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# The John Updike Review

## ESSAYS

- 1 Old World Readings of a New World Novel: European Perspectives on John Updike's *Terrorist*  
LAURENCE W. MAZZENO AND SUE NORTON
- 13 Imagining the Perpetrator: Reflections on the Terrorist as Other in Updike, DeLillo, and Amis  
SYLVIE MATHÉ
- 31 Gestures of Amends and Rebuke: Updike's "Gesturing," "Killing," and "A Constellation of Events"  
PETER J. BAILEY
- 47 Remapping the Updike-Cheever Relationship Thirty-Five Years On  
ROBERT MORACE
- 65 Precise Proofer: John Updike and the Galley of "Shipboard"  
DONALD J. GREINER
- 77 THREE WRITERS ON "HIS MOTHER INSIDE HIM"
- 79 His Mother Inside Him  
JOHN UPDIKE
- 85 Ghost Inside the Story: Spectrality in Updike's "His Mother Inside Him"  
MOLLY REID

- 91 The Women Inside Him: John Updike Writing the Feminine  
JENNIFER GLASER
- 101 From Without to Within: The Recalcitrant Semiotic Tracery  
of John Updike's "His Mother Inside Him"  
ROBERT M. LUSCHER

#### REVIEWS

- 113 Lost Luggage: Updike in the Keystone State  
MATTHEW SHIPE  
*John Updike's Pennsylvania Interviews*, edited by James Plath
- 119 Dialogic Impasses and the Literary Imagination  
ARISTI TRENDEL  
*Rhetorics of Religion in American Fiction: Faith, Fundamentalism,  
and Fanaticism in the Age of Terror*, by Liliana M. Naydan
- 123 The Towers' Shadow  
ANTONIO J. FERRARO  
*9/11: Topics in Contemporary North American Literature*,  
edited by Catherine Morley
- 129 Contributors' Notes

# Old World Readings of a New World Novel: European Perspectives on John Updike's *Terrorist*

LAURENCE W. MAZZENO AND SUE NORTON

Given the diverse and polarized reaction by reviewers and scholars in the decade immediately following its publication, John Updike's 2006 novel, *Terrorist*, is likely to become a textbook case for reception studies. In reception studies, differences in space (in Updike's case, globally) and time play an important role in shaping a reader's reaction to a text.<sup>1</sup> Within months of its publication, *Terrorist* generated hundreds of reviews in dozens of countries around the globe; scholarly articles began appearing less than a year later. Most notable is not simply the sheer number of publications devoted wholly or in part to this novel, but the wide range of critical commentary. By way of brief example: the expatriate American novelist Lionel Shriver argued that *Terrorist* "may be Updike's finest novel," while Christopher Hitchens claimed to be so disgusted by it that he sent it "windmilling across the room in a spasm of boredom and annoyance." What difference do these initial evaluations mean to subsequent readings of the novel? Sorting out the place of *Terrorist* in the Updike canon is likely to be an ongoing project for some time to come. This essay is an early attempt to initiate that work.

As most scholars will agree, no matter how valuable a text may be as a window onto the culture that produced it, no work of literature will endure unless it appeals to the aesthetic sensibilities of readers over time. But to view *Terrorist* from a purely aesthetic perspective is virtually impossible. In "Racing Toward the Apocalypse," Bob Batchelor makes an important observation about the critical straitjacket we

find ourselves in when approaching the novel: “One cannot analyze *Terrorist* outside the context of 9/11” (175). The work is a product not only of Updike’s personal experience—he witnessed the attacks from Brooklyn Heights—but also “what pundits deemed ‘the post 9/11 world,’ a new cultural environment fundamentally different than had existed before” (175). To this we must add a further limiting factor: our knowledge of Updike’s earlier work inevitably colors our reading of his later work. In “The Writer in Winter,” published by AARP in 2006, Updike himself worried that, like many aging writers, he was at risk of having been “typecast.” He recognized that reader expectations are driven by past experiences of a writer’s work. Indeed, Salman Rushdie called *Terrorist* “beyond awful” and suggested that Updike “should stay in his parochial neighborhood and write about wife-swapping because it’s what he can do” (qtd. in Campbell).<sup>2</sup>

#### WHY LOOK TO EUROPEAN CRITICS?

When *Terrorist* appeared, the United States was five years beyond 9/11 and three years into a war in Iraq that was growing increasingly unpopular. Roughly half of the American people wanted to wipe out terrorism at any cost, while the other half wanted to curb the adventurism of the Bush administration. Many American reviewers’ assessments of *Terrorist* had as much to do with their political bias as with their literary judgment—perhaps even more so. In an early review in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Harry Levins offers a prescient assessment of the novel’s impact in America: “*Terrorist* is likely to upset lots of people. American Muslims surely will complain that Updike has depicted them as mindless zealots, while some on the civil-rights side will accuse Updike of stereotyping his poor urban black characters. Red-state Americans will grouse that Updike portrays US society largely in Ahmad’s terms: hedonistic, carnal and godless.” More than a hundred reviews prove him largely correct, with a few notable exceptions. One never can be certain if American reviewers are unhappy with Updike’s politics or his aesthetic sensibilities, but they seem, as a rule, either to blame him harshly for transgressing into territory they believe should have been off limits to him, or praise him for exposing the dangers of home-grown terrorism.<sup>3</sup>

The reaction by scholars from the Middle East has been consistently hostile. Titles tell the tale: Maryam Salehnia’s “Political Zionism and Fiction: A Study of John Updike’s *Terrorist*,” Amal Al-Leithy’s “Stereotyping Islam: A Critical Study of Terror in John Updike’s *Terrorist*,” and Mohammad Deyab’s “Muslim Stereotypes in John Updike’s *Terrorist*” leave no doubt about their orientation. These and other

Middle Eastern scholars universally dismiss Updike's misguided portrait of Islam as another glaring example of Western ideological blindness.

European perspectives, however, suggest interpretive orientations less biased by national chauvinism or religious ideologies. Of more than fifty reviews of *Terrorist* in European newspapers and periodicals, the majority appeared in western European countries: fifteen in Britain, seventeen in Germany, five in France, and five in Denmark. Reviews were also published in Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Spain, Hungary, and Albania. Although it is hard to produce a simple "favorability scale" for these reviews, many of which offer surprisingly nuanced analysis of the novel, favorable notices generally outnumbered unfavorable ones by a margin of two to one.

Among positive reviews, several major trends emerge: approval for Updike's ability to understand his character; his appreciation for religious, ethnic, and racial diversity; and his withering critique of contemporary American values. Swedish reviewer Ragnar Strömberg, who calls *Terrorist* "without doubt one of Updike's strongest novels," suggests that it fits well into the Updike canon because it depicts a young man's quest for value and reveals the fragility of American identity. Writing in Germany's *Stern*, Gisela Ostwald even suggests that Updike's treatment of religion—including Islam—is quite favorable; notably, she says, the Imam is not made out to be a villain. Almost all who approve of *Terrorist* point out that Updike's real target is American decadence. Hungarian Miklós Vámos reflects the view of this contingent: Updike "takes as his subject not terrorism, but American consumerism."

A common charge made by European reviewers who find the novel wanting is that Updike relies too heavily on stereotypes. Hence, Pankraj Mishra lumps in Updike with other American novelists who have produced "identikit terrorists." Dutch reviewer Julie Smit finds the book well written but full of clichés. James Wood complains that "when Ahmad speaks, he sounds like V.S. Naipaul" and when he thinks "he sounds like John Updike." This view is shared by many others, including some who admire the novel. *Frankfurter Allgemeine* reviewer Julia Encke finds the novel tacky. Natasha Walter, who has not always been kind to Updike, admires him for his attempt at getting into the mind of a terrorist—a difficult task both artistically and politically, she says—but finds *Terrorist* artificial, too dependent on research and not enough on imagination. The same objections are made in the *London Review of Books* by Thomas Jones, who describes *Terrorist* as an "imaginative failure" (29).

In the same AARP essay cited above, Updike says that an older writer often finds himself competing against his younger self, and European reviews of *Terrorist* prove his point. The Updike canon certainly influenced Tim Adams's judgment that "this is a profoundly curious novel for John Updike to have written." Claire Allfree writes in the *Metro* that the novel "feels like the work of an ageing author trying to understand the modern world and his changing country out of a sense of moral obligation." Mads Rosendahl Thomsen suggests that Updike "peaked earlier." Wieland Freunde finds it necessary to remind readers of *Die Welt* that Updike was among the defenders of the Vietnam War—perpetuating a half-truth that is now influencing a third generation of critics. Also writing in *Die Welt*, Uwe Wittstock asks the broader question, can a Westerner credibly represent the motives of anti-Western fundamentalists? Implying that such representation is indeed impossible, she dismisses *Terrorist* as unworthy of Updike. Bryan Appleyard of *The Times* salvages his fairly negative reaction to *Terrorist* by resorting to comparative judgments: *Terrorist* "is not Updike's best novel," he admits, but it is "way better than almost everybody else's best" (6).

In addition to the dozens of reviews that appeared within two years of the novel's publication, *Terrorist* has received an unusual amount of critical attention from European scholars in the past decade. To date, nearly thirty scholarly articles and book chapters by Europeans discuss the novel at some length.<sup>4</sup> How they approach *Terrorist* depends in part on the individual critic's theoretical and political leanings. In their various hands, Updike's tale becomes a malleable text in which the words on the page are open to widely differing interpretation. In some respects, European critics have been less kind to *Terrorist* than European reviewers who share with their American counterparts the same broad norms of reviewing. Updike himself endeavored to codify these norms in *Picked-Up Pieces* where he wrote, "Do not imagine yourself a caretaker of any tradition, an enforcer of any party standards, a warrior in any ideological battle, a corrections officer of any kind" (xix). Reviewers, Updike advised, should "try to understand what the author wished to do, and do not blame him for not achieving what he did not attempt" (xviii). Literary critics, by contrast, tend to be academics and often take "party standards" as the starting point.

John Hawley argues that *Terrorist* is one of several "studies of the making of a terrorist" that "are rapidly becoming a literary trope as a subgenre within portrayals of disturbed late adolescence" (242). As one of more than a hundred published 9/11 novels, *Terrorist* is often analyzed along with other texts and subjected to extensive (or sometimes just perfunctory) comparative criticism. For example, in their chap-

ter on 9/11 fiction in *Sacred Violence: Political Religion in a Secular Age*, David Martin Jones and M. L. R. Smith place Updike among those novelists who view terrorism inspired by fundamentalist beliefs as an existential threat to Western ways of life. They point out—in what may be reasonably interpreted as criticism of the Bush administration specifically and American policy toward non-Western nations in general—that there is another tradition of the 9/11 novel, one that sees terrorism as a political statement against an imperialist colonial government representing the worst of Western hegemony. Similar commentary can be found in articles by Catherine Morley, Katherina Dodou, Birgit Däwes, and Ingrida Žindžiuvėnė.<sup>5</sup>

The consensus among European critics—though by no means a universal conclusion—is that Updike fails in creating a believable protagonist. The reasons for this judgment vary. Among British scholars, Richard Gray believes Updike is making a good-faith attempt to use his own “unbounded distaste for the secular temper of contemporary America and a world of commodities” to get into the mind of a young Arab American, but is “never able to engage his protagonist imaginatively” (34). Martin Randall argues that *Terrorist* suffers because Updike’s familiar preoccupations (sex and religion, and concern for the quotidian in American life) overshadow his attempt to get inside the mind of the terrorist. Claire Clambers has a harsher view: Updike simply resorts to stereotype, using Islam “rather reductively” (175). Geoffrey Nash believes Updike “does not have the semantic tools to penetrate the mysteries of Muslim identity,” a fault he shares with other Western novelists, since “the failure to engage with non-western cultures and identities” is “pervasive” (108). Behind this judgment resides, of course, the assumption that a novelist’s imagination cannot compensate for some direct experience (or perhaps academic expertise). Czech scholar Michal Sýkora argues that Updike has sidestepped the problem of confronting the non-Western mind by creating a hero that “is no terrorist” (87). Sýkora believes the novel is a failure because its didacticism, “ideological manipulation,” and ham-handed introduction of “correct models of behaviour (the brave Levy, Muslims loyal to the USA), turn most [readers] against Updike” (88).

In two articles that offer a measured critique of *Terrorist*, Anna Hartnell insists that, despite his denials and explanations to the contrary, Updike’s chief aim in *Terrorist* is to “take on Islam in the wake of 9/11” (“Writing Islam” 135). Unfortunately, she feels, Updike’s protagonist emerges as “Other,” an example of “commonplace Orientalist stereotypes” (135). Hartnell charges Updike with ideologically induced blindness: “Christianity polices Updike’s religious vision,” she says, “and further highlights his own secularist stance” (143). Hartnell’s criticisms pale beside those

of University of Mainz Professor Mita Banerjee, who says Updike's novel participates in the project of restoring whiteness as the dominant ideology by painting as suspect all other racial and ethnic groups. She argues that Updike's "psychological profiling" in the novel often slips into "racial profiling," a symptom of "a much wider logic haunting the war on terror" (15). Using legal terminology, Banerjee concludes that the novel is "a racial prerequisite case trying—and ultimately rejecting—an Arab American's claim to whiteness and hence to cultural citizenship" (19). In an article that points out how the tendency to attribute suicidal violence to non-Western nations fails to account for Western versions of the phenomenon, Arata Takeda of the University of Tübingen argues that *Terrorist* is one of several novels by Westerners that tend to "culturalize or religionize the motives for suicide bombing and thus, independent of their authors' intentions, to risk reinforcing a biasing trend" (471). By such lights, Updike as a writer of Western white privilege is destined to failure in attempting to imagine someone from a non-Western culture.

But there is a group of European critics that has written about *Terrorist* quite favorably. For example, Pamela Mansutti challenges Banerjee's "jingoistic" (108) reading, arguing that "whiteness does not come out as strong as Banerjee thinks" (113). Mansutti also argues, contra Hartnell, that "the religious underpinnings of Updike's poetics were essential in the construction of *Terrorist* . . . I believe Updike has a larger vision in *Terrorist* that questions the cultural imperialism of 'whiteness' by making the ethnic gaze of the young Arab American protagonist, Ahmad, the gaze we side with throughout the story" (108). Like Mansutti, Phillippe Cantié praises Updike for being able to get inside the mind of a budding terrorist rather than seeing the book's impressionable adolescent, Ahmad, only externally. Martina Wolff reads the novel as an exploration of identity formation in contemporary multicultural America. Dominic Head defends *Terrorist* on literary grounds, arguing that Updike is using the tools available to him to create an imagined scenario in which the protagonist's enactment of his growing rage against American culture is counterbalanced by the "beauty of the ordinary," which Updike is so adept at describing. Ulla Kriebner suggests that the political dimension of the novel is not to be found principally in its focus on the clash between Western and non-Western values; rather, Updike is concerned with "a renegotiation of Americanness for all of his characters and a search for or re-affirmation of some common ground beyond ethnic and religious borders."

However, it is Belgian critic Kristiaan Versluys who offers what is possibly the most extended defense of the novel's merits by a European in *Out of the Blue: Sep-*

*tember 11 and the Novel*. Arguing that *Terrorist* is indeed flawed if read as a political tract—or an indictment of Islam—he constructs a close reading that emphasizes Updike’s imaginative powers in exploring “the inner struggles of a boy adrift, who is attracted to the certainties of fundamentalist Islam but ultimately declines to pursue a life-denying ideology to its logical conclusion” (172). Somewhat incongruously, however, Versluys tends to write in the dichotomous language he wishes to expunge from the critical conversation—noting, for example, the presence of “several key scenes in which this tug-of-war between the directives of a strictly interpreted and death-driven Islam are opposed to the promptings of instinct and the joy-giving evidence of the senses” (174)—a description sure to disappoint Muslim readers (and others) who may not recall his earlier qualifier that Ahmad is drawn to a decidedly fundamentalist version of Islam.

Indeed, sensitivity to the varieties of Islamic experience is essential to any fair interpretation of the text. Irish scholar John-Paul Colgan argues that *Terrorist* is not simply another 9/11 novel but is part of Updike’s ongoing critique of American society, and he insists that Updike posits the figure of an adolescent, multicultural terrorist to examine and critique mainstream American values. Colgan’s understanding of the novel’s moral purpose is consistent with the perspective of Ireland’s most well-known book reviewer, Eileen Battersby, on Updike’s writing career in general. In her eulogizing column in *The Irish Times* in January of 2009, she begins by telling her readers that “John Updike, an observer who not only loved his country, he liked it, has died.” She goes on to praise Updike’s powerful historical awareness and to extol the subtle and deft ways in which he told the stories not only of his characters, but of America as well. Her sense of Updike’s overriding purpose—a purpose both social and aesthetic—is shared, as well, by Irish critic Brian Duffy who maintains that one of Updike’s greatest achievements is his resonant response to “modern existential despair” (27).

These three words, “modern existential despair,” comprise an apt phrase by which to describe Ahmad Mulloy’s psychological plight. As so many European critics and reviewers have argued, Updike constructs this Irish-American-Egyptian Angry Young Man at the center of his novel mainly so that he can gaze upon contemporary America’s demoralizing culture of instant gratification and rampant consumerism. As Colgan writes, “by constructing viewpoints that develop as a result of multicultural contact, Updike is able to comment critically on the nature of American progress to a degree that would not otherwise be possible” (129). Had Updike not “liked” his country quite so much, he probably would not have

ventured to offer us, in a post-9/11 world, a sympathetic, aspiring jihadist to steer us through a tunnel.

#### LITERARY MERIT AND LONGEVITY

In offering any judgment about the merits of *Terrorist*, it may be wise to remember Samuel Johnson's observation that it is not possible to judge writers' reputations until a hundred years have passed since their death. Perhaps the same criteria ought to pertain when evaluating books so that sufficient time will have elapsed for the transitory events that shape initial reactions to fade from memory and permit more disinterested judgments. After all, no one reads Tolstoy's *War and Peace* today principally as an analysis of the Napoleonic Wars.

Nevertheless, some preliminary predictions might be made about *Terrorist* based on the reactions of Europeans who have written about the novel. Several reviewers and most critics who read *Terrorist* as a political document find it wanting. On the other hand, those who see it as fiction in which Updike uses the current worldwide interest in terrorism to explore familiar themes—particularly in this instance, coming-of-age in contemporary America—give the novel considerably higher marks. Either way, general interest in the novel has been sustained over a decade. Many other 9/11 novels have appeared, some by authors whose reputations rival Updike's. Yet *Terrorist* continues to figure prominently not only in discussions focused on Updike but also in those that treat the larger political dimensions of America's self-proclaimed war on terror, with its attendant—if sometimes unstated—assumptions about the nation's role as the defender of “freedom.”

The novel also goes some way toward escorting us, interested readers from anywhere, on an inventory of contemporary American societal anxieties: obesity, jihad, bullying, public-school mediocrity, racial profiling, fear of aging, and even loneliness. New Prospect, the novel's made-up suburb in decline, offers an apt vantage point from which Updike allows us to take stock of the many ordinary forms of human suffering that equally ordinary human compassion could alleviate. Ahmad's last-minute choice to forgo destruction and veer toward the George Washington Bridge, despite his seething anger toward the devils who have taken away his God, suggests the possibility of American renewal, of a new founding. While critics and reviewers of serious fiction may inhabit an overlapping realm of intellectualism and judgment, readers of fiction inhabit our perilous world. And in that space, thematics of hope offer abiding, perennial appeal. For better or worse, then, *Terrorist* is likely to be one of the novels on which Updike's enduring reputation is affirmed.

## NOTES

1. The effect of initial and subsequent reader response on the reputation of a work or author is discussed at length by contributors in Machor and Goldstein 2001.

2. Reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic expressed surprise that Updike would decide to write a novel against type. Gail Caldwell begins her generally laudatory review with the observation that “we tend to regard [Updike] as the author of a certain kind of novel: gorgeous prose, white-guy existential despair, sex in the suburbs.” Reva Klein observes, “In *Terrorist*, John Updike has waded into unfamiliar and inevitably shark-infested waters: religion, radical Islam, race, prejudice. Heady, edgy, very of-the-moment stuff, but at the end of it, you wish he’d stuck to the material he is good at and is at home with: the physical and metaphysical angst of suburban, middle-class America.” Paul Constant argues that, because he’s grown older, Updike seems incapable of adjusting to the new society around him: “The world has changed and Updike can’t quite change with it. He can only stand and gape.”

3. It is not simply that a majority agree that the novel is “shopworn” (Kakutani) or “lame-brained” and “improbable” (Gates). Charles Demers questions Updike’s authority to write such a work, arguing his status as an older, privileged white male make it impossible for him to enter into the mind of a working-class young Muslim. Sheheryar Badar Sheikh concludes that he could only have written this novel for money. Even the “red-staters” Levins mentions could find fault: Warner Huston excoriates Updike as a liberal too sympathetic to this supposedly misunderstood group. Many who praise the novel do so for extraliterary reasons: Ian Mulgrew believes *Terrorist* suggests “that there is far more common ground than is contemplated by the US Administration’s demonic jingoism.” Tracy Simmons, writing in the conservative *National Review*, describes the novel’s portrait of Ahmad as “sympathetic, if not sympathizing,” and considers the work a cogent examination of fundamentalism. Roger Burdette sees *Terrorist* as a potential morale booster; Updike provides an “interesting and entertaining—albeit fictional—glimpse into how a terrorist’s reasoning processes might work. That’s important a time when thousands of American and coalition service members are putting their lives on the line against real, live terrorists.”

4. The number of scholarly assessments by American critics is not quite as high; we have identified fewer than two dozen articles and book chapters published between 2006 and 2016.

5. To be fair to European critics, some have noticed that there has been a tendency to disparage all novels like *Terrorist*. As David Brauner of the University of Reading noted in 2010, the “relatively few American fictions engaging explicitly with 9/11” focused on “the American experience”; those like Updike’s “that have attempted to inhabit the minds of the perpetrators of terrorism have received harsh criticism for the alleged shortcomings of their portrayals” (3).

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# Imagining the Perpetrator: Reflections on the Terrorist as Other in Updike, DeLillo, and Amis

SYLVIE MATHÉ

Renewing with a form of ancient retribution, in which the punishments visited upon the sinners fit the crimes they perpetrated, Frank Bidart, in his poem “Curse” (2002), apostrophizes the 9/11 terrorists in these terms:

May what you have made descend upon you.  
May the listening ears of your victims their eyes their  
breath  
enter you, and eat like acid  
the bubble of rectitude that allowed you breath.  
*May their breath now, in eternity, be your breath.*

\*

[...]  
Out of the great secret of morals, *the imagination to enter  
the skin of another*, what I have made is a curse.

The poet’s malediction thus consists in literalizing “the great secret of morals,” which is also the great secret of fiction, namely the power of the imagination to enter the skin of another. This essay takes for its cue this great secret, *the imagination to enter the skin of another*, not as the *lex talionis* that the poem calls for but as an ethical exploration of the powers and limits of fiction in relation to the literature of 9/11. More specifically, what I wish to address is the problematic issue of the fictionalization of the 9/11 terrorists, with a view to investigate why, as critic Natasha Walter

writes (and actually titles her essay), “The leap into the terrorist mind appears too great for most authors.” This exploration of the particular challenges, in terms of ethics and aesthetics, inherent in the fictional representation of Islamist terrorists will be based primarily on John Updike’s 2006 novel *Terrorist*. This fictional venture into the forbidding territory of terrorism will then be put into perspective with three other texts in which the historical Mohamed Atta and his sidekicks figure more or less prominently: Updike’s earlier short story “Varieties of Religious Experience” (2002), Martin Amis’s “The Last Days of Muhammad Atta” (2006), and Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007). The objective will be to examine how the paradigm of “otherness” is inscribed in these texts and how the Islamist terrorist ends up being construed as an “Ultimate Other” (Versluys). I shall be guided in this reflection, on the one hand, by Edward Said’s concept of otherness in his study on Orientalism and, on the other, by Emmanuel Levinas’s definition of the Other in terms of responsibility for the Other. Said shows that Western views of the East are distorted by a Eurocentric perspective that results in “othering,” i.e., treating the other as alien or inferior. By contrast, Levinas’s “Other” (capital O) implies the recognition of the full singularity of the Other as different from the same, particularly someone belonging to a different ethnicity or culture.<sup>1</sup> So whereas Said argues that “othering” is an act of reduction, of downgrading and exclusion, Levinas insists that the interpellation of the face of the Other is the bedrock of ethics. The face of the enemy is the face of the Other—calling us to the prohibition of violence and the precariousness of life, as Judith Butler eloquently argues. In her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Butler pits the death of anonymous targets against the assassination of the American reporter Daniel Pearl. In so doing, she raises, in Levinasian terms, the ethical issue of the value of life, including the lives of others, by asking, “what counts as a livable life and a grievable death” (xv):

Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life*? . . . Indeed, Daniel Pearl, “Danny” Pearl, is so familiar to me . . . But those lives in Afghanistan, or other United States targets, who were also snuffed out brutally and without recourse to any protection, will they ever be as human as Daniel Pearl? . . . Mourning Daniel Pearl presents no problem for me . . . But at what cost do I establish the familiar as the criterion by which a human life is grievable? (20, 37–8)

#### “TRUTH IS STRONGER THAN FICTION”

What followed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks was a resurgence of political Manichaeism in terms of a division of the world into good and evil, Us and Them, or, as

Benjamin Barber had phrased it in the 1990s, “Jihad vs McWorld.” The geopolitical consequences of this initial response are well known. But what of the novelistic responses? If novelists are characterized by imaginative empathy, if indeed empathy is their trade—“The core skill of a novelist is empathy,” Mohsin Hamid, author of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, reminds us—how do they manage to exercise this skill in a world shattered by terror attacks? How can imaginative empathy be engaged at the service of an event that defies representation? As Henry Perowne, the protagonist of Ian McEwan’s oblique 9/11 novel, *Saturday* (2005), puts it, “The times are strange enough. Why make things up?” (66). Why indeed not stick to fact and nonfiction—a refrain that rings through the critical reviews of the decade?<sup>2</sup> Cullen Murphy, long-time editor of *The Atlantic*, thus accounts for the magazine’s decision to stop publishing fiction starting in 2005<sup>3</sup>:

In recent years we have found that a certain kind of reporting—long-form narrative reporting—has proved to be of enormous value . . . in making sense of a complicated and fractious world. . . . Certain kinds of nonfiction writing have claimed some of the territory once claimed by fiction. Not because nonfiction writing has become ‘fictional,’ in the sense of taking liberties, but because certain traits that used to be standard in fiction, like a strong sense of plot and memorable characters in the service of important and morally charged subject matter, are today as reliably found in narrative nonfiction as they are in literary fiction. Some might even say ‘more reliably’ found. (Cullen Murphy, quoted in Donadio)<sup>4</sup>

So while writers like V. S. Naipaul argued that “the novel’s time is over” and that only nonfiction can render the complexities of this new world, novelists went on pondering the impact that 9/11 would have on their vocation. “Is it too soon?” asked DeLillo in his seminal essay, “In the Ruins of the Future,” while calling for the salutary, hoped-for “counter-narrative”: “The narrative ends in the rubble, and it is left to us to create the counter-narrative” (34). Following the initial phase of shock, the texts were slow to come and even slower to tackle the question of the terrorists’ representation. If entering the skin of the other—becoming Madame Bovary—has traditionally been the prerogative of the novelist, somehow the leap of imagination required, the ethical gap to be bridged, when dealing with terror attacks and suicide bombers turned out to be arresting factors. While nonfiction writing could thrive on this territory of the “contemporary extreme” (Durand and Mandel), terrorism and terrorists appeared to put in jeopardy the powers of fiction. In his essay “Outtakes and Outrage: The Means and Ends of Suicide Terror,” Samuel Thomas interrogates the impasse that the world of suicide martyrdom

entails: “How then are we to proceed from this impasse? What exactly . . . would constitute an acceptable way of measuring and mediating the humanity of the suicide bomber?” (441). The question of humanity, in its ethical implications, is here central. As terrorist violence, in its very nature, defies humanity, imagining terrorism and its perpetrators forces the mind to court the limits of humanity. Reflecting upon the imagination of evil, the psychoanalyst Ruth Stein stresses the breach of humanity that it implies:

Thinking about evil requires a tremendous effort of the imagination and a willingness to encompass mentally a totally threatening phenomenon. . . . The shocking absence of compassion in evil-doing is jarringly discordant with our Western ideals and humanistic values. . . . (396)

How then does the novelist put his powers to work “to understand something that is meant precisely to annihilate any understanding as well as any physical (or normal) existence” (396)? If Conrad, in his exploration of the “heart of darkness,” knew how to capitalize on “our fascination with the abomination,” “the horror, the horror,” it seems that in the context of post-9/11 America the imaginative probing of that horror was severely restrained by a reluctance or a flaw of the imagination to enter into the other’s mind. Hence the question: Is the challenge facing novelists attempting to write about 9/11 forbidding in itself, a kind of “blind spot” (Agamben) in representation as is the case with fictional attempts to deal with the Shoah?<sup>5</sup> Or can it be viewed as a corollary of the “irremovable strangeness of being different” (Homi K. Bhabha), resulting in a form of incapacity to perceive the other from within the landscape of cultural difference—what the *New York Times* critic Rachel Donadio zeroes in on when she asks, “for a writer with no Arabic and a limited understanding of Islam, is literary skill enough? . . . How far can the Western literary imagination take us into the minds and motivations of Islamic terrorists?” (“Under Western Eyes”)

#### AHMAD

Ian McEwan, for one, argued in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 that “now was the time to just go back to school, as it were, and start to learn” (quoted in Donadio), a cautious admonition to fellow novelists to approach the subject only after undertaking serious research. Yet, while Updike’s abundant display of the suras of the Qur’an testifies to his thorough background research for *Terrorist*, the novel paradoxically suffers from this scholastic exhibition. What comes to mind here is Cynthia Ozick’s warning, her caveat about another one of Updike’s fictional

“others,” the Jewish writer Henry Bech: “Beware of any character requiring more sociology than imagination” (quoted in Shainin). Contrary, for instance, to his brilliant handling of arcane computer science in *Roger’s Version* or of angioplasty procedures in *Rabbit at Rest*, Updike’s use of his Quranic research feels laborious in *Terrorist*. His characterization for once suffers from it, as do his dialogues. Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, his eighteen-year-old Arab American protagonist from New Jersey (who has been indoctrinated by a fundamentalist imam from Yemen and secretly maneuvered by an undercover CIA agent to have a bomb explode in the Lincoln Tunnel) is never the “natural” that Updike’s earlier Pennsylvania protagonists are. When the novel begins, Ahmad, who has grown three inches in the past year, is about to graduate from high school. The opening sentence in italicized free reported speech—“*Devils, Ahmad thinks. These devils seek to take away my God*” (3)—echoes in a familiar way, and we enter the novel moving in and out of the character’s consciousness, feeling securely anchored in Updike territory. As in *Rabbit, Run*, it is springtime, and the halls at Central High smell of perfume. Caught in a web of intertextual references, the reader thus embarks on a journey where the trail is at once new and studded with shocks of recognition.

