



Updike

*J.M. Coetzee
(In a glass,
darkly)*



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John Updike Review

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The John Updike Review

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Crushing on Updike

VALERIE (MARKOS) PAAVONPERA

I was seventeen, maybe eighteen
Hoarding daydreams of poet's fame
While dry summer wind blew Ipswich dust
Up past the Old North Church onto High Street
Where old town tales spanning centuries
Had nothing on his stories

He strutted past me often in a week
Punctuation, grammar and genre with each stride
Racy mischief in his world of words
My ordinary father worked his landmark pub
While the writer's passion pounded mysterious words in the rented space above
Later, in the afternoons, my Dad poured a daily dose of calm
For him, and many less noteworthy
I made myself apparent for my daily dose of thrill
The Ipswich River flowing through me

Updike walked the town often
Holes in his sweaters, sloppy jeans, worn sneakers
Perhaps his love muse that torrid summer
Being undressed on Argilla Road, or Crane's
One salacious summer day I stalled Dad's Chevy convertible

As he crossed South Main Street at the Common
He paused amused and like an iron
Steamed me with his sharp light eyes

All summer his prize-winning words were kept secret
Over lunch, a beer, and the *Ipswich Chronicle*
My Dad liked to say he'd entertained Updike
That day and many at his Pub
My Dad never knew my obsession
Yearning, daydreams and desire
To be noticed by him
But more to be half as accomplished, half as clever
Half as charming, composed, casual and collected
Half as talented, confident, sexy and sublime
Half as adored.

2009

Three Writers on “Giving Blood”

This section of the *JUR* provides space for three invited writers to compose responses to a single Updike story, novel, poem, or essay. The primary and immediate objective is to draw critical attention to an individual work. Over time, these incremental reports may begin to offer, collectively, a fuller understanding of the breadth and depth of Updike’s writings.

“Giving Blood” is one of the earliest Maples stories, completed on March 10, 1962, and published in the *New Yorker* on April 6, 1963. Though not frequently anthologized like “Separating,” it remains one of the stronger Maples stories and was, perhaps, the first to reveal the threatened state of Richard and Joan’s marriage.

“Giving Blood” was proposed for discussion by Toni Judnitch, a fiction writer whose work has appeared in *Sycamore Review*, *Nashville Review*, *Ninth Letter*, and *Third Coast*. A PhD candidate in Creative Writing/Fiction at the University of Cincinnati, Toni received *New South*’s 2018 Prose Prize and had a story selected for reprinting in *New Stories from the Midwest*. She is currently at work on her first novel while serving as a research assistant on the Updike Letters Project. A native of Minnesota who is drawn to fiction that deals with working-class poverty, Toni is particularly interested in how grammar can function on a metaphorical level within a story.

Maggie Su is also a fiction writer, and her work has appeared in *DIAGRAM*, *Mid-American Review*, *Joyland*, *The Offing*, *The Journal*, *Green Mountain Review*, and *SmokeLong Quarterly*. A native Midwesterner of Taiwanese American heritage, Maggie grew up in Champaign, Illinois, and received her BA from the University of Illinois and her MFA from Indiana University; currently she is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing/Fiction at the University of Cincinnati. Her academic interests include flash fiction, speculative fiction, Asian American literature, and performance studies.

A former chemical engineer from Newark, New Jersey, Sakinah Hofler is the winner of the Manchester Fiction Prize (2017) and the Sherwood Anderson Fic-

tion Prize (2017–18); she was also shortlisted for the Manchester Poetry Prize (2016). Her work has appeared in *Mid-American Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *Philadelphia Stories*. She received her MFA from Florida State University, where she was a recipient of the 2015–16 Edward H. and Mary C. Kingsbury Fellowship, and she is currently a PhD student and Yates Fellow at the University of Cincinnati. Sakinah refers to herself as “a lover of narration . . . because it toys with the idea of whose story is this? Does this person have the right to tell the story?” and is drawn to cross-genre writers like Margaret Atwood, Raymond Bradbury, and Ursula K. Le Guin.

We hope this discussion of “Giving Blood” will generate further interest in *The Maples Stories*, a collection I place among Updike’s finest as well as most teachable works.

JAMES SCHIFF, EDITOR

Giving Blood

JOHN UPDIKE

The Maples had been married now nine years, which is almost too long. ‘Goddamn it, goddamn it,’ Richard said to Joan, as they drove into Boston to give blood, ‘I drive this road five days a week and now I’m driving it again. It’s like a nightmare. I’m exhausted. I’m emotionally, mentally, physically exhausted, and she isn’t even an aunt of mine. She isn’t even an aunt of *yours*.’

‘She’s a sort of cousin,’ Joan said.

‘Well, hell, every goddamn body in New England is some sort of cousin of yours; must I spend the rest of my life trying to save them *all*?’

‘Hush,’ Joan said. ‘She might die. I’m ashamed of you. Really ashamed.’

It cut. His voice for the moment took on an apologetic pallor. ‘Well, I’d be my usual goddamn saintly self if I’d had any sort of sleep last night. Five days a week I bump out of bed and stagger out the door past the milkman, and on the one day of the week when I don’t even have to truck the brats to Sunday school you make an appointment to have me drained dry thirty miles away.’

‘Well, it wasn’t *me*,’ Joan said, ‘who had to stay till two o’clock doing the Twist with Marlene Brossman.’

‘We weren’t doing the Twist. We were gliding around very chastely to *Hits of the Forties*. And don’t think I was so oblivious I didn’t see you snogging behind the piano with Harry Saxon.’

‘We weren’t behind the piano, we were on the bench. And he was just talking to me because he felt sorry for me. Everybody there felt sorry for me; you could have at *least* let somebody else dance *once* with Marlene, if only for show.’

‘Show, show,’ Richard said. ‘That’s your mentality exactly.’

‘Why, the poor Matthews or whatever they are looked absolutely horrified.’

‘Matthiessons,’ he said. ‘And that’s another thing. Why are idiots like that being invited these days? If there’s anything I hate, it’s women who keep putting one hand on their pearls and taking a deep breath. I thought she had something stuck in her throat.’

‘They’re a perfectly pleasant, decent young couple. The thing you resent about their being there is that their relative innocence shows us what we’ve become.’

‘If you’re so attracted,’ he said, ‘to little fat men like Harry Saxon, why didn’t you marry one?’

‘My,’ Joan said calmly, and gazed out the window away from him, at the scudding gasoline stations. ‘You honestly *are* hateful. It’s not just a pose.’

‘Pose, show, my Lord, who are you performing for? If it isn’t Harry Saxon, it’s Freddie Vetter—all these dwarfs. Every time I looked over at you last night it was like some pale Queen of the Dew surrounded by a ring of mushrooms.’

‘You’re too absurd,’ she said. Her hand, distinctly thirty-ish, dry and green-veined and rasped by detergents, stubbed out her cigarette in the dashboard ash-tray. ‘You’re not subtle. You think you can match me up with another man so you can swirl off with Marlene with a free conscience.’

Her reading his strategy so correctly made his face burn; he felt again the tingle of Mrs Brossman’s hair as he pressed his cheek against hers and in this damp privacy inhaled the perfume behind her ear. ‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘But I want to get you a man your own size; I’m very loyal that way.’

‘Let’s not talk,’ she said.

His hope, of turning the truth into a joke, was rebuked. Any implication of permission was blocked. ‘It’s that *smugness*,’ he explained, speaking levelly, as if about a phenomenon of which they were both disinterested students. ‘It’s your smugness that is really intolerable. Your knee-jerk liberalism I don’t mind. Your sexlessness I’ve learned to live with. But that wonderfully smug, New England—I suppose we needed it to get the country founded, but in the Age of Anxiety it really does gall.’

He had been looking over at her, and unexpectedly she turned and looked at him, with a startled but uncannily crystalline expression, as if her face had been in an instant rendered in tinted porcelain, even to the eyelashes.

‘I asked you not to talk,’ Joan said. ‘Now you’ve said things that I’ll never forget.’

Plunged fathoms deep into the wrong, feeling suffocated by his guilt, he concentrated on the highway and sullenly steered. Though they were moving at sixty

in the sparse Saturday traffic, Richard had travelled this road so often its distances were all translated into time, so that the car seemed to him to be moving as slowly as a minute hand from one digit to the next. It would have been strategic and dignified of him to keep the silence; but he could not resist believing that just one more pinch of syllables would restore the marital balance that with each wordless mile slipped increasingly awry. He asked, 'How did Bean seem to you?' Bean was their baby. They had left her last night, to go to the party, with a fever of 102°.

Joan wrestled with her vow to say nothing, but maternal concern won out. She said, 'Cooler. Her nose is a river.'

'Sweetie,' Richard blurted, 'will they hurt me?' The curious fact was that he had never given blood before. Asthmatic and underweight, he had been 4-F, and at college and now at the office he had, less through his own determination than through the diffidence of the solicitors, evaded pledging blood. It was one of those tests of courage so trivial that no one had ever thought to make him face up to it.

Spring comes reluctantly to Boston. Speckled crusts of ice lingered around the parking meters, and the air, grayly stalemated between seasons, tinted the buildings along Longwood Avenue with a drab and homogeneous majesty. As they walked up the drive to the hospital entrance, Richard wondered aloud if they would see the King of Arabia.

'He's in a separate wing,' Joan said. 'With four wives.'

'Only four? What an ascetic.' And he made bold to tap his wife's shoulder. It was not clear if, under the thickness of her winter coat, she felt it.

At the desk, they were directed down a long corridor floored with cigar-colored linoleum. Up and down, right and left it went, in the secretive, disjointed way peculiar to hospitals that have been built annex by annex. Richard felt like Hansel orphaned with Gretel; birds ate the bread crumbs behind them, and at last they timidly knocked on the witch's door, which said BLOOD DONATION CENTER. A young man in white opened the door a crack. Over his shoulder Richard glimpsed—horrors!—a pair of dismembered female legs stripped of their shoes and laid parallel on a bed. Glints of needles and bottles pricked his eyes. Without widening the crack, the young man passed out to them two long forms. In sitting side by side on the waiting bench, spelling out their middle names and recalling their childhood diseases, Mr and Mrs Maple were newly defined to themselves. He fought down that urge to giggle and clown and lie that threatened him whenever he was asked—like a lawyer appointed by the court to plead a hopeless case—to

present, as it were, his statistics to eternity. It seemed to mitigate his case slightly that a few of these statistics (present address, date of marriage) were shared by the hurt soul scratching beside him. He looked over her shoulder. 'I never knew you had whooping cough.'

'My mother says. I don't remember it.'

A pan crashed to a distant floor. An elevator chuckled remotely. A woman, a middle-aged woman top-heavy with rouge and fur, stepped out of the blood door and wobbled a moment on legs that looked familiar. They had been restored to their shoes. The heels of these shoes clicked firmly as, having raked the Maples with a dazed, defiant glance, she turned and disappeared around a bend in the corridor. The young man appeared in the doorway holding a pair of surgical tongs. His noticeably recent haircut made him seem an apprentice barber. He clicked his tongs and smiled. 'Shall I do you together?'

'Sure.' It put Richard on his mettle that this callow fellow, to whom apparently they were to entrust their liquid essence, was so distinctly younger than they. But when Richard stood, his indignation melted and his legs felt diluted under him. And the extraction of the blood sample from his middle finger seemed about the nastiest and most needlessly prolonged physical involvement with another human being he had ever experienced. There is a touch that good dentists, mechanics, and barbers have, and this intern did not have it; he fumbled and in compensation was too rough. Again and again, an atrociously clumsy vampire, he tugged and twisted the purpling finger in vain. The tiny glass capillary tube remained transparent.

'He doesn't like to bleed, does he?' the intern asked Joan. As relaxed as a nurse, she sat in a chair next to a table of scintillating equipment.

'I don't think his blood moves much,' she said, 'until after midnight.'

This stab at a joke made Richard in his extremity of fright laugh loudly, and the laugh at last seemed to jar the panicked coagulant. Red seeped upward in the thirsty little tube, as in a sudden thermometer.

The intern grunted in relief. As he smeared the samples on the analysis box, he explained idly, 'What we ought to have down here is a pan of warm water. You just came in out of the cold. If you put your hand in hot water for a minute, the blood just pops out.'

'A pretty thought,' Richard said.

But the intern had already written him off as a clown and continued calmly to Joan, 'All we'd need would be a baby hot plate for about six dollars, then we could make our own coffee, too. This way, when we get a donor who needs the coffee

afterward, we have to send up for it while we keep her head between her knees. Do you think you'll be needing coffee?'

'No,' Richard interrupted, jealous of their rapport.

The intern told Joan, 'You're O.'

'I know,' she said.

'And he's A positive.'

'Why, that's very good, Dick!' she called to him.

'Am I rare?' he asked.

The boy turned and explained, 'O positive and A positive are the most common types. Who wants to be first?'

'Let me,' Joan said. 'He's never done it before.'

'Her full name is Joan of Arc,' Richard explained, angered at this betrayal, so unimpeachably selfless and smug.

The intern, threatened in his element, fixed his puzzled eyes on the floor between them and said, 'Take off your shoes and each get on a bed.' He added, '*Please*,' and all three laughed, one after the other, the intern last.

The beds were at right angles to one another along two walls. Joan lay down and from her husband's angle of vision was novelly foreshortened. He had never before seen her quite this way, the combed crown of her hair so poignant, her bared arm so pale and long, her stocking feet toed in so childishly and helplessly. There were no pillows on the beds, and lying flat made him feel tipped head down; the illusion of floating encouraged his hope that this unreal adventure would soon dissolve, as dreams do. 'You O.K.?'

'Are you?' Her voice came softly from the tucked-under wealth of her hair. Her parting was so straight it seemed a mother had brushed it. He watched a long needle sink into the flat of her arm and a piece of moist cotton clumsily swab the spot. He had imagined their blood would be drained into cans or bottles, but the intern, whose breathing was now the only sound within the room, brought to Joan's side what looked like a miniature plastic knapsack, all coiled and tied. His body cloaked his actions. When he stepped away, a plastic cord had been grafted, a transparent vine, to the flattened crook of Joan's extended arm, where the skin was translucent and the veins were faint blue tributaries shallowly buried. It was a tender, vulnerable place where in courting days she had liked being stroked. Now, without visible transition, the pale tendril planted here went dark red. Richard wanted to cry out.

The instant readiness of her blood to leave her body pierced him like a physical

pang. Though he had not so much as blinked, its initial leap had been too quick for his eye. He had expected some visible sign of flow, but from the mere appearance of it the tiny looped hose might be pouring blood *into* her body or might be a curved line added, like an impudent mustache, to a painting. The fixed position of his head gave what he saw a certain flatness.

And now the intern turned to him, and there was the tiny felt prick of the Novocain needle, and then the coarse, half-felt intrusion of something resembling a medium-weight nail. Twice the boy mistakenly probed for the vein and the third time taped the successful graft fast with adhesive tape. All the while, Richard's mind moved aloofly among the constellations of the stained, cracked ceiling. What was being done to him did not bear contemplating. When the intern moved away to hum and tinkle among his instruments, Joan craned her neck to show her husband her face and, upside down in his vision, grotesquely smiled, her mouth where her eyes should have been, her eyes a broken, blinking mouth.

It was not many minutes that they lay there at right angles together, but the time passed as something beyond the walls, as something mixed with the faraway clatter of pans and the approach and retreat of footsteps and the opening and closing of unseen doors. Here, conscious of a pointed painless pulse in the inner hinge of his arm but incurious as to what it looked like, he floated and imagined how his soul would float free when all his blood was underneath the bed. His blood and Joan's merged on the floor, and together their spirits glided from crack to crack, from star to star on the ceiling. Once she cleared her throat, and the sound was like the rasp of a pebble loosened by a cliff-climber's boot.

The door opened. Richard turned his head and saw an old man, bald and sallow, enter and settle in a chair. He was one of those old men who hold within an institution an ill-defined but secure place. The young doctor seemed to know him, and the two talked, quietly, as if not to disturb the mystical union of the couple sacrificially bedded together. They talked of persons and events that meant nothing—of Iris, of Dr Greenstein, of Ward D, again of Iris, who had given the old man an undeserved scolding, of the shameful lack of a hot plate to make coffee on, of the rumored black bodyguards who kept watch with scimitars by the bed of the glaucomatous king. Through Richard's tranced ignorance these topics passed as clouds of impression, iridescent, massy—Dr Greenstein with a pointed nose and almond eyes the color of ivy, Iris eighty feet tall and hurling sterilized thunderbolts of wrath. As in some theologies the proliferating deities are said to exist as ripples upon the featureless

ground of Godhead, so these inconstant images lightly overlay his continuous awareness of Joan's blood, like his own, ebbing. Linked to a common loss, they were chastely conjoined; the thesis developed upon him that the hoses attached to them met somewhere out of sight. Testing this belief, he glanced down and saw that indeed the plastic vine taped to the flattened crook of his arm was the same dark red as hers. He stared at the ceiling to disperse a sensation of faintness.

Abruptly the young intern left off his desultory conversation and moved to Joan's side. There was a chirp of clips. When he moved away, she was revealed holding her naked arm upright, pressing a piece of cotton against it with the other hand. Without pausing, the intern came to Richard's side, and the birdsong of clips repeated, nearer. 'Look at that,' he said to his elderly friend. 'I started him two minutes later than her and he's finished at the same time.'

'Was it a race?' Richard asked.

Clumsily firm, the boy fitted Richard's fingers to a pad and lifted his arm for him. 'Hold it there for five minutes,' he said.

'What'll happen if I don't?'

'You'll mess up your shirt.' To the old man he said, 'I had a woman in here the other day, she was all set to leave when, all of a sudden—pow!—all over the front of this beautiful linen dress. She was going to Symphony.'

'Then they try to sue the hospital for the cleaning bill,' the old man muttered.

'Why was I slower than him?' Joan asked. Her upright arm wavered, as if vexed or weakened.

'The woman generally is,' the boy told her 'Nine times out of ten, the man is faster. Their hearts are so much stronger.'

'Is that really so?'

'Sure it's so,' Richard told her. 'Don't argue with medical science.'

'Woman up in Ward C,' the old man said, 'they saved her life for her out of an auto accident and now I hear she's suing because they didn't find her dental plate.'

Under such patter, the five minutes eroded. Richard's upheld arm began to ache. It seemed that he and Joan were caught together in a classroom where they would never be recognized, or in a charade that would never be guessed, the correct answer being Two Silver Birches in a Meadow.

'You can sit up now if you want,' the intern told them. 'But don't let go of the venipuncture.'

They sat up on their beds, legs dangling heavily. Joan asked him, 'Do you feel dizzy?'

‘With my powerful heart? Don’t be presumptuous.’

‘Do you think he’ll need coffee?’ the intern asked her. ‘I’ll have to send up for it now.’

The old man shifted forward in his chair, preparing to heave to his feet.

‘I do *not* want any coffee’—Richard said it so loud he saw himself transposed, a lesser Iris, into the firmament of the old man’s aggrieved gossip. *Some dizzy bastard down in the blood room, I get up to get him some coffee and he damn near bit my head off.* To demonstrate simultaneously his essential good humor and his total presence of mind, Richard gestured toward the blood they had given—two square plastic sacks filled solidly fat—and declared, ‘Back where I come from in West Virginia sometimes you pick a tick off a dog that looks like that.’ The men looked at him amazed. Had he not quite said what he meant to say? Or had they never seen anybody from West Virginia before?

Joan pointed at the blood, too. ‘Is that us? Those little doll pillows?’

‘Maybe we should take one home to Bean,’ Richard suggested.

The intern did not seem convinced that this was a joke. ‘Your blood will be credited to Mrs Henryson’s account,’ he stated stiffly.

Joan asked him, ‘Do you know anything about her? When is she—when is her operation scheduled?’

‘I think for tomorrow. The only thing on the tab this after is an open heart at two; that’ll take about sixteen pints.’

‘Oh . . .’ Joan was shaken. ‘Sixteen . . . that’s a full person, isn’t it?’

‘More,’ the intern answered, with the regal handwave that bestows largesse and dismisses compliments.

‘Could we visit her?’ Richard asked, for Joan’s benefit. (‘Really ashamed,’ she had said; it had cut.) He was confident of the refusal.

‘Well, you can ask at the desk, but usually before a major one like this it’s just the nearest of kin. I guess you’re safe now.’ He meant their punctures. Richard’s arm bore a small raised bruise; the intern covered it with one of those ample salmon, unhesitatingly adhesive bandages that only hospitals have. That was their specialty, Richard thought—packaging. They wrap the human mess for final delivery. Sixteen doll’s pillows, uniformly dark and snug, marching into an open heart: the vision momentarily satisfied his hunger for order.

He rolled down his sleeve and slid off the bed. It startled him to realize, in the instant before his feet touched the floor, that three pairs of eyes were fixed upon him, fascinated and apprehensive and eager for scandal. He stood and towered above them. He hopped on one foot to slip into one loafer, and then on this foot

to slip into the other. Then he did the little shuffle-tap, shuffle-tap step that was all that remained to him of dancing lessons he had taken at the age of seven, driving twelve miles each Saturday into Clarksburg. He made a small bow toward his wife, smiled at the old man, and said to the intern, 'All my life people have been expecting me to faint. I have no idea why. I haven't fainted yet.'

His coat and overcoat felt a shade queer, a bit slithery and light, but as he walked down the length of the corridor, space seemed to adjust snugly around him. At his side, Joan kept an inquisitive and chastened silence. They pushed through the great glass doors. A famished sun was nibbling through the overcast. Above and behind them, the King of Arabia lay in a drugged dream of dunes and Mrs Henryson upon her sickbed received, like the comatose mother of twins, their identical packets of blood. Richard hugged his wife's shoulders and as they walked along leaning on each other whispered, 'Hey, I love you. Love love *love* you.'

* * *

Romance is, simply, the strange, the untried. It was unusual for the Maples to be driving together at eleven in the morning. Almost always it was dark when they shared a car. The oval of her face clung in the corner of his eye. She was watching him, alert to take the wheel if he suddenly lost consciousness. He felt tender toward her in the eggshell light, and curious toward himself, wondering how far beneath his brain the black pit did lie. He felt no different; but, then, the quality of consciousness perhaps did not bear introspection. Something surely had been taken from him; he was less himself by a pint. Yet the earth, with its signals and buildings and cars and bricks, continued like a pedalled note.

Boston behind them, he asked, 'Where should we eat?'

'Should we eat?'

'Please, yes. Let me take you to lunch. Just like a secretary.'

'I do feel sort of illicit. As if I've stolen something.'

'You, too? But what did we steal?'

'I don't know. The morning? Do you think Eve knows enough to feed them?'

Eve was their sitter, a little bony girl from down the street who would, in exactly a year, Richard calculated, be painfully lovely. They lasted three years on the average, sitters; you got them in the tenth grade and escorted them into their bloom and then, with graduation, like commuters who had reached their stop, they dropped out of sight, into college or marriage. And the train went on, and took on other passengers, and itself became older and longer.

'She'll manage,' he told her. 'What would you like? All that talk about coffee has made me frantic for some.'

'At the Pancake House beyond 128 they give you coffee before you even ask.'

'Pancakes? Now? Aren't you jolly? Do you think we'll throw up?'

'Do you feel like throwing up?'

'No, not really. I feel sort of insubstantial and gentle, but it's probably psychosomatic. I don't really understand this business of giving something away and still somehow having it. What is it—the spleen?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'Are the splenetic man and the sanguine man the same?'

'God. I've totally forgotten the humors. What are the others—phlegm and cholera?'

'Bile and black bile are in there somewhere.'

'One thing about you, Joan. You're educated. New England women are educated.'

'Sexless as we are.'

'That's right; drain me dry and then put me on the rack.' But there was no wrath in his words; indeed, he had reminded her of their earlier conversation so that, in much this way, his words might be revived, diluted, and erased. It seemed to work. The restaurant where they served only pancakes was empty and quiet this early. A bashfulness possessed them both, and a silence while they ate. Touched by the stain her blueberry pancakes left on her teeth, he held a match to her cigarette and said, 'Gee, I loved you back in the blood room.'

'I wonder why.'

'You were so brave.'

'So were you.'

'But I'm supposed to be. I'm paid to be. It's the price of having a penis.'

'Shh.'

'Hey. I didn't mean that about your being sexless.'

The waitress refilled their coffee cups and gave them the check.

'And I promise never never to do the Twist, the cha-cha, or the schottische with Marlene Brossman.'

'Don't be silly. I don't care.'

This amounted to permission, but perversely irritated him. That above-it-all quality; why didn't she *fight*? Trying to regain their peace, scrambling uphill, he picked up their check and with an effort of acting, the pretense being that they were out on a date and he was a raw dumb suitor, said handsomely, 'I'll pay.'

But on looking into his wallet he saw only a single worn dollar there. He didn't know why this should make him so angry, except the fact somehow that it was

only *one*. 'Goddamn it,' he said. 'Look at that.' He waved it in her face. 'I work like a bastard all week for you and those insatiable brats and at the end of it what do I have? One goddamn crummy wrinkled dollar.'

Her hands dropped to the pocketbook beside her on the seat, but her gaze stayed with him, her face having retreated, or advanced, into that porcelain shell of uncanny composure. 'We'll both pay,' Joan said.

“Sexless as we are”: Physicality and the Soul in John Updike’s “Giving Blood”

TONI JUDNITCH

Updike begins “Giving Blood” in a moment of upheaval: “The Maples had been married now for nine years, which is almost too long” (37). The use of “almost” here effectively balances the Maples on an emotional precipice. This is not a story about reconciliation, but one of almos, of near and missed connections. They are almost at the end of something, and this pressure, the thematic resonance of teetering on the edge of a satisfying relationship, becomes the backbone of the work. They are almost able to connect with one another on a physical and spiritual level, but their relationship continues to teeter, situated haphazardly between the continuation of their marriage and the final, recognized end.

The story also finds the Maples in conflict. While they drive together to the hospital to give blood to help Joan’s relative, they argue about past slights—a party where Richard spent the evening with Marlene Brossman, while Joan stood behind the piano “snoogling” with Harry Saxon. These moments, revealing the deeper issues underlying their relationship, are grounded in physical sensation and connection with other people. The couple actively debates the type of physical interaction that happened, each disagreeing with the other. Richard, in an attempt to save face, claims that he was dancing “very chastely” with Marlene, not doing the twist, like Joan suggests. Still, what is most striking are the intimate and unknown moments Richard keeps to himself. Richard relives his moment with Marlene as he drives, and its description is vivid and clear: “he felt again the tingle of Mrs Brossman’s hair as he pressed his cheek against hers and in this damp privacy inhaled the perfume behind her ear” (38–9). He does not simply remember

this moment, but relives it (“he felt again”), and there is a sexual hunger in the description of the “damp privacy” of her neck. In this way, Joan, at least, is correct about her husband’s feelings for Marlene, but it is his perception of the woman in his private recollection that is most telling.

This image of Marlene is in stark contrast to the physical description of Joan: “Her hand, distinctly thirty-ish, dry and green-veined and rasped by detergents, stubbed out her cigarette in the dashboard ashtray” (38). Unlike the “damp privacy” Marlene offers, Joan’s physical form is flawed and familiar, altered by domestic life. In this moment, her hand almost seems to act of its own will, stubbing out the cigarette for her. Still, Richard tries to reenter the moment with his wife, attempting a joke to defuse the situation, but this, of course, backfires. Frustrated and angry, Richard tells Joan that he has learned to live with her “sexlessness” (39), an idea that reverberates throughout the story and becomes central to the overall conflict. Joan’s response is first grounded in her physical appearance: “unexpectedly she turned and looked at him, with a startled but uncannily crystalline expression, as if her face had been in an instant rendered in tinted porcelain, even to the eyelashes” (39). Again, there is a coldness in the portrayal of Joan, a hardness in the description where Marlene is private and damp and intoxicating. But while Marlene is a constant and clear memory for Richard, Joan has the ability to change, to alter her appearance in a moment.

Appearances play an important role in this story, not only in the bodily description of characters but also in the relationship between outward presentation and appearances, particularly within the social sphere they occupy. The problem becomes as much about the appearance of infidelity as the act itself, and as they drive, Joan remarks that she wishes Richard had let one other person dance with Marlene “if only for show.” When Richard reacts negatively, Joan tells him that his hateful personality is more than just “a pose.” This preoccupation with their public performance demonstrates the desire for the physical portrayal of intimacy but lacks a desire for meaning or deeper connection outside of that. It would be a truly sexless act, and false, for them to perform their relationship for others. It would also be emotionless, a shallow attempt to keep up appearances. Their fight continues, only to be eased by the mention of another vulnerable body. Their daughter, Bean, is home with a fever, and Richard brings this up in an attempt to lighten the mood. Joan breaks her silence, but Richard does not respond with gratification that their daughter is on the mend. Instead, his concern shifts to his own well-being when he asks, “will they hurt me?” (40). Despite this sudden grasping for reassurance, for a fleeting moment of intimacy and comfort, it is telling that his question remains

unanswered. It is not until they're at the hospital, and through the physical act of giving blood, that they are able to connect, at least in Richard's imaginings, on a different, spiritual level.

The hospital presents a new realm for these characters. The scene, separated by white space from the previous section, creates a liminal space essential for fresh connection. It is an unfamiliar environment to the couple, and this helps increase the tension. In these moments Richard and Joan are forced to think about their physicality and reexamine themselves: "In sitting side by side on the waiting room bench, spelling out their middle names and recalling their childhood diseases, Mr and Mrs Maple were newly defined to themselves" (40-1). The wording here is telling, particularly the use of the married titles. The narration zooms out and reduces the characters to their most generic titles, and while we see they are making discoveries, those discoveries are shallow. Although Richard learns new things about Joan (that she had whooping cough as a child), their discoveries are mainly private ones, once again highlighting the lack of connection. They are "defined to themselves" but not to each other. Still, these new definitions lead us into the first mention of the soul: "It seemed to mitigate his case slightly that a few of these statistics . . . were shared by the hurt soul scratching beside him" (41). Joan, earlier presented with harsh physical description, begins to enter a new, and more tender, realm created and filled by Richard. She is, in essence, removed from the body and the physical world. This presents an opportunity for the couple, a chance at mending their relationship.

But in the presence of others, they return to old habits. Richard's first physical interaction with the young doctor who draws blood from his middle finger is described as being "the nastiest and most needlessly prolonged physical involvement with another human being he had ever experienced" (41). When the doctor states that Richard doesn't like to bleed, Joan responds with a joke hinting at sex, linking the unpleasant experience with something more intimate. These first moments with the doctor are reminiscent of the "show" Joan mentions earlier in the story. Hers is an attempt to make the doctor laugh, to keep up the appearances of a relationship complete with a healthy sexual life, but Richard laughs merely in fright. Her joke, like her request that Richard let other men dance with Marlene in order to downplay his desire for another woman, is an attempt to create a false version of their relationship, one in which the unpleasant things are hidden. Joan is, after all, at least in Richard's eyes, "sexless." This is in contrast to the role and nature of the hospital, where they must be made vulnerable and honest in order to proceed with giving blood.

Through this vulnerable act of blood giving, the characters are pushed out of their self-fabricated roles and into states of greater bodily authenticity. Instead of the “damp privacy” of Marlene’s neck, Richard notices his wife more completely beside him. Once again, there is a sense of unease, of being in a situation that is “almost” comfortable but not quite—this is a clinical setting, and Richard is physically situated in a way that forces him to view his wife at a new angle: “He had never before seen her quite this way, the combed crown of her hair so poignant, her bared arm so pale and long, her stocking feet toed in so childishly and helplessly” (43). This change in perspective marks a strong shift in the story. Gone, for the moment, is a description of Joan as hardened. Richard’s perception of his wife shifts both literally and metaphorically, and he sees his wife with renewed interest. Still, this is far from the electric description of Marlene. Joan is described in a similarly “sexless” way, as one of an innocent, but this physically vulnerable position causes Richard to inquire after her, to make sure she is okay. When the needle is inserted into her arm, he even connects the moment with more intimate detail from their past: “a plastic cord had been grafted . . . to the flattened crook of Joan’s extended arm, where the skin was translucent and the veins were faint blue tributaries shallowly buried. It was a tender, vulnerable place where in courting days she had liked being stroked” (43). Here, for the first time, we are presented with an earlier, authentic moment between the couple, from the days before they had been married “almost too long.” Again, we are rooted in the physical, connecting her blood giving to the beginnings of their relationship, but Richard is noticeably absent from the language used to describe this moment. “In courting days” could potentially be anyone, and his absence, even in this moment of tenderness, once again shows that, despite these brief moments of connection through memory, the relationship might be far too damaged to continue.

