choice*. New York: David McKay, 1974.
- Johnson, Diane. "Stiff Upper Lip." Rev. of *The Lemon Table*, by Julian Barnes. *New York Review of Books* 21 Oct. 2004: 26.
- Macauley, Robie. "Cartoons and Arabesques." Rev. of *The Music School*, by John Updike, and *Black Angels and Other Stories*, by Bruce Jay Friedman. *Washington Post Book World* 25 Sept. 1966: 4.
- Moore, Lorrie. "Home Truths." Rev. of *The Early Stories, 1953–1975*, by John Updike. *New York Review of Books* 20 Nov. 2003: 16–18.
- Stevens, Wallace. "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. New York: Vintage, 1951. 3–36.
- . "To the One of Fictive Music." *The Collected Poems*. New York: Knopf, 1968. 87–88.
- Updike, John. *Couples*. New York: Knopf, 1968.
- . "Couples: A Short Story." Cambridge: Halty Ferguson, 1976.
- . *The Early Stories, 1953–1975*. New York: Knopf, 2003.
- . *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism*. New York: Knopf: 1983.

# The Abstract-Personal Mode: An Extrapolation

SARAH A. STRICKLEY

As a writer, I must admit that John Updike's petite and provocative story "Leaves" presents several problems for me, chief among them my desire to explicate its margins. In other words, I find the temptation to extrapolate irresistible. I want to take the dismembered elements of plot that the unnamed first-person narrator works so hard to submerge, to bury beneath the whirling churn of his own verbiage, and assemble them into something more like the whole story. I want to supplant the narrator's seamless skein of poetical rationalizations and inventive denials with hard truth.

This temptation, I hasten to add, does not arise from any particular affection for more conventional storytelling; in fact, I am wholly titillated by this story's departure from both the norm and the larger Updikean oeuvre. And it's not because I dislike "Leaves" or wish to see it altered or revised. Rather, it's about the story's implicit invitation—delivered by means of its structural conceit and stylistic choices—to piece together the story happening *beyond* the page and, further, to make answer to it. According to the narrator's version of events, the story is about his earnest endeavor to achieve a Whitmanesque reunion of body and soul. If you indulge in extrapolation, however, the story is about a cheating husband and the phenomenal power of the self-told lie. The fissure between these poles is what makes "Leaves" an exceptional work of fiction.

One of the ways in which "Leaves" marks a departure for Updike is its length. It's a very short story, published in the November 14, 1964, issue of the *New*

*Yorker*, the writer's 1966 collection of stories, *The Music School*, and subsequently in the Rust Hills–edited anthology *Writer's Choice* (1974). Updike himself chose the piece for inclusion in the anthology, remarking that the work represented “a mode of mine, the abstract-personal, not a favorite with my critics,” one of whom had called him out for his “lace-making” (*Hugging the Shore* 853). In the interest of full disclosure, I should note that I myself have been accused of “gilding the lily,” a close corollary to lace-making in the realm of critical insult, and am thus not an impartial judge of Updike's rejoinder: “Well, if ‘Leaves’ is lace, it is taut and symmetrical lace, with scarce a loose thread” (853). It's clear to me who won this exchange.

The story does indeed trade in abstractions, and it is personal in the way that only a narrative told from the perspective of a character who is a writer can feel personal. We know that the narrator of “Leaves” isn't necessarily Updike, and yet it's impossible to attribute the rhetorical prowess demonstrated in the prose to the character without simultaneously attributing it to the writer. The issue of the narrator's blind spots is a tricky one for the same reason. Does Updike share them? It's impossible to say with any certainty what Updike intended—and this is the source of my considerable anxiety regarding my desire to extrapolate—but I have faith in his powers. I think he knew exactly what he was doing, which perhaps is why the piece is as short as it is. The abstract-personal mode is not a sustainable one. It's a lithium flash, a flickering wick, not a steady flame.

Another respect in which “Leaves” is a departure, both in terms of Updike's larger body of work and our expectations of work in the short story genre, is that it's remarkably light on front story. The external events of the narrative present comprise only a few halting movements in a secluded cottage in the woods—the narrator looks out a window, rises from his chair, walks across the floor, and opens a door—which means that the bulk of the storytelling takes place inside the narrator's head. Or rather, because he is a writer, as his thoughts meet the page.

The prose is deeply poetic, associative, and performative of the narrator's psychology. Whether he means to or not, he shows us his mind and his mind's limitations by recording his thoughts in ink. Because there is no one else in the story to serve as a foil, no one to offer a counternarrative or to call the narrator to task for his sins of under- and overtelling, if I am interested in getting a good look at him I must analyze the patterns of his thoughts—by extrapolating.

Before indulging in such meaning-making activity, I should concede that it's unstable territory for me. As a writer, I generally prefer to hew to the marks as they stand on the page. Again, this has to do with my respect for the writer's in-

tent, but it's also about pointing the unwieldy instrument of extrapolation at a fictional character. In this case, though, I feel compelled, even baited, by the narrator himself. I find myself lured out of my distant writerly pose, coaxed into subjecting his telling to scrutiny, at least in part because he baldly refuses to do the work of organizing and hierarchizing the events of his life into a story for me. "The events need to be sorted out," he writes, and then proceeds to characterize the task as arbitrary and almost violent: "the actions given motivations, the actors assigned psychologies, the miscalculations tabulated, the abnormalities named, the whole furious and careless growth pruned by explanation and rooted in history and returned, as it were, to Nature" (68).\*

Concerning this *Nature* with a capital N, look back to the opening passages of "Leaves" and you'll see that the narrator demonstrates a persistent fixation with the concept. Just this morning, as he sat and wrote in the cottage to which he has fled from the as yet unsorted events of his life, it became "very clear that Nature may be defined as that which exists without guilt." Take the grape leaves, "curiously beautiful" outside his window. Why can't he exist in their guiltless state? Instead, he occupies a "long darkness of self-absorption and fear and shame" (67).

Or take the blue jay alighting on a twig: "Momentarily sturdy, he stands astraddle, his dingy rump toward me, his head alertly frozen in silhouette, the predatory curve of his beak stamped on a sky almost white above the misting tawny marsh. See him?" (67). Of course I do; the question is why I'm looking at him, and the answer has to do, if I am permitted to extrapolate, with those "events" mentioned earlier. It turns out that the narrator has arrived at a state of self-exile because he cheated on his wife, waited until the occasion of his divorce to realize that the freedom he enjoyed with his mistress was an illusion, abandoned his mistress and "plucked [his] wife back," retreated from the whole mess to hide in his tree-lush bungalow, and now feels assaulted by various missives from the outside, arriving "by mail or face or phone" (69).

This news doesn't make its way into the story's world until after the narrator presents his embroidered descriptions of the leaves: "The oak's are lobed paws of tenacious rust; the elm's, scant feathers of a feminine yellow; the sumac's, a savage, toothed blush" and so on and so forth (68). He has, as reporters say, buried the lede. It makes psychological sense, of course, that the narrator is more inclined

\* Page references are to the text of "Leaves" as reprinted in this issue of *The John Updike Review*, which is the text used in both *The Early Stories, 1953–1975* (New York: Knopf, 2003) and *Collected Early Stories* (New York: Library of America, 2013).

to luxuriate in the pleasures of rendering a jay in print—"I have reached through glass and seized him and stamped him on this page. Now he is gone. And yet, there, a few lines above, he still is" (67)—than to detail the ins and outs of the transgressions that have led him to the jay's tree. But the effect is to throw the story into a curious state of imbalance.

The full force of the narrator's rhetorical prowess is bent upon the trumped-up (and here I'm clearly extrapolating, because the narrator would never make such a confession) project of delineating the "something" that "holds us away from [Nature], like the upward push of water that keeps us from touching the sandy bottom, ribbed and glimmering with crescental fragments of oyster shell, so clear to our eyes" (67). Beautiful writing, stunningly fresh in its imagistic precision, and yet a smidge beside the point when you consider the calamity waiting for the narrator on the home front.