In terms of sheer weight, *Terrorist* remains the most in-depth investigation so far of why and how a young man beset by otherness in Western culture might opt for the road of terrorism. Spanning a period of six months, between April and Labor Day, Updike’s narrative arc retraces a kind of abortive coming of age, the germination and ultimate renunciation of a homegrown terrorist bent on jihad. Choosing to deal with terrorism in the aftermath of 9/11 from the point of view of a would-be perpetrator from *inside* the nation, rather than from that of a victim, is testimony to Updike’s imaginative audacity. Anna Hartnell rightly points out that “this attempt by a seventy-four-year-old New Englander to penetrate and ventriloquize the mind of an eighteen-year-old Islamist terrorist seems like a huge thematic jump for Updike” (484). While *Terrorist* may not be the “fiction of international relations and extraterritorial citizenship” (153) that Richard Gray and Michael Rothberg call for, Updike’s angle, given the context of the novel’s publication at the heart of the war on terror, is nevertheless one that deserves full recognition: “Updike’s decision to tackle the perspective of the ‘perpetrator’ is a courageous attempt to pull away from the prevalent cultural tendency to privilege the category of ‘trauma’ in treatments of 9/11 that emerged in its wake and with notable rapidity in the years 2005–2007” (Hartnell 478). Moreover, what Updike chose to privilege in his novel is less the political dimension of Islam than its religious impact. Returning to his familiar territory of Middle Atlantic, Middle America, but shifting his focus to

the Arab American community, the novelist thus deliberately set out to explore what Hartnell identifies as “the unnamed source of America’s post-9/11 fear: the Islamist enemy within” (480). The genesis of the novel, as revealed by the author in several interviews, lays bare the religious concern that lies at its core:

I imagined a young seminarian who sees everyone around him as a devil trying to take away his faith. . . . The 21st century does look like that, I think, to a great many people in the Arab world . . . I think I felt I could understand the animosity and hatred which an Islamic believer would have for our system. Nobody’s trying to see it from that point of view. I guess I have stuck my neck out here in a number of ways, but that’s what writers are for, maybe. (quoted in McGrath)

In his interview for the French daily *Le Monde*, Updike further clarified his purpose in writing the novel as a way of “understanding, or at least imagining *the other side*”: “to write a novel from the side of empathy, if I may say.”<sup>6</sup> So, by a leap of the imagination, the young Christian seminarian became the troubled Arab American Ahmad, a teenager from a small New Jersey town in the period following 9/11.

The protagonist’s struggle to retain his faith and live by it is of course familiar ground to Updike. Ahmad, the offspring of a mixed marriage between a “red-haired American mother, Irish by ancestry, and an Egyptian exchange student” (13), who met at the local campus of the State University of New Jersey, has been raised by his mother ever since his father “decamped” when he was three years old. Having converted to Islam at the age of eleven, Ahmad has been following the teachings of Shaikh Rashid, an imam from Yemen who has become his “surrogate father” (13). Burning with the fire of faith, Ahmad feels alienated in his surroundings, and he keeps repeating that his whole purpose is to “hold to the Straight Path” (225). Locked in binary thinking, Ahmad sees devils all around him, “*confusing things and making the straight crooked*” (11), so he lets himself be drawn into a jihad plot to become a suicide bomber and gets prepared to die an apocalyptic death that will be a way to punish his desecrated nation. Unwilling, however, or unable to take him all the way, Updike eventually and unexpectedly rescues his would-be terrorist, having him yield before some unlikely life force that takes over at the last minute and releases him from his doom.

Ahmad’s sudden illumination, as he drives his truck full of explosives through the Lincoln Tunnel, is based on the fifty-sixth sura, “The Event”: that “[God] does not want us to desecrate His creation by willing death. He wills life” (306). The very wording here strikes a familiar chord, echoing in uncanny fashion the last sentence of Updike’s short story “Pigeon Feathers”: “that the God who had

lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever" (33). Though separated by over half a century, "Pigeon Feathers," one of Updike's most celebrated coming-of-age stories, and *Terrorist*, a more risky venture into "the other side," are eerily resonant, and nowhere more so than at the moment of epiphany that concludes both stories. But where the conclusion of the short story carries with it the seal of revelation, *Terrorist* closes the loop of the novel in bleaker fashion: the last sentence, in its finality, "*These devils—Ahmad thinks—have taken away my God*" (310), sends us back to the opening sentence, "*Devils, Ahmad thinks. These devils seek to take away my God*" (3), turning it into a kind of nihilistic self-fulfilling prophecy. If the change of tense strikingly sums up what has been accomplished in the novel, Ahmad's last-minute change of heart in the darkness of the Lincoln Tunnel appears more as a graphic hallucination—the pattern of the tiles "explod[ing] outward in Ahmad's mind's eye in the gigantic fiat of Creation, one concentric wave after another, each pushing the other farther and farther out from the initial point of nothingness" (306)—than as a deliberate decision or a genuine revelation. If anything, the epiphany is negative and, as Peter Herman notes, "Ahmad's final thoughts admit defeat" (707). What future lies ahead for him remains the reader's guess. Thus, the resolution of the plot, contrived through a series of hasty coincidences that defy any kind of plausibility, leaves the novel hanging in a kind of vacuum. If, admittedly, Updike's protagonist was conceived as "an extension of the troubled teenage character in his early story 'Pigeon Feathers,' who comes to feel betrayed by a clergyman" (McGrath), the result with Ahmad is far less convincing than had been the author's earlier portraits of Christian characters undergoing similar crises of faith—most memorable among them, of course, his adolescent persona David Kern.

Why the graft from the seminarian to the Islamic believer does not take, however, has less to do with the plot's short circuits and more to do with the language Updike invents for his eponymous terrorist. By contrast, the character of the fatigued Jewish high school counselor, Jack Levy, who at the eleventh hour jumps into the truck to rescue Ahmad, or the Lebanese American Charlie Chehab, a complex figure whom Updike uses "to bridge the divide separating America and the Islamic terrorist" (Herman 712), seem much more alive on the page. Ahmad, however, remains stranded on *the other side* of the divide, a divide that is first and foremost linguistic. Whereas Charlie's speech, punctuated by his recurring affectionate apostrophes to Ahmad as "Madman," carries the reader in its spontaneous flux, Ahmad's idiom mires him in a no-man's-land. Indeed, what millennial

from New Jersey would speak like Ahmad? His syntax is oddly literary while the vocabulary and rhythm of his speech mimic the many suras that are quoted and commented on in the novel. In his fight against the so-called “devils” of his world—the materialism, obscenity, cupidity, decadence, and nihilism of American society—Ahmad thinks and speaks in some kind of archaic version of the English language, formal and foreign sounding at best, stilted and implausible at worst. The absence of contractions in his speech is the first marker of oddity, giving his exchanges with other characters a strange imbalance that is further compounded by his recurrent formulaic professions of faith and sentential sayings:

- I seek to walk the Straight Path. (148)
- [T]he American way is the way of infidels. It is headed for a terrible doom. (39)
- I do not find that television encourages clean thoughts. (172)
- The obsession with sex confesses the infidels’ emptiness, and their terror. (214)

His daily lexicon, as reflected in his speech, includes such words as “trivialize” (39), “consorting” (70), and “enamored” (180), and such phrases as “menial living” (35), “minion of the state” (141), and “sorely astray” (230). If not exceptional in themselves, these locutions sound out of tune for a millennial, the sentences reverberating an unnatural formality not to say a downright artificiality, as in these few examples:

- There is nothing in Islam to forbid watching television and attending the cinema, though in fact it is all so saturated in despair and unbelief as to repel my interest. (70)
- Is there a plan developing, with these seeds that are being watered? (200)
- [T]he mission is mine, though I feel shrunk to the size of a worm within it. (237)
- It would slay and inconvenience many unbelievers. (292)

Such awkwardness, issuing from an author whose ear for dialogue has always been such a strength, indicates the limits, in this case, of his “logic of empathetic identification” (Thomas 438).

Ahmad is thus a *terroriste manqué*, though less so because of the unforeseen happy ending than because of what turns out to be a failure to fully grasp and penetrate the otherness of the character. James Wood, in his review of the book, makes the point that “it is the otherness of Islamicism that is missing in the book.

Despite all the Koranic homework, there is a sense that what is alien in Islam to a Westerner remains alien to John Updike." Ahmad is too far and too close at once: too far from authenticity, and too close to Updike's earlier Christian protagonists. He, thus, joins the ranks of those "identikit terrorists" of fiction, "[a]ssembled from jihad-mongering journalism and propaganda videos and websites," that the critic Pankaj Mishra derides, characters who "make Conrad's witheringly evoked revolutionaries in *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes* look multidimensional."<sup>7</sup> In addition, for all his desire to enter the mind of the other and to set down what he meant to be a "sympathetic," even "loving portrait" (McGrath) of an Islamic believer-turned-terrorist, Updike cannot quite manage to render the other as Other. Mired in scholasticism, his terrorist remains a flawed, unconvincing avatar.

#### MOHAMED, MUHAMMAD, HAMMAD

In his earlier story "Varieties of Religious Experience" (2002), one of the very first fictional attempts at dealing with 9/11, Updike chose a polyptych format to explore the attacks, this time frontally. While *Terrorist* considers the aftermath of the event and its domestic repercussions in the life and psyche of a hyphenated Arab American teenager, "Varieties of Religious Experience" plunges in medias res. Juxtaposing four fragments, each with its own reflector reverberating the events from four different angles, followed by a coda reprising the opening section that resumes the storyline six months later, Updike leads the reader successively into the point of view of the witness, the perpetrator, the victim (in one of the Twin Towers), and finally, the passenger (on one of the hijacked planes).

The story's second section, which imaginatively deals with the perpetrator's experience, serves as a fictional re-creation based on witness accounts of Mohamed Atta's stay in Florida. This narrative strand focuses on the ringleader of the 9/11 hijackers, referred to in the story as plain Mohamed, and his accomplice Zaeed—Ziad Jarrah, the hijacker pilot of United Flight 93. In this scene, set a few weeks before the attacks in a sleazy roadside strip joint on the east coast of Florida, the men are downing whisky upon whisky in accordance with their instructions: "their training regimen had inculcated the importance of blending in, and getting drunk was a sure method of merging with America" (90). Contrary to Ahmad Mulloy flaunting his difference in *Terrorist*, Mohamed and Zaeed fake assimilation and pretend to a sameness that is but a semblance, an act. And contrary to the stance of sympathy, even affection, that Updike claimed to be prevalent in his characterization of Ahmad in *Terrorist*, the point of view is here distanced, even though the narrator gives us direct access to Mohamed's inner thoughts. We enter

his mind as he wrestles with the obscenity of his surroundings, which he perceives as a kind of hellish experience—a naked woman entwining herself upside down around a pole, a trio of sexy dancers, the liquor flowing all around—while endeavoring to keep the secret of his mission from being inadvertently revealed: “Within Mohamed his great secret felt an eggshell’s thickness from bursting forth” (94). In spite of the plunge inside the terrorist’s consciousness, resulting in the reader’s direct involvement through the use of free reported speech, what prevails is a sense of estrangement and alienation.

The sketch, as seen through the eyes of the drunken protagonist, remains hazy and seems eerily discordant, placed as it is in the story between the reactions of a witness, Dan Kellogg, whose faith in God suddenly vanishes as he watches the World Trade Center South Tower collapse from the vantage point of his daughter’s apartment in Brooklyn Heights, and those of two victims: Jim Finch, trapped in his office in one of the Twin Towers as the smoke gradually invades the floor; and an elderly woman from Princeton named Carolyn, one of the passengers on board United Flight 93, who tries to make sense of the confused situation as the plane plummets into a Pennsylvania field. These three narrative strands, which culminate respectively in Dan Kellogg’s “revelation of cosmic indifference” in front of the crumbling tower, Jim Finch’s desperate rallying of his “nine-to-five family” before jumping from the tower (99), and Carolyn’s final cry for God’s mercy before the fatal crash of United Flight 93, are meant to engage in dialogue with the Florida sketch of Mohamed and Zaeed in the “land of infidels” (93). But the story fails to achieve an overall effect of integration. The scene featuring the drunk Mohamed has something dreamlike or nightmarish about it, betraying an impossible empathy, an “othering” of the imagination. When the story returns at the end to Dan Kellogg, back in New York six months later, the sense of dislocation is further heightened. Dan’s “conversion to atheism had not lasted” (110), for beyond the question of faith, he has discovered that attendance at the Episcopal church with his fellow members is a necessary part of his life, akin to a civic pledge—“part, and not the very least part, of getting along, of doing their best, of being decent citizens” (111). Yet what light the resolution of his religious crisis sheds on the other fragments remains murky. In keeping with the title, borrowed from William James’s famous study (1902) of individual religious experience, the “varieties of religious experience” tackled in this portmanteau story all bear the stamp of singularity. All of the fragments raise, in one form or another, the question of faith, of confrontation with the other, of death and the “sickness of the soul,” yet they remain disjointed and the narrative strands formed by these “varieties” do not cohere. As Versluys argues,

In this case . . . the gravitational pull of the story fails to position terrorism within manageable reality. The far-flung narrative strands do not come together. No overarching image or metaphor can be found to tie up all loose ends. The story is an example of the heteropathic imagination, but at the same time it announces its defeat. In its very structure, the story dramatizes terrorism as an impossible topic. (167)

The historical figure of Mohamed Atta resurfaces, with a different spelling, in British writer Martin Amis's short story, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta." Prior to approaching 9/11 in fiction, Amis wrote numerous nonfiction pieces, beginning with "Fear and loathing" (which later became the essay "The Second Plane"), which appeared in *The Guardian* just a week after the attacks. This essay interestingly ends on a plea for what he calls "species consciousness":

[S]omething over and above nationalisms, blocs, religions, ethnicities. During this week of incredulous misery, I have been trying to apply such a consciousness, and such a sensibility. Thinking of the victims, the perpetrators, and the near future, I felt species grief, then species shame, then species fear. ("Fear and loathing")

The sense of a species community, however, soon vanished as Amis grew increasingly querulous and critical of Islamic fundamentalism. This shift in spirit culminated in the three-part essay he published in *The Guardian* for the 5th anniversary of 9/11, called "The age of horrorism." In this vindictive piece, Amis tackles the question of suicide-mass murder, which he writes is

[A]stonishingly alien, so alien, in fact, that Western opinion has been unable to formulate a rational response to it. . . . Suicide-mass murder is more than terrorism: it is horrorism. It is a maximum malevolence. The suicide-mass murderer asks his prospective victims to contemplate their fellow human being with a completely new order of execration. ("Age of horrorism")

And it is precisely this "new order of execration" that Amis fictionally enacts in his contemporaneous short story, "The Last Days of Muhammad Atta," through the imaginative reconstruction of the last two days of Mohamed Atta's life.

Beginning in Portland, Maine, and ending at the moment of impact on the North Tower, the story portrays Atta as the very "horrorist" of the *Guardian* essay. The graphic physicality of the portrait, the insistence on the character's acute chronic constipation and sexual frustration, the detestation that can be read in his face, the hostility that transpires from his every pore, everything conspires to make of him an alien in his world. Dismissing political as well as religious considerations, Amis confines the terrorist's motivations to an abstract hunger to

kill: killing becomes “the core reason” for everything, the means to enact Atta’s “all-inclusive detestation,” “his pan-anathema” (161): “To unite ferocity and recititude in a single word: nothing could compete with that. . . . If you took away all the rubbish about faith, then fundamentalism suited his character, and with an almost sinister precision” (154).

The focus on the last two days of Atta’s life allows Amis to intersperse known facts—the data compiled about the hijackers’ whereabouts in the days preceding the attack, Atta’s last will and testament, the final jihad instructions—alongside imaginative forays into Atta’s body and soul. Employing physical details, such as Atta’s contemptuous and grimacing expression on the widely circulated picture of his face, Amis projects into the character a pathological intestinal blockage bordering on the grotesque, which leads Atta to seek a vial of “holy water” from a dying imam, whom he visits in a hospital in Portland. This alleged “holy water,” supposedly from the town of Medina, is to be drunk “when you feel your trial is near,” says the imam. It will, in fact, trigger the explosive release of Atta’s bowels, simultaneous with the explosion of the tower. In return for the bottle of water, the imam asks Atta to tell him about his induction by the Sheikh, namely Osama Bin Laden. Totally undocumented, this episode is part of the imaginative reconstruction of the character, allowing Amis to account in his fiction for what remains unexplained in Atta’s last moves, i.e., why he and his sidekick Abdulaziz al-Omari drove to Portland on September 10. The penetration into the other thus becomes a kind of subjective fantasy for Amis, a projection of his own “horrorist” bias. Mishra here again rails against “Amis’s genitals-centric analysis [constipation and sexual frustration] of radical Islam.” As such, “Atta is utterly ‘othered’” and the portrait of the horrorist becomes “an exercise not of the heteropathic but the idiopathic imagination” (Versluys 160, 159).

Atta reappears yet again, not as main subject but as minor character, in the plot of Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007). DeLillo’s case, of course, stands apart in any study of the literature of 9/11, insofar as he is the novelist who has been said to have “invented” 9/11. “There is a curious knot that binds the novelist and the terrorist,” he writes in *Mao II*, and much of his fiction indeed builds upon this knot, making of his preoccupation with terrorism and conspiracy the center of the plots of most of his earlier works, from *Libra* to *Mao II*. Though the bulk of *Falling Man* is concerned with the story of Keith Neudecker, a survivor of the attacks on the Twin Towers, each of the novel’s three sections concludes with a counternarrative dealing with a fictional terrorist figure by the name of Hammad, one of the “muscle men” assigned to assist Atta in the hijacking of AA 11, along with

a second character, Amir, who is an avatar of Mohamed el-Amir Atta himself. The novel thus retraces in kaleidoscopic fashion Hammad's itinerary: his radicalization in Hamburg, his reading of the Qur'an and attendance at the mosque, his conversion to Jihad in Afghanistan, the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, the wait in Florida, and finally the descent into the Hudson Corridor on board the hijacked plane. DeLillo skims through these topoi in neutral fashion, as though leafing through a how-to-become-a-terrorist brochure. Atta's presence by Hammad's side remains rather shadowy, as a kind of domineering, fanatic guide on the path of jihad:

Amir said simply there are no others. The others exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them. This is their function as others. Those who will die have no claim to their lives outside the useful fact of their dying. (176)

Though impressed by what sounds to him like "philosophy," Hammad is nevertheless divided, having to resist "the need to be normal" (83) and the attraction of the comforts of the West: "He had his visa card, his frequent flyer number. He had the use of a Mitsubishi" (171). Yet he will turn himself over to his mission for it is what gives shape and direction to his life and, most importantly, what makes him a part of the brotherhood: "Shed everything but the men you're with. Become each other's running blood" (83).

Within the larger structure of the novel, the effacement of the self within the group echoes the main protagonist's similar reactions following 9/11: incapable of surmounting his trauma, Keith lets his life drift, absent and alien to himself, increasingly drawn to the oblivion he finds in casinos and the world of poker. In this sense, Keith becomes the Other. The impact of the plane on the North Tower, as lived by Hammad in the cockpit, and the explosion felt by Keith inside the tower operate like the baton of otherness passing from terrorist to victim. The collision literalizes the "convergence of the victim and victimizer" (Gamal 102) in this ultimate "encounter with strangeness," a tour de force that can be read as answering Martin Amis's dual interrogation in "The voice of the lonely crowd": "What was it like to be a passenger on that plane? What was it like to see it coming towards you?" This syntactic and symbolic transfer, bringing the novel full circle and back to the beginning, has nothing to do with empathy. Keith is said at one point to be "becoming the air he breathed" (230). Having physically survived the explosion in the tower, he psychically dissolves in the ruins of the disaster. Just as his body now includes "organic shrapnel . . . human flesh that got driven under the skin," the air he breathes is from the aftermath of the catastrophe, that makes him turn to ash inside. Meaning "evaporates" (Versluys 39) in the here and now; melan-

choly takes over. Thus, far from being the necessary, salutary “counter-narrative” DeLillo was calling for in his essay “In the Ruins of the Future,” the novel is in fact “death-driven,” “an utterly aporetic and deliberately antiredemptive narrative”: “the terrorist attacks in no way precipitate a cleansing or catharsis” (Versluys 21). What follows the collapse of the Twin Towers is a form of numbness and death in life, a “self-othering” (27) that destroys everything vital in the characters.

In conclusion, what these four texts present us with are four modalities of imagining the perpetrator: rendering the Other as the same (*Terrorist*); staying confined in the heteropathic imagination and dramatizing terrorism as an impossible topic (“Varieties of Religious Experience”); othering the terrorist as the “horrorist” in a projection of the idiopathic imagination (“The Last Days of Muhammad Atta”); and finally, operating a transfer between the Other and the same at the level of estrangement and alienation (*Falling Man*).

This is, of course, but a small sample of the literature of 9/11, though coming from some of the most seasoned novelists of our time. In each case, however, the ethical and aesthetic responses to the challenges posed by the representation of the perpetrator seem to remain incommensurate to the task. Seen “under Western eyes,” the Islamist terrorist appears beyond the pale of a convincing fictional representation, as though the words of Theodore John “Ted” Kaczynski, the notorious “Unabomber” of the 1990s, could be applied to the perpetrators of 9/11 and their followers: “You couldn’t figure me out then, and you can’t figure me out now.” This may explain why much of the response to the literature of 9/11 has been lukewarm at best, and downright critical in most cases. If DeLillo, Updike, and Amis fail in their “struggl[e] to define cultural otherness,” it is for want of “a capacious moral vision,” says Mishra, one that would recognize the overwhelming power of “belief and ideology.” Instead, for these writers, “Islam, or the ‘east,’ has never exerted the same influence on western self-perceptions; they remain empty abstractions, often filled by self-appointed defenders of the western civilization in order to identify alien and dangerous ‘others’” (Mishra). In other words, what this literature foregrounds is a radical deficit in the apprehension and comprehension of the Other.

To break this deadlock of representation, what is needed perhaps, as Versluys points out, is “an attempt to triangulate the situation” in order to break the binary thinking of Us and Them. Witness, for instance, Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Laila Lalami’s *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* or, in a different context, Yasmina Khadra’s *The Attack*.<sup>8</sup> Another track to follow might be what Derrida calls for in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (2003): “the deconstruction of the notion of terrorism is the only politically responsible course of action” (xiii,

italics mine). This might be another way out of the deadlock not only in politics but also in fiction. Yet the question remains of how to penetrate otherness in order to deconstruct it, and the risks this involves.

By way of conclusion, we might remember what Toni Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark*:

I am interested in what prompts and makes possible this process of entering what one is estranged from—and in what disables the foray, for purposes of fiction, into corners of the consciousness held off and away from the reach of the writer’s imagination. . . . [I]magining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, *becoming*. (4)

Can one *become* the Other, the terrorist, if, as Philippe Roger writes about DeLillo, terrorism like the sun cannot be confronted face to face?

#### NOTES

1. The “Other” corresponds to Paul Ricœur’s *ipse*, i.e., the other in the singularity of his trajectory and promise, the other as subject engaged in history.

2. Among other titles, “Truth Is Stronger Than Fiction” (Rachel Donadio, *New York Times*, Aug 7, 2005); “Dangerous Characters” (Benjamin Kunkel, *New York Times*, Sept 11, 2005); “The leap into the terrorist mind appears too great for most authors” (Natasha Walter, *The Guardian*, July 24, 2006); “Does literature sell 9/11 short” (*The Guardian*, Feb 23, 2007), “Novels about 9/11 can’t stack up to non-fiction” (*USA Today*, Sept 11, 2007).

3. Updike’s short story “Varieties of Religious Experience” originally appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* (November 2002).

4. See, for instance, Lawrence Wright’s remarkable study of the genesis of Al Qaeda, *The Looming Tower* (2006), or C. J. Chivers’s exemplary accounting of the Chechen terrorist attack on the school in the Russian town of Beslan, “The School,” in *Esquire* (June 2006).

5. This essay is part of an ongoing reflection on the question of the fictionalization of 9/11 terrorists. An earlier, shorter version has appeared under the title “Representation and Excess: Is the Figure of the Terrorist in 9/11 Fiction a ‘Blind Spot’ (Agamben) in Representation?” in *Excess(es)*, Mounir Guirat editor (Med Ali Editions, 2016, pp. 85–97).

6. *Le Monde*, Interview with Lila Azam Zanganeh (January 5, 2007, p. 12, italics mine).

7. Mishra, in his attack, is lumping together Updike, DeLillo, and Amis.

8. See Nash, “Writing Back to America,” 108–115.

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# Gestures of Amends and Rebuke: Updike's "Gesturing," "Killing," and "A Constellation of Events"

PETER J. BAILEY

In an interview, John Updike acknowledged: "I'm willing to show 'good taste,' if I can, in somebody else's living room. But our reading life is too short for a writer to be in any way polite. Since his words enter into another's brain in silence and intimacy, he should be as honest and explicit as we are with ourselves" (Vendler 113). Some readers might be surprised to see Updike subsequently providing this argument with a spiritual justification: "I have felt free to describe life as accurately as I could, with especial attention to human erosions and betrayals. What small faith I have has given me what artistic courage I have. My theory was that God already knows everything and cannot be shocked. And only truth is useful . . . Only truth, however harsh, is holy" (*Self-Consciousness* 231). The stories I address here—"Gesturing," "Killing," and "A Constellation of Events"—if "true" in any sense, are certainly harsh in their depictions of the characters' "human erosions and betrayals," including those of Updike's alter egos. My darker purpose is to ask whether any of these stories is itself an example of "human erosions and betrayals"? Do they, that is, invite readers to see beyond recognizable literary ironies to authorial self-criticism and self-betrayal?

Of course, even Updike's most autobiographical fiction contains levels of insulation for the writer, dynamics of irony that render him "safe." As he explained, "The fabricated truth of poetry and fiction makes a shelter in which I feel safe, sheltered, within interlaced plausibilities in the image of the real world for which I

am not to blame. Such writing is in essence pure" (*Self-Consciousness* 231). Because of their obvious (and dramatically compelling) relationship to Updike's personal experience, "Gesturing," "Killing," and "A Constellation of Events" might be described as relatively less "pure," and thus less generative of the "shelter in which I feel safe." What I want to juxtapose in this essay are two critical possibilities at work in these stories. Updike either ironizes his alter-ego characters sufficiently to absolve himself of any blame for the autobiographical situations he depicts. Or else he does something similar to what he described in the conclusion of Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada*: "the cardboard flats and gauze trappings collapse, and the author/hero, heavy with death, lumbers toward the lip of the stage" (*Picked-Up*, 202). In these three Updike stories, the author/hero emerges, heavy instead with guilt—if not also with some substantial self-justification.

First, however, we need to establish the autobiographicality of these stories. "John Updike wrote about himself," Adam Begley observed hyperbolically in his biography, *Updike* (10). Begley's biography stops short of identifying the author's fiction as unmediated autobiography, but his delineation of the disintegration of the Updikes' marriage in the early to mid-1970s, juxtaposed with the stories and novels Updike produced during those years, clearly indicates that Updike was, at minimum, fictionalizing from life. My essay will follow Begley's example in discussing in autobiographical terms "Gesturing," "Killing," and "A Constellation of Events," the first and third of which are discussed in his biography. I will argue that "Gesturing" and "Killing," though published for a national audience in *Playboy*, were written, in part, with a specific reader in mind, namely Updike's first wife Mary. If "Gesturing" were a work of creative nonfiction, I will contend, it would constitute a perversely sincere affirmation of the writer's voided marriage as well as main character Richard Maple's dubious rationale for the termination of the fictional marriage. "Killing," I'll argue, is Updike's fictional attempt to respond positively to Joan Maple's plea in "Divorcing: A Fragment." There, Richard Maple asks her, while they are in their eighteenth month of painfully straggling toward divorce, "What are you asking, sweetie?," to which Joan replies, "That you know what it feels like" (*Maple Stories* 215). Finally, in "A Constellation of Events," Updike strives to demonstrate that he knows what it feels like to be a woman named Betty falling in love with a clownish fellow named Rafe via a remarkably undramatic coupling which leads them to agree that, "'We're going to be a lot of trouble, aren't we?'" (*Trust Me* 82).

"Gesturing" has the oddly mixed distinction of having been rejected by *The New Yorker* and of being Updike's choice, of his eleven stories included in the

*Best American* series, for his contribution to *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*, which he edited. His introduction to that volume provides scant clarification for his selection of “Gesturing” as the story which represents him most appropriately for that very substantial anthology: “My own story seemed of the several available to offer the most graceful weave, mingling the image of a defenestrating skyscraper with those from a somewhat gaily collapsing marriage” (Updike xxii). Given that this sentence is embedded in a paragraph discussing theme in the stories of other writers he has selected for the volume, Updike’s affective rationale for including “Gesturing” seems particularly anomalous. Those who have read Updike’s similarly equivocal “Foreword” to *The Maples Stories* will recognize the same genial evasiveness and stiffness; in those stories, Updike observed, “One of [the Maples] is usually feeling slightly unwell, and the seesaw of their erotic interest rarely balances. Yet they talk, more easily than any other characters the author has acted as agent for” (*Maples Stories* 11). It is tempting to ascribe the unease of that assertion to the discomfort Updike clearly felt in addressing work so apparently autobiographical that draws from lives in addition to his own for dramatic material. By selecting “Gesturing” to represent him in *Best American Stories of the Century*, however, Updike was deliberately calling attention to this story that emerged somewhat invisibly in *Playboy* and had its first book publication in the paperback edition of the Maples stories titled *Too Far to Go*, a collection based on a televised version of the stories. What I am suggesting is that “Gesturing” meant more to Updike than is conveyed by his description of its imagery interweaving a divorce with a “defenestrating skyscraper.” The capacity to submit personal experience to the rigors of aesthetic rendering was, of course, one of Updike’s greatest gifts, and few readers would deny the possibility that Updike preferred this story because it so sympathetically dramatizes a final, amicable dinner shared by a couple on the verge of divorce. (His “gaily collapsing marriage” description suggests that he found “Gesturing” more cheerful than readers and critics have.) The story’s limitation is that the evocation of that evening—like the entire narrative—reflects only one perspective.

Reviewing *Too Far to Go* in 1979, Paul Theroux observed that “If there is something serious missing here, it is [Joan Maple’s] point of view. I think any married woman could quite justifiably accuse Updike of weighting his argument in favor of Richard; worse, he seems to want us to sympathize and understand Richard while at the same time pitying Joan. . . . [I]t strikes me as special pleading to omit the other side of the story” (Theroux 7). A brief recounting of the narrative weave of “Gesturing” will prepare us to pose a question never addressed in the story

that, as Theroux suggested, locates itself very consistently within Richard Maple's perspective: what might Joan Maple, had she the opportunity to read it, make of "Gesturing"?