As the blood first begins to leave Joan’s body, Richard’s reaction is one of fear, and this unease begins Richard’s transition into the spiritual world. His body responds to her physical discomfort with discomfort of its own. When he sees the red color of her blood, he feels a “physical pang” (43), but it is unclear if this moment is a protective response to her blood donation or his own fear. Although his initial response to the thought of giving blood (outside of his annoyance at the task) was of concern for his own well-being (“will they hurt me?”), Richard’s overt, pained response to the process is enough to push him into a new realm. As his own blood is drawn, he begins to disassociate: “What was being done to him did not bear contemplating” (44). The use of the passive voice here serves to separate him from the physical act and his discomfort; it is the first step of separating him

from his body and the pain that arises from living in one. He looks at the ceiling and sees constellations, removing himself from the physical world; “he floated and imagined how his soul would float free when all his blood was underneath the bed. His blood and Joan’s merged on the floor, and together their spirits glided from crack to crack, from star to star on the ceiling” (44). It is in this world, then, that Joan and Richard are able to connect. In this world, their spirits glide away from their physical forms, away from their bodies giving blood, and also the bodies of others—they are on the floor and ceiling, and the description of their merging is an attempt at connection.

In comparing this imagined world with Joan to his earlier memory of his night with Marlene, we see that in the earlier reverie, he is able to access a physical moment. He relives the act directly in memory, recalling clearly the physical sensations of Marlene’s hair and perfume. But his thinking of Joan reflects nothing physical. They are instead transformed into souls. They do not touch intimately, but “merge.” There is no visceral memory of Joan’s hair or the way she smells. They are sexless in this moment as well, stripped of their bodies, but they are free also from the desire and temptation that come with their corporeal forms. This is an attempt by Richard to reconcile, or at least escape, the world of poses and appearances, but despite his reverie, he ultimately remains unable to connect with Joan. These imaginings are created by Richard and Richard alone—his wife is not privy to them. This world, while peaceful, also cannot last long: “Once she cleared her throat, and the sound was like the rasp of a pebble loosened by a cliff-climber’s boot” (44). The physical act of Joan clearing her throat transports him back to reality. Their spirits, once in the stars, are returned to their bodies and the limitations that physical form creates. This is a story deeply rooted in each character’s inability to be physically intimate with the other, and the brief attempt by Richard to connect them must take place in the spiritual world. Although he remains on the table, white space ends Richard’s peaceful reverie and simultaneously shows the futility of this type of one-sided, imagined connection.

A shift occurs in this section, and the formerly peaceful dreamlike state Richard experiences transforms into something more biting and surreal. The young doctor’s conversation with the nameless old man contorts and infiltrates the spiritual moment of connection between Richard and Joan, causing the futility of their future connection to play out before Richard’s eyes. Instead of their spirits merging, the language reflects their simultaneous connection and separation. The words become beautiful and piercing, and the images are at odds with one another: “the mystical union of the couple sacrificially bedded together” (45). Here they are united and

spread out as if on a sacrificial altar. They become anonymous, merely “the couple” as opposed to the named spirits of the earlier section. Later, we observe language that continues to both join and divide them: “Linked to a common loss, they were chastely conjoined; the thesis developed upon him that the hoses attached to them met somewhere out of sight” (45). Here their connection is horrifying. Richard looks and, seeing that their blood is the same color, feels faint. The thought of this type of connection is too much. They are together in the in-betweenness of the medical procedure, in a marriage that has lasted “almost too long.” These distortions and contradictory images put additional emotional pressure on Richard, and it is only in the spiritual realm, the bodiless moments, where contortions and contradictions demonstrate the precarious positioning of their relationship.

His blood giving complete, Richard is returned to his body, and he resumes much of the same behavior he displays earlier in the story. But there is some difference. He is more tender with Joan, almost giddy at the thought of what happened to them and from the idea that everyone, both the doctors and his wife, expects him to faint, to lose control over his own body. Still, he does note that something is not quite the same as before: “He felt no different; but, then, the quality of consciousness perhaps did not bear introspection. Something surely had been taken from him; he was less himself by a pint” (49). He rejects his former spiritual state, which very nearly resembles a swoon, but he cannot shake the sense that he is “less himself” in some way—and this difference propels the story forward once again.

On the way home, the couple goes to a diner for pancakes; Richard brings up the earlier conversation, and Joan reminds him that he called her sexless. But now Richard responds differently than he would have before: “there was no wrath in his words; indeed, he had reminded her of their earlier conversation so that, in much this same way, his words might be revived, diluted, erased” (50). The act of giving blood has allowed this moment to pass, and, with it, some of his scorn for her. Instead, he becomes almost gentle: “Touched by the stain her blueberry pancakes left on her teeth, he held a match to her cigarette and said, ‘Gee, I loved you back in the blood room.’” While before, Joan’s perceived deficiencies in appearance were in stark contrast to the vivid Marlene, here her imperfection is moving for Richard—though it is still the imperfection he sees. He is less himself “by a pint,” but he’s still Richard. The relationship is in much the same place as before, moving forward despite the problems so hotly debated earlier in the story. We see this when Joan declines his offer not to dance in any way with Marlene. They will remain caught in the middle despite their attempts at connection.

Still, Richard tries to keep the lunch with his wife peaceful and offers one final moment of outward display: “he picked up their check and with an effort of acting, the pretense being that they were out on a date and he was a raw dumb suitor, said handsomely, ‘I’ll pay’” (51). The difference here is that the show is not for other people. There are no friends or lovers or physicians that might benefit from their performance. He and Joan are alone, and this attempt highlights the sense that their relationship has, at last, gone on too long. They must, even when alone, hide from each other. Upon finding only a single dollar in his wallet, Richard begins to rage, and Joan’s hardened appearance returns: “her gaze stayed with him, her face having retreated, or advanced, into that porcelain shell of uncanny composure. ‘We’ll both pay,’ Joan said” (51). It is this continued contrast between retreating and advancing that ultimately reveals the limbo-like state of their relationship: they are between places, unable to move forward or backward. And for this—the inability to be themselves, to truly connect on the physical level, to move beyond the perpetual “show”—they will both pay.

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Bleeding Your Characters: Anti-Epiphany and Conflict in Updike's "Giving Blood"

MAGGIE SU

As a fiction writer, you learn early that you're supposed to get your characters in trouble. In *Burning Down the House*, Charles Baxter writes, "If you want a compelling story, put your protagonist among the damned. The mechanisms of Hell are nicely attuned to the mechanisms of narrative. Not so the pleasures of Paradise" (133). It's good advice for writers who are squeamish about conflict or want to shield their characters from pain. In *Writing Fiction*, Janet Burroway writes, "Only trouble is interesting" (232). This is a maxim that's passed down from instructor to student. I was taught that stories should be exquisitely crafted pressure cookers designed to test our characters. The idea is that something is either changed or revealed through this process. Readers expect the conflict-crisis-resolution narrative structure. In every level of fiction workshop, questions like "How does the conflict change the character?" and "Why is this story being told?" are inescapable. We are supposed to make our characters bleed and, often, we're made to believe that through this bloodletting something transformative occurs.

John Updike's "Giving Blood" takes this metaphor literally. This fifteen-page short story begins with the third-person omniscient narrator presenting us with the Maples on their drive to Boston to donate blood for Joan's cousin; they are a bickering couple who "had been married now nine years, which is almost too long" (37). After the first sentence, the narrator zooms in and attaches to Richard. When Richard jokes about her ill cousin, Joan remarks, "I'm ashamed of you. Really

ashamed,” and he reflects that “[i]t cut.” All of this conflict happens on the first page. Updike doesn’t wait for a climactic moment to put pressure on and reveal the couple’s dysfunction; instead, readers are immersed immediately in this fraught marital relationship. Richard and Joan’s back-and-forth dialogue is full of barbs, deflections, and manipulations. Baxter tells us to put our characters in hell, but, for the Maples, hell is their ground state. The question then becomes, where does Updike go from there?

It’s significant that the tension during the car ride isn’t solely based on event. The surface-level problem is simple: Richard danced with Marlene Brossman all night instead of Joan. However, there’s a deeper dissonance happening within the Maples. They are lying to each other, performing characters instead of speaking honestly to one another. At one point, Joan remarks, “Everyone there felt sorry for me; you could have at least let somebody else dance once with Marlene, if only for show,” to which Richard replies, “Show, show. . . . That’s your mentality exactly” (38). Here Updike performs a writerly sleight of hand. He makes the reader believe that these characters aren’t just his creations but their own—that they’re capable of self-consciously constructing their own personas. Richard’s not just critiquing Joan’s superficiality, he’s drawing attention to her (false) performance of her desired identity. Later, Richard again pokes at Joan’s concern about appearances, “Pose, show, my Lord, who are you performing for?” (38). The question suggests to the reader that Joan’s character is layered, that beneath the performance is an authentic self.

Similarly, the third-person limited point of view provides insight into Richard’s consciousness, revealing the contradictions between his dialogue and his thoughts. Despite his attempts to convince Joan of his own jealousy, she remarks, “You’re not subtle. You think you can match me up with another man so you can swirl off with Marlene with a free conscience” (38). The reader is privy to Richard’s reaction and Updike writes, “Her reading his strategy so correctly made his face burn” (38). This confirms that Richard has been lying. Even as he accuses Joan of performing, Richard playacts the part of the jealous lover. By giving the reader access to Richard’s interiority, Updike reveals Richard’s hypocrisy and the extent to which this married couple is alienated from one another. In the first few pages, Updike has set up two characters who are able to self-reflexively construct and deconstruct their identities in order to gain advantage over the other. They’re not only in conflict with one another but their projected versions of themselves.

Updike establishes Richard and Joan’s personas early in the story as it allows him to use event to peel away layers of character. At the end of the drive, we get the first hint of Richard’s vulnerability as he confronts the reality of the blood dona-

tion. “‘Sweetie,’ Richard blurted, ‘will they hurt me?’” (40). Giving blood is the perfect trouble for the Maples because it’s out-of-the-ordinary trouble. The plot point, instead of exaggerating their miscommunications, takes pressure off of the lies they’ve been telling one another. Updike redirects the internal identity conflict toward a purely external source. As they fill out forms at the hospital, “[Richard] fought down that urge to giggle and clown and lie that threatened him . . .” (41). Even on the hospital forms Richard wants to perform, and it’s this inability to lie that allows for the couple’s closeness. The internal disconnect fades into the background of the story because the physical pain—the reality of the blood extraction—can’t be faked. It’s an act that by definition requires Richard and Joan to be authentically and elementally human.

Even as Richard expresses fear about the blood drawing, a tonal shift takes place in the hospital scene. Both Richard’s perception of his surroundings and the narrator’s voice lighten. It’s clear that the conflict of the car ride has been superseded by the anticipation of the shared experience. “In sitting side by side on the waiting bench, spelling out their middle names and recalling their childhood diseases, Mr and Mrs Maples were newly defined to themselves” (40–41). Richard and Joan become the Maples once again, tied together through the third-person narration. Richard’s even comforted by his shared statistics with Joan, “the hurt soul” whom he sits “side by side” with. Updike departs from the inverted check-mark narrative structure. This section takes the place of the escalating complication or “knotting up of the situation” (Burroway 240) in traditional story plot. Yet the unfolding process of the donation draws the Maples together rather than apart as it emphasizes vague commonalities such as their “present address,” “date of marriage,” and even the blood itself (41). The physical act of the blood donation is a symbol for Richard, who reflects, “His blood and Joan’s merged on the floor, and together their spirits glided from crack to crack, from star to star on the ceiling” (44). The external entangling of the blood is imbued with significance through Richard’s perspective, which supersedes his earlier reading of Joan’s performativity.

Put simply, the blood donation is anticlimactic because nothing goes wrong. Richard and Joan drive to the hospital and give blood. They accomplish their goal without any real obstacle or complication. Internally, the drama of the scene lies in the subversion of Richard’s perception of Joan. On watching the place where the needle was inserted, Updike writes, “It was a tender, vulnerable place where in courting days she had liked being stroked” (43). The emotional conflict of the car ride has been replaced with physical closeness. Richard believes that he’s able to see Joan’s authentic self, not just his constructed vision of her as a sexless, smug

New England wife. This attention to her “tender, vulnerable” body is a rewriting of Richard’s opening description of his wife’s “uncannily crystalline expression” and her “tinted porcelain [face]” (39). He’s transported back to their initial courting, a time before Richard and Joan were equipped with their performative armor. Just as he does with the entangling of the blood lines, Richard reads the past into the present based solely on Joan’s arm and the external event of the blood donation.

Janet Burroway writes, “Critics and editors agree that a reversal of some sort is necessary to all story structure . . . he or she must in some significant way be changed or moved by the action” (243). In the climactic moment of change in “Giving Blood,” Richard acts as a writer stand-in. Throughout the story, Richard has been able to read the symbolic significance of the event, and, using this internalized sense of story, he constructs narrative. His expectation is the same as Burroway’s: characters must change, and external events prompt these types of shifts. Through the process of the blood donation, Richard believes that he’s uncovered the real Joan and that they’ve regained lost closeness. As they walk away from the hospital, Richard says to Joan, “Hey, I love you. Love love *love* you” (48). The repetition of “love” reveals the underlying instability of the assertion—Richard’s trying to manifest an epiphany from this event.

It’s hard to overstate the popularity of the epiphany in contemporary literary fiction. The classic Joycean epiphany is defined as “a crisis action in the mind, a moment when a person, an event, a thing is seen in a light so new that it is as if it has never been seen before” (Burroway 233). In “Giving Blood,” we see Updike engaging with the epiphany structure as Richard has a seemingly earnest shift in perspective regarding Joan. However, Updike doesn’t leave us with Richard’s realization of his recovered love for Joan—he pushes past the epiphany. Directly after the “love” dialogue, our third-person narrator interjects: “Romance is, simply, the strange, the untried” (49). Richard’s revelation is immediately put into context. Strangeness is the impetus for their renewed romance, and, as Updike moves the Maples away from the hospital, the distance challenges the change. On the car ride to the Pancake House, Richard reflects: “He felt no different. . . . Something surely had been taken from him; he was less himself by a pint” (49). According to the rules of fiction, Richard should be changed—but he isn’t.

At the Pancake House, Richard’s epiphany is utterly debunked as the couple’s distinctly separate identities return. The trouble of the blood donation has faded into the everyday trouble that the story begins with. After they eat their pancakes, Richard reintroduces the question of Marlene Brossman and promises not to dance with her again, to which Joan replies, “Don’t be silly. I don’t care” (51). Nothing

has changed in terms of the characters' defense mechanisms; however, Richard is granted what he wished for at the opening of the story: permission to be with Marlene. He reflects, "This amounted to permission, but perversely irritated him. That above-it-all quality; why didn't she *fight*?" Nothing fundamental has changed in the dynamic between these characters, but Updike shows the reader that through the moment of vulnerability, the bloodletting, Richard is able to acknowledge that Joan's permission has never been the object of his desire. Rather, he wants his own actions to register with her—he wants her to abandon her performed role and feel the pain inflicted through his suggested infidelity.

In a circular move that clearly works against the epiphany, the explicit acknowledgment of character performance returns in the text. Updike writes, "Trying to regain their peace, scrambling uphill, [Richard] picked up their check and with an effort of acting, the pretense being that they were out on a date and he was a raw dumb suitor, said handsomely, 'I'll pay'" (51). Richard is trying to preserve the "raw dumb" openness he felt during the blood donation, to time travel back to the summoned "courting days" (43), but the effortful illusion is dispelled when it's revealed that he doesn't have enough cash to pay the bill. Updike leaves the reader with the repeated opening image of Joan's porcelain face. He writes, "her face having retreated, or advanced, into the porcelain shell of uncanny composure" (51). The military language of "retreated, or advanced" combined with the ambiguity of the action suggests that the short-lived truce has ended, and the war has begun.

There's no doubt in my mind that Charles Baxter, Janet Burroway, and my writing professors are all correct—stories require conflict. The lesson here is that the necessary conflict is not always obvious. John Updike's "Giving Blood" offers the Maples a momentary reprieve from Richard and Joan's assumed and adversarial martial roles. Updike's finesse as a writer lies in his ability to shift the stage and force his characters to forget their script for a few scenes. At the end of this circular story Richard is the same, yet he's confronted with a slightly altered understanding of his motivations. For a character who is constantly lying, not just to his spouse but to himself, this is the trouble we're reading for.

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Experiments from the Creative Writing Class: Teaching Updike's "Giving Blood" and the "Why" of Narration

SAKINAH HOFLER

In my years of teaching short stories to eager freshmen and sophomores, I've found I must shatter two of their preconceived notions about what makes good creative writing. First, I teach them creative writing does not come from a "muse." While it would be lovely to lounge around until Calliope or Melpomene whispers sweet stories into our ears and furiously transcribe every fantastic word they speak, it is, in every sense of the word, a myth. In order to become writers, they must read a lot and they must write a lot. There's no way around the work. Second, I tell them that, yes, while it's important to read as readers, they must also learn how to read as *writers*. Most of my students are very good at telling me what something symbolizes or writing literary analyses. In fact, I've had students submit stories where they've worked very hard at incorporating water to represent rebirth or stars to represent pathways, guidance, the sublime, but when we examine structures or narrative choices they've made, they realize they have spent so much time infusing their stories with meaning, they've neglected to pay attention to storytelling basics. When we read published works, I ask them: Why would this author choose a third-person narrator as opposed to a first-person narrator? Why use this form? Why choose close third instead of an omniscient narrator? Why this verb instead of that one? Why this voice? When authors have done their homework, I tell them,

when they've read and written a lot, when they've tried and failed, and tried and failed, and then produce a good short story or novel, it is due to a culmination of years of gathering the appropriate writing tools into their toolbox and learning how to deploy them. The more my students understand they're in control of the worlds they're creating, the more they become involved in reading closely and practicing what they see. I incorporate some of the methodologies Francine Prose discusses in *Reading Like a Writer*. How does the writer develop her understanding of how words, sentences, paragraphs, narration, dialogue, and details function? "This sounds like it will take a long time," says one of my students. "Should we do this for everything we read?" Yes. I tell them they have to take the time to deconstruct the "whys" of published novels and stories. I don't expect them to break down every single craft aspect of each story, but I'd like them to pay attention to what the author is doing well so they can figure out how to emulate and, eventually, transform their own works.

One of the craft aspects I spend a significant amount of time covering is narration, which, I explain to my students, is the vessel of the story. It carries the reader from point A to point B. Paying attention to narration means being painfully, consciously aware of how you will tell your story. It is deciding whether to use a first-, second-, or third-person narrator. It is pacing. It is consistency. It doesn't matter how complicated their protagonists or how lyrical their sentences, without the correct narration their stories fall apart. The reader won't trust the writer. While I've taught narration in a number of different ways to my students; after being asked to write a response to Updike's "Giving Blood," I realized this would be an excellent story for teaching third-person omniscient techniques.

The premise of "Giving Blood" is simple: the story follows the Maples, primarily Richard Maple, as he and his wife go to Boston to donate blood to his wife Joan's "cousin," who is about to have open-heart surgery. On the way to the hospital, the two of them bicker about each other's flirtatious behavior at a party the previous night. At times, Richard is harsh with his words. The argument leads to the reader discovering Richard is petrified of what they are about to do. At the hospital, the couple reacts quite differently to the doctor drawing their blood—Richard becomes agitated while Joan remains calm. Later they eat at a Pancake House and Richard is apologetic. He offers to pay for their meal but realizes he only has a dollar. The story ends with Joan suggesting they split the bill.

Students can easily identify the three-act structure: 1) the bickering spouses on their way to give blood, 2) the event of giving blood, and 3) their arrival at a sort of truce in the end. Students can also pick out thematic elements: defying gendered

norms, vulnerability, and marriage, among others. They struggle a bit identifying what type of narrator Updike employs, but ultimately conclude: an omniscient narrator who stays closest to Richard's consciousness.

Then I ask them: Why? Why has Updike decided on this type of narration? Why not use a limited third-person narrator closer to Richard's viewpoint that can immediately tell us of Ricard's discomfort with giving blood? In fact, why not use a first-person narrator to help us fully understand Richard's motivations from the onset? To tackle these questions, we begin with the story's first paragraph:

The Maples had been married now nine years, which is almost too long. 'Goddamn it, goddamn it,' Richard said to Joan, as they drove into Boston to give blood. 'I drive this road five days a week and now I'm driving it again. It's like a nightmare. I'm exhausted. I'm emotionally, mentally, physically exhausted, and she isn't even an aunt of mine. She isn't even an aunt of yours.' (37)

Within just six brief sentences, Updike establishes a confident narrator, the main characters and their relationship, their destination and what's expected there, and tension—one of the main characters isn't happy about the situation.

Next, we examine how the narrator dispenses information during this opening scene. There's a quick back-and-forth disagreement between the couple before Joan admonishes Richard for his callous remarks, which leads to the following observation, "It cut. His voice for the moment took on an apologetic pallor" (37). Here, Updike signals to the reader that this is not an objective narrator; rather, it is one who will use free indirect discourse to give us Richard's thoughts. We search for more examples and find this description of Joan: "Her hand, distinctly thirty-ish, dry and green-veined and rasped by detergents, stubbed out her cigarette in the dashboard ashtray" (38). Unattached to Richard's dialogue or sensibility, that subjective observation seems to be located in the narrator. A few lines later, the narrator gets further inside Richard's head, "[Joan's] reading his strategy so correctly made his face burn; he felt again the tingle of Mrs Brossman's hair as he pressed his cheek against hers and in this damp privacy inhaled the perfume behind her ear" (38–39). After Richard insults Joan for, among other things, her "sexlessness" and Joan curtly admonishes him, the narrator describes Richard's emotional state: "Plunged fathoms deep into the wrong, feeling suffocated by his guilt, he concentrated on the highway and sullenly steered" (39). While we're pretty sure Richard would not think those exact thoughts with those exact words, the narrator is articulating how Richard feels. We linger over the moment when Richard asks Joan about their child's health. For the first time in three pages, the

narrator moves away from Richard's consciousness and into Joan's: "Joan wrestled with her vow to say nothing, but maternal concern won out" (39). Thanks to the opening line of the story that established the narrator as omniscient, this narrative move does not jar the reader nor remove the reader from the story.

At the end of the first scene, Richard partly reveals the source of his irritation about their destination: "'Sweetie,' Richard blurted, 'will they hurt me?'" (40). This outburst is immediately followed by the narrator providing exposition for the reader: "[H]e had never given blood before. Asthmatic and underweight, he had been 4-F, and at college and now at the office he had, less through his own determination than through the diffidence of the solicitors, evaded pledging blood" (40). Again, with just a few lines from this narrator, we learn all we need to know about why Richard is so anxious.

We return, then, to our original question: Why? Why this narration? To answer, we experiment with alternative ways Updike could have told this story. For instance, first person, near past:

I had been married to Joan for nine years, which is too long. 'Goddamn it, goddamn it.' I said. We were on our way into Boston to give blood to her aunt, barely her aunt, and I was tired. I was exhausted. I told her. 'I'm emotionally, mentally, physically exhausted.'

Such an approach could shift the story's themes and our emotional attachment to the characters. If the first-person narrator berates his wife and talks negatively of her, if the comment about Joan's appearance becomes, "My wife's hand, distinctly thirty-ish, dry and green-veined rasped by detergents, stubbed out her cigarette in the dashboard tray," it might shift our feelings about the protagonist's actions at the party the night before from being flirtatious and lustful to something much darker. Richard saying "sexlessness" in the middle of an argument versus his thinking of and giving us specifics of his wife's "sexlessness," affects how we interpret their relationship. This choice would make it difficult for the reader to connect with Richard. While a protagonist does not have to be likable, he must be engaging enough to sustain the reader's attention for x number of pages (i.e., through a lyrical voice, unreliability, a wicked sense of humor, etc.). Whereas Updike's careful narration allows the reader to connect with Richard toward the end of the first scene, and somehow rationalize that his comments toward his wife stem from his reluctance and fear of giving blood, Updike would have to rearrange the story to make an attempt at achieving a similar effect with the first-person, near-past narrator. Moreover, that first-person narrator would have to do quadruple

the duty—argue with his wife, directly tell the audience why he thinks his wife is wrong, avoid and/or reveal his sentiment about giving blood, and somehow remain endearing.

Next, we can experiment with first-person retrospective because it contains similar qualities to the third-person omniscient—here the narrator can speculate, move around in time, provide rationalizations. This type of narrator sometimes tells the story with a sense of detachment and distance from ongoing story events. Consider first-person retrospective:

We had been married nine long years before Joan convinced me to drive into Boston to give blood to her sick aunt. I did not want to go—I had to take the same commute every morning. Besides, I was tired, I was sick, and I did not want to give my blood to this aunt that she barely knew. Of course, I couldn't tell her that. We were in the car fifteen, twenty minutes, before I finally told her, 'I drive this road five days a week and now I'm driving it again.'

In this example, the protagonist provides the same information as Updike's narrator; however, the story starts off much more deflated. Whatever this couple has gone through, the narrator has survived to tell this story. Would the older, wiser Richard reveal his fear of giving blood to the reader? Would the reveal come much sooner? The retrospective narrator can fill in gaps—e.g., he can tell us how he really felt about Harry Saxon and why he said those hurtful things to his wife. While some of that information might have been nice, it pulls us away from the writer's intentions—Richard shifting his views after doing something he was scared to do. The older, retrospective Richard has already given his blood, which shifts the story from “what will change when Richard goes to give his blood” to “Richard survived giving his blood and will eventually tell us what lesson he learned on this particular day.”

We continue to experiment. Third-person objective omniscience strips the narrator from all consciousness so that we only get the dialogue exchange between the two of them and their physical descriptions and movements. This would allow us to follow moments of direct dialogue, such as when Richard asks, “Sweetie . . . will they hurt me” (40), but we wouldn't get the lines about him being hurt after his wife admonishes him or his remorseful feelings after he insults her “sexlessness” (39). Third-person limited wouldn't give us that great opening statement in the beginning about being “married now nine years, which is almost too long” (37), unless it's relocated to Richard's consciousness. Additionally, third-person

limited could evoke emotions more similar to first-person, near-past than Updike's narrator. We would be in Richard's head with a very limited filter and, again, the narrator would have to put in a lot of work to pull off what Updike's narrator pulls off. You could do this experiment in a number of different ways, and it's highly unlikely you'll achieve the appropriate emotional distance Updike achieves with his choice in narrator.

After we exhaustively study the story's first section, we briefly move on to discuss the crucial role narration plays in the second act, where the Maples donate blood. Attention is directed to the language the narrator uses to show how Richard feels during his blood extraction. Updike could have chosen from a range of words to convey the hospital's setting, but through Richard's consciousness what could be medicinal becomes downright cynical. "Richard felt like Hansel orphaned with Gretel; birds ate the bread crumbs behind them, and at last they timidly knocked on the witch's door, which said BLOOD DONATION CENTER. . . . Richard glimpsed— horrors!—a pair of dismembered female legs stripped of their shoes. . . . Glints of needles and bottles pricked his eyes" (40). You can imagine how melodramatic this description could become through some of the other points of view.

Before they take Richard's blood, the narration shows us how his views of his wife have softened, "He had never before seen her quite this way, the combed crown of her hair so poignant, her bared arm so pale and long, her stocking feet toed in childishly and helplessly" (43). The sounds that had seemed to mock him before become reduced to the intern's breathing. And then there's this line, which shows us his feelings have come full circle about his wife: "The instant readiness of her blood to leave her body pierced him like a physical pang" (43). Would first-person Richard have been able to articulate that? Perhaps, but not in this manner. Once the intern turns to Richard, the narrator slows down, taking time to articulate Richard's state of mind while using ethereal, lyrical language that Richard himself probably wouldn't have used: "His blood and Joan's merged on the floor, and together their spirits glided from crack to crack, from star to star on the ceiling" (44). By the end of the scene, we're lapping in Richard's joy, "as he walked down the corridor, space seemed to adjust snugly around him. . . . [a] famished sun was nibbling through the overcast. . . . Richard hugged his wife's shoulders and as they walked along leaning on each other, whispered, 'Hey, I love you. Love love *love* you'" (48).

Perhaps the ending sentiments of this second act are why I don't linger in Act III. The initial concerns raised in the story's opening are now resolved. Richard's

animosity toward his wife dissipates. The question of whether Richard will give blood, and how that giving will affect him, has been answered. At the start of Act III, the narrator makes a statement channeling confidence similar to the story's opening line: "Romance is, simply, the strange, the untried" (49). One wonders, where can we go from here? This line offers the possibility for tension, a curveball, or an even stranger act than the unification of giving blood. Unfortunately, the next two sentences—"It was unusual for the Maples to be driving together at eleven in the morning. Almost always it was dark when they shared a car" (49)—echo what the reader already knows: this is an out-of-the-ordinary day for the Maples. While the narrator captures Richard's concern about Joan toward the end of the story, "Why didn't she *fight*?", the confident narrator offering commentary on marriage and life has receded to the background, and the story finishes with reportage rather than commentary: Richard, having the lower hand, offers a "crummy wrinkled dollar," and Joan, having the upper hand, says they'll both pay (51). Updike's narrator could have pushed this scene further, perhaps adding an image of the couple that echoes the opening line of this act, or offering another wise, ubiquitous statement that eclipses what we've already learned during the first two acts. But he doesn't; instead Updike chooses to let the dialogue do the work.

To conclude, I give my students a two-part homework assignment. First, I have them copy a couple pages of Updike's work. Similar to how composers learn by studying and practicing other greats before composing their own pieces, I urge them to type or handwrite part of the story. Word for word. Not only will they begin to intuitively understand why Updike has made his narrative choices, but they will also start to learn how to deploy this type of narration. As an almost related aside, I also urge them to stop thinking of third-person narration as direct discourse/free indirect discourse. While they are good at pointing out when others use it, they tend to get confused when they try to intellectually apply this concept to their own writing, rotating wildly and unreasonably among third-person omniscient, limited, and objective. I have found that students hand in stronger works when we talk of cultivating a narrator and having that narrator *articulate* the character's actions and thoughts. I want them to move from overthinking to trusting their intuition. The second part of their assignment involves asking students to create a short story from scratch with this type of narrator. Doing so teaches them when to zoom in to a protagonist's viewpoint and when to pull back. They will learn where to reveal information and where to withhold. "Giving Blood" offers the perfect ingredients of a basic structure, an elevated mundane story, and a bal-

anced omniscient narrator that allows us to tinker with and learn about point of view. By studying, playing with, and emulating Updike's "Giving Blood," students learn how to make choices about the use of narration in their own stories.

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John Updike, Edmund Wilson, and the Displacement of Pornography

DONALD J. GREINER

The bourgeois novel is inherently erotic.

—John Updike, “If at First You Do Succeed”

If you’re going to have sex in a book, you really ought to have it.

—John Updike, “Conversation” with Frank Gado

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.

—John Updike to Helen Vendler

In 1946, John Updike walked into the Reading (PA) Public Library and checked out Edmund Wilson’s *Memoirs of Hecate County* (1946).¹ He was fourteen years old. A reader today might ask why such an apparently mundane moment in Updike’s early years is worth remembering, but the point is that Wilson’s novel was already notorious when Updike pulled it off the shelf: by the legal terms of the day, he was “underage.” A best seller soon after publication, *Hecate County* was challenged in court on charges of obscenity—or, in the vernacular at the time, on charges of being a “dirty book.” In writing scenes of physical intimacy, Wilson did not take refuge in the relative safety of innuendo. The sex episodes in *Hecate County* are startlingly explicit for a serious American novel published in 1946, nearly clinical in the descriptions of anatomy, of the various positions during coitus, and of the

sounds of lovemaking. Yet his goal was to write not an under-the-counter book to titillate or to profit from the pornography market but to craft a more realistic, less rhapsodic mainstream novel featuring open-eyed passages about what couples do when undressed for purposes other than sleeping or bathing.