The narrator's transgressions as I have summarized them above are rendered in the story with a poetic fluency that artfully obscures his mendacity:

And I, satisfied at last, divorced, studied my children with the eyes of one who had left them, examined my house as one does a set of snapshots from an irretrievable time, drove through the turning landscape as a man in asbestos cuts through a fire, met my wife-to-be—weeping yet smiling, stunned yet brave—and felt, unstoppably, to my horror, the inner darkness burst my skin and engulf us both and drown our love. The natural world, where our love had existed, ceased to exist. My heart shied back; it shies back still. I retreated. As I drove back, the leaves of the trees along the road stated their shapes to me. There is no more story to tell. (68–69)

I quote this long passage to demonstrate the efficiency with which the narrator renders his own backstory. Months, possibly even years of domestic and extradomestic wrangling are reduced to a few cascading sentences which serve to obscure the full temporal weight and meaning of the events by cloaking them in image-laden abstraction. What exactly does it mean for an "inner darkness" to "burst" one's skin and then "engulf" and "drown" love? It means, if I may be permitted to extrapolate, that the narrator does not wish to tell you that he simply grew bored of his mistress once she became his wife-to-be.

His abstractions, then, serve both a rhetorical purpose and a personal one. But, again, this is not a sustainable mode. Eventually, someone is going to come along and force the narrator out of his reverie. Until then, he'll keep trying, watching the shadows as they shift on the leaves, imagining a warmth meant only for him. But at some point, he'll have to face the firing squad, answer the clamor of the

telephone with hard truth. It's in this way, if I may be permitted one final extrapolation, that "Leaves" so nicely encapsulates the glorious intermediary space between the chaos of life and the narrative line. Our narrator will have to make sense of things eventually. He will have to organize the chaos of life into a causal chain of events. For now, though, the events are unsorted; his ego is still in the way.

#### WORKS CITED

Updike, John. *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism*. New York: Knopf: 1983.



# On “Leaves,” a Consideration of Happiness, Righteousness, and Grace (with Digressions)

DAVID JAMES POISSANT

Leaves move in the windows. I cannot tell you yet how beautiful it is, what it means. But they do move. They move in the glass. . . . the leaves blowing past him, and our encounter drives me sadly home to poetry—where there’s no answer.

—William H. Gass, “In the Heart of the Heart of the Country”

My love affair with John Updike began in my early twenties with the discovery of “Separating” in an American literature class. Enchanted, I read the story several times. Then, learning that “Separating” was only one in a series of Joan and Richard Maple stories, I went to the bookstore and purchased *Too Far to Go*. That book took me three days to finish, and then it was off to the races. I read most of Updike’s short stories before turning to the novels. In my consumption of these stories, I read *The Music School*, which means that I must have read “Leaves,” but I confess that I don’t remember my first brush with it, embedded as the story was among longer, more memorable stories like “The Christian Roommates” and “The Bulgarian Poetess.” Several years later, I took the publication of *The Early Stories* as an opportunity to revisit many of Updike’s stories including “Leaves,” which, the second time around, did not escape my notice.

Why might this have been? Well, for one thing, I’d grown up a little, and my tastes had become more refined. (They’re always being refined, and I hope that

they'll continue to be refined and reconfigured, that I'll never settle grumpily into one mode of appreciation.) Plus, I'd developed a real love for what Updike probably never would have called—but what most American fiction writers now call—*short-short* stories, as well as a greater patience toward work in Updike's self-styled “abstract-personal” mode. “Leaves” will never be my favorite Updike story (there will always be a special place in my heart for the Maples tales), but I no longer overlook “Leaves” or see it as a minor effort.

It isn't difficult, though, to see why “Leaves” is often overlooked. Not all of Updike's more than 200 stories can be oft-talked about. And, of his much-anthologized stories, only “A&P” is on the short side. Better known for his longer stories (which is not to say *better* or *fuller* stories, just *longer*), Updike called “Leaves” “taut and symmetrical . . . , with scarce a loose thread” (*Hugging the Shore* 853). Threads tight or not, “Leaves” has been more or less relegated to the kind of list a music label would call “rarities and B-sides”: songs sure to be favorites with diehard fans but unlikely to capture the notice of casual listeners.

In the case of “Leaves,” even the diehard fans appear to be late to the game. True, in the lines I've used above as an epigraph, William H. Gass seems to allude to “Leaves” in his contemporaneous story “In the Heart of the Heart of the Country.”<sup>1</sup> But in my survey of the early scholarship on “Leaves,” I found the pickings slim. In their 1971 monographs on Updike, Larry E. Taylor devotes a chapter to *The Music School* but omits any mention of “Leaves,” while Rachael C. Burchard in her chapter on the short stories gives “Leaves” only a paragraph, reducing it to the tale of a young man's “near madness” (154).<sup>2</sup> In a chapter on *The Music School* in his 1972 study of Updike, Robert Detweiler calls “Leaves” “more of a prose-poem than conventional fiction” and gives it only three sentences (124). Whatever else it is, “Leaves” is most definitely not a prose poem. It's closer, in form and structure, if not in voice, to the short-short stories of Donald Barthelme. It isn't until 1993 that a critic gives “Leaves” its due, with Robert M. Luscher calling it “a tour de force of poetic language and imagery” and giving it a sizeable unpacking in his own chapter on *The Music School* (48). Let me attempt an unpacking of my own, to see if I can get to the heart of the heart of what I love so much about this story.

“Leaves” is the story of an unnamed narrator, a writer, who has come to a cottage in the woods, Thoreau-style. We think at first that he's come to contemplate Nature with a capital N. From inside the cottage, he waxes poetic on the grape leaves outside his window, a blue jay, and the sunlight and shadow. Only then does he begin to let us in on his secret, which is that he hasn't *come* here so much as *retreated*. “I am told,” he tells us, “I behaved wantonly.” This isn't the same as

admitting that he behaved wantonly. “[I]t will take time,” he says, “to integrate this unanimous impression with the unqualified righteousness with which our own acts, however admittedly miscalculated, invest themselves” (68).\*

What a curious sentence. It’s at least as “curiously beautiful” as the grape leaves the narrator can’t stop looking at. What he seems to mean, we soon gather, is that he has committed an infidelity, an Updikean narrative staple leading, Updikeanly, to a divorce with a kiss on divorce day (see also “Here Come the Maples”). He then escaped to his “wife-to-be,” only to feel his “inner darkness . . . drown [their] love” (68). His actions were “miscalculated” (an understatement for an extra-marital affair if ever I’ve heard one), and now he’s in the position of assimilating everyone’s “impression” of his misbehavior with the excuses he’s still making for himself (68). It’s a curious and beautiful sentence because Updike is here giving us a man on the *brink* of epiphany, a man who knows he’s bound to come to the realization that he’s done wrong—sinned, even, since Updike seemed disinclined to shy away from a spiritual reading of his work—but who is stubborn enough (and self-aware enough) to admit that he’s going to choose to live in this tension a little while longer because he’s unwilling, just yet, to yield to the “unanimous impression” (i.e., admit guilt), though he knows that ultimately he will.

Whether you’re a person of faith, someone working through twelve steps, or just a humanist with a heart, we can agree that it’s hard to reclaim joy until you’ve done your best to right your wrongs. And here’s where I’d quibble with the author, who said that the story’s effects are “of the order of artistic ‘happiness’ that is given rather than attained” (*Hugging* 853). In my own experience, it is grace, not happiness, that is given rather than attained. Happiness is between you and yourself and often has to do with your willingness or unwillingness to embrace the grace given. And that’s supposing that grace has been offered, a big “supposing” in this case, as the story is unclear on this point (while some will likely apply Updike’s remark about the “artistic ‘happiness’ that is given” to Updike’s own *writing* of the story, I see it instead pertaining to the narrator *in* the story). The narrator says that “[t]here is no more story to tell” before telling us in uncharacteristically vague language that at some point between his “retreat” from his mistress and his self-imposed exile to the cottage, “I plucked my wife back; I clasped the black of her dress to me, and braced for the pain” (69). This is no real reconciliation, no

\* Page references are to the text of “Leaves” as reprinted in this issue of *The John Updike Review*, which is the text used in both *The Early Stories, 1953–1975* (New York: Knopf, 2003) and *Collected Early Stories* (New York: Library of America, 2013).

hand outstretched toward grace, merely confirmation of a pattern among Updike's philanderers. As Hedda Ben-Bassat, speaking of Updike's work as a whole, puts it: "Nor is this promise of grace sought by Updike's fictional characters who, as grotesque parodies of Puritan history-making ministers, prefer despair to grace and happy self-ignorance to tormenting self-examination" (42). I don't know whether the narrator of "Leaves" *prefers* despair to grace, but he's certainly chosen it for himself, and, unlike the characters Ben-Bassat describes, he has certainly chosen "tormenting self-examination" over "happy self-ignorance."