"Gesturing" represents Updike well in the *Best American* collection because it exemplifies his fondness for fugally constructed stories that are less precisely plotted than they are woven together out of a set of contiguous themes or images. ("Packed Dirt . . .," "The Blessed Man of Boston . . .," and "The Music School" are three familiar examples.) The pedal chord uniting the various events and meditations of "Gesturing" is implicit in the title; from the first scene on, we watch Richard and Joan Maple communicating through gestures evolved during the twenty years of their marriage. After weeks of separation during which Richard appears regularly for the family dinner hour, Joan asks him to move out of town into Boston, a request he embraces enthusiastically, having himself hesitated to do so out of fear that Joan cannot function without him nearby. Richard's Boston apartment looks out on an unfinished skyscraper that frequently ejects its windows onto the street below, necessitating that they be replaced by unsightly black slabs. Richard develops an affection for the disfigured building, which he associates with a bachelor life he enjoys more than he expected to, part of the pleasure of which involves having his wife and mistress pay him conjugal visits. The story's final scene depicts Richard and Joan having dinner at a restaurant they had patronized throughout their marriage, exchanging intimate details about their new lovers. Richard's closing epiphany constitutes the moment to which one would most like to have Joan Maple's reaction.

Joan might initially be flattered by the closing that Stanley Elkin, introducing the story in *Best American Short Stories 1980*, so admired for its dramatic ending sentence: "There is usually something summary and terribly final about the closing rhetoric [in the stories Elkin selected]—the ringing long-range long view of language" (xv). What Elkin was celebrating was Updike's description of Joan's last gesture: "The motion was eager, shy, exquisite, diffident, trusting." Updike wrote: "[Richard] saw all its meanings and knew that she would never stop gesturing within him, never; though a decree come between them, even death, her gestures would endure, cut into glass" (*Early Stories* 819).

Joan would understand immediately that one of the motifs of the story is the difference between the communication modes of Richard's mistress, Ruth, and her own. Ruth is a former schoolteacher who insists on things being spelled out and specified in language: "Her words often seemed not real words but blank counters, phrases of a prescribed etiquette." Joan's words, on the other hand, "always opened

inward, transparent with meaning" (802). Communication in the Maples' marriage has been largely conducted through gestures, actions on Joan's part that allow Richard to "see all [their] meanings" without her ever uttering a word. (Richard may not be a writer, but he nonetheless married a woman who expresses herself the way much of post-Hemingway literature does.) As a Radcliffe graduate, Joan would also notice the convergence between Richard's notion that "her gestures would endure, cut into glass" and its echoing of the affirmation Richard twice notices etched into the window of his Boston bachelor digs:

With this ring  
I thee wed

Those six words, she must surely recognize, will constitute "a decree come between them" of Richard's interior monologue—his future articulation of this vow in replacing Joan with Ruth as his wife. Similarly, it is unlikely that Joan would miss the story's implication that Richard is discomfited by the intrusion of this marriage formula into his bachelor lair: he likes his "holiday" from husbanding and palpably delights in having an apartment to which his two women can visit him for sex. Once he publicly repeats the formula etched indelibly into the glass, he will re-enter the condition of bourgeois constraint against which he had chafed in the years with Joan. As Julian Barnes described this dilemma in reviewing *The Maples Stories*, "Updike's epitomal marrieds, the Maples, try the easiest escape from marriage, adultery; then the second one, divorce. But what lies beyond? A second marriage, perhaps further dreams of leaving, and so on, until life's final escape, into death" (10).

Because "Gesturing" dramatizes the Maples' marriage as a culminated series of private gestures exclusively perceived by Richard, the final passage seems to commemorate both the gestures and gesturer. "He saw through her words to what she was saying," Updike wrote: "—that these lovers, however we love them, are not us, are not sacred as reality is sacred. We are reality. We have made children. We gave each other our young bodies. We promised to grow old together" (808). Since Richard seriously believes that Joan's words "always open inward, transparent with meaning," he would have to recognize that the undelivered indictment at the end of her protracted gesture would be "AND YOU'RE BREAKING THAT PROMISE!" If "reality is sacred," why is it, she might also wonder, that we're choosing to unite with "not us" lovers, and with a reality less sacred?<sup>2</sup> What Richard's interpretation of Joan's gesture suggests is that she is resigned to the divorce, though the story provides little evidence for this. In fact, on at least one occasion

when she implies an acceptance of the split, Richard is certain that she is waiting for him to say that the divorce isn't inevitable and to back off the assertion with which she provisionally agrees, but then he quickly changes the subject. There is, admittedly, a measure of self-indictment in Richard's elaborate misconstrual of Joan's gesture, but, like the story's closing sentence, it compliments her through providing a rationale for their marriage's severance.

The final sentence reads: "The motion was eager, shy, exquisite, diffident, trusting," Updike wrote: "[Richard] saw all its meanings and knew that she would never stop gesturing within him, never; though a decree come between them, even death, her gestures would endure, cut into glass." Robert Luscher argues that "Updike pulls together the motifs in a masterful closural weaving, less a resolution of the plot than a gesture that illuminates a reflection from [*Too Far to Go*]'s foreword: 'if temporality is held to be invalidating, then nothing real succeeds'" ("Motions of Meaning" 119). Beautifully expressed, but Joan Maple might object that this, like many formalist readings of the final sentence, overlooks how immersed it is in Richard's self-serving subjectivity.

Richard's compliment to Joan's no-need-to-explicate gestures contains within it a cruel justification for breaking up the marriage: since her gestures survive in him, Richard can with clear conscience move on to Ruth, secure in the self-justifying notion that all that matters of Joan lives on in him, as if "cut into glass." Would that mollify the Joan Maple who appears in "Divorcing: A Fragment"? Not in the least. Whereas "Gesturing" closes upon Richard's self-absorbed resolution of the tension between Joan and Ruth, "Divorcing: A Fragment" dramatizes how desperately unreconciled Joan is to the split, the juxtaposition accounting, perhaps, for Updike's other than self-evident inclusion of this fragment into the collection. It also throws into ironic focus the assumedly affirmative ending of the previous Maples story, "Gesturing," by revealing how little consolation Joan Maple would find in learning that her gestures live on in Richard once he has formally and legally separated himself from her. Richard alone benefits from the memories of her gesturing. The lovely Modernist close of "Gesturing" offers the reader a gratifying aesthetic culmination while giving Joan no solace whatever. "Gesturing," she would understand, only gestures toward conciliation and condolence; it is, instead, Richard's resoundingly sneaky declaration of independence from her.

"Harsh!" I imagine my students responding to this projected Joan Maple reading of "Gesturing." Perhaps so, but even more caustic is "Killing." In this story it isn't Joan Maple who shows her husband and the reader "what it feels like" to be an abandoned wife, but the story *does* at least partially respond to Theroux's criti-

cism of the Maples stories for never incorporating Joan's point of view. Lynne, the protagonist of "Killing,"<sup>3</sup> is also the third-person narrative center, and it is therefore through her eyes that we view both the last days of her father's life and the final days of her marriage to Martin. Adam Begley notes that Mary Pennington Updike's father died during the Updikes' marital dissolution, leading some readers to wonder why for "Killing" Updike renamed his couple and chose not to include the story in the autobiographically-oriented *Maples Stories*. As we shall see, although the story is more fractious and explicitly erotic than the Maples stories tend to be, Lynne and Martin resemble the Maples in many ways.

Because her father is a widower and her sisters live elsewhere, it falls upon Lynne to decide whether to have her father receive continued medical treatment or cease medication and allow him to die. (Thus, one explanation of "Killing" as the story's title.) Out of protracted marital habit, she confers with Martin about her decision, often receiving from him the opinions of his mistress, Harriet. Lynne's judgment is influenced by her father having sat with her when, as a girl, she suffered insomnia at the onset of menstruation. "In her memory," Updike wrote, "[her father's] voice had been not merely paternal but amused, leisurely, enjoying itself, as if this visiting were less a duty than an occasion to be relished, in the manner of the country world where he had been a boy, where sitting and talking had been a principal recreation. He had not begrudged her his time, and she wanted not to begrudge him her company now. She would put him to sleep" (81). Her inability to accomplish for him what he achieved for her years earlier ("she would put him to sleep") is the first of two failures to minister to men for which she blames herself, and with which Updike's story appears to indict her as well.

As she sits by her father's side, Lynne meditates upon the tenacity with which he is holding on to life: "In his pugnacity and ferocity Lynne saw the force, now naked, that had carved from the hard world a shelter for his four dependent females" (814). (Is this how a woman would think about her father—or how a man would think a woman would think about him—and his paternalistic power?) "With Martin's leaving, she, too, was naked. Herself helpless, she at last loved her father in his helplessness." The story's central metaphor emerges here: Lynne's father's death in her absence and her husband's rejection of her are all one source of terrible suffering linked by the resoundingly recurrent word, "abandoned." Updike continues, "Her love made all the more shameful her inability to stay with him, to lull his panic at the passage facing him as he had once lulled her panic at entering womanhood." "Just relax," she tells her father, who evinces no consciousness of anything she says. "Re-lax. It's all right. I'm right here, Daddy. I won't go away"

(811). His unresponsiveness, the incessant TV chatter in the nursing home, and the instabilities of the facility's other patients compel Lynne to break her solemn vow to him. She's at home, raking her "frostbitten lawn," when a nurse calls with word of his death.

Once the funeral is over, Martin agrees to spend the night at his former home (like Richard Maple, he has moved to Boston during the separation), and his behavior there engenders the story's primary critique of him. Rather than consoling her for her father's death, he uses the event's aftermath as an opportunity to lobby Lynne about the virtues of his mistress:

Lynne saw that for him the funeral had been an opportunity for Harriet's advancement. In his mind he had leaped beyond their separation, beyond the divorce, to some day when she, his first wife, would be gracious to his second, repaying this supposed admiration. How small, Lynne thought, he had grown: a promoter, a liaison man. "I did nothing," she said.

"You did everything," he responded, and this, too, was part of his game: to sell her herself as well as Harriet, to sell her on the idea that that she was competent and independent; she could manage without him. (815)

This passage effectively skewers Martin's agenda, confirming that Updike fully understood what a wife might feel like as she watched her husband weaseling his way out of their marriage with transparent salesmanship and disingenuous compliments. Updike also knew how critically she would perceive a husband's guilty but well-received attentions to the children he has left:

[Martin's] virtuoso show of dutifulness—his rapid survey of the photographs the boys had developed in their darkroom, the brisk lesson in factoring he administered to his younger daughter—to Lynne felt intended to put her to shame. His removal, rather than bringing her and the children together, had put distance between them. They blamed her for losing him. They blamed themselves. Night after night they sat wordlessly around the dinner table, chewing their failure. (816)

Updike clearly understood, too, the self-hatred that a husband's defection can instill in his former family, though Lynne here may be projecting too readily her own feelings of desertion onto her children. In Lynne's eyes, the effect of the separation on Martin has been improving, though desensitizing: "Harriet had made of him something smaller but more positive, less timorous and diffuse. Before, he had been in the house like the air they unthinkingly breathed; now he manifested himself among them as a power, his show of energy and duty vindictive—the display of a treasure they had wasted" (816).

Martin's unlikable behavior here might have reconciled Lynne to the divorce, were she not subsequently compelled by their sharing a bed into re-enacting a central liability of Updike's fictionalized marital pairs. Consequently, the remaining scene of "Killing" seems gradually to deflect the story's critique from Martin to Lynne.

Because all four children are at home, Martin is obliged to sleep with Lynne in the couple's former marriage bed. He declines Lynne's gesture inviting lovemaking ("that would be too much," he primly admonishes her), and he then proceeds to complain that—owing to an inadequate pillow and her oblivious slumber, which causes him, as it had throughout their marriage, anxiety—he can't fall asleep. (With Harriet, Martin boasts, "I sleep like a baby.") Her father's death is another cause of his worries, and when Lynne comments that the man's will to live "put me to shame. It put us all to shame," Martin asks "Why?" (818). His question surprises her, and in an echo of "Gesturing," she thinks, "The old one and she had understood each other without trying. She understood him now: he was saying, *Put yourself to shame, put yourself to death, but don't include me: I'm alive. At last.*" Arguably, Lynne comprehends Martin more presciently than Richard in "Gesturing" imagines Joan's thoughts about "lovers-not-being-sacred-as-we-are-sacred," which is merely a blandishment intended to facilitate his exit from their marriage. The cause then of Martin's lack of vitality in their marriage, as Lynne in "Killing" views it? She intuits that, Martin's disclaimer notwithstanding,

His taut body wanted to make love. But, as had happened so many nights when they were married, by the same mechanism whereby the television news had lulled her, commercials and disasters and weather and sports tumbling on with the world's rotation, so her awareness of Martin's wishing to make love—of male energy alive in the world and sustaining it—put her to sleep, as her father's once sitting by her bedside had.<sup>4</sup> (818)

*Male energy alive in the world and sustaining it?* Is this Lynne's indictment of herself for nodding off, or Updike's indictment of her for not rising to the level of vitality that the "male energy that sustains the world" indubitably deserves? In the story's close, Lynne fails once again to meet that level of energy. "Re-lax," she tells Martin, reprising her urgings to her father. The scene that follows very likely accounts for the story's publication in *Playboy* rather than in *The New Yorker*.<sup>5</sup> Lynne handles Martin's penis, attempting to vitalize it, with the ultimate result that we've seen often in Updike texts of marital collapse: "Together, after a minute, they realized it was not rising, and would not rise. For Martin, it was a triumph, a proof" (819)—a triumph, assumedly, of his perception of the marriage's brokenness, a proof of

its irreversible loss of potency. So supremely confident is Martin in his flaccidity that he actually defies her: “‘Come on,’ he taunted, ‘Do your worst.’” Stanley Elkin would have much admired the final paragraph of “Killing” for its cruel conjuring of marital closure: “For Lynne it had been, in [Martin’s] word, an experiment. Among her regrets was one that, having held her father’s hand so continuously, she had not been holding it at the moment in which he passed from life into death; she had wanted to know, childishly, what it would have felt like. It would have felt like this.” Death would have felt like the unresponsiveness of Martin’s phallus—in both instances, Lynne is depicted as deficient in ministering to the male, her failure in each case justifying her abandonment by father and husband. All that’s left is for Martin and Lynne to do what she tried (and failed) to help her father do: “‘Go to sleep,’ someone [Martin] was pleading far away. ‘Let’s go to sleep’” (819).

In “Killing,” arguably, Updike was most focused on conveying the parallel between the father’s hand and the soon-to-be-ex-husband’s penis. The “weave” of two instances of Lynne’s hands on males may have diverted Updike’s attention from the story’s concomitant demonstration that this is a marriage doomed by sexual incompatibility, and that, however obnoxious Martin is depicted as being, the sexual dysfunction is nevertheless dramatized as all Lynne’s. (He never even attempts to stimulate her.) The reader feels badly for Lynne, who is about to be abandoned by a second male, but this doesn’t change the reader’s impression that the story foregrounds Lynne’s inadequacy. Once again, as in “Gesturing,” “Killing” becomes a literary rationale for terminating a marriage. Was Updike actually seeking to make amends in these stories by demonstrating his compassion, or was he, perhaps unconsciously, writing fictionalized narratives of self-justification?

“Gesturing” ends on a Modernist epiphany of memorial preservation that provides no solace to Joan Maple, the object of Richard’s memory; “Killing,” which seems to want to prove that its husband/writer “know[s] what it feels like” to be an abandoned wife, closes on a note validating the marriage’s termination on grounds of that wife’s sexual incapacity. Updike must have understood how killing the conclusion of “Killing,” in its “honesty and explicitness,” would seem to at least one female reader who had previously served as his fiction’s first editor. “A Constellation of Events” provides an alternative vision of a marriage’s nullification, this time from the perspective of the woman who conspires in creating “the trouble” which she and Rafe Smith are eventually going to become.

In *Updike*, Adam Begley provides the publishing history of “A Constellation of Events,” which simultaneously offers compelling evidence for the story’s autobiographical basis. In March 1975 Updike completed his account of Betty and Rafe

(Updike and Martha) coming together over an essay on Jane Austen written by Betty's former professor. In Martha Ruggles Bernhard's actual experience, Begley explains, the professor was Vladimir Nabokov, who responded to her exam by saying he had wanted to "see what a genius looked like" (365). An endorsement from Nabokov, whom Updike admired, would have enhanced Martha's attractions for him, Begley argues, and the remainder of "A Constellation" details the meetings between Rafe and Betty that lead to their ultimately becoming "a lot of trouble" for their families and social community—trouble the story leaves undramatized. Aware of the sensitive nature of the material, *The New Yorker* suggested changes to the narrative for the purpose of disguising the actual circumstances, but even as late as 1979, Updike was still resisting publishing the story with those changes out of anxiety that Martha Bernhard's husband (who appears briefly in the story as Rob) would sue for libel. Consequently, as Begley puts it, "A Constellation of Events" finally appeared [in *The New Yorker*] when the damage done was a distant memory" (366)—eight years, that is, after Updike and Martha Bernhard married.

When the story finally appeared, few readers would have guessed its autobiographical nature because Updike had published so many other stories about suburban adultery<sup>6</sup>; in addition, the understated nature of "A Constellation of Events" would have seemed to belie any suspicion that its fable had any more emotional urgency for its author than do his other stories. Begley's description that "the two lovers are helpless as they drift into adultery" (366) seems to me exactly right: Betty, whose perspective the story occupies, is primarily entertained by Rafe's inability to keep his ski bindings closed on Sunday, the first day of the four-day amatory confluence/constellation of events that the story depicts. Betty seldom thinks about Rafe, save through the essay on Austen, the delivery of which is the pretext for his coming to her house on Monday when she is alone there. (The passage she reads to herself says much about her and the commitment she is gradually moving toward: "As Lionel Trilling was to say in 1957 [before women had risen in their might], 'The extraordinary thing about Emma is that she has a moral life as a man has a moral life'; 'A consciousness is always at work in her, a sense of what she ought to be and do'" [79].) After some heated foreplay in Betty's living room, which seems to take both of them by surprise ("What are we doing?" she asks him), Rafe flees, looking thoroughly relieved to have escaped.

The following day, Betty leaves on a scheduled trip to Philadelphia with her husband, feeling very close to Rob during the visit to her childhood home despite the fact that the smiles emerging on her face are clearly linked to Rafe. As she meanders among statues in the Museum of Art, a "consciousness is at work in her"

evaluating the strength of her new feelings. She muses: “*Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* no longer puzzled and offended her. The daring passes into the classic in our very lifetimes, while we age and die” (77). In the museum cafeteria, she notices that art students wear the uniforms of their counterculture predecessors from the sixties, and Betty decides that “Here, too, the radical had become the comfortable” (78). Although speaking affectionately with her husband over tea and going home with him to make love, she is mulling over J. Alfred Prufrock’s question, which she will articulate aloud when Rafe invites her to his office the following day: “Do I dare?” (81).

Not much in the four-day affair between Betty and Rafe seems very daring or radical, as the account of Betty’s Wednesday morning conveys: “The children gone to school, [Betty] moved through the emptiness of the house, exploring the realization that she was in love. Like the floorboards, the doorframes, the wallpaper, the fact seemed not so much pleasant as necessary, not ornamental but functional in some way she must concentrate on perceiving” (80). It seems as if she has stumbled upon the solution to a problem she was unaware of having.

In that frame of mind, she dials Rafe’s law-office number, “less to reach him than to test the extent of her emptiness.” When he invites her to meet him there, she asks, ““Do I dare?”” Rafe responds, ““I don’t know. Do you?” More gently, he [adds], ‘You don’t have to *do* anything. You just want to *see* me, right? Unfinished business, more or less?’” (81). On her way there, Betty notices that a winter sound from her childhood—“the song of tire chains”—is missing, and she realizes that “Snow tires had suppressed it. Time suppressed everything, if you waited.”

Once she arrives at his office, without preliminaries, Betty and Rafe make love on his office sofa, and more unfinished business results. Rafe proves impotent:

“What do you think the matter is?” he asked her.

“You’re frightened,” she told him. “I don’t blame you. I’m a lot to take on.”

He nodded, his eyes less green, here in this locked, windowless anteroom. “We’re going to be a lot of trouble, aren’t we?”

“Yes.” (82)

It is probably textually unfounded and critically irresponsible to invoke continuities between Updike stories with different protagonists. That said, after the intense drama of marital discord and infidelity leading to separation and divorce that mark the eighteen Maples stories, as well as other non-Maples stories such as “Killing,” “Problems,” “Guilt-Gems,” “Domestic Life in America,” “The Egg Race,” “Trust Me,” and “Deaths of Distant Friends,” all stories in which a separa-

rated ex-husband confesses his terrible feelings of guilt over having broken up his family—after all that, the precipitating cause of that dislocation and suffering is identified as an impotent sex act and the line, “We’re going to be a lot of trouble, aren’t we?”? Granted, Updike is justly famous for crafting literary anticlimaxes, but “A Constellation of Events” may be the most gracefully pulled punch of them all.

Begley concludes of Rafe and Betty that “They’re helpless and therefore somehow blameless” (366), an interpretation that seems to coalesce nicely with the emptiness Betty keeps feeling in these passages (neither her home nor her interior life present substantial obstacles to loving Rafe), and her intuition that this love for him is pragmatic; “Like the floorboards, the doorframes, the wallpaper, the fact seemed not so much pleasant as necessary, not ornamental but functional in some way she must concentrate on perceiving” (80). For Betty, this love is a “fact”; it’s “necessary,” not “pleasant” and “functional” to this woman who appears as far from romantic as an inamorata can be. Betty is nothing if not someone in whom “consciousness is always at work,” someone possessed of “a sense of what she ought to be and do.” When Rafe wonders whether his impotency is his body telling them that there is still time to back out, she glances up at his legal library and notices a paperback copy of Austen’s *Emma*. Then, as if reminded of Lionel Trilling’s characterization of the protagonist, “She answered, ‘No.’”

Betty has a different sense of time from Rafe’s anxious perception of it as something that runs out. As she reflects en route to his office, “Time suppressed everything, if you waited” (81)—time will suppress as well the hurt that she and Rafe are about to cause, and she is thoroughly prepared to wait stoically for that pain to be suppressed. She is serenely confident that their radical dislocation of existing conditions will, with time, become comfortable. The story’s muted tone and absence of erotic guilt are, clearly, projections of its point-of-view character. Occasionally, the style approaches Richard’s description in “Gesturing” of Ruth’s linguistic mode: “Her words often seemed not real words but blank counters, phrases of a prescribed etiquette.” That seems not completely unlike viewing falling in love as “functional in some way she must concentrate on perceiving.” In “Love Song for a Moog Synthesizer,” which contains a character not completely unlike Betty, the narrator comments about the protagonist courting her, “Sometimes it occurred to him that not everyone could love this woman” (*Problems* 178).

“A Constellation of Events” ends with the kind of rhetorical culmination that Stanley Elkin so admired for its “ringing long-range long view of language”: “And, though there was much in the aftermath to regret, and a harm that would never cease, Betty remembered these days—the open fields, the dripping eaves, the

paintings, the law books—as bright, as a single iridescent unit, not scattered as is a constellation but continuous, a rainbow, a U-turn” (82). Begley finds in the last sentence a hint that their romance is “blessed by divine sanction. . . . Although the U-turn ends two marriages and inflicts enduring harm, it also takes the shape of a rainbow, God’s covenant promising no recurrence, no more wreckage” (366). Denying the Christian content of an Updike work is risky, but for me in this highly secular story, a rainbow is a rainbow, a U-turn a U-turn. The closing paragraph confirms how very capable Betty is of daring to act radically, brushing aside regrets and “unceasing harm” in order to think of the period the story covers as “bright, as a single iridescent unit” which, by projecting her angle of vision throughout, the story has very effectively dramatized. If the story has a connection to Updike’s Christianity, it is in the way that he explains to Jeff Campbell: “My art is Christian only in that my faith urges me to tell the truth, however painful and inconvenient, and holds out the hope that the truth—reality—is good. Good or no, only the truth is useful” (104).

Gesturing is the trope that organizes and resolves “Gesturing,” the story’s aesthetic conclusion validating Richard Maple’s psychic departure from Joan to Ruth. “Killing” ruthlessly depicts the ineffectuality of Lynne’s efforts to stand by her men, the narrative closing on the same admonition Lynne had used to urge her father towards death: “Go to sleep. . . . Let’s go to sleep,” articulated this time by the male to whom Lynn ascribed the conviction, “*I’m alive at last.*” “A Constellation of Events” presents the convergence of Betty and Rafe as undramatic yet inevitable, relegating its repercussions beyond the couple to a dependent clause: “though there was much in the aftermath to regret, and a harm that would never cease.” That regret and harm are quickly absorbed into Betty’s positive memories of those four days as an “iridescent unit,” a “rainbow, a U-turn.” All three narratives derive much of their power from their “painful and inconvenient relationship to truth,” but the question remains: are these stories examples of spiritually inspired truth telling or instances of aesthetically beautiful cruelty?

## NOTES

1. The odd publishing history of “Gesturing” continues in its omission from the *Collected Early Stories* (2013), though it was omitted because it was one of the *Maples Stories*. I am using the 2003 version of “Gesturing” from *Early Stories 1957–1975*. The pairing of “Gesturing” and “Killing” in this essay reproduces Updike’s placement of them back-to-back in “The Single Life” section of his *Early Stories*.

2. David Crowe’s *Cosmic Defiance: Updike’s Kierkegaard and the Maples Stories* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2016) quite literally sees the Maples’ marriage as sacred, arguing that, by remaining together, the couple would have ultimately achieved Kierkegaard’s leap of faith.

3. The story's initial book publication in *Trust Me and Other Stories* (1987) gave the female protagonist's name as Anne, which may have seemed too close to Joan.

4. In "Wife-Wooing," the second Maples story, Joan frustrates Richard's desire to make love by burying herself in a biography of Richard Nixon—not unlike the narrative of "male energy alive in the world and sustaining it" that we see in "Killing"—until she falls asleep.

5. Christopher Carduff explains in "Notes to the Texts" of *Collected Early Stories* that Updike submitted "Killing" to *The New Yorker* on January 27, 1975. When the magazine declined it, he submitted it to *Playboy* in June, only to withdraw it for further development. It was resubmitted to *Playboy* on March 25, 1981, and published in the January 1982 issue. "A Constellation of Events" was submitted to *The New Yorker* on March 11, 1975, less than two months after "Killing" was submitted, suggesting that the two stories were initially drafted in close proximity to each other.

6. Robert Luscher's *John Updike: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1993) is typical of pre-Begley criticism of "A Constellation of Events," positing the story as one of many Updike stories dealing with adultery in the suburbs (143–44).

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# Remapping the Updike-Cheever Relationship Thirty-Five Years On

ROBERT MORACE

This essay is based on the paper I delivered at the 4th Biennial John Updike Society Conference, held at the University of South Carolina on October 12–15, 2016. Had the conference begun just two days later, I might have given my talk exactly thirty-five years after the two Johns—Cheever and Updike—famously appeared together on the *Dick Cavett Show*, taped before a live audience and aired the following month. But, as Herman Melville wrote in *Billy Budd, Sailor*, “the might-have-been is but boggy ground to build on,” especially when the keynote speaker, Garrison Keillor, would have hogged the stage that anniversary night. Readers of *The John Updike Review* will recognize “hogged the stage” as an allusion to what Cheever wrote in a letter about Updike’s penchant for upstaging him, and they will therefore understand that I do not have a Trump-sized ego and bear no animosity toward the keynote speaker. They will also realize that even if I did have either or both, I would be sure to let readers know privately, in a letter, which would be published after my death, but while Mr. Keillor is alive so that he can read it and feel suitably saddened and publically discomfited, even humiliated, as was Updike when he read Cheever’s posthumously published *Letters* (1988) and *Journals* (1990), along with Blake Bailey’s nearly 800-page *Cheever: A Life* (2009). Constituting his own private *Groundhog Day*, those revelations forced Updike to rethink, and in reviews publically comment on, what had seemed a congenial relationship.

Cheever was, after all, a writer whom Updike had eulogized, as had Saul Bellow—who, Updike would later learn, was not subjected to the same belittling criti-

cism and ridicule in Cheever's private correspondence and voluminous journals. Bellow, whose fiction Updike often disparaged in "stealthily cruel reviews" (Atlas 502n), is mentioned much less than Updike in the published letters but always more admiringly. Nowhere is Cheever's opinion of his two most "esteemed" (a favorite Cheever word) colleagues and friends more extreme than in this passage from a letter written to fellow novelist, and alcoholic, Frederick Exley:

[M]y admiration for Saul's work is genuine; but Updike, whom I know to be a brilliant man, traveled with me in Russia last autumn and I would go to considerable expense and inconvenience to avoid his company. I think his magnanimity [*sic*] specious and his work seems motivated by covetousness, exhibitionism and a stony heart. . . . Bellow's mind is, of course, erudite, bellicose and agile and as a companion I find him one of the most difficult of men to part with. (*Letters* 245)

I have taken some editorial license in quoting this passage by omitting, with ellipses, its—humorous? disarming?—penultimate sentence: "I put all this down to show how truly innocent and generous I am." Of course times change and so do people and their judgments of others. Seventeen years passed between Cheever's letter to Exley and his appearance with Updike on the *Cavett Show*. Nearly three more decades would pass before the video of that show would become available on the *New York Times* website, by which time those interested would see it through the refracting light of Cheever's letters and journals, as Updike himself already, and painfully, had.

The purpose of this essay is to reexamine the Cheever-Updike relationship in light of revelations from Cheever's posthumously published letters and journals, and the subsequent treatment of those revelations by biographers, editors, and critics, including Updike. What emerges is not so much a radically different view of the Cheever-Updike relationship but a fuller, more nuanced understanding of its motivations, effects, and contexts.

I wish to start by revisiting their joint appearance, knowing that we can never see it as innocently as viewers did in 1981. Cavett would later say that the two "elevate[d] praise to an art form," so much so that at one point Updike jokingly said to their host, "I bet you wish you had Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal back on the show." The two Johns—often conjoined, sometimes confused—are nothing if not amiable. Yet the interview gets off to a slightly discordant start. Asked when the two first met, Cheever mentions a note he wrote Updike upon the latter's moving to Ipswich in 1957. Updike doesn't recall the note and more plausibly dates their first meeting to the time they spent in Russia in October 1964. Adam Begley dates

their first meeting eight months earlier, in New York, when Updike received the National Book Award for *The Centaur* (Cheever had been one of the judges). We then discern another faintly discordant note when Cavett asks Updike about the way he and Cheever have so often been linked. "I am very flattered by the linkage," Updike replies, "insofar as it exists"; he goes on to say that Cheever has indeed been an influence, as any good writer is, and that "the similarities to me are not as meaningful as the differences." That's three degrees of separation in one sentence. Chief among those differences is Cheever's being "more of a transcendentalist than I am," and the "radiance which he feels and conveys" that "make[s] me feel as though I am living in an interesting world," "a kind of paradise"—a tip on Updike's part to *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*, the novel Cheever had just finished and that Updike would soon read and glowingly review.