Wilson (1895–1972) was not a novice writer in 1946 when *Hecate County* appeared. He had already published fourteen books, including the early novel *I Thought of Daisy* (1929). An undergraduate at Princeton with F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Peale Bishop, and an author of poems, plays, and fiction, he was recognized at the time of *Memoirs of Hecate County* primarily for his literary and cultural criticism, notably *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870–1930* (1930), *To the Finland Station: A Study in the Writing and Acting of History* (1940), and *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature* (1941). To say that he was erudite is to understate. Wilson was the preeminent American critic of the day—pungent, incisive, knowledgeable, and direct: characteristics he brought to *Hecate County*. Updike never forgot the impact the book made on him as a teenager. During his career, he wrote reviews and essays about Wilson's achievements, but with special interest in *Memoirs of Hecate County*, a volume some readers define as a collection of stories, others as a novel unified by the voice of the unnamed narrator. The book is less a conventionally structured novel—with developing characters and relevant action—than a narrator's musings on his desires and commitments as he pursues erotic entanglements with women of different social class and education. Although sexual implications are featured in *Rabbit, Run* (1960), traditionally forbidden four-letter words (“cunt,” for example) do not often appear in Updike's fiction before *Of the Farm* (1964). But the lure and complexity of sex and adultery became a primary Updike theme early on, particularly in the short stories: “Leaves” (1962), “Harv Is Plowing Now” (1963), “The Music School” (1963), and the limited-edition “Couples: A Short Story” (1963). Explicitness, however, of the degree Wilson developed in *Hecate County*, was not yet a factor in his work. All that changed in 1968 when Updike published *Couples* to both acclaim and dismay. I want to suggest that *Couples* is a direct and deliberate descendant of Wilson's most infamous publication. Stepping into Wilson's large footprints, Updike liberated mainstream American fiction from the twin threats of censorship and court cases, thus establishing his continuing importance by demonstrating that men and women are creatures of sexuality worthy of being accurately depicted in serious novels where the centrality of sex/body is not coyly dodged but explicitly featured.²

The responses—from skeptical to outraged—to *Memoirs of Hecate County* and *Couples* need to be understood in the context of two American court decisions regarding the matter of pornography vs. literary merit: one case decided in 1933 involving James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), the other decided in 1947 involving *Hecate County*. On 6 December 1933, Judge John M. Woolsey of the Southern District of New York lifted the ban on Joyce's masterpiece. Focusing on the question of whether, in Woolsey's words, *Ulysses* was written to be "what is called, according to the usual phrase, pornographic, that is, written for the purpose of exploiting obscenity," Woolsey declared that he did not "detect *anywhere* the leer of the sensualist," and thus held that the novel was not pornographic (ix, italics added). He went on to insist that he found nothing "that I consider to be dirt for dirt's sake. . . . nowhere does it [*Ulysses*] tend to be an aphrodisiac" (x, xii). The final sentence of his decree is understated: "*Ulysses* may, therefore, be admitted into the United States" (xii).

On 11 December 1933, five days after Judge Woolsey's landmark ruling, Morris L. Ernst, one of the attorneys who defended the novel, wrote the foreword to the Modern Library edition of *Ulysses*. Understandably elated with the verdict, Ernst both pointedly attacked censors and optimistically predicted a new freedom for serious authors:

The *Ulysses* case marks a turning point. It is a body-blow for the censors. The necessity for hypocrisy and circumlocution in literature has been eliminated. Writers need no longer seek refuge in euphemisms. They may now describe basic human functions without fear of the law. . . . The precedent [Woolsey] has established will do much to rescue the mental pabulum of the public from the censors who have striven to convert it into treacle. (v)

Ernst concluded with a prediction that, unfortunately, turned out to be unwarranted: "it should henceforth be impossible for the censors legally to sustain an attack against any book of artistic integrity, no matter how frank and forthright it may be" (vi).³

Judge Woolsey's decision should have become an accepted precedent. The case was widely covered because by 1933 *Ulysses* was a famously "dirty" novel but largely unread in the United States due to censorship. Yet only fourteen years later, on 13 November 1947, *Memoirs of Hecate County* was legally banned. Published by Doubleday, the novel quickly sold approximately 60,000 copies and was a best

seller before 130 copies were removed from four book stores and the New York Public Library on behalf of the Society for the Suppression of Vice. Doubleday challenged in court, but the ban was upheld by a 2–1 vote. The case then went to the United States Supreme Court in 1948, which supported the ban on a 4–4 vote. No longer available in the United States, the novel was published in Great Britain in 1951, its popularity reconfirmed when six impressions were required in just two years. Ernst's optimism for unfettered serious fiction in America was neutralized for a decade. Yet following the publication of Vladimir Nabokov's controversial *Lolita* in 1958, the firm of L. C. Page quietly ignored the prohibition and republished *Hecate County* in 1959. A year later, when D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) was admitted into the United States, Ernst's hope for all books displaying what he described as "artistic integrity" was finally realized. John Sutherland's observation of the comparable situation in Britain is relevant: "For a while [that is, once *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was declared not obscene in 1960], it seemed as if authority's main target was to be the burgeoning mass-market paperback. Some custodians had been alarmed less at the four-letter words and 'bouts' in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* than at the fact that they were available to all in a 3s.6d book" (Sutherland 1, brackets in original).⁴ In other words, expensive editions were tolerated because most of the public could not afford them. Still, publishers of mass-market paperbacks prevailed: "Hence the all-time bestsellers of the 1960s and 1970s are dominated by novels which would have been unpublishable, in Britain and America, before 1960" (Sutherland 2).

Updike was later so taken by the negative implications of the 1947 *Hecate County* decision that he included four pages of excerpts from the court proceedings as a preliminary document to the afterword he wrote for the 1980 reprinting of Wilson's novel. The 1947 court ruling was direct: "The People asserted that the triers of the facts were justified in finding the book obscene and that its suppression raised no constitutional question" (450). Updike also included statements from the testimony of witnesses, one of whom was the respected literary critic Lionel Trilling, called to the court on behalf of Doubleday and Wilson. The plaintiff's attorney read several passages from *Hecate County* that explicitly referred to a woman's "mossy damp undergarments" and to a vagina "doing [its] feminine work of making things easy for the entrant with a honeysweet sleek profusion. . . . Her little bud was so deeply embedded . . ." (451). Trilling held firm, replying that the passages "added to the accuracy, the precision of the story," which was "about sexuality" (451).

The two court cases affected Updike, particularly the one censoring Wilson,

because the republication of *Hecate County* in 1959—despite the continuing ban—renewed public interest in the 1947 verdict. In 1959, Updike was just beginning to be recognized as a young writer to watch. He had published three books, but, more important, he was completing *Rabbit, Run*, the novel that put him on the literary map in 1960. Yet, as initiated readers of his canon know, his publisher Knopf feared a legal battle over *Rabbit, Run* and thus required Updike to censor his own novel, to remove passages that, while not explicit, readily convey what Rabbit and Ruth are doing in bed. He reinserted the excised material four years later for the British Penguin edition, but, because of production schedules, he and Knopf did not have time in 1960 to take advantage of the recent republication of *Memoirs of Hecate County* or of the 1960 legal ruling that allowed for the importation of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Unlike Henry Miller, whose *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) was not legally available until the Supreme Court ruled in its favor in 1964, Wilson and Updike were admired mainstream artists. Courtroom battles were to be avoided. The characters in *Couples* mock Miller as being deliberately provocative, as an American novelist whose aim to shock swamped his skill with prose. *Memoirs of Hecate County* nudged Updike toward *Couples* with its frankness about sex that far outpaced the innuendos originally expurgated from *Rabbit, Run*, albeit from predominately the male point of view.

Updike regularly reviewed Wilson's work: the correspondence with Nabokov, the notebooks and journals, and the fiction, but *Hecate County* was his primary interest. Although he collected his "tribute" to Wilson in *Odd Jobs* (1991), a tribute in which he recalls the novel as offering him, at age fourteen, "a stimulating glimpse into the strange realities of sex" (838) by illustrating the centrality of eroticism in human affairs, he assembled most of his observations about Wilson in *Hugging the Shore* (1983). The key exhibit, critical to his decades-long appreciation of Wilson, is the essay "Edmund Wilson's Fiction: A Personal Account," collected in *Hugging the Shore* but originally published in different form in *The New Republic* (17 January 1976) and then expanded for inclusion in *Edmund Wilson: The Man and His Work*, edited by John Wain in 1978. His commitment to Wilson's novel was so sustained that he revised the essay again to serve as the afterword to the 1980 reissue of *Hecate County*, which is the version that includes the partial transcript of the 1947 trial and the one that interested readers should consult.

The afterword begins with an amused confession: "Legally immature [age fourteen], I read a copy of *Memoirs of Hecate County* borrowed from the Reading, Pennsylvania, public library, where it sat placidly on the open shelves while the book was being banned in New York State" (452). His irony is clear: big, sophisti-

cated New York bans a novel that sat on an open library shelf in little, blue-collar Reading. Focusing, as most commentators do, on the chapter titled “The Princess with the Golden Hair,” he confirms that he never forgot how Anna, “as a gesture of affection and respect, held the hero’s penis in her hand as they drifted off to sleep; and how Imogen in coitus halted her lover and ‘did something special and gentle’ that caused her to have her climax first” (453). He salutes Wilson for creating characters and scenes that “smelled of the real,” of depicting sex as a “human transaction that did honestly take place, not in the infinitely elastic wonderland of pornography” (453). His larger point is that such novelists as Erskine Caldwell and John O’Hara wrote sex scenes, “but the sex in these writers was not fortified by Wilson’s conscious intention of bringing European sexual realism into American fiction at last” (454). The key phrase in the previous sentence is “at last,” by which Updike means that Wilson had both the art and the determination to show how American authors could frankly detail sexual activity not to excite the reader but to reveal the social and psychological condition of the characters.

Updike followed Wilson’s example when he wrote *Couples*. The profusion of Wilson’s details lends “the factual sexual descriptions a weight, a heat, far from tame” (“Afterword” 456). Wilson’s Anna is lower-class proletarian, while his Imogen is upper-class aristocrat, but Wilson succeeds in anatomizing their sexual longings and activities as natural extensions of their radically divergent cultures. Updike even quotes the passages from *Hecate County* that the attorney read to Trilling in 1947, passages about “honey-sweet sleek profusion” and “brimming female fluid,” as if he were exposing not the genitals but the verdict of obscenity for what it was, as no more than standard American prudery: “No longer shocking, and never meant to be,” *Memoirs of Hecate County* remains “a work of exemplary merit, still the most intelligent attempt by an American male to dramatize sexual behavior as a function of, rather than a suspension of, personality” (“Afterword” 458–459).

Wilson drew the closely observed details in the novel from his voluminous notebooks—notebooks that Updike read and reviewed.⁵ Leon Edel, Wilson’s editor, describes the journals as “the equivalent of a painter’s sketchbook,” the minutiae of the specifics being a record of not what Wilson remembered but what he saw (xiii). Setting down what Edel calls “evanescent bits of life,” Wilson used this minutiae as the foundation for fleshing out the narrator’s two lovers, Imogen and Anna. In “The Princess with the Golden Hair,” the longest and most engaging chapter around which the other sections of *Hecate County* revolve, the women’s dresses and undergarments, their accessories, their distinctive accents,

their cultural backgrounds, and their preferences and responses when engaged in sex, all enhance the development of their characters. His candor in describing erotic encounters is more realistic, less extravagantly enthusiastic than Lawrence's verbal swirls of ecstasy. Edel's emphasis is pertinent: before *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was published in 1928, Wilson in his notebooks "was discovering the objective language—a mixture of the crude and the delicate—to render erotic experience. . . . [He] antedated the later avalanche of erotic writings that now colors the creative imagination of America" (*The Twenties* 245). Jotting down observations about the woman who would become Anna in *Hecate County*, Wilson used the notebooks to detail explicit sexual encounters that he then refashioned in the novel twenty years later. The following examples are typical of the notebooks: "Climax of fellatio. . . . She used to sleep curled up to fit my back and with my cock in her hand. . . . I used to stroke it [vagina] and caress it with my tongue" (*The Twenties* 413). Updike pointedly cited this notebook entry when he praised Wilson's accounts of the body and sex. Similarly, this description of sex in the notebooks illustrates the realism that attracted Updike: "Her little mouth under the moist kisses of my mouth and my finger on her little moist cunt rubbing its most sensitive spot—I felt that I was in contact with her two tenderest places—tiny, infinitely delicious . . . where personality melted into magic and delight" (*The Twenties* 518). The two examples confirm Wilson's skill in uniting crudeness and delicacy. His insistence on specificity became central to Updike's art in 1968 and beyond. The crude and the delicate: Edel might have been describing the attractions of *Couples*.

The notebooks were the germ of *Memoirs of Hecate County*, whose narrator is a man who loves women. Associating, for example, golden-haired Imogen with Guinevere, Melisande, Isolde, and the "Blessed Damozel," the narrator first undresses Imogen with his eyes before finally removing her garments with his hands. Because he sees Imogen as mythic, identifying her with paintings, he longs to counter myth with body, to watch her "lying spread out before me: a rich repast to be had for the taking" (*Hecate County* 119). His goal is not to defile perfection but to engage flesh. When he succeeds in his quest for the body of the golden girl, Imogen becomes an earthly Venus:

But what struck and astonished me most was that not only were her thighs perfect columns but that all that lay between them was impressively beautiful, too, with an ideal aesthetic value that I had never found there before. The mount was of a classical femininity: round and smooth and plump; the fleece, if not quite golden, was blond and curly and soft; and the portals were a deep tender rose, like the petals of some fleshly flower. And they were doing their feminine work of making things easy for the

entrant with a honeysweet sleek profusion. . . . Her little bud was so deeply embedded that it was hardly involved in the play. . . . (250, 251)

This is one of the passages that landed Wilson in court in 1946–47.

Anna, on the other hand, is the polar opposite of Imogen: earthy, uneducated, eager for sex—no fairy tale princess or painting by Rossetti, willing to let the narrator liberate “one little breast” but, she insists, “only one!” (153). Her coyness overcome, the narrator recalls a “gray-lit Sunday” when he “made love to Anna for the second time [that day], by a sudden revival of appetite after she had put her clothes on to go, by way of her white thighs and buttocks, laid bare between black dress and gray stockings—she was so slim that it was almost as easy to take her from behind as face to face—while she kicked up one foot with its blunt-toed black shoe as a gesture of playful resistance or simply wanton freedom” (211). Where *Couples* is an erotic-religious novel, *Hecate County* is an erotic-political novel. When the narrator turns toward Anna instead of Imogen, Wilson underlines his general concern that females like Anna are not common just because they are lower class, not to be dismissed just because they are poor, and not vulgar just because they openly enjoy sex. His sociopolitical commitments shaped his responses to the two women.

When Wilson and Updike set up contrasts between the two primary women in their novels, they indirectly signaled that their fiction belonged in a venerable American literary tradition dating to James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), and that they were not writing from an outlaw position as was, say, Henry Miller, but were providing a much needed corrective to a long-established paradigm: the sensitive blonde shrinking from the dirt of the world to protect her purity, and the alluring brunette displaying a sexuality that proclaims her strength. In Cooper’s *Mohicans*, fair-haired Alice and dark-haired Cora are sisters, but by the conclusion sexual Cora lies dead in the unknowable forest while virginal Alice must flee the wilderness for civilization where she will marry pristine Duncan. The couple will then become the progenitors of America. Desired by both Uncas and Magua, Cora with her eroticism is the unsettling factor in *Mohicans*. When she walks into the forest with Natty Bumppo and Uncas as her protectors, sexual desire slithers its snakelike entrance into Cooper’s ironic Edenic wilderness.

Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James, about whom Wilson and Updike wrote knowledgeably, followed suit, particularly in *The Marble Faun* (1860) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). Hawthorne’s blonde Hilda keeps to her tower where she

tends a shrine to the Virgin. Despite the phallic implications of the tower, she equates sex with sin, clings to her purity, and waits for Kenyon so that consummation can be sanctified in marriage. Dark, erotic Miriam, however, is associated with an unexplained stain, reminiscent of Hester Prynne's "A," and with the forbidding catacombs of Rome. She mysteriously fades away, leaving the future to Hilda and Kenyon. James extends the paradigm with Maggie Verver and Charlotte Stant. Both are already sexually initiated, Maggie via marriage, Charlotte via lovers and marriage. Yet at the conclusion of *The Golden Bowl*, fair Maggie regains her adulterous husband and thus the socially sanctioned safety of sex within matrimony, while dark, enticing, sexually free Charlotte is banished with her much older husband. Death, disappearance, or banishment await the erotic brunette. Cooper, Hawthorne, and James can only hint at the complications of eroticism personified in the stark contrast between the women, but not Wilson and Updike. In *Hecate County* and *Couples*, they explode the paradigm by exploring the particulars of sex—genitals included—and they do so by upsetting the implications of the blonde/brunette dichotomy popularized by their canonical predecessors. Wilson's blonde Imogen, the princess with the golden hair, and Updike's Foxy, the blonde who pushes aside Angela, the suburban angel, understand that sexuality powers strength. Wilson's narrator finally turns away from Imogen in favor of blunt, dark-haired Anna, while Updike's Piet (piety, Pieta, Simon Peter) walks away with the sexy blonde.⁶ The long observed literary tradition was radically altered as if to underline the change in how American novelists would now portray man-woman-bed.⁷

II

In 1963, only four years after the publisher of the reissued edition of *Memoirs of Hecate County* flouted the 1947 ban, Updike wrote a short story titled "Couples." Taking notes for the tale on the back of proof sheets for *The Centaur* (1963), he completed the story on 16 May 1963 and mailed it to the *New Yorker*, which rejected it in August. The rejection confirmed his doubts about the flaws in "Couples" that he later identified as vagueness, sentimentality, and, primarily, overcrowdedness. Although he set aside the story for thirteen years, he did not abandon his plan to write about a couple moving to an upper-middle-class suburb of Boston, getting involved with other affluent young marrieds, and participating in a merry-go-round of multiple adulteries and betrayals. In 1966, three years after the failure of "Couples," he began drafting *Couples*, the novel that in 1968 became his biggest seller and his most controversial book.⁸ Anticipating the controversy, he took his

family to England for a year before the storm of both outrage and acclaim broke. He referred to his retreat to England in “Minority Report,” a poem collected in *Midpoint and Other Poems* (1969), which was published the year after *Couples*. A love letter to America, “Minority Report” is set in England. The first lines indirectly comment on his escape from the foreseen publicity and controversy that swirled around *Couples*: “My beloved land, / here I sit in London . . . / exiled by success of sorts” (76). In 1976, the year that *Marry Me*—with its lyrical investigation of infidelity among the suburban well-to-do—appeared, he lifted “Couples” off the rejection pile and agreed to publish it as “Couples: A Short Story” in an edition limited to 250 numbered and twenty-six lettered, signed copies, marketed to collectors and thus all but guaranteeing that the story would remain unknown to most of his vast readership.⁹ He also agreed to write a foreword, which he later collected in *Hugging the Shore*, but he never republished the story. The scarce limited edition is the only source for “Couples,” the ur-*Couples*.

Just as Wilson relied on his precisely detailed journals of the 1920s for the explicitly erotic scenes in *Hecate County*, so Updike, albeit to a lesser extent, resurrected the mood, tone, and subject of “Couples” when writing *Couples*. Clinical accounts of sexual arousal and the resulting betrayals are not a feature in the story, but the union of desire with a longing for religious surety is. Readers of “Couples” do not have to turn many pages before realizing that in 1963 Updike was already developing the unnamed first-person narrator of the story to blossom into Piet in the novel. When, for example, the narrator first feels the lure of forbidden desire in the hermetic, sexually charged garden of suburban Tarbox, he has “this sharp sense then, filling my eyes with a pressure as if I were confronting an angel (“Couples” 21). Notions of the fall into adultery merge with the theologically debated tradition of the “fortunate Fall” from the perfection of the Garden of Eden into the messiness of humanity, and the narrator looks for an angel in the guise of a lover to bless his transgression, just as Piet hopes that Angela, his pointedly named wife, will offer a benediction when he strays away with Foxy. Guilt, however, negates blessings. The narrator and Piet are seekers, but neither finds religious certainty or a guilt-free paradise in his erotically permissive world. Adultery leads to betrayal and then to expulsion from the community in both story and novel. As Updike remarked, the story was one of his “first attempts to write about suburban adultery, a subject that, if I have not exhausted it, has exhausted me. But I have persisted . . . with the conviction that there was something good to say for it [adultery], some sad magic that, but for me, might go unobserved. . . . ‘Couples’ bares the muffled heart of *Couples*, the theme of friendship—of friendships and their inevitable, never-quite-

complete betrayals” (“Couples” 9, 10). In the “muffled heart” of *Couples*, as with *Hecate County*, the sex is freely and fully exposed, but with a difference. Sin and guilt are not issues for Wilson.

Early commentary about *Couples* zeroed in on the explicitness, implying that the novel was a kind of upscale pornography: dirty writing for serious readers. In a 1968 interview with Updike, for example, Sally Reston complained that “Mr. Updike’s reporting of extramarital adventures is almost painfully explicit. . . . [He] leaves nothing to the imagination” (Plath 20). Yet Reston’s complaint is mild when set beside the outrage of Diana Trilling (Lionel Trilling’s wife, a subtle irony). In a long review that Updike later described as “a banshee cry of indignation” (Plath 25), Trilling savaged *Couples* as little more than cheap pornography:

With nice economy the book is called *Couples*. It would have been more precise to have called it *Coupling*. . . . We see that *Couples* meets many of the specifications for pornography: it has the obsessiveness, the overtness, the infantilism, the tediousness that differentiate pornographic writing from other fictional work which may deal extensively, or even primarily, with sex. (Trilling 129, 130)

The effect of such a banshee cry was ironic, of course, because it stimulated readers to buy the book if only to see what all the fuss was about. *Couples* became his first best seller and earned him a portrait on the cover of *Time* (26 April 1968), which in turn prompted even more sales.

Updike wasted no time initiating the controversy. The novel begins with a couple undressing in a bedroom. Piet and Angela are married, but sex ordained by church and state is about to be denied. Angela holds the spotlight as Updike describes her as a contradiction, a puzzle of angel, woman, and girl: “a fair soft brown-haired woman, thirty-four, going heavy in her haunches and waist yet with a girl’s fine hard ankles and a girl’s tentative questing way of moving, as if the pure air were loosely packed with obstructing cloths” (3). She is Wilson’s Imogen. Although displaying “soft brown” hair rather than Imogen’s luxurious golden tresses, she is, as it were, Imogen’s sister: gracious, aristocratic, fine. Her languid beauty lures Piet as he watches her undress. But by the end of the novel, her diffident freshness, cool self-possession, and immaculate beauty will engulf him to the extreme that he feels trapped (4). Angela is Updike’s sexually experienced brunette who is never stained, who rises from the rumpled bed as if untouched. Sex with her is cramped. Like Wilson’s narrator, Piet breaks for freedom, finds it in tall, blonde Foxy, and accepts expulsion from Tarbox’s new Garden of Eden. Angela/serene angel and Foxy/predatory animal are refashioned from Imogen and Anna. Whereas Wilson’s

narrator ponders Marxist class concerns of the 1920s, and Piet suffers the religious uncertainties of the 1960s, the promise of uninhibited sex trumps all. Explicit and, in 1968, unexpected details of sex secure the point. Such earlier American masters as Cooper, Hawthorne, and James tiptoe past the shuttered bedroom door, but Updike and Wilson barge in without knocking.

A contractor, Piet loves “all houses, all things enclosed,” including the vagina (5). When he stares at Angela’s body, he “gloats” as if possession were the key to his masculinity. Updike immediately establishes the conflict in this opening scene with an explicitness he will enhance as the novel develops:

Angela had flinched and now froze, one arm protecting her breasts. A luminous pol-
lency pallor, the shadow of last summer’s bathing suit, set off her surprisingly luxuriant
pudenda. . . . Her throat, wrists, and triangular bush appeared the pivots for some
undeniable effort of flight, but like Eve on a portal she crouched in shame, stone. (9–10)

When Angela turns Piet down, puts on her nightie, and goes to bed, Updike nods to Joyce’s language (though the sexual candor in *Couples* is much more pervasive than that in *Ulysses*): “Sex part of nature before Christ. *Bully*. Bitch. Taking up three-quarters of the bed as if duty done. . . . Virgins pregnant through the ear. . . . He touched in preference again himself. Waxen. Wilted camellia petals. In his youth an ivory rod at will” (11). Piet will have a wandering eye and a willing “rod” for the rest of the novel, his escapades described with an unblinking specificity that primarily reflects the Wilson of the notebooks and novel. Both Piet and Wilson’s narrator are sex drenched, as if their personal odysseys take place not in foreign lands among strange creatures but in mundane bedrooms full of alluring lovers.

Introducing Foxy, Updike varies the American literary tradition of blonde/pure vs. brunette/erotic. Socially and culturally, Foxy is far from Anna’s depressed proletarian milieu, but Foxy becomes an exciting Anna with golden hair. She has no difficulty confidently rebuffing Piet’s gaze when he first sees her and looks up her skirt. Confidence and lack of inhibition are linked. When Foxy recalls her sexual initiation while an undergraduate at Radcliffe, the reader knows she will soon push Angela aside: “He [Foxy’s college lover] scorned any sign of fear from her. He taught her to blow. His prick enormous in her mouth, she felt her love for him as a billowing and gentle tearing of veils inside her” (40). Had *Couples* been published unexpurgated at the time of the *Memoirs of Hecate County* court case in 1947 or even at the time of the censored *Rabbit, Run* in 1960, Updike and Knopf would have ended up before a judge. *Couples* is full of accounts of sexual encounters that would have been labeled obscene before the 1960s, particularly in mainstream

novels (what Morris Ernst had described as “books of artistic integrity,” written by established authors and published by major firms). L. C. Page sensed the shifting legal winds in 1959 and took the chance of republishing *Hecate County*, but Knopf held back. Thus, one cannot miss the irony after Updike’s eminently respectable publisher declined to emulate Page when deciding how to publish the first “Rabbit” book. The irony is that, placed beside Wilson’s novel, *Rabbit, Run* is tame and unthreatening—a novel relying more on the reader’s imagination to “see” the escapades than on Wilson’s precise descriptions of positions, body parts, and sounds. Not so, however, in *Couples*. Updike waits only fifteen pages before the first account of an offer of oral sex. Note that Piet addresses Angela as Angel:

Angel, your nipples are hard.
So?
You’re excited and could have come too.
I don’t think so. It just means I’m chilly.
Let me make you come. With my mouth.
No. I’m all wet down there.
But it’s me, it’s my wetness.
I want to go to sleep. (15)

The scene foreshadows a later moment in the novel when Foxy, unlike Angela, eagerly engages in oral sex with Piet:

No. Don’t stop.
I’ll come.
Do. I can’t this time. Do, Piet.
Truly? You like it? She nodded, silent, her mouth full. Her tongue fluttered him into heat; her hand helped. *Oh. Sweet. Swallow me.* She swallowed him. (272)

The contrast with Angela is overt, but the more important issue is the italics that Updike uses to call attention to the scenes, to flaunt them, as it were, in the face of Mrs. Grundy, to announce a radical change from his earlier fiction and from American fiction in general.

Couples is long, leisurely, elegantly written, and full of closely observed scenes as in the following snapshot of Piet’s church: “The interior of the church was white. Alabaster effects had been skillfully mimicked in wood. Graceful round vaults culminated in a hung plaster ceiling. A balcony with Doric fluting vertically scoring the parapet jutted as if weightless along the sides of the sanctuary and from under the painted Victorian organ in the rear” (17–18). It’s as if Updike, like Wilson,

were describing a painting. Dozens of similar passages flesh out the natural and human worlds of Tarbox with its population of upper-middle-class couples casually changing partners while, unlike Piet, oblivious to such beauty, yet the details make *Couples* a mid-twentieth-century social comedy reminiscent of Victorian fiction minus the sex. Updike admitted as much when he spoke with Frank Gado and agreed that *Couples* was “an old-fashioned book—a big roomy book with a lot of little chambers and many characters—and in that respect it could be called Victorian.” But then, given the subject matter of the novel, he capped his remarks with humor: “But I don’t feel ‘Victorian’” (Gado 24).

His characters take full advantage of what Georgene, one of Piet’s several mistresses, jokingly calls “*the post-pill paradise*” (52). Yet while the preponderance of specifics—as in *Hecate County* carefully noticed and poetically expressed—aggravates some readers because the details make *Couples* read at the pace of a nineteenth-century triple-decker, the significance is that Updike’s accurate, Vermeer-like eye balances the grittiness of the sexual adventures. His goal is not to shock or to tilt the novel in favor of what censors shrink from as pornographic but to transfer descriptions of sex in a graphically frank novel into the pleasures of art in order to capture the particulars of the so-called swinging sixties in a suburban enclave, an ironic Eden. Mimicking Henry Miller is of no concern.

A churchgoer and, at the time of *Couples*, a traditional Christian believer, Updike refuses to separate body and soul. That is, he does not brand his sexually adventuresome wanderers with a stain as Hawthorne marks Miriam and Hester. Note how Piet exits the Sunday service: “They sang ‘Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates’ and sat for prayer. Prayer and masturbation had so long been mingled in Piet’s habits that in hearing the benediction he pictured his mistress naked, a reflected sun pooled between her breasts. . . . Erotic warmth infused Piet’s greetings as he edged down the aisle” (22). Sex and religion merge, as they do for the more skeptical, less believing Foxy. Most of the Tarbox women drive staid station wagons, but she has a sporty, black MG. The word “grace” resonates as she roars away from the church parking lot: “Thinking herself unseen, she entered her car with violent grace, hitching up her skirt” (23). The A marks Hester as both adulterer and angel, but for Foxy only the former applies. Angela remains the only angel in Tarbox, so pristine and lovely in her sexual allure that Piet leaves her for Foxy, and Freddy Thorne, the court jester of the community, is struck impotent when he sees her elegant, naked body in bed. Foxy observes the difference. Looking at the other couples at a dinner party, she knows that she could be the “princess” with the golden hair, an earthly “delicacy” to Angela’s heavenly glow (31). Georgene’s double

entendre hits the mark when she says of Angela, "I don't think she gives Piet very much" (35). When Updike pointedly lists the volumes in Georgene's bedroom as she and Piet undress for a few minutes of ecstasy, he distances himself from the kinds of books written primarily to stimulate: "Henry Miller in tattered Paris editions . . . *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* fresh from Grove Press . . . *Psychopathia Sexualis* in textbook format" (53). *Couples*, implies Updike, is not that kind of novel. Georgene entices because she has "no love of guilt" (52). The initial description of Piet and Georgene luxuriating in adultery outdoors establishes the tone for their explicit scenes of sexual abandon: "Between the frilled holes her underpants wore a tender honey stain. Between her breasts the sweat was scintillant and salt. He encircled her, fingered and licked her willing slipping tips, the pip within the slit, wisps. Sun and spittle set a cloudy froth on her pubic hair. . . . He parted her straight thighs and took her with the simplicity she allowed. . . . His widening entry slowly startled her eyes. . . . Touch Angela, she vanished. Touch Georgene, she was there" (54, 48).

Foxy's notion that all marriages "consist of an aristocrat and a peasant" is a variant on the theme that Wilson and Updike flesh out in *Hecate County* and *Couples* (60). Imogen/Angela and Anna/Foxy: a cynic might fall into cliché and dismiss the pairings as "victims of the male gaze," a stereotyped division of women into Virgin and Whore. To do so, however, is to ignore Wilson's sociopolitical concerns and Updike's religious/theological ruminations. While Imogen—the princess—lives in the garden of the estates of Hecate County (cut off from Anna's daily struggle in the city to find a job that pays enough for her to care for her daughter), and while Angela—the angel—thrives in a soiled suburb of bedroom adventures, life with its open celebration of complexity and flesh flourishes outside the conventions of Hecate and Tarbox. Wilson's narrator sides with the exploited workers when he chooses Anna, and Piet elects (a theologically charged word) to be expelled from the community when he chooses Foxy. For Wilson, not the soul but the body is all; for Updike, the union of body and soul is paramount. Updike is direct: "Description expresses love. . . . 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. . . . Such writing is in essence pure" (*Self-Consciousness* 231). To find life, whether a Marxist workers' paradise or a Christian heavenly paradise, is to embrace the flesh in all its messy glory. What better way to make the point in a serious novel than to revel in the particulars of copulation?