You may be asking, Why bring God into this when Updike hasn't? I'd argue that in every Updike story, God is there. The author himself, the grandson of a Presbyterian minister, was raised Lutheran, married the daughter of a Unitarian minister, joined a Congregational church with his first wife, and then an Episcopalian church with his second wife. To read an Updike story not through a veil of faith but through some other veil is to risk misreading it. As Detweiler notes, "Updike's fiction drives distinctly toward" an "eschatological faith" so that, in his stories, "[a] faith in divinity lingers even in the efforts of self-consciously secular men" (129).<sup>3</sup>

The writer-narrator of "Leaves" certainly appears to be a secular man. Where, in order to again find happiness, he might ask forgiveness or make atonement (to a God we can't be sure he believes exists, to the wife he's scorned, or to the wife-to-be whom he finds he no longer loves), he instead, in secular fashion, seeks superficial ointments for the "pain."

He has "retreated" to the cottage to "hide," but you can't outrun guilt. Even in hiding, "[t]he pain does not stop coming" (69). He looks for a cure in reading. He reads from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and experiences "a beautiful awakening," but continues, "by the next night I had returned to my house" (70). And so the writer writes a panacea against the pain. Spotting a blue jay, he writes a description of it in careful detail. Once the bird has flown off, the narrator finds that the blue jay still exists, "stamped" on the page: "A curious trick, possibly useless, but mine" (67). A curious sentence, again, because of course it's not *his* trick. It's what every writer has done as long as there has been writing, and so what we have here is either a narrator with an overinflated ego or one desperate to distract himself from guilt with the kind of writerly parlor tricks about which, as with his affair, he feels an "unqualified righteousness." But writing only manages to ease an author's pain in the movies, so it's no surprise to find our narrator admitting, toward the end of "Leaves," that his composition of these pages—the pages being the "leaves" of the story itself—is little more than his attempt "to thrust, by some subjective photosynthesis, my guilt into Nature, where there is no guilt" (69).

And now we have an Edenic situation on our hands. "Nature," the narrator has told us early on, "may be defined as that which exists without guilt" (67). Eden, it would seem, stands just beyond the window, just beyond the cottage walls where the grape leaves grow along with leaves of oak and elm and sumac. The narrator is "surrounded by leaves . . . [y]et something plucks [him] back," just as he "plucked"—or tried to pluck—his wife back, the way one plucks a grape, or the way Eve, in the book of Genesis, plucks the forbidden fruit (68).

The narrator has to get out of the cottage. He must release himself from the purgatory that, in refusing to face his guilt and repent, he's stubbornly banished himself to. But he's getting there. In Catholic terms, he's halfway through the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. He's confessed and given himself a penance of solitude to perform. He's expressed his sorrow, but he's not quite contrite. The Act of Contrition is what's missing, that divorce from the "unqualified righteousness" to which the narrator clings. He doesn't get there, not in this story, not yet, but already he can *imagine* it: "I imagine warmth leaning against the door, and open the door to let it in; sunlight falls flat at my feet like a penitent" (70). Until he's good and truly contrite, he can't accept the absolution waiting on the other side of the door. Until he shakes off his pride and "falls flat" as the sunlight at his feet, he can't step through the door he's just opened and go in peace and happiness.

Detweiler calls this a "secular reconciliation process, the imagination replac[ing] faith; and natural innocence offer[ing] its own measure of grace" (124). That may well be the case, but no matter how the grace has been gifted, it's not the same as a gift of happiness (sorry, Updike), nor does this mean that the gift of grace has been *accepted*, an act I'd argue is essential for Updikean characters looking to step out of despair and into grace.<sup>4</sup> Our narrator's not shaking off the "unqualified righteousness" of his affair. He's not flat on the floor and penitent—the sunlight is. Nature or God appears to be modeling what needs to happen next, stopping just short of breaking the narrator's back and forcing an Augustinian or Calvinist absolution. In addition, the narrator's lack of faith seems to me the very source of his unending guilt, that "sharpening . . . edge" on which he stands "at the intersection of two kingdoms," those "contiguous but incompatible cosmoses" (68, 69). Surely a writer of Updike's care and caliber would not throw around terms such as *kingdoms* and *penitent* unless he wanted us to read some religion into the text.<sup>5</sup>

A final clue: Toward the end of "Leaves," Updike gives us a mysterious spider. The narrator finds that "[a] spider like a white asterisk hangs in air in front of my face." For Luscher, this is the spider in Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider," but that spider's threads are plain to see, whereas this spider's thread is "invisible"

(Luscher 50). The narrator looks up but can't find a thread holding the spider to the ceiling. It's almost as if there is no thread. But something holds the spider there.

I can't read this without thinking of Jonathan Edwards's sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," in which God "holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire," and "all your righteousness [there's that word again], would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock" (97, 96). But that God doesn't seem quite Updike's style. As Ben-Bassat puts it, Edwards's sermon could never "provide Updike with a satisfactory, indigenous-American model for a prophetic call to awakening" owing, as the sermon does, to the thesis that "righteous self-reliance is God-reliance." No, Updike's works "debunk and parody, rather than praise, the delusions of grandeur of self-reliant Americans" (42). The narrator tells us that he's "unable to read the lesson" of the spider, and perhaps that's because, for Updike, if this is Edwards's spider, there is no lesson there ("Leaves" 69). The only lesson worth learning stands beyond the cottage walls, beyond the dead leaves the narrator has "tracked the floor with," and outside among the living leaves and light (69). But the narrator never doubts that there is a lesson to be learned. He is possessed of Detweiler's "linger[ing]" faith in divinity, which exists "even in the efforts of self-consciously secular men" (129).

Updike might have given his readers a little relief. Instead, he leaves us at the threshold, teetering on that sharpening edge. What's the lesson, then? For me, it's unclear—"Leaves" wouldn't be an Updike story if the moral hit you over the head—but the lesson, if there is one, has something to do, I think, with how that sunlight bows to our narrator, and, in bowing, teaches him to bow. "[I]t will take time" for him to do so (68)—who knows whether a few seconds or months more—long enough, in any case, for him to be done looking for answers in poetry and blue jays and, yes, even in leaves. Long enough for him to let go of his unqualified self-righteousness, accept grace, and, in this way, attain some new measure of happiness.

## NOTES

1. Gass published his story in the *New American Review* in 1967, while Updike published "Leaves" in the *New Yorker* in 1964 and collected it in *The Music School* in 1966. We know Gass was reading Updike by 1968, thanks to a review of *Couples* in which he asks "how anyone could take this diagrammatic melodrama seriously, least of all its author" before spoiling the end of the book ("Cock-a-doodle-doo" 3). Ouch. Hard to know whether Gass had read "Leaves" before composing "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country," though it seems, to this writer, impossible he hadn't.

2. To be fair to critics who gave "Leaves" short shrift, *The Music School* contains twenty stories, a number that by today's standards would be considered intimidating and potentially unmarketable.

Why current publishing trends favor—or why publishers seem to believe that readers favor—shorter story collections is a subject for another essay.

3. I wish I could go into all of Updike's thoughts on faith, God, and organized religion here, but they are many and sometimes contradictory, and, in part because I can't quite get a grip on the author's theology, I'm going to take the easy way out and, like Detweiler, say that this "is not the place to discuss Updike's theological vision, suffice it to say that he has one" (129).