Speaking in his trademark plummy voice, which made him seem "almost a parody of the pompous toff" (Bailey 334), Cheever repeated his Olympian refrain, "writing is not of course a competitive endeavor," before turning the conversation, albeit playfully, into just that: "Of course I immediately want to return the serve." He goes on to say, "John Updike can do things I cannot," and "I am deeply indebted to John for his inestimable contribution and the excellence of his work: his intelligence, his maturity, and his giftedness." Cheever then praises the recently published *Rabbit Is Rich* in equally exalted and general terms. Asked if he would consider reviewing it, Cheever, who famously did not write reviews, said no; to do the novel justice the review would take at least three weeks to write because the novel is so "rich." As he explained, "I am an old man nearing the end of my journey, and he is at the peak of his powers." Intimations of mortality were indeed very much with Cheever, who'd recently had a kidney removed and would succumb to cancer eight months later. We need to keep in mind, however, that Cheever had been describing himself as "an old man, nearing the end of a journey" for a quarter century, when he was still in his forties (Bailey 261). More interesting than the difference in age are the differences in literary output and education. There is a significant contrast between Updike's prodigious literary output, which he attributed to his father, the model "of a dutiful American male," and Cheever's comparatively low productivity and more "volatile" life. As for the contrast in educational achievement—Updike's summa cum laude degree from Harvard vs. Cheever's expulsion from Thayer Academy—it's not so much the difference that is significant, but rather the joke Cheever makes of it: "That's why I can't review books, because I never went to college." More importantly, consider how Updike immediately comes to Cheever's defense, calling him "a very learned fellow" and claiming that going to

college was a “generational” thing—he, Updike, needed the “polishing” Harvard provided while, he implies, Cheever did not. Years later, after reading Cheever’s letters to Exley, Updike would wonder whether his leaping to Cheever’s defense in Russia may have been the inadvertent but justifiable cause of the resentment so evident in the correspondence (*Odd Jobs* 115). The moldy cherry on top of Cheever’s humble pie came when Cavett asked if they could still have a story rejected by *The New Yorker*; both answered in the affirmative, but again there is a world of difference in what each meant, especially Cheever. More about that later.

Although Cheever is at ease in making his Olympian pronouncements about literature and Updike’s work, physically he appears ever-so-slightly ill at ease (or so we have come to believe). Cheever’s postshow explanation is just as hilarious as it is plausible, but we have to realize that, as in the sentence I omitted from his letter to Exley, he often used humor to make light of what was deadly serious, to deflect and defend. Here is how Cheever explained his discomfort to his good friend John Weaver:

When it was time to dress for the show Mary was at her Yoga class and I didn’t know what to wear. I put on some real nice shoes but the only pants I could find were very worn and the only tweed jacket I have had already appeared in a Cavett show. I dressed this up with a necktie Esse Lee knitted for me when she last crossed from Liverpool. Dick asked about this tie and I told him that dull talk shows had done more for the cravat than Beau Brummel and that when you couldn’t tolerate the interlocutor you could always count the stripes on his tie and wonder if it lived in a drawer or on a rack. He snapped at me and said that we would dispense with makeup. Cavett was already made up and Updike was painted like a piece of marzipan. . . . When the count-down came for my appearance I went into the toilet and got my fly-zipper caught on my shirt tail. It would not come undone. So then I went into the Green Room with my fly open and asked everybody what I should do. They all looked away. So then I went back to the toilet and took off my pants and ripped my shirt-tail out of its trap and closed my fly. They plan to air the show in November and if you see it this will explain why my hair is mussed, why my face is so red and why I keep looking down at my fly. (Weaver 317–18)

The brief note that Weaver appended to the letter in *Glad Tidings* retrospectively highlights Cheever’s physical discomfort: “Pamela Fiori called to tell me she had run across a line in the *New York Times* about John undergoing some tests at Sloan-Kettering.” Cheever was in fact undergoing an intensive course of chemotherapy at the time to treat the kidney cancer for which he had been given a wildly optimistic but erroneous prognosis a few months earlier. But there is more to the story, a second silent omission, this time by Weaver, not Cheever, that Bailey discovered

and that Updike, shortly before his own death, would have read while reviewing *Cheever: A Life*. The sentence missing from the letter as it appeared in *Glad Tidings* is funny, but the humor is barbed: Updike, Cheever writes, had “described erections so exhaustively that he’s beginning to look like a big prick with a hair-piece” (Bailey 636). As a satirical caricature, it’s as good as anything David Levine ever drew and on a par with Christopher Cranch’s famous drawing of Emerson as a transparent eyeball, or David Foster Wallace’s female friend’s description of Updike as “a penis with a thesaurus.”

Adam Begley doesn’t mention the Cavett interview in his 2014 biography *Updike*. Scott Donaldson mentions it twice in his 1988 *John Cheever*, the second time to note a small and arguably deflating correction Updike made in a December 11, 1981, letter to Cheever: “I kept saying radiant on Cavett, but it’s more like a little star inside a snowball on a sunny day” (358). Bailey devotes a densely packed page to the interview, whose revival on the *Times* website was part of the publicity blitz surrounding the biography’s publication on March 10, 2009. Updike’s review appeared posthumously and fittingly in *The New Yorker*, where the title, “Basically Decent,” seemed as appropriate to Updike as reviewer as it was to Cheever as subject, as Updike sought to portray him.

The Cavett interview is the most visible evidence of a relationship firmly embedded in the minds of readers, general and academic. Jack DeBellis provides a brief but exhaustive overview of the biographical connections between the two Johns in the “Cheever” entry in his *John Updike Encyclopedia*, and James Schiff provides a literary comparison in his essay “Updike, Cheever and Short Fiction.” Robert Beuka has back-to-back chapters on the two authors in *SuburbiaNation*. Patrick Meanor links them as mythopoeic writers who, like Faulkner, created their own clearly identifiable worlds. Updike’s Jewish alter ego, Henry Bech, links the two by dismissing both. Donaldson is spot-on when he writes that “Cheever’s 180 stories, spanning from 1930 to 1980, tell us more about people in the American middle class during that half century than any other writer’s work has done or can do” (*John Cheever* x); with minor changes in genre and time frame, the same is true of Updike. The two first crossed figurative paths a decade before their Russia meeting, when Updike in 1954 published “Friends from Philadelphia,” the story that launched his *New Yorker* career and that he wrote in critical response to Cheever’s “O Youth and Beauty!” published in the same magazine the year before. They then crossed literal paths not only in Russia in 1964, but in Boston in 1974, a time of great personal crisis for both: Updike had just separated from his first wife and their children, and Cheever had become a suicidal drunk separated from nearly everyone.

The Cheever-Updike relationship was one of friends and rivals, variously seen as father-son, uncle-nephew, older brother-younger, or perhaps I should say, pick of the litter and runt: Updike was much larger both in physical size and in literary reputation. Updike was a master of details, Cheever was not, either depicting them “with a faint and uncanny distortion” (Yagoda 288) or more often resorting to grandiose claims lyrically rendered (Morace). Even this difference may not be all that great if we agree that Updike’s obsessive interest in precisely rendered details was in effect an effort, as Louis Menand put it, at “transubstantiation,” and as such was the complement to Cheever’s transcendental style and vision. The marked difference when it comes to sex also comes to less than is generally thought. The “penis with a thesaurus” did write freely about sex. Cheever did not—at least not in his published fiction, where his sense of decorum ruled and where sexual encounters often end in comic rebuff (paradise denied) rather than bliss or satisfaction. Nonetheless, Cheever was obsessed with sex—the actress Hope Lange called him “the horniest man [she] ever met”—and wrote about it freely but privately in his voluminous journals (qtd. in Bailey 422).

This apparent difference turned similarity mirrors another ostensible fact about the two writers: Updike’s immense productivity and versatility (a writer of novels, short fiction, poetry, reviews, criticism, children’s books, and memoir) versus Cheever’s slender output and dedication exclusively, purely, to fiction. Updike’s formidable productivity was his Protestant inheritance: a ferocious work ethic coupled with strict adherence to the biblical injunction to name all creation. Cheever’s inheritance was, as Updike recognized, Puritanism’s flip side, “the deep melancholy peculiar to American Protestant males” (*Odd Jobs* 109). Of Cheever’s *annus horribilis*, 1974, Updike said, “Being back in New England had activated dormant evils in him” (*Odd Jobs* 112). As the 4,300 mainly singled-spaced pages of his journals indicate, Cheever was, in his own way, as prolific a writer privately as Updike was publicly. Of course, Updike inherited more from his parents than his father’s “dutiful American male” work ethic. He was the adored son of a mother who realized her own largely thwarted literary ambitions through him. He was the “golden boy” whose “life was golden from the get-go” (Dirida) and whose intellect was as prodigious as his output. Cheever’s father had failed during the Great Depression, and his mother, much to Cheever’s embarrassment, had opened a gift shop to keep the family financially afloat. Scratch away his thin veneer of Brahmin respectability and what you found was Lawrence, the despised older sibling of “Goodbye, My Brother,” who can only see the worm in the apple. What you also found was the Cheever version of “the New Jersey Updike who aspired to be a

Rhode Island Updike” (Updike, *Self-Consciousness* 210–11) and, as Updike put it, the “Shabby gentility [that] has ever been the cradle of upstart writers” (*On Literary Biography* 22).

In a letter to his and Updike’s *New Yorker* editor, William Maxwell, Cheever mentioned the “ego clash” with Updike that made “a merry friendship unlikely” (*Letters* 308). Cheever’s relationship with the paternalistic editor would sour a few years later when he learned that, thanks to Maxwell, he had been passed over for the Gold Medal for the Short Story from the Academy of Arts and Letters:

The difficulty may be with Bill Maxwell who, having put me above Updike for years, now feels that I have had more than my share of everything and should be rebuked. It doesn’t matter to me at all. . . . I gave a reading last night that included THE SWIMMER and I would much sooner have written that story—without a gold medal—than anything that has so far been accomplished by my dear friend Updike. (qtd. in Bailey 577)

The “ego clash” was as much within Cheever as with Updike and is evident in the following photographic montage: on the front cover of Donaldson’s biography, a casually attired Cheever sits on his front porch, looking like a successful suburbanite and country squire, an expensive-looking watch conspicuously present; in the inside pages of Susan Cheever’s *Home Before Dark*, a beaming Cheever in suit and bow tie holds the honorary degree he had just been awarded at Harvard; and finally, in Donaldson’s inside pages and again on the back cover (smaller and grainier this time) Cheever stands in a field, alone and off-center, about to walk out of the frame, clutching the MacDowell medal he had just received as if—and here I am editorializing—it were an object of little worth. In this last black-and-white photograph he appears as a dark figure, partially swallowed by the dark field and even darker trees in the distance. While disturbing enough on its own, the darkness of the photo is deepened by Donaldson’s description of the weekend’s events:

The administrative staff at MacDowell seemed to vanish, leaving their guest of honor to fend for himself. Cheever had to borrow a car to drive himself to the award ceremony from Hillcrest, the handsome old house of Mrs. MacDowell, where he was staying. That night there was a big dance where Cheever kept looking for “someone short enough to dance with.” Perhaps bored and certainly sober among the merrymakers, he slipped away and walked the long way back to Hillcrest in the dark. Leonard [the *New York Times* reviewer John Leonard] found him sitting alone at ten o’clock, drinking the instant coffee he had brought along with him. They talked away much of the night. At first it was Cheever the charmer and Leonard the admirer, but then—and for the rest of the night—all that Cheever could talk about was his loneliness and his need for

love. “Sex is very important to me,” he said, “and there is no sex in my marriage.” He was, that night, the most unhappy person Leonard had ever seen. (*John Cheever* 329)

In 1974, while Cheever was living alone, nearly drinking himself to death, and ostensibly teaching creative writing at Boston University, the department chair, George Starbuck, “realized too late how much Cheever craved public attention” (Donaldson, *John Cheever* 284)—the kind of public attention Updike regularly received and Cheever only rarely did. Despite his claims to the contrary, literature was for Cheever very much a competitive sport. The deforming psychological effects of this competitiveness are greatly exacerbated in the modern era, with its media attention and “prize game,” as detailed by James F. English in *The Economy of Prestige*, where incidentally Cheever is not mentioned but Updike is, endowed with a three-page listing of awards won.

“I am galled by my lack of physical bulk and galled that this should concern me,” Cheever wrote in 1977 (*Journals* 330). The comment was nothing if not consistent, since Cheever had a quarter century earlier contrasted the fullness of Bellow’s fiction with the smallness of his own (*Journals* 53). By the late 1960s, Cheever yearned “to be considered in the same breath with Bellow, Updike, Roth” (Bailey 435). Shortly after signing a lucrative two-book deal with Knopf, Updike’s publisher, Cheever wrote to his new editor, Robert Gottlieb, about a seriocomic “nightmare” in which “I push a super-market wagon across River Street—macaroni and cold cuts—and am either run down by Roth in his Daimler or buzzed by Updike in a new flying machine” (Bailey 408). Here are Updike and Cheever by the numbers. Updike: 70 books, including 9 posthumous publications; Cheever: 18 books, 5 of them posthumously published. The MLA Bibliography lists a total of 200 Cheever items, 48 of them since 2000, and 858 for Updike, 273 since 2000. The number of times Updike is mentioned in *Conversations with John Cheever* and in either Cheever biography far exceeds the number of times Cheever is mentioned in *Conversations with John Updike* and in Begley’s biography. Put dollar signs in front of the numbers and the disparity widens, as does Cheever’s resentment (and envy). Soon after *The New Yorker* published “The Swimmer,” and just as he was completing *The Wapshot Scandal* and had learned that he would be the subject of a *Time* magazine cover story, Cheever asked for, and received, a raise—one that still put him, at \$2,600 per story, well below what *The New Yorker* was already paying their most important writers, such as Updike, who was drawing \$3,500 (Bailey 320–21). “‘John’s new novel (*Couples*) has made him a millionaire,’ Cheever reported a bit sadly in 1968,” Bailey notes (388). To put that in perspective, Cheever’s earnings

from *The New Yorker* over more than four decades totaled less than \$200,000 (Susan Cheever 137). It was not until 1973 (one year before his nearly fatal Boston misadventure) that Cheever learned, from Harold Brodkey, just how shabbily the magazine had treated him (Bailey 321). Making matters worse, Cheever had long been pigeonholed as a short-story writer, and real American male writers write novels. Worse still, Cheever's first two novels were criticized as the work of a short-story writer. Though his next two were more conventionally novelistic, albeit short, his fifth novel was so short that Knopf refused to accept it as fulfilling the terms of his two-book contract, and demanded that he sign a humiliating addendum, which to his daughter Susan's dismay, he did (Bailey 635). So much for "Cheever's triumph."

Cheever's competitiveness extended to other American writers, of course, but his rivalry with Updike was more visceral. Soon after Updike's stories began appearing in *The New Yorker* in 1954, Cheever "told his Barnard students that Updike was one of the most promising writers of his generation, though almost in the same breath he remarked that Updike seemed almost a bit *too* talented—'too pretty'—for his own good" (Bailey 262). Cheever's comment uncannily echoes the judgment, or caveat, that Struthers Burt appended to his influential review of Cheever's first collection, *The Way Some People Live* (1943): "John Cheever has only two things to fear; a hardening into an especial style that might become an affectation, and a deliberate casualness that might become the same. Otherwise, the world is his." When a publicist at Knopf asked him to write a blurb for Updike's first novel, *Poorhouse Fair* (1959), Cheever declined, saying, "He seems to me an unusually gifted young man, but perhaps not as a novelist. His eloquence seems to me to retard the movement of the book and to damage his control" (qtd. in Bailey 261). He was essentially repeating the same charge leveled against his own first novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle*, published less than two years earlier. Cheever was at times a fount of praise and support for Updike, "though afterward, as ever, he was," Bailey claimed, "bemused by his own generosity: 'Sometime I like the thought of [Updike] and just as often he seems to me an oversensitive changling [*sic*] who allows himself to be photographed in arty poses'"—quite a criticism coming as it does from the arch-poseur himself (347).

Relying heavily on *Cheever: A Life*, Begley emphasizes the one-sided "sibling rivalry," which he partly attributes to both having the same *New Yorker* paterfamilias, Bill Maxwell, as editor. There was, Begley claims, a "masked ambivalence on Cheever's side, a hidden animosity that flared when Updike's back was turned" (266). Putting a decidedly positive spin on the relationship, Ben Cheever claims

that although his father could be quite nasty behind John's back, "there was also genuine admiration and affection" (*Letters* 279), which, Ben adds, "was, at bottom, 'an attempt to be better than he was'" (Bailey 668). Donaldson, who saw Cheever as "a man divided against himself" (*Impossible* 221), also spins a rather benign Cheever who "was subject to twinges of resentment [only] when authors he regarded as inferior were honored out of proportion to their accomplishment. He felt nothing of the sort, however, with respect to the writers—Saul Bellow and John Updike among them—whose work he most valued" (*John Cheever* 318). But despite his extensive research, Donaldson had limited access to Cheever's unpublished works and little cooperation from (indeed much opposition from) the Cheever family. Cheever's habit of slighting, often belittling, others was one of the ways he dealt with feeling slighted himself. Alcohol was another. Self-deprecating humor a third, as in turning even a perceived slight (in this case, of being confused with Updike when asked to do a reading at Notre Dame University) into a Brodige-like comedy (Brodige is the portmanteau name linking campus novelists, close friends, and fellow academics Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge who, like Cheever and Updike, were often compared and even confused, but in their case without any feelings of envy or resentment): "In yesterday's mail I was cordially invited to Notre Dame on the strength of the mastery and the penetration of the *Maple Stories*," Cheever wrote Updike in mid-1979. "I think you don't know me well enough to know how vile I can be but in this case I was retiring and pious" (*Letters* 355). Cheever was being funny, but he was also right: Updike did not know; for that he would have to wait nearly a decade. In 1979, with *Falconer* hailed as "Cheever's Triumph," a Pulitzer for *The Stories*, and \$500,000 from a two-book deal with Knopf, Cheever could afford to be, for the moment anyway, "retiring and pious," funny and magnanimous. But as always, his humor had an edge. Even with all the honors and money, he was not entirely at ease, least of all in relation to Updike, who years later found himself in the same position that Cheever was in when he read about Notre Dame's invitation.

"Mr. Updike—did you write the wonderful story about the man who swims from pool to pool?" someone asked him in 1993 [at a reception at Lawrence University].

"I wish I had," he answered at once, his voice honeyed like his interlocutor's; "that was John Cheever, 'The Swimmer.'" He grinned, and contained in that wolfish grin . . . was a mixture of pure amusement, malice, and forbearance. "Perhaps now that John is dead I could lay claim to some of his stories." The assembled company exhaled with a long, relieved laugh. They were relaxing, surrendering to his charm." (Begley ix)

“Amusement, malice, and forbearance”: quite possibly. As Updike writes, “All those years in Shillington, I had waited to be admired, waited patiently, for there was considerable pleasure in the waiting, the lying low, the keeping (in one of my grandfather’s favorite phrases) ‘out of harm’s way’—pleasure in the shyness, the malicious slyness . . .” (*Self-Consciousness* 32–33). But Updike’s response derived from his accomplishments and seemingly unflappable sense of self-worth and self-assurance—not, as in Cheever’s case, a toxic brew of malice-producing self-doubt, self-pity, and rivalrous resentment. We find all three in a letter Cheever wrote in the early 1970s to Tanya Litvinov, the translator he had met in Russia in 1964: “John Updike has gone to Africa. My marriage is in the dumps. I drink vodka for breakfast” (*Letters* 287). The complex relations between these three paratactic sentences speak eloquently to Cheever’s complex and competitive relationship with Updike in ways that Begley’s “amusement, malice, and forbearance” do not. In 1970, Cheever made a point of saying he had stayed at Tokyo’s “posh Okura [hotel].” Yet in Seoul, “Cheever was relegated to the pedestrian Tae Yun Kak, whereas more favored delegates—such as Updike—stayed at the Chosun, where the [PEN] conference was being held” (Bailey 441). Just prior to the start of the Asian trip, Cheever wrote to John Weaver: “I go on Monday for a change of landscape to Tokio and Seoul but I go with John Updike who is very grabby about the mise-en-scene. He walks a little behind me and hogs all my sensitive observations” (*Letters* 280). Quite funny, but it is what Cheever wrote immediately before and after that gives the humor its edge. “Whenever I start a story these days I discover that I’ve written it” is the phrase that precedes the Updike comment, and what follows is the observation, “Hope [Lange] and Alan [Pakula] are getting a divorce but I seem, through some sleight of hand, to have ended up with Alan. Hope has found what she calls an ‘uncreative’ man.”

Context matters a great deal more when trying to understand the Cheever-Updike relationship than has generally been assumed. From Seoul, Cheever reported, “John’s paper was brilliant and so was John”—a typical Cheever about-face, albeit one diplomatically attuned to his audience: Bill Maxwell, not John Weaver (*Letters* 281). In 1977, Cheever wrote Weaver:

TIME shit on [Falconer] this week—a month before publication—because *Newsweek* is running a feature. It was a bad few hours but only a few. The people whose opinion I value seem to like it. There is, of course, the company of sopranos. Phil Roth called, towards midnight to say in his windiest voice: “Thank you for sending the book and I’ll read it when I next take a vacation but the reason I’m calling is to ask for John Updike’s new telephone number.” (*Letters* 326)

A few days later he wrote Updike to praise *The Poorhouse Fair*. The passage in Cheever's letter to Weaver is nearly identical to a journal entry written around the same time: "Waiting for another photographer and interviewer. I operate at a thoughtless level. Phil Roth calls to say he received 'Falconer,' and would I give him John Updike's address. The rivalry among novelists is quite as intense as that among sopranos" (*Journals* 330). The change from Roth asking for Updike's address in the journal entry to asking for Updike's phone number in the letter seems calculated, not a slip of memory, designed to add urgency (Roth, one assumes, will immediately ring Updike), and to heighten both the slight and the slapstick pants-down, slipping-on-a-banana-peel comedy: from Cheever's triumph to Cheever as phone directory in less than a sentence.

In 1990, looking back to his time with Cheever in Russia thirty-six years earlier, the fifty-eight-year-old Updike, in effect, casts himself as the offending party, not the offended:

[I]n the Communist world my eager middle-American naivete may have been more intelligible than Cheever's wry East Coast diffidence. I led a rather sheltered existence back home but as a cultural emissary, in a culture full of strangeness and menace and flattery, I became, on stage, quite talkative. At one of our joint appearances, I blush to remember, observing our audience's total ignorance of Cheever's remarkable work, I took it upon myself to stand up and describe it, fulsomely if not accurately, while my topic sat at my side in a dignified silence that retrospectively feels dour. Perhaps it felt dour at the time: the thought that I might have seemed officious flitted, batlike, through my mind as the limousine hauled us on to the next exposure. (*Odd Jobs* 115)

Having misread Cheever all those years, as he now claims, Updike goes on to admit to a second misreading, one on which his career as a writer, or at very least a *New Yorker* writer, was based:

John Cheever was a golden name to me—a happy inhabitant of *The New Yorker* penthouse all those years I was staring up from the sidewalk. In fact, it was my covetous dissatisfaction with one of his most assured and sardonic tales of suburban life, "O Youth and Beauty!," that goaded me to write a contrastingly benign story, "Friends from Philadelphia," which *The New Yorker*, to my undying gratification, accepted. In my youthful innocence I had mistakenly misread Cheever, one of the most celebratory of writers, as a misanthropic satirist. (*Odd Jobs* 115)

Donaldson, who seems not to have known about the Exley letters, attributes the competitive aspect of Cheever's relationship with Updike in Russia to Cheever's reaction to *The New Yorker* publishing Updike's "The Morning" ahead of "The

Swimmer” in the same issue just a few months earlier, “even though,” Donaldson points out, “he must have known [that] the magazine normally ran shorter stories ahead of longer ones” (*John Cheever* 215). Begley, who devotes more than a page to the Exley letters, follows Updike’s lead and interprets Cheever’s remarks as a “fantasy, obviously concocted for Exley’s amusement,” but then goes on to say that it was “the malice behind [the passage that] surprised and saddened [Updike], and opened his eyes to the ubiquity of the competitive reflex in writers” (268).

Updike had gotten a taste of Cheever’s malice a year earlier when he read one of the *The Selected Letters of S. J. Perelman* (1987) in which Cheever describes Updike’s White House reading unflatteringly and inaccurately (*Odd Jobs* 117). The same month Cheever wrote disparagingly of Updike in his letters to Exley he also wrote Litvinov about Updike’s having published “some asinine poems on Russian cities in the last *New Yorker*” (*Letters* 246). Part of the letters’ context is made visible in a photo, reproduced in Bailey, of Updike, Cheever, and Yevgeny Yevtushenko: Cheever, considerably older (by twenty years), with the bearded, long-haired Updike looking especially youthful and handsome. Another part of the context is not simply the misdirected bitterness Cheever felt over *The New Yorker* publishing Updike’s story ahead of his in the July issue. It is the story itself, of a man who appears to age over the course of a midsummer afternoon, losing not only his youth but his confidence, job, financial security, social standing, mistress, family, home, memory, and mind. He loses his grip on reality the way the story loosens its grip on realism in a lighthearted daydream that almost imperceptibly turns into suburban nightmare. Arriving at the home of his former mistress—she all but tells him, as Hope Lange told Cheever, “I can’t help you” (Bailey 618)—he discovers that she now has a much younger lover, one whom Cheever might have described as “comely,” the word he used to describe Updike as he watched the two on the Cavett show. “I saw the TV show here alone in the kitchen. Mary and the dogs all went to bed. I thought you comely. I looked exactly like my Uncle James. He used to squint his eyes and speak hesitantly as if he were waiting for some intestinal gas to be freed. He looked rather like a viper who was trying to break wind” (*Letters* 372). What is so astonishing, and revealing, is how much Cheever’s self-deprecating assessment of his and Updike’s appearance on *Cavett* resembles Updike’s description of himself in a similar situation: “Viewing myself on taped television,” Updike wrote in 1989, “I see the repulsive symptoms of an approaching stammer take possession of my face—an electronically rapid flutter of the eyelashes, a distortion of the mouth as of a leather purse being cinched, a terrified hardening of the upper lip, a fatal tensing and lifting of the voice. And through it all

a detestable coyness and craven willingness to please, to assure my talk-show host and his millions of viewers that I am not, appearances to the contrary, an ostrich” (*Self-Consciousness* 80–81).

Updike’s response to the Cheever revelations is characteristically generous. Not merely forgiving, he feels chastened: “It is very hard for a young writer to imagine that an older, with a famous name and his books deathless on the shelf, might be unhappy or have feelings that can be hurt” (*Odd Jobs* 116). Updike ends one of his four Cheever “tributes” in *Odd Jobs* this way: “For all that, those who knew him can testify, he was a gem of a man, instantly poetic and instinctively magnanimous—one of those rare persons who heightens your sense of human possibilities” (119). Updike’s tribute is so fitting because it evokes the writer Cheever most resembles, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and the only one Cheever wrote about in anything that remotely resembles a critical essay. The tribute serves as both review and homage, one that captures Cheever’s heightened expectations. But since Updike was the kind of writer on whom nothing was lost, we detect as well a note not of malice but ironic skepticism, an almost imperceptible poking back in Updike’s use of the word “magnanimous,” a word Cheever liked to use but could not spell correctly, as Updike most certainly could. Bailey calls our attention to another instance of Updike’s wryly, slyly, shyly turning Cheever’s words to his own advantage when in a 1994 BBC documentary he uses Cheever’s remark about his “stony heart” in the 1965 letter to Exley, which Updike read in 1988. We may also detect in Updike’s more than forgiving response to having been so shamefully treated by his erstwhile friend and colleague a faint whiff of wounded pride and self-pity: look at me, the review implies, traduced by Cheever but forgiving and magnanimous nonetheless.

The other place in the letters and journals in which Updike figures prominently concerns Cheever’s reaction to the false report, through a 4 a.m. telephone call on June 1, 1976, of Updike’s death. Begley does not mention it. Neither does Updike in his review of *Cheever: A Life*. Donaldson does, pointing out that Cheever was “an emotional wreck,” his brother Fred having died the day before (*John Cheever* 300). Bailey gives it far more attention. “‘This is CBC,’ the man said. ‘John Updike has been in a fatal automobile accident. Do you care to comment?’ Cheever burst into tears. ‘Oh, was it personal?’ the man asked. ‘He was,’ Cheever sobbed, ‘a colleague’” (534). Bailey’s account conflates the three-sentence letter that Cheever wrote Updike later that day with the three-paragraph journal entry that Cheever composed. Bailey’s account is also highly selective, tailored to fit the conclusion he wishes to draw—namely, that “[o]ne of the signs that Cheever was mellowing with age and sobriety was his ever more gracious, even tender, attitude toward Updike,

especially after his rival's kindnesses in Boston" (534). Never mind Cheever's later description of Updike as "a big prick with a hair piece." The reconciliation that Bailey emphasizes is in line with Donaldson's narrative of personal redemption rather than with Bailey's family-approved view of Cheever as the Freddy Krueger of Cedar Lane, to which Bailey then returns. In his version, which derives from Cheever's journal entry, Bailey emphasizes the telephone call and Cheever's initial response, the eulogy Cheever then composed for his dead friend, and the news from his daughter, Susan, that the call was a "fraud." In its entirety, paragraph one from Cheever's journal entry offers a lesson rather different from the one Bailey offers:

The telephone rings at four. "This is C.B.C. John Updike has been in a fatal automobile accident. Do you care to comment?" I am crying. I cannot sleep again. I think of joining Mary in bed, but I am afraid she will send me away. I think I am right. When there is a little light I feed the dogs. "I hope they don't expect to be fed this early every morning," she says. I do not point out that John will not die every morning, and that in any case it is I who feed them. This restraint costs me nothing. When I go into the kitchen for another cup of coffee she empties the pot into my cup and says, "I was just about to have some myself." When I insist on sharing the coffee I am unsuccessful. I do not say that the pain of death is nothing compared to the pain of sharing a coffeepot with a peevish woman. This, again, costs me nothing. And I see that what she seeks, much more than a cup of coffee, is the gratification of a sense of denial and neglect—and that we so often, all of us, put our cranky and emotional demands so far ahead of our hunger and thirst. (*Journals* 323)

From grief to grievance in a single paragraph. Here we might say of Cheever's concerns about his dear friend and colleague's sudden death what Michael Updike said to Katie Roiphe about the evening his parents told the children about their separation: "how quickly Updike's concerns about the family transmogrified into 'a little pity party for himself'" (146). Complicating matters even more are the entry's narrative and compositional chronologies. The three paragraphs from the journal present a straightforward chronology, from receiving and responding to the call to drafting the eulogy to learning from Susan that the report was a hoax. Written in the present tense, the entry creates an Edward R. Murrow "you-are-there" immediacy, even though the paragraphs must have been written after Cheever already knew that the call had been a hoax; it may even have been revised later, as Bailey discovered Cheever sometimes did (Bailey 669).

