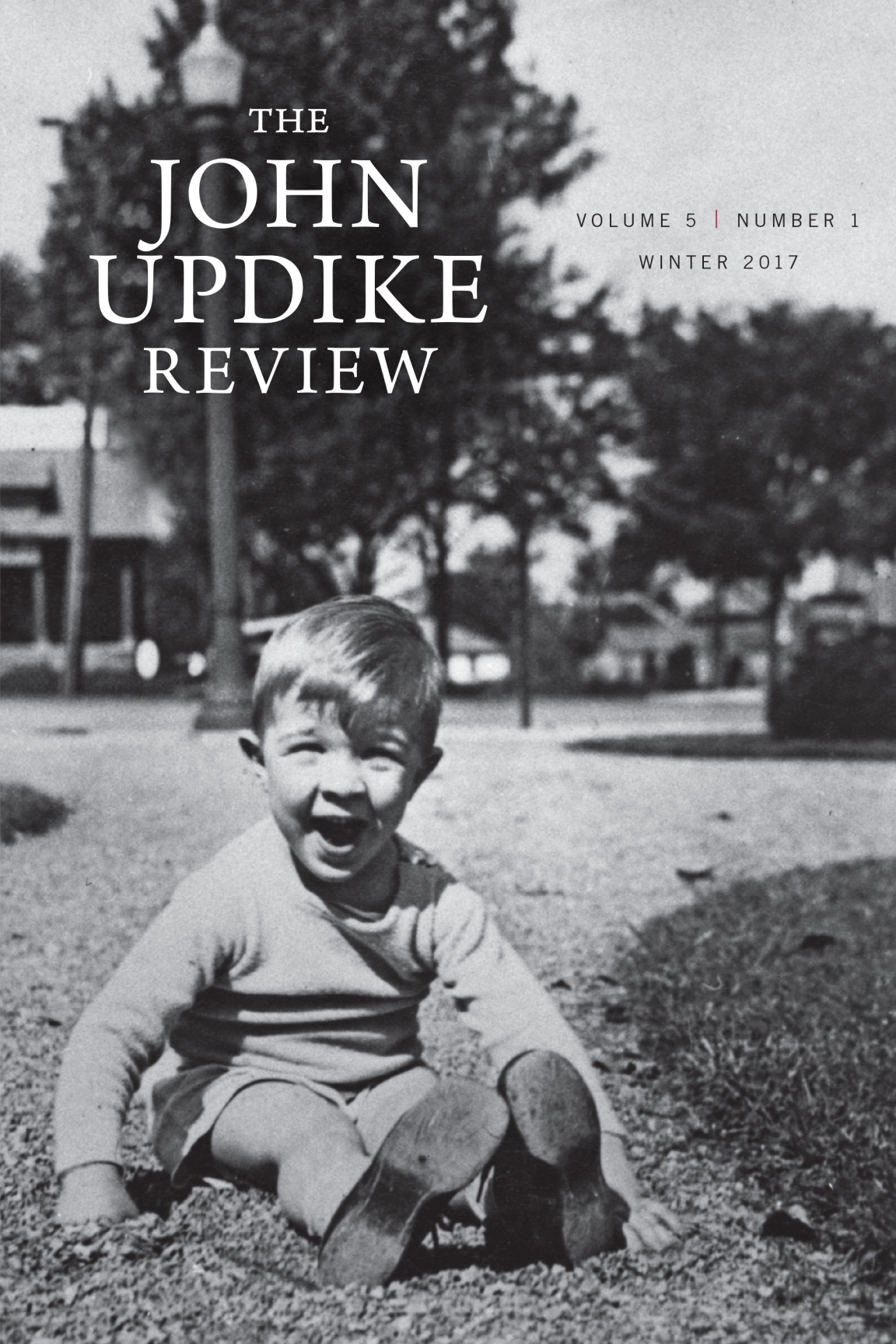


THE
JOHN
UPDIKE
REVIEW

VOLUME 5 | NUMBER 1

WINTER 2017





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VOLUME 5 | NUMBER 1

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The John Updike Review

- 1 A Word from the Editor
JAMES SCHIFF

ESSAYS

- 5 Summer 1974, in Fiction and Memory
DAVID UPDIKE
- 19 A Conversation with John Updike in Moscow
WARD BRIGGS AND J. ALEXANDER OGDEN
- 41 Updike in Venice
JOHN PHILIP DRURY
- 53 John Updike's Broad­sides: The Blackness of Death and *Bath
after Sailing*
DONALD J. GREINER

THREE WRITERS ON *VILLAGES*

- 71 Programmed Delirium: *Villages* and the God of Multilevel
Selection
MARSHALL BOSWELL
- 81 Dreams, Conflated Wives, Lingering Guilt, and Coitus
Recalled in Updike's *Villages*
JAMES SCHIFF

- 91 Seduction in John Updike's *Villages*
ARISTI TRENDEL

REVIEWS

- 105 Mortality as Muse
SUE NORTON
The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End, by Katie Roiphe
- 111 Unlocking the Secrets of Updike's Fiction
LAURENCE W. MAZZENO
Myth and Gospel in the Fiction of John Updike, by
John McTavish
- 115 Contributors' Notes

A Word from the Editor

It's been five years since our first issue appeared in November 2011, which calls for modest celebration, some self-examination, and thoughts on where we're headed.

From the beginning, the objective of the *John Updike Review* has been, simply, to provide a space where those interested in writing about John Updike can participate in discussion. In five years we have released eight issues, containing thirty-six essays, fifteen critical responses to five works of fiction ("Leaves," "Gesturing," "Trust Me," *The Widows of Eastwick*, and *Villages*), twelve book reviews, two tributes, one panel discussion, and one bibliography—sixty-seven pieces in all, excluding the three reprinted short stories. A respectable start.

Though the novels, particularly the Rabbit novels, have historically garnered the lion's share of attention in Updike studies, in our pages the short stories have drawn the most interest: ten essays, nine responses in the "Three Writers" section, and two reviews, which comes to twenty-one pieces, nearly a third of our offerings. This is good news. Many have argued that the short story is Updike's strongest suit, a genre in which he has few rivals, so this focus is gratifying, especially given how often short fiction is neglected. As for the novels discussed in the *JUR*, attention has been spread rather evenly, with the Rabbit books holding a slight edge over *Couples*, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, *Toward the End of Time*, *Gertrude and Claudius*, and *Villages*. I'm hesitant, though, to read much significance here—one or two new essays could alter these preliminary findings. Further, if recent conference papers are any indication, *Terrorist* is mounting a charge.

As for the subjects of and critical treatments in our published essays, there has been considerable examination of the author's biography, including his childhood and juvenilia, his college years, his politics, and his travels. This is not surprising. An artist's death is usually followed by biographies—two have already appeared

since 2009 and more are surely coming. Related to this growing interest in his life, Updike's volume of memoirs, *Self-Consciousness*, has been one of the more frequently cited texts in these pages. Essays in the *JUR* have focused on language and aesthetics, form, gender, religion, ecocriticism, politics, critical reception, textual matters, and the visual arts—again, no strong discernable pattern so far.

While we welcome essays on the Rabbit novels and *Terrorist*, which together drew the most attention at the 4th Biennial Updike Society Conference in October 2016, we are equally interested in other writings, including the poetry, nonfiction, and criticism. As evidence, the current issue of the *JUR* features two essays on the author's poems, one on his short fiction, and three response pieces on the seldom-discussed *Villages*.

As I noted in my introduction to our inaugural issue, our hope has been to publish pieces by not only critics and scholars, as is typical for an academic journal, but also by fiction writers and poets, which is less customary. We opened the first issue with an essay by Ann Beattie, included a piece on *The Centaur* by novelist Michael Griffith, then closed with tributes from poet J. D. McClatchy and fiction writer (and son) David Updike. Our aim, among other things, is to demonstrate how deeply Updike's works resonate with his fellow writers. This was visibly apparent upon his death, in January 2009, when a flood of tributes poured forth from Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, Joyce Carol Oates, Nicholson Baker, E. L. Doctorow, Jeffrey Eugenides, Richard Ford, Claire Messud, George Saunders, Jonathan Lethem, Jane Smiley, Lorrie Moore, and ZZ Packer, to name just a few. While the majority of our content is written by critics and scholars, we also have published twelve pieces by novelists, story writers, and poets. Our current issue includes essays by four writers—David Updike, John Drury, Aristi Trendel, and Marshall Boswell—who have, like Updike, published volumes of poetry or fiction. We anticipate that this trend will continue.

Another important feature of the *John Updike Review* has been the significant contributions of international scholars. Our pages have been enriched by work from critics and writers in Japan, India, France, the UK, Ireland, Israel, and Serbia. The John Updike Society itself is comprised of nearly three hundred members from seventeen different nations, including, in addition to those above, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iran, and Mexico. This intercontinental enthusiasm is apparent at the biennial gatherings of the Society, where participants travel across many time zones to deliver papers, and it will be even more notable at the next conference, to be held in June 2018 in Belgrade, where Ian McEwan will be the keynote speaker.

The *JUR* is also committed to celebrating the work of younger scholars. Our inaugural issue included an essay by Liliana Naydan, a doctoral student who had just finished her dissertation on Updike, Pynchon, Roth, and DeLillo. In the years since, Liliana has gone on to publish other essays as well as her first book, *Rhetorics of Religion in American Fiction* (Bucknell UP 2016), which includes a chapter on Updike. In that first issue we also launched our Annual Emerging Writers Prize, which is awarded for an essay on Updike composed by a young or emerging writer (anyone under forty is eligible). The prize of \$1,000, which comes with publication, has been awarded to an array of promising scholars: Vidya Ravi, Jeffrey Ludwig, Matthew Shipe, Yoav Fromer, and Scott Dill. Their work has already been impressive, and their efforts will likely play an increasingly prominent role in assessing Updike's *oeuvre* and legacy.

The study of single authors, of course, continues to remain less fashionable in academia. There are fewer monographs published and more encouragement for dissertation projects focused on issues and problems than on individual *oeuvres*. That said, attention to Updike has remained fairly steady since the late 1960s, when longer studies of his work began to emerge. While early critical interest may have peaked during the 1980s and early 1990s, a steady stream of scholarship has continued into the twenty-first century. Books on Updike (in English) were, perhaps, at a low between 2007 and 2011, when only one volume appeared (a portion of a second was also devoted to Updike, along with two volumes in German). More recently, there has been an uptick in interest. Between 2012 and 2016, the number of books increased to ten, more if you include studies written in other languages, such as Serbian. Further, several edited volumes as well as monographs are slated for publication in 2017 and 2018. To handle as well as encourage this upswell, the *JUR* transitioned, in 2015, from publishing one issue per year to two.

The *JUR* could not have easily made this transition were it not for our managing editor, Nicola Mason, who is a woman of many talents: visual artist, writer, editor, beekeeper, and much more. We are immensely fortunate to have Nicola's keen and discriminating eye, her editorial guidance, and her high standards. We have also had a knowledgeable and experienced copy editor in Gary Kass. Though Gary has recently taken on new responsibilities and cannot continue with us, we remain grateful for his early assistance. And of course we are thankful for the talented Barbara Neely Bourgoyne, our designer. Barbara not only creates wonderfully appealing and memorable covers but gives the pages within a clean and warm elegance. We are also grateful to the Department of English at the University of Cincinnati and to the John Updike Society for their support during these early honeymoon years.

Going forward, we have much to anticipate. The John Updike Society, under the tireless and adept leadership of president Jim Plath, continues to thrive and add new members. The John Updike Childhood Home in Shillington, Pennsylvania, owned by the Updike Society, courtesy of the financial support of the Robert and Adele Schiff Family Foundation, has been undergoing an extensive, museum-quality renovation. And the author's writings, through the wisdom and patience of the John H. Updike Literary Trust, continue to appear in new editions from Knopf, Everyman's Library, the Library of America, and Random House Trade Paperbacks.

Yet the best news of all is that a lifetime of extraordinary writing is just sitting there, waiting to be discussed, and debated. The quality as well as quantity of Updike's literary output is startling. Readers and writers will likely be engaged for a very long time. As always, the *JUR* encourages new voices to join the discussion. We're also interested in hearing what our readers think, so please don't hesitate if you have thoughts or suggestions.

Most of all, though, I would like to say, very simply, Thank you for your support over these first five years.

JAMES SCHIFF, EDITOR

Summer 1974, in Fiction and Memory

DAVID UPDIKE

It was a beautiful day in June 1974, clear and windless with the chill of late spring still in the air, held against the coming warmth of summer. I was seventeen, home after my first year in private school, thirty miles away, and I had already resumed my job at the beach and its adjoining estate, mowing lawns and picking up trash and riding around on the back of a pickup truck, gazing down onto the unknowing backs of sunbathing teenaged girls. Later that day, with a few friends from town, I traveled into the city to attend a jazz concert someone had heard about at a club that catered to underage teenagers, like us. By attending the concert, however, I would miss a family gathering to welcome back my older sister from a year in London with her older boyfriend, who, the year before that, had been her high school history teacher. She had graduated, and he, in somewhat murky circumstances, perhaps related to their relationship, was asked to leave. Now they'd returned from their time abroad, with a fancy lobster dinner to celebrate the occasion.

In the late afternoon my three friends and I boarded the train that creaked and swayed into Boston. We flipped one of the seats around to form our own booth, then chatted and joked our way into town. There was Dave Benedix, with whom I worked at the beach, and Chip Parker, newly arrived in town and a fellow skier, tennis player, and, like me, soccer fanatic. There was also Henry MacNeil, a reformed bully who had once terrorized me, but had been rescued and improved by a local minister, then adopted into a foster home. Henry's mother was still in town, but his father had disappeared. Henry had piercing blue eyes and was considered incredibly handsome, and had begun to do well in school, playing sports, acting in the local play, and hanging out with the artsy crowd.

Once in the city we caught the Green Line to Park Street, and the Red Line to Harvard Square. We were very early—what to do? We wandered around the square, went into Truc, a hippie-ish store that sold tie-dyed shirts, zodiac charts, hash pipes, and bongos. I believe we had brought a little pot with us too, a joint or two of the rather mild variety that we grew in the field above the house. We wandered over to the Cambridge Common, a public park, and I became aware that I had fallen into a sudden dark mood, a kind of impenetrable sadness that even my friends could not coax me out of. “What’s wrong, Davey?” Henry asked me, more than once, but I couldn’t tell him, for I didn’t know. I had no apparent reason to be sad: it was a gloriously beautiful late spring day; the summer loomed before me; I had a job, a fancy prep school and soccer season awaiting me in the fall, then college beyond. Yet all I could think about was that I wanted to go home—get back on the subway, to the train, back to the house, my room, my bed, and go to sleep.

We made it, finally, to the concert, held in a low, dark room of a former parking garage. It was a “no alcohol” kind of club, though full of blue smoke, and I may have found some solace in the music, a balm for whatever it was that had come over me, but by the time it was over, as we headed to the subway and then the train, I was in no better a mood than before. The train was at midnight, and there was a further wait in the cavernous vault of North Station. When we did finally board, I curled up in a kind of half sleep as we crept and swayed through the familiar towns leading to our own. It was past one when we arrived. Why was my father’s car there, in the parking lot, waiting? It was not my parents’ habit to ferry us around town: a shudder of dread. Had someone been hurt, or worse?

And now I will defer to another point of view—the narrator of my father’s story “Separating,” in which a man named Richard Maple sits in a car at a train station waiting for his son Dickie to return from a concert he has been attending with friends, in the city. He is there to tell his son some sad news, revealed to the rest of the family during the tumultuous dinner Dickie had missed:

A train whistle caused [Richard] to lift his head. It was on time; he had hoped it would be late. The slender drawgates descended. The bell of approach tingled happily. The great metal body, horizontally fluted, rocked to a stop, and sleepy teen-agers disembarked, his son among them. Dickie did not show surprise that his father was meeting him at this terrible hour. He sauntered to the car with two friends, both taller than he. He said “Hi” to his father and took the passenger’s seat with an exhausted promptness that expressed gratitude. The friends got in the back, and Richard was grateful; a few more minutes’ postponement would be won by driving them home.

He asked, "How was the concert?"

"Groovy," one boy said from the backseat.

"It bit," the other said.

"It was O.K.," Dickie said, moderate by nature, so reasonable that in his childhood the unreason of the world had given him headaches, stomach aches, nausea. When the second friend had been dropped off at his dark house, the boy blurted, "Dad, my eyes are killing me with hay fever! I'm out there cutting that mothering grass all day!"

"Do we still have those drops?"

"They didn't do any good last summer."

"They might this." Richard swung a U-turn on the empty street. The drive home took a few minutes. The mountain was here, in his throat. "Richard," he said, and felt the boy, slumped and rubbing his eyes, go tense at his tone, "I didn't come to meet you just to make your life easier. I came because your mother and I have some news for you, and you're a hard man to get a hold of these days. It's sad news."

"That's O.K." The reassurance came out soft, but quick, as if released from the tip of a spring.

Richard had feared that his tears would return and choke him, but the boy's manliness set an example, and his voice issued forth steady and dry. "It's sad news, but it needn't be tragic news, at least for you. It should have no practical effect on your life, though it's bound to have an emotional effect. You'll work at your job, and go back to school in September. Your mother and I are really proud of what you're making of your life; we don't want that to change at all."

"Yeah," the boy said lightly, on the intake of his breath, holding himself up. They turned the corner; the church they erratically attended loomed like a gutted fort. The home of the woman Richard hoped to marry stood across the green. Her bedroom light burned.

"Your mother and I," he said, "have decided to separate. For the summer. Nothing legal, no divorce yet. We want to see how it feels. For some years now, we haven't been doing enough for each other, making each other as happy as we should be. Have you sensed that?"

"No," the boy said. It was an honest, unemotional answer: true or false in a quiz.

Glad for the factual basis, Richard pursued, even garrulously, the details. His apartment across town, his utter accessibility, the split vacation arrangements, the advantages to the children, the added mobility and variety of the summer. Dickie listened, absorbing. "Do the others know?"

"Yes."

"How did they take it?"

"The girls pretty calmly. John flipped out; he shouted and ate a cigarette and made a salad out of his napkin and told us how much he hated school."

His brother chuckled. "He did?"

"Yeah. The school issue was more upsetting for him than Mom and me. He seemed to feel better for having exploded."

"He did?" The repetition was the first sign that he was stunned.

"Yes. Dickie, I want to tell you something. This last hour, waiting for your train to get in, has been about the worst of my life. I hate this. *Hate* it. My father would have died before doing it to me." He felt immensely lighter, saying this. He had dumped the mountain on the boy. They were home. Moving swiftly as a shadow, Dickie was out of the car, through the bright kitchen. Richard called after him, "Want a glass of milk or anything?"

"No thanks."

"Want us to call the course tomorrow and say you're too sick to work?"

"No, that's all right." The answer was faint, delivered at the door to his room; Richard listened for the slam that went with a tantrum. The door closed normally, gently. The sound was sickening.

Joan had sunk into that first deep trough of sleep and was slow to awake. Richard had to repeat, "I told him."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing much. Could you go say good night to him? Please."

She left their room, without putting on a bathrobe. He sluggishly changed back into his pajamas and walked down the hall. Dickie was already in bed, Joan was sitting beside him, and the boy's bedside clock radio was murmuring music. When she stood to go, an inexplicable light—the moon?—outlined her body through the nightie. Richard sat on the warm place she had indented on the boy's narrow mattress. He asked him, "Do you want the radio on like that?"

"It always is."

"Doesn't it keep you awake? It would me."

"No."

"Are you sleepy?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Sure you want to get up and go to work? You've had a big night."

"I want to. They expect me."

Away at school this winter he had learned for the first time that you can go short of sleep and live. As an infant he had slept with an immobile, sweating intensity that had alarmed his baby-sitters. In adolescence he had often been the first of the four children to go to bed. Even now, he would go slack in the middle of a television show, his sprawled legs hairy and brown. "O.K. Good boy. Dickie, listen. I love you so much. I never knew how much until now. No matter how this works out, I'll always be with you. Really."

Richard bent to kiss an averted face but his son, sinewy, turned and with wet cheeks embraced him and gave him a kiss, on the lips, passionate as a woman's. In his father's ear he moaned one word, the crucial, intelligent word: "*Why?*"

Why. It was a whistle of wind in a crack, a knife thrust, a window thrown open on emptiness. The waiting white face was gone, the darkness was featureless. Richard had forgotten why. ("Separating" 187–91)

So there it was: while I had been away, schlepping around town with my friends, a family drama had been unfolding at the dinner table back at our house, and I, thirty-five miles away, had been somehow attuned to it, somehow affected by the news that my parents, after more than two decades of marriage, would be separating. Is this possible? I will leave it to the psychics and scientists to discuss. But I am certain that my own despondent mood, that lovely June evening, was caused by the events taking place in the family house in Ipswich, somehow communicated to me through the ether.

As to how the drama played out, we can return to the short story "Separating" for a fictional account. The plan had been for the Maples to reveal their separation to their children one by one, over the weekend, but the father, during the dinner, found that his eyes kept filling with tears. "*Why is Daddy crying?*" the youngest girl asks, and soon the secret is out. She and her brother return from the kitchen:

John returned to the table carrying a bowl of salad. He nodded tersely at his father and his lips shaped the conspiratorial words "She told."

"Told what?" Richard asked aloud, insanely.

The boy sat down as if to rebuke his father's distraction with the example of his own good manners. He said quietly, "The separation."

Joan and Margaret returned; the child, in Richard's twisted vision, seemed diminished in size, and relieved, relieved to have had the bogeyman at last proved real. He called out to her—the distances at the table had grown immense—"You knew, you always knew," but the clenching at the back of his throat prevented him from making sense of it. From afar he heard Joan talking, levelly, sensibly, reciting what they had prepared: it was a separation for the summer, an experiment. She and Daddy both agreed it would be good for them; they needed space and time to think; they liked each other but did not make each other happy enough, somehow.

Judith, imitating her mother's factual tone, but in her youth off-key, too cool, said, "I think it's silly. You should either live together or get divorced."

Richard's crying, like a wave that has crested and crashed, had become tumultuous; but it was overtopped by another tumult, for John, who had been so reserved, now grew larger and larger at the table. Perhaps his younger sister's being credited with knowing

set him off. "Why didn't you *tell* us?" he asked, in a large round voice quite unlike his own. "You should have *told* us you weren't getting along."

Richard was startled into attempting to force words through his tears.

"We do get along, that's the trouble, so it doesn't show even to us—" *That we do not love each other* was the rest of the sentence; he couldn't finish it.

Joan finished for him, in her style. "And we've always, *especially*, loved our children."

John was not mollified. "What do you care about *us*?" he boomed. "We're just little things you *had*." His sisters' laughing forced a laugh from him, which he turned hard and parodistic: "Ha ha *ha*." Richard and Joan realized simultaneously that the child was drunk, on Judith's homecoming champagne. Feeling bound to keep the center of the stage, John took a cigarette from Judith's pack, poked it into his mouth, let it hang from his lower lip, and squinted like a gangster.

"You're not little things we had," Richard called to him. "You're the whole point. But you're grown. Or almost."

The boy was lighting matches. Instead of holding them to his cigarette (for they had never seen him smoke; being "good" had been his way of setting himself apart), he held them to his mother's face, closer and closer, for her to blow out. He lit the whole folder—a hiss and then a torch, held against his mother's face. The flame, prised by Richard's tears, filled his vision; he didn't know how it was extinguished. He heard Margaret say, "Oh, stop showing off," and saw John, in response, break the cigarette in two and put the halves entirely into his mouth and chew, sticking out his tongue to display the shreds to his sister.

Joan talked to him, reasoning—a fountain of reason, unintelligible. "Talked about it for years . . . our children must help us . . . Daddy and I both want . . ." As the boy listened, he wadded a paper napkin into the leaves of his salad, fashioned a ball of paper and lettuce, and popped it into his mouth, looking around the table for the expected laughter. None came. Judith said, "Be mature," and dismissed a plume of smoke. ("Separating" 182–84)

Writers pick and choose from their own experience, leave out details of what actually happened (as they remember it), or alter details, or make things up as it suits their fictional mission. So it is in "Separating," in the description of the drive home, that the father looks up at the lit window of his mistress's house as he passes the church, when in reality this could not happen, as the two are on different routes, perhaps a quarter mile away.

Nonetheless, these final scenes in "Separating" are, in essence, as I remember them, and although I do not recall, at the end, uttering the "crucial, intelligent word: 'Why?'" I have little doubt that I did. But there were other things my father said during our five-minute drive from my friend's house to ours that were not

included in the story, things that came out in a blur of openness, of confession—something about how, during the course of their marriage, they both had had relationships, “affairs,” but they had always been able to get past them, or through them, and back to their marriage, at least until now. And then he mentioned the name of a woman who, four years before, had moved into the house we had moved out of (a curious detail, also not in the story) with her husband and three sons. He had “admired” her at first, he told me, but not wanting to disrupt their marriage, had stayed away. When he eventually learned that she, too, was not fully “happy” in her marriage, he had fallen “in love” with her.

In love? This was the phrase that startled me, there in the safe darkness of the car, and would follow me around for days and weeks afterwards.

We knew this woman well, for we had babysat for her three sons, in our former house, where we had once been the same age as her children. In love, with Mrs. Y? In today’s lingo this would qualify as TMI, too much information, and justifies Richard Maple’s self-observation that he had “dumped the mountain on the boy.”

Conversely, Adam Begley, in his biography, *Updike*, writes that my father’s affair remained a “secret” from his children, and from his mother, for “the first fifteen months of the separation”: not so, for we knew of this, and of whom, from the very beginning (372).

How did the rest of the summer go? Bumpily, you might say. Once I got used to the idea of my parents’ separation, and the odd fact that my father no longer lived with us and had taken an apartment in a depressing, generic compound of low, brick apartment buildings on the other side of town, I proceeded with my life as a soon-to-be-senior in high school, who was looking forward to soccer season, then college over the horizon. I continued my work at the beach, played tennis and soccer in the evenings, drank beer, and entered into a rather tentative, fumbling romance with a pretty Greek American girl two years my junior. With any luck, I thought, I would escape this domestic confusion of the family when I headed off to school at the end of August.

My father, meanwhile, was having a terrible summer—granted, of his own making. However much in love he was with Mrs. Y, he was still tormented by confusion and guilt and the curious fact that he no longer lived with us. After a morning of writing in his office downtown, he would drift back to the house and resume some project he was working on, shingling the barn, or building a chicken coop for my sister. Through it all I was trying not to blame him too much for leaving his wife of twenty-one years, and his four teenage children, on the grounds he must have some compelling reasons outside the realm of my own comprehension. In any case I had

problems of my own. I didn't really know how to proceed with my relationship with my girlfriend, who was prone to sudden mood swings and mysterious swales of gloom I could not decipher. Our amorous adventures had proceeded only as far as kissing, for when my hand roved too far into the unexplored territory of her body, I felt, almost to my relief, her fingers lock around my wrist, halting further progress.

One evening I picked her up in front of her house, on the other side of town, in my father's lime-green Mustang. She seemed particularly melancholic that evening and would not speak. In an effort to cheer her up I suggested she drive for a while, as I had let her do before, although she was only fifteen, and unlicensed. What happened next I described in a short story I wrote a decade or two later, titled "In the Age of Convertibles":

A reddish late-summer sun was slanting down through the tired-looking leaves, and I was driving the Mustang that night, as my mother had gone away for the weekend, and my father was looking after us. Julie was sullen, and quiet, and I suspected she was gearing up to break up with me. When I tried to get something out of her she would say it was "nothing," and look down and away, through the window. She was pretty when sad, her wavy brown hair parted in the middle, and she was wearing a white cashmere sweater that made her skin, after a summer on the beach, look even a deeper, darker brown. We drove in silence down Fletcher Road, and we were about to turn down Juniper Lane when I impulsively pulled over and asked if she wanted to drive—a last-ditch attempt to cheer her up and postpone my return to teenage bachelorhood. It worked, too, at first, and Julie looked cute in the driver's seat, peering up over the wheel, and seemed to be getting happier, and at one point I laid my hand on her knee as we rolled along the narrow country road, stripes of sunlight flashing through the trees.