From Foxy's point of view, Updike describes the dismal existence within her social set where life depends on an endless series of games:

[T]his chronic sadness of late Sunday afternoon, when the couples had exhausted their game, basketball or beachgoing or tennis or touch football, and saw an evening weighing upon them, an evening without a game, an evening spent among flickering lamps and cranky children and leftover food and the nagging half-read newspaper with its weary portents and atrocities, an evening when marriages closed in upon themselves like flowers from which the sun is withdrawn. (73–74)

Sunday afternoon, but few go to church, and fewer pray. When religious pieties fail, sex becomes the new religion. Adultery in *Couples* can be either just another game, a momentary escape from marriages already closing down, or a rush toward life. Piet's acerbic comment to his wife lays bare his need: "But Angel, the rest of us think of you as never having left Heaven" (79). Even Angela's friend Janet calls her "a cockteaser" (125). Updike is direct when he has Piet confirm that "he had never known Angela as he had often known his lovely easy matter-of-fact morning lay" (92). The allusion to the biblical meaning of "know" is clear. The snake enters the garden.

Updike once remarked to me that he saw *Couples* as a domestic comedy, thus the rich details of the houses, the clothes, the backyard games, the children, and how the weather was. Creating a detailed microcosm of the post-pill revolution initiated by a restless suburban elite unsure of what the new freedom means to their marriages, families, and communities, he uses comedy—not smutty jokes—as a contemporary Shakespeare might: man/woman face obstacles; obstacles are surmounted; man/woman unite; all's well that ends well. Updike mentions Shakespeare several times in the novel to establish a context in the form of an ironic contrast: Piet/Foxy face obstacles, unite through adultery, and end well—but only after divorcing spouses and abandoning children. He reserves the jokes for allusions to novels that display more sex than art. When, for example, Georgene admits to having recently been to bed with her much-disliked husband, Piet sarcastically retorts, "You each had seven orgasms and read Henry Miller to each other between times." Her reply is equally barbed: "You see it very clearly" (189). Georgene and her spouse belong in *Tropic of Cancer*. Piet and Foxy belong in *Couples* or *Memoirs of Hecate County*. The indirect point in Updike's allusions to Shakespeare is that neither Piet/Foxy nor narrator/Anna belongs in Shakespeare's Forest of Arden.

Thus it is interesting that when discussing *Couples* soon after publication, Updike offered a weak, passive defense of Henry Miller while insisting on the

necessity of not innuendo but starkly realistic accounts of coitus in fiction: "About sex in general, by all means let's have it in fiction, as detailed as need be, but real, real in its social and psychological connections. Let's take coitus out of the closet and off the altar and put it on the continuum of human behavior. There are episodes in Henry Miller that have their resonance" (Plath 34). The implication is, of course, that Miller's erotic "episodes," unlike, say, Wilson's, are rarely integral to the "social and psychological" connections. They are episodes, as in the set pieces of eighteenth-century episodic novels, rather than "connections" to the fully developed psychological makeup of the primary characters. Despite the "resonance" he occasionally glimpses in Miller, Updike's dismissal is sharp: "The sex in Henry Miller, to me, is quite strident and very anti-female. He can't get over the notion that there is something monstrous in the female genitals, that as objects there is really an unspeakable quality about them. But then Miller is not a very good writer, for many reasons" (Gado 23). Wilson's narrator pursues the alluring golden-haired princess partly because she represents the social milieu that Wilson himself came from: upper-class suburban New York.¹⁰ Psychologically and socially, Imogen reflects a culture that the narrator knows. But when he chooses Anna, he does so not merely because her sexual eagerness is magnetic but also because she personifies the working poor neglected in the indulgent 1920s and thereby appeals to Wilson's commitment to Marxist principles during that unsettling decade. Wilson and the F. Scott Fitzgerald of "the Jazz Age" were close friends, but their political persuasions diverged.

Three years after the publication of *Couples*, Updike reiterated his position in "If at First You Do Succeed, Try, Try Again": "The bourgeois novel is inherently erotic, just as the basic unit of bourgeois order—the family unit based on the marriage contract—is erotic. Who loves whom? Once this question seems less than urgent, new kinds of novels must be written, or none at all. If domestic stability and personal salvation are at issue, acts of sexual conquest and surrender are important" (402). Piet's dilemma is not domestic stability *and* personal salvation but domestic stability *or* personal salvation. All but paralyzed by the conflicting demands of religious restraint and sexual desire, he defines salvation as Foxy's body, believes he can unify body and soul, and breaks for freedom. As Tony Tanner, no friend of *Couples*, writes in *Adultery in the Novel*, "The fact is that from the start, the novel had a conservative drive, serving to support what were felt to be the best morals and manners and values of the period. . . . But in addition to that conservative drive, the novel has also always contained potential feelings for that which breaks up the family—departure, disruption, and other various modes of

disintegration" (369). *Couples* and *Hecate County* are novels of disruption. The sex in *Couples* may be what Updike calls "real, real," but he insists that the novel is "not about sex: it's about sex as the emergent religion, as the only thing left"—which is why Piet's church is destroyed by fire at the end with only the symbolically potent weathercock surviving (Plath 52).

Depictions of sex, however, are often the foundation of laughter and satire. Updike does not shy away from smiling *at* his characters, the better to feature through contrast the more committed passion of Foxy and Piet. The gently satirical snapshot of Marcia and Harold daring to swim naked at night is a case in point: "So they would walk down in moonlight through poison ivy and cut-back sumac, treading warily . . . and on the splintery soft dock take off their clothes. . . . Sometimes, at high tide, like a laboring Cyclopean elephant a powerboat would come crowding up the channel with its searchlight and they would squat like aborigines under the dock in the root-riddled mud until the boat passed" (124). So much for the idealization of skinny-dipping. Or, when Harold drags Janet "into a heap of unwashed clothes," Janet strains to "uncouple" her bra, "so her blue-white breasts came tumbling of their own loose weight, too big to hold, tumbled like laundry from the uplifted basket of herself, nipples buttons" (134). Updike's pun of "uncoupled" accurately aims his satirical dart. The comedy of sex is not a feature in *Hecate County*, but both novels revel, as it were, in nakedness. Janet's "blue-white breasts . . . too big to hold" foreshadow the scene in which even Piet and pregnant Foxy feel the barb of Updike's humor. Walking into the bathroom while Foxy is on the toilet, Piet sucks her milk-filled breasts, hears Angela knock on the door, and jumps out the window, all the while dressed in a tuxedo. His fall from the upper story of the house parodies his Fall from grace as it was once religiously defined: "Button. Caught. Ah. There. He slid out on his chest and dangled his weight. . . . Loose nails, might catch on a nostril, tear his face like a fish being reamed. Air dangled under his shoes. Ten feet. Eleven, twelve. . . . Angela saying it was all right, she knew? Too late. Fall" (314). Joyce's prose style echoes, and Piet becomes the butt of the laughter, but he still gets to suck Foxy's engorged breasts in a parody of Virgin and child.¹¹ Fastidious concerns about declining public morality precipitated by the demise of censorship after 1960 falter when blatant accounts of sex, even if funny, become central to serious fiction. The comedy may make the sex more acceptable to some readers, but the laughter does not cover up the coupling. Yet Updike denies the satire: "Satire—this wonderful story. It's a loving portrait of life in America. It doesn't have a dirty sentence, not a dirty word in it" (Gado 21). He continues, "If you're going to have sex in a book, you really ought to have it.

You should go into it enough to try to show what happens, to make it a human transaction. The convention of closing the bedroom's doors that worked well for the Victorians doesn't seem honest applied to today's world" (Gado 21–22). Like pornography, comedy is in the eye of the beholder.

III

The outcry—pro and con—over *Couples* faded to a lower key long ago, but the reputation of the novel as “popular porn” continues. In 2012, *Time* published a commentary on E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey*, a blockbuster best seller about sexual initiation and bondage. As part of the article, Belinda Luscombe, the reporter, included a subsection titled “Sex Sells. Popular Erotica” with color photographs of the dust jackets of four so-called “naughty books”: *Story of O* (1954), *Peyton Place* (1956), *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), and *Couples*. Grouping *Couples* with the other three novels, books written to titillate, confirmed that Luscombe made no distinction between arousal and art. Updike would not have been pleased to know that *Time*, which featured a portrait of him on the cover of the 26 April 1968 issue and announced the publication of *Couples* with a banner proclaiming “The Adulterous Society,” identified his novel with the fiction of “popular erotica” in 2012. Further, in 2018 *Bookforum* reproduced the *Time* cover to illustrate a short essay by Christine Smallwood on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Couples*. Smallwood ignores Updike's affirmative critics, cites his detractors (Norman Podhoretz, John Aldridge, Elizabeth Hardwick—the usual suspects), dismisses the novel as “too smug, too pompous,” and declares that parts of *Couples* fill her “with rage” (Smallwood 23). Rage? To paraphrase Alfred Hitchcock's reply to an upset viewer (“It's *only* a movie.”), *Couples* is *only* a novel.

I know of no reader who argues that *Memoirs of Hecate County* is as “good” as *Couples*. Both were notorious when first published, and both were best sellers, but *Couples* is more comprehensive, more complex: a cultural history of the American 1960s from the points of view of well-off swinging suburbanites. Yet Updike's debt to Wilson is clear in the union of the characters with their social and psychological concerns, in the precise painterly details, in the blonde/brunette contrast between the two principal women, and primarily in the overt depiction of sex. He acknowledged the debt in the jacket blurb he contributed to the 2004 reprint of *Hecate County*:

There is a true whiff of hell in Hecate County—in the low ceilings and cheap underwear of the sex idyll, the clothes and neuroses of the copulators. . . . After 1946, Hecate Counties would spread and multiply and set the new cultural tone. The suburban home would

replace the city street as the theater of hopes; private fulfillment and not public justice would set the pace of the pursuit of happiness. Wilson foretold it, casting his fiction in the coming mold, of sexual candor, dark sardonic fantasy, and confessional fragment.

The overtness became an expected feature in Updike's later novels, but it is interesting that after 1968 he brought a similar explicitness to his poetry, for example, "Fellatio" (1969), "Cunts" (1973), and "Pussy" (1977) as the representative lines below confirm:

How beautiful to think
that each of these clean secretaries
at night, to please her lover, takes
a fountain into her mouth
and lets her insides, drenched in seed,
flower into landscapes. . . .
("Fellatio," *Collected Poems* 49–50)

but the beauties we must learn to worship now all
have spread legs, splayed in bedspread motel beds,
and the snowflakes that burst forth are no two alike. . . .
("Cunts," *Collected Poems* 117)

Your pussy, it is my pet, it is my altar, *totaliter*
aliter: unknowable, known, and wild, subdued.
("Pussy," *Tossing and Turning* 81)

The specifics could easily have been part of *Couples* but not of any Updike book before 1968. Like the novel, these poems convey the same force that Updike felt when he read *Memoirs of Hecate County* at age 14: allowing "eroticism its centrality in human doings." A key difference is that the emphasis on sex in the poems is proclaimed up front, in the titles, but now readily included in volumes published by Knopf. The point is that 1968 was a watershed for how explicitly Updike would present his material for the remainder of his long career. In a short prefatory note written for the 1959 reissue of *Hecate County*, Wilson declared it "my favorite among my books," despite his fame as a critic. Updike agreed. He included "Fellatio" and "Cunts," but not "Pussy," in *Collected Poems* (1993), a volume for which he had control of the contents.¹² He and Wilson made mainstream American literature safe for sex and thereby blocked the stare of Mrs. Grundy's unblinking and censorious eye.¹³

NOTES

1. Hecate: a Greek goddess, once assumed to have power over the heavens, the earth, and the Underworld, but today associated with witch, hag, and darkness.

2. Unlike in 1968, scholarly discussions of sex-gender-body-self are today matters of serious interest. See, for example, Lies Xhonneux, "Performing Butler? Rebecca Browne's Literary Supplements to Judith Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2013, pp. 292–307; and Sonia Villegas-Lopez, "Body Technologies: Posthuman Figurations in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* and Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2015, pp. 26–41.

3. The later corrected text of *Ulysses*, edited by Hans Walter Gabler and published by Random House in 1986, does not contain the Woolsey court decision or the Ernst letter. In 1968, thirty-five years after the Woolsey ruling, and the year in which *Couples* was published, the distinguished barrister John Mortimer defended Herbert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1964) in the English Court of Appeal. Selby's controversial novel had been judged obscene by a lower court despite the earlier legal cases freeing *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Ulysses* from the censor's chains. Mortimer successfully argued the Selby case, prompting the Court of Appeal to overturn the ban. Revisiting the experience in his memoir, *Clinging to the Wreckage*, Mortimer wittily summarized the fallacy of efforts to "protect" the public: "The administration of censorship laws entails dividing society into the sensible and the idiotic, the strong and the weaker brethren, and we all know, of course where *we* belong. . . . The attitude of censorship depends on the assumption that there is a superior type of person qualified to tell the rest of us what is good for us to read" (Mortimer 236, 237). Mortimer pointed out an obvious contradiction that exposed courts to public ridicule when a book is legally banned: murder is against the law, but to write novels featuring the specifics of murder is not a crime; sex is not against the law, but to write novels featuring the details of sex may be ruled a criminal offense. Once the defense of "literary merit" was introduced in the proceedings against *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (surely one of Lawrence's lesser efforts), the absurdity of censoring novels was underscored: a book may be found to be what Mortimer mocks as "depraving and corrupting," thus dragging the publisher into court, but the same book may be defended on the basis of artistic merit, thus ennobling the public after all (Mortimer 232).

4. John O'Hara faced a similar dilemma when *Ten North Frederick* was published in 1955. The novel was honored with the National Book Award in 1956, but the town of Port Huron, Michigan, prohibited sales of the book because of "objectionable material." Although the federal district court ruled against the Port Huron prosecutor's office, thereby lifting the ban on sales, the novel was censored again when, in 1957, Bantam Books published *Ten North Frederick* in an inexpensive paperback edition, thus making it readily available. Pointing to the low cost of the Bantam edition, authorities in Detroit and Cleveland banned the novel on the grounds that it was "unfit for minors." New York State then indicted O'Hara and Bantam for "conspiring to distribute obscene literature." Obscenity charges against O'Hara were not lifted until July 1958, after which the bans in other jurisdictions were dismissed. See *John O'Hara: Stories*. Edited by Charles McGrath, Library of America, 2016, p. 827.

5. Wilson's notebooks, deposited in the Beinecke Library at Yale, total a little more than 2000 pages. Updike's blurb celebrating the publication of Wilson's notebooks over a period of several decades was reproduced on the back jackets of the various volumes: "[The journals] contain much

beautiful writing and many telling vignettes that could have found their niche in print nowhere else. Their poignance, overall, stems from the transformation, by the mute years, of an immediate presentness for the writer to an irrevocable pastness for us, the readers." See the back jackets of Wilson's *The Forties* (1983), *The Fifties* (1986), and *The Sixties* (1993).

6. In *The Long Goodbye* (1953), Raymond Chandler famously satirized the American literary trope of the alluring blonde female when he described Philip Marlowe, his detective-knight of the mean streets, sardonically observe a woman at the next table: "Her hair was the pale gold of a fairy princess. . . . There are blondes and blondes and it is almost a joke word these days. All blondes have their points. . . . There is the small cute blonde who cheeps and twitters, and the big statuesque blonde who straight-arms you with an ice-blue glare. There is the blonde who gives you the up-from-under look and smells lovely and shimmers and hangs on your arm and is always very very tired when you take her home. . . . There is the soft and willing and alcoholic blonde who doesn't care what she wears as long as it is mink. . . . There is the small perky blonde who is a little pal and wants to pay her own way. . . . There is the pale, pale blonde with anemia of some non-fatal but incurable type. She is very languid and very shadowy and she speaks softly out of nowhere and you can't lay a finger on her because in the first place you don't want to and in the second place she is reading *The Waste Land*. . . . And lastly there is the gorgeous show piece who will outlast three kingpin racketeers and then marry a couple of millionaires at a million a head. . . . The dream across the way was none of these, not even of that kind of world. She was unclassifiable, as remote and clear as mountain water, as elusive as its color" (89–90).

7. A similar variation on the blonde/brunette female dichotomy occurred in many American movies in the mid-twentieth century. In his famous series of interviews with the renowned French film director Francois Truffaut, for example, Alfred Hitchcock summarized his rationale for featuring blonde women, particularly in the movies he directed from the 1940s through the mid-1960s: "Sex on the screen should be suspenseful, I feel. If the sex is too blatant or obvious, there's no suspense. You know why I favor sophisticated blondes in my films? We're after the drawing-room type, the real ladies, who become whores once they're in the bedroom. Poor Marilyn Monroe had sex written all over her face . . ." (Truffaut 224).

8. For an account of "Couples: A Short Story" and *Couples*, see Donald J. Greiner, "Story into Novel: The Genesis of Updike's *Couples*." *John Updike Review*, vol. 2, Fall 2012, pp. 1–10.

9. The limited edition of "Couples: A Short Story" was published by Halty Ferguson. Updike later collected the foreword in *Hugging the Shore: Essays and Criticism*, 853–56, but he never republished the story.

10. For an incisive, revealing account of Wilson's privileged but fraught upbringing, see his *Upstate: Records and Recollections of Northern New York*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971.

11. John Ditsky dismissed this scene: "One cannot separate the intentionally ludicrous from the clumsily awful in this novel. . . ." (113).

12. He omitted "Pussy" because he considered it inferior to "Cunts." The three poems are not included in *Selected Poems* (2015), a volume for which Updike did not specify the contents.

13. Austin Briggs, Updike's Harvard classmate, recalls a postscript his wife Margaret added to a letter he sent to Updike in which she tells Updike of an exchange she had with Edmund Wilson. She had mentioned to Wilson "John's essay about recalling reading *Memoirs of Hecate County* at age

fourteen. When she asked Wilson what he thought of *Couples*, . . . the answer was on the order of, 'Oh, my dear, I can't read that. I can't make love now.' Margaret added that she wondered whether Wilson 'would have recognized himself as one of the parents of *Couples*?' (De Bellis 199).

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Apologies to His Father (and Others)

ROBERT MILDER

It is easy to love people in memory; the hard thing is to love them when they are there in front of you.

—John Updike, “My Father’s Tears”

“You’re not the man your father was,” he told Ferguson.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

—John Updike, “The Egg Race”

I

I would like to deal with two later Updike stories, “My Father’s Tears” (2005) and, subordinately, “My Father on the Verge of Disgrace” (1997), as they represent acts of apology, making amends, bringing unfinished filial business to an imagined close, and, by extension, reflecting on the differences between one generation and another and, within what Updike liked to think of as his “continental *magnum opus*” (*Self-Consciousness* 103), on the mores of a segment of twentieth-century American culture.¹

The surprising thing about “My Father’s Tears” is how much of it is given to subjects other than its titled one. Rich with familiar figures and oft-used personal details, the story is a compendium of Updike’s life and work with echoes of *The Centaur* (1963) and several Berks County stories. Memories of broken-down cars; the mother’s “bursts of anger” and chronic “psychological heat” (*Later Stories* 848); the father’s liability to embarrassments and minor catastrophes; hints of the parents’ marriage and of the narrator’s own; the figure of the wife, Deb, here a St.

Louisan but essentially another fictionalization of Mary Pennington; the trip to Italy that did not succeed in saving the marriage; the guilt and evasiveness about the divorce; the sad decline of Alton (Reading); the attendance at high school reunions, most recently a geriatric fifty-fifth with many missing; the death of the father in 1972 and of the mother seventeen years later—all these things, drawn closely from Updike's life, make their way into a story of no considerable length.

Updike wrote compound stories early in his career but gave them compound titles.² “My Father's Tears” is distinctive for *not* having an inclusive title while incorporating seemingly peripheral materials within its frame of separation and death. What is “My Father's Tears” about? *Who* is it about? As is often the case with Updike's semiautobiographical fiction, it's difficult to know just how to think about its protagonist, who confounds Wayne Booth's helpful discrimination between “the ‘I’ who purportedly narrates much fiction,” the “*implied author*” responsible for the narrator and everything else in the story, the “*career-author*” manifested by “a *sequence* of implied authors” (what we generally mean by “Austen” or “Hawthorne” or “James”), and the “*postulated writer*” known through extraliterary materials and with the help of biographers (269, 270, 268). The Olinger father in an Updike story or novel may teach chemistry, social science, or math and have a wife of one name or another, but in substance he is a version of Wesley Updike refracted through the circumstances and fictive intent of the work at hand yet inescapably calling to mind other versions of the character and inviting comparison to them. Who can read “My Father's Tears” or “My Father on the Verge of Disgrace” without thinking of the father in *The Centaur* or “A Soft Spring Night in Shillington” (1984; 1989) and without reaching beyond the published writing to what is known or may be conjectured about Updike's life?

In her Foreword to *The View from Castle Rock*, Alice Munro distinguishes between first-person stories in which she drew “on personal material, but . . . then did anything I wanted to” with it and another kind of story, closer to memoir, in which she explored her “own life, . . . not in an austere or rigorously factual way,” but “as searchingly as I could” with a fidelity to inner truth and a freedom of invention with surrounding figures (n.p.). Beginning with “A Sandstone Farmhouse,” Updike's later Pennsylvania stories occupy various points along the continuum between these two types of stories, with some like “The Walk with Elizanne” (2001) and “The Road Home” (2004) inclining strongly toward fiction and others like “My Father on the Verge of Disgrace” and “My Father's Tears” toward displaced memoir with altered or invented details. Biographer Adam Begley includes the latter in his opening chapter on Updike and Berks Country and, in lieu of other

materials, uses it to fill an evidentiary gap (51). Munro's words about the status of memoir-stories are a useful caveat: "You could say that such stories pay more attention to the truth of a life than fiction usually does. But not enough to swear on" (n.p.). The author I will be considering here is one that Booth omits but that I take to be the focus of authorial criticism with any writer as it addresses portions of a career: the succession of implied authors set within the extratextual life—for purposes of this essay, Updike's representations of his father chiefly as they are shaped by and testify to present concerns rather than as indulgences in nostalgia or belated efforts to get his portrait "right."³

II

Updike wrote extensively about his mother, a highly cathected, ambivalent portrait that deepened and shifted in emphasis as she and he aged but that in essentials did not substantially change from "Flight" (1959) and "Museums and Women" (1962) to *Of the Farm* (1965) to "A Sandstone Farmhouse" (1990), "His Mother Inside Him" (1992), and "The Cats" (1996). Wesley Updike, for his son the junior partner in a marriage of unequals, is George Caldwell of *The Centaur*, a book Updike later described as "a good story because it has a good man in it" (*Hugging the Shore* 852). In fact, the story is patchy despite (or partly because of) its overlay of myth and the man too obsessed with his anxieties, physical infirmities, and daily humiliations to allow his son to appreciate much of his goodness at the time. Making fiction from life is "a dirty business," Updike remarked in *Self-Consciousness* (1989): "Parents, wives, children—the nearer and dearer they are, the more mercilessly they are served up" (231). In *Of the Farm* Updike prematurely widowed and served up his mercurial mother; in *The Centaur*, despite what some see as an affectionate portrait, he was equally unsparing about the comic-pathetic ineptitude of his father. He returned to both parents after his mother's death in 1989 (his father had died in 1972). In "The Cats" his alter ego David Kern is still quarreling with his mother (recently deceased), now for the disorder she left behind; in "My Father on the Verge of Disgrace," republished and placed just before "The Cats" in *Licks of Love* (2000), the tone is gentler, more affectionate, and more forgiving of the parent's faults. Here and in "My Father's Tears," a more subtle, complexly layered story, Updike seems to be saying "I'm sorry," privately in apology for his treatment of his father in life and fiction, more broadly in recognition of the difficulties of being (as he felt his father was) "a good man."

Updike thought enough of "My Father's Tears" to make it the title story of his final and, it turned out, posthumous 2009 collection. "The Dogwood Tree: A

Boyhood" (1965) had ended with the family's removal to the farm in Plowville in 1945 and the thirteen-year-old Updike looking back through the car window as his paradise recedes from sight. "My Father's Tears" begins with another departure, the character-narrator James Werley returning to college after spring break and his parents looking "smaller, foreshortened," as the train moves forward (*LS* 839). The student himself is moving forward, to his life in prospect, and the poem he reads as he fills time before returning to the place that is now home and the girl who is now the female center of his life is Milton's *Paradise Regained*. For the father, the scene amounts to *Paradise Lost*. "I was going somewhere, and he was seeing me go," the son says: "I was growing in my own sense of myself, and to him I was getting smaller" (838). The father's tears are for the loss of his son—"the boy I had been was dying if not already dead, and we would have less and less to do with each other" (839)—but they are also for himself and for human beings generally. The lesson the son reads in his father's eyes is that "time consumes us," a thought probably as old as cognizant humanity but one that each generation discovers for itself at a pivotal moment when the life-ahead-to-be-lived turns into the life-behind-that-has-been-lived. The son feels treacherous, almost patricidal: "My life had come out of his, and now I was stealing away with it"; at the same time, he can't get away quickly enough, home and parents having already "become somewhat unreal to me" (839, 838).

Written when Updike was much older than the father in the story, older than his own father had been when he died, the story's consciousness of annihilating time (a motif even in his early work) must have been his own. The son intuits his father's unspoken meaning but not as it applies to himself, thinking only of his life ahead at college "with its courses and the hopes for the future they inspired and the girlfriend" who "had become more real every semester" (*LS* 838). The older narrator knows better. He interrupts the flow of the story to look ahead and tell us that the Alton railroad station in which they are standing will lose its traffic within a decade and "be padlocked and boarded up," with "[a]ll the life it had once contained . . . sealed into silence," the monumental granite building itself eventually "to be razed" (839). In the "we" of "[w]e did not foresee," the narrator joins his father, in effect *becomes* his father, in a common awareness of the impermanence of all things, themselves included. A communion has been established, not between son and father within the story's narrated past (age and distance will separate them further) but between the older son and the long-deceased father. *Now* I understand, the narrator seems to say; we may as well all cry.

As the train pulls out, parents and child "waved sheepishly" to each other

(LS 840). That's the best they can do. "He had loved me, it came to me as never before," the son had felt at the station: "It was something that had not needed to be said before, and now his tears were saying it" (838). In fact, as the relationship had been portrayed in *The Centaur*, it *had* needed to be said—said by the father to the son within the book and by the son-as-writer to the still living father *through* the book. To the novel's George Caldwell, his son Peter is "the kid," a sidekick in misadventures, bragged about to others but rarely complimented himself or shown physical or emotional affection. The latter Peter sees bestowed on the loutish swimmer Deifendorf (the father nominally coaches the swimming team), who "loved my father" and received from him "an actual affection" (*Centaur* 102). "I resented how lavishly my father outpoured himself before the boy," Peter says, a feeling that years later still "pains [him] to admit." On his side, the fifteen-year-old Peter is impatient with his father, embarrassed by his antics and blundering, aggressive-defensive in the "accusing" tone he "almost always" takes toward him (*Centaur* 76), and filled with a love he can seldom express or find recognized when he tries to.

In a moving but typically muted incident, as father and son drive to school on a frigid January morning, Peter notices his father is not wearing the gloves he had bought him for Christmas at great expense, partly as a gesture of love, partly from social shame: "I so wanted my father to care about his clothes and his comfort, like the fathers of my friends" (*Centaur* 76). His father wore the gloves once, then "tossed them into the back seat" where they "lay curled palms up between a rumpled road map and a snarl of baling rope" (76, 75). "Why don't you ever wear them?" Peter asks; "They're too good," his father says, by which he means too good for *him*, raised in deprivation with a meager sense of his entitlements and self-worth. Peter grasps his father's meaning and is physically pained by it, sensing "something *in*" him at the root of his chronic self-deprecation that is impossible for Peter to "purge or change completely" or even fully to comprehend (76), and that gives his father a perverse egotism, a narcissism of the defeated, that impairs his ability to give or receive love. The gloves are stolen that January morning by a sleazy hitchhiker the father picks up and drives miles out of his way to take to his destination. "Well," his father says, "he needs 'em more than I did"—a characteristic farewell to Peter's "expensive and painstakingly deliberated gift" (92).

The true poignancy of *The Centaur* is not in George Caldwell's indignities and plodding sufferings or Updike's supposed celebration of him but in the failure of intimacy between father and son. Even as he wrote the book, Updike's prime allegiance, as he says of Peter, was to that "little intricate world" he had made with his mother "where my father was a fond strange joke" (*Centaur* 289). The theme

runs throughout Updike's treatment of the family. As late as "The Laughter of the Gods" (2002), he can be horribly cruel toward a father resembling his own. Benjamin Foster grew up "with the impression that his parents' marriage had been a mistake, partially redeemed by his birth" (*LS* 749); he "never doubted that his mother loved him better than she loved her husband," whom he regarded with "the tolerant good humor with which one treats a defeated rival" (744).⁴ Benjamin's feelings may say more about himself than his father, but Updike gives the story a lurid edge by taking a remark of Wesley Updike's that he had used in "Pigeon Feathers" (1960), *The Centaur*, and "A Sandstone Farmhouse"—in this story, "Your mother should have gone onto the burleycue stage . . . instead of marrying me. She had the figure for it, but not the temperament" (744)—and placing it in an overtly sexual context of "creaking bedsprings" and an overheard "Ooo-oooh" from his father, his mother's insinuation of perverse sexual demands, and an account of Benjamin's first experiments with masturbation in the paragraph immediately following the bedroom one. Updike has taken what had seemed an innocent joke (the burlesque stage) and retroactively cast a sexual light upon it. The story ends with the thought, more in keeping with other portraits of husband and wife but scarcely flattering, that in marriage to Benjamin's mother, as in college football, his father had been "overmatched" and "had given his mother his all" (752).

Elsewhere in fiction and memoir Updike could treat his father more kindly as a sort of déclassé Don Quixote but nearly always with a condescension signaling that, unlike his mother, he is not someone to be reckoned with or treated seriously in fiction. There was much to apologize for, even in the later writing. Through James's moment in the train station, ("He had loved me, it came to me as never before" [*LS* 838]), the son receives love and is emotionally softened by it in a way that Updike could neither dramatize in *The Centaur* nor sustain, then or later, in a respectful portrait of his father. Back in Boston, the week at home is "already faded in memory" and the reunion with the girl, who tells James of her own tears as an exploited waitress over the break, seems prosaic; what remains for James, "like a glittering splinter," is the image of his father's tears "lodged" in his mind as something deeply moving and momentous, if not fully understood (*LS* 840). *That* he will need to grow into and thereby, long after his father's death, be united with him in an awareness of all that the tears had been for.

III

Though a scant three pages in the Library of America edition, the opening episode of "My Father's Tears" has the symmetry and pathos of an Aristotelian tragedy. It

is “serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude”; it deals with a good but limited man (or men); and with its theme of time, change, and mortality it resonates beyond its dramatic situation to evoke pity and fear in its audience (Butcher 61). As an apology specifically to his father, this is where the story might end. Updike has rehabilitated a man he had treated in life and fiction as a living caricature and by rendering homage to him has rehabilitated himself as his memorialist. The incident, however, is followed by sections spaced off from it and narratively independent. In the first, James recalls the idyll of a summer with his young wife in a Vermont farmhouse, then recounts his rude, condescending attitude toward her father, a minister whose “untroubled Unitarianism,” “so milky, so smugly vague and evasive” (LS 843), grated against his own boyhood Lutheranism and latter-day religious anxieties. The segment is based on Updike’s relationship with his own father-in-law, minister Leslie Pennington. “They were quite quarrelsome and I was shocked,” Updike’s wife Mary recalled: “He was insulting my father, who took it pretty calmly” (Begley 107). James compounds the injury even now by telling how, as if in retribution for the sins of religious liberalism and paternalistic gentility, the minister was “brought low, all dignity shed, before he died,” by Alzheimer’s (LS 844). Scathing to the point of caricature, the portrait of the father-in-law reflects poorly on the young husband and on the older James himself, who, as if catching sight of himself in a moral mirror, proceeds to make what verbal reparation he can. He describes the minister as someone “as innocent of harm as my own father” and far less demanding, and realizes that even in earlier years he had “loved him, in fact.” The “theology, or lack of it,” that had offended him at a time when theology was his own needed support “now seems one of those spacious views I enjoyed thanks to him.” In this mood he can appreciatively recall the minister’s “old-fashioned transcendentalist sermons . . . delivered in a mellow, musing voice” (844–45). “He was a transparently good man who took himself with a little Maine salt” (845), James adds in summation. Justice to the minister has been done. “It is easy to love people in memory; the hard thing is to love them when they are there in front of you,” James concludes in a tone at once rueful, ironic, self-critical, and self-justifying. Modern goodness, even in apology, is seldom innocently transparent.