In his reviews of the *Letters*, *Journals*, and Bailey's biography, Updike found it increasingly difficult to reconcile the revelations with his memories of Cheever and his work. As a result he wanted, as he wrote in his review of the *Journals*, "to

quote [Cheever] on and on, erecting a glowing verbal shield against the dismaying personal revelations” (“John Updike Explains”). Mindful of Cheever’s fate, Updike took biographical matters into his own hands. Calling even the prospect of someone writing his biography “repulsive,” Updike wrote the autobiographical essays that comprise *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* (1989). A decade later he gave the talk “On Literary Biography.” “The main question concerning biography is, surely, why do we read it at all?” Updike pugnaciously began, before conceding that biography does have its uses, as long as it serves and does not detract or distract from the literature. But then he asserts that “As long as I am alive, I don’t want somebody else playing on my jungle gym—disturbing my children, quizzing my ex-wife, bugging my present wife, seeking for Judases among my friends, rummaging through yellowing old clippings, quoting in extenso bad reviews I would rather forget, and getting everything slightly wrong” (31–32). When, in the mid-1980s, Donaldson had asked to interview him for the Cheever biography, Updike agreed so long as the interview was by mail, not in person. To Donaldson’s three pages of questions, Updike responded promptly and generously with “half a dozen single-spaced pages of unmistakably Updikean limpidity” (*Impossible* 219).

Generosity is, however, only half the story; having been misquoted or otherwise misrepresented before, Updike wanted to control what others said he said. Although Cheever is nowhere mentioned in either *Self-Consciousness* or *On Literary Biography*, his presence is impossible to miss. Indeed, I don’t think it an exaggeration to claim that Cheever haunts these two works—and our reading of them—as he also haunts the last two decades of Updike’s life. By the late 1990s Updike had, Begley says, begun to feel “anxiety about his fame, present and posthumous” (Begley 461), strangely so, for Updike had always seemed so sure of himself and his mission. Toward the end of his career, Updike became more prone to self-doubt as to, in Cheever’s words, “who I am and what my purpose in life is” (*Journals* 366). He was reaping what David Foster Wallace had sown in his 1997 essay, “John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One; Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?” In *The Violet Hour: Great Writers at the End* (2016), Katie Roiphe presents Updike working to the end, putting the finishing touches on a new book of poems and another of essays (and of course his review of Bailey’s biography)—no hyperattenuated *O What a Paradise It Seems* for him—but also full of doubts and increasingly sealed off from others by his protective second wife, Martha, and by his wall of words, “my ponderously growing oeuvre, dragging behind me like an ever-heavier tail” (*Self-Consciousness* 86).

With all this in mind, perhaps we can now say that the greatest difference between Cheever and Updike was indeed generational, not just in the one going to college and the other not, but perhaps more importantly the fact that their careers began twenty years apart, so that Updike had to wait until the final two decades of his life to experience the doubts with which Cheever struggled nearly his entire career. Updike struggled with his stammer and against “my having nothing, as a memorable early review of one of my books put it, to say” (*Self-Consciousness* 86), just as Cheever struggled with Alfred Kazin’s view that he wrote to cheer himself up (a view Updike quoted in his review of *Journals*). In response, Updike erected his seventy-book-high wall of words, a monument, a monolith, a fluent, unimpeded and unstoppable monologue, a magic act of nonstop performativity of the kind Robert Coover wrote about so brilliantly, and hilariously, in one of his best known metafiction, “The Hat Act.” Cheever, who, like Updike, also “kept the inmost Me behind its veil,” wrote less, of course, but he also arguably wrote more dialogically, his published words in endless dialogue with his private ones, a body of work filled with decrowning doubles, loopholes, and sideward glances, directed at Updike most of all, for it was indeed Updike whom Cheever most resembled—and also most envied and therefore resented. Updike was Cheever’s alter ego and road not taken, the writer whose career began with a sideward glance at Cheever’s “O Youth and Beauty!” and ended with a review of the biography of the writer with whom he was so often linked and compared, the writer who, thanks to those linkages and comparisons, came to resent him. This was the Cheever who became his friend, colleague, rival, and, perhaps above all during the last two decades of Updike’s life, his ghostly other and proverbial bad penny, not unlike the face Updike saw upon returning to his childhood home, which held a photograph of his five-year-old self: “little Johnny, his tentatively smiling mouth, his dark and ardent and hopeful eyes. For a second he looks evil. He has got me into this” (*Self-Consciousness* 238).

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# Precise Proofer: John Updike and the Galley of “Shipboard”

DONALD J. GREINER

Today I wrote some words that will see print.  
Maybe they will last “forever.”

—JOHN UPDIKE, “A Rescue”

Initiated readers of John Updike know that he was a meticulous overseer of his canon. Unlike F. Scott Fitzgerald, for example, about whom he wrote perceptively, he did not squander his gift.<sup>1</sup> When Fitzgerald confessed in “The Crack-Up” (1936), “I had been only a mediocre caretaker of most of the things left in my hands, even of my talent” (71), he raised a red flag for authors following in his wake. Updike took care. When Harper, the publisher of his first book, *The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures* (1958), asked him to alter the conclusion of his first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959), he refused and offered the book to Knopf. When the Knopf attorneys balked at the erotic passages in his second novel, *Rabbit, Run* (1960), he acquiesced to the censorship but reinserted the expurgated material in subsequent editions—and then proceeded for several decades to change words here and there until he was satisfied enough to publish the omnibus volume *Rabbit Angstrom: A Tetralogy* in 1995. He continued perfecting his texts throughout his career, even to the extent of adding a significant passage about Hamlet’s mother Gertrude to his late novel *Gertrude and Claudius*, first published in 2000, for the Bulgarian edition in 2003.<sup>2</sup> Updike applied the same level of care to drafts, galley proofs, and page proofs; he did so from the very beginning of his professional career after graduat-

ing from Harvard in 1954. My emphasis in this essay is *not* that he exercised great concern for his writing but *how* he demonstrated the concern. Evidence of his early commitment to being what Fitzgerald described as a “caretaker” of his talent is the unusual galley proof for the twelve-line humorous poem “Shipboard,” which Updike submitted to *The New Yorker* in 1954.<sup>3</sup> He was not pleased when he spotted a single unauthorized emendation on the galley sheet, and, despite being only twenty-two years old and fresh out of college, he had the temerity to let the editor know of his displeasure. The editor was the redoubtable Katharine S. White who, as Adam Begley observes, “was almost single-handedly responsible for the magazine’s emergence as a prestige venue for serious fiction” (Begley 111).

The Updike-White relationship officially dates from September 1954, just three months after Updike left Harvard and sailed to England to study drawing at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford. Begley reports that “A letter from Katharine White dated September 15, 1954, and addressed to ‘John H. Updike, General Delivery, Oxford,’ proposed that he sign a ‘first-reading agreement,’ a scheme devised for the ‘most valued and most constant contributors’” (109). As a senior editor at *The New Yorker*, White would have been aware of Updike’s emerging talent because he had submitted cartoons, poems, and stories to the magazine during his undergraduate and even his high school years despite the regularity of the rejection notices. In one sense he was already a “constant contributor.” Shrewd and experienced, White gambled that he would soon prove to be “most valued.” Her acknowledgment that it was “unusual” to offer such an agreement to an unproven writer just starting his career seems a judicious understatement given that at the time Updike had no standing whatsoever in American letters. She treated the inexperienced Updike “with a firm maternal hand, mixing encouragement with the occasional reproof” (Begley 111). The point is that, once aware of the dispute between Updike and the unidentified *New Yorker* employee who altered a word in “Shipboard,” White’s approval was required for either the employee’s alteration or the poet’s wording. She sided with Updike.

I

The affected stanza of the poem reads:

That line is the horizon line.  
The blue above it is divine.  
The blue below it is marine.  
Sometimes the blue below is green.

Stamped in eye-catching bright red ink at the top of the single sheet galley of “Shipboard” is an explicit declaration of instructions from the magazine:

NOTICE TO THE AUTHOR

Please make your notations, if any, on this proof;  
sign it; and send it back as soon as possible.

THE NEW YORKER

Updike made his notations on the proof, signed it, and sent it back, but he was upset. “KSW” [Katharine White] acknowledged receipt of the corrected proof in holograph on the galley: “KSW: Ok’d by the author with this one change.” Although White retired in the early 1960s, Updike remembered her impact. More than thirty years after he first read her “Ok’d,” he wrote an essay-review for *The New Yorker* (August 10, 1987) with the revealing title “Goody Sergeant; The Powerful Katrinka; K.S.W.” His article is ostensibly a review of Linda A. Davis’s biography of White, *Onward and Upward: A Biography of Katharine White*, but Updike turned his remarks into a meditation on the strong-willed editor at the magazine to which he contributed for more than fifty years. The “KSW” that White wrote on the galley was her trademark at *The New Yorker*. As Updike observed, “[I]t was her second married name, with its forceful initials K.S.W. (attached to notes and memos in a hand of singular clarity and erectness), that she carried through most of her more than thirty-five years as an editor with this magazine. To say that she took to her editorial work here like a duck to water would be an understatement” (74). For Updike, White was a “born editor” committed to “her endless editing” (76). To make a change on a galley proof required those three initials. The KSW impact continued indirectly through Roger Angell, who is not only White’s son but was also a senior editor at and long-time contributor to *The New Yorker*. In his memoir *This Old Man*, Angell titles his short chapter about Updike “Past Masters: John Updike.” Comprised of two memorial tributes to Updike written shortly after Updike’s death in January 2009, the chapter offers a window into Updike’s preciseness with his proofs:

As a contributor, he was patient with editing, and pertinaciously involved with his product: an editor’s dream. . . . He wanted to see each galley, each tiny change, right down to the late-closing page proofs, which he often managed to return by overnight mail an hour or so before closing, with new sentences or passages, handwritten in the margins in a soft pencil, that were fresher and more inventive and revealing than what had been there before. (256)

A comment from a later copy editor at *The New Yorker* echoes Angell's account. Mary Norris, a thirty-year veteran at the magazine, recalled in her memoir that Updike "turned in immaculate copy" (Norris 50). He did so from the beginning, including "Shipboard."

The galley is dated September 27, 1954, and confirms the concern Updike took with his art as he began his professional career. The evidence for his meticulousness is based on only a single, apparently innocuous, word. Surprisingly, his "one change" was not to delete the "a" and add an "e" in the title "Shipboard" (to make the title "Shipbored," the title by which most readers of Updike today know the poem). This is because "Shipboard" was the original title when the poem was first published in *The New Yorker* (15 January 1955). Updike revised the title from "Shipboard" to "Shipbored" three years later when he included the poem in *The Carpentered Hen*, presumably because the original title merely indicated the location of the poem, whereas the revised title mocked the wrong-headed attitude of the poet figure. Rather, his "one change" was to the very first word in the poem: he altered "The" to "That." Such an apparently minor "notation" would not normally raise an eyebrow. Yet already the guardian of the accuracy of his publications, he provided on the galley sheet itself a long explanation of his insistence that one apparently insignificant word was more appropriate to the poem than another apparently insignificant word. His remarks comprised a thirty-three line justification of "That" instead of "The," what at first glance seemed to be little more than a tempest in a teapot. Three of the lines are in pencil; the remaining thirty are typed. He used the three penciled lines to illustrate what he described as "the regular iambic tetrameter line" employed in "Shipboard": "u/u/u/u." Eschewing a salutation in his comments, he jumped immediately into the fray. His first comment was firm: "'That' for 'The' because:[.]" The catalyst for his unusually detailed, not to mention direct, rationale for what even he conceded to be "this minor change" was that the unnamed staffer replaced "That" with "The" in the poem's first line without consulting him. He was unaware of the unauthorized emendation until he received the galley.

Updike divided his justification into three sections lettered (a), (b), and (c), and he went directly to the heart of the matter. In (a), "the more explicit demonstrative ["That" instead of "The"] creates a sense of immediacy." His point was that beginning "Shipboard" with "That" "gets the reader right into the poem; makes clear that the poem is from a man on shipboard; emphasizes the carefully explanatory tone of the poem which is half the humor." In other words, Updike used (a) to explain the point of view of the poet figure. He admitted that "The" makes the

“same assumption,” but he dismissed the unauthorized change because “it simply does in a weak manner what ‘That’ does firmly.”

Updike’s defense of “That” hinges on the phrase “weak manner.” In section (b) he shifted from point of view to meter: “the first line, as it now stands, is hopelessly enfeebled metrically.” He conceded that variations in the “placing” of accents in any poem prevent what he called “rhythmical monotony,” yet he argued that in a “technically straightforward poem” such as “Shipboard” the twelve lines should “have pretty much the same weight.” Since the “middle of line one” [“That line is the horizon line.”] is “light,” the spondee [“That line”] which begins the poem “compensated adequately” for the lightness. Updike did not mince words when dismissing the alteration of “That” to “The”: “The present meter is pale and scraggly.” He then illustrated “scraggly” with “u/uúu/u” in order to contrast it with his preference: “ú/uúu/u/.” Note his sarcasm, discretely conveyed by the repetition of “presume” and “presumably”: “I presume the change from my ‘that’ was made because the instantaneous placing of the reader in a position where the horizon is presumably before his eyes as well as the poet’s was felt to be misleading or inexact.” Even without the sarcasm, his argument is consistent. “The” makes the same assumption, but “The” is weak. To augment his position, his insistence on his own word choice, he personalized his defense by addressing an unidentified “you” (the copy editor? his editor Katharine White? the editor-in-chief William Shawn?). Appealing directly to the “you’s” ear, to the “you’s” sense of how a poem sounds at its best, he cleverly invited “you” to his side of the dispute by letting “you” know that both “you” and the author shared the same sensitivity when assessing the proper sound of poetic lines. The lines in question were “The line is the horizon line. / The blue above it is divine.” Updike explained, “If you read the two lines aloud, notice how in the present (the ‘The’ version), the ear, sensing something wrong, forces you to put unnatural emphasis on the *second* ‘the.’ My way, (the ‘that’ way) the tongue skips happily from the initial security of ‘That line’ into the terminal regularity of ‘horizon line’” (Updike’s emphasis).

Not done with standing firm for “That” instead of “The,” he added a third section to his rationale. Where section (a) focuses on point of view, and section (b) on sound, section (c) analyzes how “Shipboard” looks on the page. Updike was blunt: “(c) the three ‘The’s’ right down the stanza look awful.” Soon to be lauded in only a few years as a master of keen observation and precise detail, he was aware even at this stage of his career that the way a poem appears in print affects the way the poem is read. Sound alone will not suffice:

Throughout, the main structural element is the contrast between the two blues. The balance between 11. 2–3 is expanded in stanza 2 (11. 5–6 vs. 7–8) and doubled in stanza 3 (1. 9 vs. 10, 11 vs. 12). The way the first stanza is now, three elements are grouped, and the whole thing is dulled.

“The whole thing is dulled”—Updike’s frustration is palpable. The apparently insignificant substitution by *The New Yorker* staffer’s “The” for the confident poet’s “That” ruins not only the first line but also the entire poem for, in Updike’s judgment, both the author and reader. Given his dismay, one grins when noting the final salvo of his defense. His concluding comment is effective because it is understated: “I *do* hope you can see your way clear to making this minor change” (Updike’s emphasis). Once again, “you” is unidentified, but the sting of the stressed “do” burns. To underscore his insistence, Updike signed his name directly below his final remark.

## 11

Interestingly, Elizabeth Lawrence, Updike’s editor at Harper for *The Carpentered Hen*, placed “Shipbored” in a list of sixteen poems that she believed “not up to the best of the collection,” even though the poem had already been published in *The New Yorker* (Begley 162). Updike did not agree. Following the appearance of the poem in the magazine and in his first book, he included it in *Verse* (1965) and *Collected Poems 1953–1993* (1993). Christopher Carduff, however, omitted “Shipbored” from *Selected Poems* (2015). To emphasize his pleasure with the poem, Updike reprinted the first stanza in “The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother’s Thimble, and Fanning Island” and appended the following comment about “Shipbored” in the Notes section of *Collected Poems*: “An allusion to the writing of this poem can be found in my short story ‘The Blessed Man of Boston. . . .’ (*Pigeon Feathers*, 1962)” (*Collected Poems* 369). Completed on September 27, 1960, and first published in *The New Yorker* (January 13, 1962) before being collected in *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (1962), the story features an unnamed narrator who composes “Shipbored” while keeping his sick grandmother company. Updike reprised the first stanza of the 1955 poem in the 1962 story:

I remember sitting in the rocking chair at the foot of the bed, near the spot where my grandfather’s body had lain that night in the warm lamplight, and writing, while the sun streamed in through the geraniums on the window sill, a piece of light verse about what I imagined the sea voyage I was soon to take would be like.

That line is the horizon line.  
That blue above it is divine.  
The blue below it is marine.  
Sometimes the blue below is green.  
(*Pigeon Feathers* 234)

Begley is surely correct when he observes that “it’s more than usually tempting to treat the personal elements of this story as undiluted autobiography” (214). What is significant, however, about Updike’s reprising the first stanza of “Shipbored” in “The Blessed Man of Boston . . .” is that he emended the second line, not for *The New Yorker* version of the story but for *Pigeon Feathers*. When published in *The New Yorker*, the lines read:

That line is the horizon line.  
The blue above it is divine.  
(*The New Yorker* 29)

Yet when “The Blessed Man of Boston . . .” appeared in *Pigeon Feathers* only a few months after its publication in the magazine, the disagreement about “That” and “The” in the first line of “Shipboard,” initially generated by the galley proof of the poem in 1954, was now extended to the second line. In “The Blessed Man of Boston . . .” as they appear in *Pigeon Feathers*, the first two lines begin not “That” . . . “The,” but “That” . . . “That” (*Pigeon Feathers* 234).

A keen caretaker of his talent, Updike himself apparently made the change but then rejected it in subsequent reprintings of the story. When, for example, the Crest paperback edition of *Pigeon Feathers* was published in April 1963, shortly after the first Knopf edition, he returned the lines in question to the wording that he had pointedly defended nine years earlier on the galley proof of “Shipboard”:

That line is the horizon line.  
The blue above it is divine.  
(Crest edition 160)

In effect, he revised his own revision and thus reaffirmed the original wording of the poem once he had corrected the galley and persuaded Katharine White. Later reprintings of the first stanza of “Shipbored” in “The Blessed Man of Boston . . .” in *Olinger Stories: A Selection* (1964) and *The Early Stories 1953–1975* (2003) followed suit. Christopher Carduff endorsed “That” . . . “The” (instead of “That” . . . “That”) in his edition of *Collected Early Stories* (2013). All this because of two simple words.

The reader of “Shipbored” may be excused for commenting, “but no one notices, much less cares.” Updike cared.

III

*The Carpentered Hen* is a volume of clever light verse, the kind of poetry Updike excelled at when writing for *Chatterbox*, the Shillington (PA) high school newspaper, in the late 1940s, and for *The Harvard Lampoon* in the early 1950s. Beginning with *Telephone Poles and Other Poems* (1963), however, he separated his comic verse and his serious poems into two sections usually numbered I and II in the table of contents (*Telephone Poles* vii-viii). By the time of *Midpoint and Other Poems* (1969), Updike had formalized the distinctions by specifically designating one section as “Poems,” the other as “Light Verse” (*Midpoint* vii-viii). Hereafter in his subsequent collections of poetry, he set off the humorous poems with either a Roman numeral or a variation on the phrase “Light Verse.” He justified his reasoning in the “Preface” to *Collected Poems*:

In making this collection, I wanted to distinguish my poems from my light verse. My principle of segregation has been that a poem derives from the real (the given, the substantive) world and light verse from the man-made world of information—books, newspapers, words, signs. If a set of lines brought back to me something I actually saw or felt, it was not light verse. If it took its spark from language and stylized signifiers, it was.

A number of entries wavered back and forth across the border; the distinction becomes a subjective one of tone. (*Collected Poems* xxiii)

When choosing the poems to include in his edition of Updike’s *Selected Poems*, Carduff explained that he honored the poet’s “principle of segregation” between poems and light verse, and thus chose only those items that “Updike would have deemed poems” (*Selected Poems* xiii). Because, in Carduff’s judgment, Updike assigned his light verse to “a secondary status,” the editor omitted “not only light verse but also verse for children, poems in translation, found poems, and lines written for family birthdays and other private occasions” (*Selected Poems* xiii). At first glance, Carduff’s position appears to be sensible given that Updike wrote so much comic poetry throughout his lengthy career, beginning as a teenager in the 1940s. Yet in 1954, the year he composed “Shipboard,” light verse held for him not secondary but primary status as confirmed by his first book. He loved vocabulary, the sheer possibilities of the individual words themselves. To omit the clever, humorous poems entirely from *Selected Poems* is grossly to undervalue a substantial part of his canon, a part in which he took understandable pride and to which he

devoted considerable effort. Updike's high school classmates were surely prescient when they voted him "the wittiest" during their senior year. His detailed rationale for changing one minor word in the galley of "Shipboard" illustrates the seriousness with which he approached the potential for humor in poetry. His models in the 1940s and 1950s were not Ezra Pound or Robert Frost, John Keats or William Wordsworth, but Phyllis McGinley and Ogden Nash, with Max Beerbohm serving as the presiding godfather.

But if the early "Shipbored" is to be relegated to secondary status and thereby banished from *Selected Poems*, it nevertheless bookends one of Updike's finest late poems, "Endpoint," collected in *Endpoint and Other Poems* (2009), his final volume of poetry. In the comic "Shipbored," the poet figure is bored. In the serious "Endpoint," the poet figure knows that "Nature is never bored" (*Endpoint* 5). As Brad Leithauser correctly notes, Updike's "scientific interests often crossed and blurred the border he kept between his 'poems' and his 'light verse'" (*Selected Poems* xix). The immense complexity of sea and sky looms before the bored passenger in "Shipbored." He looks but does not see. The strict regularity of the poem's tetrameter rhythm captures the man's ennui, but Updike and the reader are not bored. They laugh at the poet figure's blindness.

I wonder whether the young Updike's elaborate defense of "That" instead of "The" was both deliberately exaggerated and seriously argued. After all, he was only a few months out of Harvard when he received the galley proof in September 1954, but he was six years away from *Rabbit, Run* (1960), the breakthrough novel that put him on the literary map. It is important to remember that when he displayed the nerve and confidence to challenge what appeared to be a minor change in a minor poem during an editorial process under the authority of Katharine White, he was a tyro so far as *The New Yorker* was concerned and had published only four comic poems and one story in the venerable magazine.<sup>4</sup> He was not yet "the John Updike, famous and much honored writer," the author who rose to such a lofty position that he could influence the choices of the dust jacket, the type font, and the binding of his more than sixty books. All he was trying to do in 1954 was insist on what looked to an unidentified copy editor at *The New Yorker* to be a trivial "That." Yet by emphatically asserting the necessity of "That," and by doing so in such an erudite, lengthy, humorous, and impassioned manner, he signaled to the formidable Katharine White that, although young and inexperienced, he knew what he was doing and was going to stand his ground. One salutes both Updike for his determination and White for her laconic "OK'd by the author"—a short phrase that neatly balanced Updike's thirty-three lines.

## NOTES

1. See Updike's "This Side of Coherence," in *More Matter: Essays and Criticism*. Knopf, 1999, pp. 538–52, and Updike's "To *The Rich Boy*" in *Due Considerations: Essays and Criticism*, edited by Christopher Carduff. Knopf, 2011, pp. 72–73. Ernest Hemingway's observation about Fitzgerald's "carelessness" confirms Fitzgerald's self-assessment. In a letter (11 October 1928) to Maxwell Perkins, who was both Hemingway's and Fitzgerald's editor at Scribner, Hemingway wrote, "But I often wonder if he would not have been the best writer we've ever had or likely to have if he hadn't been married to some one that would make him waste *Everything*. I know no one that has ever had more talent—or wasted it more. I wish to god he'd write a good book and finish it and not poop himself away on those lousy Post stories" (emphasis in original). (*The Letters of Ernest Hemingway: Volume 3 1926–1929*. Edited by Rena Sanderson, et al. Cambridge UP, 2015, pp. 467–68.)

2. See Randall H. Waldron, "Rabbit Revised." (*American Literature*, vol. 56, 1984, pp. 51–67); and Donald J. Greiner, "Updike Revised: The Authoritative Edition of Gertrude and Claudius." (*The John Updike Review*, vol. 3, 2014, pp. 1–14.)

3. The galley proof may be examined in the Ernest F. Hollings Special Collections Library at the University of South Carolina.

4. "Duet with Muffled Brake Drums." (*The New Yorker*, 14 August 1954); "Friends from Philadelphia." (*The New Yorker*, 30 October 1954); "Player Piano." (*The New Yorker*, 4 December 1954); "Clan." (*The New Yorker*, 18 December 1954); and "Song of the Open Fireplace." (*The New Yorker*, 8 January 1955). See *John Updike: A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Materials, 1948–2007*.

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## Three Writers on “His Mother Inside Him”

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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 writings, particularly ones that have been neglected, and to provide a forum in which a range of writers—critics, scholars, fiction writers, editors—attempt to better understand an individual work.

One of many fictions the author composed about his mother, “His Mother Inside Him” is the fourth Updike short story to be discussed in this section of the *John Updike Review*. Submitted to the *New Yorker* on January 8, 1992, the story was published in the magazine on April 20, 1992. It later appeared in both *The Afterlife* (1994) and *Collected Later Stories* (2013).

“His Mother Inside Him” was proposed for discussion here by Jennifer Glaser, an accomplished critic whose wide-ranging interests include comparative ethnicity, diasporic and transnational studies, Jewish studies, gender and sexuality, digital humanities, and comics and the graphic novel. Jennifer’s writings have appeared in *PMLA*, *MELUS*, *American Literature*, and the *New York Times*. Her first book, *Borrowed Voices: Writing and Racial Ventriloquism in the Jewish American Imagination*, was recently published by Rutgers. Joining Jennifer in the conversation is Updike critic Rob Luscher, who over the years has contributed more than anyone to our understanding of Updike’s short fiction. Rob’s critical volume, *John Updike: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1993), remains one of the most useful and intelligent sources for understanding the stories. In addition to his essays on Updike, Rob has also published on the writings of Ernest Gaines, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Clark Blaise, and Robert Olen Butler. The final member of our critical trio is a promising and gifted young fiction writer, Molly Reid, whose stories have appeared on NPR and in *TriQuarterly*, *Crazyhorse*, and *Gulf Coast*. The recipient of numerous fellowships, Molly is a doctoral student in fiction at the University of Cincinnati, where she is currently working on a novel.

JAMES SCHIFF, EDITOR

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# His Mother Inside Him

JOHN UPDIKE

Allen Dow had been fearful, in childhood, of his mother's unhappiness, which would vent itself in sudden storms of temper that flattened the other occupants of the house into the corners and far rooms. Once he saw his father cowering under the dining table while his mother, red-faced with fury, tried to get at him to slap him again. Allen never forgave her for that—for her doing it, for his seeing it. Though he learned to get around her—indeed, no one was better at getting around her; he was her only child, her confidant, her charmer, her prince, amusing and politic—he remained wary of the rage inside her that he had been permitted to glimpse. She made him nervous, and nervousness became his mode. All the complaints of nervousness—skin rashes, stammering, asthma, insomnia—were his. It took him decades of living hundreds of miles beyond her reach to begin to breathe, to sleep, and to speak normally. The women who drew close to him in the course of his life tended to suffer, and it took no great insight of his to imagine why his heart was, in regard to their sufferings, rather aloof and cool, if not faintly exultant. Whereas with the sufferings of a child or of a man—a man cowering under the table as an alternative to hitting back, or a child helplessly watching—he was quickly empathetic. He resented it, then, when, after her death, people (second cousins, Lutheran ministers) fondly remarked on how much he, as he approached sixty, resembled his mother.

He couldn't see it. He looked in the mirror. The fair skin, yes—freckled in his childhood, now pocked by spots of sun damage. Though her hair looked brown and had early turned gray, she had been one of nature's redheads, and when he had grown a beard, it had come in reddish. And there was a vexed something about his

forehead—a rather low forehead like his mother’s, for all their intellectual pretensions. When her temper flared, a pink V had appeared between her eyebrows; he had no temper to speak of, but there was a pink roughening of his skin exactly between his eyebrows. Otherwise—nose, mouth, ears—he saw no resemblance.

His ears were the “Hofstetter ears”—small-lobed, protuberant at the tops, like a lemur’s. He had inherited them from his grandmother, his mother’s mother; a photograph existed of her and her eleven brothers and sisters posed in black together, all with variants of these ears, sticking out white against the black. His mother’s ears, while the rest of her body had dwindled in old age, had grown larger and come to look just like her father’s, with big, flat, dull-colored lobes. As a little boy, Allen, crayoning on the floor, had often looked up and admired the impressive ears of his grandfather as the old man tilted back his head to bring the newspaper print into focus. His mother, he felt, had identified more with her father than with her mother, a tiny industrious woman toward whom her daughter had felt a compound of admiration, exasperation, and pity—somewhat the way, perhaps, in which Allen regarded his own father. His mother’s father figured in the vividest of her family tales of the past—the man returning from a tavern down a straight dirt road and greeting with harsh drunken words the little girl who had run up the road to meet him; the man, younger, working in the woods, sawing and burning trees for the “charcoal business” with his bride’s brothers; younger still, slender and unmarried, the man walking miles up and down the local hills to teach at a one-room schoolhouse. The walk took him daily through the farm where a certain young woman, the baby of her large family, spied him out and created a reason, one day of deep snow, for them to meet. We are all the result of sexual events, and their faded heat still warms us. Allen’s mother had implanted him with a set of images that entwined, flourishing and fading, among those he had acquired with his own senses.

It surprised him, unpleasantly, when his mother’s laugh, its unmistakable sly cry and shy trailing-off, came out of his mouth. And it irritated him to detect, in the workings of his brain, an increasing amount of the fanciful, self-defeating obliquity that had irritated him in her. In conversation she always resisted simple concurrence, and would nimbly take a contrary position, as if to make life, for herself and her partner in dialogue, more interesting. This curious courtesy was generally wasted, Allen had long ago observed, on the world, yet he felt in his own dealings an increasing tendency in the same direction; he couldn’t help himself, the pull of the contrary was too strong, and there was too much justice lurking in the case not being presented.