"What's on the radio?" she asked. I reached down to find something on the dial, and she reached down to help me and must have forgotten that she was driving, because when I next looked up the car had just started angling into the woods—mowing down those little white cement guardrails, chunks of cement bouncing up over the car, and once we were finished with those we started in on the trees—clunk, clunk, clunk, clunk, clunk—until we met one big enough to put a stop to the macabre charade, and left us, a washed-up teenage couple, sitting in a car in the woods, the crumpled hood hissing out steam and smoke, the radio faithfully playing the final, stickey ballad of our summer romance.

The rest, needless to say, was a bit of a blur—out of the car, quickly, and up onto the deserted road, following Julie as she paced around in small, tightening, circles, mumbling to herself, "Oh my God. Oh my God. I don't believe it. Oh my God." But then, before the police and tow trucks came, I captured her long enough in my arms

to tell her the plan that had come to me even as we were still plowing through trees: that it was I, and not she, who had been driving. She was only fifteen, after all, didn't even have a license, and the only way to get the insurance money and avoid a fuss and a scandal was for me to take the blame. She was unconsolated, and kept pacing around in tiny circles, but when the flashing lights and soft-spoken men arrived and pulled the car out of the woods, I told them that we had both been looking for a station on the radio, and the next time I looked were driving into the woods. I left out the part about Julie being at the wheel. ("In the Age of Convertibles" 35-37)

Once I was back in town I made a preemptive phone call to my father, so he could get used to the idea of what had happened before I got home. He sounded panicky and shocked and, blaming himself, wondered aloud if they had been too "lenient" with their children and the cars. No doubt he was also wondering if his abdication from the family had caused my mishap. By the next day he had regained his good humor, going to the garage to which the car had been towed to take pictures. "It's a wonder no one was hurt!" he said, almost happily. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," I reported, "I think it was all those smaller trees that slowed us down."

It must have been August by then, and aside from the crash, my relationship with my girlfriend was beginning to show fatal flaws. Her parents were no longer crazy about me, and we both knew I was heading back to school in the fall. It was clear to me, too, that my parents would not be getting back together.

At some other point in the summer, in a small act of rebellion, I had quit my steady, low-paying job at the beach, and took up freelance house-painting with my friend Chip. We painted his girlfriend's house an ugly shade of yellow called "Republic Gold," which is what we named the crop of marijuana we had grown in the field above the house, surrounded by raspberry bushes. By September my father had moved into the city and I had gone off to prep school, leaving my mother and two younger siblings in the big white house on the marsh to fend for themselves. It was they who bore the emotional brunt of my father's departure, and the sudden absence of a grown man to protect them from intruders and peril.

I ended my own fictional account of this summer, in the already-mentioned "In the Age of Convertibles," with another family dinner, held on another beautiful summer day, in late August or early September, as if to make up for the one I had missed back in June. The story has a somewhat comic tone, and concerns my role among the children as the family conscience, a self-appointed "Mr. Perfect" who had taken upon himself the task of pointing out everyone else's flaws and imperfec-

tions. But here we are, nonetheless, at the dinner table, late summer 1974. Bear in mind that I still had not told anyone that it was Julie, not I, who had been driving my father's car when we crashed.

A week later, my family held a farewell dinner of sorts for me, lobster and candlelight and evening sunlight, slanting with an autumnal tint into the room. My dad was there, as he'd always been, and Neil [my older sister Lila's boyfriend] had broken into the inner circle of the family, somehow, and he sat in silence, mostly, watching, and gently kneading his beard—like a visiting archaeologist quietly examining the shifting bones of the family. We gave him a good show that night: the old geniality back, wine flowing, jokes flying, my parents, at opposite ends of the table, looking much as they always had—in my eyes, still the perfect couple. I was proud of them, somehow—proud that even though they were at odds, they could still sit down and have a peaceable dinner with their overgrown children, just like old times. And although it was clear by this time that they were never going to get back together, it also occurred to me that night that our family was still intact, somehow, and that whatever was going to happen, we were all in it, more or less, together.

Earlier that day on the golf course my father had told me he was proud of how well I was doing, and was sorry that their marital difficulties had come just as I was getting ready to go off to school, and he hoped it all didn't affect my ongoing, unspoken program for self-improvement. I tried to assure him that it wouldn't and, as if in proof, played well that day.

"You should have seen him on the course," he reported at dinner. "He almost beat me, the little rat."

"He's so competitive," Lila said, in such a way to indicate that she didn't consider competitiveness a virtue. Through his beard, Neil managed a little smile.

"Now all he has to do," Charlie chimed in, "is learn how to drive."

The barb was too crude for a rejoinder, and, if nothing else, I had learned that summer the subtle power of silence.

"Yeah, Pete," Charlie continued, not content with my lack of response. "Are you going to go out with Julie again, or won't her parents let her drive with you anymore after you drove her into the woods?"

This was beginning to irk me, but I held my tongue. Charlie was bigger than I now, and harboring fifteen years of pent-up fraternal animosities. But if he had had a crystal ball there at the dinner table, instead of an oft replenished glass of wine, he would have seen that two family vehicles awaited their destruction at his own hand, on the same bend of road within a half mile of our house—one going into town, the other coming home—both with high levels of alcohol and adolescent confusion coursing through his veins. He still had a hard row to hoe, and it would be he, and [my younger sister]

Mary, and my mother who would bear the brunt of the new family order—spending the winter in the cool and fatherless house.

This was the first public mention of my friendship with Julie Markos, and my mother played dumb. “What, who?” she was saying, with a little smile, pretending she knew nothing, but the sound of Julie’s name had caused me to turn inward, like a man in a trance, gazing into the yellow light of the candles, and as the banter of my family went happily on without me, it slowly dawned on me that it was I who had failed her, though I wasn’t certain how, or why: our imperfect love was spawned at the edge of a swimming pool, under a canopy of summer leaves. Her belly was smooth and brown, like a child’s, her lips full and sweet, tasting faintly of coconut. Her hair was frazzled and silken, and her sweated breasts were not large, but wonderfully present, the color of moonlight, and were willing to be held in my fumbling, adolescent hands. I loved her as best I could, which wasn’t, as it turned out, very well. One summer night, in the twilight of our love, I let her drive my father’s car, and together we rode it into the woods, and thereby brought the age of convertibles to a close.

It would be years before, at this same table, I revealed to all my secret—played the final trump card of my youth—but until then it was mine to keep, like a precious jewel—a private cloak of martyrdom. I had Julie’s honor and reputation to protect, after all, and it was the least I could do by way of gratitude, for among the many gifts she had given me that summer, her love among them, she had inadvertently relieved me of the tiresome burden I had been carrying around with me since childhood: after she crashed my father’s car, no one called me “Mr. Perfect” anymore, and I quietly became, in a way that I had never been, just one of the family. (“In the Age of Convertibles” 41–44)

Of course this, too, was a false ending of sorts—*my* attempt, this time, to paint a somewhat rosy picture of a rather difficult reality: the end of my parents’ marriage, and with it the end of the perfect symmetry of my childhood: two parents; two boys, two girls; two cats, one female, the other not. Soon, I would head off to prep school, and a year later, college. My older sister, after her own attempt to go to college, would enter into an ill-advised marriage that would end five years later. The dissolution of my parents’ marriage would take another year or two, well chronicled in the remaining Maples stories. My father eventually remarried, and so did my mother, but that, too, involved another painful restructuring of a family. At about this time, my father stopped writing about his children, now adults, perhaps after my older sister expressed unhappiness about “The Lovely Troubled Daughters of Our Old Crowd,” which describes a group of young women in our town, in their early- to mid-twenties, who seemed reluctant to move forward and were still living at home, not yet married or in established careers, strolling around in gypsy dresses

with a melancholic, winsome air about them. It ends with the somewhat pointed question, “What are they afraid of?”

His wives, however, both first and second, continued to appear, in fictionalized form, in his stories and novels. While his children had been born into the orbit of a writer and were therefore innocent bystanders, the wives knew what they were getting into from the get-go and were therefore fair game. Writers need to be true to themselves, above all, and this would involve a certain amount of collateral damage and possible hurt feelings. In “A Letter to My Grandsons,” a personal essay he included in *Self-Consciousness*, my father remembers what his mother told him at the time he was leaving his wife and four children—the time of his life described in “Separating” and other Maples stories:

At a low time in my life, when I had taken an exit not from my profession but from my marriage, and left your mother and her siblings more in harm’s way than felt right, my mother in the midst of her disapproval and sadness produced a saying so comforting I pass it on to you. She sighed and said, “Well, Grampy used to say, ‘We carry our own hides to market.’” The saying is blunt but has the comfort of putting responsibility where it can be borne, on a frame made to fit. The comfort of my hearing it said lay in its partial release from tribal obligations—our debt of honor to our ancestors and our debt to shelter our descendants. These debts are real, but realer still is a certain obligation to our own selves, the obligation to live. We are social creatures but, unlike ants and bees, not just that; there is something intrinsically and individually vital which must be defended against the claims even of virtue. (211)

My grandmother, Linda Grace Hoyer, my father’s mother, was also a writer and, like me, published two collections of short stories, the second a posthumous volume, *The Predator*, which appeared just months after *Self-Consciousness* in 1989. One of these stories, “Unlike Girls,” takes place in the late spring of 1974, the same month of June as in “Separating,” marking an occasion when my father drove to Pennsylvania with my two sisters to visit his mother: to celebrate her seventieth birthday, and also inform her of this impending separation from his wife of twenty-one years. After he tells her his news, she states, “I want . . . to know why you are abandoning your children” (“Unlike Girls” 37), which echoes Dickie’s question of “*Why?*”

“It’s not easy to say,” he tells her, and then evades. “I’d rather not talk about it.” But then, feeling some sort of further explanation is owed to her, he summons a reply. “No, mother,” he says, “the time has come when I must do something for

the boy I used to be.” (38) This answer, too, is an enigmatic one, but his mother seems to understand: *Do something for the boy I used to be.*

“And what can I do for him?” she says. “He was such a good boy.”

To which he answers, “Just love us all.”

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A Conversation with John Updike in Moscow

WARD BRIGGS AND J. ALEXANDER OGDEN

In 1964 John Updike took part in the second year of a writers' exchange program with the Soviet Union.¹ At the outset of a similar trip, Eddie Chester, the narrator of Updike's "Licks of Love in the Heart of the Cold War," says, "Our State Department's theory was that almost any American, paraded before the oppressed Soviet masses, would be, just in his easy manner of walking and talking, such an advertisement for the free way of life that cells of subversion would pop up in his wake like dandelions on an April lawn" ("Licks" 101). The American participants were to be suggested by the Soviets, and a younger and a senior man were to be chosen with the approval of the United States State Department. The first participants, in 1963, were John Steinbeck, who had won the Nobel Prize the previous year, and Edward Albee. The Soviets liked Steinbeck's worker-friendly, capitalist-hostile writings, while Albee's depiction of American race relations in *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1959) confirmed a negative view of American society. The Soviet delegation that came to the United States under the exchange agreement in 1963 comprised noted novelist-playwright Valentin Kataev; dramatist and screenwriter Viktor Rozov, whose *The Cranes Are Flying* (1957) won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival; and literary translator (and chaperone) Frida Lurye.² Literary exchanges between the two countries continued until the break-up of the Soviet Union, going on to include, from the American side, E. L. Doctorow, Arthur Miller, and others; writers from the Soviet side included Vasily Aksyonov, Chingiz Aitmatov, and Yuri Trifonov (Richmond 154, 155).

The second year's participants were Updike and John Cheever. In 1962, the *New York Times* reported that after J. D. Salinger, Cheever, whose *The Enormous Radio and Other Stories* (1953) had been translated that year, was also very popular among young, pro-Western youth in Russia.³ The success of Cheever's novel *The Wapshot Scandal* (1964) had landed him on the cover of the March 27, 1964, issue of *Time* magazine, in a profile entitled "Ovid in Ossining." Cheever's Russian translator, Tatiana Litvinov—daughter of a Soviet ambassador to the United States, Maxim Litvinov—encouraged Cheever to come to Moscow, writing him to say that his stories' "sympathetic irony" "belonged to Russia and had to be got back" (Bailey 341).

The year 1964 was already a banner one for Updike. The thirty-two-year-old had just been elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, *The Centaur* (1963) had won the National Book Award, and shortly before leaving for Moscow he submitted the manuscript of his fourth novel, *Of the Farm* (1965).

Although he was much less well known in the Soviet Union, he had his own champions there, just as Cheever did. A free translation of his story "Dear Alexandros," which contained a paragraph describing the visit to America by Russian premier Nikita Khrushchev during September 1959, had appeared in the literary and political journal *Znamia*, and *Pravda* had published an abridged translation of his memoir, "The Lucid Eye in Silver Town," "perhaps because it takes an unfavorable view of a rich capitalist" (Updike, "Introduction" 767).⁴ *Rabbit, Run* (1960) was described as presenting "the crisis of the human spirit under conditions fostered by consumerism and commercialism," while noting that Updike's combination of realism and lyricism clearly indicated "the presence of an artist with his depth of insight and feeling" (Anastasyev 91).

The impetus for Updike's invitation may well have come from Anna Arkad'evna Elistratova, one of the Soviet Union's top experts on English-language writers. Employed at the Gorky Institute of World Literature and holding a doctorate in English literature, Elistratova presented the works of leading English and American authors to Russian readers as a member of the editorial board of "Literary Monuments." The wide-ranging and authoritative series of Russian and foreign literary works had been published by the Academy of Sciences since 1948. Elistratova served as editor for English and American titles in the series, which included translations of works by Henry David Thoreau, Lord Byron, Washington Irving, George Bernard Shaw, William Faulkner, and many others.

In December 1963, ten months before Updike would arrive in Russia, Elistratova published an article about Updike in *Inostrannaia literatura* (*Foreign Litera-*

ture), an official organ of the Union of Soviet Writers (the Writers' Union) and the major Soviet publication on literature beyond the country's borders. Elistratova argued that *Rabbit, Run* and *The Centaur* "must attract the interest of Soviet readers" based on a good Marxist argument: Updike was important as a social critic, proving that Theodore Dreiser's condemnation of "the American way of life" was alive and well in American literature long after the American literary establishment had tried to consign Dreiser and his critique to the past (Elistratova 226). *Rabbit, Run*, for all its calm restraint of style, was all the more terrible as a firsthand account, "showing, in all its humdrum, everyday verisimilitude, the process of disintegration of natural human bonds taking place in a society hostile to genuine humanity" (222). In a country where Socialist Realism was still the only literary approach with official approval, Elistratova—while discussing in detail the mythological plane of *The Centaur*—ultimately concluded that the classical symbolism and allusions "leave the reader cold. . . . The tragedy of America's youth, whose future may be offered up in sacrifice by the hawks of atomic war, is sufficiently terrible in and of itself—without mythological associations with ancient human sacrifice or with the doleful fate of the most beautiful youths and maids of Athens. . . ." (226).

At the end of her article, Elistratova polemicized with a portrayal of Updike that had gained wide exposure in Soviet society earlier in 1963: an article by American scholar Arthur Mizener titled "Mixing Memory and Desire: The Promise of John Updike," which appeared in the propaganda magazine *Amerika* (also known as *America Illustrated*). *Amerika*, "modeled after *Life* and other popular U.S. magazines" (Crane), was published in Russian by the United States Information Agency (USIA) and grudgingly distributed by Soviet authorities under an agreement that also made *Soviet Life* available to American readers. As one former embassy official noted, "it was everything that the USSR wasn't . . . glossy, colorful, varied, and well-edited" (qtd. in Crane). Mizener's article was adapted from the discussion of Updike in his just-published *The Sense of Life in the Modern Novel* (1964) and appeared along with a translation of Updike's story "The Persistence of Desire" from *Pigeon Feathers* (1962). In Elistratova's view, Mizener intentionally downplayed the "critical, sharply-contemporary, living essence of Updike's works"; instead, she argued, Mizener "wants to present this young American artist to Soviet readers as a 'transcendentalist,' a follower of the romantic tradition in the literature of the U.S.A., and a pupil of Joyce. . . ." (Elistratova 226).

However excited the Soviet literati were about Updike's Joycean use of a mythological basis to describe personal experience, Soviet apparatchiks would have been pleased by the exchange between *The Centaur's* Peter Caldwell and Minor, the

owner of a luncheonette. “‘Minor,’ Peter calls from his booth, ‘you’re old-fashioned. There’s nothing wrong with Communism. In twenty years we’ll have it in this country and you’ll be happy as a clam . . . Communism has to come, one way or another; it’s the only way to beat poverty” (202–03). Peter goes on to praise the bravery of the Russian soldiers at Leningrad.

Political issues do not seem to have come up on Updike’s tour; the Russians were more interested in the overlay of myth and modernity in the Joycean manner. Updike was questioned about it at nearly every stop on his tour, and he was, as the interview shows, happy to discuss the application of a variant of the Chiron story to his own rural Pennsylvania family. Updike’s choice of a mythological approach in *The Centaur*, and the appearance of a Russian translation in *Inostrannaia literatura*, would have even greater impact in retrospect, as it resonated with one of the central literary events of the decade: the publication, more than a quarter-century after its author’s death, of Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* (1966–67). Both novels juxtaposed the mythological and allegorical with the contemporary daily life of their respective societies in a way that was exhilarating and freeing for a generation of Russians less than a decade removed from the death of Stalin. Looking back on the mid-1960s in an Updike obituary for *Literaturnaia gazeta*, novelist and Russian Booker nominee Anatolii Kurchatkin noted that together these two novels made “such a deafening double shot—one of such lethal force—that, like it or not, . . . its echo, undiminished, still resounds in Russian literature, which afterward could no longer remain as before.”

For whatever reasons, the Writers’ Union set about making Updike known in their country. As the author Evgeniia Vasil’evna Stoianovskaia says in the interview reprinted below, “it fell to us to acquaint Soviet readers with his *oeuvre* for the first time” (Stoianovskaia 255). So three significant publications in *Inostrannaia literatura* (December 1963, January and February 1965) served as a major introduction of Updike to Soviet readers: Elistratova’s essay; a full translation of *The Centaur* in two parts; and the text below, likely Updike’s earliest extended interview in any language.⁵ The end of the novel was supplemented in the February issue with an impressionistic but appreciative afterword by Daniil Granin, a party-line novelist and official in the Leningrad branch of the Writers’ Union (notorious then for its role in the arrest of the young Joseph Brodsky).⁶ The small campaign was successful. Though Russians were only just beginning to know Updike before his arrival in the Soviet Union, the efforts of the Union—aided immeasurably by the artistry of his fiction and the charm of his personality, displayed repeatedly to audiences in several cities—ensured that he would soon be far more widely known.⁷

Updike, 4-F in the eyes of the Selective Service, considered his trip “a small patriotic service, a wearing abroad, at last, of my country’s colors” (“On Not Being a Dove” 137). He and his family had spent November through January of 1962 and 1963 in Europe, but this was his first trip behind the Iron Curtain, and he had reason to be apprehensive. The Cold War had escalated, following a series of major events: the launch of Sputnik in October 1957, the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Berlin Crisis of 1961, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, and the ouster of Nikita Khrushchev in October 1964 (*Bech* 4; “Licks” 118). Briefed by the State Department (likely by “experts and refugees from the Soviet Union”; “Licks” 103), Updike was presumably told, as was Cheever, “that my liberty would be in danger, that my possessions would be rifled, my conversations bugged, and my walks shadowed” (Bailey 341; “Licks” 102–03). Updike even wrote to his *New Yorker* editor William Maxwell that he was going to draw up a will before going (Begley 262–63).

Contrary to his apprehensions, Cheever was greeted at the Moscow airport on October 1 by fifteen Soviet writers chanting his name (Bailey 342), was embraced by the young literary superstars Yevgeny Yevtushenko and Andrei Voznesensky, and was showered with praise and vodka everywhere he went. Updike and his wife Mary (who was traveling at the Updikes’ expense) arrived at midnight on October 22 on an Aeroflot flight from Paris (*Bech* 4; “Licks” 102) to a warm welcome from not only Cheever and William Luers (second secretary to the American embassy), but the Soviets as well.

The Soviet Union portion of the trip, which lasted until November 22, involved fifteen days in Moscow, five days in Leningrad, and short visits to Tbilisi, Yerevan, and Kiev.⁸ The first week’s round of official duties in Moscow passed pleasantly for Updike, who said that Cheever’s “lively fancy and brave ebullience lit up those potentially glum Soviet surroundings and made our days of touring catacombs and classrooms and speaking to wary clusters of writers and students as gay as an April in Paris” (“John Cheever—II” 112).⁹ Normally diffident about public speaking (perhaps due to his lingering stutter), Updike recalled, “as a cultural emissary, in a culture full of strangeness and menace and flattery, I became, on stage, quite talkative,” making him, in Cheever’s words, “a darling of Russian youth.”¹⁰ Following college, Updike had purposefully avoided becoming a teacher like his father, but his lectures on current and classic English and American literature were so dazzling, Luers wrote, that Updike “gave some of the most clear and erudite observations on American literature I have ever heard . . .” (4).

It seems that Updike grew into the role of emissary and pundit on American literature during the trip. He wrote that he had refused to give lectures but “in fact

needed on occasion to express myself to an audience—mostly one of teachers and students from English departments” (Updike, “Between Europe” 54).¹¹ The presentations consisted of “stories about myself,” remarks on American literature (both contemporary and historic), and responses to audience questions. Updike took on these presentations as “an intellectual exercise: with each discussion I refined and clarified for myself what at first had been only a set of hazy propositions and the first names that came to mind” (54).

Like the Soviets, but unlike many American writers, Updike “was willing to speak frankly about his own writing, past, present, and future” (Luers 4). His public and private performances involved detailed explanations of *The Centaur*, which helped critics and academics understand the book, which in turn led to sympathetic reviews and increased sales. In all, Updike “liked the warm-hearted, boisterous, mischievous, many-layered Russians” and did his best to be “a good guest of the Soviet state” (“On Not Being a Dove” 138–39). No wonder his Moscow chaperone Luers, who had accompanied Albee around Russia the year before (Bridges 80), wrote that “Updike’s visit was in many ways the most successful of the visits in which I was involved” (Luers 4).

Whatever improvement in East-West cultural relations Updike’s trip may have made at the height of the Cold War, one lasting literary legacy was the creation of Updike’s fictional alter ego, Henry Bech, who first appears in “The Bulgarian Poetess,” then “Rich in Russia” and “Bech in Rumania,” all stories that arose from this tour. In 2001, Updike gave Luers credit for the creation of the initial stories, if not the character himself: “Without you, Bech might never have left his dreary digs at 99th and Riverside and never become an international operator. . . . You were the star of the entire troupe of US diplomatic personnel. . . .”¹²

Like Updike, Bech is translated in the pages of *Inostrannaia literatura*. Bech is given 1,400 rubles to spend by the Writers’ Union, and he has a “not repulsive” translator/escort named Ekaterina. Bech’s fictional Russian journal (*Bech* 191–200) comports with known appearances by Updike, though there are differences. Updike left New York on October 20 on a Pan American Airways flight to Paris and then went on to Moscow by Aeroflot on the twenty-second. After ten days Cheever left for Berlin and Rome (October 31). The next day Updike and Mary were given a weeklong tour of Georgia and Armenia,¹³ after which Mary returned to Ipswich. Updike had two more weeks in the Soviet Union, and then he was scheduled for stays in Rumania (November 22–26), Bulgaria (November 26–December 1), and Czechoslovakia (December 2–6) (“Briefing”), where he was virtually unknown to all but the most avant-garde writers.¹⁴ The appearances,

tours, and receptions, accompanied by “the ubiquitous Soviet escorts and translators and their jealously watchful American counterparts,” now became more tedious and repetitive (Updike, “John Cheever—IV” 115). We can perhaps hear Updike’s voice when Henry Bech complains about his handling by the Soviets, “I am transported around here like a brittle curio; plug me into the nearest socket and I spout red, white, and blue” (*Bech* 199). On December 6 Updike flew back to Moscow from Prague, stopping by the offices of *Inostrannaia literatura* in a last rush for the following “conversation” before flying home.

The conversation (as the editors called it) presented here, the last of Updike’s official duties, took place in the editorial offices of *Inostrannaia literatura* at 41 Pyatnitsky St. At this point in his career Updike was very reluctant to give interviews. He disliked talking about himself and was apprehensive of the one-on-one spontaneity required. Even two years later he declined an invitation from the *Paris Review* to sit for an interview: “Perhaps I have written fiction because everything unambiguously expressed seems somehow crass to me; and when the subject is myself, I want to jeer and weep. Also, I really don’t have a great deal to tell interviewers; the little I learned about life and the art of fiction I try to express in my work” (Plath 22). When he finally agreed to the *Paris Review* interview, he insisted that the questions be submitted in writing and that he respond in writing (a practice of Vladimir Nabokov). He later met in Martha’s Vineyard with the interviewer, Charles Thomas Samuels.

We do not know who was present for the Moscow conversation. A description of similar contemporaneous visits to *Inostrannaia literatura* by Steinbeck and Erskine Caldwell, however, captures the likely circumstances: “The meetings with the two writers took place at the magazine’s offices during their respective stays in Moscow. They told members of the editorial staff of their impressions of the Soviet Union and Soviet people, their ideas concerning the future of literature, and their own creative plans” (“American Writers” 178).¹⁵ This account of meetings with Steinbeck and Caldwell also noted that “no record of what was said was made” at the time, so the writers’ observations were not documented in the original English, only in the published Russian versions.

The format of the published interview with Updike closely matches that of the Steinbeck and Caldwell interviews and does not indicate exactly who was present or identify who from the editorial staff asked what question. Updike may not even have realized that this would be printed as an interview, since it very likely followed the lines of Henry Bech’s reception at the Bulgarian Writers’ Union, hilariously described in “The Bulgarian Poetess” (53–59), and Updike’s dinner with Voznesen-

sky at the Soviet Writers' Union (Updike, "Voznesensky" 7–9). In both accounts various literary worthies lob questions about American literature and the writer's own works. The paragraph devoted to Elistratova's article may coyly indicate that she was present and asked Updike about the comparison of *Rabbit, Run* and *The Centaur*. In any case, this conversation was a kind of final report to his hosts on his Soviet experience and offered Updike a chance to express his gratitude for the publishing of the translation of *The Centaur*. The conversation was documented and written up for publication by Evgeniia Vasil'evna Stoianovskaia, a literary editor at the journal.¹⁶

Characteristically gracious, Updike had many positive things to say about the places he visited and people he met in the Soviet Union. His character Eddie Chester says of his own performances in Russia, "Listening to myself talk, I'd sometimes think the State Department knew what it was doing, bringing a natural patriotic optimist like me over here" ("Licks" 111). Updike's statement of admiration for the way Russia treats its writers was no mere platitude: he recurred to it more than once.¹⁷ He and Cheever were both taken by the celebrity status of Russian writers like Yevtushenko and Voznesensky.¹⁸ The cult of personality around them meant that readers would naturally look for elements of the author's life and opinions in the works themselves, and so a number of the questions for Updike dealt not so much with his personal life as reflected in the action of *The Centaur*, but rather with the author's "inner character" and "moral biases" as reflected in his work. Updike seemed happy to answer questions on theme and process, but he would tell the *Paris Review* three years later, "I disavow any essential connection between my life and whatever I write. I think it's a morbid and inappropriate area of concern, though natural enough. . . ."¹⁹

The interview below in its explication of *The Centaur* and its wide-ranging discussion of literature, particularly American, gives a feel for what Updike's public presentations must have entailed. He explicated the novel use of the Chiron myth to elevate personal history in *The Centaur*; compared that book with its predecessor, *Rabbit, Run*; and then expanded to a discussion of the contemporary novel and the moral imperative to make one's writing new. Despite the obvious influence of Joyce in the blend of the personal and mythological in *The Centaur*, Updike tried to keep some distance between himself and the Irish master, whose picture hung in Updike's Ipswich office. He considered the role and nature of literary criticism and the role of the writer in American and Soviet societies. He concluded with balanced remarks about the differences and commonalities of American and Soviet life.