4. To be clear, I'm not talking salvation here, or anything evangelical. I'm not sure whether, for Updike, salvation was universal. I'm merely referring to hope/happiness in the act of accepting grace versus despair and stewing in one's own guilt in the wake of *any* misdeed.

5. We must draw a distinction between author and narrator. Narrators don't always believe what their writers believe, and sometimes writers let their characters learn the wrong lessons. Even if there is no God for this narrator, only Nature and Detweiler's "imagination . . . and natural innocence," God could very well have been here for Updike.

#### WORKS CITED

- Ben-Bassat, Hedda. *Prophets without Vision: Subjectivity and the Sacred in Contemporary American Writing*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2000.
- Burchard, Rachael C. *John Updike: Yea Sayings*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1971.
- Detweiler, Robert. *John Updike*. New York: Twayne, 1972.
- Edwards, Jonathan. *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*. Ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, Kenneth P. Minkema. New Haven: Yale UP, 1995.
- Gass, William H. "Cock-a-doodle-doo." Rev. of *Couples*, by John Updike. *New York Review of Books* 11 Apr. 1968: 3.
- . *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country and Other Stories*. New York: Harper & Row, 1968.
- Luscher, Robert M. *John Updike: A Study of the Short Fiction*. New York: Twayne, 1993.
- Taylor, Larry E. *Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral Patterns in John Updike's Fiction*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1971.
- Updike, John. *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism*. New York: Knopf, 1983.



# A Well-defended Life for Writing

JUDIE NEWMAN

*Updike*, by Adam Begley. New York: HarperCollins, 2014.

Adam Begley's father was a classmate of John Updike's at Harvard, both majoring in English, and his parents were friendly with Updike and his first wife, Mary. Indeed Updike once juggled oranges to trigger a smile from his infant biographer-to-be. Begley thus draws upon a sound understanding of Updike's social milieu, along with a dozen phone calls and two extended interviews with his subject and a plethora of other sources, both oral (interviews with family, friends, and lovers) and written. Just getting on top of the available material was no mean feat. Updike was notoriously prolific (sixty-odd books in fifty years, plus a wealth of other publications); in his later years he traveled almost obsessively (three or four trips each year); there was a daisy chain of adulteries; and he also found time for a weekly poker game, twice weekly golf, a recorder group, assorted civic and church activities, Sunday group sports, home improvements, and four children. Merely reading the record of his spare-time activities is exhausting. From the mid-sixties onward he boxed up and delivered to the Houghton Library at Harvard his drafts, false starts, galley proofs, and personal correspondence, leaving a massive paper trail. He corresponded with a host of people (his mother every three days when he first left home, then once a week; Joyce Carol Oates for four decades), and he kept up with his childhood friends and attended high school reunions. There was a mountain of material for Begley to draw on.

The result is an informative and, in the main, nicely judged account of a writer whose central place in any assessment of the literature of the twentieth century is not likely to be in doubt. Quite apart from the undisputed achievements of the

major novels, the sheer mass and variety of his work makes him relevant to any literary historian. If the biography has a limitation, it consists in Begley's fixation on the early years, perhaps because there is less information available on the later ones. Mary and all four of the Updikes' children feature in the acknowledgments, but there is no mention there of Updike's second wife, Martha, who is very much "the elephant in the room" in this book. It appears that she kept people at something of a distance from Updike, organizing a "well-defended life" for his writing (407). For that, readers owe her a huge debt. In the thirty-five years he spent with her, he wrote sixteen novels and around a hundred stories, two hundred fifty poems, and three hundred reviews, hardly a feat he could have accomplished had she not dealt with so many of the day-to-day distractions that come with being a writer. Ian McEwan, after visiting, remarked that she created a very good writing environment for her husband. She also encouraged Updike, a tremendously obliging man, to say no (and sometimes said it for him) to many of the more ephemeral activities requested of the writer. It is striking that once remarried he seems to have seen very little of his friends from Ipswich and rather less of his children than they might have wanted, and also passed on civic activities.

What this means for the biography is an imbalance. It is not until page 357 that Updike leaves Mary, and the years of 1974 to 2009 are covered in the remaining 130 pages. Granted, most biographers frontload their account with discussion of their subject's formative years—childhood, family, education—and in Updike's case the enormous influence of his mother, his hothouse upbringing as a solitary child with four adults, and the crucial influence of his Pennsylvania background all demand a fair amount of space. As a result, however, Begley risks selling Updike short intellectually and in terms of the broader sociopolitical context. He spends a disproportionate amount of time discussing the short stories, which he thoroughly mines for biographical correspondences (often persuasively). The Updike presented here is formed essentially in his early years and not appreciably modified by his later experiences or his reading. The intellectual biography is therefore neglected; Updike does not seem to have ideas. Begley tells us that Updike wrote *The Coup* (1978) because he had things to say about Africa, but he does not say what those things were, merely commenting that in this novel adultery was not an issue since the hero has four wives. He does celebrate *Rabbit Redux* (1971) as Updike's most powerful novel, and one which he describes as entirely made up, uncoupling fiction from autobiography. But given that sixteen of Updike's novels were produced after 1974, the emphasis on earlier events cuts the space available for their discussion. It is not that Begley does not discuss the novels, but that he

does not discuss them enough, as compared with the short stories. Near the end of the book, Begley provides a rather brisk round-up of the later novels. *Memoires of the Ford Administration* (1992), *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), *Toward the End of Time* (1997), and *Terrorist* (2006) merit two to three pages each, but Begley covers four of the late novels—*Gertrude and Claudius* (2000), *Seek My Face* (2002), *Villages* (2004), and *The Widows of Eastwick* (2008)—in only half a page. It seems as if more importance is assigned to the Bech and Maples stories than to the novels.

One of Begley's main arguments is that "John Updike wrote about himself" (10), often in lightly fictionalized peek-a-boo autobiography. But is that the fiction which deserves the most attention? Most of the novels are not autobiographical at all, or at best reflect an intellectual biography. Begley discusses the influence on Updike of Nabokov, Henry Green, and Denis de Rougemont, but not much is made of Updike's theological and philosophical reading, his engagement with Freud, his scientific interests, or the importance in his work of the visual arts. The image that emerges is of a writer tied to the daily realities and experiences of his time, rather than of an imaginative being, inventing whole worlds of past and future: the imaginary Kush of *The Coup*; the heavily imagined setting of *Brazil*; the dystopian futures of *The Poorhouse Fair* and *Toward the End of Time*; the magic of the witches, and then the widows, of *Eastwick*. Updike was like a bloodhound when on the trail of useful material, and he certainly exploited his family's lives without mercy. His son David is quoted as acknowledging that his father "decided at an early age that his writing had to take precedence over his relations with real people" (9). This is normal for many writers, but in this biography it seems more extreme because we see so little of Updike's imaginative writerly self. The account of the correspondences between the short story "Separating" and the events that inspired it (Updike and Mary breaking the news of their separation to their children) is enough to make the reader wince. Begley makes some sharp observations here, noting also how many of the works of the late sixties and early seventies portray parents who misbehave and children who see things they should not. Updike may have been autobiographical, but he was not necessarily celebrating himself.

Begley also characterizes Updike as a master of impersonation, posing in a charmingly self-deprecatory manner or playing the role of "eminent man of letters" to perfection. Even Rabbit and Bech are seen as alter egos or doubles, so that Updike is always somehow writing about himself. This somewhat devalues his achievements, both in terms of his wilder flights of imagination (the characters of Colonel Elleloù, Saint Paul, Skeeter, Horwendil and Feng) but also his creation

of believable women (Janice Angstrom, Sarah Worth, Gerutha). Pennsylvania was important to him but so was ninth-century Ireland, Hamlet's Denmark, and an ashram in Oregon. Begley contends that Updike was no less an artist because he often relied on self-portraits and the transcription of actual events, given his ability to make this material come alive on the page. True—but that is only part of his achievement. Perhaps readers also owe Martha a debt for her discouragement of that autobiographical impulse. She did not go along with the idea that successive portraits of her should pop up in his fiction. Her ex-husband was even more resistant. A partner in a top Boston law firm, Alex Bernhard recognized his children in Updike's short story "Domestic Life in America" and made it clear that he would sue if they ever appeared again in his work. (They disappeared from the cast list forever.)