“If only one knew what to remember or pretend to remember,” Elizabeth Hardwick begins her memoir-novel *Sleepless Nights*: “Make a decision and what you want from the lost things will present itself” (3). What Updike seems to want from the things culled from memory in “My Father’s Tears” is an airing of guilt and a degree of self-absolution. His decision to write a fictionalized apology about and to his dead father connects itself to feelings about his former second father—

“former” in the double sense of “deceased” and “previous,” the narrator having divorced Deb some years before. This in turn calls up the subject of Updike’s own divorce of 1976, after nearly thirty years still a source of discomfort.⁵ Among the aphorisms James happens upon in a volume of Emerson he opens in the Vermont farmhouse is “Everything is made of one hidden stuff” (*LS* 841). The “hidden stuff” in “My Father’s Tears,” and perhaps its true center, is the feelings hinted at but left unstated concerning the divorce. Describing Deb’s first visit to Pennsylvania, soured by the sulks and fits of temper of James’s mother and tensions between mother and wife that recall *Of the Farm*, he has the father appeal to the standby Updike-father explanation: “It’s her femininity acting up” (*LS* 846). The sexism embarrasses James (somewhat anachronistically; this is the early 1950s), but the notion of “femininity” recurs in the story when, after James’s divorce, his now-widowed mother tells him of his father’s reservations about Deb: “He didn’t think she was feminine enough for you” (848). Was this truly the father’s feeling? Is it the mother’s rivalrous feeling ascribed to him, as James half suspects? Or is it a projection of Updike’s own feeling about his first wife visible in characters of the 1960s based upon her—the unnamed wife-to-be in “Museums and Women” (1962), Ruth Conant in *Marry Me* (completed in 1964 but unpublished for twelve years), the ex-wife Joan in *Of the Farm*, and Angela Hanema in *Couples* (1968).

The failings of the seemingly admirable Mary Updike figure are among the more puzzling obscurities in Updike’s work. “She had what they used to call poise,” Joey Robinson’s mother half-grudgingly says of Joan in *Of The Farm* (139); Foxy Whitman in *Couples* feels this of Angela, whom she will displace as Piet’s wife. In “First Wives and Trolley Cars” (1982), William Farnham likens first wives to women in one of Updike’s favorite painters: “Tall and silent, they turn at the head of the stairs, carrying a basket of first family laundry, and their face is that of Vermeer’s girl with the pearl earring” (*LS* 167). Save in the matter of social class, the analogy is an entry point for thinking about the Mary-figure in Updike’s writing. Like Vermeer’s women, she is serene, restrained, abstracted as if communing with some thought or feeling, pure but with an air of latent sensuality, and impenetrable.⁶ An “innocent sad blankness” he feels he can “stamp [his] name” upon draws William Young to the girl he sees on the steps of the Fogg Museum at Harvard in “Museums and Women,” but the “something mute and remote” he senses in her, the self-withholding that will show itself even during their lovemaking (*ES* 437, 438), proves too great or deep or forbidding a vacancy for an Updike husband to fill. Little of this is said explicitly in “My Father’s Tears.” “Why” the divorce, James asks. “It’s hard to say,” he shrugs, then closes the matter with an offhand allusion:

“We boil at different degrees,’ Emerson had said, and a woman came along who had my same boiling point” (*LS* 848). As elsewhere in Updike’s fiction, we’re told that the divorce took place after the father’s death, the father representing a standard of dutifulness both moral—“My conscience and my father were rarely on opposite sides,” Peter Caldwell says as if for all Updike-based sons (*Centaur* 116)—and cultural insofar as earlier generations felt bound to live with marital disappointment as best they could.

The apology “My Father’s Tears” extends to Deb turns out to be James’s self-apology. “My reflex is always to come to Deb’s defense, even though it was I who wanted the divorce” (*LS* 848), James says apropos of his mother’s femininity remark. Yet no sooner does he claim to have supported Deb than he points to her shortcomings by noting “how much” his high school classmates at reunions prefer his outgoing second wife to his first; “it is true,” he says, “Sylvia really mixes it up with them, in a way that shy Deb didn’t.” “See? I was right,” James all but proclaims even as he professes to be shocked by his classmates’ words. With this, the question of Deb and the divorce is shunted to the margins and the story passes to the safer ground of reunions, a congenial subject for Updike even as age and mortality took their toll.

James’s disingenuousness about Deb raises again questions of Updike’s relationship to his character-narrator and the generic status of “My Father’s Tears” as something intermediate between fiction and displaced memoir. Here, as elsewhere, Updike’s special gift in writing on adultery and divorce is his ability to identify with the transgressor and at the same time look askance at the transgression. “Maybe our trouble,” he has Jerry Conant say of his contemporaries in *Marry Me*, “is that we live in the twilight of the old morality,” the world of the father with its sentiments, obligations, and capacity for tears, “and there’s just enough to torment us, and not enough to hold us in” (53). In the memoir “Getting the Words Out,” Updike depicts this cultural moment as he describes his sensation of domestic suffocation in early 1960s Ipswich. Married to the wife he had wanted (“attractive, and motherly, and artistic, and quiet”), blessed with the children he sought (“healthy and lovable”), he nonetheless feels that “now, through no fault of their own, they composed a household whose walls seemed to be shrinking around me, squeezing my chest” (*Self-Consciousness* 99). He cites his asthmatic allergy to the family cats, which, like the allusion to Emerson in “My Father Tears,” enables him to talk around the circumstances involved in the separation. “As I contemplated the problem, it seemed easier to get rid of me,” so “rather than discomfit the cats, I discomfited the human beings of my family and moved to Boston” (*Self-Consciousness* 101). In

the war between desire and conscience, desire has its way, conscience feels shame and guilt, and art negotiates the conflict, first evasively through the cats, then (as if baring the scarlet “A” on his chest) with an incident imported from the sketch “Guilt Gems” (1977)—one of his sons “angrily throwing” a cat “down the cellar stairs” in an effort to keep the family intact (*Self-Consciousness* 101; “Guilt Gems,” *LS* 60). A similar division between character and author governs “My Father’s Tears,” with Updike associating himself situationally *with* James and as architect of the story distancing himself *from* him in a way that even as retrospective narrator James himself cannot. Updike is at once the fictionalized offender, the self-accuser, and the Olympian observer of this small domestic *comédie humaine*.

IV

At the reunion a classmate asks James about his father and mother (both long deceased), which allows Updike a smooth transition back to the time of his father’s death years earlier. Still married to Deb and vacationing with her in Italy, James receives a call from his mother and hurries home, too late; his father has died. Deb consoles him and urges him to “cry”; he sees “the opportunity” and feels “the rightness of seizing it” (an oddly dissociated response), but he doesn’t “believe” he did: “My father’s tears had used up mine” (another odd phrasing) (*LS* 851). Instead of telling his story chronologically, Updike organizes his materials as a triptych in which the father’s tears in the presence of loss and the son’s lack of them form end panels enclosing other recollections of insensitivity, indifference, betrayal, and guilt.

How we read “My Father’s Tears” depends finally on the meaning we attach to James’s tearlessness, to which I will return. “My Father on the Verge of Disgrace,” written several years earlier, takes a thoroughly different stance toward father and son, the two appearing as “partners in peril, fellow-sufferers on the edge of disaster” (*LS* 655). Opening somberly, or mock somberly—“It filtered even into my childhood dreams, the fear. The fear that my father would somehow fall from his precarious ledge of respectability, a ledge where we all stood with him”—the story quickly becomes a picaresque *mélange* in which experiences distressing at the time become remembrances jaunty in the telling (645).⁷ Scenes from *The Centaur* are now alluded to with bittersweet nostalgia: “flat tires, broken axles, fearful struggles to put on tire chains at the base of a hill in the midst of a snowstorm, nights stranded in “fleabag’ hotels,” humiliations in the classroom, tensions with the high school principal, marital difficulties, crises over money. It may have been “dreadful . . . to be stuck in a stalled car with only four dollars between us,” but it

was also “authentic,” and over time the dreadfulness of such moments dims and their authenticity remains as part of a rich and fictively usable stock of memories (655). One passage, striking a more intimate tone, is noteworthy for its expression of feelings Updike could only cumulatively suggest in *The Centaur*, whose power lies, paradoxically, in the myopic immediacy and sullenness, the pained *inarticulateness*, of young Peter’s narration:

I stood in sardonic, exasperated silence during his conversations with hotel clerks, garage mechanics, diner waitresses, strangers on the street, none of whom were accustomed to encountering such a high level of trust. . . . His suppliant air humiliated me, but I was fourteen, fifteen; I was at his mercy, and he was at the mercy of the world. I saw him rebuffed and misunderstood. Flecks of foam would appear at the corners of his mouth as he strove to communicate; in my helpless witnessing I was half blinded by impatience and what now seems a fog of love, a pity bulging toward him like some embarrassing warpage of my own face. (655–56)

The “fog of love,” which the retrospective narrator can now recognize as such, is just what Updike had found difficult to communicate in *The Centaur*, but in “My Father on the Verge of Disgrace,” where distance from events might have allowed for additional moments of this kind, the passage is an outlier. The aim in the story is not pathos or self-reflection but high-spirited camaraderie, even at the cost of tonal consonance with Updike’s previous treatments of this material. The story is filled with claims that brighten the past. The move from Shillington to the farm, lamented in other writings by father and son alike, is portrayed as having “liberated us both” from town small-mindedness (*LS* 657), always the mother’s view but never before the father’s or the son’s. So, too, the ordeal of commuting from the farm to school—the hurried, anxious morning drive detailed in *The Centaur*: Will the car start? Will it get past the dirt road onto the highway? Do father and son truly have anything to say to one another?—is recast as a ritual of bonding. Most of all, the fecklessness of the father is turned on its head and presented as not only endearing but also quintessentially human, since “part of being human is being on the verge of disgrace.”

So far as Updike takes these words seriously, it’s in the context of the caution with which he feels he’s lived his own life and failed to provide his children with what his father gave him.⁸ “There was that about being his father’s son,” middle-aged Ben, father of a rebellious teenager, muses in “The Gun Shop” (1972), published the year of Updike’s father’s death: “one had adventures, one blundered into places, one *went* places, met strangers, suffered rebuffs, experienced breakdowns,

exposed oneself in a way that Ben, as soon as he was able, foreclosed, hedging his life with such order and propriety that no misstep could occur. . . . Ben realized that he had been much less a father than his own had been, a father's duty being to impart the taste of the world" (*ES* 759; see also "The Egg Race," *LS* 37). In these terms, Wesley Updike's life of near disasters and humiliating defeats had been a ringing success. Even so, the note of celebration in "My Father on the Verge of Disgrace" seems forced, as does its closing eulogy: "Living his life beside him for five years, I had seen that his flirtation with disgrace was only that, not a ruinous infatuation. Nothing but death could topple him, and even that not very far, not in my mind" (*LS* 657). Signaled by its hyperbolic title, the story is a nostalgic literary performance about which even its author was unsure "what in the story is made up or not." "Life, you could say, is a tall order," he observed, or perhaps in this case a tall tale (*More Matter* 776, 777).

v

What matters most is not the literal truth of Updike's relationship to his father as inferable from any particular work or group of works—the relationship is too situational, complex, ambivalent, and inexpressible, and too entwined with Updike's relationship to his mother, to be summarized—but why Updike at particular points in his life should present his father as he does. Why the difference in gravity and spirit between "My Father on the Verge of Disgrace" and "My Father's Tears"? *Licks of Love*, in which the earlier story was republished, is largely a genial collection—"the work of an elderly man" who "cannot help revisiting Paradise" through a "magic carpet woven of words," as Updike told an interviewer apropos of the book's nostalgia (*Higher Gossip* 469). *My Father's Tears* (2009), though mixed in tone, is on balance more sober. "The Guardians" (2001) and "The Accelerating Expansion of the Universe" (2004) both take up the atheistic horror of vast, near-empty cosmic space, "cold and dark forever and ever" (*LS* 727), and leaving "the old hypothetical structures" of religion—"God, Paradise, the moral law"—with "utterly no base to stand on" (*LS* 795–96). The thought of spatial infinity and temporal eternity appalled Updike throughout his career. In one of his earliest stories, "Dentistry and Doubt" (1955), a young theological student waiting for the Novocain to numb him ponders those things his faith cannot explain "such as God's aeons-long wait as life struggled up from the atom and the algae" and "the comedy of waste spaces" suggested by the far-off stars (*ES* 40). The "wait" and "waste" may indeed be a "comedy," from God's point of view; for temporal human beings they may only prove a waiting in the waste for Godot. Fairchild's doubts in

“The Accelerating Expansion of the Universe” are prompted by the discoveries of the Hubble Telescope in the 1990s and later—“Astronomy is what we now have instead of theology,” Updike commented on the story as republished in *Physics Today* (April 2005): “The terrors are less, but the comforts are nil” (*Higher Gossip* 475)—yet they also arise from Fairchild’s “own aging” and feelings of mortality (LS 796). The guardians in “The Guardians” are parents and grandparents who had once provided a “shelter” (a favorite Updike metaphor) for the child; now they are gone and offer shelter only as the adult clings to them in memory and assures himself that “they would not steer him wrong; his death would come tactfully, and was nowhere near close” (LS 725, 727).

Time and place—the former as it devours us, the latter as associated with what Fairchild thinks of as “his inmost self felt essentially exempt from ruin” (LS 796)—were both much on Updike’s mind in his last years. In his penultimate chapter, “The Lonely Fort,” Begley notes that Updike’s “compulsion to circle back to any place where he felt some essence of his being was stored grew stronger as he grew older”; Begley also remarks on “Updike’s anxiety about his own fame, present and posthumous” (469, 462). In the novella “Rabbit Remembered” from *Licks of Love*, Rabbit is remembered by characters and author alike, which gives him an afterlife of sorts. In the years following *Licks*, due partly to changing literary fashions, harsh reviews of *Toward the End of Time* (1997), and the uncertain future of books themselves in a digital age (Begley 458–61, 471–74), Updike came to wonder about his own literary remembrance. While “art hopes to sidestep mortality with feats of attention, of harmony, of illuminating connection,” he wrote in a foreword to *The Early Stories* (2003), it only provides “at best a slower kind of mortality: paper yellows, language becomes old-fashioned, revelatory human news passes into general social wisdom” (*Higher Gossip* 466).

Ensnared with second wife Martha on his Beverly Farms estate, aptly named Haven Hill, Updike also wondered about who he had been and essentially was. Two stories from *My Father’s Tears*, “The Walk with Elizanne” (2001) and “The Road Home” (2004), deal with characters’ attempts to go back in time and space and recover their “true, fumbling, vanished selves” (LS 734). “You were so . . . dewy,” David tells his former classmate Elizanne at a high school reunion; she is now an “experienced, sardonic woman” who has “gone places” geographically, economically, and sexually, as David himself has (LS 735, 733). Their attempt to penetrate each other’s polished surface and in doing so reach back to what they themselves were comes to nothing. “[W]hat does it mean, this enormity of our having been children and now being old, living next door to death?” (738), David wants

to ask Elizanne, the reunion and the memory of the walk having been prefaced by a visit to a local hospital in which another former classmate lies dying of bone cancer. The notion that “time consumes us,” which college-age James in “My Father’s Tears” could not have appreciated, permeates “The Walk with Elizanne” from the opening scene in the hospital to David’s closing words to Elizanne during the recreated walk itself, “We have t-tons of time” (740). Near the beginning of a life, time seems to stretch out infinitely; toward the end, as for sixty-eight-year-old David, it fearfully closes in. Updike spoke of the story as a “religious” one in its effort “to evoke that ineluctable strangeness of human existence in which religion takes root” (*Due Considerations* 646). “*Enormity*” suggests something more than “strangeness”; it recalls the “horror” at death and extinction David felt years ago in “Pigeon Feathers” (*ES* 278).

... “I’m not afraid of death,” [the dying classmate tells David] ... “It’s locked into my heart that—that—”

Yes, *what?* David thought, anxious to hear, though aware of time ticking away.
(*LS* 729)

Once influenced by Barth, Updike’s religion now seems closer to that of Barth’s archrival Tillich, who, “unable to exclude anxiety and doubt, brought them into the sanctum, and called them holy emotions” (*Hugging the Shore* 836). “*Yes, what?*” may be all that’s left of belief.

These are among the contexts for the ending of “My Father’s Tears.” James has not only “gone places” in worldly ways like David and Elizanne, but, like Ferguson in “The Egg Race,” he has also left home morally and “traveled in the land of guilt” (*LS* 42). From the time of departing for college, and departing once more as the story begins, James has lived as he has wanted to in his relations to parents, father-in-law, and first wife—that is, he has lived chiefly for himself—and he is mildly put off by his mother’s suggestion that he should fly home to his father in the hospital; he has reservations for the Uffizi the next day and knows (rightly) that his father “wouldn’t want me inconvenienced” (*LS* 851). This, for Updike, is the difference between the two generations. The older, at its best, thinks of the convenience of others; the younger, self-centered without being inordinately *selfish*, thinks primarily of its own convenience though not without a residual sense of duty and susceptibility to guilt: James does hurry home. Dry-eyed at his father’s death and attended by a sympathetic woman whom we know he will soon divorce, James is in something of the position of John Marcher in Henry James’s “The Beast in the Jungle,” whose lifelong self-absorption has left him unable to cry at an intimate’s

death, though he feels the appropriateness of crying and tries his best to (James 460). No beast in the jungle, however, springs out to accuse Updike's protagonist, who, far from being a man reserved for a singular fate like Marcher, is a more or less ordinary representative of his culture and class. The sins of commission and omission in "My Father's Tears" are the common stigmata of contemporary living with its abandonments, betrayals, neglects, evasions, and small day-to-day misdemeanors. Over time such things may make for a degree of emotional anesthesia but one that is saved from moral insensibility by a consciousness of falling short.

The last words of the story, "My father's tears had used up mine" (*LS* 851), are ambiguous enough to allow for many readings; my own sense is that they express a world-sorrow that "lodged" itself in James's mind as he returned to college (840), that he has since come to understand, but that he can no longer genuinely feel. He has traveled too long in the land of guilt, too far away from the simpler world of his father, and whatever was "dewy" in him has dried up. Attending his father's funeral in "The Egg Race," Ferguson is shamed by "the tears in the eyes of strangers," mostly his father's former students, while his "own eyes were dry" and his "dominant emotion was relief" (36). Genuine, innocent tears no longer seem possible for Updike sons and ex-husbands. Telling his children of his decision to leave home in "Separating" (1975), a story from Updike's decades-long portrait of a marriage published a year after his own separation, Richard Maple cries profusely, embarrassingly, and, at bottom, insincerely over what he has the power to change but doesn't want to. Richard would have the separation *and* the sentiment. Dry eyes, even if signs of a certain vacuity, are at least emotionally honest, the price exacted from us for the choices we make.

As elsewhere in Updike's semiautobiographical stories and memoirs, guilt in "My Father's Tears" is not all-consuming as in Hawthorne, a writer Updike conversed with almost to the end of his life. Rather, it hovers on the edges of consciousness like a moral toothache, discomfiting enough to remind his characters of the reality of conscience but not to impel them to follow it. They accept dry eyes knowingly, self-critically, with their fathers' more generous example in mind, but also acquiescently as a casualty of the way they live and, with a modicum of unease, will continue to live. Alice Munro ends a memoir-story about a lifelong guilt of her own—her failure to return home for her mother's final illness and funeral, the subject of her first great story, "The Peace of Utrecht" (1960), half a century before—with the lines, "We say of some things that they can't be forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves. But we do—we do it all the time" ("Dear Life" 319). Being human for Munro and Updike is not living on the verge of disgrace

but on the verge of regret—living, that is, with a consciousness of things badly done or left undone yet continuing to function without debilitating self-reproach, even, in some cases, without tears. The title of Munro's story, the last in a book of that name and the last of her career, is "Dear Life" (2012)—"dear" as in precious or rare but also as if in a letter addressed to Life in summary assessment of how she has lived it. "My Father's Tears," the title of Updike's last book, might serve as his own self-appraising letter to life. Like Munro looking back on herself, Updike feels there are things to be forgiven by others for, things to forgive ourselves for if we can, and things to accommodate ourselves to (like the divorce) if we can't. If Updike, like James Werley, is sometimes dry-eyed when he feels he should cry, he can at least write a story that confronts this and says, in effect, "I'm sorry."

NOTES

1. The dates of publication included parenthetically in the text refer to those of magazine publication; when two dates are given, the first refers to magazine publication, the second to republication in a book. After the first citation of *Early Stories* and *Later Stories*, the volumes will be abbreviated as *ES* and *LS*. I would like to thank Gail Milder for her incisive comments on the manuscript; Matthew Shippe for his helpful suggestions about a semifinal draft; the readers at *The John Updike Review* for their thoughtful remarks on the manuscript; and Julianne Lynch for her fine job of copy editing.

2. "The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother's Thimble, and Fanning Island" (1960) and "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, a Dying Cat, a Traded Car" (1961).

3. This notion of authorial criticism, which has informed my work on Melville, Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau, is close to the one Peter J. Bailey enunciated at the start of his book on Updike: "At its most vital, single author literary criticism illuminates the human drama of an individual novelist's book-by-book struggle . . . with the preoccupations that compel her to keep returning to fiction for one more go at focusing and clarifying obsessions that, translated into literature, constitute her works' themes" (13). Preoccupations ebb and flow, however; they alter with time, experience, and mood. Wesley Updike may be Wesley Updike, but John Updike looking at him at various points in his life is himself different, as no one better understood of autobiographical fiction and memoir than Updike himself. The subject of this essay isn't so much Updike's relationship to his father as what his presentation of his father indicates about himself at successive moments in his life.

4. The *F* in Foster is telling, given Updike's penchant for using *F* names for fictional characters whose experience draws on or significantly mirrors his own—among them: Ferguson, Fraser, Ferris, Foster, Fairbairn, Fairchild, Fegley, Farnham, Fulham, and with a nod to Hawthorne, Fanshawe.

5. As Frederick Crews remarks of the divorce, "The many stories and novels that dwell upon the trauma tell us that his Christian upbringing and his sense of fair play would not leave him in peace" (172).

6. In an essay on the 2017–2018 exhibition *Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting: Inspiration and Rivalry*, Joseph Leo Koerner speaks of the "sense of turning inward and away" that characterizes Vermeer's women—and might be said of Updike's Mary Pennington women (13).

7. So far as "My Father on the Verge of Disgrace" is concerned, I would agree with Joyce Carol Oates's remark, quoted with reservations by William H. Pritchard, "that Updike's genius 'is best

excited by the lyric possibilities of tragic events that, failing to justify themselves as tragedy, turn unaccountably into comedies” (qtd. in Pritchard 96). The problem with *The Centaur*, to my mind, is that it has neither the dignity of tragedy (its effort at myth notwithstanding) nor the esprit of comedy but wavers between the two.

8. In what he called “The Original Ending of *Self-Consciousness*,” Updike, playing devil’s advocate, expressed “a touch of disdain” toward how he has lived: “Precociously conscious of the precious, inexplicable burden of selfhood, I have steered my unique little craft carefully, at the same time doubting that carefulness is the most sublime virtue” (*Higher Gossip* 471). This is the crux of Updike’s distinction between “venturers like my father and ambushers like me” in “A Soft Spring Night in Shillington” (32) and the organizing theme of “The Egg Race.”

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“Travels in the Land of Guilt”: Self-Recrimination and Self-Reclamation in *Problems and Other Stories*

PETER J. BAILEY

“I seek to bring what was hidden back into the light.”

—Ferguson in “The Egg Race”

The first installment of this essay, “‘Richard Had Forgotten Why’: Deflection and Sublimation in *Problems and Other Stories*” (*JUR* 6.2), cited “The Man Who Loved Extinct Animals” as one story in that volume in which a character seeks to evade the guilt created by his divorce and abandonment of his family via a cerebral distraction: in protagonist Sapers’s case, it is an intense identification with mammals whose evolutions doomed them to extinction. For Sapers, the dynamics of natural selection are a collective enterprise, a pressure toward communality like the one he renounced in leaving his family. “Again and again, in the annals of these creatures,” the narrator explains, “Sapers found mysterious disappearances, unexplained departures. ‘By the end of the Pliocene period, all American rhinos had become extinct or wandered away to other parts of the world’” (865). As a truant husband and father, Sapers is a great partisan of these guiltless disappearances and departures, but by the story’s close his preoccupation with these doomed creatures delivers him to the very pain he studied them to deflect, his self-exculpatory Paleolithic rationalizations failing utterly to insulate him against contemporary human commitments and recriminations. Let that story exemplify those in *Problems and Other Stories* that in one way or another sidestep the central

emotional issue of the collection, “with the curve of sad time it subtends”—a phrase Updike provides in an “Author’s Note” to mark the years 1971–78, during which he divorced Mary Pennington Updike and married Martha Ruggles Bernhard. The stories considered in this essay—“Domestic Life in America,” “Love Song, for a Moog Synthesizer,” “The Fairy Godfathers,” “The Egg Race,” “Guilt Gems,” and “Atlantises”—are fictionalized versions of the marital turbulence of those years, and my critical purpose in addressing these autobiographically more “troublesome” *Problems* stories is to investigate how Updike confronted his life dilemmas fictionally in these narratives, how he sought through them to craft literary resolutions for irresolvable existential conflicts. Beyond that purpose, my objective is to treat the *Problems* stories addressed here in order of their composition¹ as barometers of Updike’s sensibilities vis-à-vis his separation, divorce, and remarriage, and to illuminate the ways in which the structure of *Problems and Other Stories* is dictated by those literary resolutions. “Atlantises,” I mean to show, is the culmination toward which the five preceding stories addressed here constitute preparation, the befuddled, ineffectual Ferris of “Domestic Life in America” ultimately giving way to Mr. Farnham of “Atlantises,” who comes into focus as a recognizably Updike alter ego.

In its narrative linearity, “Domestic Life in America” is among the most representational of the *Problems* stories fictionalizing the Updikes’ postseparation excruciations. Fraser,² living in an apartment in Boston after moving out of a house resembling the Updikes’ Labor-in-Vain residence, has returned for the weekend to the town in which his ex-wife-to-be and mistress live. Problems abound. Neither woman is in much sympathy with Fraser or with the circumstances he has visited upon them. When Fraser offers to install the storm windows in the house his wife, Jean, now owns, she asks, “If you want to be so useful why don’t you live with us?” and she later complains that “[i]t’s pathetic, to see you so married to that little—poodle” (14, 15). At her house, Greta ventilates petulantly about Fraser’s children being away when he pays visits, making him feel defensive about them; she wishes her estranged husband, Ray, would be as committed, while acknowledging that, when Ray does show, she hides in the bathroom. “The unspoken ground note of his conversations with his children,” the narrator observes, “was Fraser’s request for forgiveness” (5), while Greta’s children are politely remote with him, the youngest of them responding to the tension at home by phoning his father and begging for rescue. A short time after, Fraser is following Billy out the door. “I’m sorry,” he

said [to Greta]. ‘I thought I’d stay the afternoon, but I can’t. I feel too strange. It’s not you, it’s not us, we’re fine, it’s just—it.’” Greta decides she’s at fault: “‘Don’t be mad at me,’ she begged. ‘I’ll get better at it’” (13).

The ground note of “Domestic Life in America” is “it”—the cognitive dissonance, desperate awkwardness, and interpersonal fractiousness generated by the dismantling of two families and the torturous formation of a new one out of the surviving fragments. In a later Updike story—“Deaths of Distant Friends”—the narrator characterizes a parallel period of his life as “those embarrassing, disarrayed years when I scuttled without a shell, between houses and wives, a snake between skins, a monster of selfishness, my grotesque needs naked and pink, my social presence beggarly and vulnerable” (162). Ping-ponging haplessly between houses and impatient, discontented women, Fraser is simultaneously the creator of his fate and its victim, constantly being compelled to admit that even his most unselfish gestures have ulterior, self-serving motivations aimed at gratifying the woman he isn’t currently with. Putting the best possible face on this imbroglio is all Fraser can manage. Whether Updike experienced any of the humiliations that befall Fraser in “Domestic Life” matters far less than does his ability to depict them with such cringe-provoking effectiveness in fiction. Only the most male apologist of readers could overlook the self-deprecatory terms in which Updike fictionalizes the recent events of his life.

The snappishness that Fraser’s son Kenny displays with his mother (which daughter Nancy dates to Fraser’s departure), prompts Fraser to change the subject by quoting W. B. Yeats in a literary quiz: “‘The center cannot hold. . . . Mere’—ten points.”

Jean responds to his familiar ploy, “‘Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world’” (7).

In *John Updike: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Robert Luscher rightly points out that “[t]he Yeats quotation Fraser cites in the brief game with his ex-wife suggests his underlying worry that ‘mere anarchy’ will be the result of the marital center’s failure to hold” (131). Additionally, Fraser’s pleasure in this familial ritual he initiated is instantly scuttled: “Nancy looked from one to the other of them, and the hope in her eyes was like the dog’s warm moist muzzle, a weight laid on Fraser’s chest” (7). Fraser had completed digging a hole in preparation for the imminent death of the family golden retriever when Penny, who accompanied him to the site, placed her muzzle on his chest; even his most sincere attempts at thoughtfulness produce heartache and regret. When Fraser asks Nancy whether she wants to say

a prayer over the grave after Penny's death, she responds, "I guess not," reminding him how little influence his religiosity has had upon his eldest daughter.

Because the story is set about ten days before Christmas, the element that Fraser's visits to both homes have in common is obtaining, installing, and decorating a Christmas tree. Kenny wants to chop down a tree, to which Fraser gladly agrees, only to be lured back to Greta's before the forest expedition can occur. Fraser, Greta, and Billy go to a Christmas-tree lot on Sunday afternoon and bring back a tree "fat and full and symmetrical." The trees he and Jean acquired, "usually at night, at the last moment," Fraser muses, "had always looked scrawny, with gaps that had to be turned to the wall, only to reveal more gaps." The ornaments they place on Greta's tree seem, similarly, superior to those in the Fraser home: "As he handled this precious heritage, Fraser's hands, so clumsily intruding into a web of property and tradition, began to tremble. He felt hopelessly misplaced" (11).

Returning to his "old house," he discovers that he won't be taking Kenny to chop down their Christmas tree. In the living room a "spindly, gappy pine was standing in a bucket of bricks by the piano. 'You did it,' Fraser accused [Kenny]. 'Without me.'" Here, Fraser feels hopelessly displaced. "The tree was so sparse and feathery," Fraser notices, "he could look through it to the snowy yard, the monkey swing on the dying elm, and the tidal creek beyond." In Fraser's vision, the tree incarnates the condition in which he has left his family. The decorations are no more promising: his daughter Nancy brings another box to the tree, noting dismally, "They're mostly broken, Dad." Making the vow characteristic of the Dad in self-exile, Fraser pledges, "We'll buy some more" (14). The single ornament Fraser has contributed to his family's Christmas tradition is "an ancient cotton clown, in a little jacket of red felt and a conical hat with a cotton tassel; he had made it for his parents' tree years ago." Lest it seem facile to associate the story's familial-boomeranging hero with this ornament, Fraser *does* have a tendency to clown his way through tough moments, and we're told, "Nancy let him hang it, higher up than she could reach" (15). Fraser, clearly feeling besieged by the events of this weekend, carefully installs his Christmas avatar—in a favorite phrase of Updike's grandfather, "out of harm's way" (S-C 33)—where Fraser's extended absences cannot be avenged upon it.