In Conversation with the Author of *The Centaur*

Evgeniia Vasil'evna Stoianovskaia

The following is a translation of the interview that was first published in *Inostrannaia literatura* (January 1965): 244–68.

John Updike visited the editorial offices of *Inostrannaia literatura* the day before leaving for home, on the last evening of his stay in Moscow. Although the situation clearly demanded that we “keep an eye on the clock,” we somehow quickly forgot that. There were too many aspects of this, our first conversation with the young American writer, who in recent years has won widespread fame in his home country, that drew us deeper into specifics.

First, the impression formed from afar—from books and articles—was that of an original artist, searching and sensitive, who is discovering in today’s America something no one knew before, something one continues to ponder.

Then, too, it fell to us to acquaint Soviet readers with his *oeuvre* for the first time: at the time [of the interview, the Russian translation of] *The Centaur* was in proofs, a sufficiently original novel to justify both “curiosity” about the details of the author’s intention and a desire to hear the comments of an author addressing a new audience.

And finally, the 33-year-old John Updike had never before been in the Soviet Union.²⁰ It was interesting to learn what image of our world this young American was taking home—someone who “reads” his fellow Americans’ lives with such artistic insight and such inner passion.

* * *

The relationship of a reader to a work is in no way defined by what that reader knows about the author as a person. Books have their own fates, as even the ancients said.²¹

Even so, the affinity between a writer’s inner character and those features that make the word created by his art unique is never irrelevant to his effect on the reader.

Before getting to know him, we could divine the imprint of Updike’s personality, of his temperament and moral biases, of his way of thinking, apparently of his very appearance²² from such works as the novels *Rabbit*, *Run* and *The Centaur* and his collections of stories—all varied in style, although also drawing in their entirety on the author’s direct experience.

A lively conversation reinforced this impression. It also made it possible to discern distinctly another side of this “bipartite relationship”: everything that the author told us in replying to our questions, and how he told it, how he reacted to rejoinders, how he joked—everything brought to mind the emotional and aesthetic atmosphere of his books, making it possible to feel that atmosphere’s originality once again, sharply and in a special way.

“I am glad that my *Centaur* will be published here,” noted Updike. “It has been translated into a number of languages.²³ But the Russian translation is more than a simple translation; it is a friendly gesture, a contribution, in its way, to mutual understanding between our peoples.

“In many ways this novel is personal,” says the writer. “In some sense it is unusual, perhaps, and possibly even perplexing. The interweaving of ancient Greek myths with the contemporary reality of Pennsylvania in 1947 is a rather complex combination. I hope that Soviet readers will find it more comprehensible if I tell you where it came from.

“The idea for the book was born from several lines I came across in a collection of legends and ancient myths. Now the novel opens with them.²⁴ I was struck in these lines by the image of Chiron, who, like Christ, sacrifices himself and his immortality for the sake of mankind. I wanted to retell—to read anew—that legend. In my imagination, it blends with memories of my own Pennsylvania childhood. And so the town of Olinger became Olympus: the gods—Zeus, Hephaestus, Hera, the centaur’s wife Chariclo, and his daughter Ocyrhoe—became real people. The wise centaur Chiron—half-horse, half-man—mentor of the heroes Achilles, Jason, and Asclepius, in my version merges with Caldwell, a Pennsylvania schoolteacher, and I myself am his son.

“When a man remembers the past, especially his childhood, memories are interwoven with folk beliefs, legends, and myths.²⁵ In this way, exaggerated images of the real past intermingle fantastically with myths in Caldwell’s memories.

“According to the legend, the wounded centaur wanders the earth, suffering. On his doleful way, he meets five Olympian gods and asks each one the cause of his suffering. In my book the three-day-long wanderings of Caldwell and his son present a certain parallel to this.”

This characterization of the external plot is followed by a short self-commentary on the inner plot.

“The father renounces the chance to realize himself as an individual in order to earn money, raise a son, and give his son the chance to go out into the world. He sacrifices his conscience, and his individuality, and his immortality (in the philosophical sense of the word).²⁶ Only at such a price can he make his contribution to life’s progress.

“What did I have in mind in making Caldwell a centaur? A person who thinks and muses on the spiritual side of life in this coarsely materialistic world is already a demigod. The image of the centaur—half-man, half-horse—helps me counterpose a certain higher world of inspiration and good to the world of filth, greed, and shadows. Of course I understand that this ‘Protestant’ aspect of the design of *The Centaur* will seem foreign to Soviet readers,” notes Updike.

We ask the writer to elaborate on the meaning of the mythological line of the novel.

“Myths have various functions in the novel: sometimes they underline a sense of contrast, at times their job is to sharpen a thought satirically or to ‘push through’

the material world, set it off from the ideal world so as to even more sharply set off Caldwell's estrangement from that material world. I tried to make the realistic depiction and the myths, in their mutual penetration, supplement each other, so that reality would create a certain envelope for the myth."²⁷

Updike talks about how in the U.S. the book was published with an appendix giving, in alphabetical order, information about the gods and mythological events that are mentioned in the novel.

"With this I wanted to emphasize that mythology is the very heart of the book, and not an external device. By the way, it is not for me to judge what came of all this. I can speak only about what I was trying to do."

We will note that we have already once exercised the right to such a judgment, having printed at the end of 1963 (issue 12) an article by A. Elistratova dedicated to both of Updike's novels. And now it seems fitting once again to bring up that correct (in our opinion) thought of hers, that the mythological line of the novel *The Centaur* nevertheless remains an "envelope" for the realistic depiction of reality, and not vice versa. The artistic result in this regard became divorced from the intentions of the author—to the reader's benefit, as it seems to us.

A conversation about *The Centaur* would be incomplete without comparing it to the previous novel, *Rabbit, Run*. Both these books were first conceived as stories, but in the process of composition the limits of that genre proved to be too confining.²⁸

The article mentioned above points out their inner connection, despite all their outward differences.

"The connection is indubitable, the author of your article got it just right," affirms the writer, "and with a light 'symbolic' dotted line it is indicated even outwardly: Running Horse River figures in both novels,²⁹ and in essence the action takes place in one and the same town. These two works stand in opposition to each other. Such was the plan. In the first novel, I wanted to show a thoughtless and cowardly man who, like a rabbit, runs from life; the hero of the second novel, like a steed, fulfills his duty, labors by the sweat of his brow, plows the earth. How must a man live, what should govern him—instinct or duty? That is the indivisible dilemma of these novels of mine.

"Which is closer to me? Books are like children. You cannot make a choice between them—all of them are close and all are precious. I worked a lot on both, poured my heart into them, and did my best to bring them to a conclusion. I am gratified that it is *The Centaur* that you have chosen for publication."

* * *

Conversation turns again to *The Centaur*, but now as a springboard to consider more general problems, such as experimentation in the composition and form of the contemporary novel. How does our guest picture that problem?

“A genuine artist cannot fail to be an explorer: otherwise he cannot move beyond the level of craftsmanship. Only in science do the discoveries of one’s forebears serve as a springboard for those who make future discoveries.

“That is a postulate. Its artistic consequence is to regard without fail each of one’s own new novels as an experiment in the area of composition and form.

“I try to express in my books how an American lives, what he feels, how the world looks to him. For this, I must use all the tools of an artist. I therefore want to be free in my pursuit. Each time I search for a new approach and for new facets of reality, in order to tell once again how a man who came into this world lives, why he lives, and how he can live this life to the end with dignity.

“The reason to search for new form, for a new novelistic structure, is to express in a new way essentially the same eternal plots, to which every artist returns every time, regardless of the century, and regardless of what kind of art he is creating.

“I can imagine any work of art,” continues Updike, “split’ in two: either it is one of the endless variations on the idea of the punishment of evil and the triumph of good, or it is a new version of the story of the age-old mutual attraction of a good-looking man and a good-looking woman who are trying to come together in order to bear good-looking, healthy children.”

This unusual concept—Updike himself calls it more a vague impression than a point of view—is close to his philosophical idea of the world’s bipartite essence, its equally great constituent parts: the fleshly sphere and the spiritual sphere. That idea is tragically realized in artistic form in his novels (tragically, because in the world surrounding the writer this harmony is unattainable) and is expressed—if not directly, then indirectly—in his utterances.

Again and again the writer repeats, “My goal is to find a new point of view, in order to ask the same questions—why did a man live, and why did he die?”

An atmosphere of “moral imperative” stands out in this understanding of innovation.³⁰ You sense it as an immutable condition of the artist’s quest. The “many-hued” nature of this problem is brought out especially strongly by the author’s judgments about the legacy of Joyce (bourgeois criticism has named Updike Joyce’s successor).³¹

On his ambivalent relationship to Joyce Updike holds forth, with one foot virtually out the door.

“As a man I do not accept Joyce and I fear him,” he said. “But as a writer and a literary professional I cannot but contend with the fact that Joyce is a living tradition for contemporary literature in English. In the sense of technique and literary mastery, and of style, Joyce has remained an unsurpassed master. In his works he brilliantly realized the richness of the English language and its image structure. He mastered the scientific, bookish vocabulary, so distant from everyday life, and at the same time the essence of colloquial speech, the vocabulary of the street, full-blooded, multifaceted, and as colorful as life itself.”³²

"I do not, however, consider myself Joyce's follower and his pupil in the sense that Beckett is," notes Updike.³³

How does the writer react to reviews of his works?

"I personally have few grounds to complain about the critics," says Updike. "I am the son of a Pennsylvania schoolteacher and must be happy that I can publish my works, earn a living through literature, and in general spend my time in literary work. Even so, too often our American critics write nonsense. I understand them: of course it's difficult to read a book a day and write reviews of them. However, I wish a book were judged by what an author said in it, and how: what he wanted to say and how it turned out. Instead, a critic more often starts from what, in his opinion, the book should have been. He applies his own abstract standards to it, and the blueprint of his dogmatic ideas and preconceived criteria, and that often leads to hysterical ravings. I feel this way not only about evaluations of my own books, but also of the works of many writers I like. Critics seem consciously to erect a wall between what they say about our books and what these books actually say. Any provincial reader, it seems, is capable of understanding a book better than the critic who writes about it.³⁴ I repeat, I have not personally suffered much from critics.³⁵ Even if they understood and interpreted my works incorrectly, they have written about me either as a major writer or as a very promising one.

"The problem, clearly, is not at all with the critics themselves. I am certain," jokes Updike, "many of them are very good people, who love their wives and children. It is possible that writing a real critical article is harder than creating a novel. I myself have experienced what a writer feels in the guise of a critic.³⁶ Writing correctly and well about a book is not at all an easy thing. It is much simpler to come down hard on a book under review when it does not correspond to the critic's preconception. To be a good critic, apparently, it is necessary to know how to look at a book from the author's point of view and, from that standpoint, to judge what he has done successfully. That, probably, is the most difficult thing."

* * *

In these "accursed" questions³⁷ such as "how should a man live," to which Updike returns so insistently both in his novels and in the opinions expressed during this interview, it is possible to hear an echo of the ideas of the great Russian writers of the nineteenth century.³⁸ Updike himself calls that literature practically the most important source he had at his disposal for learning about the people of our country when he was coming here.³⁹

Naturally, we want to know to what extent his current trip has enriched these impressions.

The writer begins his answer with an admission that he grew up during the "Cold War"; his views of the Soviet Union were formed in those circumstances, and, as a

result, he came to us “with mixed feelings of attraction and fear,” with a view of our country and his as “two great states made rivals by fate.”

The range of events and facts that Updike touches upon in analyzing his “Soviet observations” is quite wide, although he speaks only about what seemed particularly noteworthy.

“I imagined I was going to Russia (as we all call your country), and it turned out that I was voyaging around a huge country made up of a whole conglomeration of regions, populated by the most varied peoples, each with its own way of life, national traditions, and language. For example, I was struck by the Caucasus—how varied and rich its nature was, how colorful its people . . .⁴⁰

“I was struck by the difference in the position of writers in your and my countries. Here, a writer is a worker, and his creative work is looked upon as very necessary and useful to people; that work gives him a certain—and not insignificant—position in society. In Russia, people regard a writer with respect and admiration, but at the same time the position he occupies, it seems to me, binds him with certain responsibilities to society and to a certain degree limits his independence.⁴¹

“In the eyes of my compatriots, though, a writer is a lazybones who doesn’t want to work the way everyone else works. In saying this, I in no way want to cast a shadow on my country, but we in America think that if a writer has attained fame, if his books are published, if by his literary labor he provides for the life of his family, that means that he has succeeded in outwitting society, his critics, and his foes.⁴²

“In our country, a reception such as I saw at the Voznesensky event is bestowed only upon athletes and movie stars.⁴³

“I visited several schools and universities here and observed your schoolchildren and students. The wholesomeness of your youth stands out, their sense of purpose and seriousness. An interest in science, art, and books is an inseparable part of your students’ daily life. These qualities are less evident in our young people, although they study just as diligently as yours do. But they are more free and easy, and you more rarely encounter respect in them.

“In outward appearance your cities have less tastelessness, and they look more austere. I noticed that there is a greater demand here for goods than the opportunity to satisfy that demand. It’s clear that people have money, but it’s hard for them to spend it. And that offers great prospects for developing your economy. In a very short span of time, your country has covered a distance that developed capitalist countries traversed bit by bit, and therefore in certain areas you still do not have prosperity . . .

“And it also struck me that you have many beautiful women with fashionable hairstyles, and they dress well. That has been an unexpected surprise,” jokes Updike.⁴⁴

“It would be terribly ridiculous, absurd, both from a philosophical point of view and from all others,” he says in conclusion, “if between our countries, which have so much in common—in their histories, in terms of human relations, and in their pros-

pects—war were suddenly to break out. Having been here, having seen your life and your people, I depart with a faith that between the Soviet Union and America there will not be, and must not be war. I depart more reassured about the relations between our two countries.”

* * *

The writer is off again on his quest.⁴⁵ The progression of searching thoughts is almost physically palpable in interacting with John Updike, this author of—and explicator of—the novels *The Centaur* and *Rabbit, Run*.

Such is the thought of an artist at once emotional and direct, and also reflective and analytical—someone with a gift for subtly reproducing the slightest details of the perceptible world and yet able to investigate the most abstract categories.

In him are united human kindness and stringent ethical criteria, a stern view of people’s motives that excludes starry-eyed idealism or sentimentality. A boundless acceptance of everything given by nature and also scorn for the inner bankruptcy of the surrounding world, a longing for a harmonious reality, where Human Thought would occupy her proper place—thought without which man is no more than an animal.

So, while John Updike’s views on the world and on art did not entirely correspond with ours, we will await a new encounter with him.

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NOTES

1. Technically, he received an American Specialists Grant from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs from the Division for Americans Abroad of the U.S. Department of State. The exchange was between the U.S. Department of State and the Union of Soviet Writers (U.S. Department of State). In fields ranging from athletics to medicine, these literary exchanges were part of a larger U.S.-Soviet agreement, commonly known as the Lacy-Zarubin Agreement, which had been signed in January 1958. As Yale Richmond notes, “The initial agreement was for a two-year period, but it was periodically renegotiated” and lasted in one form or another until 1991 (15).

2. The three visited Washington, met Robert Frost, and were peppered with questions about Soviet censorship at Harvard. They praised Frost and Carl Sandburg as “the deans of your poets”; Lurye also “had kind words for Arthur Miller, William Inge, Gore Vidal and John Cheever, among other writers. But she singled out J.D. Salinger for special attention. . . .” (Doolittle).

3. See Salisbury 4. Cheever had first been translated into Russian in 1952.

4. “Perepiska” (Correspondence), trans. G. Sokol, *Znamia* no. 4 (1964). “Dear Alexandros” originally appeared in the *New Yorker* 31 Oct. 1959: 40–41. “Sorinka v glazu” (Speck in the eye), trans.

Nikolai Kurdiymov, *Pravda* no. 4 (21 June 1964): 4. This publication, somewhat abridged, appeared less than a month after its first publication in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Even earlier in 1964, Updike's "Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" appeared as "Udarit li volshebnik mamu?" (Will the wizard hit mom?), trans. M. Grinberg, *Nedelia* no. 5 (26 Jan.–1 Feb. 1964): 16–17. One indication of Updike's enduring popularity in the Soviet Union of the 1960s is the fact that both of these latter titles were subsequently retranslated and published again in periodicals later in the decade: "Chistyĭ vzgliad v serebrianiom gorode" (The lucid eye in silver town), trans. I. Iakushkina, *Nedelia* no. 26 (19–25 June 1966): 16–17; and "Dolzhen li mudrets pobit' momochku?" (Must the wise man beat mommy?), trans. Iu. Raiskii and F. Solomatin, *Znamia* 1967: 150–55.

5. "Kentavr (*The Centaur*)," *Inostrannaia literatura* Jan., Feb. 1965: 7–93, 79–145. De Bellis and Broomfield's bibliography lists seven Updike "interviews" through 1964. All are less than one page except Edgar J. Driscoll, Jr.'s "Updike Is Uneasy about Literary Prizes," *Boston Globe* 17 Mar. 1964 (see Plath 5–8); this interview recounts a visit to Updike's home and a brief conversation following his receipt of the National Book Award. His first formal interview of length was Charles Thomas Samuels's "The Art of Fiction XLIII: John Updike," *Paris Review* 45 (Winter 1968): 84–117 (found in Plath 22–45).

6. It is interesting to note that an article about what Americans were reading in the subsequent issue, March 1965, neglected to mention Updike while noting that the audience for "serious" fiction in America had expanded exponentially. The author, American journalist Sasha Small Lurie, a longtime correspondent for the Soviet news agency TASS, did mention Cheever's novels as significant for their portrayals of the parasitic lifestyles of their New England "ladies and gentlemen" (Luri 221–22).

7. The first volume (1962) of a major literary encyclopedia, *Kratkaia literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, which began with the letter "A" (Updike's name begins with the Cyrillic "A" in most transliterations), does not include Updike. The ninth and final volume (1978), a collection of entries that were missing or incomplete in the prior volumes, includes a very detailed entry on Updike.

8. Updike was in Rumania Nov. 22–26, Bulgaria Nov. 26–Dec. 1, and Czechoslovakia Dec. 2–6.

9. On Cheever's negative reaction to Updike, see "John Cheever—IV" 114–15.

10. "Updike Gains Russian Readers," *New York Times* 27 Oct. 1964: 44 (see Bailey 349). In general the Soviets preferred translating works that cast a negative eye on American weaknesses, such as racial bigotry (Edward Albee's *Death of Bessie Smith* [1959] and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* [1960]) and military instability (Fletcher Knebel and Charles Bailey II's *Seven Days in May* [1962]).

11. Upon invitation, Updike wrote a summary of his typical presentations to the Russians as "Mezhdū Evropoi i neizvestnym: beglye zametki ob amerikanskoĭ literature" (Between Europe and the wilderness: rough notes on American writing). Quotations here are in a back-translation from the Russian.

12. Updike to Luers, 5 Sept. 2001, Houghton Library, bMS Am 1793, box 6424. Luers and Updike remained lifelong friends, and Updike visited Venezuela with Martha in Jan. 1981, when Luers was ambassador there.

13. The State Department had originally assigned Updike to visit, in addition to Moscow and Leningrad, three cities in Ukraine (Kiev, Lvov, and Kharkov) as well as Kishinev (Moldova) and Rostov. See "Briefing." In Bech's journal a visit to Irkutsk (Siberia) is changed to "Kasakhstan" [*sic*] (Bech 193). Like Updike, Bech pays a visit to Leningrad as well as Alma-Ata—the capital of distant Kazakhstan and site of Leon Trotsky's exile—Georgian Tbilisi, and adds Prague (see also "Licks"

102–03). In “Licks of Love,” the narrator, Eddie Chester, tours the Caucasus with his translator, Nadia; stays in Tbilisi; and visits Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan (115). Leningrad is his last stop, while for Updike it was his first stop outside Moscow.

14. The Bulgarian Milcho Radev states that in Sofia, “everyone I would ask about him would shrug and answer that they had not heard the name.”

15. This description, published in the English-language *Soviet Literature*, summarized material in the March 1964 issue of *Inostrannaia literatura* (“American Writers”).

16. Stoianovskaia had a long career working both at *Inostrannaia literatura* and at *Literaturnaia gazeta*, a thrice-weekly literary and political newspaper. She went on to publish several edited volumes in the 1970s and early 1980s on foreigners’ views of the USSR and on socialist-tinged portraits of Western European and American life, including *Pisatel’ i sovremennost’* (*The writer and the contemporary world*) (1974), *Ia videl budushchee* (*I have seen the future*) (1977), *Zapad vblizi* (*The West up close*) (1982), *Amerika: Ulitsa razdeleniia* (*America: Division street*) (1984), and *S kem vy, mastera kul'tury?* (*Whose side are you on, masters of culture?*) (1985).

17. An abstract of his “often re-worked address”—called “The Plight of the American Writer”—appeared in print thirteen years later, stating, “In contrast to his Soviet counterparts, he [the American writer] enjoys freedom of expression and access to a competitive, at times richly remunerative economy, and suffers, paradoxically, from a sense of irrelevance—neither the government nor the corporations much care what he does or says” (870).

18. Bech dines with these two celebrity-poets in *Bech* (15). Updike described his own dinner with Voznesensky in “Voznesensky” 7–9, and he translated several of Yevtushenko’s poems in “Three Poems” 635–44.

19. See Plath 27.

20. In fact, Updike would not turn thirty-three until 18 Mar. 1965.

21. The full sentiment is from Terentianus Maurus, *De litteris, de syllabis, de metris* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2002): 1286: “*Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli*” (“According to the capabilities of the reader, little books have their own destinies”).

22. Three years following the publication of this interview, the Bulgarian translator of *The Centaur*, Krastan Diankov, claimed to have encountered Updike in 1964 in the lobby of his hotel in Sofia: “I approached him and said, ‘You’re John Updike, right?’ . . . [Updike replied,] ‘How did you recognize me?’ . . . ‘From the book.’ I tried to explain. From the book—I had never seen the man’s face but on the basis of the book I had constructed a mental image that suddenly materialized. The book looked like the man” (“Introduction”).

23. By the end of 1964, *The Centaur* had been translated into Dutch, Hungarian, Italian, and Swedish. None of Updike’s previous books had been translated into Russian. *The Poorhouse Fair* had been translated into German, Italian, Portuguese, and Swedish; *Rabbit, Run* had been translated into Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, and Swedish; *Pigeon Feathers* had been translated into French and Swedish. *The Same Door* had not been translated. *The Centaur* was the first of Updike’s books to be translated into Russian and would be translated twice more. See De Bellis and Broomfield 865–68 for full citations and subsequent translations of these works.

24. The epigraph of the novel is the story of Chiron (from the Prometheus chapter) from Peabody 11–12. This was apparently his wife’s copy of the book, in which he found “this variant of the Hercules legend” (Plath 51).

25. Two years later Updike told an interviewer: "I was raised among quite witty people who talked about themselves and each other all the time so that there was generated in the household a kind of running mythology which I have drawn upon and really it's no invention of mine, but I've been the one, the witness who's tried to write a little of it down" ("John Updike Comments").

26. Translator's note: that is, in terms of his literary reputation, not his corporal longevity.

27. "I always have some sort of mythological referent in mind when I write" (Plath 129).

28. "*Rabbit, Run* was originally to be one of two novellas bound into a single volume; with its companion, *The Centaur*, it would illustrate the polarity between running and plodding, between the rabbit and the horse, between the life of instinctual gratification and that of dutiful self-sacrifice" ("Special Message" 849–50).

29. See Plath 27, *Rabbit, Run* 56, and *The Centaur* 89. The Running Horse Bridge is also mentioned in Updike's short story "In Football Season."

30. Stoianovskaia may be referring to Immanuel Kant's "categorical imperative:" "act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (Kant 71). Since Soviet literature tends to be oppressively moralistic, Updike's embodiment of this notion would naturally arise.

31. For example, Orville Prescott reviewing *The Centaur* in the *New York Times* writes: "Ever since James Joyce wrote *Ulysses* . . . bemused young writers have been misled into thinking that if they imitate Joyce's dangerous precedent they will add something of value to their novels. They could not be more mistaken."

32. "Through the polymathic richness of allusion . . . we gaze into a strange simplicity, the simple-mindedness that Nora Barnacle had felt in her young lover . . ." ("Simple-Minded Jim" 138). In his short story "Wife-Wooing," Updike recalls the word Joyce uses in the "Sirens" episode (Joyce 266) of *Ulysses*: "Smackwarm. . . Smacked smackwarm on her smackable warm woman's thigh. . . A splendid man, to feel that. . . Splendid also to feel the curious and potent, inexplicable and irrefutably magical life language leads within itself" ("Wife-Wooing" 29).

33. These remarks about Joyce are quoted in Meletinsky 332. For Updike on Beckett, see "How How It Is Was."

34. "When I write, I aim in my mind not toward New York but toward a vague spot a little to the east of Kansas" (Plath 25).

35. Updike cites as one of the early reviews that "stuck in my craw" the review of *The Centaur* by Norman Podhoretz "in some unlikely magazine like *Horizon*." Another of the few negative reviews of *The Centaur* came from the actor-physician Jonathan Miller in the *New York Review of Books*: "Updike's quotations, his pretentious index, and interpolated episodes of mythical narrative simply provide an irritating distraction."

36. Updike published his first national review (*Billy Liar* by Keith Waterhouse) in the *New York Times Book Review* 3 Jan. 1960: 4, 22. He began reviewing for the *New Yorker* in 1961. By the end of 1964 he had published eleven reviews in the *New Yorker*.

37. "Accursed questions": a common Russian idiom, beloved of nineteenth-century writers, denoting questions recognized as significant but insoluble. Much of nineteenth-century Russian social, political, and philosophical thought was channeled into literature, in part because censorship often severely limited discussion in nonfiction and journalism. The mid- to late-nineteenth century was the great age of the Russian novel, and Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy, as well as dozens of

their contemporaries, were known for pushing the boundaries of the novelistic genre to incorporate the “accursed questions” of the day.

38. Updike was linked with Chekhov as early as 1959 (Peden). The Russian affinity also occurred to the critic Inna Levidova in her review of the Russian *Centaur* in Oct. 1965: “There is something of the melancholy jester, something of Dostoevsky’s meekly drooling officials in [George Caldwell,] this tall, narrow-shouldered figure in his short jacket and child’s knitted cap” (Levidova 191). She says of Updike’s description of the Caldwell’s farm, “This is a typical Updike setting, with its Chekhovian suggestiveness and its details selected in Chekhov’s manner” (Levidova 191). Updike first encountered the Russian novel as an undergraduate: “I read Dostoevsky for a college course and wept” (Plath 32). In a conversation in Sofia following the Moscow leg of this trip, Updike told a friend that “everyone writing short stories in America has Chekhov in mind and so does he” (Radev). He later said that *Couples* used elements from an early draft of *Marry Me* “in a more sociological, more removed way. Trying to get above it somewhat in the manner of Count Tolstoy” (Plath 117).