Inevitably the strong parts of the biography concern the earlier years, family, and education. This emphasis tends to pull Updike closer to his mother. Linda Hoyer Updike was the author of two books of fiction and left behind three unpublished novels and dozens of unpublished stories. Her son joked that he was an editor before he was a writer, reading and commenting on his mother's stories (ten of them published in the *New Yorker*). Updike's first story (beginning with a "tribe of Bum-Bums" sitting around "a cozy cave fire") was written at the age of eight, presumably aimed at pleasing his mother. Begley's account of the Shillington years, though largely familiar to Updike scholars, is well turned. Harvard is also covered in interesting detail, demonstrating how Updike, though cultivating the pose of an outsider, swiftly penetrated the school's charmed circle, becoming the star of the *Lampoon* (prized the most for his light verse) and an ingenious inventor of undergraduate stunts. (One involved having some classmates carry twenty pounds of elephant dung wrapped up in a baby's blanket on public transportation while "feeding" it from a bottle.) He was sociable, clubbable, and very industrious. He supplied the *Lampoon* with seven covers, a hundred cartoons and drawings, sixty poems, and twenty-five prose pieces (not all autobiographical—one concerns a Peruvian at a New Hampshire summer camp, body paint, and opera).

When Begley moves on to the *New Yorker* period, his account is masterly. He succeeds in spelling out the magazine's complicated financial arrangements (a first-read agreement, a "drawing account," cost of living adjustments, bonuses) and shows how well-paid Updike was from the start: \$612.50 for "Ace in the Hole," followed by \$826 for the next story, and \$200 for his "Talk of the Town" pieces. Updike quickly became entirely a *New Yorker* writer, abandoning any work in his

early years that was rejected rather than hawking it to other magazines. William Maxwell and Katharine White, editors at the magazine, were important influences, though she attempted to steer Updike away from nostalgic accounts of his youth (advice which he took only for a couple of years). He published light verse, parodies, and other examples of what the magazine called “casuals,” or humorous pieces (one concerned a lawn invigorator), and remained a *New Yorker* writer for fifty years. Yet he abandoned his city office and New York with great suddenness, after less than two years, and removed to Ipswich, Massachusetts, for reasons which still appear obscure. While he was clearly influenced by the desire to bring up his young family outside the city, the decision seems to have been made overnight after a literary party where he was afflicted by the sight of a crowd of writers and hangers-on getting drunk and competing with each other. It was probably the most important decision of his writing life. However enthusiastic his membership in a variety of “gangs”—adolescent, student, literary, and erotic—the incident demonstrates just how much he was always his own man.

Begley provides a fascinating account of the Ipswich years. Updike emerges as effortlessly industrious, writing all morning and regularly producing his three pages a day, and spending the afternoon reading, writing reviews, checking proofs, and taking care of other literary business (he did not have an agent). He had an obsessive interest in the design and production of his books, and in this respect he and Knopf were ideally suited; he exchanged weekly letters with Alfred A. Knopf for years. But Begley is also handling awkward material in this part of the story. He does not shy away from Updike’s promiscuity, though to protect their privacy he does not name the women with whom Updike had casual affairs. Some of these affairs are described as flings; others were extended, and there was an abortion in one case. Two of Updike’s affairs were more serious. He almost left his wife in 1962 for Joyce Harrington and finally did leave her for Martha Bernhard in 1974 (Martha’s ex-husband later married Joyce).

Begley highlights Updike’s ability to compartmentalize, to segregate his professional from his social life. Indeed he also kept his social groups apart to some extent. He played poker for nearly half a century with the same men: the local cobbler, a pediatrician, the owner of an auto parts store. The Ipswich couples were an affluent suburban crowd with which Updike remained close for fifteen years, but they were not at all literary. The exception seems to have been Martha; she had been a student of Nabokov, who described her as a genius. Begley sees Updike and Martha as drawn together by literary affinity; some of his informants

describe her as pursuing him relentlessly. Updike cannot win in this account. His dithering between Joyce and Mary does not cover him in glory, but when he does decide to leave his marriage, he also comes in for criticism. From the literary point of view, the Ipswich chapters are particularly interesting in relation to *Marry Me*, written between 1962 and 1964 and put away in a safety deposit box until it was published in 1976. (Begley is invaluable in establishing the timeline of Updike's writing.)

The threat of legal action was always a concern, as Begley shows. It is easy today to forget the difficulties faced in publishing anything frank about sex in the early years of Updike's career. *Couples* (1968) had to be comprehensively overhauled to satisfy Knopf's lawyers. In 1960, Updike had to edit out the "dirty words" in *Rabbit, Run*, though he got them back into the 1964 British paperback edition. To do so, however, he had to change his British publisher from Gollancz to André Deutsch. Whether there were similar problems with other European editions and translations remains unknown; Begley does not say. Indeed there is comparatively little here about Updike's international reception, or about his interest in the book as a material object and its effect on the published editions, his choice of illustrators, and other paratextual matters.

After *Couples*, of course, Updike was rich. It is a real strength of this biography that the reader gets a sense of just how well-paid he was. In 1967 he earned \$70,000, and the sale of the film rights to *Couples* in 1968 made him \$360,000. In England that year, the rent of his London flat was the equivalent of \$10,000 a month at today's prices. Updike was also quite canny in what Begley describes as his lucrative "shadow publishing" career—the production of chapbooks, broadsides, and signed editions from fine presses. Updike cheerfully allowed the publication of forty signed and numbered copies, at \$40 each, of "Three Illuminations," a satire on the production of collectibles. His tongue could be firmly in his cheek at times—yet he gave generously of his time, gratis, to prize committees and the like, and was an active member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Every biographer faces a multitude of choices. As Roland Barthes said, biography is a novel that dare not speak its name. What remains obscure is why Begley decided to write about Updike. If we are to believe the theorists, biographers are drawn to their subjects for a variety of psychological reasons. André Maurois wrote about Shelley to articulate his own youthful rebellion. Bell Gale Chevigny wrote about Margaret Fuller and reflected that women writing about women tend to replicate mother-daughter relations. Freud argued that biographers who take

the hero as their object of study do so because in their own personal, emotional life they already bear him a special affection and thus tend to idealization. The opposite case obtains in the genre of chainsaw biography (Kitty Kelley), and of course many biographers are taken aback by their subject's clay feet (Lawrance Thompson on Robert Frost, for example). Begley writes from a position of clear respect and admiration, and the result, while not at all hagiographic, is a little on the tame side. However, while this may be the first biography, it is unlikely that it will be the last, and one looks forward to more detailed accounts of the various women who were involved with Updike, the later years, and the intellectual trajectory.



# Be True to Your School

PETER J. BAILEY

*John Updike's Early Years*, by Jack De Bellis with David Silcox. Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2013.

Perhaps the toughest part of writing anything about John Updike is the suspicion—the near certainty, in fact—that somewhere in his seven volumes of essays and criticism lurks an Updike-devised test that your project might fail. (The critic is gone; his critical templates survive.) Donald Greiner's recent essay in the pages of this journal, "John Updike: The Artist as Reluctant Critic," lists Updike's personal rules for book reviewing, and I recognize that their strictures are thoroughly applicable to this book review. Similarly, Jack De Bellis acknowledges in *John Updike's Early Years* the applicability of Updike's essay "On Literary Biography" to his own project. "The main question concerning literary biography is, surely, Why do we need it at all?" Updike wondered. "When an author has devoted his life to expressing himself, and, if a poet or a writer of fiction, has used the sensations and critical events of his life as his basic material, what of significance can a biographer add to the record?" (*Due Considerations* 3).