Much of what Fraser attempts to accomplish in this story backfires on him or ends up injuring one of the women or children in his life. What, then, accounts for the reader's sympathy for him? Before readers encounter all of the interpersonal entanglements of Fraser's life, we're introduced to their antithesis. Approaching the house that he no longer owns, he recalls the element most valuable to him:

The one detail of life that he would miss most was not interior but exterior—the plunge, on a hot summer day, naked, from a boardwalk and float he had built into the only piece of salt water he would ever own. Even at low tide, a flat dive would carry him into water over his head, in the center of the channel; from here, the surrounding world, of dark clay bank and green marsh grass, would be subtly, marvelously transformed in low perspective, the world as early life saw it, looming, unpeopled, delicate, strange. Though cars and bicyclists passed on the bridge not far away, Fraser would choose his moment and shuck his city clothes and dive boldly in—his householder’s prerogative. (1)

In addition to poignantly dramatizing what Fraser has lost (“the only piece of salt water he would ever own”!), this vividly evoked paragraph builds Fraser’s character (personal experience—“the plunge” and its environs—means more to him than do family members) while comparing him to another *Problems* protagonist: like Sapers in “The Man Who Loved Extinct Mammals,” he’s drawn to a “world as early life saw it,” one in which the confrontations he is about to experience could not exist. Unlike most of the other Updike stand-ins, who are often just as paralyzed by indecision and ambivalence as Fraser is throughout this story (“His head was full of storm window numbers, of edges that didn’t quite fit” [4]), there *was* a time when Fraser could “dive boldly in.” He returns to his nostalgic recollection of “the plunge” when going to bed in Greta’s house: “it was as when, tired and dirty from work, Fraser had stripped and given himself to that sustaining element, the water in the center of the channel, which answered every movement of his with a silken resistance and buoyed him above its own black depth” (10). Robert Luscher argues persuasively that Greta is “the sustaining element” whose “silken resistance . . . buoyed [Fraser] above its own black depth” (130), which suggests that Fraser has found in her a substitute element into which to “dive boldly.” Nonetheless, waking the next morning, the resistance to his presence in the house is anything but silken; Fraser instantly redescends into the black depths of separation guilt and into his feelings of intrusion into others’ homes.

His weekend finally drawing to a close, Fraser returns to his old house and eats the dinner Jean cooks. “Don’t make me miss the train,” he admonishes her when he decides she is being flirtatious, “It’s at ten-fifty.” Arriving at the station, they see the train pulling out. “I knew it,” he said, “I *knew* it,” and could have cried.” Instead of crying, Jean shouts, “Oh, shut up. What a baby,” leaps to the platform, and, “looking in her parka like a kind of baggage handler,” signals for the slowly departing train to stop. Once he’s on board, she gets in a final dig: “So describe this to Greta when she says I’m clingy,” Jean said, rejecting his kiss” (15).

The night is cold enough to freeze the tracks, and fires have been set to prevent

this, their flames invoking absence for Fraser: it was “as if an army had encamped here, then vanished.” Nonetheless, “The sight consoled him, each fire burning alone, apparently untended yet part of a design of care, of perpetuation” (15–16). For the remainder of the final paragraph, the solitary Fraser seeks “designs of care,” cheering antitheses to his repeated weekend experiences of “edges that don’t quite fit” and to his abject failure to execute deeds of “perpetuation.” On Boston Common, “There seemed no life afoot but his, no spark of life but the image cupped in his head of his apartment, his room-and-a-half, its askew rug and unmade bed, its dirty windows and beckoning warmth.” Drab as the studio apartment (Fraser’s reward for disrupting two families) seems, its promise of warmth counters the way that “his walking rolled smears of light across the icy whiteness.” Even the acrimonious families he has left behind seem preferable to this bleakly arctic landscape: “Above Beacon Hill, in the general direction of his lawyer’s, an electric sign announced in alternation, remarkably, 12:00 and 0 [degrees].” For Fraser, Boston is the geography of his divorce and, despite the bad feelings with which he left both women in the suburbs, he wishes he weren’t alone here: “Fraser regretted there was no one with him to help witness this miracle” (16).³ Only a man in desperate need of consolation could find in the concurrence of time and temperature a miracle worthy of sharing with others; the reader is invited to see this miracle of midnight, experienced in a deserted Boston Commons at 0°F, as the culminating harvest of Fraser’s cold dismantling of his family for the purpose of gaining a new one. Sometimes in Updike’s stories his protagonist gets exactly what he deserves, even if he is nonetheless capable of burnishing his arctic deserts into a numeric “miracle.” Fraser has put a brave face on the bleakest of landscapes. No other story in Updike’s oeuvre better exemplifies his 1978 comment to Iwao Iwamoto: “Breaking up a family is strenuous, it’s hard work, it’s a terrible thing to do” (Plath, 122).

Why are Updike protagonists so vulnerable to choosing self-indulgence over responsibility and familial obligation? The first line of “Love Song, for a Moog Synthesizer” starkly answers that question: “She was good in bed” (871). “She” is Princess, or Pumpkin, who appears as well in “The Fairy Godfathers” and resembles Mrs. Farnham in “Atlantises”; her eyes are blue, she tends toward confrontation, quitting smoking causes her difficulty, and she favors black dresses. Those details are worth citing because there is another blue-eyed, physically assertive, smoking-addicted, black-arrayed woman in the *Problems* collection who mirrors Princess in significant ways. The first installment of this essay, “Richard Had Forgotten Why,” offers a reading of “Augustine’s Concubine” that suggests the unnamed “concubine”

is so sexually gratifying to Augustine that, after a thirteen-year highly carnal affair with her, he can repudiate extramarital promiscuity not only to save his own soul but to model righteous behavior for all the male Christians in time who follow him. The effect of this rejection on her, the story's closing sentence suggests, is that "She became a saint, whose name we do not know. For a thousand years, men would endeavor to hate the flesh, because of her" (834). Augustine, that is, doctrinally condemns extramarital carnality as a consequence of terminating his extended indulgence in it with her, and thus the story's closing irony that "men would endeavor to hate the flesh, because of her" unjustly and ironically blames her for Augustine's satiation-induced interdiction.

Christopher Carduff notes that "Augustine's Concubine" was the first story Updike wrote upon moving from Labor-in-Vain Road and settling in Back Bay, Boston (*Collected Early Stories*, 923), which may link Augustine's dramatized change of life to Updike's own; the parallels between Augustine's lover and Princess of the later stories invites speculation that Updike was using Augustine's *Confessions* to offer his own subtextual confession about the woman who had, somewhat analogously, changed his life. Discussing Updike's 1977 "Preface" to the Lord John Press edition of "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu," Adam Begley cites Updike's unexpected acknowledgment that he attended Ted Williams' final game at Fenway Park because the woman with whom he had an assignation in Beacon Hill wasn't at home when he arrived: "I believe," Begley asserts, "that the deliberate, unprompted mention of a failed tryst [in the "Preface"] was a formal gesture of farewell to a chapter in [Updike's] life that began or nearly began on the day of Williams's last at-bat, a chapter that would be coming to a close with his new marriage. He was saying good-bye to years of philandering, retiring as a womanizer, and choosing to mark the occasion in a preface to an essay about his hero's swan song" (208).

The chronological interaction of texts and events provides evidence for Begley's argument: "Augustine's Concubine" appeared in the April 1975 issue of the *Atlantic*; Updike dated the Lord John "Preface" August 1, 1977 (Greiner 13); he married Martha Ruggles Bernhard on September 30, 1977. Begley doesn't connect "Augustine's Concubine" to his "Hub Fans" preface, but what does the title character in that story do other than "say goodbye to years of philandering"? Isn't Updike, in "Augustine's Concubine," ironically identifying with Augustine's "retiring as a womanizer" and enjoying ascribing to Augustine's lover some of the traits of Princess, who so profoundly changes the life of Tod, the Updike-resembling protagonist of "Love Song" and "Fairy Godfathers"? Given the guilt-laden and self-recriminating nature of numerous *Problems* stories, there is relief in imagin-

ing Updike wryly likening his own conversion to Augustine's and in conflating Augustine's lover with both Princesses as the inspiration of that conversion. "Love Song" and "Fairy Godfathers" provide more evidence for that conflation, though there's substantially more caricature underlying both of them.

Tod is certain that Princess is "good in bed," but about other characteristics he is less sure. "She went to church. Her IQ was 150. She repeated herself. Nothing fit; it frightened him. Yet Tod wanted to hang on, to hang on to the bits and pieces, which perhaps were not truly pieces but islands, which a little lowering of sea level would reveal to be rises on a sunken continent, peaks of a subaqueous range, secretly one, a world" (871). The story's resolution is inherent in that latter sentence. In writing "Love Song," Updike had, apparently, already anticipated the metaphoric trope of "Atlantises," which treats the marriages Farnham experiences as two versions of Atlantis, the latter inhabited by him and his second wife. The narrative is a "Love Song, for a Moog Synthesizer" because of the technological artifice of that instrument, its reputation as a generator of computerized music—a music lacking in spontaneous human feeling. As Robert Luscher noticed, "Updike's choice of the moog synthesizer signals this love song's modernity and accentuates the diverse emotions that simultaneously draw Tod to Pumpkin or repel him" (131). Clearly, this synthesized "Love Song" contains little of the conventional love song—or love story. Because?

As we will see, in "The Egg Race" Updike refers only briefly to Ferguson's new wife in order that the story might test the protagonist's capacity to overcome self-recrimination and move toward self-affirmation on his own; "Love Song" is about nothing other than Princess—or, more precisely, about Tod's early reservations about loving and committing himself to her in marriage. His ambivalences stem from his awareness that "[n]othing fit; it frightened him," and therefore Tod has to resolve the dissonances, organize the pieces of Princess as if he were cartographer mapping a continent permeated with gaps, or a writer seeking to make her a coherent story. Her way of expressing affection is unusual: "She took to jabbing him at parties, jabbing so hard it hurt. This piece of herself, transferred to his ribs, his kidneys, as pain, lingered there, asked to be recognized as love" (871). For a male pursuing divorce-generated masochism, Princess's mode of conveying love is fully gratifying. Of course, Tod brings eccentricities of his own to the relationship that the story tirelessly delineates:

His brain—that impatient organ which deals, with the speed of light, in essences and abstractions—opted to love her perhaps too early, before his heart—that plodder, that

problem-learner—had had time to collect quirks and spiritual snapshots, to survey those faults and ledges of the not-quite-expected where affection can silt and accumulate. He needed a body. Instead there was something skeletal, spacy. (871)

Updike didn't normally reify antinomies such as brain vs. heart as emphatically as this passage does, and the relationship between "body" and "skeletal, spacy" isn't completely clear. Throughout "Love Song," the reader is challenged to decide whether the story's hyperbolic language is Updike's chosen idiom or reflects instead the excesses of Tod's complex emotional anxiety and neediness.

The process of effectively fictionalizing his family in the Maples stories demanded of Updike the composition of a few trial versions before he settled upon the rhetorical distance from those characters necessary to communicate his complexly ambivalent attitude toward them—toward the often anomalous behavior of Richard Maple in particular. (Contrast with the exquisite balance of authorial sympathy and remove in "Separating," and the perfectly poised ironic tone pervading the Maples' unmarriage in "Here Come the Maples.") The amorous discords of "Love Song" (and "The Fairy Godfathers"), I'll argue, are much less a product of Updike misgauging effective distance between himself and his characters as they are the result of his desire to ironize Tod (who is terribly self-conscious that his name means death in German) as an inflated, satirical projection of Updike in love; the story offers a cartoonish depiction of Updike and Martha's torturous path to marriage. The internal evidence for such a reading?

The "His brain" passage quoted above seems symptomatic of the story's hyperexpressive tendencies ("to survey these faults and ledges of the not-quite-expectation where affection can silt and accumulate") and of its invoking dehumanizing metaphors to compose Princess, both of which make the reader wonder how satirically s/he is intended to view Tod. One evening after Tod assists Princess in removing panties (which were riding up annoyingly) while they are out in public, he responds to her instinctual reaction to the breeze blowing up her skirt: "He had loved that shiver, that spasm she could not control; for love must attach to what we cannot help—the involuntary, the telltale, the fatal. Otherwise, the reasonableness and the mercy that would make our lives decent and orderly would overpower love, crush it, root it out, tumble it away like a striped tent pegged in sand" (872).

Tod's idea of naturalistic eroticism ramifies unsettlingly—there's a power discrepancy implicit here, a suggestion of affection based not in character but in behavior beyond the woman's control. "[L]ove begins in earnest," Updike wrote in "The Morning," "when we love what is limited" (466), which, in the context of that

story, means loving a limited person as opposed to a visionary being in the male imagination. More sinister is love attaching itself to the “involuntary, the telltale, the fatal,” as Tod’s subsequent invocation of the term suggests: “Time was interconnecting her features, which had been isolated in the spaces of her face by a certain glossy, infantile perfection. She was growing old within their love, within their suffering” (872). (Their suffering is caused by what “Domestic Life in America” dramatizes: “Their conversations were so boring. Them. Us. Us and them others. The neighbors, the children, the children’s teachers, the lawyers’ wives’ investment brokers’ children’s piano teachers” [875].) Most unsympathetically, we are then told that, “Tod liked her aging, felt warmed by it, for it too was involuntary. It had happened to her with him, yet was not his fault. He wanted nothing to be his fault. This made her load double” (872–3).

He is glad that her “glossy, infantile perfection” is succumbing to aging, because that process, he has determined, is involuntary, and therefore not his fault. In “Here Come the Maples,” the narrator observes that Richard feels by divorcing Joan he is generously relieving her of a terrible load of blame; apparently, Princess will be voluntarily assuming a double load of blame in their union because Tod “wanted nothing to be his fault.” (In Updike’s *Problems*, love often means having to say you’re sorry.) “Love Song, for a Moog Synthesizer” is primarily about Tod’s organizing of fragments of Princess into a whole loved object—object as in objectification—but the story appears increasingly to emphasize the eccentricity of Tod’s notions of human affection. Things become still curiously in Tod’s summation of Princess’s involuntary shiver: “He understood that shiver better now. He was the conduit, the open window, by which, on rare occasions, she felt the *ventus Dei*.” With this judgment, Tod surpasses Credo of “Believers” as the framer of the most egocentric theological position in *Problems*, one he aggrandizes by concluding, “In the center of her sexuality, she was God’s plaything” (873). When not enacting that conduit, Tod often feels the *ventus* Princess.

Princess’s temper intimidates and emasculates him: “She would rage in spirals of indignation; it was a fault in Tod that he did not afford her an excuse for such passion. It would blow itself out in a region of her where he had never lived. An island, but in a desert. Her lips and eyewhites would look parched afterwards.” Princess’s volubility doesn’t, however, deter Tod: “At times it occurred to him that not everyone could love this woman. This did not frighten him. It made him feel like a child still young enough to be proud that he has been given a special assignment” (874). The prospect of losing her fills him with an “awful emptiness,” and returns him to that unsettling childlikeness once again. “O, Pumpkin, he would moan in

the dark, 'never leave me. Never: promise.' And the child within him would cringe with a terror for which, when daylight dawned bleak on the scattered realities of their situation, he would silently blame her, and hope to make her pay" (874–5). Tod moves precipitously from the juvenile to the retributively adult; "Love Song" may be an autobiographically oriented narrative, but in it Updike was nonetheless patently ironizing his doppelganger for making the woman pay for his feelings of guilt.

One way that Tod makes Princess pay is to compel her to say "realtor," a word she can't pronounce. "She would refuse. This tiny refusal stunned him. A blow to the heart." The narrator conveys what is at stake for Tod in this utterance, as in their relationship: "They must be perfect with each other, they must. He would beg. He had wagered his whole life, his happiness and the happiness of the world around him on this, this little monkey's stunt she would not do. Just one word, 'Realtor'" (875).

He needs her to speak that word, clearly, because her inability to pronounce it is one of those involuntary incapacities of which Tod is so fond and which provide him with occasions for feelings of superiority. The egocentricity of that attitude is reinforced by his insistence that only he has "wagered his whole life" on their union, and that "his happiness" and "the happiness of the world around him" depend upon her willingness to execute this "monkey's stunt" that belittles her. It occurs to the reader that not many women could love this man.

Inexplicably, her sharp elbows, sudden rages, and inability to pronounce "realtor" notwithstanding, "One forenoon, unforeseen, he felt her beside him and she was of a piece, his. They were standing somewhere, in a run-down section of the city, themselves tired, looking at nothing, and her presence beside him was like the earth's beneath his feet, continuous, extensive, and dry, there by its own rights, unthinkingly assumed to be there. She had become his wife" (876).

Early in the story, Tod had "wanted to hang on to the bits and pieces, which perhaps were not truly pieces but islands, which a little lowering of sea level would reveal to be rises on a sunken continent, peaks of a subaqueous range, secretly one, a world" (871). By the closing paragraph, "she was of a piece"; however, that transformation is a consequence of nothing she did but of the fact that she is now "his wife." The self-absorption that pervades Tod's insistence that "they must be perfect for each other" (he means she must be perfect for him) marks the story's final sentences, concluding in the wonderful equivocation, "she had become his wife"—as if becoming a wife were an act in which she had complete agency, rather than a role he self-congratulatorily conferred upon her. In order to become "secretly

one, a world," she had only to wait until Tod chose to perceive her as a wife and until Updike had established the "Atlantis"/continent connection with which he would conclude *Problems and Other Stories*. Whether we ascribe the misogynistic metaphors of this *comedia* to Tod or to Updike, it is a thoroughly dissonant "Love Song," one that evokes the timbre of their union in the sentence, "They were standing somewhere, in a rundown section of the city, themselves tired, looking at nothing." "The Fairy Godfathers," the collection's other Tod and Princess story, does little to brighten the emotional tenor of this marriage, but in the final story, "Atlantises," the central couple does move from caricature to character.

"Love Song" is narrated from Tod's perspective to emphasize the solipsism of his conferring wholeness upon Princess as the condition for making her his wife; because "The Fairy Godfathers" incorporates the responses of different therapists to Tod and Princess, that story is relatively more balanced in its depiction of her and his sensibilities. The fact that both are consulting therapists tacitly establishes the psychic damage their courtship has caused them—as the story's first line summarizes their dilemma, "Oh, Pumpkin, Tod would say, 'Nobody likes us'" (29). Their isolation ("They had no friends. They had children, but these they had wounded." [34]) leads them to seek out professional solace. Much of the story's purpose consists of dramatizing the fact that Oz and Rhadamanthus, Tod's and Pumpkin's respective therapists, *do* like them and that the couple employs psychiatrists for the emotional encouragement and postdivorce consolation they provide.

Rhadamanthus assures Pumpkin that she was neurotic both to remain in her marriage and to grieve over leaving it, and he insists that her relationship with Tod is more fulfilling; Oz believes Pumpkin has done wonders for Tod's masculinity, and he tacitly approves Tod's leaving his wife. Having no one else with whom to discuss their psychiatrists' judgments about them, Tod and Pumpkin converse intently about how the other's psychiatrist perceives Tod and Pumpkin. Pumpkin asks Tod whether Oz wants her "to go back [home], so you can go back? He hates me," with which Tod disagrees: "Tod wondered why Oz was insistently Pumpkin's champion. Through the channel of his patient's tangled words, Oz seemed to see an ideal Pumpkin glowing" (30). For his part, Tod "continued to grope after the shadow of himself that lived in the magic cave of her sessions with Rhadamanthus. He flitted about in there, he felt, as a being semi-sublime, finer even than any of the approbation Pumpkin reported" (31). Regardless how Tod and Princess seek to construe the other's shrink's perception of him/her, Oz and Rhadamanthus remain inconvertibly positive perceivers of them and their love. Tod finally asks

Pumpkin, “Who *are* these men anyway, . . . to run our lives? What do we know about *them*? Are *their* marriages so great that they should put ours down?” (34). The last thing Oz and Rhadamanthus do is “put [our marriages] down,” except insofar as they consistently endorse the union of Pumpkin and Tod. Then, in its closing paragraph, “The Fairy Godfathers” takes as unexpected and unmotivated a turn as the conclusion of “Love Song.” Pumpkin and Tod “walked enchanted, scared, unknown but for the unseen counselors whose blessings fed the night like the breathing of stars. Then the world rotated, the children stopped crying, the pace of legal actions slowed, the city lights faded behind them. They bought a house. He built bookshelves, she raised flowers. For economy’s sake, they stopped seeing psychiatrists” (35).

Earlier in the story, when Tod claims that Pumpkin repeats herself, Oz responds to him, “‘You spend so much of your own energy’—he smiled—‘avoiding repeating yourself’” (30). The only reasonable explanation for this line that so clearly identifies Tod with Updike—the author who conscientiously refused to repeat himself—is that it indirectly signals that the conclusion of “The Fairy Godfathers” repeats that of “Love Song.” In both stories, the somewhat gratuitous imposition of domesticity resolves narrative tensions: in “Love Song,” Princess “had become his wife,” and in “Fairy Godfathers,” the “world’s rotation” allows them to take up housekeeping and banish their shrinks. Things magically transpire without human agency in love songs and fairy stories, and Updike closes “The Fairy Godfathers” first by affirming Tod and Pumpkin’s human freedom from the blandishments of psychiatry (“Now when she said to him, ‘You’re beautiful,’ it came solely from her”) and concludes by invoking the fabulist character of his lovers/protagonists: “and when he answered, ‘So are you,’ it was to quell the terror that visited them, stark as daylight, plain as the mailman. For Tod was death and Pumpkin was hollow and the fairy godfathers had vanished, taking with them the lovers’ best selves” (35). To understand why Updike subjected Tod and Pumpkin to such ironic depictions in both “Love Song” and “Godfathers,” it is necessary to notice how differently Mr. and Mrs. Farnham of *Problems*’ last story, “Atlantises,” are characterized. For that transformation to be facilitated, however, the markedly more representational, less postmodernist “The Egg Race” and “Guilt-Gems” intercede.

Having in the other *Problems* stories delivered a good bruising to his stand-ins (in “Believers,” Credo judges himself indistinguishable from an atheist; in “Separating,” “Richard had forgotten why”; the narrator of “Daughter, Last Glimpses of” concludes glumly that the “soul grows calluses”; and “Ed” recognizes “dismally,” as a consequence of his prostitutional “Transaction,” “his prick as a product, mass-

produced and mass-consumed, in a few monotonous ways" [108]), Updike determined in "The Egg Race" to give his doppelgänger the best chance in the *Problems* stories to transcend self-recrimination. Ferguson's triumph, however, contains elements some readers might construe as derisively self-indulgent. "The Egg Race" is the first Updike story in which the protagonist ferries his nostalgia for his childhood home back to the source by attending a class reunion there, initiating a journey that subsequent Updike short-story alter egos would replicate. Because of its inclusion in *Problems*, "The Egg Race" is certainly the first story to juxtapose the beloved hometown with the protagonist's remorse over a severed marriage: as Ferguson says of the organizer of the reunion, "Linda had married her tenth grade steady and never left Hayesville; she had never traveled in the land of guilt" (42). If *Problems and Other Stories* had a subtitle, it might have been "Travels in the Land of Guilt."

Given its pervasive nostalgia, the story begins with Ferguson recalling the challenges he encountered egg racing as a boy in "Hayesville." The event took place "once a summer at some fête when the gods of calendar and nation stooped low over the children, beaming, bestowing prizes as simple as a Hershey bar or a paper kite, furled. Ferguson had not thought of it for years, but lately he was visited, as if grown permeable in middle age, by recollections and premonitions" (36). Like "Packed Dirt" and "The Blessed Man of Boston," "The Egg Race" is comprised of "recollections and premonitions" moving toward an emotional/intellectual fusion. Very quietly, the story establishes what Ferguson seems only to suspect: his "recollections and premonitions" are sparked by his sense of having been cared for better in Hayesville than he has cared for those in "the land of guilt." William H. Pritchard very effectively characterized Ferguson's complex stance toward his past: "Ferguson's attitude toward the past, toward his own past, is stubborn, contradictory, willful, poetic; he is both beyond it (on the other side of it), relieved to have it over, but at the same time contemporaneous with it" (191). Amidst those contradictory temporal attitudes, "The Egg Race" leads Ferguson through guilt to self-affirmation, if not self-reclamation.

Ferguson's father, dead five years, appears to his son in a dream, spurring him to remember that he had considerably died while Ferguson, an archaeologist of lost cities, was away on a dig, thereby sparing his son "the bedside decisions, the hospital vigil, the embarrassments of parting" (36). Ferguson recalls fondly their trips together—journeys very similar to, though more affectionately remembered by the son than, Peter Caldwell's trips with his father in *The Centaur*. Ferguson had been ashamed at the funeral to notice his father's students' generous tears while his

eyes remained dry. His “dominant emotion,” he admits, “was relief.” As if to account for that relief, the narrator observes that, after his father’s passing, Ferguson “left his wife for another woman. He had long contemplated this last, but would never have done it had his father been alive” (36). In “Separating,” Richard tells Dickie, “My father would have died before doing this [leaving his wife] to me” (129). Ferguson confronts himself with Dickie’s culminating question—“Why?”—and the narrator observes in response that “[h]is father had been encouraging and forgiving, purely. There had been some great unstated sorrow his father had been protecting him from, to the end” (36–7).⁴ When Ferguson attempts to replicate his journeys with his father with his own sons and daughters, the efforts fail because:

their ventures felt like imitations, lacking not only the authentic late-Christian flair—stoic yet quixotic, despairing yet protective—of the dead wanderer but the right threadbare environment [of the Depression]. . . . Ferguson’s children graduated from ten-speed bikes to driver’s licenses, and toward the end scarcely needed him to take them places. (37)

Ferguson’s explanation for his inability to replicate his father’s role with his own children seems sympathetic, until the narrator adds one of Ferguson’s rationalizations for the divorce: “He had left them, he felt, only a little before they would have left him” (37). As if his adolescent children would be leaving him for the same reason he left them.

Ferguson *does* manage to take one son on a college trip to the Midwest, scoring his first temporary triumph in the process. During a late-night swim in a motel pool, Ferguson watches his son do backward flips off the diving board, the boy explaining that it took him an entire summer to summon the courage to attempt that maneuver. “The remark crashed epochs together,” the narrator observes,

the child . . . seemed poised exactly between boyhood and manhood, between the college student coming to birth and the diapered infant who, in the telescoping of summers, ventured to the end of the diving board and hurled himself backward into watery space. The boy’s encouraging, comradely smile resembled, down to its faint blur of fear, his vanished grandfather’s. It was a moment of harvest for Ferguson, who felt, momentarily, forgiven. (38)

Ferguson feels forgiven because of the generational bridge forged by his son’s smile of pride in his accomplishment, but also because this moment of conciliation mirrors those he and his father experienced in their travels together. Nonetheless,

Ferguson suffers two psychological setbacks before building this experience of generational connection into self-affirmation.

Ferguson's next recollection involves a fatally ill archaeological colleague, who, during Ferguson's final hospital visit to him, charges himself and Ferguson with self-indulgence: himself for draining his estate by paying for a corner hospital room with a view, Ferguson for getting divorced. This colleague's indictment constitutes an element of the antagonistic strain in "The Egg Race" that Ferguson has to contest in the story's resolution. Poised to object, Ferguson

saw the other man's face as something already lost in the earth, and an onrush of pity quelled the triumphant racing of his heart; he wanted to save his colleague from the crushing mass of forward time when the man would not be here, he wanted to lift him from the bed as he would lift the shards of a shattered amphora up from centuries of sedimentation. Forgive me, Ferguson said to himself, in this room that felt already deserted. (39–40)

Forgive me, the secular Ferguson might be thinking, for being so helpless when confronted by his colleague's mortality. The narrator of Updike's "Blessed Man of Boston" wishes that the story he has told of his grandmother might be a story of joy, one of resurrection, and, "had my powers been greater, we would know. As it is, you, like me, must take it on faith" (354). Ferguson has no such faith, and can only beg forgiveness. Of?

A central reason for Ferguson's oscillation between feeling forgiven and pleading for forgiveness is the absence from "The Egg Race" of the woman for whom he has left his family. In other *Problems* stories—"Love Song, for a Moog Synthesizer," "The Fairy Godfathers," and "Atlantises"—this second wife (Princess, or Pumpkin in the first two stories) is a major character; she figures very minimally in this narrative because Updike sets Ferguson the daunting task of justifying the divorce to himself without taking her, or the life he has created with her, into account. Accordingly, she does not accompany him to his class reunion ("His old role, of lonely grind, was waiting for him like a shabby suit; it fit perfectly" [41]), leaving him to negotiate his classmates and Hayesville on his own, and to make there a few steps toward a solitary and largely secular form of redemption.

At the Hayesville twenty-fifth reunion, Linda Weed Gottfinger, who signed Ferguson's invitation, welcomes him and poses questions for an alumni newsletter. For profession, he replies, "Digger," and then, channeling Updike describing his purpose as a writer illuminating the American middle class, Ferguson expatiates:

"I seek to bring what was hidden back into the light" (42). His comment anticipates the psychic resolution of "The Egg Race," which involves using the past to illuminate—and, perhaps, redeem—his present. Ferguson's past relationship with Linda explains why he responds to her so intensely. Updike ascribes to Linda the same insult suffered by William Young at the hands of Mary Landis in "A Sense of Shelter" (1960): after school one day, "[Mary] deftly stole [William's] rubber-lined book bag on the walk back from second grade along Jewett Street and outran him" (247), reducing William to tears as he is compelled to return home without it. Ferguson responds to Linda's larceny much in the same way that William (a high school senior who determines to tell Mary he loves her on the day on which "A Sense of Shelter" is set) does: he carries a crush on her down through the years. "The Egg Race" narrator observes that Linda "had been wonderfully quick, with pigtails and a snub nose, and even when her figure ripened—her breasts overnight became amazing jutting softnesses—her belly had stayed flat and her legs thin and hard" (41).⁵ After midnight, not a little drunk, Ferguson places those "jutting softnesses" into their precise historical context: "Now, as if to advertise that her breasts had survived two Asian wars, six Presidents, five recessions, and four children, the class secretary was wearing a deeply décolleté bodice of lemon chiffon, in the Fifties' strapless style." Only a lonely and disappointed male indulging boozily in masculine self-pity could inspire the sentence Updike wrote next: "He would never, not in all eternity, see her breasts, Ferguson thought sourly" (42).

But then, in "Pigeon Feathers," David Kern persuades himself that "we are rewarded unexpectedly," and the class of '52 clown, Nasty Kegerise, somehow manages to "flip aside one chiffon leaf of [Linda's] bodice," so that, "Unhoped for, what had been hidden came to light" (42). Such a melodramatic moment inspires prose of the sort that Updike detractors despise but that nicely evokes the mind of an inebriated reunion attendee feeling unexpectedly rewarded: "So for a second her soft conical breast lay exposed on the glazed platter of Ferguson's vision. . . . Her breast was perfect, more candid and ample than he had dreamed, weighty yet buoyant in its shadowy cup of cloth, as perfect as an egg" (42). Even more secular than Credo of "Believers," Ferguson nonetheless experiences his own answered prayer.

Before he can depart the reunion with his precious visual epiphany, however, a classmate repeats a version of the dying archaeologist's indictment of Ferguson. He reminds Ferguson that "you're not the man your father was," because Ferguson's father, using the same classroom visual aids favored by George Caldwell of *The Centaur*, had provided his students with gritty lessons about life subsequently

validated by their experiences. The former fullback towers over Ferguson, who concedes that the classmate is right about his father: he was more other-oriented, less self-indulgent, than is Ferguson. "The giant gazed down at Ferguson," the narrator reports, "where he was sunk in a trench of sadness, of love that had nowhere to flow. If he cried, would he get his schoolbag back?" (43). The evening's closing song is "Goodnight, Irene," the story's citation from which omits the phrase, "I'll see you in my dreams." In dreams is the only place that rueful Ferguson can see his father or meet intimately with Linda, spared Ferguson's distant "land of guilt" by remaining married to her "tenth-grade steady" in Hayesville.

Ferguson's sadness survives to the following day, when, hungover, he takes a nostalgic tour of Hayesville that returns him to the playground site of the Egg Race. He recalls that "the Egg Race, meant to be festive, had struck him as tragic, as one of the tough things, like the beheading of chickens and the swatting of flies and the overworking of adults that went on above and around him in the grown-up world." Clearly, his father's attempt to protect Ferguson from "some unstated sorrow" did not prevent such "tough things" from seeping through to him as a child. The narrator continues, "And he wondered now, while his airplane ticket burned in his pocket, and the bandits of Iraq swabbed their guns, and his first wife slept alone, if this premonition of the tragic had not functioned as a limitation upon him, so that to this day he crouched within his life as within a fragile shell" (45). The ticket reminds Ferguson of his imminent return to "the land of guilt"; the Iraq bandits invoke his sense of professionally exploiting the countries he excavates and recall as well his colleague's critique of one of his archaeological arguments as insufficiently rigorous; his first wife sleeping alone prods at his divorce remorse, and the fragile shell suggests someone whose premonition of the tragic has served him as a justification for a life excessively insular and self-protective.⁶ Ferguson's final self-examination in Hayesville is self-accusatory, then; back in the "land of guilt," he manages an at least provisional self-affirmation.