39. Updike told an interviewer, “. . . nothing allows you to go more deeply into a place than a novel does. You can read everything you want about 19th-century Russia, but you are still left with only Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and Turgenev. That is what I am trying to do: to say what is changing in the United States. . . .” (Plath 177). In a later Russian interview (1996), Updike noted his sustained interest in the Russian classics: “I really love Nabokov—a fabulous writer. I have read everything of his. While at Harvard I studied Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and wrote term papers on their novels. I love Turgenev, Chekhov, Pushkin. The Russian language has an honesty and frankness missing in English, where there is always a gap between word and reader—some kind of invisible veil” (Sul’kin). For Updike on Dostoevsky, see “Dostoevsky” 129–40; on Tolstoy, see “Ugly Duckling” 261–75.

40. Yerevan, capital of Armenia, and Tbilisi, capital of Georgia, are in the Caucasus. Ellipses here and elsewhere are in the Russian original of the interview.

41. See note 17.

42. Cheever said that being a writer in Russia was “like being a priest of some functioning religion” (Bailey 342).

43. Bailey describes Cheever attending a reading by Yevtushenko “which was more like a rock concert than a literary event” (344). Updike wrote in 1967, “the Soviet system, unlike ours, admits that it needs artists, as blazoners of the ideals of the state. Hence, along with the censorship, there are summer dachas and assured incomes and pleasant dining halls and erratic indulgences” (“Voznesensky” 9). Years later he wrote, “Gone are the days, in Russia and the West alike, when [Yevtushenko] and Andrei Voznesensky were glamour boys, bringing to stadiums and auditoriums on both sides of the Iron Curtain word of the new possibilities stirring under Khrushchev” (“Evil Empire” 523).

44. “Women with a touch of Western *chic* walked hatless in the park [in Sofia]” (“Bulgarian” 51).

45. This sentence indicates the enthusiasm and sense of purpose with which the interviewer perceives that Updike is pursuing his career. Updike himself told the *Paris Review* three years later, “I’m not saying I can write like Melville or James, but that the kind of passion and bias that they show is already in my bones” (Plath 32).

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Updike in Venice

JOHN PHILIP DRURY

John Updike wrote many poems from the unabashed viewpoint of a tourist, sometimes in the company of his second wife, Martha, and sometimes as a frequent flyer, the author on a book tour. They are explicitly autobiographical, with no pretense of a speaker apart from the poet. The artifice consists of candor, a relaxed sense of the self as he records and comments on what he has (or they have) experienced and perceived. It strikes me as the same point of view Updike adopts in his art criticism: the museumgoer, a visitor in the galleries.

He titled his first volume of essays on art *Just Looking* (1989), and the collection represents “the fruit of just looking, of the pleasures of the eye” (19). But the phrase *just looking* is also the stock response of an American browsing in a shop and rebuffing the assistance of a sales clerk. It’s the tourist’s polite declaration of independence. In his early visits to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Updike was also looking for a “religion reassembled from the fragments of our daily life,” and Updike himself is an expert at reassembling those quotidian fragments (16).

Among the travel poems in *Americana*, a collection published in 2001, Updike includes two set in Venice: “Death in Venice” and (after two intervening poems set elsewhere in Italy) “Venetian Candy.” Mortality haunts both of these first-person poems, one about a street scene in which two young women try to resuscitate a “stricken man,” the other about Murano glass souvenirs in the shape of hard candy in wrappers. In both poems, however, the prospect of death is countered by the power of sex and love, though in radically different ways.

Borrowing the title of Thomas Mann’s novella (1912), Updike prepares the

reader for an engagement between *Eros* and *Thanatos* in “Death in Venice.” He begins with a reporter’s description of the scene and situation:

On one of those rare streets without a view
of water, perhaps a filled-in canal,
beyond the Rialto, near the *stazione*,
a crowd had gathered around a stricken man.

A native of the city would be able to name the exact location, but Updike offers a tourist’s impression—and a poet’s suggestiveness. Since we associate Venice with water, its absence here gives the first hint of something out of the ordinary, something “rare.” In sketching the place, however, Updike is specific enough so a map reader could identify the probable location as the Lista di Spagna—or possibly, though farther from the railway station, the Rio Terrà San Leonardo, both part of the main pedestrian thoroughfare from the Rialto Bridge. In using *stazione* instead of “station,” Updike is adding a pinch of Italian just as any literate tourist might (and the only other italicized Italian word in the poem, “*quattrocento*,” is an art-history term). But he also chooses the foreign word because it fits the iambic pentameter in which he’s pacing out the poem. Although he hews to the meter casually, counting syllables more than iambic feet in line 2, for example, he stays within bounds of that metrical thoroughfare throughout the poem. His blank verse is relaxed but orderly, like a good tourist.

In line 4, the basic dramatic situation, which a passerby would take in at first glance, follows the opening lines of scene-setting: “crowd” and “stricken man,” plural versus singular, witnesses gathered around some sort of victim. In the next sentence, another set of four blank-verse lines, Updike zooms in his focus on the principal players, two women ministering to a man prostrate on the ground:

A pair of young women—one kneeling to breathe
into his mouth, the other astraddle his chest,
applying CPR with frantic heaves—
labored to save his life, it seemed in vain.

The description is admirably clear and objective, yet Updike is carefully setting up some erotic suggestions he will amplify later: “young women,” “kneeling,” “breathe / into his mouth,” “astraddle his chest,” “frantic heaves.”

As the poem moves into the second of its four eight-line stanzas, a simile about “whores” and “their client” make the sexual innuendo explicit:

In the minute or two we watched, his face,
seen upside down like some devil's, turned blue.
My wife thought they were doing it wrong,
this pair slaving like whores at their client.

It figures that the dirty-mindedness comes from the husband (and the poet), not his wife, who is concerned about the inadequate first aid, worried that the women were "doing it wrong":

"I want to ask them if they have an airway."

Significantly, it is the only direct address uttered by any character in the poem. Her empathy pulls the husband back to the literal scene, not its figurative associations, which include the image of the suffocating man's face "seen upside down like some devil's, turned blue," an observation like that of someone gazing at a religious painting. Now Updike sticks to the facts, including the recognition that he and the man on the ground are roughly the same age:

He was a man my age, in a proper suit,
ripe with small signs of self-indulgence,
yet not deserving, surely, this, this fate
of a street dog, in public view, too ugly
to be pitied.

But Updike the poet, speaker, tourist, and husband can't resist (or reject) either the figurative or the erotic, so he proceeds to evoke a grotesque, ironic act of coming, "white stuff" like semen ejaculated (literally "vomited") into the mouth of the woman administering CPR but failing to "render him erect":

He vomited white stuff
into the mouth of his would-be savior,
who spat and bent again into the attempt
to render him erect.

The literal scene of regurgitation is revolting enough, but "render him erect" impels the reader to find a sexual connection and makes the act of attempted rescue pornographic in an especially ugly way. In an earlier poem, "Fellatio," he imagines a "clean secretary" taking "a fountain into her mouth," so this kind of fantasizing about women on the street is nothing new for Updike. But in that poem it leads to

erotic lyricism; here it leads to anti-erotic nausea, along with a reference to the sexist and outdated “savioress” (a locution forced by metrical considerations, since the extra syllable makes the line scan as pentameter). At this point in the scene, after a “minute or two” of gawking, the tourist couple turns away in embarrassment at this “triple failure / to rise.” Yet both the literal scene of the women’s apparent failure to resuscitate the “stricken man” and the figurative sense of fellatio and prostitution give way to a different metaphor, a transformation of death and sexuality into art:

We turned away,
embarrassed for them all, their triple failure
to rise, as in an entangled *quattrocento*
vision, above the dust, the flow of life
reversed, redeemed, religiously transformed.

This poet’s vision of a vision in an imaginary painting represents the poem’s *volta*, a turn that reverses, redeems, and transforms the failure in a religious sense (emphasized by the alliteration), not by denying its failure but by embracing its luminosity and power as an image of ultimate terror:

Instead they cowered, tortured and contorted
like those blue figures—his face was turning bluer—
with cautionary purpose crammed into
the lower third of some church-harbored, darkened,
creased, mold-blotted, huge, ignored Last Judgment.

In those last two lines, which reflect the dank realism of an art-loving tourist inspecting an unrestored work of religious art, Updike gives a lesson in how to make adjectives matter by piling them on, within a metrical structure, and keeping them palpably specific: “church-harbored, darkened, / creased, mold-blotted, huge, ignored Last Judgment.” It helps that he begins the phrase with the beautifully articulated “church-harbored,” a quiet sanctuary in contrast to the “public view” of rubbernecks around an accident. It takes nerve and skill to pull off a succession of six (possibly seven, if you count “Last”) modifiers and never seem to be padding the lines.

The last two lines form a question that plays on the oddness of Venice itself, where the rescue vehicles are necessarily boats:

How will the ambulance come, we wondered,
through all that stone whose veins are dirty water?

Those veins, the network of waterways through which the ambulances navigate, don't extend into the immediate vicinity of this life-and-death incident, the "filled-in canal." Updike ends the poem by contemplating the prostrate body of Venice itself, "all that stone whose veins are dirty water." It's significant, though, that Updike attributes the astute observation of the last two lines to "we," the husband and wife sharing credit, just as they share the experience of witnessing a hellish death scene.

Among other things, the poem provides a souvenir of Venice for the couple on vacation. A writer, of course, never really stops working, so the poem comprises not just Updike's notes about the incident but their development beyond journalism, beyond messages scribbled on postcards. They are more like the pictures on the other side, starting with the realistic scene of the "stricken man" and the two women trying to revive him, progressing to the lurid sex scene, and culminating with the vision of figures as part of a massive Last Judgment.

We receive this triptych within the larger context of the married couple's experiences abroad. That is also the narrative framework of Updike's other Venice poem, "Venetian Candy," whose title and central image refer to three souvenirs, each a semi-permanent representation of an ephemeral sweet. Although this poem may qualify as a *Dinggedicht* (the literary term for a poem about a thing), it goes beyond focusing on objects. Like "Death in Venice," it celebrates a particular marriage. In "Death in Venice," the scenes (both literal and figurative) are framed by the presence of the observing couple. If the stricken man looks like a devil's face "turned blue," and the tableau of "cowered, tortured and contorted / . . . blue figures" is "crammed" into a vision of hell, the married couple enjoys the privilege of remaining observers, outside that vision yet taking it in, conscious of their own mortality, the refuge of being alive (and together) at that particular moment.

"Venetian Candy" opens with the poet's awareness that such refuge is temporary:

How long will our bewildered heirs
marooned in possessions not theirs
puzzle at disposing of these three
cunning feignings of hard candy in glass—
the striped little pillowlike mock-sweets,
the flared end-twists as of transparent paper?

The presence of beneficiaries divvying up their shared inheritance requires the death of the married couple, but here the living poet is imagining the future and indulging in a seemingly more modest vision than a Last Judgment. The answer

to the question “How long” would be easy (not long) except for the intervention of the poem, which lodges the question of longevity into the minds of potentially countless readers, who are always “marooned in possessions not theirs.” Once read, the poem makes it impossible to dispose of the “cunning feignings of hard candy in glass.” The phrase “cunning feignings” sounds like something Plato would recognize, and it describes the poem’s accomplishment as well. But whereas the pieces of Murano glass imitate the confections, the poem encompasses those imitations while intent on preservation—and not just of the dandiness of candy. The Venetian glass memorializes the carnal union of the married couple.

In its form, the poem differs from “Death in Venice” in several respects, lacking the stanzaic and metrical regularity. Here, those elements are perhaps intentionally more jagged, the stanzas ranging from six to thirteen lines, no two containing the same number. Although many lines move iambically, like the opening line’s tetrameter (“How long will our bewildered heirs”) and a later one that stretches out to a fourteener (“all day for a wild rich Arab, a compulsive Japanese”), the poem is written in free verse. The first two lines rhyme noticeably (“heirs” / “theirs”), and there’s a distinct rhyme in the second stanza (“trace” / “place”), but most of the poem hints occasionally at sonic echoes through assonance (“three” / “sweets”; “Hemingway” / “shade”; “aloof” / “who”; “bag” / “sad”) without settling into any pattern. By the last stanza, even those slant rhymes have vanished.

The poem is rich in verbal sweetness, from the beautifully chosen “marooned,” which suggests a Crusoe-like confinement on a desert island reserved for grown-up orphans, to the beautifully accurate and sensuous description of the candies: “striped little pillowlike mock-sweets, / the flared end-twists as of transparent paper.” Since Updike is as cunning as the glassmakers, “pillowlike” anticipates the poem’s final image of the hotel bed.

When he begins the second stanza by declaring “No clue will be attached,” Updike is providing all the clues those “bewildered heirs” could ever need:

No clue will be attached, no trace
of the sunny day of their purchase,
at a glittering shop a few doors
up from Harry’s Bar, a disappointing place
for all its testaments from Hemingway.
The Grand Canal was also aglitter
while the lesser canals lay in the shade
like snakes, flicking wet tongues
and gliding to green rendezvous.

Updike testifies to the provenance of these trivial pieces of art, and it consists of the couple's privileged moments in the Most Serene Republic: the "sunny day," the "glittering shop" near Harry's Bar (about which they shared a sense of disappointment), the Grand Canal "aglitte" and the smaller canals "in the shade," providing a touch of chiaroscuro. D. H. Lawrence calls Venice "Abhorrent, green, slippery," but Updike finds sensual beauty in likening those side canals to "snakes, flicking wet tongues / and gliding to green rendezvous." His vision of the place is Edenic, and he relishes the *frisson* of that suggestive rendezvous.

The backstory of the Venetian candy continues in the next stanza, which recounts its purchase in detail:

The immaculate salesgirl, in her aloof
Italian succulence, sized us up,
a middle-aged American couple,
as unserious shoppers who,
still half jet-lagged, would cling to their lire
in the face of any enchanted vase
or ethereal wineglass that might shatter
in the luggage going home.

The tone is wonderfully self-mocking, the "middle-aged American couple" contrasted with the "succulence" of the young woman working in the shop. She is serious enough to guide them to something that won't "shatter" in baggage and won't be unrealistically "enchanted" or "ethereal." She judges them correctly, in terms of salesmanship, but incorrectly in making assumptions about their intimate life together.

In the next stanza, Updike fleshes out the scene with a fiction writer's precision, along with wit in his observation of the elaborate ceremony of the saleswoman as she wraps the "cheapest / items in the shop":

Yet we wanted something, something small. . . .
This? No . . . How much is ten thousand? Dizzy,
at last we decided. She wrapped
the three glass candies, the cheapest
items in the shop, with a showy care
worthy of crown jewels—tissue,
tape, and tissue again sprang up
beneath her blood-red fingernails,
plus a jack-in-the-box-shaped paper bag

adorned with harlequin lozenges, sad
though she surely was, on her feet waiting
all day for a wild rich Arab, a compulsive Japanese.
Grazie, signor . . . grazie, signora . . . ciao.

The economy and specificity of this portrait of a disappointed “salesgirl” is full of delights—the choppy line of haggling about prices (“This? No . . . How much is ten thousand? Dizzy”), the “glass candies” likened ironically to “crown jewels,” her dangerously erotic “blood-red fingernails,” the comic extravagance of the “jack-in-the-box-shaped paper bag / adorned with harlequin lozenges,” the harlequin reference suggesting Venetian *commedia dell’arte*. Just as the salesgirl, at least in Updike’s view, typecasts the married couple as middle-aged and therefore unadventurous tourists who “cling to their lire,” she wishes for customers ready to spend lavishly, such as the exotic (if ethnically stereotyped) Arabs and Japanese.

Like the “thing-weary heirs,” she doesn’t look close enough to perceive the real story of this couple’s life and love together. In the final stanza, the narrator talks explicitly about his efforts to preserve both the damaged piece of glass candy (through repair) and his memory of the couple’s shared pleasures in their hotel room (through writing the poem), keeping both “intact”:

Nor will our thing-weary heirs decipher
the little repair, the reattached triangle
of glass from the paper-imitating end-twist,
its mending a labor of love in the cellar,
by winter light, by the man of the house,
mixing transparent epoxy and rigging
a clever small clamp as if to keep
intact the time that we, alive,
had spent in the feathery bed
at the Europa e Regina.

In his last poetry collection, *Endpoint* (2009), there’s a poem called “Tools,” and I like picturing Updike at a workbench in his basement, ever the craftsman, here pointing out the tools he has used to fix the broken object: transparent epoxy glue (to hide the seam) and a clamp he rigs up (to hold the pieces together until the bond has set). Just as the original “feigning” was “cunning,” his repair is “clever.” It is mainly a “labor of love” performed in the winter, as opposed to the love-making the couple enjoyed in their sumptuous bed and the “sunny day” when they purchased the candies. Love is the common denominator. After Updike describes

mending the “paper-imitating end-twist,” the rest of the final stanza provides another end-twist in its revelation of how the Proustian “mock-sweets” conjure up the real sweets of connubial joy and “keep / intact the time that we, alive, / had spent in the feathery bed / at the Europa e Regina.” He ends the poem by savoring the specific name of their lodgings. This luxurious hotel brings together five palazzi on the Grand Canal, offers painterly views of Longhena’s church of Santa Maria della Salute, and is located conveniently near Harry’s Bar and the shop where the Updikes bought their glass candies. They didn’t need to venture far from their hotel room. The evocation of their “time . . . alive” in the “feathery bed” (in contrast with the doubly hard candy, both the edible real and the glass imitation) stands as a thrilling climax in a poem about the privately treasured belongings of a deceased couple. The poem, launched by a living poet and loving husband, will remain when they are gone, explaining and commemorating not just those seemingly trivial objects but also the couple’s passionate intimate life, with no need for any X-rating.

The literal Venetian candy obviously represents souvenirs “Mrs. U. and I” brought back to America (“Birthday Shopping, 2007,” *Endpoint* 15), but so does the detail of the three figures in the lower corner of an imaginary painting in a church. Although the purpose of any Last Judgment may be “cautionary,” in this case, for this couple, it is also consoling, since they’re together, alive, on the outside looking in. His wife may “want to ask them if they have an airway,” but she apparently does not know the language and cannot intrude, however well-intentioned. *Caritas* is what she offers, from a respectful distance and a realist’s perspective, just as *Eros*, in the form of figurative language that generates one artwork within another, is what Updike offers. The power of the last line of “Death in Venice” comes from pity.

In borrowing Thomas Mann’s title for one of his Venice poems, Updike pays literary tribute without delving into the novella itself, except in the way he describes the stricken man’s death throes as sordid and public, with an emphasis on forbidden sexuality. Mann’s true influence may be more subtle, the way an artist (such as Gustav von Aschenbach or Mann himself) might consider a spell in Venice when “one wanted to arrive overnight at the incomparable, the fabulous, the like-nothing-else-in-the-world” (Mann 16). Updike actually avoids the usual tourist spots, reporting on a medical emergency and a few inexpensive souvenirs and choosing ordinary locations—a crowded pedestrian walkway and a shop—instead of what Jan Morris, in *The World of Venice* (1974), calls the “prodigies,” the “diapason sights,” the “superlatives of Venice” (233, 238, 239). Updike focuses his attention on what Morris calls the “curiosities,” but in both poems he transforms

the ordinary, whether incident or object, into something personal and yet expansive, luminous and rich in significance (220).

Most Venice poems by Americans could be classified as “tourist” or “literary,” with May Swenson’s “Notes Made in the Piazza San Marco” exemplifying the first and Anthony Hecht’s “The Venetian Vespers” (a dramatic monologue) the second. William Logan writes both kinds of poems in *Macbeth in Venice* (2003), a full-length collection about the city, its title sequence literary, imagining the setting of Shakespeare’s play transferred to Venice, and one of its sections, *Venetian Hours*, devoted to tourist poems, such as “The Lost Birds of Venice,” which begins “The hotel entrance was painted green—faux marble. / Our rooms perched on a dead-end street / and backed on a dead canal.” Just as Logan borrows the section title from Henry James, Updike borrows a poem’s title from Thomas Mann. Both men may be highly literary, but they aren’t above or beyond writing from the perspective of the tourist.

Venice certainly has an effect on Updike’s poetic libido. Those transformations of the ordinary depend on the presence of his wife, their relationship one of the two necessary conditions for the existence of these poems, the other being the watery, stony, glittering city that represents “the incomparable, the fabulous, the like-nothing-else-in-the-world.” More than most American poets abroad, John Updike embeds love poems within his travelogues—as long as they’re set in Venice.

That’s not the case with his other travel poems, even those in which his wife plays a part. In “Orvieto” (the poem that appears right after “Death in Venice” in *Americana*), there’s nothing erotic. The couple is companionable, at ease with each other as they wait for a taxi, take the funicular, look at the cathedral, sit on stone seats, and then stroll through the town. As he says in “Downtime,” she is the wife who “no longer acts like a mistress.” In “Two Cunts in Paris” (the poem just before “Death in Venice”), he does not mention his wife, and it’s possible she did not join him on the trip. Updike presents “the last / revelation allowed to art” in his descriptions of female genitalia in Gustave Courbet’s *L’Origine du monde* in the Musée d’Orsay and a clay sculpture called *La Gimblette* in the Musée des Arts décoratifs. Here, the sex is explicit, the X-rating earned. But the poem is like a comparative essay rather than a narrative. The only love belongs to “the rapt glad faces of those who love art” (a phrase from “Stolen,” a poem in *Endpoint*).

The *Publishers Weekly* review of *Americana* asserts that “Anyone who could still call a poem ‘Two Cunts in Paris’ and expect people to laugh or get a touch of frisson is either a novelist or completely out of touch—or both.” Updike has the

same “anachronistic gender trouble” in “Death in Venice” when he refers to the woman administering first aid as “savioress” and likens her to a “whore.” But in that poem, his wife’s one line of dialogue, with its concern for the closed airway of the stricken man on the paving stones, counters and puts into perspective his puerile snicker. Graphic focus on sex is a kind of leitmotif in Updike’s work, as in “Midpoint,” a sequence he wrote in 1968, in which he includes several pages of erotic rhapsodizing in his own personal *Tropic of Cancer*, describing how he “jerked off / driving home alone one-handed / singing of you” and referring lustfully to “my prick toward morning a battered miracle,” “your fucked-out insides,” and “the persimmon nightie just down to your pussy” (*Collected Poems* 83, 84). Venice brought out things in Updike’s poetic psyche that other places—foreign and domestic, as well as public and intimate—could not: the conjunction of mortality and married erotic love. His two poems set in the city transcend mere tourism. But they required his wife’s tempering influence.

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John Updike's Broad­sides: The Blackness of Death and *Bath after Sailing*

DONALD J. GREINER

... the blackness of darkness ...

—Herman Melville, “Hawthorne and His Mosses”

... the hostile, mobile black ...

—John Updike, *Bath after Sailing*

I

John Updike was a connoisseur of the art of fine press printing. Whether the issue was handmade paper, ornamental type, or upscale binding, he knew the ins and outs of how to design an elegant limited edition. His forays into what, for even initiated readers, is an arcane world were evidence of his delight in both the business and creativity of publishing. One of his earliest ventures into the fraternity of professional designers and printers of primarily collectors' editions involved “Bath after Sailing,” a poem the *New Yorker* rejected in 1967.

Yet in 1968, Country Squires Books (Stevenson, Connecticut) published “Bath after Sailing” in booklet form in an edition of 125 numbered, signed copies. The project initially called for a broadside, which would have been Updike's second following the publication of *Dog's Death* in 1965 in an edition of 100 numbered, signed copies.¹ During the rest of his career, he not only agreed to but also oversaw the production of a large number of limited edition broadsides, cards, and separately

published poems in various formats. Many of them were not originally intended for sale but distributed to friends of the author and sponsors of the press, and thus difficult today to locate in libraries or even the rare book market. In addition, he published such scarce curiosities as the small, boxed art book *Impressions* (1985, 300 copies), the miniature book *Mites and Other Poems in Miniature* (1990, 226 copies), and the single-poem-as-book *In Memoriam Felis Felis* (1990, 238 copies). These lovely editions were often released in three states as, for example, in the case of *Felis Felis*: 12 identified by Roman numerals, 26 identified by letters, and 200 identified by Arabic numbers.

One of the most elusive of the special publications from Updike's late career, as opposed to *Dog's Death* and *Bath after Sailing* from his early career, is *Duet on Mars*. As Jack De Bellis and Michael Broomfield note, the poem was first published in the *New Yorker* on March 1, 2004, but they do not identify the broadside edition (387). This is because the limited edition was all but unknown at the time. In 2005, Eric Sunada of Archetype Press published *Duet on Mars* in an unusually small limitation of 50 numbered copies. None of the copies was for sale. Moreover, the poem was not collected until 2009. Thus, the only way to read "Duet on Mars" between 2004 and 2009 was to track down the issue of the *New Yorker* or serendipitously discover a copy of the rare broadside itself. Even Updike was unaware of the item, which suggests that the publication of the broadside was unauthorized. Not until February 2008 (a year before Updike's death), when Broomfield contacted the author, did Updike learn about it. Unfortunately, De Bellis and Broomfield did not become aware of its existence until a few weeks *after* the publication of their bibliography in 2007. At that time, Eric Sunada solicited Broomfield's assistance in securing Updike's signature on a copy of *Duet on Mars*. Broomfield agreed. Because of his friendship with Broomfield, Updike complied and then collected the poem in *Endpoint and Other Poems* (2009).

Updike's association with fine printing and broadsides developed in two phases. From 1965, the year of *Dog's Death*, through 1975, the year of *Sunday in Boston* (100 copies), he consented to the creation of nine of these special publications. Yet from 1975 until his death in 2009, at least an additional thirty-one appeared (De Bellis and Broomfield 360–88). The number is always indefinite because different scholars count Updike's private press editions differently, describing, for instance, cards as broadsides. Broad­sides are generally larger than cards and thus have the space for original illustrations that cards lack. In both cases, however, the poem is elegantly printed on one side of the special paper. The average limitation for these

scarce-to-rare items was 100 to 250 copies, nearly all of them numbered, signed, beautifully designed—and expensive.

In 1967–68, the journey of “Bath after Sailing” from typescript through proofs to broadside to booklet illustrated the complexity of guiding these scarcities from concept to completion. It is clear from Updike’s comments to R. E. Garnett, the publisher of *Bath after Sailing*, that he claimed to know little about the difficulties of creating tastefully produced limited editions. In an October 10, 1967, note to Garnett, he quipped, “I hope this venture pays off for you; it is a novelty to me.” Yet by the time the broadside was ready for sale, Updike had taken over the position of unofficial art director of the project. As the distinguished rare book dealer Darren Overy observed of Updike’s claim of ignorance, “*This* from a man who would go on to almost single-handedly create a signed, limited industry that helped to keep many a small press in business!” (email message, April 14, 2016). The “industry” also helped to keep Updike “in business.” As his involvement with these special publications grew, his remuneration expanded. Because they were expensive to purchase, broadsides were usually profitable for both author and publisher, but more important, Updike enjoyed the process of creating broadsides and particularly appreciated the art of the final product. *Bath after Sailing* was the turning point. A discussion of the various drafts and proofs of the poem that led to the 125 copies of the booklet in 1968 will not only demonstrate the difficulty Updike had in even completing the poem to his satisfaction but also chart how he, instead of Garnett, assumed final authority for the font, format, and design.