The Olinger stories and *The Centaur* are Updike's literarily mediated versions of his childhood, but De Bellis seeks to illuminate Updike's past via a different set of lights. "Updike said Shillington was his incubator," writes De Bellis,

and the dedication I have chosen ["Dedicated to the classmates of John Updike, Most near, most loved, and most far"] shows that his Shillington High School classmates were essential to his inspiration. This book proposes that John Updike's school years in Pennsylvania were the crucible in which he forged his consciousness, transforming

a simple suburban city, Shillington, into Olinger, the world of his creative imagination. (xix)

Updike was deeply and forthrightly grateful to his Shillington High classmates, but he never compiled, as De Bellis indefatigably has, a thirty-page appendix profiling the school's students, teachers, and administrators. De Bellis also provides extended discussions in the text of close Updike friends such as Joan Venne Youngerman, Peggy Lutz, Fred Muth, Dick Manderbach, Bill Forry, and Nancy Wolf, and their translation into fictional characters in the stories. (It is not happenstance that De Bellis is also the author of *The John Updike Encyclopedia*.) "Updike's classmates," De Bellis says, "recovered Updike for me as the sensitive, charming, witty, ingenious, daring, energy-laden, fun-filled guy they knew personally. They performed an act that Updike might have called 'personal archeology' and rescued his early life. For this I am grateful" (xxiii).

In his essay on literary biographies, Updike says that we read them "for a variety of reasons, of which the first and perhaps the most worthy is the desire to prolong and extend our intimacy with the author—to partake again, from another angle, of the joys we have experienced within the author's oeuvre, in the presence of a voice and mind we have come to love" (*Due* 4–5). Displeased by the news that another writer was about to infringe on his intimacy with his audience by publishing a biography of him, Updike in 1989 published *Self-Consciousness*, a memoir in which he offered generous chapters on his boyhood sufferings from psoriasis and a stutter. The disclosure of these "wounds" (Updike's word) leaves De Bellis with few new intimate details to disclose, although his catalogue of Updike's virtues derived from his friends' characterizations suggests how little taste this biographer has for skewering his subject. Revelations, such as they are, come from Updike's family and friends.

De Bellis's brief portrait of Wesley Updike cites the father's admission that "[t]he kid got me right" in *The Centaur* (Plath 26), and there's nothing in *John Updike's Early Life* to alter appreciably the impression of him formed by readers of that novel as a humorously self-effacing, highly entertaining teacher who engaged in intense conversations with nearly everyone he could find, especially if the dialogue delayed his return to the family farm. Hardly a critical word is cited about him in the book. Such is not the case with Linda Grace Hoyer Updike, whose central role in inspiring a writerly vocation in her son is counterbalanced in the biography by evidence that she was not universally admired among Shillingtonians. (To his great credit, this is as close to "dirt" as De Bellis ever gets.)

So focused was Updike's mother upon his escape from Shillington and his literary future that she made it very clear which of his friends were welcome at 117 Philadelphia Avenue and which were not. De Bellis comments: "Linda Updike was troubled by her son's boyhood friends for three reasons: she dreaded her boy might become an athlete, a homosexual, or the battered loser of a fight" (3). Accordingly, Shillington to her represented nothing but the threat of distraction from her son's projected destiny, comprising (in Updike's characterization of her vision of it), "small minds, small concerns, small hopes" (*Self-Consciousness* 37). Her condemnatory attitude very likely prompted the unsympathetic recollections of her from Shillingtonians who suggested to De Bellis that she was "strait-laced" and an "old-fashioned person" about whom it was "rare that anyone said they liked her"; another close Updike friend found her "very quiet, withdrawn," while yet another termed her a "recluse." De Bellis's conclusion seems fair: "Her writing routine and her dedication to her son's success had absorbed her life and made her unapproachable" (8). Updike's highly affectionate reminiscences of her in fiction, poetry, and essays, of course, countervail these opinions.

George D. Painter's two-volume biography of Marcel Proust might seem a disproportionate comparison with De Bellis's modest book, but Updike's description of that text in "On Literary Biography" is apposite nonetheless to *John Updike's Early Years*:

[It] allows us to enter the vast mansion of the novel by a back door, as it were, an approach that turns solid and hard and definite what in the novel was large and vague and inconsecutively arranged and beautifully charged with Proust's poetic sensibility. Painter must use research and investigation to build what Proust constructed out of his memory, but it is recognizably the same edifice, with some practical additions. . . .

The biography becomes, then, a way of re-experiencing the novel, with a closeness, and a delight in seeing imagined details conjured back into real ones . . . (*Due* 5-6)

In his final chapter, De Bellis turns imagined details back into real ones by providing the likely Shillington models and inspirations for numerous stories, *Rabbit, Run*, and *The Centaur*. The short story "The Happiest I've Been," De Bellis persuasively argues, has its genesis in a 1952 New Year's Eve party at the home of Dick Manderbach, attended by Updike and his classmates Bill Forry, Peggy Lutz, and other members of "the gang." A bottle was passed around, Forry's date fell asleep on Updike's shoulder, and in the end Updike and Forry took off in Forry's car for Chicago, where Updike would ask Mary Pennington to marry him. Because De

Bellis's intention is "to reveal the links between living persons and Updike's work, not to explicate" texts (91), his analytical silences nearly always invite the reader to notice all the resonant moments in the story that seem not to have existed in the inspiring circumstance.

In "The Happiest I've Been," the New Year's Eve party is held two days early so that John Nordholm (Updike) and Neil Hovey (Forry) can attend, the rescheduling making the event seem a more informal and spontaneous example of what Nordholm terms "the party I had been going to all my life" (*Early Stories* 71). Forry had a date that night, unlike the story's Hovey, who feels rejected by women until he encounters a guest who has accompanied the host's former girlfriend, Margaret Lento, who spends much of the party getting drunk and throwing up. When the party dies out after 1 a.m., Hovey and Nordholm drive the two women to Lento's house, where Hovey gets romantically involved with the unnamed companion while Lento falls asleep on Nordholm's shoulder in the kitchen, which is frigid because her "[c]heap bastard" father turns down the heat at night (78). De Bellis's recreation of the actual event includes no rescheduling of the party and no stop at another, markedly shabbier house, nor does Forry fall in love with someone he had never met before. How many events in the story actually occurred that night (the Ping-Pong game with rotating players, the ex-high school athletes who unobtrusively crash the party) De Bellis couldn't possibly discover and we'll probably never know. The point is that the story's "abrupt purchase on lived life" (*Odd Jobs* 135) is an alchemical blending of the factual and fictional, an ordinary small-town ceremony of friendship that has been translated, through imagination and memory, into the emotional climactic invocation that this was "the happiest I've been." In an essay titled "How Does the Writer Imagine?" Updike described that transformation in the story: "Things turn symbolic; hidden meanings emerge. The blurred sexuality of this playful moment is ominous, for it is carrying the participants away from their childhoods, into the dizzying mystery of time" (*Odd* 135). What De Bellis's book does extraordinarily well is to provide a sufficient number of real-life details underlying the stories and novels to allow readers to see just how much creative imagining was required for Updike to translate biographical fact into literature—to make of the night of the New Year's Eve party, for instance, a nuanced study in class differences as well as a dramatization that real happiness is not fulfillment, but anticipation.

*John Updike's Early Years* stands up very well to the Updike test of literary biographies, then, but it introduces one element that Updike's essay doesn't address. Because De Bellis deals only with Updike's Pennsylvania years, some of the topics

he discusses are adolescent commonplaces—precisely what Updike managed to translate into art. De Bellis is unremittingly conscious of the way in which his biography, limited as it is to Updike's youth, has to make much of what seems a not completely untypical American childhood, one richly supplied with mundane detail. Rather than apologize for this, De Bellis cites in his book's closing sentences Updike's relationship with Nancy Wolf, aspects of which are dramatized in "Flight," "The Persistence of Desire," and *The Centaur*: "Updike had once vowed that as a writer he intended to explore even the most mundane subject. What could be more mundane than the loss of a high school sweetheart? And what in Updike's continuous imagining could be simultaneously more poignant, desperate, and symbolic of ecstasy and failure, of ambiguity and the tragedy of irredeemable choice?" (97–98).

Jack De Bellis is a scholar whose decades of studying Updike have developed in him a prescient and highly empathic grasp of his subject. For his biography, I am—we are—grateful.