Upon Ferguson's return home, the morning newspaper informs him that his colleague (whom he had viewed as a sort of father figure) has died, to which Ferguson reacts with "exultation" he must suppress.⁷ Ferguson's stepson has stayed home this day with a sore throat, and as the boy's mother brings him breakfast in bed, Ferguson "remembered those lost mornings when he, too, stayed home from school" (45). Intuiting the drift of the story's ending precisely, William H. Pritchard perfectly introduced the sentence that follows: "In one of Updike's longest sentences . . . the sickbed is lovingly exfoliated" (192):

the fever-swollen mountains and valleys of the blanket where books and crayons and snub-nosed scissors kept losing themselves, the day outside the windows making its irresistible arc from morning to evening, the people of the town travelling to their duties and back, running to the trolley and walking wearily back, his father out suffering among them, yet with no duty laid upon the child but to live, to stay safe and get well, to do that huge something called nothing. (46)

Earlier in the story, Ferguson failed with his own children to resurrect his experiences travelling with his father, in part because the world had changed so radically over those years; here, nostalgic reenactment is more efficacious because it invokes a spiritually tinged self-perception of the sort described in “Augustine’s Concubine”: “this amorous youth whose precocious and epochal intuition it already was to seek truth and truth’s Lord not in mathematics nor the consensus of the *polis* but in one’s own unique and uniquely configured self. . . .” (830). What Ferguson arrives at in the last sentence of “The Egg Race” is a “reverent examination of one’s own unique and uniquely configured self.” “The house in all its reaches attended to him,” Updike continues, “settling, ticking, clucking in its stillness, an intricately worked setting for the jewel of his healing; all was nestled like a spoon beneath his life, his only life, his incredibly own, that he must not let drop” (46). The Egg Race, which he had previously perceived as “tragic, as one of the tough things” because of the competitive edge and naturalistic certainty that nearly all of the racers lose, is now transformed via this sick day reminiscence into an objective correlative of existence, into a form of self-affirmation, a reminder of Ferguson’s “unique and uniquely configured self.” It is also his (and the story’s) rejoinder to the archaeologist and classmate’s charges of Ferguson’s self-indulgence.

Obviously, “The Egg Race” is not the story embodying the perfect foil to David Foster Wallace’s broadside against Updike in his essay “John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One; Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?” A better counter, arguably, appears in *Self-Consciousness* in an oft-cited passage in which Updike identifies his hawkish stance on Vietnam and devotion to Christianity with his devotion to self:

My undovishness, like my battered and vestigial but unsundered Christianity, constituted a refusal to give up, to deny and disown, my deepest and most fruitful self, my Shillington self—dimes for war stamps, nickels for the Sunday-school collection, and grown-ups maintaining order so that I might be free to play with my cartoons and Big Little Books. I was grateful to be exempted from the dirty, dreary business of

maintaining the overarching order, and felt that a silent non-protest was the least I in gratitude owed those who were not exempted. (141)

Ferguson never considers political implications in his narrative, but in invoking his Hayesville/Shillington self, he is harking back to a day on which he was exempted from “maintaining the social order,” a day on which he was able to commit himself thoroughly to his “deepest and most fruitful self,” his Hayesville self, when allowed to stay home from school to do nothing other than to take care of “the jewel of his healing” (46). Wallace would have found Updike’s *Self-Consciousness* argument juvenile and would very likely have rejected the resolution of “The Egg Race” on the same ground. What that assessment underestimates in the story is its dramatization of the extent to which Ferguson’s memory of a blameless day off from school in childhood bears so much significance for adult Ferguson, a man who has travelled so extensively in “the land of guilt.” The innocence of that sick-day memory allows him a brief respite from guilt. What Wallace would surely also have noticed—and what Updike unmistakably did—is that Ferguson’s lovely sick-day epiphany contains its own tacit indictment: in “The Egg Race,” Ferguson never resolves the self-recriminatory realization that his “land of guilt” is one because he cared for others there less well than he cared for the “one life he must not let drop”—his own. His Egg Race reminiscence provides Ferguson with a provisional self-affirmation, but the *Problems* stories never fully resolve the issue of affirming the self without its becoming a justification for insufficiently caring for others.

“The Egg Race” is a great Updike story because it so perfectly sets the value of self-affirmation—to which he so often returned in his fiction and autobiography⁸—against the responsibility to others that his protagonists reject in divorcing and remarrying. However extraordinary his literary craft, not even Updike could discover a way to make it resolve this profoundly human dilemma—guilt vs. self-gratification, responsibility vs. sensual pleasure—that haunts the last three *Problems* stories this essay addresses (“Love Song, for a Moog Synthesizer,” “The Fairy Godfathers,” and “Atlantises”), all of which dramatize in painful detail the excruciations of postmarital recoupling.

No story in *Problems* better exemplifies the collection’s preoccupation with guilt and self-recrimination than does “Guilt-Gems,” which represents another attempt on Updike’s part to turn “the curve of sad time [*Problems and Other Stories*] subtends” into shapely, moving fiction. “Guilt-Gems” is a narrative concatenation of experiences that make its protagonist feel lesser or greater guilt. Ferris, middle-aged

and recently divorced, takes the opposite tack from “The Man Who Loved Extinct Mammals”: rather than sublimating his suffering through paleontological study, Ferris masochistically confronts the pain he has caused, reifying his emotional devastations into what he characterizes as “Guilt-Gems.” Ferris had, the story’s narrator explains, “discovered in the blue ground of his midnight brain certain bright moments that never failed to make him feel terrible. Guilty. The treasure was of inestimable value” (60). So significant to Ferris’s life are these treasures that his narrative is a detailed inventory of them, incorporating a set of standards by which their emotional intensities might be contrasted. In making a fetish of these sources of pain, he organizes them into stratifications of emotional effect.

His younger daughter’s explosion at him, “I think you’re very *selfish!*” (for leaving the family, assumedly), earns only a middling score: “Her accusation had the flaw that it was *meant* to make him feel guilty; and such a moment is to the real thing as a cultured pearl is to the found pearl” (61). That is, intentional hurtfulness on the part of family members is artificial; only disguised, illicit actions qualify as found pearls, “guilt-gems.” (As both referee and scorekeeper, Ferris refuses to allow others’ motives to dictate his experiences of guilt.) Accordingly, the “real thing” is seeing his son trying to force the family cats back into the basement because he knows that their dander gives his father allergies and that Ferris will have a physiological rationale for leaving the house if they sneak upstairs. “Had Ferris imagined his son’s tears of despairing fury?” the narrator wonders. “He thought not; there has to be some shine of the extreme, to make a guilt-gem” (60–1). Guilt-gems are Ferris’s personal jewelry store of shame, his obsessive-compulsive stratification of the pain he has caused others. Most tellingly, the memory that fails to rise to the guilt-gem standard is of Ferris’s ex-wife: “while it was widely agreed he had treated his ex-wife reprehensibly, her image shed his guilt as a seal sheds droplets of water.” Then, Ferris blithely indicts himself: “He did remember this: at some point in their separation, Eileen had put her arms around him in their old kitchen, overcome by the sight of him once more leaving, and had sobbed; and by sympathetic pumping action her belly beat against his like a heart. Like a heart: more background noise, momentarily amplified by a defect in his automatic deafener” (63).

Clearly, Ferris’s “automatic deafener” has been at work throughout the narrative as he rather impassively, and even artfully, juxtaposes one devastating moment with another, apparently unmoved by his ex-wife’s sobs or the “background noise” of her belly’s beating like the heart that he seems to lack. The story’s conclusion confirms its ironic take on Ferris, who “was further soothed by this discovery: in amassing these guilt-gems, in reducing the matrical terror and grave displacement

of his existence to a few baubles he could, as it were, put in his pocket and jingle, he was, doubly, guilty” (65). The amassing of these guilt-gems becomes itself a form of sublimation, a deliberate patterning of pain that effectively distances Ferris from it. He is doubly guilty because the gems themselves induce guilt and because his organizing of them lessens the guilt, thereby generating more. Given that all of these guilt-gems could have been Updike’s experiences (the cat/allergy issue is invoked specifically in *Self-Consciousness* [101]), the story opens a markedly post-modern possibility for making its author triply guilty: he has taken guilt-inducing incidents, created a protagonist to turn them into “guilt-gems,” and created a bauble for the *New Yorker* in a publishable story titled “Guilt-Gems.” Extinct mammals aren’t the only means of deflection a guilty ex-husband can employ to distract himself from shame; a short story, Updike demonstrates with highly self-conscious guilt-ladenness, can become an even more effective aesthetic dodge, a means of articulating pain while simultaneously sublimating it. Probably the most tacitly self-lacerating of the *Problems* stories addressed in this essay, “Guilt-Gems” is otherwise typical in its unmistakably critical stance toward its Updike alter ego: Fraser’s bleak Boston Commons “miracle,” Tod’s insistence upon making Princess pay in “Love Song,” Ferguson’s failure to transform the “land of guilt” into something less solipsistic in “The Egg Race,” and Tod’s characterization as death and Pumpkin’s as hollow in “The Fairy Godfathers.” From these landscapes of self-recrimination rise Mr. and Mrs. Farnham.

If Mrs. and Mr. Farnham *do* believe in “best selves,” they don’t require the employment of fulsome psychiatrists to sustain them. Memory provides all the assistance they need. “Atlantises” dramatizes the recently wedded couple awkwardly encountering memories from previous marriages they don’t share, recalling amours from the past imaginatively transformed into the mythological Atlantis. (The Farnhams’ marriage exists in a second Atlantis—thus “Atlantises” of the title.) Overall, Mr. Farnham regards that earlier Atlantis more romantically and nostalgically, musing that, “He had got out just in time. Atlantis was now sunk beneath the sea. It had been sandy, marshy, permeated by glistening water like something very rotten, and doomed. Odd moments of his life there, as detailed and difficult of explanation as religious visions or archaeological finds, returned to him” (66–7).⁹ Evoking a few of those “Odd moments” and their incommunicability to Mrs. Farnham is much of the gist of “Atlantises.” Updike’s citations from Plato’s “Critias” convey the cultural cataclysm of Atlantis’s sinking, which then serves Updike as a metaphoric configuring of the two eras and the unbridgeable gaps between Mr. and Mrs. Farnham’s

two marriages. This incompatibility, unlike the perversities that frequently mark the earlier five stories, is humanly recognizable, ego-affirmatively justified.

Conveniently, no culpability attaches to the vanishing of Atlantis: human beings aren't responsible for natural disasters. Consequently, the terrible separation guilt of "Guilt-Gems," the collection's penultimate story, is largely absent from "Atlantises," which portrays its protagonist couple as settled, sane, and maritally contentious; what replaces that guilt is Farnham's nostalgic preoccupation with the mythic realm of Atlantis—that is, with the women he knew there. He recalls one who assisted him after a nail pierced his foot, necessitating a tetanus shot, a lost golf game, and a conflict with his son: "Of all these consequences, none endured now but the somehow uneradicated image wherein, at sunset, at one of those typical Atlantan beach parties, with their poignant intersections of childhood and adulthood, conjugality and infidelity, this woman in no way especially dear to him had taken pity on his buffoonishly displayed discomfort and led him to the water. . . ." (67). Nothing much evolved from this experience: "That was all. The memory, now sunk so deep in the currents of time, had invested it with an idyllic grandeur, magnified like a plaster castle in an aquarium and perhaps lent a touch of eternity by the uninvited kindness of the woman. On Atlantis, every woman was a priestess" (68). This is *Couples*, transformed by the male imagination into an irrecoverably lost world; meanwhile the prose evokes ironically tinged sympathy in the reader rather than a consciousness of weirdly hyperbolic expression.

Mrs. Farnham had resided in Atlantis as well, and she recalls much less fondly similar events: "'After church,' she said, 'all the husbands would play touch football, while we sat on the cold grass reading the damn Sunday paper. Or softball, depending on the time of year. Once we even had a track meet'" (69). She terminates their Atlantis dialogue by reminding Mr. that neither of them is young as they were then, a gesture that reminds him of another woman from that place/time who was frequently anxious that her husband and children would arrive home early to discover her and Farnham together. "The very atmosphere of Atlantis, in such moments," the narrator suggests, "seemed a shimmering fabric that might tear." In Farnham's idealized vision, Atlantis never tore, never delivered him up to the consequences of his erotic choices. "On the sloping banks of the river," Farnham recalls, "dark mud mixed with granite and clamshells, an old man would be tying a dinghy, or some children might be skipping stones, to the admiration of a pet dog. The innocence of the scene would float up to their windowsill, and tremble through, it seemed in memory, while their breathing stopped and their hearts thundered on" (70). That blameless river, clearly, would subsequently engulf Atlantis. The innocence of that

scene floating up to their windowsill is antithetical to the woman's apprehensions about discovery, but with "their breathing stopped," Updike is also setting up the story's ending.

First, however, he gives Farnham a final judgment on Atlantis, one that conveys unambiguously how serious Updike was about this trope: Mrs. accurately accuses Mr. of mentally reminiscing about old girlfriends, which she knows because, as she says, "The light in your eyes. They get green." Mr.'s recollection follows:

The same light, sea light, had trembled through and saturated the skin of the priestesses as they lifted on an elbow and listened for that which was forbidden to be discovered. The sacred laws of Atlantis were written on golden tablets. The tidal world outside creaked, as with a complexity of winches—gulls, oarlocks, children's voices. And the alien corn outside his window dimmed, became husky, negligible, permeated by the memory of Atlantis, its curving waterways, its towering cities, its endless parties. A whiff of salt water wakened him to the present reality; he looked across the breakfast table and said, "Don't cry." (70)

Given how centrally nostalgia continued to pervade Updike's fiction, it is possible that he never surpassed the beauty of this passage's paean to and evocation of Atlantis. The priestesses are curious about "what is forbidden to be discovered," but they are not gratified because Atlantis exists without guilt: husbands and children never burst in on lovers when they're unexpected. (There is not a word in the story about the Farnhams' previous spouses.) Atlantis may have suffered its fate via water, but Farnham remains unreconciled to the corn he now must live amid, which easily gives way to memories of the "curveless waterways" and "endless parties" of Atlantis. In admonishing Mrs. not to cry, Farnham is very clearly projecting, talking to himself.

At the story's end, it is Mrs.'s turn to recall her past. On a drive to Connecticut for the wedding of Mr.'s daughter, Mrs. Farnham is reminded by a tower they pass of a Navy frogman she dated before marrying Farnham. His job had been to ensure that frogmen in training breathe out sufficient bubbles to prevent their lungs from exploding in the depths of that tower, pulling them, as she explains, into "a kind of compartment until you'd got up your nerve and start blowing bubbles again." Consequently, it was his responsibility to make sure that the recruits' breathing does not stop while their hearts thunder on. Farnham is impressed by this account, and he tries to draw her out about the frogman. "He had his points," she responds, and when Mr. asks how well she knew him, her answer, as her eyes turn green, is "Pretty."

She is no more willing to confide details of her past to her husband than he is to her. (Perhaps this was the moment for “She had become his wife.”) In silent response, affirming the connection they won’t discuss, “Farnham, heading toward his daughter’s wedding along the mazy coast, prayed: O rise, frogman, smoothly and without panic, up from the depths, trailing your train of air; bring us news of sunk Atlantis, our fabled pasts. Keep us in touch” (71). This strange prayer, addressed to one who saves others from drowning until they regain the nerve to keep blowing bubbles, effectively ties the frogman to sunken Atlantis, translating him into a messenger from those depths. What the story leaves gapingly ambiguous is whether constantly returning to “our fabled pasts” is psychologically healthy, and whether “keep[ing] . . . in touch” with Atlantis isn’t a template for a contemporary marriage destructively sunk in an idealized yesterday. Adam Begley was cited earlier, arguing that the preface to “Hub Fans” marked “a chapter that would be coming to a close with [Updike’s] new marriage. He was saying good-bye to years of philandering, retiring as a womanizer” (208); “Atlantis” is clearly a story mourning the passing of that era for Farnham, whose love for his new wife fails to preclude his eyes from going green. How to “keep us in touch” with that era without letting the contact disable Farnham’s present marriage isn’t answered by the story, but this much is: one way to “keep . . . in touch” with it is to write a story like “Atlantis” which dramatizes simultaneously the pull toward the idealized past and the desire to live effectually in the present. With the invocation of that nuanced tension in their marriage, the Farnhams enter the realm of domestic realism inhabited by the Maples for thirty years of narratives; the Atlantis allegory complicates the parallel, but the Farnhams emerge nonetheless as a fully realized couple, one confronting thoroughly human dilemmas.

Thus does Updike close *Problems and Other Stories*, the collection spanning 1972–8. Its final story appeared in the *New Yorker* on November 17, 1978, not quite fourteen months after his marriage to Martha Ruggles Bernhard on September 30, 1977. Two final points about “Atlantis”: Mr. and Mrs. Farnham are characters, rather than caricatures, their preoccupation with the past seeming complexly human compared to the fabulist depiction of Tod/Death and Pumpkin/Hollow. *Problems* closes, then, with a reversion to form for Updike, with a story, stylistically at least, that might stand with “Separating” and “Here Come the Maples,” the collection’s two Maples stories. And yet, given the domestic realism of “Atlantis,” how very strange it seems that the first story Updike published on a recently married

couple resembling the Updikes of Georgetown, MA, emphasizes not early marital equanimity but depicts instead the couple ruefully indulging in nostalgia for the past and for past lovers. And yet, “Atlantises” appears to sustain few of the tendencies of “Love Song, for a Moog Synthesizer” and “The Fairy Godfathers” to offer dourly ironic introductions to Tod and Princess’s courtship, which are prefaced by the unappealing portrait of Fraser boomeranging between homes and women in “Domestic Life in America.” The story perhaps most likely to evoke sympathetic feelings in the reader, “Guilt-Gems,” features a protagonist who collects his experiences of separation anguish as if they’re baubles in his pocket, the pain muted by his “automatic deadener.” A nearly self-flagellating story, “Guilt-Gems” seems to function as the fictional confession that transforms Tod and Pumpkin into the Farnhams.

However much Updike ironizes Ferris’s insensibilities in “Guilt-Gems,” it seems likely that he needed to write that implicitly self-lacerating story in order to move from the fabulism of “Love Song” and “Godfathers” to the compelling domestic realism of “Atlantises.” That supposition provokes the ultimate unanswerable question: what is the relationship between these stories and their creator’s experience in the world moving from his first marriage into his second? Why does he present so querulously the ultimate familial choice of his lifetime? Was “Guilt” (the original title of “Guilt-Gems”) obtruding upon Updike’s capacity to dramatize this relationship more positively, or was he insisting that these stories are fiction and his life is private, and that the reader is deluded if s/he reads them as autobiography? Just as in “Guilt Gems,” in which self-recriminatory memories are simultaneously a means of distancing Ferris from the pain he has caused others as well as a memorial provocation of that pain in himself, so for Farnham in “Atlantises” his new marriage is meaningful only if buoyed up by the harrowing memories of “our fabled pasts” (71)—the lost Atlantis he prays to the frogman to provide heartrending reminders.

“A guilt-gem is a piece of the world that has volunteered for compression,” Updike opened the final paragraph of “Guilt-Gems.” “Those souls around us, living our lives with us, are gaseous clouds of being awaiting a condensation and preservation—faces, lights that glimmer out, somehow not seized, save in this gesture of remorse. Sifting them through his brain, Ferris would grow dulled to their glitter, indifferent to life and able to sleep” (64–5).

For Ferris, at any rate, travels in the land of guilt had ended; for Updike, “Atlantises” seems to constitute, at least partially, *Problems* solved.

NOTES

1. The six stories, presented in the order in which they appeared in *Problems and Other Stories*, were written between September 1974 (when Updike moved from Ipswich to Boston) to July 1977, ten months after Updike's marriage to Martha Ruggles Bernhard (Carduff, *Early Stories* 924; *Later Stories* 950). "A Constellation of Events," which dramatizes a woman's committing herself to an affair with a man resembling Updike, figures in the evolution of Updike's ability to write effectively about emotional dislocations in his life. The story was originally submitted to the *New Yorker* on March 11, 1975, but Updike withdrew it for fear of legal action by Martha's husband (Begley 365–6), and it was published in the *New Yorker* in 1985.

2. Ferris, Fraser, Ferguson, Farnham—"I have written about aging, doddering, nostalgic American men whose names begin with 'F' before," Updike explained in his note to "Playing with Dynamite" in *Best American Stories 1993*, "and let loosely related incidents weave their way around a central theme or bitter fact before, but the recipe seemed to produce a warmer richer dish than usual [in "Playing with Dynamite"] (375). My argument here is that these *Problems* stories with F-named protagonists may be rich, but they aren't warm.

3. In both the *New Yorker* and *Problems* printings of the story, the "miracle" electric sign alternates between "10:01 and 10 [degrees]" (49, 173); his perception of the repeated integers dramatizes Fraser's frantic need for connection, coincidence, and continuity, in this winter wasteland. Updike's revision of the "miracle" to "12:00 and 0 [degrees]" in the *Later Collected Stories* version retains the emotional credulousness with which Fraser observes the world after his traumatic weekend, but it adds the suggestion that both gauges have reached their extremities, increasing the suggestion of his having entered a point of no return, a subjective twelfth of never.

4. Throughout *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs*, Updike describes his parallel childhood feelings of the adult world protecting him so that he could devote his time to coloring books and Mickey Mouse cartoons. He recalls during his Shillington walk in the 1980s "that I had once hastened low to the ground, day after day, secure as a mole, in the belief that I was known, watched, placed" (27). Ferguson takes similar pride in being "known" in Hayesville.

5. In "Updike in Love," Donald J. Greiner shows that Mary Landis of "A Sense of Shelter" is a composite of Updike's Shillington High classmates, Jackie Hirneisen and Peggy Lutz (58). Recollected in similar terms by David Kern, Sandra Bachmann Lang, with whom Kern has dinner in "The Road Home" (2004), is also modeled on Peggy Lutz.

6. In *Self-Consciousness*, Updike worried that success had made him smug. "The critics who found me callow might be right: I had been lucky, and, as the lucky will do, had become hard hearted" (151). ". . . [A]t some point I had acquired an almost unnatural willingness to make allowances for other people, a kind of ready comprehension and forgiveness that amounts to disdain, a good temper won by an inner remove" (256).

7. "Deaths of Distant Friends" supplies a possible explanation (though no justification) for Ferguson's exultation over his colleague's death: "The world is getting lighter. Eventually there will be no one to remember me as I was in those disarrayed years. . . . The deaths of others carry us off, bit by bit, until there will be nothing left, and this, too, will be, in a way, a mercy" (162).

8. "Precociously conscious of the precious, inexplicable burden of selfhood, I have steered my unique little craft carefully, at the same time doubting that carefulness is the most sublime virtue . . .

I have absorbed the belief . . . that our instincts and appetites are better guides for a healthy life, than the advice of other human beings" (*Self-Consciousness* 257).

9. This sentence, invoking memories "as detailed and difficult of explanation as religious visions," seems to anticipate the stories Updike crafted in later life ("The Guardians," "The Laughter of the Gods," "Kinderszenen,") that evoke so lovingly Updike's childhood memories as to seem to make them approach "religious visions."

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Updike, Melville, and the Domestic Novel: *A Month of Sundays* and *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities*

CHRISTOPHER LOVE AND JEFFREY PUSCH

In a 1981 lecture titled “Melville’s Withdrawal,” John Updike concluded that *Pierre; or, the Ambiguities* (1852) was a groundbreaking domestic novel, despite its bizarre and complicated plot (*Hugging the Shore* 85). Indeed, Melville scholars consistently rank *Pierre*¹ as one of Melville’s greatest works, often second in his oeuvre to the majestic *Moby-Dick* (1851). In later writings, Updike continued to discuss *Pierre*, its genesis and composition, and he recognized its verging parodic style and action in addition to its realistic portrayal of a desperate artist torn between commercial success and artistic fidelity. While reviewing Philip Roth’s novel *Zuckerman Bound*, for example, Updike finds Roth’s protagonist akin to Melville’s Pierre Glendinning—whom he characterizes as a “driven young writer tortuously struggling with the besieging shadows of a feminized, claustrophobic America” (*Odd Jobs* 373). Throughout Updike’s commentary on Melville, he praises Melville’s refusal to relapse into drab, commercial fiction, positing him among the first modern artists, a writer who was “at war with [his] audience’s expectations” (127).

While acknowledging its faults and the disastrous effects that *Pierre* had on Melville’s career, Updike emphasized the innovative nature of the novel that perplexed critics and scholars alike for over a century and a half. *Pierre*’s parodic and transgressive style was lost on its prudish nineteenth-century audience who had zero taste for novels that satirically and vulgarly mocked the hallowed values that undergirded sacred sentimental domestic novels, such as Susan Warner’s *The*

Wide, Wide World (1850). Indeed, *Pierre* so scandalized Melville's reputation that it ruined his career as a self-sustaining professional writer, leading to the infamous attacks on his very sanity.² Nevertheless, Updike rightly points out that the novel, along with *Moby-Dick*, marks Melville's artistic watershed, a turning point in his vision for himself as an artist and his work (*Odd Jobs* 127).

Despite Updike's clear admiration for Melville as a groundbreaking artist, most scholars have focused—consistently and justifiably so—on Nathaniel Hawthorne's influence rather than Melville's.³ However, Updike wrote and spoke far more about Melville than has been sufficiently accounted for. Like Melville, Updike shocked audiences and transgressed boundaries of what could be written in fiction; indeed, both writers were far more controversial than Hawthorne for the daring nature of their writing. Moreover, Updike's reading of Melville predates his reading of Hawthorne,⁴ and, significantly, both Melville and Updike shared an important endeavor that proved crucial to the maturation and deepening complexity of their work: they both reinvented Hawthorne's domestic novel, a genre in which the institution of Christian marriage and traditional sexual mores are upheld. Although many American writers, such as Henry James and William Faulkner, have at some point engaged Hawthorne's work, Melville and Updike both identified a crucial essence in Hawthorne's domestic writing: its daring to explore the ambiguous nature of morality regarding sexual mores, marriage, and religion.

If *Pierre* was a book ahead of its time, then the novel would seem more at home in 1975, the year of Updike's first installment of his Hawthorne trilogy, *A Month of Sundays*, than in 1852. In *Pierre*, Melville revises and evolves the ideas Hawthorne set forth in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) to their most blasphemous extent. While Updike may be similarly utilizing characters and plot elements from *The Scarlet Letter* in *A Month of Sundays*, it is Melville's *Pierre* that Updike echoes in his parodic, intentionally overwrought prose and his transgressive reconfiguration of the domestic novel. Therefore, when considering *A Month of Sundays*, in addition to *The Scarlet Letter*, we find Melville and *Pierre* as integral to fully understanding Updike's rewriting of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Updike's revitalization of American domestic fiction. As James Schiff and Jane Tompkins have pointed out, there are many versions of Hawthorne, as readers, critics, and writers have created versions and crafted interpretations of his work that are heavily shaped by historical and social context. Melville was the first to craft his own version of Hawthorne, and it is this version of the author that has the most relevance to Updike and *A Month of Sundays*.

The significance and scope of Updike's project in revitalizing American domes-

tic fiction and rewriting Hawthorne are profound, not just in relation to Updike and Hawthorne, but also in relation to Updike's relationship to the deeper context of nineteenth-century domestic fiction. By engaging Hawthorne, Updike also engages Hawthorne's own historical context. Certainly, this context includes Melville's Hawthorne-inspired foray into the genre of the domestic novel with *Pierre*. Therefore, by comparing Updike's *A Month of Sundays* to Melville's *Pierre*, we provide a wider framework in which to understand Updike's relationship to Hawthorne, Melville, and domestic fiction as a lens for understanding the American nation.

We cannot overlook how significant and vital the nineteenth-century domestic novel was in creating a new and unique American literature, one that reimagined the domestic sphere in uniquely American ways.⁵ The domestic novel provided a medium through which the crucial issues of the country played out, one in which the roles of men and women in marriage and in the home were being redefined and reexamined for the young nation. Although the domestic novel was dominated by women writers, Hawthorne responded to its popularity by delving into the genre himself and reexamining the concepts of Christian morality that these novels conveyed. In *Sensational Designs*, Jane Tompkins asserts that Hawthorne's work exemplifies the domestic (or sentimental) novel of the mid-nineteenth century. These domestic novels espoused the "sanctity of the home," the positive moral effects of sentiment-based Christian marriage, and ultimately "the bringing of souls to Christ" (Tompkins 18, 149). Hawthorne's two exemplary novels, *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, therefore, participate in the discourse of nineteenth-century domesticity, which has at its center sentimental Christianity and its power to reform the nation. In short, the domestic novel helped shape the type of nation that America was and could become.

Despite Tompkins's assertion that Hawthorne's work was often conventional, Melville believed Hawthorne's art went beyond that of any writer of his day. Indeed, Hawthorne opened new moral and theological possibilities for his admiring protégé, which helped Melville reimagine the potential for philosophical and metaphysical postulations in both the sea novel and the domestic novel (as exemplified in *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, respectively). In his first book, *Typee* (1846), Melville showed interest in the variation of domestic relationships he saw during his sea travels. These experiences no doubt influenced him to reimagine the domestic sphere and later radically reinvent the domestic novel with *Pierre*. In *Pierre*, Melville postulates not only a new type of domestic realm, but a new type of nation no longer saddled with an old-world morality not fit for this young, modern country

and free from the haunting sense of guilt that pervades Hawthorne's work. When we read *Pierre*, we can study the ways Melville expanded the possibilities for and altered the genre of the domestic novel, which, in turn, informs our understanding of Updike's approach to the genre and Hawthorne.

Furthermore, Updike's participation in domestic fiction by rewriting Hawthorne is equally important to his reimagining of a nation that was also in a great transition during the social, cultural, and political upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. Like Melville, Updike finds Hawthorne's moral and theological conundrums innovative and enticing to engage (Plath, "Updike" 122–23). As James Schiff explains, Hawthorne's work provided Updike with a template to further his ideas on "the conflict between matter and spirit" and "the anxiety and fear of moral damnation, the interrelationship between sex and religion, and the use of ambivalent symbolism" (6). Melville and Updike find Hawthorne's intricate exploration of morality, sex, and religion tantalizing while at the same time unsatisfying in its reach and conclusions (Kelley 496–97, Schiff 7–8).

In rewriting Hawthorne, both Melville and Updike take on Hawthorne's configuration of the complex relationships among religion, sin, and morality. While Melville offered *Pierre* to enter and radically alter the popular discourse of the domestic novel, Updike's domestic writing during the 1960s and 1970s was unique for the time, especially among the most celebrated writers of the period. Indeed, Donald Greiner points out that Updike's domestic fiction became a source of criticism and placed him outside contemporary trends (*John Updike's Novels* xi). Furthermore, Updike admitted that his approach "has not been the kind that is especially congenial to my time" and that he aligned himself with "domestic writing" rather than the writing of his contemporaries Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, and James Jones (Plath, *Conversations* 49, 178).

In contrast to the specific conventions of the nineteenth-century domestic novel, domestic fiction in the twentieth had a looser definition that generally applied to any works that centered on the home and family relationships. By rewriting and engaging Hawthorne, though, Updike recovers and revitalizes the American tradition of the domestic novel as a genre of serious literary merit and moral, religious, and theological debate, essential to understanding the country at a time when the genre was largely ignored by leading figures of American literature.⁶ As one of the most prolific and observant writers of the American Protestant middle class, Updike demonstrates that the issues raised by the nineteenth century's domestic novels remain crucially relevant to understanding American life. Amid the outward social and political upheavals of the sixties and seventies,

Updike understood that the most dramatic elements of many ordinary Americans' lives—and their private moral quandaries—still manifested within the triad of marriage, religion, and conventional morality that played out in suburbs, small towns, and middle-class homes still deeply influenced by Christian sense, guilt, and religiosity. Though Updike is an inheritor of Hawthorne's literary influence, Schiff argues that Updike also "parodies and deromanticizes Hawthorne's text," incisively critiquing Hawthorne's "moral tenets" (Schiff 7–8). But in revisiting Hawthorne, Updike leads us to reexamine the context in which Hawthorne's art is situated and from which Hawthorne is understood. Melville's *Pierre* is the first significant novel written to respond explicitly to Hawthorne's domestic writing and expand and revise his ideas. Reading Melville, and specifically *Pierre*, provides us with a more nuanced understanding of the genre of the domestic novel and the conceptions of Hawthorne that Updike is working with in *A Month of Sundays*.