In an undated (but most likely 1967) note to Garnett, Updike wrote of “Bath after Sailing,” “I like this poem, though the *NYer* didn’t take it, and hope you can use it for your broadside. Consider setting it in two columns; the stanzas are many and the lines short. I of course want to see a proof, and hope you can follow my corrections here.” The key line—“I of course want to see a proof”—resulted in an unusually complex revision process that affected not only single words and phrases but also format and font. The Updike-Garnett relationship began in early 1967 when, in a letter dated April 5, Updike replied to an unidentified request from the future publisher of *Bath after Sailing* for his signature on a manuscript. Although Updike suggested in an August 26, 1967, letter to Garnett that the art of broadsides was a mystery to him, he undercut the disclaimer when he went on to discuss the 1965 publication of *Dog’s Death* and the copyright issues regarding broadsides. He closed with a direct invitation, asking Garnett to write when he was ready for such

a project. Less than a week later (August 31, 1967), he again signaled his willingness to cooperate. After explaining that he had no new poems at the moment but had one in mind, he made his intentions clear: if the *New Yorker* were to reject his poem, he would send it to Garnett. The magazine did turn it down, and the process of designing *Bath after Sailing* began. His letter of September 26, 1967, indicates he was paid \$300, but the larger point is that in four letters spaced only six weeks apart (September 26, October 10, October 24, November 6) he reiterated his insistence on seeing proofs and pasteups every time he emended the material. Further, by October 10, he had changed his mind about the broadside format, suggesting that a chapbook might be better but probably more expensive. It's clear that he was *not* a novice about the ins and outs of publishing limited editions.

Four primary stages of composition led to *Bath after Sailing*. Given the complexity of the process, I will use the following designators to clarify the stages: typescript, revised typescript, revised galley proof one, and revised galley proof two. The typescript that Updike originally forwarded to Garnett featured fourteen quatrains totaling fifty-six unrhymed short lines in a single column. Yet as the undated note to Garnett confirms, Updike had already rejected the single-column arrangement of the typescript. He advised the publisher to set the proposed broadside in two columns because, in his judgment, the length of the poem determined the format of the design.

Broadsides became a regular feature of English-language publishing soon after the development of printing, particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Normally prepared on folio sheets, printed on one side only, and formatted into two columns to the page, broadsides were often satirical in tone and personal in attack; but they also publicized popular ballads, the dying words of the condemned, religious messages, and political harangues. By the time Updike began publishing broadsides in the 1960s, however, the form was the purview of specialist printers that featured fancy type fonts and handmade paper, and offered broadsides in limited quantities. Whereas sixteenth- and seventeenth-century broadsides were distributed in large amounts, contemporary broadsides are usually restricted in number and marketed to readers as examples of the printer's art.

The correspondence with Garnett is notable because it reveals that Updike submitted not a clean copy of "Bath after Sailing" but a typescript marked with numerous holograph emendations he had made *prior* to forwarding the poem to the publisher. Thus the significance of his comment to Garnett: "hope you can follow my corrections here." The corrections turned the typescript into something other than what one would expect an author to submit to a publisher: a draft with

revisions already in place. In the case of “Bath after Sailing,” Updike’s career-long need to revise translated into a metaphor for ceaseless creativity standing firm as a bulwark against oblivion, defined in the poem as death by water:

I was afraid,
afraid of heeling over in the wind.

Adam Begley confirms that in the 1960s Updike “was in the grip of a low-level spiritual crisis. . . . He battled death with God and romance” (223). And with art. His dilemma became worse. The primary cause of the condition that occasionally approached existential terror was the guilt-laden conflict between his religious faith and his numerous adulteries during the years of *Dog’s Death* and *Bath after Sailing*. He was a committed churchgoer, a believer, but he was also a wanderer from the marriage bed. To point out the connection between the death-filled atmosphere of his first two limited editions and his fear at the time he wrote them is not to claim that *Dog’s Death* and *Bath after Sailing* carry the weight of the short stories about collapse—such as “Twin Beds in Rome,” “The Music School,” and “Leaves”—that he wrote during his time of fear. Yet the connection does confirm that he felt surrounded by loss, death, and extinction. He saw, as Begley remarks, “death everywhere” (243). *Dog’s Death* may be “merely” about the loss of a much-loved pet, but in *Bath after Sailing* the poet himself confesses his terror of personal annihilation generated by a day spent sailing in a sloop on the ocean with the blackness of darkness just beneath him.

Normally an indicator of life, of affirmation in the face of negation, water in *Bath after Sailing* signals the contradictory meanings of death and healing. Note the pun on “heeling” in the first stanza of the typescript (which Updike did not revise during the initial round of “corrections”):

From ten to five we whacked the waves,
the slippy-sloppy hostile black
that lurched beneath the leeward winch
as helplessly we heeled.

He began emending the poem with the second stanza of the revised typescript, which initially read:

Now at six I lie at ease,
soaking off salt in a sea my size,
my fingertips shriveled as if dead,
the sway of the sloop still haunting the tub.

Intimidated by “the sway of the sloop,” the poet knows that the smallness of the tub is for the moment his safe port beyond the enormity of the black sea. Yet Updike had trouble with the second line: “soaking off salt in a sea my size.” First, he canceled “salt in a sea my size.” Then he substituted “my salt-soaked frame.” Finally, he reinserted the original phrasing.

The other primary change in the revised typescript occurred in the sixth stanza, which initially read:

I did not, I did not want
to die. I saw death mirrored in that
sliding heedless mass absorbed
in shrugging off its timeless weight.

Rather than directly specify the source of his fear—death by water—he revised the second line from “I saw death mirrored in that” to “I saw what it was in that.” The emendation served as a deflection of what he originally described as “the slippy-sloppy hostile black” before he enhanced the atmosphere of terror with a revision: “the hostile, mobile black.” With the emendation, he likely alluded to Herman Melville’s resonant phrase “the blackness of darkness”—in *Moby-Dick* and in Melville’s memorable account of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short stories—as exposing “the blackness of darkness” beneath “the bright gildings in the skies he builds over you” (“Hawthorne and His Mosses” 1159).² In his introduction to Melville’s *Complete Shorter Fiction*, Updike quotes Melville’s variation on the phrase “great power of blackness” (xxx). Interestingly, in “Bech in Rumania,” one of the earliest stories about his ironic alter ego Henry Bech, Updike includes a scene in which Bech praises Melville: “Melville, it happened, was Bech’s favorite American author. . . . ‘No one,’ Bech said . . . ‘more courageously faced our native terror. He went for it right between its wide-set little pig eyes, and it shattered his genius like a lance” (36–37). Updike’s knowledge of Melville’s canon was impressive: he also delivered a lecture titled “Melville’s Withdrawal” in 1981 in Rochester, New York, before publishing it in the *New Yorker* (May 10, 1982).³

Fully aware that death is the power lurking beneath “as helplessly we heeled,” he resorted to the relative safety of indirection. The blackness of “death” becomes the ambiguity of “it.” The starkness of “I saw death” is deflected by “I saw what it was.” The peace of the bath, what the poet concedes is merely “my mock survival,” feebly pushes back against the immensity of Melville’s power of darkness:

Black sea, deep sea, you dangle
beneath my bliss like a dreadful gamble.

For the final quatrain of the revised typescript, Updike added “how” and “I” to assert the authority of the artist, to personalize his escape. The typescript reads:

of sleeplessness, of my sleep,
of all sleep, much preferring
this microscopic version
of flirting with immersion.

In the revised typescript, he redirected the “urgent message from nothing to nothing” into the affirmation of art:

—how much I prefer
this microscopic version
of flirting with immersion.

The “microscopic version / of flirting with immersion” is both the poem and the tub.

Garnett accepted Updike’s original recommendations about the design of the proposed broadside, set the first proof of *Bath after Sailing* in two columns, and forwarded the galley to Updike. But without consulting the author, Garnett also printed the poem in italic font, added ornamental capital letters to the first word in eight of the fourteen stanzas, and arranged each quatrain in lines of what Updike denigrated as “diagonal indentation,” as in

From ten to five we wacked the waves,
 the slippy-sloppy hostile black
 that lurched beneath the leeward winch
 as helplessly we heeled.

On October 24, 1967, Updike returned the galley but with new revisions *and* a firmly worded, typed letter to Garnett. Although he indirectly apologized for the numerous changes he made in holograph on revised galley proof one, he pointedly expressed his dismay with the format. He admitted that the many revisions confirmed his uneasiness about the poem in its current state and expressed his unhappiness with the way the poem looked on the proof. Declaring that he was not fond of the italic font, but conceding that it might serve, he added in holograph

that he would prefer roman face. Yet he rejected outright both the ornamental capitals and the diagonal indentations of the lines, typesetting devices that forced on the poem what he called “a false form.” His rationale was clear: the eye-catching capital letters divided the poem into units as if they were separate poems, and the diagonally indented lines guided the reader to expect a tighter organization of the stanzas. He then urged Garnett to do “away” with both devices. He closed the letter with a comment that was more or less an authorial command: “In view of my corrections, and—more to the point—my typographic reservations, I would be extremely grateful for another, revised proof.”

Significantly, the emendations on revised galley proof one redirected “Bath after Sailing” back to his horror of death by water as opposed to his effort in the revised typescript to deflect his fear. The fourth stanza of revised galley proof one reads:

Not me. I was afraid,
 afraid of heeling over in the wind
 and inhaling bubbling lead
 and sinking like a stone, a skipped stone.

Canceling “and sinking like a stone, a skipped stone,” a simile that suggests a pleasant pastime beside a placid lake, he changed the line to emphasize the utter blankness of annihilation, the sheer meaninglessness of death: “and sinking, opaque as a stone.” To underscore his decision to face the opaqueness of death head-on, his fear that human flesh trapped in the enormity of the ocean is no more than a sinking stone in a lake, he reversed his previous attempt to deflect death by identifying death as “it.” The first two lines of the sixth stanza of the revised typescript read:

I did not, I did not want
 to die. I saw what it was in that

On revised galley proof one the revision reads:

I did not, I had not wanted
 to die. I saw death’s sense in that

Religion and art, two of Updike’s “three great secret things” (the third is sex), offered consolation to him throughout his career when faced with nothingness (“The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood” 180–86). As he writes in “The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood,” “Blankness is not emptiness” (186). Unchanged from the revised typescript, the tenth stanza of revised galley proof one honors religious faith:

I thank you, God of trees and air, whose slender steeples testify
to something steady slipped by chance
upon Your tar-green formless face.

The only emendation to this confession of belief on revised galley proof two was to substitute “sliding” for “formless”: “upon Your tar-green sliding face.” Updike’s God was not formless but undefinable. His description of Melville’s own faith is relevant to the belief/death tension that shapes *Bath after Sailing*: “Melville is a rational man who wants God to exist. He wants Him to exist for the same reasons we all do: to be our rescuer and appreciator, to act as a confidant in our moments of crisis and to give us reassurance that, over the horizon of our deaths, we will survive” (“Melville’s Withdrawal” 98). Death by water looms. God sustains.

Slightly altered from the revised typescript, the final stanza of revised galley proof one celebrates the art that Updike created from the contrast between the endless, fear-inspiring ocean and the confining, comforting tub:

—I much prefer
this microscopic version
of flirting with immersion.

The subtle change from “much preferring” and “how much I prefer” in the revised typescript to “I much prefer” in revised galley proof one confirms his confidence in the power of art. Although he later reinserted “how much I prefer” in revised galley proof two, the point is that for Updike both the bathtub and the poem are “microscopic versions of flirting with immersion.” They keep at a distance the terrifying experience of sailing on the ocean in a sloop.

With sex, however, the third “great secret thing,” Updike conceded its impotence when faced with drowning. Stanza twelve of revised galley proof one reads:

my penis, my representative,
my emissary to darkness, survivor
of plunge upon plunge, flipflops
amiably sideways, alive
yet delicate and pallid in reprieve.

The key emendation from the typescript is the canceling of “childlike”—“yet delicate and childlike in reprieve”—in favor of “pallid.” To associate children with sex is inadvertently to suggest pedophilia. “Pallid,” on the other hand, conveys the uselessness of sex in a dire situation. Readers aware of Updike’s career-long

probing of the power of coitus, with its uneasy combination of ecstasy and guilt, will understand how much the author's terror is enhanced in a poem in which the force of sex is diminished in favor of the authority of religion and art. The single alteration Updike made to the stanza in revised galley proof two was to exchange "plunge upon plunge" for "many a plunge."

At this stage of what had become a complicated process, Garnett printed an elegant proof of the originally proposed broadside. The proof has since been certified by book specialists as a rare Updike "A" item, described as proof of an abandoned broadside. (An "A" item is the first *separate* appearance of the contents of the item.) Rather than the standard galleys on which Updike compulsively kept making extensive emendations, Garnett produced what became a rarity on a single 13 15/16" by 19 15/16" sheet of cream laid paper. The proof is beautifully arranged and formatted with the indented lines and ornamental capital letters to which Updike objected. In addition, the title, the text of the poem, and Updike's name are in italics; and the poem is set in a *single* column as opposed to the double columns of revised galley proof two. In their bibliography, De Bellis and Broomfield report, "*Bath after Sailing* was originally planned as a broadside to be set in italic type. Approximately ten copies were pulled for proof. The author then decided against the italic type and the broadside format and roman type was set for the wrapped edition as printed. Proof of the roman typesetting has previously been mistaken as a broadside proof copy" (25). As Overtly observes, "The booklet [i.e., the wrapped edition of *Bath after Sailing*] is relatively common, but the broadside—the original 'A' item per De Bellis and Broomfield—is genuinely rare. . . . Consequently, the *Bath after Sailing* broadside is on virtually every Updike want list I've ever seen (along with the Phi Beta Kappa of course)" (email message, March 4, 2016). Updike's dismissal of the font and format caused Garnett to scrap the broadside despite its stately appearance. With only ten copies available in 1967, this elusive item is virtually impossible to examine today.⁴

Once again Garnett agreed to Updike's demand for changes. He reset the poem in roman type and eliminated the diagonal indentations of the lines as well as the ornamental capital letters. He also altered the design of the fourteen stanzas from two columns to one, although Updike had initially recommended double columns. Updike responded on November 6, 1967, with yet more holograph emendations and a typed letter of both mild apology and strong suggestions, apologizing for the all-but-unending revisions, but defending the improvements in rhythm and clarity. After approving the change to roman font, he urged Garnett to add a "large ornamental F" to the first word ["From"] of the poem and to separate the lines with

more leading. By this stage, Updike was in effect serving as the graphic designer of the project. Although still the publisher, Garnett was now reduced to a mere artisan yielding to the demands of the unyielding artist.

Referring to Updike's insistence from the beginning of his professional career in the mid-1950s on having the final word about the appearance of his books, Begley describes a process that also applies to Updike's broadsides and other fine press editions: "he was passionate about the physical object, the item you held in your hand—the feel of it, the look of it, even the smell of it. Early on he insisted . . . that he had to have the last word on any editorial changes, however small . . . he sent off long, precise letters concerning typography and layout, the weight and color of the paper . . . and the design of the title page. No detail was too tiny for him to consider . . ." (169). Similarly, J. D. McClatchy, then president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, observed in his eulogy for Updike read to members of the Academy, "He cared only about the book. He pestered the art department to design what was in his mind's eye. He had top stain and full-cloth bindings to the end. In the days of letterpress, he would pick up the first copy of a new novel, smell the pages, and run his hand over the type to feel the ink" (134). He followed the same regimen when working with Garnett. His career-long fascination with the design and format of publications began in his preteen years: first as a cartoonist during his grammar school days;⁵ then as a cartoonist, a featured writer, and an editor of *Chatterbox*, the newspaper at Shillington (Pennsylvania) High School (1946–50). He enhanced his publishing experience at Harvard University (1950–54) when as a freshman he was elected to the staff of the *Lampoon* and then to the office of editor in his senior year. Following graduation from Harvard, he was a student at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford (1954–55) and later became a respected art critic and author of three books about painting. Updike's seizing control of the publication of *Bath after Sailing* may have surprised and even irked Garnett, but the situation was normal for Updike. As Begley correctly notes, "Updike had a precocious sense of the sanctity of his own artistic aims: he was never inclined to compromise on what he considered essential matters" (170).

The original agreement to publish a signed, limited edition broadside of "Bath after Sailing" was now rejected in favor of a signed, limited edition booklet. In the November 6 letter, Updike pointed out his mistake in not catching what he called a significant typo—"microscopic version" for "microcosmic version"—in the penultimate line of the poem, praised the revised design with its merger of austerity and elegance, and asked Garnett to forward a pasted-up proof of the booklet. One suspects that, from Garnett's point of view, the most comforting comment in the

letter was Updike's assurance that his rewriting of the poem had concluded with his most recent list of changes.

Garnett now had to deal with the new emendations on revised galley proof two that Updike included with the November 6 letter. For the third and final set of revisions, Updike stressed his fear of death by water while maintaining faith in both the "God of trees and air" and the affirmation of art. Three revised stanzas are particularly relevant. The third quatrain of revised galley proof two reads:

Still I see the heartless waves
the mirthless color of green tar
sliding on themselves like ball-bearings,
deep and opaque and not me

For revised galley proof two, he altered the first line of the stanza to feature the endlessness of his terror: "Still I see the heartless waves" became "I can't stop seeing the heartless waves." A day spent amid the surging water imprints the nothingness of oblivion on his eyes.

The sixth quatrain of revised galley proof two reads:

I did not want, I had not wanted
to die. I saw death's sense in that
sliding heedless mass absorbed
in shrugging off its own weight.

On revised galley proof two, Updike changed the emphasis to personify death by stressing its face:

I did not want, I had not wanted
to die. I saw death's face in that
timeless mass absorbed
in shrugging off its weight.

In *Bath after Sailing*, death is timeless, terrifying, final—and yet a catalyst for the poet's creativity.

The ninth quatrain of revised galley proof two reads:

and his [the sloop's skipper] horror less than expected,
and one wave much like the rest,
a toppling ton, a rib of time,
a message from nothing to nothing

Updike emended the final line of the stanza to highlight the insistent call of death: “a message from nothing to nothing” was changed to “an urgent message from nothing to nothing.” Only the safety of the tub, a metaphor for the comfort of art and the consolation of religion, can counter the never-ending lure. Little wonder that he preferred “the microcosmic version / of flirting with immersion.” “Bath after Sailing” is a poem about terror. Yet as he wrote to Garnett in the November 6 letter, he kept revising in order to get as close to perfection as possible. Art celebrates life despite the shadow of nothingness.

Still, Updike was not through. Although the unbound sheets to be used for the booklet were already prepared, De Bellis and Broomfield report that he took one of the sheets, struck through the word “delicate” in stanza twelve, and indicated that “small” was to be inserted. The alteration was not formally made until 1977 when he collected “Bath after Sailing” in *Tossing and Turning*. The affected lines in stanza twelve in the 1968 limited edition read, “amiably sideways, alive / yet delicate and pallid in reprieve,” whereas in *Tossing and Turning* the lines read, “sideways, alive and small / and pallid in reprieve.” The textual history of “Bath after Sailing” illustrates the old saying, “A poem is never finished. It’s abandoned.”

He later included “Bath after Sailing” in *Collected Poems: 1953–1993* (1993), but Christopher Carduff excluded it from *Selected Poems* (2015), published six years after Updike’s death. Rejected by the *New Yorker* at the beginning and by Carduff at the end, “Bath after Sailing” had what I may call a strange life, but it became a poster child for Updike’s obsession to revise. And, perhaps more interesting, it was the germ of one of the rarest of all Updike publications.

II

I wonder whether Updike later thought about the irony generated by the process of publishing *Bath after Sailing* in 1968. First, given the numerous revisions he made to the typescript and to the first and second galley proofs of the booklet, it was the proof of the abandoned broadside that specialists designated to be a rare “A” item and thus much more coveted than the booklet. Further, although Updike initially recommended to Garnett that the poem be created as a broadside set in double columns, he rejected his own proposal in favor of the single-column wrappered edition. Finally, during the effort to bring *Bath after Sailing* to publication, he made so many emendations to the text and suggestions about design that he became both the author of the poem and the director of the project. At 125 copies, *Bath after Sailing* is a desirable item in booklet form, relatively challenging to find. Yet at ten copies, “pulled” in 1967, the elegant proof of the abandoned broadside

is almost impossible to locate, even assuming the unlikely possibility that all ten copies survived.

Although *Dog's Death*, Updike's first broadside, was published in 1965, the year 1968 marked his commitment to the distinctive world of limited editions created at small presses. Following *Bath after Sailing*, for example, *December* (100 copies) and *The Angels* (150 copies) appeared, both in 1968. Despite his claim in the October 10, 1967, letter to Garnett about what he called the "venture" of designing publications being a novelty, evidence from his early years at Knopf suggests otherwise. For example, laid in to the sample casing of *The Centaur* (1963) that Updike received for inspection from Knopf was a selection of different colors for the binding, a trial sheet folded to make four pages to indicate size, and a galley of the last page of the novel to illustrate the typeface of the closing passage in Greek—all for his approval. Not surprisingly, he then made three changes in holograph to the Greek and one in holograph to the size of an upper case letter.⁶ I doubt that the art of planning any publication to his satisfaction was a novelty in 1967. He was already a major player in the design of his books at Knopf. As the complex textual history of *Bath after Sailing* demonstrates, he relied on creativity, both the artistic use of language *and* the production values that conveyed the language to the public, as a bulwark against fear, death, and the blackness of darkness. And he did so nearly up to the moment of his death from lung cancer in January 2009. As late as December 22, 2008, as the final lines of the moving suite of poems in *Endpoint*, about his own dying, confirm, writing remained his strength, whether from the safety of the bathtub or the pain of the hospital bed—his determination to live despite the blackness.

In *The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End*, Katie Roiphe recounts her reaction after examining the manuscripts of Updike's last poems in his archive at Harvard:

Much of my sense of his illness, and his dedication to work, came from a trip to the Updike archives at Harvard's Houghton Library. The handwritten manuscripts of the final poems were particularly startling, as the handwriting itself told a story about the sheer effort it took to get the words on the page. One can know this abstractly, or have it described, but it is very different to see it in the spidery letters themselves, the slanted lines, the scratched-out words. (296)

Composing from his bed, Updike cast his "CAT-scan needle biopsy" into *Endpoint's* blank verse sonnet "Needle Biopsy 12/22/08," which concludes:

Days later, the results came casually through:
the gland, biopsied, showed metastasis. (28)

Out of metastasis and stage 4 cancer came poetry. On the same day, he wrote his final poem “Fine Point 12/22/08,” a sonnet in which art and religion merge. The last word is “forever”:

Surely—magnificent, that “surely”—
goodness and mercy shall follow me all
the days of my life, my life, forever. (29)

For Updike, art equaled life—the blackness of darkness be damned.⁷

NOTES

1. Following the lead of bibliographers, I use quotation marks to indicate the title of a poem but italics to indicate the title of the separate publication of a poem, as in a broadside. Interestingly, Updike used the lower case “a” for “after” when “Bath after Sailing” was first published in 1968 but the upper case ‘A’ when he reprinted the poem in *Collected Poems* (1993).

2. Melville used the phrase “the blackness of darkness” twice in *Moby-Dick*, in the chapters “The Carpet-Bag” and “The Try-Works.”

3. Updike collected “Melville’s Withdrawal” in *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 80–106. See also Updike’s interview titled “Hawthorne, Melville, and the American Experience” (15 May 1986) in *Conversations with John Updike*, ed. James Plath (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994), 176–80.

4. The abandoned broadside and relevant correspondence with R. E. Garnett may be examined in the Greiner Collection. The “Phi Beta Kappa” that Darren Overty refers to is the poem Updike read at a Phi Beta Kappa induction ceremony at Harvard in 1973, later much revised as “Apologies to Harvard.” The original version of the poem, the version before the poem was reworked as “Apologies to Harvard,” is rare and may be seen in the Greiner Collection. The revised typescript and the two revised galley proofs of *Bath after Sailing* may be examined in the Irvin Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Ernest F. Hollings Special Collections Library of the University of South Carolina.

5. The earliest example of Updike’s published artwork that I have seen is the cover he drew for the *Little Shillington* (29 May 1944), the student newspaper of his grammar school in Shillington, Pennsylvania. He drew an angry fledgling in a tree and signed the cover “Updike.” He was twelve years old. The cover may be examined in the Greiner Collection.

6. The sample casing and accompanying material may be examined in the Greiner Collection.

7. “The Full Glass,” Updike’s last published story before his death in January 2009, as well as before his diagnosis for cancer, appeared in the *New Yorker* (26 May 2008): 66–71. The story was collected in *Collected Later Stories*, ed. Christopher Carduff (New York: Library of America, 2013), 902–14. The final lines read: “My life-prolonging pills cupped in my left hand, I lift the glass, its water sweetened by its brief wait on the marble sink-top. If I can read this strange old guy’s mind aright, he’s drinking a toast to the visible world, his impending disappearance from it be damned” (914).

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Three Writers on *Villages*

This section of *JUR* provides space for three invited writers to compose responses to a single Updike story, novel, poem, or essay. The objective is to bring attention to a range of Updike's writings, particularly ones that have been neglected, and to provide a forum in which a range of writers—critics, scholars, fiction writers, editors—seek to better understand an individual work.

Programmed Delirium: *Villages* and the God of Multilevel Selection

MARSHALL BOSWELL

In a 1995 essay titled “The Short Story and I,” John Updike casually revealed that his National Book Award-winning novel *The Centaur* (1963) and his 1976 “romance” *Marry Me* were “written consecutively but appeared over ten years apart” (*More Matter* 795). This admission conceals much more than it reveals. Although Adam Begley also confirms this account in his biography of the author, noting that Updike began writing *Marry Me* “in the spring of 1962 and completed it two years later” (249), Begley goes on to explain why Updike held back *Marry Me* for twelve long years. Begley’s chronology places the novel’s composition nearly parallel with Updike’s first major adulterous affair—namely, with an Ipswich neighbor named Joyce Harrington—which the book chronicles “in excruciating, barely fictionalized detail” (249). Updike understandably felt that publishing the book in 1964 “would have been too brutal an invasion of [his wife] Mary’s privacy” and did not give it a public hearing until after he and Mary were divorced, “when the Harrington fiasco . . . was a fading memory” (249–51).

It is tempting to regard in this fascinating biographical detail the seed for Updike’s twenty-first novel, *Villages* (2004), a *bildungsroman* that is conspicuous primarily for how closely it resembles Updike’s output from the 1960s to the mid-1970s. *Villages* traces the life of its hero, Owen Mackenzie, who, like Updike, enjoys a charmed boyhood in small-town Pennsylvania in the 1940s, attends a prestigious New England University—MIT rather than Harvard—marries young, and settles down for a decade of serial adultery in an affluent bourgeois suburb of Boston. The affairs come to an end in the mid-seventies when Owen meets the woman

who would inspire him to divorce and remarry. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, Updike's literary production alternated between stories drawn from his own 1940s boyhood in Shillington, Pennsylvania—called Olinger in the work—and contemporary stories and novels focusing on marriage and, usually, adultery. This collection of texts includes the Maples stories, the core of which are scattered across *The Music School* (1966), *Museums and Women* (1972), and *Problems* (1979). It also encompasses the novels *Couples* (1968)—set in a fictionalized version of Ipswich called Tarbox—*A Month of Sundays* (1975), and, yes, *Marry Me*. *Villages* joins these two otherwise separate strands of Updike's writerly world: Olinger meets Tarbox. In light of the consecutive composition of *The Centaur* (his only Olinger novel) and *Marry Me*, it is possible to conclude that, for Updike, the two strands were less separate in his imagination than his publishing history suggests. In more ways than one, the two modes actually did follow one upon the other, and *Villages* reveals how they match up.

In "Autobiography, Updike, and the 'Self-Serving Corruptions of Fiction'" (2013), Peter J. Bailey affirms that *Villages* exemplifies Updike's "late career penchant for returning to territory he had visited before, as if in validation" (83) of his earlier claim, made in "Endpoint," that his life was a "life poured into words—apparent waste / intended to preserve the thing consumed" (*Endpoint* 8). Yet if that is all Updike is doing—preserving old territory—then *Villages* does not amount to much, as Bailey and others have already suggested. While certainly flawed by overfamiliarity, *Villages* does more than simply combine two otherwise disparate fictional worlds; rather, it revisits the themes and preoccupations of both fictional modes from a radically different perspective. In *Rabbit (Un)Redeemed: The Drama of Belief in John Updike's Fiction* (2006), Bailey traces what he calls "the reluctantly expanding secularism of Updike's aesthetic" (33). *Villages* undoubtedly conforms to this secularizing impulse in Updike's late work, so much so that the most significant contribution it makes to Updike's *oeuvre* is the way it essentially rewrites as secular drama the otherwise Christ-haunted worlds of Olinger and Tarbox. While replaying his most characteristic material, he exchanges the theological framework that gave the original material its depth and urgency with a new focus on biology and evolution. The result is a dispassionate novel that mixes nostalgia with a kind of cool biological fatalism that is utterly free of existential anxiety or the fear of nothingness.