For instance: When his second wife was negotiating the price of the suburban spread where they would consolidate their married status, he found himself in the mental position of the sellers, who were desperate to move to California, and he kept proposing to his wife a worse bargain than the one she eventually managed to strike. "Whose side are you on?" she asked in exasperation, and he felt his mother inside him itching to embark on a discourse as to the small- and mean-mindedness of taking anything as simple as a single side, this being the root of all wars and exploitation. There was something very vulgar and un-Christian, this inner voice urged, about any display of self-interest. Yet in some sense, too, he was arguing *against* his mother, for she had been, in her rural realm, a considerable acquirer of acreage, adding slice after slice of neighboring property as "protection" for the acreage already possessed. She had done this, in her later years, with Allen's money, even though he hated land—its weediness, its erosiveness, its taxability. Or, rather, he felt about land, as about his mother, ambivalent, she having planted in him the idea that land was sacred, a piece of Mother Earth, endlessly valuable, and the last thing that the vulgar self-interest-seekers of the world would manage to take from you.

So within him his mother was battling his mother, and his sensible, hard-headed wife was the exasperated recipient of a double message. His first wife, too, had been fond of land; she still queened it over a tract his diligence had supplied. It seemed to be his circular fate to settle one woman after another on a sizable property and then move on, momentarily free, until the next female real-estate developer locked him into her plans. If he had not, in his wish to avoid his mother's temper, totally tamed his own, it might have angered him to contemplate. But, then, his mother's contrarian voice within him urged, where would he have lived, but for these landed women? On the streets? In the trees?

When his mother died, he became the sole custodian of hundreds of small mental pictures. In the most recent, he and she were moving in and out of hospitals, stooped and slow, like one of those elderly couples in which the man looks a generation younger. Hospitals, all glossy and abounding in exits and entrances and eccentric minor characters, seem made to be sitcom sets, and his mother and he laughed at the same places in the script. When the big, black, male nurse insisted on cutting her toenails and washing her ticklish feet, Allen laughed at her account of it, while thinking secretly that it had needed to be done. Her sphere of effective supervision had so shrunk that even her feet were out of it.

Yet she looked, with her white hair flung about unpinned on her pillow, attractively wild, and the brick cityscape out the hospital windows took her back to her

own city days, when she and his father had travelled through the state's small cities as his father's employer directed. Allen preferred her city self, the young woman predating his birth, whose aura of nervous grace clung to the young mother who would take him on the trolley car into town, to buy him a jacket for Sundays, or shoes in which he could see the bones of his feet move in an eerie green space at the bottom of a fluoroscope; or she would take him to a dance lesson, or a piano lesson, or the office of a city doctor, redolent of raincoats and Mercurochrome. Sometimes, when he thought back on it, it had been *she* who was going to the doctor, for female reasons that belonged to the dark subterrain of her unhappiness.

When she was dead and her input had ceased, he wondered about her unhappiness. Had the two of them imagined it? Her life had been no worse than most lives and better, surely, than many. Being a woman had no doubt frustrated her, keeping her at home, tying her to the fortunes of men less intelligent than herself, denying her a career. Perhaps something timid within her, even a lazy and self-indulgent something, had held her back from joining the women of her generation who did manage to make their own lives, as schoolteachers and saleswomen if not as artists and executives. This idea—that she was lazy and self-indulgent—came from her; all of Allen's ideas came from her, save the male, boyish idea of *getting away*, of getting out into unheated, unmediated space. Even that, in truth, had been her idea; she had once taken him up on the little hill, Shale Hill, that overlooked their town and told him that some day he would leave all this, he would fly free.

She was in him not as he had been in her, as a seed becoming a little male offshoot, but as the full tracery of his perceptions and reactions; he had led his life as an extension of hers, a superior version of hers, and when she died he became custodian of a specialized semiotics, a thousand tiny nuanced understandings of her, a once commonplace language of which he was now the sole surviving speaker.

Finding human relations difficult, she had turned to nature for comfort, and now, as he aged, the vast, restless natural presence, the birds and blossoms in their seasons and the chromatic tunings of air and weather, pressed upon him as he paced the suburban acreage where his present wife had installed him. His mother had had a nature-lover's hatred of smoking and drinking—her father had come home drunk and cruel from the tavern—and Allen had relinquished both habits years ago. She didn't smoke or drink but had loved to eat, and her middle-aged corpulence embarrassed him as well as her. In the hospital, looking back upon her life, she had confessed only one regret, with a fleeting expression of disgust: "I'm sorry I let myself get fat."

But then, in the sentences that followed, as an excuse, she had described the irresistible apple pie à la mode served in the basement cafeteria of a downtown department store where she had worked for a few Christmases—the delicious crust, the cinnamon on the crust, the creaminess of the vanilla or even fudge-ripple ice cream on top of that. The store had been the classier though smaller of the two major downtown emporiums, both rendered defunct by the rise of suburban malls; inside the revolving doors, gusts of candy-sweet perfume had swamped his youthful senses, and Christmas tinsel shivered everywhere, and carols were chiming from high on the walls, and toward the rear of the first floor, across from the stairway leading down to the clattering, fragrant cafeteria, a lending library had held, each jacket proudly wrapped in cellophane, the new Ellery Queen mystery, the new Thurber collection. Trembling tracks of wire carried money and receipts around the ceiling to an unseen cashier's office and back again—or was this in the big hardware store in the next block? Were pneumatic tubes used here, spitting out, with a stunning thump and crash, cylinders colorfully padded at both ends with thick felt? His mother would have known; she could have shared with him the vanished texture of this lost world, the world she had brought him to life within, a world of glamorous drugstores, with marble counter tops, and movie houses that were exotic islands of air-conditioning, with paper icicles dripping from the marquee. The entire old downtown that had held such wonders was not just dilapidated but wiped out—replaced by blank-faced buildings holding only the gray minions of government and finance. He wandered a world without features, just grass and sky, as in Brazil's remotest Mato Grosso, the last of his tribe, silent and hungry.

Hungry—he could not stop eating. After a full dinner, while his wife loaded the dishwasher, he would rummage rather frantically in the breadbox and the cupboards, scarcely conscious of what he was doing, and stuff his mouth with cookies, peanuts, raisins. On weekend mornings, in a strange daze he would find himself in the kitchen, not remembering how he got there, and consume half a bag of potato chips, or a safe-dish of leftover microwaved peas. Food, all the other sirens having grown faint and hoarse with age, now sang to him penetratingly—the edginess of food; the friability; the saltiness or sweetness of it in the ardent moment of first contact with his membranes; the ruminative pulverizing and liquefying and incorporating of it, like an act of memorization or of mathematical comprehension. Eating was a way, his only remaining way, of intersecting with the world. People guessed; his Christmas presents tended to be edible—boxes of giant cashews, of pricey conglomerate nuggets of chocolate, nuts, and caramel—and at dinner

parties, he was the one somehow elected to take a second helping, to gratify the hostess. Allen Dow was getting fat. Just five pounds overweight, as he saw it, though he could have lost fifteen without looking thin. Each day proved to be not quite the one in which to eat less. Though he woke to a stomach ache, and vowed moderation, as the sun grew higher the cry from an emptiness within was too sharp, too persistent. As the last of a jar of sugared peanuts, or of a nicely buttered blueberry scone, disappeared into his insides, smothering the suppressed panic there—not so much the fear of death as the sensation that his life was too *small*—he smiled to think that his mother had reached this point at the age of thirty, whereas he was all of sixty. As they tell you in seventh-grade health class, girls develop more rapidly than boys.

# Ghost Inside the Story: Spectrality in Updike's "His Mother Inside Him"

MOLLY REID

In his *New Yorker* article "True Story," Louis Menand writes that the short story is "a haunted genre" and Updike is a master of it. He goes on to say, of the short story, that "the whole idea is to make language perform its own little supernatural act, which is to turn marks on a page into an emotion, an effect, an apparition of something that is not there, a ghost." Menand clarifies that he is not talking about traditional ghost stories or tales of the supernatural. He writes, "For the most part, of course, the contemporary story keeps the supernatural safely concealed below the floorboards."

In a story like "His Mother Inside Him," the ghost, while perhaps not completely out in the open, is not quite so "safely concealed below the floorboards." Though Allen Dow's mother is not the traditional figure of the specter, clanking chains and washed in light, she does surface for Allen in visible and not-so-visible ways. This story explores a fairly common type of haunting: the ways in which we cannot quite escape our parents' shadows, those annoying habits and frustrating qualities we swore we'd never have.

Allen Dow tells us about his mother's temper in the beginning of the story, about how this has shaped the way he's learned to move through the world, along with the way he relates to women. Then, as he ages, and after his mother's death, people begin to tell him he resembles her physically, which he mostly rejects, though can't completely dismiss. But what really bothers him is the surfacing of his mother's unattractive tics and habits of mind: "It surprised him, unpleasantly, when his mother's laugh, its unmistakable sly cry and shy trailing-off, came out of

his mouth. And it irritated him to detect, in the workings of his brain, an increasing amount of the fanciful, self-defeating obliquity that had irritated him in her” (80).<sup>\*</sup> It is this unconscious internalization that disturbs Allen Dow the most. The haunting that cannot be dismissed because it lives inside him.

The logic of the story is associative, moving as memory and grief moves, subject to the vicissitudes of consciousness. In this way, it also follows the logic of the ghost. Vivid detail giving way to abstraction and retreat. In the last paragraph of the story, the narration becomes sharply focused on the demands and cravings of the body, as the slightly grotesque premise in the title becomes manifest in the thrilling visceral way of the good ghost story. The last paragraph of “His Mother Inside Him” starts thusly:

Hungry—he could not stop eating. After a full dinner, while his wife loaded the dishwasher, he would rummage rather frantically in the breadbox and the cupboards, scarcely conscious of what he was doing, and stuff his mouth with cookies, peanuts, raisins. On weekend mornings, in a strange daze he would find himself in the kitchen, not remembering how he got there, and consume half a bag of potato chips, or a safe-dish of leftover microwaved peas. (83)

Here, the narrative voice shifts to focus fixedly on Allen’s hunger. As the narrator describes his eating habits and the voraciousness with which he consumes various foods, the effect is powerful—it both evokes the corporeal appetite it describes and complicates the relationship between the body and the mind, between emotions and physicality. Allen is consumed with the urge to eat and eat, an urge beyond his control but clearly connected to his mother’s habits—and her death. The narrator describes “the edginess of food; the friability; the saltiness or sweetness of it in the ardent moment of first contact with his membranes, the ruminative pulverizing and liquefying and incorporating of it . . .” (83). Slightly gratuitous, carnal even, this description crosses boundaries, dissolves clear separation between inside and outside, solid and liquid. It makes the non-physical, the spirit of Allen’s mother, explicitly, bodily manifest. It introduces the horror of what links us to the dead, the dread of not being able to control the forces that shape us.

Though hauntology has been accused of being a flash-in-the-pan academic fad, and though it sounds like the title of a campy eighties movie, I find myself a little

<sup>\*</sup>Page references to “His Mother Inside Him” are to the text as reprinted in this issue of *The John Updike Review*, which is the text used in *Collected Later Stories*, ed. Christopher Carduff (Library of America 2013).

in love with it these days. First coined by Jacques Derrida in his *Spectres of Marx* (1993), the term has been used to look at various manifestations of art and culture through the conceptual metaphor of the ghost.

In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida was specifically writing about the ways the “spectre” of Karl Marx and communism haunts society, though Derrida eventually expanded its application, and many others have taken it up. In “Spectrographies,” Derrida, in a conversation with Bernard Stiegler, says, “What has, dare I say, constantly haunted me in this logic of the specter is that it regularly exceeds all the oppositions between visible and invisible, both phenomenal and nonphenomenal: a trace that marks the present with its absence in advance” (39). It is this quality of absence in presence, of the in between, that feels, at least to my own suspicious fickle heart, a productive lens through which to look at the contemporary moment—and particularly at this story.

Echoing Derrida, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock writes: “Neither living nor dead, present nor absent, the ghost functions as the paradigmatic deconstructive gesture, the ‘shadowy third’ or trace of an absence that undermines the fixedness of such binary oppositions” (62). Both Derrida and Weinstock explain the ghost or specter as something that lives in the spaces in between the text. This might take the form of memory, trauma, secrets—the things that defy our regular modes of knowing.

The shift in the very last paragraph of Updike’s story solidifies its habitation in the spectral realm. Throughout the story, the influence of Allen’s mother on his appearance and behavior, like her spirit, hovers, but it is in this last paragraph that she becomes a “trace of an absence” and “both visible and invisible.” The descriptions of Allen’s eating are sensory and physical, though the reader is aware of the less material, shadowy source of this possession. Instead of acting like a juxtaposition, throwing the physicality of Allen’s hunger in relief, emphasizing the difference between his being alive with the attendant urges of the body and his mother’s death, her invisibility “undermines the fixedness of such binary oppositions.” It exaggerates the physical, and, in doing so, conjures the spirit.

My mother has always had a habit of saying “very interesting,” in a way that makes clear whatever you were talking about was not, in fact, interesting at all, that you would be wise to reconsider whatever it was you just said, that you may, in fact, want to reconsider the entire cognitive paradigm from which that statement came.

I used to hate it when she said this. I used to swear I would never say such a thing in such a way. And yet. I find my mother’s words, along with her delivery, infecting my responses to friends and family before I have a chance to stop myself.

My father is a minor hoarder. Not a can't-walk-through-his-living-room-due-to-the-stacks-of-*People*-magazine-and-proliferation-of-cats kind of hoarder, but it's a problem. He doesn't like to throw anything away. The last time I visited him, his dining room table was without a visible surface, stacked with papers and books and, perplexingly, twenty-three empty eyedroppers. This used to drive me crazy when I was a kid, the embarrassing detritus of an adult life lived. And it still drives me crazy, especially as it has become more pronounced with age.

And yet. Though I'm lucky to have found a partner who counteracts my hoarding propensities, I still fill most available surfaces when given the opportunity, am still loath to throw away that receipt for the paper towels I bought last month. I have inherited verbal tics from my father, too. Phrases and jokes I do not condone, that hatch from my mouth and fly away in broad daylight.

This is not an uncommon phenomenon. We are critical of our parents, or at least of their less-attractive qualities, and swear we will be better—we will not be so petty, so strict, so cheap. We will not X. And if we X, it will be a different brand of X; it will be in full consciousness and openheartedness. We will do X in a way our mother never did X, in a way she was incapable of even imagining.

But we inevitably fail. If not completely, then in moments, slips when the thing we've tried so hard not to be, the thing we swore we'd never do, emerge suddenly, unbidden, when we are not paying attention, when we are not being careful. My parents are both still alive, but I imagine this experience becomes even more fraught when the parent is no longer physically there. There is a psychoanalytic term, I am sure, to describe this involuntary phenomenon. But to me, it is a supernatural takeover, an inevitable, reason-opposed pull. It is a haunting.

The ghost story has been around for a long time, its "Golden Age" often said to be the period from the late nineteenth century until roughly the first World War. The popularity of the ghost story coincided with the rise of Spiritualism, spirit photography, and a general interest in the mystical. Many, such as Luke Thurston in *Literary Ghosts from the Victorians to Modernism*, have posited that this was due to a kind of existential or spiritual crisis—ghost stories both acted out fears that the past could return and offered reassurance that death was not the end (7). In the wake of scientific and technological developments that threatened to disrupt the notion that humans were the special chosen ones, not subject to the same laws of mortality and decay as animals and plants, ghosts promised a more sublimated realm, one unreachable through science, an afterlife. There is something comforting about ghosts, despite their often menacing agenda. They promise another chance.

And perhaps this is what Allen Dow's hunger is all about—a way to calm the anxieties about mortality his mother's death prompted, a way to hold on to her even in death. Though his appetite seems out of his control, Allen isn't particularly upset about it. Updike writes, "As the last of a jar of sugared peanuts, or of a nicely buttered blueberry scone, disappeared into his insides, smothering the suppressed panic there—not so much the fear of death as the sensation that his life was too *small*—he smiled . . ." (84). Allen's eating, "smothering the suppressed panic," provides comfort. The ghost promises more, promises something larger than our base mortality.

Though "His Mother Inside Him" does not contain the gothic elements of a traditional ghost story—full moons, old gloomy houses, suspicious governesses—or the visible, hostile specter invoked in the English and American ghost stories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (like M. R. James's famous "Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad," in which the protagonist blows on a whistle he shouldn't have and summons a menacing spirit), it does contain what Thurston calls "a strange sensory irruption . . . [an] uncanny manifestation" (3). Allen Dow's hunger is not presented as a reasonable one, despite his seeming welcoming of it. It is intense and all-consuming. The viscerality of Updike's descriptions—"the ruminative pulverizing and liquefying and incorporating"—and the inability of Allen to be sated add up to a haunting rooted in realism but not less unsettling because of this.

Updike refuses to offer the reader closure for this kind of takeover. The story ends with the following words:

Though he woke to a stomach ache, and vowed moderation, as the sun grew higher the cry from an emptiness within was too sharp, too persistent. . . . [H]e smiled to think that his mother had reached this point at the age of thirty, whereas he was all of sixty. As they tell you in seventh-grade health class, girls develop more rapidly than boys. (83)

Updike resists traditional narrative closure, as the spectral resists closure. To provide closure would be to make sense of this haunting, to provide comfort, to say there is a clear beginning and a clear end, and hence a way to control or shrug off our ghosts. But here, Updike leaves Allen Dow caught in the midst of his hunger, without clear answers or a way out.

Maybe it's true that all stories are haunted, at least those written down. The presence behind the words is no longer present; the characters exist in some other realm beyond the material. As Julian Wolfreys writes, "Texts are neither dead nor

alive, yet they hover at the very limits between living and dying” (72). This hovering allows us to transcend our own mortality, gives us a glimpse of what it might be like to permeate the boundary between life and death. For Updike, this boundary is blurred in story, in memory and grief, in the specters that live inside us. In “His Mother Inside Him,” Updike doesn’t just show us how fragile and insubstantial those boundaries are (between alive and dead, here and not here), he makes us feel it. Allen Dow’s hunger becomes our hunger, and our disgust. Words are turned into flesh—a supernatural act if there ever was one.

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# The Women Inside Him: John Updike Writing the Feminine

JENNIFER GLASER

In “American Bitch,” a controversial episode of *Girls*, HBO’s exploration of the agonies and ecstasies of millennial privilege, main character Hannah Horvath (series creator Lena Dunham’s alter ego) visits a decorated literary fiction writer, Chuck Palmer, in his Manhattan apartment. She has been summoned there after writing a blog post excoriating him for his alleged affairs with college girls, some of which are rumored to have been nonconsensual. The episode, an elaborate set piece, is characterized, like much of the series, by its commitment to romanticizing a New York life increasingly out of reach to any but the wealthy few. As much as anything, “American Bitch” is about the imagined landscape of a successful, male writer’s life—complete with wall-to-wall bookshelves, framed literary awards, and a photograph of the author in Toni Morrison’s auratic embrace.

But the show quickly shifts to a darker place. Never moving from the capacious apartment, Horvath and Palmer have an intense, free-wheeling conversation about writing, consent, power, and the difference between being a male and female writer. This conversation, which casts Palmer as alternately appealing and slimy, but always human, invokes a variety of bogeymen for its primarily female viewership—from Woody Allen and Louis C. K. to Philip Roth and Tao Lin. Trailing behind Palmer are a number of heated debates about the ethics of enjoying art produced by men who have been accused of misogyny or outright abuse of women. What does it mean to watch Woody Allen films in the wake of his daughter’s accusations of abuse?<sup>1</sup> (Palmer even has a caricature of Allen in his apartment.) How should we

respond to charges of sexual harassment against comedian Louis C. K. by female comics? What do we make of a rash of recent online stories about successful male writers and editors who've used the power of their position to pressure young, aspiring women writers into sex? Whom should we believe and how should it affect our aesthetic habits? Are these issues related to how we read authors whose crimes are representational, rather than real-life, such as the aforementioned Roth, whose women characters run the gamut from icy objects of desire to castrating mothers and controlling shrews? "American Bitch" emphasizes the problem of artistic affinity and the difficulties of fandom for female readers, themselves often aspiring writers, as Hannah is in *Girls*.

Chuck Palmer, the writer figure in this episode, is a stand-in for a certain strain of male writer who remains at the core of the American literary pantheon: Mailer, Updike, and Roth, the writers whom David Foster Wallace called "the Great male Narcissists who've dominated postwar realist fiction." Near the end of the episode, Palmer, courting Hannah's approval, makes this link to the literary legends obvious, giving her a signed first edition of Philip Roth's *When She Was Good* (original title, *American Bitch*). Hannah marvels at the gift, averring that: "I know I'm not supposed to like him because he's a misogynist and he demeans women, but I can't help it. I fuckin' love his writing." Palmer responds that "[y]ou can't let politics dictate what you read or who you fuck."

Horvath is willing to accept his book (and his advice) because the celebrated novelist has just admitted to a fundamental vulnerability as a writer and a person: he has never truly been able to imagine what it was like to be a woman. His lovers, his sister, his daughter, his mother. They were all opaque to him. And, what is worse, he admits that he never thought to probe further. He insists that Hannah read aloud a short story he is working on devoted to the topic—one that portrays a male writer engaged in the futile task of trying to imagine the interior life of a woman with whom he is about to have oral sex. Hannah reads Palmer's narrative as a recognition of the limits of his own empathic imagination and how it keeps him from knowing the young aspiring writer with whom he is having sex: "And as she unbuckled it, I thought sadly of my sister, my daughter, even my mother and the times they had resisted being known, guessing instead that the man they were standing across from wanted something or someone else entirely." Reading the story, which is written from the male writer's perspective, fully convinces Hannah to identify with (and imagine herself into) Palmer's position, a desire that the script has hinted at from the beginning of the episode. At this moment, the viewer watches a transformation in Hannah. Compared to his accuser, whose Tumblr

narrative of coercive sex first spurred Hannah to write about him, Palmer is the more convincing writer. She begins to believe his story, a decision undermined only in the final minutes of the episode, when the writer graphically propositions her. The episode is justly celebrated for its nuanced take on a variety of thorny subjects, including sexual assault, inequities of power, and aesthetic appropriation. But “American Bitch” also takes on the generally unacknowledged fact that, for many male writers, female interiority presents an intractable puzzle.

Throughout “American Bitch,” Palmer mentions that it is not only the women with whom he has had casual sex who vex him, but also the women who people his life in the most emotionally intimate ways: his daughter, his sister, his mother. To imagine, in depth, the inner life of these women is to embark on a dangerous empathic adventure with tragic results for male sexuality, as well as male literary freedom. Palmer is not alone in having an ambivalent relation to knowing and writing women. Even the most gifted twentieth-century male writers have had avowed struggles with the ethics of representation when it came to portraying their female loved ones in print.

In “His Mother Inside Him” (1992), a short story published a little more than two years after his own mother’s death, John Updike meditates on the knowability of the mother and the unavoidable imprint she leaves behind. This consideration, in turn, hints at a larger conflict in the writer’s work, which has itself often been labeled too flowery and domestic, too “feminine,” to be counted among the giants of modern American literature, even as it has been pilloried for misogyny by feminist critics.<sup>2</sup> “His Mother Inside Him” has been largely absent from critical accounts of Updike’s *oeuvre*, yet it illustrates some of the writer’s central preoccupations, as well as his uncanny capacity for linguistic precision and emotional compression. “His Mother Inside Him” takes up only three pages in *The New Yorker* issue in which it was originally published, but in it, Updike’s magisterial grasp of the short story form is on full display.

The story relates something of the relationship between protagonist Allen Dow, one of Updike’s fictional avatars, and his mother. Dow, mourning his mother, is forced to take stock of both the ambivalence he had felt for her during her lifetime and the various ways in which he has come to resemble her after her death. Although Updike is celebrated for his fealty to realism (in eulogizing him for *The New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik writes that “[d]espite the lyrical surface of his prose, Updike was a realist, as comedians must be, and never even marginally a romantic.”), “His Mother Inside Him” features an almost supernaturally symbiotic relationship between mother and son.

Dow opens the story with a vignette about his mother's fearsome temper and the ways in which she cowed his quiet father. Only in moving far away from her, he suggests, could he feel safe from her mercurial personality. Despite this desire for distance from his mother, Dow recognizes that her death has only increased the *unheimlich* nature of the mother-son bond. As the title of the story suggests, "His Mother Inside Him" is a narrative about the ways in which mothers come to colonize their children's interior spaces, for good or ill. Updike relates that Dow "resented it, then, when, after her death, people (second cousins, Lutheran ministers) fondly remarked on how much he, as he approached sixty, resembled his mother" (79).<sup>\*</sup> Moreover, "[i]t surprised him, unpleasantly, when his mother's laugh, its unmistakable sly cry and shy trailing-off, came out of his mouth" (80). In "His Mother Inside Him," Dow's mother becomes a kind of maternal dybbuk or, less ethnically, since this is Updike, a maternal succubus. In an inversion of the mother-child relationship, the son is now swollen (sometimes literally) with his mother's unappetizing habits and failed desires for recognition. As Updike puts it, with characteristic elegance:

She was in him not as he had been in her, as a seed becoming a little male offshoot, but as the full tracery of his perceptions and reactions; he had led his life as an extension of hers, a superior version of hers, and when she died he became custodian of a specialized semiotics, a thousand tiny nuanced understandings of her, a once commonplace language of which he was now the sole surviving speaker. (82)

Taking the metaphor of mother-son as a nation of two further, he writes that "[h]e wandered a world without features, just grass and sky, as in Brazil's remotest Mato Grosso, the last of his tribe, silent and hungry" (83).

After her death, Dow finds himself possessed by an insatiable hunger that echoes the hunger his mother experienced during her middle years. He begins to eat and eat, feeling that his life has become unbearably small without his mother around. This feeling of shrinking echoes his mother's own experience of limitations, both physical and psychical, and allows Dow to think about the ways in which his mother suffered from the narrowness of expectations for her gender. "When she was dead and her input had ceased, he wondered about her unhappiness. Had the two of them imagined it? Her life had been no worse than most lives and better, surely, than many" (82). Updike belies this neutral assertion in the next sentence,

<sup>\*</sup>Page references to "His Mother Inside Him" are to the text as reprinted in this issue of *The John Updike Review*, which is the text used in *Collected Later Stories*, ed. Christopher Carduff (Library of America 2013).

as Dow suggests that “[b]eing a woman had no doubt frustrated her, keeping her at home, tying her to the fortunes of men less intelligent than herself, denying her a career” (82). He adds, in the earlier *New Yorker* version of the story that “[s]he was never unconscious of her sex, its embarrassments foremost; she more than once told her son how when she was young and ambitious her menstrual periods laid her low for four or five days each time, a monthly thunderbolt” (35). The mother’s body, like her unhappiness, is unavoidable for Dow. It is what marks her, for both Dow and his father, as “a dangerous treasure, glowing but radioactive” (35).

But, who, Dow wonders, should he blame for her unhappiness and its effect on their family? He muses: “Perhaps something timid within her, even a lazy and self-indulgent something, had held her back from joining the women of her generation who did manage to make their own lives, as schoolteachers and saleswomen if not as artists and executives”. Again, though, Updike moves from this purported critique of his mother as “timid,” “lazy,” and “self-indulgent” to a more ambiguous statement about her own perceptions and their overweening influence on her son. Dow admits that “[t]his idea—that she was lazy and self-indulgent—came from her; all of Allen’s ideas came from her, save the male, boyish idea of *getting away*, of getting out into unheated, unmediated space”. But, as he relates just a sentence later (and details in an earlier story, “Flight”), “Even that, in truth, had been her idea; she had once taken him up on the little hill, Shale Hill, that overlooked their town and told him that some day he would leave all this, he would fly free” (82). Dow’s “boyish idea of *getting away*” is really a fun-house reflection of his mother’s own frustrated desires.

“Flight,” another of Updike’s Allen Dow stories, published in *The New Yorker* in 1959, also focuses on the relationship between mother and son. In this narrative, Allen and his mother engage in a pitched battle about the appropriateness of his girlfriend, Molly. To his mother, Allen is meant to escape the narrow confines of small-town Olinger, to “fly,” like the birds they witness soaring over the hills near their home. Continuing to date Molly, a “dumb” local girl, will forever trap her gifted son, according to Dow’s mother. In the climactic scene of the story, Dow agrees not to see his girlfriend anymore, but, in doing so, he also asserts that this is the last time he will listen to his mother. This collision between the unfettered self and the importunities of the collective, between success and intimacy, independence and dependence, is at the heart of Updike’s work, as it was for many writers of his generation, including Philip Roth (who writes so eloquently in *The Human Stain* of anxieties about “the coercive, inclusive, historical, inescapable moral *we* with its insidious *E pluribus unum*” [108]). Dow’s mother inhabits a complicated

role in this myth of flight. Even as it may seem a plea for loyalty, her insistence on Allen's independence from Molly and the town of Olinger is also an insistence on his leaving *her* behind. Hidden just beneath the surface of "Flight" and "His Mother Inside Him," as well as the longer story "The Sandstone Farmhouse" (which features a mother-son relationship, although not the Allen Dow character), is Updike's bottomless guilt about separating from and exceeding the mother.

Updike didn't often acknowledge that his mother, like Allen Dow's, was a writer. Published a number of times in *The New Yorker* (presumably due in part to her son's influence) under her maiden name, Linda Grace Hoyer, she spent her son's childhood writing and attempting to publish her writing. Adam Begley frames his recent biography of Updike through his relationship with his writer-mother, focusing on how the relationship shadowed both his fiction and nonfiction and the fragile line between autobiography and invention in Updike's work. Central to Updike's writing, according to Begley, was his encouraging mother. As he puts it, "Part of what allowed Updike the freedom to indulge his autobiographical impulse was his relationship with his mother . . ." (16). "She was, as he put it, an 'ideally permissive writer's mother,' meaning that he was free to write exactly what he pleased, no matter how painful to his family." Hoyer Updike encouraged her son to write thinly veiled autobiography without worrying about its effect on his loved ones. But this is not to say that Updike and his mother had a simple bond. As Begley points out, "To say that Linda Hoyer Updike encouraged her only child and nurtured his precocious talent is to understate and simplify an unusually close and complicated relationship." Throughout her son's childhood, Hoyer Updike worked on an unpublished novel about Ponce de Leon. "'There was a novel,' Updike recalled, 'that slept in a ream box that had been emptied of blankness, and like a strange baby in the house, a difficult papery sibling, the manuscript was now and then roused out of its little rectangular crib and rewritten and freshly swaddled in hope'" (quoted in Begley 18). Updike's "papery sibling" offered little reason for rivalry, however. His mother's fiction was rarely, if ever, published during Updike's young life; instead, Hoyer Updike put her ambitions into her son. As Begley suggests, "Updike, like his mother, believed in his own special destiny—his show must go on" (14).