#### WORKS CITED

- Greiner, Donald J. "John Updike: The Artist as Reluctant Critic." *John Updike Review* 2.2 (Spring 2013): 43–57.
- Plath, James, ed. *Conversations with John Updike*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994.
- Updike, John. *Due Considerations*. New York: Knopf, 2007.
- . *The Early Stories: 1953–1975*. New York: Knopf, 2003.
- . *Odd Jobs*. New York: Knopf, 1991.
- . *Self-Consciousness*. New York: Knopf, 1989.



# Updike and His Critics

BOB BATCHELOR

*Becoming John Updike: Critical Reception, 1958–2010*, by Laurence W. Mazzeno. Rochester: Camden House, 2013.

Imagine—John Updike repeatedly criticized for writing too much! *Rabbit, Run* “greeted with enthusiasm by many and a good deal of skepticism by others” (9). A critic concluding about the best-selling *Couples* that “you don’t have to be a bad writer to come up with an awful novel” (30). These are the kinds of confounding moments captured in *Becoming John Updike: Critical Reception, 1958–2010*, by Laurence W. Mazzeno. The book, part of Camden House’s Literary Criticism in Perspective series, charts Updike’s reputation as it dipped and dived, rose and solidified from the mid-1950s to his death in 2009 and beyond.

Mazzeno’s detailed research and skillful account offers new insight into how the professional critics and scholars encountered and defined Updike’s work. For Updike’s supporters, the book puts into perspective the rough treatment he often received, even after winning just about every writing award available and securing his standing among scholars. His detractors, on the other hand, will find more than enough examples of the charge that Updike was all style, no substance. Even those uninitiated in the tumultuous seas of Updike criticism will find the book enlightening. Here is a writer who at various times was championed as one of America’s all-time greats, while simultaneously vilified as little more than a hack, wordsmith, or worse yet, pornographer.

Mazzeno acknowledges that tackling Updike has never been easy. Despite the millions of words published by and about him, countless interviews and profiles,

and a lifetime spent in the public eye, Updike remains elusive and slippery. Part of this stems from the various personas he created. Was he the modest freelancer that he presented himself as in public, or a more aggressive figure who dictated how book reviews should be written and who composed the memoir *Self-Consciousness* to discourage others from investigating his life? While practically every nook and cranny of Updike's work and life has already been covered in one form or another, Updike remains in many ways a mystery.

These contradictions are at the heart of *Becoming John Updike*, and few are better prepared than Mazzeno to make sense of them. President emeritus of Alvernia University, Mazzeno is a prolific scholar who has previously written volumes on Austen, Dickens, Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold for the Literary Criticism in Perspective series. In *Becoming John Updike*, Mazzeno proves once again to be a careful, masterly interpreter of literary reputation, sifting through many years of professional and scholarly reviews to produce a full portrait of Updike's reception.

Mazzeno demonstrates that from the earliest days of his career, "Updike was a controversial figure in American letters: for some, a major voice in fiction, for others a pretentious mannerist who substituted florid stylistic flourishes for substantive insight" (1). *Becoming John Updike* makes it clear that Updike's legacy has always been up for grabs and continues to be today. Mazzeno shows that despite the newspaper and magazine critics' varied reactions to each new Updike work, academic scholars early on found him a worthy subject and explored his writings in great detail. Among the scholars considered at length in the book are Donald Greiner, James Schiff, James Plath, D. Quentin Miller, and William Pritchard.

But Updike from the beginning had strong critics, whether with the Rabbit novels (now considered collectively one of America's foremost works of fiction), the bestseller *Couples*, or many of his later novels. Some reviews were quite harsh, and even those critics who wrote favorably about Updike early on would later express disappointment. In his discussion of *Couples* Mazzeno quotes from reviews by such early champions as Granville Hicks and Alfred Kazin, neither of whom felt that the novel lived up to expectations, given Updike's talent and potential (29).

What we should not expect in *Becoming John Updike*, Mazzeno notes at the outset, is an assessment of every review of Updike ever written or "lengthy analysis of many critiques of individual works"; he prefers, he says, to "let . . . readers get a sense of what these commentators have said directly from them" (4). Some readers might find this disappointing, particularly given Mazzeno's expertise as a critical bibliographer, but keeping his own analysis to a minimum helps make for a clear overview of Updike's reception. Mazzeno allows the critics to speak

for themselves, telling the history of Updike's literary reputation via the voices on the scene at the time the books were published. When Mazzeno does offer assessments or add context, he is judicious. Noting that reviewers began debating Updike's legacy as early as *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959), he writes: "The notion that a great novel lay hidden somewhere inside Updike, just waiting to be written, became a cliché that lasted more than a decade" (7).

One characteristic of this type of critical bibliographic study is that it continually calls attention to the best and worst that reviewers and scholars have offered. At times, Mazzeno seems to be performing a balancing act, presenting the pro and con sides as two equal groups, as if a negative review by Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times* is somehow offset by a positive piece in an academic journal with a comparably small audience. As a result, readers may have trouble keeping the different voices in perspective.

As for its structure, *Becoming John Updike* is divided into ten concise chapters, which examine Updike's critical reception in chronological fashion, marking his career into periods bookended by important novels or events. For example, Chapter 2, "Making a Name on the National Scene (1968–1975)," begins with the runaway success of *Couples* and ends with the early approval of scholars who had already recognized Updike's importance and begun deep examinations of the Rabbit novels and other early works. At the conclusion of Mazzeno's study is a valuable, 47-page Works Cited section, which provides a wealth of source material.

Reading this book, one is left wondering how a writer so lauded by scholars could simultaneously provoke such hostility from critics. The words *precocious*, *clever*, and their equivalents appear frequently as Mazzeno reveals the consistent theme rung by Updike's detractors: all sizzle, no steak. As this claim is made decade after decade, it seems as if some critics viewed Updike as they did Rob Lowe or Patrick Swayze, underestimating him because he was born with the literary equivalent of good looks: a natural writing style that simply rubbed reviewers the wrong way.

I have always felt that Updike achieved too much success too early in his career for many reviewers to take him seriously. The combined power of the *New Yorker* and Knopf established Updike for some, but ruined him for others who chalked up his standing to his association with those venerable giants. I also think there was a "too smart by half" vibe emanating from Updike that troubled reviewers, who felt that his modesty and "aw, shucks" demeanor did not jibe with his Harvard education and *New Yorker* sensibility—an impression, Mazzeno notes, that Frank Kermode dismissed in his defense of *The Coup* (56).

Even when his books received critical praise and public acceptance, Updike faced detractors. As Mazzeno shows, it was often the critical heavyweights, such as Kakutani or James Wood, who attacked him at every turn. Updike felt their arrows and threw a couple of jabs back. In a 2006 interview, he quipped: “Michiko Kakutani and I have danced many a round together and her reviews of me seem petulant . . . and she gets on a subject, a point of the book, one tiny point of the book, and won’t let it go. And she is censorious . . . I don’t feel this so keenly when she reviews other authors (“John Updike in Conversation”). One valuable aspect of *Becoming John Updike* is the way Mazzeno illuminates the relationship between writers and their critics and the way these relationships unfold over time. We no longer need to wonder whether a particular reviewer was pro- or anti-Updike; Mazzeno has set the record straight.

As for reviewing, Updike famously outlined his own “code of reviewing,” which included understanding the author’s intention; describing the book through sufficient quotation to give a sense of its style; not giving away the plot; and attempting to understand why the book fails, if it does. He concluded: “The communion between reviewer and his public is based upon the presumption of certain possible joys of reading, and all our discriminations should curve toward that end” (*Picked-Up Pieces* 14). Mazzeno’s readers will appreciate why Updike would create such rules, especially as his own creative work became a punching bag for critics.

Most of those who pick up Mazzeno’s book will already have an abiding interest or stake in Updike’s posthumous reputation. A question worth pondering, however, is whether *Becoming John Updike* provides a basis for predicting how Updike will be assessed in years to come.

Mazzeno’s book appears during a busy period in Updike studies, marked by the publication of Jack De Bellis’s *John Updike’s Early Years*, a biographical study of the author’s early life in Pennsylvania; my own *John Updike: A Critical Biography*, which situates Updike’s writing in the popular culture of his times; and Adam Begley’s *Updike*, the first full-length biography. If recent biographical studies of Updike’s contemporaries Salinger and Mailer are any guide, these new books will generate buzz and spur sales of Updike’s novels. In addition, there have been a variety of other recent developments, such as the establishment of the John Updike Society and the purchase of the John Updike Childhood Home, which the Society is remodeling and turning into a museum.