Updike's biological perspective is perhaps best understood within the context of Edward O. Wilson's sociobiology. In 1994, Updike penned a genial and largely sympathetic review of Wilson's autobiography, *Naturalist*, a review since collected

in *More Matter* (1999) and placed at the beginning of a section of science-related book reviews Updike titled, significantly, “Things as They Are.” As Updike explains, sociobiology—which Wilson originally called “The New Synthesis”—posits that, based on “what is known about cooperative animal behavior from coral colonies to chimpanzee clans, . . . human social behavior might be genetically, rather than culturally, determined” (*More Matter* 574). Included in that category of genetically determined social behavior is religious worship, about which Wilson says, “The enduring paradox of religion is that so much of its substance is demonstrably false, yet it remains a driving force in all societies” (qtd. in *More Matter* 576). Although Updike notes that Wilson’s thesis has been consistently attacked on the grounds that it provides “a genetic justification of the *status quo* and of existing privileges for certain groups according to class, race, or sex,” Updike also seems to share Wilson’s contention that the early attack on sociobiology was “political, not evidential” (574). Instead, Updike archly concludes, “Nature must be faced” (578). *Villages* does just that, revisiting Updike’s tales of sexual pursuit, adultery, and deceit from a purely naturalist perspective, with Nature understood as, to quote the adulterous narrator of his 1962 story “Leaves,” “that which exists without guilt” (*Early Stories* 510).

For Wilson, the development of human civilization, though no doubt rare in evolutionary terms, shares much with the complex societies of ant colonies. Both have arisen through eusociality, whereby members “cooperatively rear the young across multiple generations” (19). Eusociality in turn is a product of multilevel selection. This update on Darwinian natural selection recognizes two selection levels: “individual selection based on competition and cooperation among members of the same group, and group selection, which arises from competition and cooperation between groups” (24). Wilson goes on to claim that group-to-group competition has been “a major force in the forging of advanced social behavior,” including our “intense, even obsessive interest . . . in other people,” our ability to read “the intentions of others,” and our tendency to review “past experiences while imagining the consequences of future scenarios” (29–30). Our modern-day cities are just sophisticated versions of the original tribal groups wherein evolution forged what makes us human. What’s more, multilevel selection leaves us “suspended in unstable and constantly changing positions between the two extreme forces that created us” (33). The Freudian battle between the id and the ego, as well as the Christian conflict between the body and the spirit, gets reformulated in Wilson’s work as a purely biological phenomenon, an “eternal conflict” that is “not God’s test of humanity,” as Updike’s earlier work would have it, but rather “just the way things worked out” (33–34)—or, in Updike’s own words, “things as they are.”

Updike signals his naturalistic intention with his title, *Villages*, a deliberately quaint term that he applies to the novel's three primary locales: Willow, Pennsylvania; Middle Falls, Connecticut; and Haskells Crossing, Massachusetts. In this way, Updike links these communities to the most primitive of human communities, going back to the beginning of the species. He not only depicts all three villages in primitive terms, but also grants them the power to shape and influence Owen's development. Early on, Owen observes that "the villages he has lived in have been sites of instructions" (*Villages* 41), and throughout the novel the narrator makes many sociological observations about the innate, underlying structure of villages writ large. We are told that a village "is a hatchery, cherishing its smallest members" (211) and "woven of secrets, of truths better left unsaid" (209). In accordance with Wilson's assertion that the "function of anthropocentricity—fascination about ourselves—is the sharpening of social intelligence" (Wilson 43), the people in Updike's villages are all anchored by gossip: "all personalities were studied, cherished, glamorized" (*Villages* 137). The narrator compares the spouse-swapping that vitalizes Owen's early married life in Middle Falls to "a village chain dance" (138). Most importantly, in the final paragraph, Updike's narrator declares that it is "a mad thing, to be alive" and that "[v]illages exist to moderate this madness—to hide it from children, to bottle it for private use, to smooth its imperatives into habits, to protect us from the darkness without and the darkness within" (321). That madness, that darkness, Updike depicts as the instinctive drive to pass on the "selfish gene," to use biologist Richard Dawkins's famous term; the village represents, to use Wilson's language, one of the "two extreme forces that created us" (Wilson 33).

Updike furthers his naturalistic agenda by making his hero, Owen, a pioneer in the development of computer technology. In this respect, *Villages* might have its earliest roots in Updike's 1963 story "The Music School," in which the narrator reveals that "[i]n the novel [he] never wrote," he imagined his hero to be "a computer programmer" who was "to die of adultery" (187). "The Music School," along with nearly a dozen other stories (including "Leaves," "The Stare," "The Morning," "Avec la Bebe Sitter," and "Four Sides of One Story") from the collection of the same name (1966), were composed between 1962 and 1963—in other words, contemporaneously with *Marry Me*. All feature heroes suffering from anguish, confusion, guilt, and shame as a result of an illicit love affair. Updike's other like-minded heroes also share this sense of moral and spiritual anguish; what's more, they tend toward professions that are creative, artful, and plastic. *Marry Me*'s Jerry Conant is a tortured Lutheran who meets his first wife while in art school and makes a living animating propaganda films for the U.S. State Department;

similarly, Piet Hanema from *Couples* is a tortured Christian adulterer who earns his keep renovating houses. Conversely, Owen skirts Harvard and the humanities for MIT, where he meets his first wife, Phyllis, a fellow mathematician who takes comfort in the fact that, as David Hilbert once said, “nobody will ever expel us from the Paradise [Georg] Cantor created” (*Villages* 94). When Charlie Stavros asks Rabbit Angstrom, in *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), “What’s wrong with running your blood through a machine? What else do you think you are, champ?” Rabbit silently replies, “A God-made one-of-a-kind with an immortal soul breathed in. A vehicle of grace. A battlefield of good and evil. An apprentice angel” (*Rest* 237). Owen and Phyllis are closer to Charlie’s notion of the human as a machine, with computer technology providing a clear analogue for the mechanistic nature of human consciousness and biological necessity.

Phyllis is sharper and more intuitively mathematical than Owen, but less practical. “I love what’s pure and useless,” she admits (*Villages* 83). Her impracticality, Updike suggests, is a product of her upbringing, as she is the daughter of “humanities snobs” who care only about “literature and art” and who think “science is vulgar” (92–93). Owen feels “mathematically inferior to her, earthbound, relatively muddy in his thinking” (129). Phyllis even accuses him of being “very tied to [his] senses” (131). As such, Updike deftly connects mathematics and science with the “vulgar,” the “earthbound,” and all that is “muddy,” while depicting the worlds of art and literature as abstract, proudly impractical, and comically out of touch with “things as they are.” Owen regards Phyllis’s father as having “dwelled too much in the world of books, its conceits and fictions, to make much of a dent on this one” (105). *This* world, the novel suggests, is the real one: mechanistic, biological, and coolly mathematical.

This emphasis on mathematics and biology helps explain why the novel’s treatment of sexuality—and, impossible though this is to believe, *Villages* might just be John Updike’s most sex-obsessed novel—is so clinical and devoid of, for lack of a better word, soul. Gone are the tortured allusions to the Tristan and Iseult myth, by which Updike sought to elevate Jerry Conant’s and Piet Hanema’s suburban adultery. Gone, too, are the lengthy, rational discussions “over coffee, over cocktails, over Cointreau,” in which the adulterous husband and betrayed wife “shaped the strategy of their dissolution” (*Early Stories* 788). Owen is not, as Jerry Conant is, “divided . . . between body and soul,” a split that Jerry believes “alone can save men from extinction” (*Marry Me* 186). Rather, *Villages* depicts copulation merely as a “powerful and highly prioritized event” that Owen, for one, cannot—or, at any event, does not even try to—resist. Owen marvels that Phyllis’s “hormonally

replete body sprung from these two dainty, dry people" (*Villages* 102), while her initial appeal to him springs from a source deeper than erotic desire. To use a computer term, the attraction is considerably more programmed. Passing her in the MIT hallways, Owen registers a change in "his own electromagnetic field" that is as "subtle but as crucial as the difference between $d\Phi$ and dt " (60). Early in their courtship, Owen acknowledges that he had "been numbed into becoming a mere implement in the hand of a designing Nature" and intuits that "[t]heir bodies knew they would make good babies" (87). Their marriage he views as a "fresh genetic start," reasoning that, "[a]s computers know, the past is mere storage, to be called upon only as the present calculation requires" (88).

Yet that fresh genetic start is not strong enough to contain Owen's sexuality. If Willow, Owen's first village, is this novel's counterpart to Olinger, then Middle Falls is the novel's Tarbox, for it is in Middle Falls that Owen, in the wake of his first affair, resolves "in his heart to become a seducer" (*Villages* 186). As Brian Duffy argues in "Male Sexuality in John Updike's *Villages*," "If Tristan predominates in *Couples*, Don Juan alone reigns in *Villages*" (11). This middle village in Owen's trajectory is "an institute of middle-class know how" wherein Owen, in addition to learning how to play tennis and volleyball, discovers the lure of "[p]olymorphous life" (139, 186). Once he decides to be a seducer, he instantly establishes himself, "at the level of pheromones, as a man with a taste for what women can give," and the women "flocked around him" (213). The seductions—while following the trajectory of the *bildungsroman*, each one adding to his store of information—are coldly scientific in nature, in them his knowledge of sexuality expanding like the ever-metastasizing size of computer memory. Each lover he "milk[s] . . . for revelations and wisdom" (253). Owen and his various partners are "explorers in a terrain, adultery, not totally strange but far from deeply familiar" (206).

In the course of his explorations, he acquires several key bits of knowledge, all of which confirm the novel's biological focus. He learns that the core of himself is "this sore-looking blue-veined thing," those "hair-adorned nether parts . . . seats of being" (*Villages* 203). He also asks each of his lovers the novel's central question, which Owen first asks when he comes upon a pornographic drawing in Willow and is still asking as late as the novel's final page, namely, "Why do women fuck?" (205). For Owen, men seek sex for the "obvious" reason that "women are so beautiful" (205), whereas the act poses so many risks and humiliations for women that their willing participation remains, for him at least, a mystery. Although Owen's various lovers provide a running list of answers, not all of them plausible, the novel returns to one overriding response: because both women and men are programmed for

it. As Alissa, his most instructive lover, explains, "People don't know, it's deeper than the brain. It's pheromones and all sorts of programmed behavior, like the nest building instinct" (206). As Owen continues his explorations, he comes to agree with Alissa: "some women did sex because it was what they could do, just as he could write programs for payrolls and pension plans. . . . there was no mystery. Why had he ever thought there was a mystery?" (234). Similarly, later, as he reflects on his life as a seducer, he wonders "what drove him into so many hazardous passes and contorted positions" and concludes that he "was a puppet" to his sex drive, Nature's passive plaything (320).

Yet God is not entirely absent in all of this. Religion enters Owen's life with his final illicit lover, Julia Larson, whose erotic appeal is apparently strong enough to keep Owen out of other people's bedrooms. When he meets her, she is "the minister's wife" (*Villages* 289), and so in taking her from her clergyman husband, he weds himself to her spirituality. Although "his upbringing had been only perfunctorily religious," and his married life with Phyllis is depicted as a form of "genteel-bohemian decency, extending to the end of life the student quest for knowledge" (280), Owen becomes a regular, if complacent, churchgoer in his second marriage. His churchgoing he assigns to Julia's "matter-of-fact Christian piety, in which he has joined her in defiance of his scientific instincts and his indifferently church-ed upbringing" (309).

Even so, from first to last, Owen imagines God merely as "the unthinkable keystone, but at a mercifully great distance" (*Villages* 44). An early image of God looking down at us "from on high, as the tiny, unaging figures in a shaken snow globe" persists through to the end of the novel, by which point Owen acknowledges that not even Julia's Christian piety can save him from the "enlarging hollow in his life" (43, 309). Ultimately, Owen regards the persistence of Christian belief, both in the world and in his own life, in purely pragmatic, biological terms, in accordance with what Wilson dubs "the relatively young discipline of the neuroscience of religion," which has demonstrated that there are in fact "genes for religiosity" that affirm the biological roots of religious belief (Wilson 148). The "fear and loathing of death," which the Christian belief in an afterlife seeks to mollify, Owen reduces to "a survival device selected and refined by Darwinian evolution. Because we fear death, we try harder to live" (*Villages* 312). Similarly, Owen notes, though not without objection, the numerous studies proving that religious belief "benefits the health . . . An anxiety-relieving faith conduces to worldly efficiency and success" (313). Even in matters of religion, the novel favors a Darwinian perspective.

The opening sentence of *Villages* reads, "For a long time, his wife has awoken

early, at five or five thirty" (3). The phrasing deliberately calls to mind the opening of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1982), which begins—in the original Scott Moncrieff translation—"For a long time I used to go to bed early" (3). Later, Updike extends his dialogue with Proust, and the novel's intertextual relationship with *Swann's Way* (1922) more specifically, when he has Owen recall the "two routes" he and his parents took on their Sunday walks, very much as Proust's narrator recalls the two "ways" his family had at their disposal on their Sunday walks in Combray (*Villages* 28; Proust 146). These allusions to Proust contextualize the novel's curiously scientific perspective. Jonah Lehrer, in *Proust Was a Neuroscientist* (2007), argues that Proust the novelist "intuited some of modern neuroscience's most basic tenets" (76). Updike seems to be groping for a similar Proustian blend of the scientific and the novelistic. The Proust connection also helps us better understand the novel's retrospective angle. Although Owen knows that his "charmed life had been a long torment of fear, desire, ambition, and guilt," emotions Updike's earlier adultery novels address at great length, the elderly Owen, removed from the immediate circumstances that inspired those emotions, sees nothing but instinct and programming (*Villages* 320). Sex itself he finally deems "a programmed delirium that rolls back death with death's own substance" (319), while his past comes back to him not as a long torment but rather as "a sheet of inky-blue tissue paper held up to a light, so the holes pricked in it shine: these stars are the women who let him fuck them" (321).

This last line, which amounts to what Duffy calls a "coarse and loveless credo," is also the novel's final piece of "village wisdom" (14). Duffy then correctly asks, "Is it also, then, the *novel's* credo?" (14). Duffy worries that the novel could be read as Updike's final word on the themes of adultery and male sexuality, in which case the Christian writer ended his career by affirming, simply and uncompromisingly, that "fucking' women is everything" (15). Indeed, when Owen finally breaks from Phyllis to join with the more erotically compatible Julia, he wonders "if it was that simple, and if life accordingly wasn't too simple" (*Villages* 289). Yet rather than read *Villages* as a "rebalancing" of *Couples*, as Duffy suggests (14), we might read the novel as a late, and playful, revision, an attempt to see what old themes might look like when poured into another bottle. The novel's numerous allusions to previous works in Updike's *oeuvre* suggest that this novel be read as a supplement, not a summation, to that work. What's more, Owen, though in many respects a typical Updikean hero, is markedly different from the typical specimen in his complacent religiosity, his unartistic nature, and his mathematical and scientific background. These key differences allow Updike to re-examine his signature themes from a

purely materialist, secular perspective, one that he has been drawn to in a spirit of wicked provocation reaching back to *Roger's Version* (1986), which shares *Villages's* preoccupation with computer technology. Debra Shostak, in *Philip Roth: Counter-*texts, Counterlives** (2004), demonstrates that Updike's esteemed contemporary often conceived of his own novels as a series of countertexts, each one reversing thrust on its predecessor: "Roth's compulsion to contradict and counterimagine drives the logic within each narrative as well as the juxtaposition of one novel to the next or to some previous work in his career" (4). So, too, might we read *Villages* as a Rothian countertext to *Couples* and *Marry Me*. This countertext strategy also represents another variation on Updike's famous claim that his work is energized by a "yes, but" quality, one that affirms but questions at the same time. If *Couples*, as he explained in 1968, said "No . . . to a religious community founded on physical and psychical interpretation, but—what else shall we do, as God destroys our churches," then it is possible to regard *Villages* as Updike's late attempt to see what would happen if he wrote a novel that *did* say yes to the former (Plath 33). Although certainly unsatisfying if taken entirely on its own, as Duffy bravely reads it, *Villages* makes a fascinating contribution to Updike's massive corpus if read as a provocative countertext whose purpose is to caution readers from refracting his work through a single, monolithic prism.

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Dreams, Conflated Wives, Lingering Guilt, and Coitus Recalled in Updike's *Villages*

JAMES SCHIFF

For many, John Updike's *Villages* (2004) was a disappointing novel covering all-too-familiar terrain. Adam Begley wrote, "Nothing happens that hasn't happened elsewhere in the vast *oeuvre*; no new kind of character is introduced, no new landscape limned." Like much of Updike's writing, *Villages* focuses, through a male lens, on sex, adultery, the female body, and small-town quotidian life, with the central action turning on leaving the first wife to marry the mistress. The novel's protagonist, Owen Mackenzie, is a slightly older variation on the highly sexed Updike male who, as John Banville wrote, "wins the favors of more women than most men get to shake hands with" (56). The novel is also set in villages that neatly align with the three small towns (Shillington, Ipswich, and Beverly Farms) that shaped Updike's life and that serve, with different names, as primary settings for most of his writing. More than any other work from this late phase in his *oeuvre*, *Villages* feels like more of the same, a variation on *Couples* (1968) or *Marry Me* (1976). Updike did little to shift readers' impressions or persuade them of the novel's intrinsic value, stating perhaps too openly in 2004: "I several times thought [*Villages*] might be a bad idea and kind of abandoned it. So, it was really the habit—the habit of writing that kept me at it in the end. It was like a bad marriage. . . . This is the wife I'm married to here, and I'm going to finish this book. Finishing it becomes the only way to get rid of it" ("Showing Ordinary Life").

One questions the wisdom in releasing such a novel. That said, had *Villages* gone unpublished, we would no doubt be clamoring for its posthumous appearance.

Told retrospectively, *Villages* is to some degree a *bildungsroman*, depicting Owen Mackenzie's education into the world of women, adultery, and village life. We witness first his sexual apprenticeship as a boy, in which he sees and hears things he does not understand. This is followed by a period of sexual exploration with his high school girlfriend, Elsie Seidel, in the town of Willow. Subsequently, we observe his courtship of his first wife, Phyllis Goodhue, a fellow mathematician and a professor's daughter whom he meets at MIT. Together they raise a family of four children in the village of Middle Falls, though Owen, a computer software developer, finds Phyllis instinctively resistant to his sexual desires and, somewhat comically, is absent for the birth of each child. After a series of adulterous affairs, Owen meets Julia Larson, a minister's wife who eventually becomes his second wife. In Julia, Owen finds a more sexually attuned companion, and following the scandal that brought them together, they enjoy a relatively quiet existence in Haskells Crossing. Owen's story stands as a lightly fictionalized version of Updike's own life, as he moved from a Pennsylvania boyhood in Shillington, to young married life and adultery in Ipswich, to his final, more remote existence in Beverly Farms.

Not surprisingly, Updike's twenty-first novel was ignored by critics for nearly a decade until good essays by Peter J. Bailey and Brian Duffy surfaced in 2013 and 2015, respectively. Demonstrating "how closely the outline of [Owen] Mackenzie's life parallels Updike's," Bailey treats *Villages* and *Toward the End of Time* (1997) as "autobiographical companion novels" that offer contrasting views (the former "serene" and affirmative, the latter "relentlessly grim") of aging, the future, and a life perceived in retrospect (Bailey 91, 93). These two novels, thus, provide deeply contrasting fictionalized versions of Updike's later years, about which relatively little is known in comparison with his early and middle years. In many respects, *Villages* feels like Updike's most autobiographical novel. Yet such a claim can be easily challenged when one considers that the most important aspect of Updike's life was his writing, whereas Owen, in contrast, works with computers.

In Duffy's essay, the focus turns to male sexuality—with particular attention to its rapacious and seigneurial tendencies—and how sex is viewed "in terms of ownership, possession, land, territory, power, mastery" (Duffy 3–4). For Duffy, *Villages* is less serene and affirmative as well as more imperious, and the more apt companion novel becomes *Couples*. Tracing the arc of Updike's views on male sexuality, Duffy reveals how the redemptive and affectionate attitudes from *Couples* evolve into the narcissistic and destructive tendencies of *Villages*, which serves

as an “addendum to *Couples*, a necessary rebalancing” (14). *Villages* also allows Updike to offer his “final thoughts in a stock-taking review of a life of sexual promiscuity” (14). Yet Duffy concludes there is sufficient ambiguity to be uncertain as to whether Owen’s life is “morally barren and emotionally puerile” or “full and prosperous” as marked by vivid, transcendent memories of the women he fucked (14). While neither Duffy nor Bailey challenged the generally accepted status of the novel as minor, both have contributed to a growing dialogue about the final phase of Updike’s writing and the extent to which his earlier views shifted.

My own take on *Villages* is that it is a more assured, occasionally humorous (e.g., the mundane interplay between Owen and Julia), and quietly generous novel than was apparent from a previous reading. For the longtime Updike reader, the familiarity of the material disguises what is distinctive. While not an important work in the Updike canon—at times the story feels more rote than compelling—it nevertheless possesses passages of elegance, all the while deepening and slightly altering our understanding of the author’s thinking. Further, while the material and setting are familiar, the perspective is not: Owen is a seventy-year-old man who spends much of the novel lost in memory or dreaming. Unlike younger protagonists in Updike’s *oeuvre*, who are more actively involved in village life (work, adultery, the lives of children and friends), Owen has reached a point where his existence has become largely contemplative and retrospective. He is more eager to stay in bed and recall past sexual episodes than to engage romantically with his wife, and he would prefer to paint or golf than to seduce other men’s wives, who have evolved into “twittering biddies” that he no longer covets (*Villages* 54). A former philanderer, Owen now seems relatively content in marriage. With no new sexual adventures on the horizon, he relies instead upon a loop of interior home movies of past sexual encounters. In shunning his wife so that he can think about other women, Owen finds, perhaps, another outlet for his adulterous impulses. That said, and somewhat ironically, his wife Julia, rather than Owen, is now the one drawn to other women: “In Haskells Crossing, it is Julia who loves the women. She finds reality and comfort in their company” while Owen and other “[h]usbands are superfluous, dutiful adjuncts to the busy interaction of women” (55, 56). Throughout his career Updike depicted various stages of a male life—boyhood, young marriage and children, adultery and divorce—and in *Villages* he gives us, again through a male lens, old age, which is dominated by dreams and memories.

The novel also introduces elements that are either new or not widely discernible in Updike’s *oeuvre*: e.g., the notion of Owen, the philanderer, as a killer, with

an occasional tendency toward violence in his sexual rapaciousness; the strong guilt that lingers from having left and “killed” the first wife; the extended analogy between the human brain and the computer as systems of intelligence that store and retrieve memory; the relatively autobiographical depiction of the first and second wives; the use of math theory, computer science, nature, and biology to explicate existence; the sense of life being, at its conclusion, a journey through a series of sexual encounters with women in various villages; an extended investigation of what it is that women want from men, e.g., “Why do women fuck?” (*Villages* 205); the importance of dreams in a life that has turned inward; and the possibility of achieving transcendence in later age not through physical activity but recollected memory. While these are far too many topics for discussion in such a short paper, the subject of dreams, which has drawn little attention in this novel as well as in Updike’s *oeuvre*, is worthy of exploration and may help to tease out other elements.

Villages contains five dreams as well as a final fantasy/memory, which concludes the novel. The first of these dreams comes in the opening pages, as Owen’s second wife, Julia, tries to rouse him from early morning sleep through sexual play. Though highly sexual himself, Owen resists, wishing instead to return to “his precious dreams,” where he sees a young man lying “upon his wife’s body as if attempting resuscitation or (not at all the same thing) concealment” (*Villages* 4). After the young stranger removes himself, Owen discovers his wife’s body beneath: “She is dead, a suicide. She has found the way out of her pain” (4). Believing he has killed his wife, Owen “yearns to embrace her and breathe her back to life and suck back into himself the poison that his existence has worked upon hers” (4). The dream is ambiguous. Who is the young man—Owen? A stranger? What caused the death of Owen’s wife? Was it a suicide or did he in some way kill her? Which action is Owen attempting—resuscitation or concealment? At this point the reader assumes the wife is Julia, though later we will think differently. As for Owen’s guilt, its source is mysterious, though he did shun Julia’s sexual advances. Awake and “half-roused,” Owen attempts to find his way back to sleep by recalling women he once slept with, using those memories, albeit unsuccessfully, for masturbatory purposes (5). Several elements are worth noting about this opening scene: Owen prefers sex in his head to real sex with his wife, alerting us to the prominence of interiority at this stage in his life; Owen is unable, perhaps given his age, to arouse himself; and the dream remains puzzling, particularly as to why Owen blames himself for his wife’s death and whether concealment or resuscitation is his objective. Interestingly, the novel both opens and closes with Owen in bed in early morning, failing at masturbation yet engaged by his dreams and memories.

Owen's second dream comes thirty pages later (*Villages* 35–36) and also involves his wife as well as the threat of danger or death. Picturing himself on their lawn, Owen watches his wife's BMW rush past, followed by his own Mitsubishi, with "duplicated Julias" at the wheel of each vehicle (36). Feeling "something headlong and dangerous in her speed," Owen notes that Phyllis, like Julia, "held her head in this tense, eye-catching way when behind the wheel—tipped slightly back as if in anticipation of the engine's exploding" (36). Other cars clog the driveway, including one with his weekly lawn crew. Upon stepping into his living room, Owen encounters a "family of three Chinese, identically blobby, like inflated dolls or swollen gray ticks" (36). Given Julia's absence, he is expected to serve as host to these visitors, yet it's a role "he has never quite grown into" (36). As with most of his dreams in the novel, Owen immediately wishes to share it with Julia, who, we are told, tends to merge in his dreams with Phyllis, assuming the role of a generic wife who is "ambiguous, misty-faced, and could be either woman" (38). This second dream enforces the earlier notion that Owen has lost his wife and that she may be in danger involving an automobile. In addition, Owen feels, given his wife's absence, out of sorts and confused in his own house. The dream suggests danger, vulnerability, and social ineptitude.

Owen's third dream, recalled a third of the way through the novel (*Villages* 115–16), is perhaps his strangest. Imagining himself at a party, in a skyscraper that has a retro fifties feel, Owen observes how the women seem "too dressed up, in powdery colors and wide-skirted, sharply cinched taffeta and rigidly waved hair" (115). Two of the women he engages in conversation are "dressed in painted china, rigid carapaces with shiny sculptural edges, as if they are eighteenth-century figurines," though their "arms appear soft and alive, gesturing playfully" (115). In contrast, Owen feels "ill-dressed" and is "looking for a porcelain suit he can put on" (116). Observing that "an elderly guest has passed out, a halo of sleeping dogs around his head" while a fox runs loose, Owen suddenly realizes that the party is being held in his own house and that "he is the mysterious host, humiliatingly ill-clad without a porcelain suit" (116). Again, Owen is the underdressed, confused host who is not up to the task, suggesting an underlying inferiority or vulnerability about his social position. While his wife is not represented in the dream, the women at the party are objectified as beautiful albeit breakable objects that are socially and aesthetically superior to him. At the end of his dream, Owen again goes in search of Julia.