In the poem "My Mother at Her Desk," Updike again draws a contrast between the horizons of his mother's ambitions and his own—and the relationship between their prospects and the gender to which they were born. He compares his own experience—"propelled to confidence by mother-love / and polished for the New York market by / New England's wintry flair for education"—with her

“purer ambition, hatched / of country childhood in the silences / of crops accruing, her sole companions birds / whose songs and names she taught herself to know” (13). Hoyer Updike is possessed of the “purer ambition,” “hatched” in a pastoral setting, her education self-generated, organic, and natural.<sup>3</sup> Her son, in contrast, is “polished” for the metropolis by Harvard’s “wintry flair for education.”

Her gendered difference is expressed not just in how she writes but in how she interprets the world around her:

... Bent above a book, she'd lift  
her still-young face and say, "Such ugly words!"  
as if each stood alone. *No, no*, I thought,  
*context is all.* (13)

The speaker's assertion that "*context is all*" functions as a criticism of his mother for how she reads (without context). It also stands as a rueful explanation for why the son has so surpassed the mother's own dreams of literary success: Updike was "male, and made / to make a mark, while Mother typed birdsong" (13). Her writing, like birdsong, was small and ephemeral and destined not to reach listeners outside the pastoral setting in which she was born.

What complicates this comparison between mother and son is that Updike was, essentially, a domestic writer, whose fixations were similar to those of his mother and many other women writers: the small town, the family mythos, the intergenerational conflicts and failed love affairs. In contrast to Roth, the writer to whom he is most often compared, Updike did not make self-conscious runs at the great themes.<sup>4</sup> An article in the *New Republic*, titled "John Updike: Tedious Suburbanite or Literary Great?" and published in the wake of Adam Begley's Updike biography, asks whether the author's focus on small-town, domestic drama impedes his pursuit of literary greatness. He was criticized for this purported lack of ambition, as well as for the suspicious flamboyance of his prose. James Wood, for instance, takes Updike to task for the stylishness of his writing in *How Fiction Works*. As Katie Roiphe puts out in a defense of the author, "The idea is that we should somehow distrust Updike because he is too good a writer. The word *stylish* in this way of thinking becomes a slur, as does the word *beautiful*." Barb Johnson's "Updike Writes Like a Girl" points out the ways in which the often-rehashed debates about the value of the writer's work hinge on how stereotypically feminine his stories are, "mostly about feelings and home and relationships" (657). "Anyone who has studied literature—though not necessarily Updike—knows to say that his sentences are either gorgeous and stunning, or, you know, totally overwritten

and ostentatious—awash with shimmering phrases, like bubbles that Updike has blown just to watch them catch the light: whee!” (656).

These debates largely hinge on reductive stereotypes of femininity and masculinity. However, they suggest that Updike’s own relationship to femininity and the feminine voice may be more complicated than some of his more grossly misogynistic portraits of women suggest. Natasha Walter is correct to point out that Updike, like Chuck Palmer in *Girls*, struggled to represent women in his fiction, especially in his earlier work. As she argues, “His women do not have characters, or pasts, or conversation worth any careful enunciation. They have pasty thighs, and breasts like sugary buns, and sly vaginas.” They exist primarily as sexual objects. Updike’s “inability to create depth in a female character means his women must collude even in abuse,” as a woman is imagined to do in her own rape in *Rabbit Redux*. However, in his later work, Updike seemed to grapple with the paucity of his usually capacious vision when it came to women. In *S*, published in 1988 as the third installment of his *Scarlet Letter* cycle, Updike writes an epistolary novel from the perspective of a woman, Sarah P. Worth. The novel details—in the form of tape recordings and letters sent to her family—Worth’s flirtation with Eastern spirituality and adultery. As James Schiff notes in his appraisal of Updike’s largely neglected late novels, *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000) and *Seek My Face* (2002), “over the final quarter-century of his life, his female characters, including Janice in the remaining *Rabbit* installments, become not only increasingly articulate and capable, but assume a more central role, serving as protagonists in three of his final five novels” (46).

While it would be far-fetched to label these moves instances of *écriture féminine*, it is clear that Updike endeavored in these novels to move beyond the merely satirical mode in representing the trials of his protagonists into an exploration of the female voice and interiority, as well as his own limitations in accessing them. This frustrated desire to represent and understand women—to become the mother who encouraged him to take flight, even while flying away from her—was at the heart of Updike’s project. One might say that Updike the writer, like Allen Dow, carried his mother inside himself—ambivalently, but unavoidably.

#### NOTES

1. Lena Dunham has publicly criticized Allen and supported his daughter, Dylan Farrow, in comments at a Sundance Film Festival Panel and on a Marc Maron WTF podcast.

2. David Foster Wallace famously said that many women readers perceived Updike to be little more than “a penis with a thesaurus,” while Natasha Walter wrote that “there is only one reason for women to exist in Updike’s world: to be fucked, or at least fuckable.”

3. In "His Mother Inside Him," Dow remarks on his mother's association with the land. She is synecdochic for Olinger but also marks her son's ambivalence for settlement in her love for acquiring property.

4. Roth and Updike were often linked by critics. Roth is also clearly one of the models for Updike's Bech character.

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# From Without to Within: The Recalcitrant Semiotic Tracery of John Updike's "His Mother Inside Him"

ROBERT M. LUSCHER

As I recently reread Austin Wright's "Recalcitrance in the Short Story," an essay I'd assigned to my students in an upper-level class on the genre, his definition of recalcitrance seemed curiously apt to John Updike's "His Mother Inside Him." Wright defines the term as "simply the resistance offered by the materials to that form as it tries to shape them" (116) and observes that the challenges to configuring meaning and coherence presented by features such as discontinuity, linguistic density, and narrative ambiguity are essential to the genre's pleasures. While "His Mother Inside Him" is not as metaphorically dense as the lyric story "Leaves," or as fragmented as the modular story "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car," it nonetheless presents a high degree of recalcitrance. Struggling to configure the stubbornly resistant Updike narrative into acceptable coherence—or at least to appreciate better its subversion of such—I was struck by how the story generates formal recalcitrance in its plotless, associative narration, its rich metaphorical network, and its oblique closure. In addition, recalcitrance emerges as the story's central subject in its depiction of Allen Dow's struggle to comprehend the nature and degree of his mother's existence inside him, as well as his resistance to that reality. Whatever resolution the story presents—if, indeed, anything is resolved—is ultimately riddled with paradoxes and ambivalence emerging from,

and perhaps inherent in, the inner landscape of memory and the articulation of its convergence with the present.

A dense, heterodiegetic narration focalized nearly exclusively in its protagonist's consciousness, "His Mother Inside Him" engenders an instant subtext, resurrecting Allen Dow from the well-known, early story "Flight," in which Allen engages in conflict with his mother over a girlfriend and ultimately his fate. While he is determined to assert his will, his mother's resolve that he take flight from Olinger and transcend the constrictions that have marked her life there triumphs. "His Mother Inside Him" brings Allen full circle, well after he achieves autonomy, to contemplate the surprising extent of his late mother's influence. Laurie Champion places the story at the end of a configured cycle of mother-centered Pennsylvania stories that span Updike's career and contends that they move toward some final resolution, a relinquishing of the past so that the composite male protagonist, no longer encumbered by the mother, can "move forward in his personal growth." Aristi Trendel groups this story with two later tales concerning the mother-son relationship, "The Sandstone Farmhouse" and "The Cats," and views them collectively as a "short trilogy on mourning," with Allen's nostalgia generating melancholia and regression. Yet, considered as autonomously as any reader familiar with Updike's oeuvre might, "His Mother Inside Him" constitutes a narrative representation of the elusive search for resolution and closure, one that ends in neither forward movement nor regressive melancholia, but rather depicts a muddled acceptance that no final resolution or clear understanding may ever be achievable. Its provisional and ironic closure accepts that the maternal legacy cannot be evaded, mildly acceding to defeat and recognizing its ambiguous nature, yet doing so obliquely—a strategy that might also derive from that same legacy.

The story opens with the narrator's declaration that "Allen Dow had been fearful, in childhood, of his mother's unhappiness, which would vent itself in sudden storms of temper that flattened the other occupants of the house into the corners and far rooms" (79),\* establishing the baseline from which to gauge Allen's evolution. In the earlier *New Yorker* version of the story, his reaction is described as "alarmed" (34), but the revision's stronger choice of the word "fearful" seems more appropriate to the effect of these vented "storms of temper" that manifest the "rage inside her" (79). In this initial use of the key word "inside," the image depicts the movement of rage from inside the mother to outside, provoking a palpable

\*Page references to "His Mother Inside Him" are to the text as reprinted in this issue of *The John Updike Review*, which is the text used in *Collected Later Stories*, ed. Christopher Carduff (Library of America 2013).

reaction; most of the story, however, examines the process of transmission of her ideas and values to her son. Though Allen is now “without” his mother, many of her qualities, behaviors, and values subsequently materialize from within him and emerge into the outside world. In contrast, the narrator later notes that Allen “had no temper to speak of” (80), a difference that might gratify him as he seeks to distinguish himself from her. Still, Allen has remained “wary” of her rage, and the memory of his father cowering under the dining room table represents a mode of reaction he resolves to avoid, though nervousness breeds side effects—“skin rashes, stammering, asthma, insomnia” (79)—that persist into adulthood. Perhaps more importantly, the memory becomes part of the internalized matrix of images he carries forward, the distance in time seemingly failing to diminish its impact, so that Allen never forgives her for implanting it, even from the distance he has been able to establish via his flight from home. While more comfortable “miles beyond her reach,” where he can “begin to breathe, to sleep, and to speak normally,” such physical separation ultimately does not equate with psychic distance.

Many of the memories Allen retains have their genesis in direct observation, though some have been implanted via stories his mother shared, such as those of her father: drunkenly greeting her on his return home, working as a young man in the charcoal business, walking through the rural hills to teach at a one-room schoolhouse, and engaging in a tryst with a young woman who, observing this daily journey, conspires to meet him one snowy day. Commenting on the incident, the narrator steps out of the predominant mode of engaged exploration into Allen’s relationship with his mother to offer a generalized conclusion that halts the narrative flow: “We are all the result of sexual events, and their faded heat still warms us” (80). While this acknowledgement might harbor Freudian implications concerning the mother-son relationship, perhaps metaphoric implications related to insemination are more central, as the sentence that follows obliquely moves to a summative conclusion about their relationship: “Allen’s mother had implanted him with a set of images that entwined, flourishing and fading, among those he had acquired with his own senses.” Suggestive of conception and gestation, the verb “implanted,” evocative of the previously described tryst, links to the reciprocal and inescapable dependency that characterizes Allen’s relation to his mother. While she conceived and gave birth to him, she has subsequently, in a sense, impregnated him with these images whose entwining evokes the double-helix structure of DNA. Encoding themselves into his subsequent autonomous experiences, they inexorably become part of his ongoing history and enter into his interactions with others, such as Allen’s somewhat perverse behavior when he

and his second wife negotiate for a house, a manifestation of the same “fanciful, self-defeating obliquity” that irritated him about his mother.

Although memory is central to the inscription of Allen’s mother inside him, his struggles with her tangled legacy originate in the mirror, where he examines the external rather than internal realm, exploring those DNA-encoded features that have emerged over time. When a remark is made at his mother’s funeral about “how much he, as he approached sixty, resembled his mother,” Allen’s immediate response is denial: “He couldn’t see it” (79). Yet his subsequent assessment in the mirror yields undeniable evidence in his sun-damaged fair skin. Further, the memory of how his attempt at growing a beard yielded reddish facial hair likewise links her to him, as “she had been one of nature’s redheads.” Yet the most prominent resemblance involves “a vexed something about his forehead.” This “pink roughening of his skin exactly between his eyebrows” corresponds to the more prominent “pink V” that appeared in the same spot when her temper flared. Characteristically, Allen contextualizes this irrefutably shared characteristic with the mention of difference—his lack of temper. Then, as the narrator chronicles Allen’s thought process closely (another instance of “the narrator inside him”), the paragraph’s concluding sentence represents Allen’s curt, self-satisfied attempt to pronounce closure on the subject: “Otherwise—nose, mouth, ears—he saw no resemblance.” Yet these three divergences hardly counterbalance the previously enumerated evidence of continuity. Still, Allen attempts to further distinguish himself from his mother in the extended reflection that follows, elaborating on the difference between his own lemur-like “‘Hofstetter ears’ . . . inherited . . . from his grandmother” and his mother’s larger, flatter ones that resemble those of her father.

Closely studying these particulars paradoxically leads the narrative into a relation of Allen’s mother’s embattled and complex connection with her own mother—“a compound of admiration, exasperation, and pity” (80), which the narrator links to Allen’s feelings toward his father. Despite the difference in objects, this narrative drift not only connects mother’s and son’s kindred feelings but also foreshadows how this mingled compound of emotions emerges in the subsequent exploration of Allen’s tangled relation to his mother: he admires her persistence, is exasperated by the inheritance of her contrariness and contradiction, and finally pities her somewhat in her old age. For the majority of the story’s opening section, however, Allen’s reactions to the strength of the maternal legacy are described in unfavorable terms. He “resented” comments about his physical resemblance to her, which “surprised him, unpleasantly” (80). Further, “it irritated him to detect,

in the workings of his brain” her habit of “obliquity,” just as it irritated him to hear her laugh emerging from him; after he recognizes that the resultant contrariness exasperates his wife during a real estate negotiation, “he felt his mother inside him *itching* to embark on a discourse” (81, emphasis mine) against the pursuit of self-interest. In a quick aside pertaining to land acquisition, the narrator tones down the chafing effect, noting that Allen “felt about the land, as about his mother, ambivalent, she having planted in him the idea that land was sacred”. Nonetheless, these two implanted principles exist in perpetual conflict, and he must conclude that “within him his mother was battling his mother.” Now that he is without her, she resides inescapably within him, ever a “contrarian voice.”

The story’s middle section emphasizes the burden that falls upon Allen after his mother’s death, as he must become “sole custodian of hundreds of small mental pictures”. This custodial responsibility transcends the mere maintenance of an archive, as recall brings out emotions and questions inherent in each image; remembrance ultimately involves an examination of what lies behind each signifier and an extrapolation of the continually reinscribed terms of the mother-son relationship. In the memory of their repeated hospital visits near the end of her life, the narrator—presumably focalized in Allen’s consciousness—likens them to “one of those elderly couples in which the man looks a generation younger,” enhancing that closeness by noting their sitcom-audience-like simultaneous laughter. An element of pity enters Allen’s mind when he recalls how she must have her toenails trimmed and feet washed by a nurse, bemoaning how “[h]er sphere of effective supervision had so shrunk” (81). Yet he subsequently counters this image of diminishment with a memory of her “attractively wild,” more dynamic younger self, evoked by seeing her hair spread upon the hospital pillow. This image of her city self—initially located by the narrator in her mind—is one that Allen links fondly to their shared trolley journeys into town, as he recalls various errands performed for him, though in fact, he corrects himself, “it had been *she* who was going to the doctor, for female reasons that belonged to the dark subterrain of her unhappiness.” Contrasting with the vented rage that opens the story, this buried sorrow remains locked inside her, part of the enigma Allen inherits, ready to be explored by and within his own sympathetic imagination.

Updike omits two substantial passages from the *New Yorker* version of the story in which Allen recalls his mother’s frank discussion of the “special natural burdens” of her “mysterious” (35) femaleness. In the first passage, she contrasts a brief account of her own birth, characterizing herself as a “twelve-pound near-murderess,” with his birth, during which she doubts her maternal ability. Afterward,

however, her uncertainty recedes, and “for the first time in her life she had felt *right*.” The second omitted passage concerns menstruation; she shares how the “monthly thunderbolt” could be devastating for multiple days. While embarrassing to Allen, his father’s response is a line that also occurs in “Pigeon Feathers”: “Your mother’s a real femme,” which he makes here as a “sly boast,” augmented with the characterization of her as “a dangerous treasure, glowing but radioactive.” Whatever the rationale for Updike’s editing, the omissions lessen Allen’s intimate knowledge about his mother, keeping him on the outside, “wondering,” as the words “no doubt” and “perhaps” (which appear in both versions) further emphasize: “Being a woman had no doubt frustrated her, keeping her at home. . . . Perhaps something timid within her, even a lazy and self-indulgent something, had held her back from joining the women of her generation who did manage to make their own lives” (82). Allen thus realizes that even his speculation may be ultimately derivative, implanted inside him. Even the one idea he tries to own in order to establish his autonomy—“the male, boyish idea of *getting away*”—is, he must admit, derived from her.

The densely metaphoric reflection that follows concludes the story’s middle section, providing a conceptual network of images that attempts to capture the essence of his mother’s influence. The narrator begins by establishing an essential difference: “She was in him not as he had been in her, as a seed becoming a little male offshoot” (82). This variance distinguishes the implantation of memory and habit from the process of conception, gestation, and replication through producing an “offshoot.” In altering this word from “idol” (35), as it initially appeared in the *New Yorker* version, Updike drops the explicit implication that Allen’s mother worships him and adjusts the basis of the relationship to a closer, more organic one. Yet Allen’s role metaphorically maintains some male autonomy in the narrator’s (and we assume Allen’s) initial rejection of the seed metaphor and the analogy to her pregnancy, though it does not negate his mother’s undeniable presence inside him or its generative nature. Allen tries to assign another metaphor as more apt, characterizing the influence in terms of inscription, “as the full tracery of his perceptions and reactions” (82). While the comparison may evoke the decorative and ornamental, it establishes that the design has its genesis in *his* life, producing a lacework that nonetheless expresses the intersection of both lives. The original *New Yorker* version of the passage uses the word “web” (35) instead of “tracery,” which likewise denotes patterned intricacy and intersection. However, the replacement not only provides connection to a site of worship but also connotes sculpted permanence.

If Allen's life has been led "as an extension of hers," it is nonetheless, the narrator contends, "a superior version of hers" (82). Having made this claim of primacy, Allen accepts a vital responsibility she seems to have assigned him by her absence: as "custodian of a specialized semiotics, a thousand tiny nuanced understandings of her, a once commonplace language of which he was now the sole surviving speaker." Foreshadowing his later comparison to the last Brazilian tribesman, and echoing the word "custodian" from earlier in the story, Allen characterizes his task as a lonely yet crucial one, despite its custodial nature. The *New Yorker* version originally had Allen as "custodian of all his little images of her" (35), a more passive curatorial function of tending a collection, preserving, cataloguing, and arranging memories when compared to the semiotic task that emerges in the revision, as the "nuanced understandings" are no longer "*like the words of a once commonplace language*" (35–36, emphasis mine) but rather constitute that language. Allen's charge as semiotic custodian is connected to his role as "sole surviving speaker." While he may be the only one who fully comprehends the complex system of signs and signifiers behind these interrelated but inexorably entangled "understandings," he is tasked not only with making them meaningful but also with communicating them, producing narratives that articulate the dynamic and ambiguous inner reality of his mother inside him. In omitting the phrase "with no one to speak it to" (36), which concludes this section in the *New Yorker* version, Updike removes emphasis on Allen's aloneness—i.e., his being without his mother—and places it instead on Allen's active role in producing meaning as "speaker," which becomes the section's new final word.

The story's final section circles back to the physical realm, with an extended probing into the reasons behind the weight that both mother and son gain in their later years. The narrator renders Allen's condition bluntly—"Allen Dow was getting fat" (84)—echoing the blunt language of apology issued to Allen by his mother in "a fleeting expression of disgust: 'I'm sorry I let myself get fat'" (82). Her weight gain is contextualized within what might at first seem an unrelated topic: "Finding human relations difficult, she had turned to nature for comfort." Arising from this predisposition, her "nature-lover's hatred of smoking and drinking" leaves her with eating as a mode of solace. While the adjectival phrase locates the source of these later life aversions in nature, the narrative employs dashes to insert another probable cause—"her father had come home drunk and cruel from the tavern." This comes just before noting the emergent similarity that Allen dropped both habits years ago. While not explicitly tying his relinquishment to his mother's preferences, Allen's changed habits nonetheless constitute further, though unremarked upon,

evidence of his mother inside him. Allen once again unconsciously inherits her habits, perhaps responding to the pressure of nature he now feels on his suburban acreage during his second marriage, as well as to the developing need to fill a growing and voracious internal emptiness.

The catalogue of vivid memories arising from his mother's excuses for her cravings creates a series of loosely associated sensory and visual images: pie à la mode, the department store where she once worked, its cafeteria and library, the subterranean pneumatic tubes that carried money and receipts. All of these images are rendered in loving detail that resurrects "the vanished texture of this lost world, the world she had brought him to life within" (83). The pneumatic tubes provide a correlative image of the conduits of memory that cycle material within Allen's own head, as well as through the narrative itself, though he defers to his late mother as the ultimate but lost authority on details about which he is unclear. This rich and sustained re-creation of the city's vanished glamour and wonders is juxtaposed with a return to the present urban dilapidation and effacement, shifting to an image of Allen "wander[ing] a world without features, just grass and sky, as in Brazil's remotest Mato Grosso, the last of his tribe, silent and hungry." The narrative emphasizes the disjunction between the fertile realm of memory and the bleakness of the present, but it hyperbolically depicts the extent of possible erasure that Allen fears in the images of the tribesman's desolation, aloneness, and silence. Nonetheless, this verbal evocation has captured the vanished life "without," resurrecting it from memory within, to counter being without his late mother, who is no longer there to share her memories but clearly provides the seeds of those images implanted within, all of which flourish in the process of recollection.

Characteristically, the penultimate paragraph's final word—"hungry"—brings the narrative back to the thread begun earlier: the sixty-year-old Allen's voracious appetite. He seems unable to control his eating, indicative of the similar passion for internalizing images and memories that he fears will be lost. His frantic consumption is "scarcely conscious" (83), performed in a daze. The lure of food overwhelms him, a siren that "now sang to him penetratingly," an adverb that further links the intake of food and the maternal legacy. While reminiscent of Rabbit Angstrom's undisciplined and incessant appetite for potato chips in *Rabbit at Rest*, which ultimately contributes to his fatal heart attack, Allen's appetite assumes the status of an overwhelming passion. This passion is associated not just with the sensual qualities—edginess, friability, salty or sweet tastes—but rather with the act of internalizing: "the ruminative pulverizing and liquefying and incorporating of it, like an act of memorization or of mathematical comprehension" (83). This

explicit conjunction of eating and memory highlights the narrative act performed in the story as well, containing this amalgamation of images for preservation and transforming it into consumable art, a text for comprehension, a locus of intersection with that which is lost. Though likened to a “mathematical” process of understanding, Allen’s eating follows few formulas: it is primarily additive, with lists of edible Christmas presents, mention of second helpings, and enumeration of particular snacks piling up in the story’s final paragraph to illustrate the extent of his urges and his inability to curb them. Self-consciousness of his mother inside him emerges from the perpetual struggle to assert some difference, and the parallel internalization evoked in this final instance of similarity perhaps acknowledges his lessened resistance and movement toward wry acceptance.

Without his mother, eating becomes Allen’s “way, his only remaining way, of intersecting with the world” (83). Here we see a somewhat desperate portrait of Allen’s need later in life to fulfill a sharp, persistent “emptiness within” that arises at least partially from his mother’s absence. In emphasizing how food “disappeared into his insides,” the narrative’s verbal connection to the preposition from the story’s title explicitly confirms the metaphoric correspondence. It diminishes recalcitrance by establishing convergence while at the same time creating recalcitrance as we examine how food and legacy diverge, notably in that the latter is neither pulverized nor ever truly disappears. While admitting that the eating provides a way of “smothering the suppressed panic there”—“there” being inside Allen—the narrator carefully forecloses equating the desire for consumption with suppressing the fear of death. Allen contends that the feeling of being smothered is “that his life was too *small*,” a judgment that the resistant reader might question, since Allen has previously noted that his life became “superior” to his mother’s through flight. So eating may not represent simply a hedge against death but rather an unconscious strategy of enlarging his life, which ultimately might be traced back to that moment on Shale Hill when his mother casts herself in the role of catalyst.

Nonetheless, Allen’s eating ultimately ranks as one more item in the array of resemblances to his mother. Surprising in its emergence, his eating is an inevitable product of her seeds implanted inside him, like those DNA-encoded physical resemblances examined in the story’s opening section. By the story’s conclusion, Allen seems to have accepted the inevitability of his mother’s ascendancy, the contradictory impulses he has inherited that will perpetually war inside him, and the need to perpetuate this problematic legacy, lest it perish entirely with him, the author of that demise. Allen thus faces the final ironic revelation with a smile, the narrator reports, chagrined that yet another similarity has emerged, albeit

with a longer learning curve on his part: “he smiled to think that his mother had reached this point at the age of thirty, whereas he was all of sixty. As they tell you in seventh-grade health class, girls develop more rapidly than boys” (84). This closural pronouncement undercuts Allen’s previously remarked-upon feeling of superiority, paradoxically reducing him in stature by comparison; his later arrival at this juncture of overwhelming hunger, fully considered, hardly represents a victory, as he has only staved off the inevitable until sixty. The droll tone of the final sentence diverges from the story’s predominant narrative mode, as well as from the evocation of existential panic immediately preceding it, presenting what Wright might label, in his survey of closural recalcitrance, “modal discontinuity” (127). However, it also represents his mode of “unresolved contradiction” related to character and/or action, presenting “mimetic resistance” (124) with a coda that ultimately deflects resolution and recognition in favor of Allen’s terminal ironic chuckle at himself, one that provides confirmation of a seemingly peripheral seventh-grade health lesson by arriving so late to this juncture.

“His Mother Inside Him” ends in a sort of narrative deflection, without really closing, an apt finish for an attempt to capture the paradoxes of a dynamic and ambiguous subject. If melancholy arises at times, largely from Allen being without tangible connection to his shared past with his mother and to the past to which she had access, it is also tinged with the guilt arising from resentment. Allen resents the struggle against his mother’s dominance, against those persistent similarities that emerge unbidden, the product seemingly encoded in his genes as well as in the transmitted images and understandings. In youth, Allen may have become an expert in “get[ting] around” (79) his mother, but in his sixties he finds that no such maneuver is possible or desirable, given that her continuance now resides within him. The inscribed tensions finally prevent full resolution, leaving Allen an overweight crucible of contradiction. Yet reconciliation, or at least the belief that it might be possible, becomes the more achievable alternative. Such reconciliation emerges provisionally through Updike’s narrative and its accumulated metaphors. Casting forward and backward to create a semiotic tracery, the story inscribes on the page what has come to reside within. In the process, the story brings memory alive and creates some semblance of permanence during the very act of struggling to comprehend.

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# Lost Luggage: Updike in the Keystone State

MATTHEW SHIPE

*John Updike's Pennsylvania Interviews*, edited by James Plath. Lehigh UP, 2016. 264 pages.

Toward the conclusion of “A Soft Spring Night in Shillington,” the opening chapter of his 1989 memoir *Self-Consciousness*, John Updike once again considers the meaning of his relationship to the small Pennsylvania town where he enjoyed his first thirteen years. Wandering the streets of his hometown, Updike relishes the opportunity to recalibrate his sense of the place that had been pivotal to his earliest fiction. Waiting for his luggage to be delivered from the Allentown Airport, he elaborately captures the details of growing up in Shillington—the way, for instance, Walt Stephens prepared hot dogs, “cutting them the long way and putting the butterfly shape flat-side-down on the griddle and then serving it in a hamburger roll with the ends sticking out” (*Self-Consciousness* 7). The essay, however, memorably concludes with Updike questioning the significance of his memories of the small Pennsylvania town that had shaped his initial impressions of the world: “Nothing I have described here has importance except to me, and to those few thousands who thanks to chance also live or have lived in Shillington,” Updike notes in the chapter’s penultimate paragraph, “they will see that I haven’t described it very well, for I haven’t described *their* town—only mine, lost luggage by and large, a few scraps preserved by memory and used more than once, used to the point of vanishing like the wishing hide in the fairy tale, used up and wished away in the self-serving corruptions of fiction” (40).

Updike's description of Shillington as "lost luggage" is only partially self-deprecating as it hints at the more difficult ambivalence that frequently characterized his treatment of the town. As he discusses in "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington," his mother's ambition for him made it imperative that he ultimately leave the town that she had fervently believed was too confining a place—"small minds, small concerns, small hopes"—to support her only son's artistic talent (37). "My love for the town," Updike goes on to say in the essay, "once we had moved from it [to Plowville], had to be furtive, and my dates with Nora [the name he gives his high school girlfriend] also; I was not allowed to be a normal boyfriend but had always to be sneaking and breaking up and saying goodbye" (38). Throughout his lengthy career, Updike endeavored to conserve his "Shillington" before it was vanquished by the progression of time, his elaborate prose becoming the vessel through which he could crystallize his amorphous memories of the community into an aesthetic object that might outlive the individual consciousness that had initially contained them. That said, his relationship to Shillington, and Pennsylvania more broadly, remains somewhat knotty: Updike moved away from the state when he left to attend Harvard, and, while he returned regularly to visit his family, he never lived in the region as an adult. As early as the publication of *Olinger Stories* (1964), Updike seemed determined to move his fiction outside the confines of Pennsylvania, noting in his foreword to that collection how the act of writing "in crystallizing memory, displaces it, and the town and the time it localizes have been consumed by the stories bound here" (vi).

With the exception of the Rabbit novels and the occasional short story (most notably "The Egg Race" [1976]), Updike spent the middle years of his career mining material that had its basis outside of the region that had propelled his earliest work. It was not until his mother's death in 1989 that Updike began to revisit Pennsylvania in his fiction on a regular basis. In his introduction to *Rabbit Angstrom: A Tetralogy* (1995), Updike noted how his regular trips back to Pennsylvania in the late 1980s to visit his ailing mother "exposed me more intensely to Reading and its environs than at any time since the Fifties, and so Rabbit's home turf . . . acquired substance and the poignance of something slipping away" (xxi). Indeed, a great many of the stories that appear in his final three collections (*The Afterlife* [1994], *Licks of Love* [2000], and the posthumous *My Father's Tears* [2009]) are set in Pennsylvania, and, in many ways, much of his most successful later fiction is devoted to memorializing his recollections of the region. Describing how his Pennsylvania upbringing helped shape his artistic sensibilities, Updike writes, "My assets as a novelist I take to be the taste for American life acquired in Shil-

lington, a certain indignation and independence also acquired there, a Christian willingness to withhold judgment, and a cartoonist's ability to compose within a prescribed space" (*Self-Consciousness* 109). Despite the centrality of Pennsylvania to so much of his fiction, Updike's relationship to the Keystone State has often been overshadowed by his reputation as a chronicler of suburban life (and suburban adultery). In many ways, he has become more closely associated with the New England terrain where he lived his adult life and where much of the fiction that he produced during his middle years was set.