Running counter to these developments is the fact that Updike is not on the minds of today’s graduate students and young scholars. Though there will, of course, be additional articles, dissertations, and books on Updike, he is not a hot

topic. In 2012, Katie Roiphe wrote: “Exactly three years after his death, it’s sad to see that John Updike has subtly fallen out of fashion, . . . and that a faint sense of disapproval clings to his reputation, even as his immense talent is recognized” (“Rabbit at Rest”).

While his critics have questioned the sheer volume of Updike’s published work, it was his steady rate of production, Mazzeno demonstrates, that kept him in the literary headlines and on readers’ shelves. The ability to generate interest is what slowly dissipates after an author’s death. Shane Salerno’s documentary on Salinger and Baz Luhrmann’s cinematic adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* are examples of what it takes to gain momentum in the multimedia age. Perhaps some enterprising director, using Begley or Mazzeno as a guide, will tackle the Rabbit books anew, providing Updike with a new generation of readers.

Yet, pinning the hopes of Updike’s future literary standing on Mazzeno and others who study his work is to saddle them unfairly with a heavy weight. *Becoming John Updike* is a masterful appraisal of Updike’s literary reception, which is exactly what Mazzeno set out to accomplish. The book provides insight and plows through a mountain of criticism to give readers a straightforward assessment. Ironically, as Mazzeno’s readers will appreciate, this is not the kind of treatment Updike often received. This important book adheres to Updike’s critical guidelines and is essential reading for those who want to gain a full understanding of his oeuvre.

#### WORKS CITED

- Roiphe, Katie. “Rabbit at Rest.” *Slate*. 27 January 2012. Web. 28 January 2012. [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/roiphe/2012/01/john\\_updike\\_the\\_bizarre\\_and\\_misguided\\_assault\\_on\\_his\\_reputation\\_.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/roiphe/2012/01/john_updike_the_bizarre_and_misguided_assault_on_his_reputation_.html).
- Updike, John. Interview. “John Updike in Conversation with Jeffrey Goldberg.” Celeste Bartos Forum, Humanities and Social Sciences Library. New York Public Library. 15 June 2006. Web. 9 July 2009. <http://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/events/updike061506.pdf>.
- . *Picked-Up Pieces*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1975.



## Contributors' Notes

**PETER J. BAILEY** is the author of *Reading Stanley Elkin, The Reluctant Film Art of Woody Allen*, and *Rabbit (Un)Redeemed: The Drama of Belief in John Updike's Fiction*. With Sam B. Girgus, he co-edited *A Companion to Woody Allen* for Wiley-Blackwell, published in 2013. Bailey is the secretary of The John Updike Society.

**BOB BATCHELOR** is James Peadar Professor of Communication at Thiel College. He is the author or editor of 26 books, including *John Updike: A Critical Biography* and *Gatsby: The Cultural History of the Great American Novel*. He edits the "Contemporary American Literature" book series for Rowman & Littlefield. Bob also serves as Director of Marketing & Media for The John Updike Childhood Home museum in Shillington, Pennsylvania. Visit him on the web at [www.bobbatchelor.com](http://www.bobbatchelor.com).

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

**KAZUKO KASHIHARA** is Professor of English and American literature at Kansai Gaidai University (Japan). She has published more than ten essays, mainly in Japanese, on various Updike novels, including the Rabbit tetralogy, *Roger's Version*, *S.*, and *Gertrude and Claudius*. Her current interests pertain to Updike's thinking and philosophy in his later years.

**JUDIE NEWMAN** is Professor of American Studies at the University of Nottingham. Her recent publications include *Utopia and Terror in Contemporary Fictions of America*

(Routledge, 2013); *Fictions of America: Narratives of Global Empire* (Routledge, 2007); and *Public Art, Memorials, and Atlantic Slavery*, edited with Celeste-Marie Bernier (Routledge, 2009).

**SUE NORTON** is a lecturer in English at the Dublin Institute of Technology. Her Ph.D. dissertation (2001) was on representations of family in contemporary American fiction. She is an essayist and reviewer whose writing has appeared in such publications as *Commonweal*, *Faith and Freedom*, and *Times Higher Education*. Her recent scholarly work has appeared in *Sense and Sensitivity: Difference and Diversity in Higher Education Classrooms* (Peter Lang), as well as in *The Explicator* (Taylor & Francis) and *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* (Taylor & Francis).

**DAVID JAMES POISSANT** is the author of *The Heaven of Animals*, a short story collection published by Simon & Schuster in 2014. His stories and essays have appeared in the *Atlantic*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *New York Times*, *Playboy*, *Ploughshares*, and in several annual award anthologies. He teaches in the MFA program at the University of Central Florida in Orlando.

**JAMES SCHIFF** is the author or editor of five books on contemporary American fiction, including *John Updike Revisited*, *Updike in Cincinnati*, and *Understanding Reynolds Price*. His work has appeared in *American Literature*, the *Southern Review*, the *Missouri Review*, *Tin House*, *Critique*, *Studies in American Fiction*, the *South Atlantic Review*, and elsewhere. He is Associate Professor of English at the University of Cincinnati and serves as the editor of *The John Updike Review*.

**SARAH A. STRICKLEY** is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship, an Ohio Arts Council grant, a Glenn Schaeffer Award from the International Institute of Modern Letters, and other honors. Her work has appeared in *Oxford American*, *A Public Space*, *Witness*, the *Harvard Review*, *Gulf Coast*, the book *Labor Day: True Birth Stories by Today's Best Women Writers*, and elsewhere. She's a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and is currently a doctoral candidate in the University of Cincinnati's Department of English and Comparative Literature.



# The John Updike Review

## A Prize for Young Writers

*The John Updike Review's* Annual Emerging  
Writers Prize

Congratulations to Vidya Ravi and Jeffrey Ludwig,  
who shared the inaugural award in 2013.

- ELIGIBILITY** Anyone under 40 years of age
- PRIZE** \$1,000, along with publication in the journal
- GUIDELINES** *The John Updike Review* is looking for an essay by a young writer or critic that deepens our understanding of the work of John Updike. The writing may be scholarly or *belletristic* in nature. Academics, critics, graduate students, assistant professors, novelists, poets, and short story writers are encouraged to submit essays, which should be ten to thirty pages in length.
- DEADLINE** Submissions are open and rolling. Depending upon the quality of submissions, one or more winners will be announced annually.
- SEND  
SUBMISSIONS TO** Professor James Schiff  
Editor, *The John Updike Review*  
james.schiff@uc.edu  
(513) 556-0930

For more information about the journal, visit our website:  
[www.updikereview.com](http://www.updikereview.com)

## THE JOHN UPDIKE REVIEW IS ACCEPTING SUBMISSIONS

*The John Updike Review* is a peer-reviewed, scholarly journal published by the University of Cincinnati and The John Updike Society. The journal specializes in scholarship on the writings, life, and literary and cultural significance of John Updike.

*The John Updike Review* welcomes all critical approaches and publishes full-length articles as well as shorter notes, book reviews, bibliographical updates, and professional postings about conferences, calls for papers, scholarships, and other items of interest pertaining to Updike.

### ESSAYS AND INQUIRIES SHOULD BE ADDRESSED TO:

Professor James Schiff, Editor

*The John Updike Review*

P.O. Box 210069

Cincinnati, OH 45221-0069

EMAIL: [james.schiff@uc.edu](mailto:james.schiff@uc.edu)

TELEPHONE: 513-556-0930

Electronic submissions, via email (as attached Word files), are preferred. Receipt of your manuscript will be acknowledged. Decisions take between 8 and 12 weeks.

### FIND FURTHER DETAILS AT:

[http://blogs.iwu.edu/johnupdikesociety/?page\\_id](http://blogs.iwu.edu/johnupdikesociety/?page_id)

THE  
JOHN UPDIKE  
REVIEW