Owen's fourth dream, which comes nearly two-thirds of the way through the novel (*Villages* 188–90), recalls the beginnings of his "rapidly burgeoning

relationship” with Julia many years prior, which led to their subsequent marriage and his divorce from Phyllis (189). In this dream Owen “keeps losing [Julia],” who is “withering smaller and smaller . . . to become forever lost” (189). Waking in a panic, Owen feels “bereft” but realizes it is not Julia but “Phyllis who is lost” (190). This dream reveals, once more, his sense of having lost a wife as well as the underlying confusion within his subconscious when it comes to distinguishing between his two wives. Increasingly, the lost wife, the one who has somehow been killed, is Phyllis, and as always in Updike, it is the woman lost who resonates most profoundly.

Owen’s fifth dream comes near the end of the novel (*Villages* 306–07), after we learn that Phyllis did indeed die in an automobile accident decades prior. In this fifth dream, which is also female-centered, the starring role is played by Owen’s childhood classmate Barbara Emerich, who is now “morbidly fat” but was once a young, lissome girl with “long white legs and a supple abdomen” (307). Owen dreams of being “delegated by the teacher to take a pencil or textbook to Barbara,” which he does and then realizes “she was willing to have him kiss her” (306, 307). The dream, which sexually arouses Owen, brings back to him “the aura, the *climate* of a woman, the cloud her presence makes as you walk along a street beside her, haunch to haunch” (307). This then leads, as do almost all his dreams, to Phyllis and his memory of walking along a sidewalk in Cambridge or Boston with her, the “atmosphere of her flowing beside him down the sidewalk” (308).

The prominence of Phyllis in Owen’s dreams makes more sense once we learn, late in the novel, the details leading to her death. Immediately following a conversation with Owen, in which she tells him, “I’m not going to give you this divorce” (*Villages* 292), she rushes away in her Falcon station wagon, which she crashes and flips, breaking her neck. Asked shortly thereafter to identify her body, Owen observes, “Her eyes were still open, which shocked him, but the face had already begun its transition to the inanimate . . . She looked like a statue; but then she had been a statue in his mind for a long time” (299). Through her cool distance, “air of absence,” and sexual reserve—“How unattainable she had seemed!”—Phyllis serves as the elusive and slightly ethereal first wife (96, 114). The allusion to her as a statue may even find some correlation with the women who stand as porcelain figures in Owen’s dreams. Yet what is noteworthy about *Villages* is Phyllis’s sudden, accidental death and Owen’s lingering guilt. Sudden, tragic death is rare in Updike’s *oeuvre*. It can produce a profound and shocking moment, as it does near the end of *Rabbit, Run* (1960), though in *Villages* we’re probably more surprised than emotionally devastated. Further, Owen’s ostensible “killing” of Phyllis began long before the

proposed divorce; it started as early as their wedding night, when Owen, during sex in a Truro cottage, has the impression that “he was looking down at someone somehow slain” (109). Later we are told, “Leaving Phyllis in their mid-forties was the first adult action of his life. To be an adult is to be a killer. Pacifists and non-combatants are just fooling themselves, letting others do the dirty work” (277). Owen clearly feels as if he has harmed Phyllis, and this image of him as a young man on his honeymoon lying upon his slain wife reminds us of his first dream, in which he ostensibly tried to conceal her death. This wedding night memory also contrasts greatly with the image Owen recalls of lying upon Julia during her recovery from a broken leg: “He tried to hover above her, on his elbows and knees, sparing her as much of his weight as he could, and to his grateful amazement felt her rise to him, in her excitement, quicker than usual; she ground her pubic bone against his decisively and they came together” (39). Though the two wives are confused within his subconscious, there’s little confusion otherwise. Selfless and sexually reserved, Phyllis possesses a “certain bohemian insouciance” and, from Owen’s perspective, is seemingly slain by the weight of his body (38). In contrast, Julia, who is “snappier in her dress” as well as more sexual and scolding, is able to rise and lift herself to the weight of Owen’s body (38).

Though Owen seems relatively content with Julia, he continues to be haunted by Phyllis’s death, with his lingering guilt revealing how important, decades later, Phyllis remains in his subconscious. This is a new element in Updike’s writing. Though his first wife has been gone for twenty-five years, Owen “thinks of Phyllis every day” (*Villages* 304), and his dreams arguably have more to do with her than with Julia. While separation and divorce are immensely painful, as evident through Updike’s *Maples Stories* (1979, 2009), there is usually relief once the split has been achieved. *Villages*, however, challenges such thinking by suggesting that Owen continues to feel guilty over the damage he caused. Generally speaking, there is little regret in Updike’s writing: characters are seldom wracked by guilt for past crimes and indiscretions. Yet in *Villages* there’s greater contemplation of the past and a heightened sense of guilt over transgressions, which makes the novel similar to *The Widows of Eastwick* (2008), which depicts an effort late in life to atone for sins, including a “murder,” committed many years previous.¹ As Updike’s characters approach death, addressing past wrongs becomes an increasing concern. That said, while Owen views himself as Phyllis’s killer, his guilt is not particularly wrenching or all-consuming—it seems clear he would not change his ways or do anything differently.

Owen's final dream, at the close of the novel, is more a series of images than a dream. Here he tries to conjure up, in order to fall back to sleep, the many women, in various sexual positions, whom he once fucked in the village of Middle Falls. Ultimately, however, his effort at arousing himself proves unsuccessful. Yet what remains are the romantic, transcendent "moments of tender regard" with each woman: Vanessa, Alissa, Faye, Karen, Jacqueline, Antoinette, and Mirabella (*Villages* 321). These are moments that shine and seem worth treasuring: "Owen's past is like a sheet of inky-blue tissue paper held up to a light, so the holes pricked in it shine: these stars are the women who let him fuck them" (321). The simile provides a memorable and arresting image that speaks to the importance of sexual intimacy and variety in Owen's life. In recalling these moments, Owen experiences a contemplative transcendence, though as Duffy points out, its interpretation remains ambiguous. Does this passage expose Owen's moral shallowness as a serial adulterer, or is fucking as many women as possible a worthwhile lifelong endeavor? Perhaps it's a mixture of both, though Updike would appear sincere in his belief that the intimacies that occur during coitus are of great value, "the supreme interaction" (321).

While the image of the inky-blue tissue paper held up to light would have provided a memorable send-off, Updike does not end his novel here. Rather he gives us one final paragraph, which leads us back to chapter 18 of Thoreau's *Walden*:

It was a celibate villager who wrote, "We know not where we are. Beside [sic], we are sound asleep nearly half our time. Yet we esteem ourselves wise, and have an established order on the surface." Such a surface order makes possible human combinations and moments of tender regard. It is a mad thing, to be alive. Villages exist to moderate this madness—to hide it from children, to bottle it for private use, to smooth its imperatives into habits, to protect us from the darkness without and the darkness within. (*Villages* 321)

Though Owen is in many ways Thoreau's antithesis, Concord's famous citizen reminds us that much of our existence is spent asleep as well as dreaming, and that it is the interior life that tends toward a madness that must remain hidden from view. The village, or civilization, provides a surface order that enables us to live among others and moderate our madness. In some respects, *Villages* is a celebration of those places and people, particularly women in Owen's case, who provide sustenance and moments of transcendence.

Villages alters our thinking about how transcendence figures in Updike's writing. In *Rabbit, Run*, moments of transcendence are sought through physical activity:

shooting a basketball, striking a golf ball, having sexual relations with a woman. Such moments overshadow all other experiences in daily life. This kind of thinking runs throughout Updike's *oeuvre*. Yet in later works, such as *Villages*, the physical world recedes and becomes secondary to the interior realm of memory and dream, where past physical encounters are stored. The human brain, as the novel demonstrates, resembles a computer, serving as an operating system of memory and its retrieval. In his later years Owen shifts from being an active member of a community to a retiring figure who dwells upon images from his past and stories that his subconscious delivers while asleep. One wishes that Updike had devoted more energy and space to Owen's dreams than to his memories of his seductive past—the dream sequences are fresh and engagingly ambiguous, while the recalled adulterous liaisons are old news in Updike. Yet *Villages* reveals a slight shift in the author's thinking, such that abandonment of the first wife continues to resonate decades later and interiority increasingly becomes the primary setting of our lives. While interiority has always been important in Updike's writing, nowhere is it more central than in *Villages*, which sings of the lingering pleasures of memories and dreams.

NOTE

1. In both novels the idea that the past sin rises to the level of murder feels contrived: the witches supposedly killed their younger rival, Jenny Gabriel, through a hex that brings on cancer; Owen ostensibly kills Phyllis through sex, as well as betrayal, abandonment, and simple involvement in her life. Perhaps Updike was overreaching by suggesting that these characters are killers, though his larger point may be that it is not so much whether they actually killed as it is their belief that they did something terrible and malicious.

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Seduction in John Updike's *Villages*

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John Updike wrote constantly till his death in 2009. Unlike Philip Roth, who withdrew from the job after a late series of flimsy novels and wisely settled for a happy retirement, Updike continued to write on his deathbed, though in the last years of his life he wavered between the suspicion that “stories of senility’ are about the only ones I have to tell” and “the irrational hope that the last book might be the best” (“Writer in Winter” 5, 7). *Villages* (2004), soon to be followed by *Terrorist* (2006) and *The Widows of Eastwick* (2008), is certainly not his best but complements the writer’s vision of “life’s great game”—that is, the “love game,” the game of seduction (*Villages* 236, 263). Though his protagonist is an elderly man, the narrative is not a story of senility, but rather one about “life in full tide” (“Writer in Winter” 5).

If *Villages* were Updike’s first novel, it would probably have attracted much critical attention, as his prose still retains “a flow, the forward momentum of a certain energized weight,” to use the author’s elegant turn of phrase about good fiction (“Writer in Winter” 5). Yet it is his twenty-first novel, so reviewers, almost unanimously, could not tolerate an apparent recycling of previously used material that once again appeared autobiographical. Indeed, his biographer Adam Begley recognizes that Updike “wrote about himself compulsively, or even—as some would claim—ad nauseam” (Begley 10). However, Updike always did so in varied ways, offering statements about American culture for newcomers to his writing or for old-timers keen on discovering the author’s news. And he does have news to offer in *Villages*, making seduction the main theme of his novel. Updike cherishes

the game of love in this narrative, turning it into love of life. Although Walter Kirn wittily calls “the philosophy of pleasure” that informs the narrative “the Hefner Creed,” thus simplifying it, Updike for his part complexifies the experience. The indefatigable celebrant of life is intent on celebrating the light, unruly side of seduction in *Villages* without keeping silent on seduction’s dark, devastating side.

The novel features seventy-year-old Owen Mackenzie, a retired computer programmer who looks back on his life in playful lust. Updike seems determined to restore seduction’s nobility in an era that has increasingly no place for it, as Jean Baudrillard makes clear: “Today the exorcism is more violent and systematic. We are entering the era of final solutions; for example, that of the sexual revolution, of the production and management of all liminal and subliminal pleasures, the micro-processing of desire, with the woman who produces herself as woman, and as sex, being the last avatar. Ending seduction” (*Seduction* 2).

Though Baudrillard in 1980 announced the end of seduction, the commodification of sex, and the triumph of pornography, Updike looks back to the pre-1980 period when the game of seduction was easier to play, before the controversies around political correctness and the pervasiveness of the hookup culture. Therefore, Updike’s character cannot possibly represent one of “the rascals who were present” in a bygone era (Kirn 13; emphasis added) or be dismissed as “an unsavory character” (Duffy 14). The narrative revisits the myth of Don Juan, which is a myth of seduction, to claim the right to perennial seduction and therefore to the happiness it ensures for the character. No other novel in Updike’s work features a central character who so embraces Epicurean eudaemonia as the highest value. Likewise, no other novel in his work draws so heavily from the literary figure of Don Juan; by borrowing elements from this legendary seducer, Updike makes his character more significant than an irresponsible *homme moyen sensuel*.

Moreover, *Villages*, like Balzac’s *The Human Comedy*, offers a rich repertoire of first encounters that depict seduction as “a suspended moment meant to produce enchantment in the greyness of social relations” (Dauphin 7; my translation). The narrative highlights these moments, whose cumulative effect preserves the enchantment involved in seduction against its many negative perceptions.¹ Finally, the narrative assumes its positive stance toward seduction while allowing a peek at seduction’s dark underside, which accounts for some of the novel’s most hostile criticism.² Indeed, Owen Mackenzie’s *Bildung* and *Weltanschauung* rely on seduction, whose paradoxes Updike is also eager to acknowledge.

Just like Philip Roth’s *Professor of Desire* (1977),³ *Villages* is Updike’s contribution to the vitality of the Don Juan myth, which has been evolving since Tirso

de Molina's founding text. Jean Rousset's requirement scenario in *Le Mythe de Don Juan* (1978)—involving the hero, a group of women, and the presence of death—has found its way into Updike's novel. Owen is a self-made man who, from his rural origins, was “hoisted . . . up into Cambridge and the snob life of the mind, . . . and the life of the bourgeois repose” (*Villages* 317). His memories set up a somewhat chronological catalog of his extramarital conquests,⁴ and the second part of his life is haunted by his first wife's death. To some extent, traces of the four patterns that have characterized the myth, according to Frédéric Monneyron, inform the narrative: effeminacy of the hero; classification of women into two categories, bourgeois and prostitute; sapphic rivalry; and the dialectics of seduction and possession.

Though Owen, like all of Updike's characters, is what feminist readers could call “a stereotypical male”⁵ and resolutely heterosexual, the narrative does include elements that threaten his masculinity. More often than not, it is the women in this novel who initiate seduction as well as marriage proposals. Owen sees in his second marriage a “chance to settle safely into married concupiscence and *obedience*” (276; emphasis added). Moreover, homosexual experience as a further exploration of sexuality is not refuted by the character in his conversation with one of his lovers, Vanessa. The narrative lightly harbors two extremes in its representation of women: an idolized, placed-on-a-pedestal wife who looks down on other women and a woman whose persona hints at prostitution (Owen wonders whether the woman he has a fling with in Las Vegas, Mirabella, is not “a hooker”) (235).

In addition, sapphic rivalry—though much more prominent in “The Women Who Got Away” (*Licks of Love*), where the two women whom the narrator did not succeed in sleeping with have formed a lesbian couple at the end—is not absent from this narrative. Owen suspects that Vanessa has had an affair with his former lover, Alissa, and to counter this rivalry he suggests taking up another woman in their lovemaking. Vanessa points out to him, “*You want that. Two women serving you*” (256). Owen's affair with Vanessa carries echoes from Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's eighteenth-century novel *Dangerous Liaisons*, as the two lovers discuss the seduction of another woman.

Although three of the four patterns that appear in the narrative are rather peripheral, the dialectics of seduction and possession is central in *Villages*. The narrative makes clear that possession is antithetical to seduction and that the former puts an end to the latter—and along with it the enchanted happiness that seduction entails. The first victim of such dialectics is Owen's wife Phyllis, who turns into a “statue” (299) in his mind. There is a hint at her future plight on the

couple's wedding night, when Owen tries to defer the moment of possession: "His impression grew that he was looking down at someone somehow slain" (109). It is precisely the multiplicity of partners that guarantees the perennity of seduction.

Though seduction and possession are mutually exclusive, Owen is tempted by possession in his first two affairs with Faye and Alissa, despite his awareness of the negative effects of possession. His response to his friend and business partner, Ed—who idolizes Phyllis and asks, "What more could a man want out of life than Phyllis?"—indicates such awareness: "Ed's estimation of Phyllis was unrealistic" (171). What is realistic seems to be the so-called "Coolidge effect" (Symons 209). The phrase refers to variety as a guarantee of sexual stimulation for male mammals, which have an enormous capacity to discriminate (that is, to recognize difference among mating partners while being indiscriminate in their choice of female mates). Although Donald Symons, who inquired into this "effect," is naturally very cautious about establishing straightforward parallels between mammals and human beings—or, as he puts it, "with human mating patterns in their normal social contexts" (211)—he does cite the anonymous Victorian autobiography *My Secret Life*, in which the main theme is the narrator's passion for sexual variety. Don Juan's indiscriminate seduction guarantees multiplicity. Pascal Bruckner and Alain Finkielkraut highlight Don Juan's nondiscriminatory seduction by asserting that there is "nothing exclusive in the multiplicity of his transports" (273; my translation). Owen is very sensitive to "the town's vivid young matrons" (*Villages* 136) who seem to have "a collective loveliness" (137) made up by their multiplicity and the opportunities for variety it represents.

This indiscriminate perception of the host of women in Owen's social surroundings is accompanied by his heightened sense of what differentiates one from another, and this difference sets off seduction that "is not desire" but "what plays with desire" (Baudrillard, "Les Abîmes Superficiels" 204). The love game offers opportunities for homing in on differences in a daring way: "His was that her cunt did not feel like Phyllis's. Smoother, somehow simpler, its wetness less thick, less of a sauce, more of a glaze" (154).⁶ Nevertheless, possession puts an end to Owen's trajectory as Don Juan, which comes to a standstill with his second marriage. The latter is given relatively little attention as Owen's memories mainly span the making of Don Juan.

If *Villages* is a *bildungsroman*, then it relates the development of the hero as a Don Juan—an American Don Juan, to boot. Like André Brink—who appropriated this myth in *Before I Forget* (2004), creating an eminently South African Don Juan by mingling seduction with South African politics⁷—Updike embeds his

character in a particular time and space: the United States from the fifties to the present. During this period the country's mores evolve from viewing sex as sin to the perception of fellatio as "a friendly act" (184). The central space of Owen's development as a seducer is the middle-class village of Middle Falls, a place that reaps the fruits of sexual revolution, but also wider America, which brings "the computer world" and "young women . . . [with] fancy names, trim bodies, short skirts, long hair, and liberated morals" to Owen (224).

In fact, Updike makes sure that the reader is always informed of the temporal background of the action, using American presidents as markers. At times, the impact of historical developments upon the character is made explicit. Owen's first adulterous affair is set right after John F. Kennedy's assassination: "Late in the preceding year, President Kennedy had been shot and Phyllis had produced a fourth child . . . ; both events left Owen a little shaky, feeling his mortality" (142). This first experience with Faye marks the passage from "innocence" to knowledge and then from a state of "self-denial" to full indulgence (176). After the affair is over, he moves to the position of seducer as a way of being that echoes Kierkegaard's tactical character in the *Diary of a Seducer*: "He resolved in his heart to be a seducer" (*Villages* 186). Such resolution is reflected in his actions and confirms this new identity to the women in his environment. In fact, Owen as Don Juan belongs to a category of his own, which we could call "the seductionaholics," as the narrative voice seems to suggest, comparing him to alcoholics, workaholics, and worn-out men in Middle Falls: "The scent upon Owen had ripened, the scent that told women he was in the market for what only they could provide. Not every man was. Some men in Middle Falls were more interested in the next drink. . . . Some . . . put their passion into their work. . . . Certain husbands . . . were simply too dry, too stiff . . . to play the love game" (236). Seduction seems to appear as a sign of vitality and a safeguard against more dangerous or duller pursuits.

The narrative describes Owen's progression in the love game as he learns its rules successfully. From "his one fling into the dreamland of sexual happiness" (167) with Faye, Owen, making the village his "educational toy" (140), moves to the real land of milk and honey, where he leads a fulfilled life. Women are his teachers in this period, from Faye's welcoming lessons—"She was being a teacher; he loved that" (151)—to Vanessa's sagacious "tutelage" (241). Contrary to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the codes of seduction were unilateral, the twentieth is the century of the reciprocity of seduction, and the narrative clearly depicts the reversibility of seduction, as Owen, "seduced and seducing" (213), becomes a shrewd player familiar with "the terms of play, challenges, duels, the strategy of

appearances—that is, the terms of seduction. A universe that . . . implies a seductive reversibility—a universe where the feminine is not what opposes the masculine, but what seduces the masculine” (Baudrillard, *Seduction* 7). In the narrative, seduction counterbalances the opposition between the sexes. Owen’s understanding of women is very limited, yet the reversibility of seduction somewhat bridges this gap.

The first rule of the love game is that secrecy in seduction should not disturb social order: “A village is woven of secrets, of truths better left unstated” (*Villages* 209). Alissa returns to the cradle of monogamy when she gets pregnant, for her affair with Owen makes it difficult to know whether the father is Alissa’s lover or her husband. Even late in the seducer’s life, Owen evaluates the extent of secrecy: “He couldn’t look far into the Slades’ strange marriage but believed that, like his own, it would not accommodate open infidelity” (260). Another rule involves a constant negotiation with guilt, which paradoxically appears minor in *Villages*, even though there is a major guilt-generating event: the death of Owen’s abandoned first wife. Guilt is easily cast off by Owen and his lovers: “the film of guilt that attached to them was, like the secretions of lovemaking, something to be wiped off before they went back out into the street” (206). Likewise, he easily finds “a road map out of his guilt” (239).

Avoiding emotional involvement is another rule of the game: “I’m crazy about you.’ A substitute for that poisoned chalice of a phrase *I love you*. . . . Faye had believed it and so had he and they had done damage” (207). If the reader were to graph the evolution of love following seduction in Owen’s adult life, the line would mark the first peak with Phyllis, descend with Faye, get even lower with Alissa, and continue to plunge, reaching the lowest point with the “one-night stands” (230) that guaranteed a higher degree of variety and hence sexual stimulation. The graph would then rise abruptly toward a new peak when Owen meets Julia. This encounter marks the end of the seducer’s life. Paradoxically, Julia, who wants “to reform” (292) Owen, acts as a *femme fatale* upon his life, since she destroys it by offering him a new one.

It would be legitimate to ask why Owen, a man in his prime, gives up the love game. The reform incentive is quite ambiguous, though the narrator does heighten the reform hypothesis with an unflattering image: “he might have lagged indefinitely, keeping women in the air like a juggler’s gaudy balls, had she not shamed him out of it” (276). Yet Owen as Don Juan continues his activities through his nostalgic memories and full-of-regret fantasies, finding no more opportunities to act as a seducer in his environment. It might be meaningful that the end of Owen’s life as

an active seducer at the close of the seventies corresponds to the emergence of debate about political correctness. We may wonder whether what was once called “seduction” now goes by the name of “harassment,” at least in universities and at the workplace. The narrative does not tackle this question, as Owen’s amorous life ends in the seventies. His “retirement” from the love game, though, coincides with social change, in which seduction, becoming increasingly ambiguous, has to be investigated or abolished. Overall, *Villages* is Updike’s nostalgic exposition of seduction in a society that questions it in 2004.

Thus the narrative offers a repertoire of first encounters, which are fundamental to seduction.⁸ They are framed by two major encounters that involve what Updike, in one of his eponymous early stories, called “wife-wooing.” What makes these encounters noteworthy is the narrative length devoted to each: a whole chapter, entitled “How Phyllis Was Won,” deals with the seduction of Owen’s first wife, while brevity distinguishes the second. Another contrast marks these two first meetings: while the narrative paves the way for the encounter between Owen and Phyllis when “their eyes meet,”⁹ the reader is taken by surprise when that same thing occurs between Owen and Julia. Thus Updike attributes a special status to wife-wooing in *Villages*.

Phyllis’s special status is demonstrated through her high social standing as the daughter of a distinguished Cambridge scholar. Likewise, she stands out at MIT for both her looks and brains. She exists far above Owen, who singles her out among her peers and defers to her high stature. Their first encounter highlights Phyllis’s intellectual superiority. Owen’s first words to her, “You’re getting all of this?” (81), and his subsequent sense of “sounding like a malcontent, a surly know-nothing” (82) set the terms of the relationship: she is idealized, respected, and admired by Owen, and the narrative maintains her proud aloofness and impenetrability to the end. The type of courtship and love between Owen and Phyllis is redolent of another age. Interestingly, Brian Duffy uses the term “seigneurial” (Duffy 3) to discuss male sexuality in *Villages* but leaves out the notion of courtly love that refers to the knight and his lady. In fact, Owen’s courtship of Phyllis carries some echoes of such romantic love, awakened now and then when Owen’s initial Ada Lovelace-like image of Phyllis is revived amid stifling domesticity: “she could sometimes suggest, in a weightless leap of insight, a fresh way around some linear difficulty; Owen would be quite dazzled, and fall in love with her anew” (*Villages* 124). However, when the courtship period draws to a close, some disappointment seems to accompany possession: “Phyllis in all her aloof beauty was a fruit with a

stem more weakened than was apparent; she fell to Owen rather confoundingly, her fall resisted less than he had expected or, at some deep level, hoped" (106). It is also worth noting that the seduction game is foreshadowed on their wedding night, when Owen starts combing his bride's pubic hair to defer the moment of possession.

Wife-wooing is persistent in *Villages*, testifying to the strength of marriage in Updike's work. For the elderly couple, Owen and Julia, wife-wooing is transformed into "connubial nonsense" (6), a playful exchange maintained by Owen. While much information is given about Phyllis, who is presented as an inaccessible Madonna and wounded Amazon, and also about the couple's courtship period, which constitutes the narrative's purple pages, scant information is given about Julia and the courtship period involving her. That period seems to pass in a flash, just like Owen's dream, which refers to the courtship as "his rapidly burgeoning relationship with Julia, compact, firm, decisive, surprisingly sexy Julia" (189). Though seduction is at its apex here, the action is not shown but summarized. Likewise, though sexual scenes abound in the narrative, very little description of Owen and Julia's lovemaking informs the text.

However, what most highlights the relationship between Julia and Owen is the scene of the first encounter, which also emerges in a flash at the very end of the twelfth chapter, titled "Village Sex—VI." The paragraph-long passage that describes this first encounter is marked not only by its brevity but also by its adjectival economy. The traditional portrait of the beloved is limited to "fine female fingers" and aquamarine eyes (268). The reader can only infer the surge of nostalgia that takes hold of Owen as Julia's eyes abruptly take him back to his childhood: "Her eyes were the sharp aquamarine of, in Willow, the tinted wineglasses . . . that house-proud aunts . . . would set on the locked upper edge of the lower window sash to catch the light" (268). The reader is not directly told but can infer that Owen is dazzled by the light in these eyes.

The delaying of the enchanted moment, the very last of its kind in the text—re-layed without any announcement and with Julia's name appearing only at the end of the paragraph and chapter—has an uncanny effect upon the reader. Indeed, the reader is seduced by the alluring atmosphere thus created, as it dawns on her who the woman introduced to Owen is. The reader can deduce the force of the seductive effect on Owen as the encounter finds him amid a host of affairs of various statuses: namely, a long-term relationship (Vanessa), an occasional one (Karen), circumstantial flings, new seduction plans (Trish), and women on the waiting list

(Imogen). They are all swept away in a single handshake that “startled him” (268). As Rousset states, the term *startled* “belongs to the category of the legendary love at first sight” (*Leurs Yeux* 43; my translation).

It seems that this first encounter bears the seed of what Francesco Alberoni conceptualized as *innamorento* or “the process of falling in love.” Furthermore, Alberoni qualifies seduction in *innamorento*, making it appear not as a deliberate act but as a natural one: “People in love cannot think about seducing their object of love; they just make themselves pleasant, for they know that they can have no power and therefore the other’s love will always be and can only be a free gift” (my translation). Therefore, the Italian author makes a distinction between deliberate, tactical seduction and a spontaneous “natural” sort. However, if the seduction phase with Julia belongs to the latter kind, there is certainly a continuum. The narrative also shows the other end in “[Owen’s] visions of enlisting [Trish] in a threesome with Vanessa” (*Villages* 261), a follow-up of his conversation with Vanessa about bringing another woman into their affair.