Yet, much of Updike's most successful writing—not only the early fiction and Rabbit novels but also the late short stories that return to Shillington—remains rooted within Pennsylvania. It is this critical imbalance that James Plath's new collection, *John Updike's Pennsylvania Interviews*, addresses. Plath, who serves as President of The John Updike Society and was editor of *Conversations with John Updike* (U of Mississippi P, 1994), gathers together forty-four pieces that chronicle Updike revisiting his home state at different stages throughout his long career. In the collection, Plath helps us to understand Updike as a Pennsylvania writer, one who chronicled the region's history and whose writerly identity was shaped by his home state. More than just updating the material collected in *Conversations with John Updike*, this new volume traces Updike's relationship with Pennsylvania, capturing his transformation from the young (and somewhat scandalous) writer of *Rabbit, Run* (1960) and *Couples* (1968) to one of America's most preeminent writers. While the volume covers nearly the entire span of Updike's career—the first interview is from 1965 and the last is published in 2009—its focus is on the second half of his career: thirty-five of the pieces were published after 1980, when his reputation as one of America's most prominent writers was safely established. As Plath acknowledges in the book's introduction, the collection also stretches the definition of an interview by including newspaper articles that report on Updike's appearances within his home state. Even the more minor articles—short newspaper reports like "Updike Visits School" (1968) and "'Rabbit' Evolves" (1982)—should be of interest to Updike scholars and fans as they provide a compelling portrait of how the author was perceived in his home state. The inclusion of such articles lends the book the feel of a meticulous scrapbook that yields a deeply satisfying chronicle of Updike's evolving relationship with his home state.

In the collection's introduction and conclusion, Plath demonstrates how Pennsylvania remained vital to Updike, inspiring much of his most memorable fiction. "Despite his leaving," Plath notes in the book's introduction, "Updike's corner of

Pennsylvania was clearly as important to him as Mississippi's Lafayette County was to William Faulkner, who had christened his fictionalized version 'Yoknapatawpha County'" (xii). The Faulkner comparison is intriguing—Updike's debt to such Modernist predecessors as Proust and Joyce (or even Hemingway in his Michigan stories) can be more immediately felt in his early fiction—which suggests the importance of place in his work. Despite Updike's repeated insistence that he needed to escape Berks County to achieve his writerly identity, the Rabbit novels, along with the short stories inspired by his childhood memories of Shillington and Plowville, yield a rich history of how this region changed during his lifetime. What's remarkable about the later Rabbit volumes, including "Rabbit Remembered" (2000), is how Updike layers the remembered past—the townscape that he had enjoyed in his childhood—against the altered and seemingly diminished present. A deeper history of the region slowly emerges in Updike's fiction as his late work attempts to preserve in print his childhood memories.

As a whole, Plath's introduction offers a thoughtful overview of Updike's relationship with his home state, adding a brief reflection from his first wife, Mary Weatherall, as well as a few comments from his high school classmates that help clarify Updike's relationship with Shillington. At the heart of the book, Plath gently suggests how Updike possessed a particular warmth toward his home that colored his interactions with reporters and interviewers from Pennsylvania. "As he did with interviews outside of Pennsylvania, Updike altered his demeanor and delivery to fit the formality of the occasion," Plath writes in his introduction. "Yet a degree of playfulness emerged between Updike and his fellow Pennsylvanians that wasn't as evident in his other professional exchanges" (xxii). Plath ends the book on a similar note: "Would [Updike] have felt the same about his childhood had he been raised in another city, another state? After reading these interviews, articles, columns, and editorials, it's tempting to say, *probably not*" (252). And while such claims are hard to prove—despite his supposed distaste for interviews, Updike almost always emerged as a generous and thoughtful subject—the pieces included offer a useful and appealing portrait of Updike.

Particularly engaging are the transcripts from talks and Q&A sessions that Updike participated in on various occasions throughout the state. The transcripts from these appearances—"Updike at Moravian College" (1982) and "A Writing Mother and Son" (1991)—are particularly rewarding, as we get to see Updike playfully charm his audience on a range of subjects. Similarly winning is one of the last pieces, "In the Limelight: Shillington Native, World-Renown Author John Updike" (2004), a substantial interview conducted by Dorothy Lehman Hoerr for *Berks*

*County Living*. This interview seems especially warm as the conversation moves beyond the expected territory to a lively discussion of the novelist John O'Hara, who had grown up in nearby Pottsville, PA. Though the material collected in this interview is not particularly revelatory—Updike does not confess any secrets—the conversation reveals a less-guarded Updike with Hoerr giving him space to riff on subjects beyond himself.

That said, the most substantial interviews here are a series of conversations that Terry Gross conducted for her *Fresh Air* program on National Public Radio. The connection with Pennsylvania in these chapters is somewhat tenuous. Though *Fresh Air* is produced in Philadelphia, the subject of Pennsylvania is rarely at the forefront of Gross and Updike's conversations. Nevertheless, these interviews offer a fascinating overview of many of Updike's later works. Starting with *S.* (1988) and concluding with *Bech at Bay* (1998), they cover a decade of Updike's writings and offer some keen insight on that period. These interviews include a wide range of subjects, e.g., there is an especially amusing exchange regarding the history of oral sex and the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal. Taken together, these *Fresh Air* sessions illuminate Updike's sense of his late career. At the conclusion of the interview devoted to *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), Updike considers his sustained creative output at sixty-three. "I'm not exactly bubbling over with inspiration," he notes. "What inspirations I have I tend to harbor and nurse along and sometimes even repeat them. I try to be thrifty. My model in this is somebody like a painter like Cézanne, who painted those apples and Mont Sainte-Victoire over and over again. You know, there's always something new by looking at essentially the same human adventure" (183). This comment encapsulates Updike's sustained impulse to reshape his memories in his fiction and suggests how we might understand the sense of repetition that governs his later work. As all the pieces in this collection remind us, Pennsylvania remained central to Updike's sense of himself, and *John Updike's Pennsylvania Interviews* offers a compelling portrait of how the dynamics of the relationship between place and memory function within his fiction. But more than this, Plath's collection allows us the pleasure of once again experiencing Updike's voice as he contemplates the world around him.

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# Dialogic Impasses and the Literary Imagination

ARISTI TRENDEL

*Rhetorics of Religion in American Fiction: Faith, Fundamentalism, and Fanaticism in the Age of Terror*, by Liliana M. Naydan. Bucknell UP, 2016. 220 pages.

Several studies of American literary production after 9/11 have emerged over the last decade, most prominently Kristiaan Versluys's *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (2009) and Richard Gray's *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (2011). In bringing to the forefront this traumatic event and its effect on literature, few of these studies consider the ways in which contemporary American novelists address the subject of religious belief in the post-9/11 age of terror. This is why Liliana M. Naydan's book, *Rhetorics of Religion in American Fiction: Faith, Fundamentalism, and Fanaticism in the Age of Terror*, is so valuable.

Painting a complex portrait of religious fundamentalism, Naydan traces the origin of the term *fundamentalist* back to 1920, when "a conservative Baptist editor added *-ist*' to the nonplural term *fundamental* from *The Fundamentals*, a series of twelve pamphlets comprising essays that attempt to counter religious skepticism" (3). She goes on to show how the strict conservatism, eschatological ideologies, and combative sectarianism of certain forms of religious fundamentalism have over time collided with modern forms of liberalism, e.g., during the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial. These clashes between religious fundamentalism and liberal modernity have produced moments of violence, of which the 9/11 attacks serve as the most prominent example. Naydan explicitly casts 9/11 as a "religious event," and she posits her study as an effort to explore how post-9/11 American fiction

has attempted to complicate “the dialogic and ideologic impasses” that have been placed into stark relief by the terrorist attacks (18).

In her introduction, Naydan establishes five major religious-dialogic impasses that post-9/11 American fiction has attempted to negotiate: the impasse between liberal, secular humanism and “religious fundamentalism as nonfundamentalists misunderstand it, namely evangelical ways of thinking and being” (7); the impasse between liberals and fundamentalists of non-Christian heritages; the impasse “between fundamentalists of different kinds,” such as conservative Christian and conservative Muslims (10); the impasse between religious fundamentalists and nonreligious fundamentalists, such as “market fundamentalists” (11); and finally, the impasse between state governments and violent religious fanatics that can lead to sanctioned acts of violence, such as drone killings of civilians. She then sets out to explore how these impasses manifest themselves in the fiction of Mohsin Hamid (*The Reluctant Fundamentalist*), Laila Halaby (*Once in a Promised Land*), Philip Roth (*Everyman* and *Exit Ghost*), Don DeLillo (“Baader-Meinhof” and *Point Omega*), John Updike (“Varieties of Religious Experience” and *Terrorist*), and Barbara Kingsolver (*Small Wonder* and *Flight Behavior*). These authors—great rhetorical negotiators of faith, fundamentalism, and fanaticism—explore and complicate the terms of these impasses. In the process, they manage to transcend these conflicts and produce “*counterfundamentalist work*,” writings that serve as an antidote to fundamentalism and fanaticism (15).

The authors chosen by Naydan are meant to represent a variety of religious and cultural backgrounds that inform their fiction, namely Islamic, Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and, last but not least, pantheistic. The progression of chapters traces a movement from “the perspectives of relative religious Others in America to presenting the perspectives of relative insiders who critique America and faith” (15). The volume’s first chapter, in contrast to subsequent chapters that analyze two works by a single writer, brings together two authors, Mohsin Hamid, of Pakistani origin, and Laila Halaby, an Arab American writer. Their respective novels, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *Once in a Promised Land*, provide a critique of Islam and “market fundamentalism,” a belief that free-market policies can solve economic and social problems.

From the Muslim Other, Naydan transitions to the Jewish Other in a chapter on Philip Roth’s *Everyman* and *Exit Ghost*. While “Roth distinguished himself from contemporaries such as Don DeLillo and John Updike by never speaking about 9/11 in interviews in the immediate aftermath of the attacks,” he directly addresses the attacks in these two novels that valorize art as a counter force to market and

religious fundamentalism (56). Naydan's reading of *Everyman*, however, is not particularly persuasive given that the novel has much more to do with aging and death than the sweeping forces of fundamentalism, or even art.

The chapter on Roth is followed by an analysis of two works by DeLillo: the short story "Baader-Meinhof" and the novel *Point Omega*. Naydan reads DeLillo as "an author of Catholic heritage who looks to heterodox Catholicism for alternatives to fundamentalism and terrorism" (16). DeLillo occupies a middle ground between "what counts as Otherable and what counts as mainstream in terms of religion in the United States" (85), and his Catholic background becomes interesting to Naydan because it restores a sense of mystery, whereas "fundamentalists paradoxically demystify mysteries" (90). Indeed, in her discussion of *Point Omega*, Naydan suggests an intertextual relationship between that novel and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's *The Future of Man*, "a heterodox Catholic theological text that works to unify scientific developments with religious orthodoxy" (17).

In her chapter on Updike, Naydan considers the former Lutheran/Congregationalist who converted to Episcopalianism to be "a Protestant insider who positions hybrid identity, or variety that exists within us, as a counterfundamentalist force" (17). Focusing on Updike's short story, "Varieties of Religious Experience," and his novel *Terrorist*, Naydan pays particular attention to William James, whose 1902 work *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* established James to be a "keen witness to belief as a changing phenomenon and as a believer in belief" (118). This chapter employs Jamesian rhetoric and religious variety to help unlock these two fictional works. In the process, Updike explores the impasse between secular liberalism and religious fundamentalism, and he demonstrates that the impasse exists not only "between an array of fanatical and temperate believers and nonbelievers" but that it also "exists within individuals" (119). Naydan believes that in *Terrorist* Updike ultimately "proposes that the solution to the problem of religious difference in the post-9/11 world involves believers and nonbelievers looking inward to recognize and explore varieties that exist within their own hybrid identities with the goal of transcending narrow, fundamentalist perceptions of the self" (119).

In her fifth chapter, Naydan treats another Protestant writer, Barbara Kingsolver, whose "sustained interest in Protestant Christianity" (151) seems to mesh with a strong rhetoric of ecology as employed in the United States. Placing two Kingsolver texts in dialogue with one another, the novel *Flight Behavior* and the collection of essays *Small Wonder*, Naydan "expose[s] the fault lines between believers and scientists" (17). She also invites her readers to "see ecologically ori-

ented connections between one another to develop a new and more socially just American patriotism” (17)

In her conclusion, Naydan boldly juxtaposes two discourses, the fiction she analyzes and the rhetoric of the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in New York City. Her objective here is to show how the latter promotes American exceptionalism and patriotism, excluding diversity and religious difference, while the former encourages interfaith dialogue and understanding. For Naydan, the texts she has analyzed also serve as “memorials of a sort” (184). The conclusion, thus, reads as a daring proclamation of faith in fiction that ultimately “may, too, involve working towards memorialization through the enactment of social justice in more robust and visible ways, not just through dialogue with or about books” (196).

Naydan’s book has much to offer, including a lengthy, rich, and useful bibliography. Though the volume suffers at times from its theoretical underpinnings and repetitive terminology, it is both engaging and generally accessible. Perhaps most importantly, Naydan makes a strong argument in favor of the value and utility of literature, particularly in regard to literature’s ability to memorialize 9/11. In the process, Naydan contributes significantly to the scholarship of 9/11 fiction.

# The Towers' Shadow

ANTONIO J. FERRARO

*9/11: Topics in Contemporary North American Literature*, edited by Catherine Morley. Bloomsbury, 2016, 206 pages.

Kathryn Bigelow's 2012 film *Zero Dark Thirty*, which tautly dramatizes the decade-long manhunt for Osama bin Laden, opens with an ominous black screen. Slowly, a wall of sound begins to build in intensity: desperate phone calls, chaotic radio dispatches, TV announcements, explosions, screams. The words "September 11, 2001" briefly appear in stark white print and then vanish, ceding to the increasingly harsh, jumbled noises. Sitting in a movie theater in the winter of 2012, I remember this cinematic intro as oppressive and overwhelming. The young men sitting behind me felt the same way. Or, more precisely, they were so overwhelmed that they forgot to discontinue their pre-movie conversations, instead launching into a barely-whispered dialogue during the opening sequence. One of them finally wondered aloud: "Are they going to show it?"

Years later, this moment still resonates with me, and not only because I hold rather long grudges against those who talk during movies. The question of whether the film was going to "show" 9/11 rather misses the point. *Zero Dark Thirty's* deeply affecting opening scene manages to "show" without showing anything at all. The blank screen conveys the terror, violence, and chaos of the attacks without using any of the widely available footage from that day. 9/11 is a visually mediated historical event—we have been inundated over the years with an endless repetition of images and videos of the planes crashing, the towers collapsing, men and women leaping from the burning building into the clear blue sky. The film recognizes that such repetition can reduce the affective impact of visual representation, and there-

fore chooses to pivot away from the visual by employing emptiness and absence to convey both the emotional and historical weight of the 9/11 attacks.

*Zero Dark Thirty*, in its opening scene, powerfully substitutes the aural for the visual and thus offers an alternative approach to representing 9/11. In so doing, it demonstrates art's ability to explore, redefine, and challenge the representational registers of historical catastrophe in general and 9/11 in particular. This artistic capacity to find new forms of representation in the wake of trauma is the central interest of the new collection *9/11: Topics in Contemporary North American Literature*. Taken as a whole, the essays suggest that bound up in the question of 9/11's artistic representations are the tensions between the personal and public, the domestic and global, faith and secularism, art as personal exorcism and political tool. Editor Catherine Morley and the authors she gathers together—a mixture of American and European critics including Debra Shostak, David Brauner, and Kristiaan Versluys—see post-9/11 American art as directly responding to the “dark shadow” cast “not just over literary fiction, but over American culture more generally” (4). And since many critics in the wake of 9/11 believed that “only novelists, with their special gift for seeing and ordering the world, could begin to make sense of the attack on the United States” (4), it stands that a close examination of a variety of post-9/11 literature might reveal how American artists have chosen to respond to the traumatic events, and what representational tools they utilize to convey the sorrow, violence, and significance of the event.

Several essays engage with texts that directly narrate or illustrate the historical events of September 11, 2001, such as Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* and Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on the Wall*. Others analyze works, including Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* and Amy Waldman's *The Submission*, composed within the historical and aesthetic shadow of the attacks. Articles that do not deal with novels or texts explicitly *about* 9/11, such as Aaron DeRosa's excellent examination of Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, instead engage with works that are *of* or *on* 9/11. Hamilton Carroll's essay, “Anticipating the Fall’: Art, memory, and historical reclamation in Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin*,” articulates the difference between these types: “the attack on the WTC [World Trade Center] occupies a central place in McCann's novel and is the event through which—and toward which—its multiple narratives must travel. Therefore, while *Let the Great World Spin* is not a novel *about* September 11, it is undoubtedly a novel *of* September 11” (148; emphasis in original). The essays that grapple with stories *of* or *on* 9/11 represent the furthest, and often most compelling, reaches of the collection's scope. In these texts, 9/11 figures not as an event that must or even can be repre-

sented, but rather as a haunting historical specter that hovers over and influences the production of American art.

The diversity of critical approaches in the collection suggests that 9/11 cannot be understood monolithically. It is simultaneously a historical event, a source of intense personal trauma, and a violent rupture in America's grand geopolitical narrative. These are the issues of 9/11, and several essays, such as Catherine Morley's astute examination of the politics of memorialization in Amy Waldman's *The Submission*, explore these topics in-depth, asking questions about the relationship between the unrepresentability of trauma and the ever-present need for artistic production. Despite the range of subjects addressed throughout the collection, the only essay that dedicates considerable space to the issue of faith and religion is Mark Eaton's "Beyond Belief: John Updike's *Terrorist*." Eaton's essay is unique in that it explicitly foregrounds the ongoing conflict between the cultural binaries that were reified with a vengeance by the 9/11 attacks: East/West, Christian/Muslim, and White/Other.

Eaton argues that Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), saddled as it is with an "implausible ending" (108), treats with great seriousness the consequences of America's simultaneous insistence on secularism and religious pluralism. 9/11 exposed the implausibility of a pluralist world that takes for granted the irrelevance of religion: "The events of 9/11 at once exacerbated fears about religious extremism and rendered one of the axioms of secularism—the notion that religion should have been more or less eradicated by now—totally untenable" (108). Updike's novel focuses on Ahmad Ashmawy Malloy, a recent high school graduate who becomes radicalized in the aftermath of this fissure in America's understanding of the power of religion. The work carefully traces Ahmad's transformation from devout young Muslim to radicalized terrorist, exploring the appeal and transformative force of the purity of ideological extremism. Eaton analyzes Ahmad's radicalization by utilizing the model of the "devoted actor," or the concept, developed by sociologist Scott Atran, of "an individual who becomes 'willing to protect morally important or sacred values through costly sacrifice and extreme actions, even being willing to kill and die, particularly when such values are embedded in or fused with group identity'" (110). The secular panic over religious extremism thus reinforces the extremist's belief that his sacred ideals are under attack. The extremist frames his act of terrorism—in *Terrorist*, Ahmad's attempt to detonate a truck bomb in Lincoln Tunnel—as a means of shoring up personal identity through allegiance to a unified community opposed to a common enemy.

This is not, as Eaton points out, exclusively the behavior of one religion or

culture. While some Americans responded to 9/11 with calls for greater inclusivity and productive cultural exchange, many responded to one form of extremism with a fundamentalism of their own. Eaton writes, "If one response to secularization has been greater acceptance of pluralism, another response was insisting on one true faith" (120). Extremism is not a feature unique to Islam but rather one possible response to radical socio-cultural change. Updike's novel recognizes this and treats extremism as, if not forgivable, then at least explicable. *Terrorist* therefore serves for Eaton as an example of how fiction can be a "means of recovering the otherwise irretrievable motivations of suicide bombers" (116). Ahmad's story is an illustration and an examination of not only how religious fundamentalism can be compelling on its own terms but also how "angst and fear as well as . . . religious ideology" (116) can motivate someone to find completion in the purifying simplicity of extremism. It is still up for debate whether in *Terrorist* Updike entirely succeeds in creating a convincing portrait of teenage American life, or recognizes the authorial limitations of his approximation of the complex and diverse experiences of Muslims in America. But what is clear, both from the text itself and Eaton's shrewd analysis, is that Updike's intimate understanding of the transcendent power of faith allows him an uncommonly generous perspective on religious extremism.

The variety of objects of analysis and critical approaches present in Morley's collection is certainly one of its strengths. At the same time, this diversity can make for less cohesion and more confusion. The essays occasionally seem united only by their general investment in 9/11. Further, this investment is hardly uniform across the works. In some pieces, 9/11 is understood as an unrepresentable trauma that nevertheless demands representation; in others, it functions as a narrative touchstone that serves to organize certain twenty-first century fictional texts; still in others, it operates as a historical signpost, a cataclysmic break in Western teleological fantasy. In this sense, the collection suffers from the ambiguity of its own object of analysis, even as it manages to serve as a primer in the increasingly broad field of 9/11 studies. But one gets the impression after reading the collection that even within this field there is not a unified understanding of either the nature of 9/11 as historical event or 9/11 as object of critical interrogation.

While the essays often operate not in conversation with one another, either productively or antagonistically, but on different planes of inquiry, this is hardly reason to dismiss the project of the book. The essays, uniformly well-written and engaging, are united in the admirable effort to emphasize the role of art and artists in healing the wounds of national and personal trauma. Updike scholars will certainly appreciate Eaton's thoughtful exploration of *Terrorist*, and the diversity

of art objects examined within the individual articles underlines the need for a more capacious understanding of 9/11 and its cultural, political, and even aesthetic aftereffects. While as a unified work it might not present a clear vision of those aftereffects, *9/11: Topics in North American Literature* is certainly a compellingly diverse introduction to some fundamental terms of critical engagement. It also serves as a reminder of how far scholars have come in recognizing the seismic, irreversible shifts in American culture initiated by 9/11 and how much work remains to be done.

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*Zero Dark Thirty*. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow, Columbia Pictures, 2012.



## Contributors' Notes

**PETER J. BAILEY** is the author of *Reading Stanley Elkin, The Reluctant Film Art of Woody Allen*, and *Rabbit (Un)Redeemed: The Drama of Belief in John Updike's Fiction*. With Sam B. Girgus, he edited *A Companion to Woody Allen*; he edited as well *Critical Insights: Stanley Kubrick*, published in 2016. Bailey is Piskor Professor of English Emeritus at St. Lawrence University and secretary of the John Updike Society.

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**ROBERT MORACE** is Distinguished Professor of English at Daemen College in Amherst, New York, and the author and editor of six books: *John Gardner: Critical Perspectives* (Southern Illinois), *John Gardner: An Annotated Secondary Bibliography* (Garland), *The Dialogical Novels of Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge* (Southern Illinois), “*Trainspotting*”: *A Reader’s Guide* (Continuum), *Irvine Welsh* (Palgrave Macmillan), and *John Cheever: Critical Perspectives* (Salem). He is currently completing a book on post-devolution Scottish fiction.

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**MOLLY REID**'s stories have appeared or are forthcoming on NPR and in the journals *TriQuarterly*, *Crazyhorse*, *Gulf Coast*, and *The Normal School*, among others. She has received fellowship and residency support from the Breadloaf Writer's Conference, the Millay Colony for the Arts, the Ucross Foundation, I-Park, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. She is currently a doctoral student in fiction at the University of Cincinnati, at work on a novel.

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**ARISTI TRENDEL** is associate professor at the University of Maine in Le Mans, France, where she offers courses in American civilization and business. She has taught American literature and creative writing for several years at the School of Management of Strasbourg, France. Her doctoral dissertation focused on John Updike's short fiction, and she has published book chapters and articles on American writers (John Updike, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, Flannery O'Connor, Djuna Barnes, and Jeffrey Eugenides, among others) in American and European journals (such as *Psychoanalytic Review*, *Philip Roth Studies*, *Columbia Journal of American Studies*, *Journal of the Short Story in English*, and *EJAS*), as well as book reviews and fiction in literary magazines. She is the author of four books of fiction.



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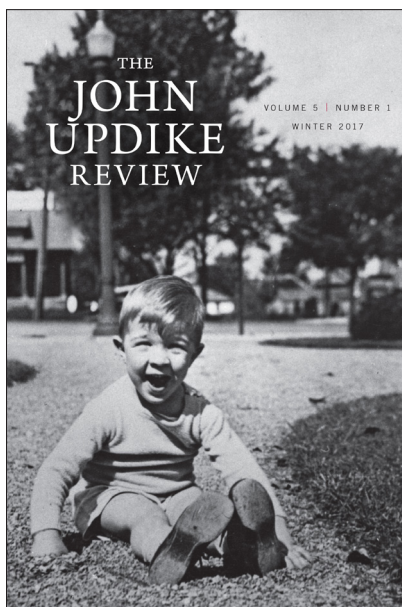
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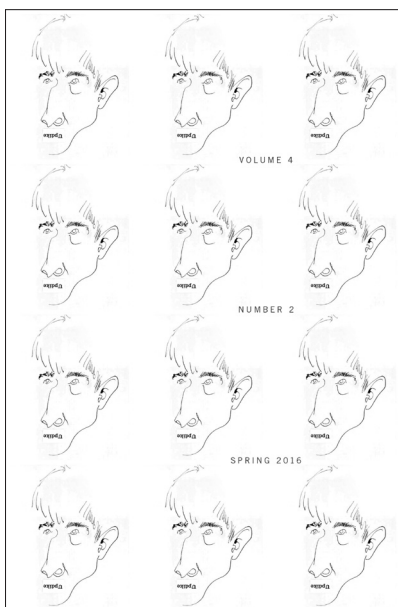
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## **JUR 5.1 (Winter 2017).**

Essays by David Updike, Ward Briggs and J. Alexander Ogden, John Philip Drury, and Donald J. Greiner. Responses to *Villages* by Marshall Boswell, James Schiff, Aristi Trendel. Reviews by Sue Norton and Laurence W. Mazzeno.



## **JUR 4.2 (Spring 2016).**

Essays by Scott Dill, Yoav Fromer, James Schiff, and Donald J. Greiner. Responses to "Trust Me" by D. Quentin Miller, Daniel Paul, and Mical Darley. Reviews by William H. Pritchard and Robert M. Luscher. Includes Updike's story "Trust Me."



**JUR 4.1 (Fall 2015).**

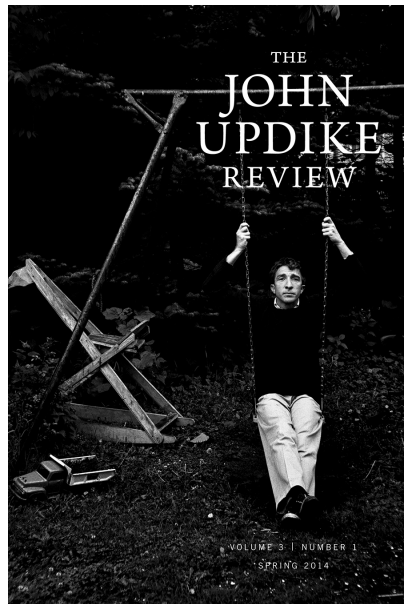
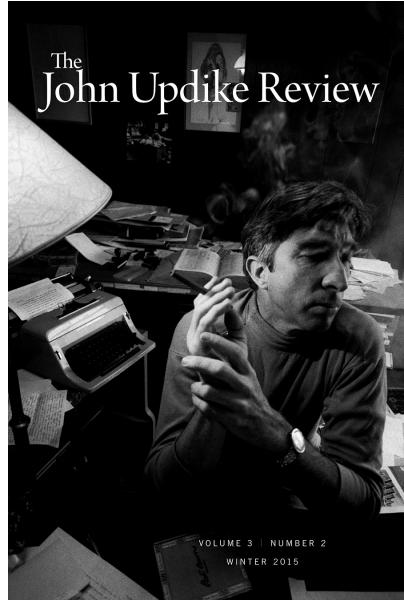
Essays by Brian Duffy, Peter J. Bailey, David Penn, and Donald J. Greiner. Responses to *The Widows of Eastwick* by Judie Newman, James Plath, and James Schiff. Includes Updike Bibliography, 2009–2015 by James Schiff.

**JUR 3.2 (Winter 2015).**

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).**

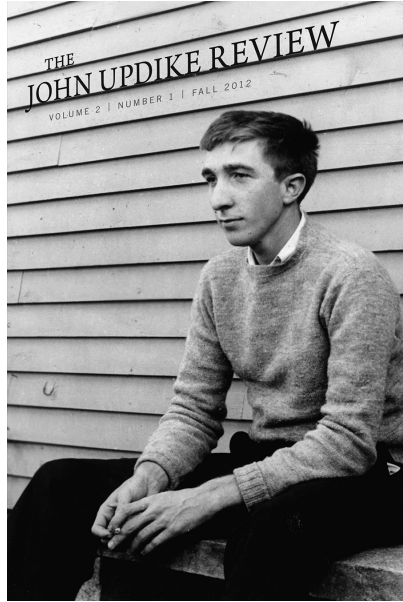
Essays by Donald J. Greiner, Kazuko Kashihara, Sue Norton, and James Schiff. Responses to “Leaves” by Donald J. Greiner, Sarah A. Strickley, and David James Poissant. Reviews by Judie Newman, Peter J. Bailey, and Bob Batchelor. Includes Updike’s story “Leaves.”





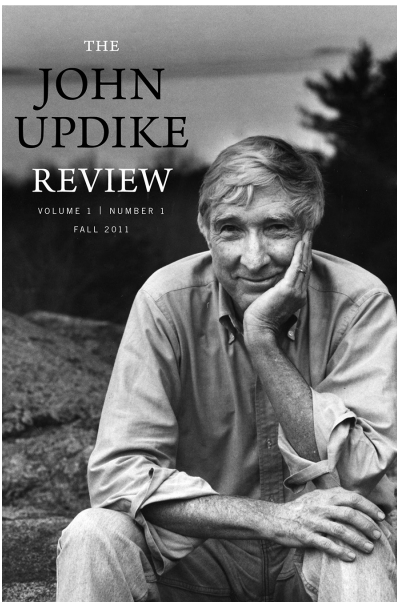
**JUR 2.2 (Spring 2013).**

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



**JUR 2.1 (Fall 2012).**

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.



**JUR 1.1 (Fall 2011).** Essays by Ann Beattie, Sylvie Mathé, Michael Griffith, Donald J. Greiner, Judie Newman, Peter J. Bailey, and Liliana M. Naydan. Reviews by William H. Pritchard and Robert M. Luscher. Tributes by J. D. McClatchy and David Updike.

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