The narrative depicts the ceremonial, ritualistic, and strategic side of seduction, the main theme in eighteenth-century literature dealing with libertine sexuality (Laclos, Casanova, de Sade). *Villages* offers a rich array of seduction-related discourse that needs to be decoded, a colorful range of gestures, exchange of glances or gazes, and modalities of what Rousset calls “crossing” (*Leurs Yeux* 59)—that is, the passage from a neutral environment to the environment of seduction. Generally speaking, as Olender puts it, “seduction involves a veil which desire penetrates” (162; my translation). This veil does involve speech acts. The most eloquent statement of such acts is articulated by Julia, who sums up the topics of conversation Owen had with the wives in Middle Falls thusly, “You talked about how you wanted to fuck them, without exactly saying so” (*Villages* 46).

The veil is still present in Faye’s and Vanessa’s playful directness. While the former informs Owen that her psychiatrist wants her to ask him why he does not want to sleep with her, the latter suggests an exploratory, tête-à-tête lunch with the purpose of “see[ing] if we want to have lunch again” (238). Stacey’s preparatory speech about Owen’s state of imprisonment is followed by a daring, liberating gesture: “With her middle finger and thumb pinched as if to untie a bow, she pulled the tab of his fly zipper down” (183). Though less of an invasion into Owen’s intimacy than Stacey’s gesture, Karen’s offer of “a wadded warm handful of nylon underpants,” when she goes to Owen’s office on a professional errand, is more revealing, as it depends on a visual effect: “Karen stood there with swarming eyes

and lifted up her skirt, showing that her pants were in his hand and not on her” (251). The directness of such crossing highlights the evolving mores and subsequent codes of seduction but does not destroy the veil, the enchanted surprise that marks every new promise of sex.

Contrary to Stacey and Karen, Faye adopts a strategy of deferment once the seduction game is launched, asking Owen to wait for a later date. As Baudrillard puts it, “This is what occurs in the most banal games of seduction: I shy away; it is not you who will give me pleasure, it is I who will make you play, and thereby rob you of your pleasure” (*Seduction* 22). Conversely, there is a hypnotic quality in Owen and Alissa’s crossing over to a physical exchange once a meaningful meeting of eyes has been established: “Veering toward each other like planets out of orbit, Owen and Alissa kissed” (*Villages* 191). The simile echoes the meaning of seducing—turning someone away from his path—and the sentence highlights the reversibility of seduction.

What all the acts of seduction have in common is the happiness they bestow upon Owen, who basks in the experience, even in memory, though his life is marked by a tragic event. The chapter that ends with the description of Owen’s first encounter with Julia, which determines the second half of his life, is followed by the chapter titled “You Don’t Want to Know,” which recounts the price Owen has to pay for being “led astray,” as the Latin etymology of the term *seduction* signifies. Phyllis’s ambiguously accidental death is tinged with hints of suicide, while Owen is rendered morally responsible for her death by Ed, his business partner. Ironically, the “reformer,” Julia, ranked “among the best” seductresses by Owen (46), turns out to be the most powerful one. The radical change she executes on Owen’s life—which is foreseen in the “inscrutable, somewhat humourless vitality” (268) detected in their first encounter—ironically annihilates the vitality afforded him as Don Juan. Further, his life is transformed into what Peter J. Bailey calls “a site of geriatric seclusion and symbolic incarceration” (91). As Owen is cornered into selective sociability with only elderly couples, the merry-go-round of seductive pursuit is displaced by fantasy and memory, where instead of renewal there is recycling.

If Owen’s encounter with Julia finds him in his heyday of happiness, qualified as “guilty bliss,” retrospection makes all the more salient the happiness he explores and fully assumes in the “enlarging hollow” of his present (*Villages* 267, 309). Recalling his first extramarital encounter, he notes, “A pressure of happiness from deep in his being added to his height and the fluidity of his movements” (142). In retrospect, Faye represents a memorable affair for “[s]he had given him, at thirty-one, . . . a freedom of the body” (156), which was necessary to make bearable the

dreariness of everyday life: “Liking each other was what all of them needed, to get through the slog of child-rearing, of homemaking, of earning a living, hour by hour” (147). The love game not only counterbalances the quotidian drabness and boredom, but also acts as a barrier against the assailing sense of mortality that death and birth entail. Certainly, Owen’s affair with Faye offers him an outlet for his fear of death. Moreover, it appears as a channel for the existential malaise and restlessness, even anxiety, to which Updike’s character is particularly sensitive:

Their wives are twittering biddies, haggard rasping former debutantes, perky, mannerly, and as finely fitted to this society as the parts of a well-milled machine. In Middle Falls . . . none of the women had quite fit; all wanted something different, though it was hard to say what, hard even for them. A wide-spread discontent had filled the town with an erratic rueful energy not unlike that of Owen’s mother. (54–55)

The Middle Falls spouses, pitted against the “twittering biddies,” become all the more attractive, endowed as they are with the sensibility of the maladapted finding an outlet in seduction. Owen is part and parcel of this group related to the mother figure, whose presence is very discrete in this narrative, contrary to other Updike novels or short fiction.

It is no wonder then that Owen finds his bearings in life through seduction, just as he uses it to find his way around town: “Middle Falls, in the years when he lived there, was mapped by the location of the homes of women in whom Owen was interested. . . . Driving or walking in Middle Falls, then, gave Owen the happiness of orientation, of his position being plotted on a specific cartography, of being *somewhere*” (308–09). The sense of place is accompanied by a sense of purpose, which is absent from his present: “Though Owen has lived, driving and walking, in Haskells Crossing longer than at any other address, it remains unmapped in his mind” (309).

Unlike André Brink, who in an interview with Sophie Pujas dismissed his character in *Before I Forget* as macho, Updike provides no dismissal within or outside the narrative, and the novel’s “depiction of a life devoted to sensual indulgence is remarkably nostalgic and highly positive” (Bailey 93). Updike’s love of his characters persists to the end and seems large enough to envelop a Don Juan who claims, “To be an adult is to be a killer” (*Villages* 277). The statement somewhat echoes Updike’s line from his poem “Endpoint”: “I drank up women’s tears and spat them out” (*Endpoint* 10). Owen’s declaration of happiness challenges the tradition of ethical thought from Aristotle and Aquinas to Hegel and Marx, according to which human self-fulfillment and happiness spring from the practice

of virtue. Owen's happiness derives from the game of seduction, the freedom of the body, and satisfaction, as the narrator's rhetorical question makes clear: "One-night stands had their underside of sorrow, but had he ever been more crazily happy, more triumphantly himself, than when Mirabella was blowing him while he sped at ninety miles an hour into the flat Nevada desert, straight into the rising morning sun?" (*Villages* 230). The supremacy of the senses, galvanized by seduction, at times would not tolerate any control, making the game a dangerous undertaking: "He knew a twitch of the wheel would annihilate them both and Mirabella knew it too but kept giving him exceedingly welcome sensations" (231).

However, there is definitely control at the end, as this happiness is sacrificed on the altar of "bourgeois repose" well guarded by Julia (317). In this settled life, happiness is remembered rather than experienced. The narrative reminds the reader of the paradox that Freud pointed out in *Civilization and Its Discontents*: although the purpose of civilization is human happiness and the amelioration of human misery and suffering, the renunciation of instincts, vital to a civilized society, is actually partially responsible for human unhappiness. In the aporetic concluding chapter, through a reference to Thoreau, the narrator belatedly raises the issue of human wisdom, which is rather unattainable for this character. Owen's final assessment of his life—suggested in the compelling metaphor of the night sky, whose stars are his lovers—leaves no room for wisdom: "Owen's past is like a sheet of inky-blue tissue paper held up to a light, so the holes pricked in it shine: these stars are the women who let him fuck them" (321). The language in this passage is "uncivilized," as in the scale of offensive words, "fuck" remains a strong one. Didn't Updike's Henry Bech, who claims the Nobel Prize in "His *Oeuvre*," finally consider women rather than his books his "masterpieces" (*Licks of Love* 140)? Seriously or satirically, the same assessment seems to challenge a wisdom that claims detachment from the senses. After all, pitted against Owen's unwise, uncivilized persistence in the love game are the words of a "*celibate villager*" (*Villages* 321; emphasis added).

Whether Updike sides with his character(s) or not, *Villages* is Updike's twenty-first-century contribution to Don Juan's literary myth and an homage to the vitality of seduction in all its forms.

NOTES

1. As Jean Baudrillard writes, "Seduction continues to appear to all orthodoxies as malefice and artifice, a black magic for the deviation of all truths, an exaltation of the malicious use of signs, a conspiracy of signs" (*Seduction* 2).

2. In reviewing *Villages*, Thomas Karshan writes, "The priapic curiosity and dynamic tensions of the characters in Updike's earlier novels are desperately missing." In another review, Lee Siegel states,

“naturally you wonder whether such repelled and repellent passages about sex are the result of Owen’s walled-off ego, or the author’s.”

3. For a reading of Roth’s novel from this perspective, see Monneyron 100–08.

4. It is worth noting that in Greek antiquity the list of wives and lovers was a genre of its own, known as the catalog (Chantal 28).

5. Anna Shapiro summarizes feminist readers’ reaction to Updike’s work thus: “feminists spotlighted him as sexist [and] female readers choked a little on his novels and stories.”

6. *Villages* could offer a good case study for the representation of the vagina to Emma Rees, who quotes Updike’s poem “Two Cunts in Paris” in her book *Vagina: A Literary and Cultural History* (72).

7. For a reading of André Brink’s novel from this perspective, see Aristi Trendel, “The Myth of Don Juan in André Brink’s *Before I Forget*,” *Alizés* no. 33 (Dec. 2010): 165–82.

8. This is how Jean Rousset, who studied first encounters in *Leurs Yeux*, defines this event in narratives: “it is a dynamic unit destined to correlate with other units and to trigger a host of consequences” (7; my translation).

9. See Rousset’s study *Leurs Yeux* (or *Their Eyes Met: First Encounters in the Novel*).

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Mortality as Muse

SUE NORTON

The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End, by Katie Roiphe. New York: Dial Press, 2016.

Katie Roiphe's project in *The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End* is to create for the reader a kind of anteroom to death. She investigates the ways in which highly articulate, artistic people, familiar to the public, approach their own imminent passing. In choosing her subjects, Roiphe asks, "If it's nearly impossible to capture the approach of death in words, who would have the most hope of doing it?" (9). With this criterion in mind, she turns to the last days and mortal musings of Susan Sontag, John Updike, Sigmund Freud, Dylan Thomas, and Maurice Sendak. In five engrossing chapters, she explores whether the impulse to render feelings imaginatively is a direct consequence of death's certainty and, if it is, whether death is to be understood as a kind of lifeblood.

With varying degrees of intention, these celebrated writers did indeed attempt to capture the approach of death in words. What makes their efforts curious is how they suggest that the acceptance of one's own mortality may be aided by eloquent rumination. In addition, their writings indicate that the skilled narration or depiction of the universal experience of death strikes writers and artists as being beneficial to others. Their renderings of terminal illness become sacrificial offerings to the public. Roiphe's probing of these renderings is an offering too: she wants to help us, and herself, to see into the death of things.

Annie Leibovitz's photographic chronicling of Susan Sontag's last days of life and, controversially, first days of death appears to have been a labor of love for both Leibovitz and Sontag. Sontag submitted willingly to the observation of

the camera, having once written that “to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed” (Sontag 4). She felt that “photographed images do not seem to be statements of the world so much as pieces of it,” whereas writing, by contrast, is only ever “an interpretation” (Sontag 4). By this logic, Sontag was allowing her trusted friend and former lover to appropriate her death and permit it to be looked upon. Roiphe details, with humane sensitivity, the queasiness that this decision provoked in Sontag’s intimate circle of family and friends. But however readers of Roiphe’s book may feel about the voyeuristic texture of Leibovitz’s unflinching gaze onto Sontag’s visible suffering, most will not fail to note that Sontag did *also* turn to the written word to articulate her experience of dying, an experience that she desperately wanted to forestall and even, ideally, to forgo.

Of the five writers covered by Roiphe in her book, Sontag is the one most resistant to her own death. She fought it to her last breath, steadfastly maintaining denial as a kind of arsenal. She had been seriously ill twice before and, from childhood onward, maintained a running discourse about death through her personal journals, short stories, and long works of nonfiction, including her book *Illness as Metaphor* (1978). Such commitment to the theme of mortality raises a dual question inherent to *The Violet Hour*: what does a writer *get* from the verbal narration of death, and what does a writer *give*?

Roiphe’s chapter on John Updike may best hint at an answer. Though Updike had established mortality as a recurring if not constant theme in his writing (consider his early and graphic poem “Dog’s Death”), we learn that upon initial comprehension of his terminal diagnosis with lung cancer, he did not reach for the pen—nor was he at all inclined to select a shade of blue for the cover of his soon-to-be-published *My Father’s Tears and Other Stories* (2009). His shock must simply have been too great. But a mere day or two later, he began composing verse from his hospital bed about, indeed, his hospital bed. The impulse of “bringing news,” as he once wrote himself in an article for AARP, had been prodded (124).

Based on conversations with his widow Martha, Roiphe tells us that Updike’s resolve to write, once he was discharged from the hospital, did falter again. But he yielded to Martha’s coaxing to produce, “Just one more book” (118). *Endpoint and Other Poems* (2009) was published posthumously. The fact of his dying would now become, in Roiphe’s words, his “fresh subject” (119). How it is that death, even one’s own death, can become so paradoxically invigorating a topic for a writer can perhaps be partly divined through constructions of audience. Roiphe reminds us of a section in *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* (1989) when Updike, she writes, is “suddenly flattened by the idea” (123) that both he and his own young daughter,

for whom he has just built a dollhouse, will one day be dead. She also tells us that Updike's first wife, Mary, revealed to her that he kept "private" his preoccupations with mortality and, in Roiphe's words, "poured them into his writing, to be consumed by strangers, but did not discuss them with his family" (123). Roiphe reminds us, too, of a scene from *Marry Me: A Romance* (1976) when Jerry Conant becomes frustrated by his wife Ruth's drowsy unwillingness to indulge his late night anxieties about death.

What comes into view is the possibility that interior, "private" anxieties, such as a fear of death, are for artists and writers more easily, and perhaps more therapeutically, shared with anonymous readers than with loved ones. In domesticity, life is about keeping the show on the road. It's about building the dollhouse, getting a solid night's sleep. It's not about the ventilation of angst. "Woody Allen types" in Woody Allen films who kvetch about the void at the center of their beings do not, generally, inhabit harmonious relationships.

Nor, of course, did Dylan Thomas, whose marriage was fraught with volatility and whose parenting left much to be desired. He both courted death with his incessant drinking and other forms of indulgence, and resisted it vociferously in much of his writing—most famously in "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," in which he exhorts his dying father to "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." Roiphe details how Thomas's chronic vacillation between life at full throttle as a darling of the literati and his own "morbid and overblown fear of death" (188) made for constant tumult. He luxuriated in sick beds attended by mistresses and at other times turned to his wife, Caitlin, to comfort him with milk-soaked bread. Roiphe believes that "Thomas was the kind of man who wanted to stay out because to be at home in bed was to surrender to nothingness" (190). He was not at all private about his anxieties, telling a friend once at a very young age, "I've got death in me" (191). He used his dread of death freely and consciously to fuel his writing, but this verbal extravagance around the subject matter never brought him peace. Though he could assure his readers of eternal redemption in poems such as "And Death Shall Have No Dominion," Roiphe believes he maintained a sense of the "completely illusory control that language gives over life" (170).

This interest in the power and limits of language to help human beings reckon with death, whether as writers or as readers, is at the heart of Roiphe's analyses. Over the course of their lives, her five writers put emotional stock into the wishful idea that visual and verbal composition can mitigate what she refers to as the panic of death's approach (283). It was for such a reason, Roiphe believes, that Sigmund Freud wrote letters to his dearest confidantes detailing his state of mind and body

over his final days, having once famously and controversially argued in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) that “The aim of all life is death.” Roiphe tells us that he refused painkillers because he wanted “to be able to consider and analyze what remains to be considered and analyzed” (80). Thus, we are left with the impression that Freud’s dignity was deeply connected to his ability to articulate his own demise for the benefit of future clinicians and for posterity in general.

Maurice Sendak, likewise, was determined to delineate in both visual and narrative detail a recognizable terror of personal dissolution and to do so as a kind of offering. Roiphe’s analysis of his children’s stories suggests he believed that “kids are already scared, that what they crave is seeing their anxieties thrillingly laid out” (207). While her speculation here and elsewhere is almost certainly correct, sometimes her literary interpretations, especially with Sendak, seem superfluous and far too lengthy given the refined critical faculties of her probable readers.

For it is certainly the case that her study of these writers—along with James Salter, whom she interviewed shortly before his sudden death in 2015—is a literary as well as biographical endeavor. And while her line of inquiry is unfailingly sensitive and sincere, she may sometimes overreach as to the psychological motivations and general states of mind of her subjects. She concludes of Susan Sontag, for instance, that because she was known to deceive herself and others about such matters as her smoking and her lovers, she “mostly lied to protect the mythology she had constructed for herself” (50). Nevertheless, the full account of Roiphe’s research methodologies offered in her closing pages, where she details the degree of access she had to archives, letters, emails, and surviving loved ones, is crucial to her readers’ confidence that she is on reasonably sure footing to hypothesize about the intentions and longings of her subjects.

Regarding John Updike’s final days, for instance, Roiphe relies upon interviews, conversations, and emails with the author’s two wives, four children, and golfing buddy, as well as his correspondence. In addition, through close readings of numerous of Updike’s writings, she suggests that “there was in his later years a fascination with death, which almost eclipsed the fascination with sex” (141). These and other insights arise from her own informed intuition, though she credits others with helping sharpen her narrative regarding Updike’s religious faith and the manner in which he approached death. She believes that Updike and her other writers, whose portraits she found “hugely and strangely reassuring,” had in common “the power of an inspiring mind working on the problem” (15).

The problem, of course, is death, and the things that absorbed these inspiring minds in their last days—Sontag’s wild resistance, Freud’s determined smoking,

Updike's self-reflective verse, Thomas's drunken carousing, Sendak's intricate illustrations—reveal the coping mechanisms used by gifted writers and artists, masters of metaphor, to empower them to turn their final leaves, complete their final chapters.

But, of course, we can be no more certain than can Roiphe that her perceptions are reliable. Her meeting with Salter at his home is, for obvious reasons, the only unmediated, primary research she can offer. His advanced age and prolific writing life are what drew her to him. He died at the age of ninety of a sudden heart attack. What he shares with her in their interview is generous of spirit and lovely to savor. It will serve as a very nice final reward to Roiphe's readers for having accompanied her on her journey to understand, quite literally, the meanings of death.

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Unlocking the Secrets of Updike's Fiction

LAURENCE W. MAZZENO

Myth and Gospel in the Fiction of John Updike, by John McTavish. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016.

John McTavish's *Myth and Gospel in the Fiction of John Updike* is the record of two lives over a forty-year period: the imaginative life of John Updike and the critical life of one of his most devoted readers. John McTavish's credentials differ markedly from most critics of Updike's work. An ordained minister in the United Church of Canada, he brings to his criticism a keen understanding of the theological dimensions of Updike's novels, stories, poems, and essays. Unsurprisingly, the essays and reviews collected in *Myth and Gospel* have a decidedly religious orientation, as McTavish works diligently to establish his claims that myth plays a large role in Updike's ostensibly realist novels and short stories, and that religious allegory, particularly biblical typology, provides the key to understanding a writer who "stand[s] virtually alone with his bracing interaction of realist fiction and solid theology" (106).

Those deeply immersed in Updike scholarship will experience a sense of *déjà vu* in reading this collection. Nearly everything in the book is a reprint, or a revision, of articles and reviews McTavish published over the past four decades. The predominance of myth in Updike's fiction (and the influence of Karl Barth) serves as the central theme of chapters on *Rabbit, Run* (1960), *The Centaur* (1963), *Of the Farm* (1965), *Marry Me* (1976), and *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984). An essay on the Rabbit tetralogy argues that this series will be the work for which Updike is

remembered and admired for decades (even centuries) to come. Supplementing these articles is “A Potpourri of Reviews,” a chapter consisting of twelve McTavish reviews, most from *Theology Today* or the *United Church Observer*. Some of these evaluate Updike’s books; others cover important critical studies, notably James Yerkes’s *John Updike and Religion: The Sense of the Sacred and the Motions of Grace* (1999) and Adam Begley’s *Updike* (2014). Like the articles, these reviews focus on the spiritual and mythic dimensions of Updike’s fiction.

Curiously, the short stories are addressed in only one chapter; in it, McTavish highlights stories “where the mix of myth and gospel is particularly thick” (135). Despite its title, McTavish’s book also contains a chapter on myth and gospel in Updike’s poetry. In a conscious gesture of humility, McTavish includes an op-ed piece from the September 27, 1998, *Muskoka Advance* in which he makes the bold prediction that “next week John Updike will win the Nobel Prize in literature” (104). As McTavish admits, the prediction was rash but certainly delivered with conviction by a critic who sincerely believes in the value of Updike’s literary endeavor. As his later reviews and articles clearly demonstrate, McTavish has never lost his enthusiasm for the writer, who is able to “speak to the emptiness that characterizes so much of our postmodern culture” (111).

McTavish bolsters his assessments of Updike by also reprinting other scholars’ work. David Updike’s 2009 tribute to his father, first delivered at the New York Public Library, opens the volume. Philip Marchand’s long review of *Seek My Face* (2002), a review originally featured in the *Toronto Star*, appears in “Potpourri of Reviews.” McTavish also includes an interview with Updike from James Plath’s *Conversations with John Updike* (1994) and brief appreciations from twenty readers of Updike (Donald Greiner, Biljana Dojčinović, William Pritchard, and Plath among them) on how Updike’s fiction affected them. The closing chapter features the 2009 tribute to Updike delivered by J. D. McClatchy, then president of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Scholars familiar with early critical commentary on Updike will notice striking similarities between McTavish’s methodology and that of Alice and Kenneth Hamilton. In the 1960s and 1970s the Hamiltons wrote several articles and the first book on Updike’s work, *The Elements of John Updike* (1970). The argument of Kenneth Hamilton’s 1967 “John Updike: Chronicler of ‘the Time of the Death of God’”—that Updike is a prophet warning America to turn away from materialism and once again seek spiritual nourishment—is echoed in much of McTavish’s criticism. The correspondences are not surprising. McTavish knew the Hamiltons and admired their work; *Myth and Gospel* functions in part as a homage to them

for their contributions to Updike scholarship. In a long section of the book, “An Interlude: The Hamiltons,” McTavish explains his relationship with the Canadian professors and reprints his review of *Elements*. The section also contains two articles by the Hamiltons that appeared originally in the 1970s and are now hard to locate except in the collections of a few research universities. Whatever one thinks of the Hamiltons’ stridently theological readings of Updike’s fiction, having ready access to their assessments is important for anyone wishing to understand the history of Updike criticism.

The current focuses on cultural studies and on theoretical approaches to literary texts may cause some to be skeptical of a book arguing that we should read Updike to discover “the secrets in his stories” (174). McTavish finds the justification for his approach in a comment made by Updike, quoted as one of the opening epigraphs for this volume: “I think books should have secrets, as people do” (vii). McTavish’s essays and reviews hark back to a time when Updike critics were interested in these secrets—as George Hunt’s influential 1980 study *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things: Sex, Religion, and Art* amply demonstrates. It is certainly true that neither Hunt’s work nor that of the Hamiltons is cited frequently in contemporary criticism of Updike. Yet the religious and mythic dimensions of Updike’s fiction continue to attract critics as we move into the twenty-first century, as the works of Yerkes and David Leigh attest. It would be unwise, then, for scholars to dismiss out of hand the approach McTavish employs in *Myth and Gospel*.

One might have wished that McTavish’s exceptionally brief “Selected Bibliography” contained more than a listing of works that support his own interpretation of Updike’s fiction. Additionally, the absence of an index makes it difficult to locate commentary on specific novels or stories. Despite these small disappointments, *Myth and Gospel* is not only valuable for the insights it provides into Updike’s mind and the role he sees for the artist in the modern world, but also exceptional as a record of one scholar’s quest to understand a major American writer. For these reasons McTavish’s study is a welcome addition to the growing body of critical commentary on Updike and his work.

Contributors' Notes

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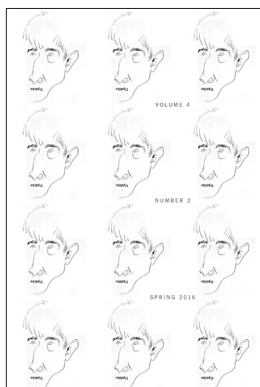
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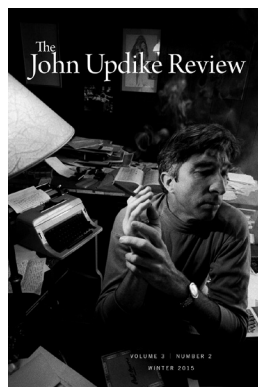
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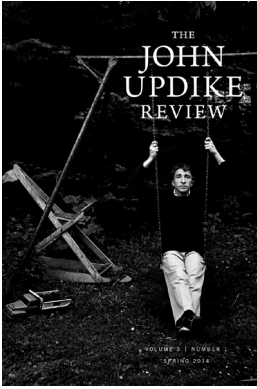
JUR 4.1 (Fall 2015).

Essays by Brian Duffy, Peter J. Bailey, David Penn, and Donald J. Greiner. Responses to *The Widows of Eastwick* by Judie Newman, James Plath, and James Schiff. Includes Updike Bibliography, 2009–2015 by James Schiff.



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Essays by Ward Briggs and Biljana Dojčinović, Donald J. Greiner, Matthew Shipe, and Pradipta Sengupta. Responses to "Gesturing" by Robert M. Luscher, Dario Sulzman, and Kathleen Verduin. Review by Matthew Shipe. Includes Updike's story "Gesturing."



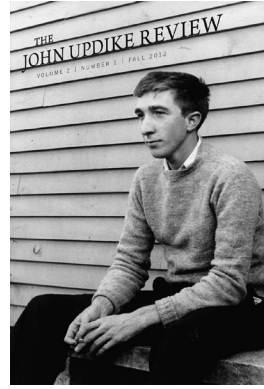
JUR 3.1 (Spring 2014).

Essays by Donald J. Greiner, Kazuko Kashihara, Sue Norton, and James Schiff. Responses to “Leaves” by Donald J. Greiner, Sarah A. Strickley, and David James Poissant. Reviews by Judie Newman, Peter J. Bailey, and Bob Batchelor. Includes Updike’s story “Leaves.”



JUR 2.2 (Spring 2013).

Essays by Jeffrey Ludwig, Vidya Ravi, Donald J. Greiner, Brian Duffy, and Peter J. Bailey.



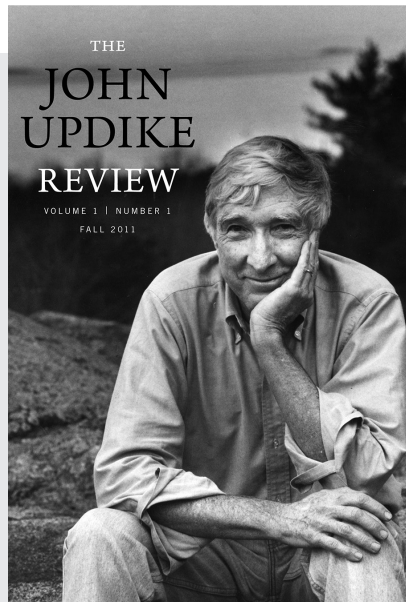
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Essays by Donald J. Greiner, Avis Hewitt, Brian Duffy, and Aristi Trendel. Reviews by Leonard Cassuto and Sylvie Mathé. Family panel discussion moderated by James Plath.

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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.

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IN THIS ISSUE

Marshall Boswell

Sue Norton

Ward Briggs

J. Alexander Ogden

John Philip Drury

James Schiff

Donald J. Greiner

Aristi Trendel

Laurence W. Mazzeno

David Updike