In addition to *Pierre*, Melville's essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" provides another basis for understanding the link between Melville and Updike through Hawthorne. In this essay, Melville first posits Hawthorne as a criminally misunderstood writer poised to become an American Shakespeare. The essay was originally published on 17 August 1850, a little less than two weeks after Melville met Hawthorne in person during a gathering in the Berkshires. Melville contends that most people understand Hawthorne as a "pleasant writer," but it is "the hither side of Hawthorne's soul . . . [that] is shrouded in blackness, ten times black" (520, 521). This darkness makes Hawthorne, like Shakespeare, a master of "the great Art of Telling the Truth," which Melville defines as one with "those short quick probings at the very axis of reality" (523, 522).

However, Melville does not simply laud Hawthorne as a model American writer; he also sets himself up to be the recipient of Hawthorne's greatness, inheriting his knowledge of "Truth" telling. Indeed, the metaphor of inheritance is apt, for Melville describes this in frankly sexual terms. "Hawthorne has dropped germanous seeds into my soul," Melville writes, "and further, shoots his strong New England roots into the hot soil of my Southern soul" (529).⁷ Wyn Kelley argues that in this essay and elsewhere in Melville's correspondence, Melville couches the intellectual influence that Hawthorne has on him in sexual terms, reflecting the "ecstasy" that Melville felt of "reading and being read" (505). It is difficult to deny the effect that meeting Hawthorne had on Melville. In the late summer of 1850, he was struggling with his novel about a white whale as Hawthorne's reputation was flourishing in the wake of *The Scarlet Letter's* release. Melville scholars such as Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford⁸ have charted the changes Melville made

to his manuscript after 5 August, moving the novel away from the straightforward seafaring style of his early novel *Typee* to his metaphysical musings in *Mardi* (1849). Ultimately, Melville dedicated *Moby-Dick* to Hawthorne as a gesture of gratitude and acknowledged the latter's literary influence.

Yet it is Melville's follow-up to *Moby-Dick* that has the most significant bearing on our understanding of John Updike and *A Month of Sundays*. Pulling inspiration from popular sentimental tropes as well as from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of the Seven Gables* (Brodhead 175), Melville hoped to reinvent the domestic novel in *Pierre* just as he intended *Moby-Dick* to be a radical departure from his other sea-adventure novels (Kelley 497). In *Pierre*, Melville utilizes and parodies domestic tropes that would have been familiar to readers of novels such as Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*, a novel that was rivaled only by *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in popularity. *Pierre's* Lucy and Isabel, for example, are cut from the same cloth as typical domestic heroines: pious, pure, hardworking, and faithful. Indeed, both are models of what was known at midcentury as True Womanhood. Yet Melville also draws plot points from the domesticity in Hawthorne's *Seven Gables*: a prominent New England family in decline, a mysterious portrait, and a central character's near-magical artistic abilities. Finally, Melville grafts semibiographical elements onto *Pierre's* central quest. *Pierre's* search for and failure to find ultimate Truth coincides with his failure to write a commercially successful metaphysical novel, echoing Melville's complaint to Hawthorne that "Dollars damn me" (qtd. in Parker 713). Melville paraphrased critics of *Moby-Dick* in blasting *Pierre's* attempt at a similar novel, allowing him to disparage inattentive readers while simultaneously indicting the conventional domestic novel as a genre.

For those unfamiliar with *Pierre*, it might be beneficial to provide a quick plot summary. The novel's hero, Pierre Glendinning, is the sole heir of a once-proud estate. He is engaged to the angelic Lucy Tartan and has a *very* close relationship with his mother, Mary, whom he calls "sister." *Pierre's* life is shaken when he meets Isabel, a woman who claims to be his half-sister and who bears a striking resemblance to a portrait of *Pierre's* deceased father. Deciding that he has filial obligations to Isabel, Pierre calls off his engagement to Lucy, announces that Isabel is his wife to avoid besmirching his father's name by revealing an illegitimate child, and travels to the city (with a fallen woman, Delly, in tow). Pierre acquires lodging at a former church, now mostly occupied by a ragtag community of philosophers called the Church of the Apostles. The community's leader provides Pierre with a pamphlet containing an argument for relative, rather than absolute, morality. As Pierre slaves away on a new novel, Lucy arrives (in the guise of *Pierre's* cousin) to

live with him and Isabel. Yet mounting threats from Lucy's brother, Mary's death, and the anger from his publishers, lead Pierre to self-destruct and commit murder. Lucy learns that Isabel is Pierre's sister and dies from shock, and on the final page Pierre and Isabel poison themselves.

Pierre is the typical sentimental hero, complete with the "polished steel of the gentleman, girded with Religion's silken sash" (11). Lucy adheres to the four pillars of True Womanhood—purity, piety, domesticity, and obedience—and Isabel's backstory could have been drawn from any popular domestic fiction of the day: she is poor, makes a meager living sewing, and attempts to evoke pity from Pierre, the hallmark of the sentimental heroine. "Oh, my brother, my dear, dear Pierre," she says in her letter to him, "pity, pity—here I freeze in the wide, wide world" (70). Even the phrase "wide, wide world" is key for Melville's audience, for that is also the title of Susan Warner's 1850 best seller. Finally, Pierre's mother is the typical stately sentimental matriarch, and her estate provides Pierre with the sentimental hero's usual legacy.

Despite adhering to certain tenets of the sentimental genre, Melville's novel also makes some departures. The language of Hawthorne, and that of conventional domestic texts, enact its virtues: it is pious and inoffensive even when engaging transgressive ideas about religion and women. Moreover, the domestic novel relies on a common sympathy its authors anticipate in its readers; indeed, Hawthorne was praised in his day for adhering to such conventions (Tompkins 18). Melville's language in *Pierre*, though, is radical. In fact, it reflects Jane Tompkins's description of Melville's style, which features characters who "rant incomprehensibly about esoteric issues; and their ravings verge dangerously and irresponsibly on blasphemy" (19). Further, Melville's "convoluted and purple prose" is "deliberate" in *Pierre*, as it serves a fundamental purpose to his generic innovation (Bercovitch 451). Although Hawthorne inspired Melville to take on the domestic novel, Melville's language in *Pierre* breaks up the politeness and prudishness of the genre. Updike's language in *A Month of Sundays* makes a similarly radical departure from Hawthorne's and reveals a strong affinity with Melville's style. For example, Marshfield digressively and heretically ponders the virtues of adultery. Discussing *A Month of Sundays*, John McTavish notes that "Updike's method of storytelling offends many people, particularly Christians"; yet, as he himself remarks, Updike provides serious "moral investigations of how we live" (66, 167).

Therefore, the parodic elements of both novels undermine the conventions of the domestic novel. For example, early in Melville's novel, Pierre is effusive in his hyperbolic praise of Lucy's beauty: "love in us is profane," he claims, "since it

mortally reaches toward the heaven in ye!" (8). The narrator's description of Lucy is equally parodic:

there always will be beautiful women in the world; yet the world will never see another Lucy Tartan. Her cheeks were tinted with the most delicate white and red, the white predominating. Her eyes some god brought down from heaven, her hair was Danae's, spangled with Jove's shower, her teeth were dived for in the Persian Sea. (28–29)

The increasingly hyperbolic tone leads readers to understand that Melville is parodying the language of the domestic novel as much as he is using it. This becomes obvious during the scene when Pierre has dinner with his mother and the local parson, aptly named Mr. Falsgrave. During their discussion of Delly, a local woman who has had a child out of wedlock, Mary exhibits nothing but scorn for the poor girl. A sentimental figure such as Delly usually evokes sympathy, yet Mary and Falsgrave conclude that it would be unchristian to pity Delly. With everyone except Pierre set on abandoning Delly to her fate, it is up to the young man to set a new standard of sympathy through which Melville redefines the domestic novel.

Melville's new standard is one of relative morality. Domestic novels usually have distinct and religious morals, often relating to a True Woman's loyalty to God, husband, and family (in that order). In *Pierre*, however, Melville crafts moral situations that are saturated in ambiguity. Immediately following his mother's condemnation of Delly, Pierre asks about the duty a legitimate son should have for an illegitimate sibling. Falsgrave equivocates, saying that it is a question of "morals absolutely incapable of a definite answer, which shall be universally applicable" (109). While it is true that Falsgrave lacks the spine to give Pierre a definite answer (and perhaps is anxious because he is sleeping with Pierre's mother), the message about relative morality stands. Eventually, Pierre reads an obscure pamphlet titled "Chronometricals and Horologicals," which similarly argues that it is unfeasible to live one's life under "heavenly" morality and men must therefore rely more often on "terrestrial" morality (214). This leads the reader, if not Pierre himself (it is unclear if he understands the pamphlet's message), to recognize that Melville is removing absolute morality from the center of the domestic novel and replacing it with something much more ambiguous.

Both Updike and Melville flaunt sexually charged language throughout their novels. Updike's narrative juxtaposes sexual description with acts of reading, and Melville repeats the sexual metaphors he used in "Hawthorne and His Mosses" to describe the effect that a text, particularly a sentimental text, has on its reader. In *A Month of Sundays*, Tom Marshfield's own narrative arouses him and seduces

Ms. Prynne, and in *Pierre* characters become vibrantly sexual through reading and writing. Early in Melville's novel, the narrator argues that a "sister had been omitted from the text" of Pierre's life, which conflates the ideas of reading, family, and, eventually, sex (11). Additionally, the texts Pierre reads have a distinct impression on him. Dante and *Hamlet* give him insight into his initial dilemma, while the act of reading Isabel's letter causes him to "irretrievably entangle his fate" with hers (69). But ultimately the texts have a sexual effect on him. For example, he receives a letter from Lucy in which she claims that she has forgiven him and wants to live with him in the city. And here is where Melville's robust parody arises once again. Lucy writes ecstatically:

I must come! I must come! God himself cannot stay me, for it is He that commands me. . . . But thou art my mother and my brothers, and all the world, and all heaven, and all the universe to me—thou *art* Pierre. One only being does this soil in me serve—and that is thee Pierre. So I am coming, and quickly. . . . Look for me then. I am coming! I am coming! I am coming!" (308–9)

The effect of this overly sexualized missive is immediate. Pierre "started up from his plank" as he felt an "outswelling" of an "angelical plume of humanity" (309). In his aroused state, he visits Isabel, who immediately says, "now thou art risen" (310). He explains that they will soon have a visitor, but she seems distracted: "then her dry lips slowly parted—'my bed, lay me, lay me!'" (310). The sexual energy of the letter has traveled from Pierre to Isabel, for despite her initial jealousy she asks if it would "be well, if I slept with her, my brother?" (311). Therefore, it is not the rigid moralistic texts that ultimately shape the lives of Pierre and his three women, but texts sexual and secretive and vaguely incestuous. Therefore, the novel posits a new domestic sphere, one without absolute morality and traditional marriage, but one populated with relative morality and polyamory, themes that also underlie Updike's *A Month of Sundays*.

Melville implies that the problem with traditional marriage, the institution defended by domestic novels, is its insistence on moral certainty. Marriage "removes [a husband's] morbid *subjectiveness*," Pierre learns "and makes all things *objective*" (280). Pierre's collection of domestic novels only offers "false, inverted attempts at systematizing eternally unsystematizable elements" so they likewise offer no answer to life's ambiguities (145). The novel depicts a new domestic unit, merging Pierre with his half-sister (posing as his wife) and his former lover (posing as his cousin). This inverts the traditional domestic sphere, with the women entering the marketplace with their music and art, while Pierre cloisters himself like a monk

searching for Truth. The result is a union seen as vile by other characters but which has religious implications for Pierre himself. Indeed, he refers to dinner with Isabel as “the real sacrament of the supper” (165) and claims that “Love is built upon secrets [that,] being mysteries, ever pertain to the transcendent and the infinite” (87). By focusing on the ambiguous elements of love and life—their “secrets”—Pierre is ultimately able to recognize the need for an understanding of relative Truth. In his writing, Pierre admits that he can finally “catch glimpses, and seem to half-see, somehow, that the uttermost ideal of moral perfection in man is wide of the mark” (272), echoing both the pamphlet on relative morality as well as Melville’s own claim that Hawthorne revealed the truth only in “snatches” (“Hawthorne and His Mosses” 523). Therefore, Melville can forge a domestic novel that imagines a new domestic sphere, one where traditional marriage is replaced with a more radical understanding of True Womanhood, where sex and writing are intertwined, and where the only moral is that there is no absolute morality. Not surprisingly, the novel proved disastrous for Melville as it mocked, parodied, and rejected most of the tropes of contemporary popular novels. He challenged his audience and was met with outright rejection.

Yet it was not only the generic issues that so offended Melville’s readers but the novel’s themes: implied incest (Pierre and his mother, Pierre and his half-sister), critiques of middle-class Christian morality, and an argument for utter moral and religious relativism, especially within a sexual context. Ultimately, *Pierre* stands as an indictment of nineteenth-century virtues inculcated by the domestic novel, such as the piety and chastity of the True Woman or the apparent moral superiority of devout Christians. In this light, Updike’s *A Month of Sundays* has more in common with *Pierre* than the guilt-laden, but ultimately socially conservative, *Scarlet Letter*. In regard to characters like Tom Marshfield of *A Month of Sundays*, “Updike’s characters resist the gloom” of Hawthorne’s tortured souls (Greiner, “Body and Soul” 478).

By reading *A Month of Sundays* as the spiritual successor to *Pierre*, we can understand that Updike’s critique of middle-class domesticity and the sexual mores of 1975 are analogous to Melville’s indictment of the nineteenth-century Cult of Domesticity. Indeed, Updike sympathizes with Pierre’s “ordeal of writing” that stems from having artistic ambitions and at the same time having to write to feed a growing family—which mirrors both Melville’s life at the time and Updike at the beginning of his career. This textual curiosity fascinates Updike for its evocation of pious ridicule. Updike quotes from a fictional review of Pierre’s book that

denounces it as blasphemous, and then from actual reviews of Melville's novel, which is denounced along the same lines: *Pierre*, according to contemporary views as quoted by Updike, espouses "atrocious doctrines," "glaring abominations," "blasphemous rhapsody," and Satanic "virtue and religion" (qtd. in *Hugging the Shore* 87). Accusations of blasphemy are more readily understood when Updike's novel reveals that middle-class domesticity was just as sacred in 1975 as it was in 1852.

One of the charges from his prospective publisher against Pierre the character is that Pierre has deceived them, promising a popular novel. As Updike notes, the publisher calls Pierre a swindler because rather than submitting a manuscript of a conventional novel, Pierre turns in the "blasphemous rhapsody, filched from the vile Atheists" (*Pierre* 352). Pierre's refusal to turn in a popular novel also mirrors Melville's promises to his own publisher that he was working on "a regular romance," when, in fact—Updike points out—he was working on a parodic domestic novel (qtd. in *Hugging the Shore* 87). It is important to reiterate that the types of novels that Melville and Pierre are supposed to produce are novels that would reinforce traditional morality and other conservative social values—resulting in a conventional novel morally instructive for its audience and one that would reveal the traditional moral values and authority of their authors. The ideal reader of these novels could then take moral instruction from the work. However, Pierre's and Melville's ambitions have a different kind of ideal reader in mind—the kind of reader that Melville was of Hawthorne, seeing through to the darkness of Truth—the moral ambiguity that Melville and Pierre are so desperate to explore in their works. Melville and Pierre then become the moral authors of the new, ambiguous moral disorder.

Like Melville's Pierre, Updike's protagonist in *A Month of Sundays* is supposed to produce a certain type of text, one that will please and meet the moral demands of his audience. The novel's plot centers on Reverend Tom Marshfield, a cognate for Hawthorne's Dimmesdale, who is banished to a desert retreat for a month after committing adultery. His crime is polyamory; his sentence is literary penitence. And like Melville and Pierre, Marshfield does not produce the type of text that is supposed to serve its absolute moralist purpose. Instead, Marshfield refuses to conform to the expectations of the church authority. As a minister, he is supposed to uphold traditional Christian values. However, his writings not only discuss the virtues of masturbation and revel in his amorous adventures but also explore how heavenly morality is incompatible with his instinctual sexual drive, which is fueled

by both biology and his own longing for spiritual Truth. Furthermore, Marshfield rejects the purpose of his writing: to reform him morally so that he can reestablish his moral authority and return to the pulpit, authoring sermons to morally instruct his faithful audience. But in writing, Marshfield chooses not to repent but instead to seduce his ideal reader Ms. Prynne, the manager of the motel to which he is exiled. It is here in Updike's parodic, intentionally overwrought prose that we see other similarities to *Pierre*. Marshfield careens from English to Latin to French; in one of his "sermons," the disgraced reverend, in churchly tone, preaches on the virtues of biblical "adulterous women" (55). The sexual puns and double entendres abound as they do in Melville's novel, and Updike even has Marshfield imply an incestuous relationship between his paramours (Jane, his wife, and Alicia, his lover). Marshfield remarks that he "felt my body, in Jane's mind, a kind of shadow of Alicia's, its value enhanced by her secret erotic regard for the other woman (women had just begun to call each other 'sister')" (119). Just as Melville's novel implies Isabel's erotic regard for Lucy through their competitive, polyamorous relationship with Pierre, Marshfield senses Jane's erotic desire is heightened by consummating her romantically competitive relationship with Alicia through him. Through Jane's hidden erotic desire, he remarks "She had become 'good in bed'" (119)—just as the erotically charged, orgasmic exclamations indicate Lucy and Isabel's sexual readiness for Pierre's reconfigured morality. Marshfield imagines that tapping into the depth of Jane's sexual desire and fantasy might unleash a hidden part of herself. Polyamory, then, can reveal a truth to her that each member of the love triangle might devilishly explore, consequently relieving his wife's sexual repression and in turn bringing more out of her than she had previously known—perhaps even, in Marshfield's fantasy, reinvigorating each of their relationships.

As less experienced men, both Pierre and Marshfield hold reverence for female virginity. Staring into the ultrapure Lucy Tartan's bedroom, Pierre feels "a wonder reverentialness. The carpet seemed as holy ground" and "Every chair seemed sanctified by some departed saint" (45). He catches "glimpses of its most inner secret shrine," and as he moves across "the magic silence of the empty chamber," Pierre notices the "snow-white bed reflected in the toilet-glass" and steps toward "the spotless bed" (46). Mesmerized, he sees Lucy's nightgown on the bed next to one of the pillows: he "longed to unroll the sacred secrets of the snow-white, ruffled thing" (46). Lucy abruptly enters, startling him and herself. Innocent as she is, she notices that he looks different but is unaware of his sexual arousal: "Why, Pierre, thou art transfigured; thou lookest as one who—why, Pierre?" Pierre replies, "As one who had just peeped in at paradise, Lucy" (46). Similarly,

in Marshfield's first sexual encounter with Jane, a cognate for the True Woman, both are virgins. Marshfield wanted to undress her, but unable to control his excitement, he "made of her clothing an asymmetric mess of rumples and undone snaps" (65). Marshfield recalls that Jane's body looked like "cut marble" and that "No formula, utilitarian or idealist, could quite do justice to the living absoluteness to it" (65). Her bedroom, he tells us, "surrounded me like a fog of dream furniture as my eyes in twilight drank" (65). Like Pierre, Marshfield is entranced at the sight of and sense of unspoiled feminine virtue. Although they simulate sex, Jane holds onto her virginity, and the young Marshfield is moved to propose: "I introduced the word 'marriage.' Jane nodded, silently. I saw her as 'wife' and went blind with pride" (67).

However, Melville and Updike undo their protagonists' feelings about the sacredness of female virginity and its holy transformation during the rite of marital sex. While catching sight of Lucy's bed in the mirror, Pierre, Melville writes, "seemed to see in that one glance two separate beds—the real one and the reflected one—and an unbidden, most miserable presentiment stole into him. But in one breath it came and went" (46). In a moment, Pierre is shaken by the image of the two beds: one is the "real" bed and the other a reflected one—the ideal counterpart. The mirror momentarily reveals a disturbing truth, one that suddenly shakes him but is ultimately unable to sober him up from the intoxication of Lucy's holy-sexual aura. To enjoy the heavenly pleasures of Lucy's bed and body, Pierre must graduate to her husband before being rewarded with the paradise her pristine, celestial sexuality offers. But the disturbing impulse Pierre senses portends what he will begin to realize once he learns that his revered father had committed adultery and fathered his half-sister Isabel. The "realness" of the bed, or in other words, the realness of sex, its worldliness rather than its unworldliness, is revealed to him, and it is this realization that sets Pierre upon his quest to discover the truth of moral ambiguity.

During his marriage to Jane, Marshfield has a similar awakening. Reflecting on his proposal to Jane, Marshfield remarks that there is nothing special about the word *wife*; in a footnote, Marshfield writes that the word "is just the Anglo-Saxon *wif*, for woman" (67). *Wife* has no special meaning; Marshfield implies that any woman is, by definition, a *wife*. Skeptical of the specialness of *wife*, and thus marriage, he proclaims marriage a sacramental precursor to the "sacrament of adultery" (59). Just as *Pierre* hypothesized a domestic unit comprised of three women and a single husband, *A Month of Sundays* is attempting to deconstruct the altar of monogamy by calling into question the sanctity of "man and wife."

Nevertheless, neither Pierre nor Marshfield finds complete, lasting satisfaction in adultery or in illicit relationships. Pierre marries Isabel in part to cover up his father's adultery as well as his transgressive, incestual, and forbidden attraction to her, and further welcomes Lucy to join in a plural marriage with him and Isabel. Ultimately, Pierre's violation of man-made morality causes traditional society to punish him when he accidentally kills Glen Stanly, his cousin and Lucy's fiancé, and Lucy's brother, Fred Tartan. After the scuffle, Pierre is immediately arrested, leaving him, Lucy, and Isabel to their fateful ends. Marshfield, too, is in the middle of a transition, catalyzed by his first foray into adultery. "Alicia in bed was a revelation," he writes in his journal (43). Marshfield says he "inherited her" (34), which recalls Pierre "inheriting" Isabel, his sister and soon-to-be wife. Like Isabel, Alicia is a musician, and she is artful, taking liberties with the usual tempo of the church music. She, as artful musician, conveys a truth that initiates Marshfield's awakening. Though Marshfield complains about her tempo while playing the church organ, the conversation is teasing and flirty and drifts toward their mutual unhappiness. Alicia begins to open up to him about her dissatisfied life, but it is he who turns the conversation toward himself. Their talk is about to conclude when Marshfield impulsively decides to continue their discussion; he wants her to tell him what is wrong with him, and she becomes his counselor. Within a few moments, Alicia makes him face the truth about his marriage to Jane, which over the years has become dull and drab. Alicia, "by reclaiming a wedge for mankind for the Good and the Beautiful," reinvigorates Marshfield, but the truth that she reveals (his marital unhappiness) and the rapturous sex in which they engage prove only to be a stage in Marshfield's greater transition (51). Though Marshfield extols the virtues of adultery, he soon finds it leads to other complications and hassles. Alicia wants marriage, and they soon bicker and feel mutual jealousies; her affair with Ned Bork crawls under his skin, and Marshfield's affair humiliates Jane. Finally, his affair with Frankie Harlow leads Alicia "to want to destroy" him, and his exile soon follows (200). Consequently, Updike plunges his narrator into the same confusion of ambiguity that threatens to unravel Pierre. Marshfield and Pierre both spurn traditional domestic arrangements but find that the alternatives are fraught with turmoil.

As men in transition, neither Pierre nor Marshfield fully recognizes that one discovery only leads to another set of angst-ridden complications rather than a reconciliation of the moral ambiguities they have uncovered. Both men long for final divine revelation. "Silence is the only Voice of God," writes Melville, "Silence permeates all things" (203). Because of God's silence, Pierre and Marshfield turn

to writing, lest other writers become authorial interpreters of Truth. Though Marshfield is initially resistant to the mandate to write, he finds himself “warming to this, which is not my intent” (8). Indeed, Marshfield finds it titillating that he can turn his writing into an act of transgression—not against God but against the prescript of church authority—and embark on his own quest for spiritual renewal. Both Melville and Updike posit writing as a form of spiritual recalibration: writing calls to the surface not the “ultimate element” (*Pierre* 282) that both *Pierre* and Marshfield seek but at least exposes the ambiguities of morality and immorality, doubt and faith, body and soul, all of which complicate their readers’ understanding of the roles of morality and sex in middle-class domesticity. *Pierre* and *A Month of Sundays* serve as critiques of the reverence that middle-class America holds for traditional marriage as both the ultimate sign of happiness and an end to the quest for spiritual fulfillment, instead positing marriage as a social institution wrought with ambiguities that often cannot relieve or reconcile physical, artistic, and spiritual yearnings.

Although more than a century separates the two novels, American reverence for monogamous marriage seems to have dissipated little between the mid-nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth. Certainly, critiques of traditional marriage were already in circulation by the 1970s and even abundant in Updike’s earlier works; however, in *A Month of Sundays* Updike unmasks marriage’s hallowedness at its most theological, institutional core among middle-class Christian Americans who still hold on to its sacramental and moral status. Both Melville and Updike are seriously committed to probing answers to the questions that their novels pose. Therefore, by reinventing the domestic novel both writers challenge readers to reconsider ways of conceptualizing the moral world and the institutions used to configure it.

Both Melville and Updike also experiment with the form of the domestic novel. Indeed, *Pierre* and *A Month of Sundays* exhibit variation not only on the domestic novel’s themes, but they feature juxtapositions of genres such as the epistolary and seduction novels, both of which were precursors to the mid-nineteenth-century domestic novel; moreover, these genre elements were often used in the narrative of the domestic novel for plot clarification and didactic purposes.⁹ For example, letters illuminate concrete facts about the characters’ histories and motivations and distinguish seduced women from domestic heroines. However, in *Pierre* and *Sundays*, these same elements instead obfuscate perspectives and moral distinctions. Formal experimentations are replicated by the two novels’ protagonists, but these experiments challenge both writers and their readers. In fashioning their writing,

both Pierre and Marshfield imagine ideal readers who will recognize the allure of their work. Pierre embarks on his quest to become a writer who will discover and reveal sacredness through his own writing. He fantasizes about being read and that he will “give the world a book, which the world should hail with surprise and delight” (282). Melville, though, comments on Pierre’s ambition, explaining that his hero’s belief that his genius will be rewarded financially is a mistake. Audiences will not share in Pierre’s desire “to mine into the pyramid” only to discover man’s “vacant” and “vast” soul (283). Instead, they prefer his conventional sentimental poetry. Pierre, though, idealizes readers like himself, those who share in the writer’s desire to probe into the “miserably neglected Truth” of the world (281). Thus, both writer and reader share in the transgression of writing and reading texts that dare to expose that “this world is a lie” (207). Indeed, through the reading and writing of letters, the characters of *Pierre* continue to discover truths, uncomfortable ones, that nevertheless reveal the “lie” of their sentimental, conventionally moralistic world. These discoveries and their reading and writing of each other encourage their erotic, transgressive reactions to reading and being read, leading to the expansion of ideas and possibilities.

Like Pierre, Marshfield also stumbles upon this realization. However, *Sundays’* first-person narrative from Marshfield’s perspective intensifies its protagonist’s subjectivity while *Pierre’s* third-person narrative is more consistent with the domestic novels of its day. By limiting perspective, Updike complicates even further than Melville the conventional domestic novel’s pretensions of truth and absolute morality. Melville chose the tragic ending for *Pierre*, electing one of the binaries of the comic and tragic endings, providing in one sense an unambiguous finale to his novel centered on ambiguity. Pierre is not didactically punished as a lesson to readers as he would be in a conventional domestic novel; instead, the narrative makes clear that with his ambiguous moral sense, Pierre is no longer fit for this world insistent on its conventional moral certainty. Updike, though, deviates from the clarity and certainty of the domestic novel’s typical ending and that of Melville’s definite conclusion. Blurring the lines among genres, Updike engages in formal playfulness that underscores the novel’s theme of ambiguity.

With its focus on the meaning of Christian marriage and its sanctity, *A Month of Sundays* opens with the central subject of the conventional domestic novel. But Marshfield’s sermons and journal entries are also letters of seduction; the journal recounts his adulterous affairs with varying degrees of pride and guilt. In juxtaposing generic conventions, Updike complicates writerly meaning and readerly interpretation; furthermore, this complication allows for the reevaluation and

contemplation of ideas, oneself, and—in the spirit of the domestic novel—the nexus of sex, marriage, adultery, morality, and religion. Marshfield's moral journey and determinations are not clearly discernible and his fate is strikingly different from *Pierre's*. By the mid-1970s, the American middle class, though still conservative in its views, could find salacious interest in reading about the sexual exploits of an adulterous minister. In the conventional domestic novel, the seducer and the seduced can only be redeemed through traditional Christian marriage and sincere repentance. But Updike rewrites such a formula, and with the novel's influx of humor and generic playfulness, Marshfield's reader can enjoy and participate in the seduction while contemplating, even if not accepting, the minister's perspectives. Though *Pierre*, like Melville, was destined to be misunderstood with devastating results, Updike's novel takes place in an America Melville's transgressive writing anticipated. Yet despite the humor of *Sundays*, Updike still confronts serious issues about the nature of morality, marriage, religion, and adultery. Like Melville, Updike demonstrates through his fiction that transgressive writing allows both writer and reader to expand on ideas and contemplate the nature of their beliefs. Indeed, before Marshfield embarks on his seduction of Ms. Prynne, he declares that "All men hate God, Melville says" as he rails against the "off-center center" nature of things (a golf hole being one of them) (25). Marshfield takes for his theology Karl Barth, longs for Kierkegaard,¹⁰ and asks about his father's beliefs, "where is the leap! the abyss, the black credibility of the *deus absconditus!*" (32). Marshfield is attracted to blackness, and, as with Melville's novel, *A Month of Sundays* explores an ambiguous morality in which a writer surreptitiously finds his ideal reader as they both confront unconventional truths and discover the erotic relationship between writing and being read.

In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Nathaniel Hawthorne suggests that solace can be found in a reorganized domestic sphere in which genuine, equitable love can redeem and restore a fallen world. Its conclusions follow in the mode of the popular sentimental novels of the period, despite Hawthorne's complaints against "scribbling women" (qtd. in Tompkins 125). Though Melville offered Hawthorne praise for *Gables*, he resisted its conservatism and instead dared something more radical in *Pierre*. With *Gables*, *Mosses*, and *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne, Melville felt, had dared to peer deep into the intimate lives and minds of his fellow Americans. Believing that he was acting as the inheritor of Hawthorne's genius, Melville writes *Pierre* as a transgressive experiment in genre, rewriting the laws of the domestic novel and dramatizing a domestic unit characterized by polyamory and incest. In *A Month of Sundays*, Updike provides his own reworking of the domestic novel,

further tracing and revealing the intricate ambiguities of American domesticity. Therefore, Updike's experiments with the domestic novel and its themes revitalize the genre, demonstrating its possibilities for contemplating moral, spiritual, and religious quandaries. With this framework, it is easy to see that *Pierre* and Melville are as significant a point of reference for *A Month of Sundays* as are Hawthorne and his novel. By highlighting the generic and thematic similarities between Melville's and Updike's novels, we believe that astute readers can pursue new avenues to critical investigation, avenues that acknowledge that Updike's critiques of middle-class domesticity (as well as critical evaluations of Updike's novels) mirror concerns that Melville articulated a century before. Thus, Updike scholarship might focus on the generic lineage of Updike's novels to better understand the nuances of his moral concerns, social critiques, and formal innovations.

NOTES

1. Updike's 1981 commentary on *Pierre* predates by a decade the novel's critical revival by Melville scholars, initiated by Sacvan Bercovitch in 1993 (Levine and Weinstein xvi).

2. The anonymously penned "Herman Melville Crazy" headline appeared on 7 September 1852 in the *New York Day Book* in response to *Pierre*. In addition, contemporary reviewer Fitz-James O'Brien remarked in *Putnam's Monthly* that the novel shows "inexcusable insanity" (February 1853). Both reviews are reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of *Pierre, or the Ambiguities*, pp. 431, 437.

3. Donald Greiner points out that "Updike's knowledge of Melville's canon was impressive" ("Broad-sides" 58). Charles Berryman acknowledges that Updike "continued to study and respond" to both Hawthorne and Melville; Berryman also states that Updike "compromise[s] the difference between the two" (197) as well as noting that both authors "fascinated" him (204).

4. Updike states that he had read Melville in his youth but had not read Hawthorne until "around age 30" (Plath, *Conversations* 178).

5. Refer to the introduction to and chapter six, "The Other American Renaissance," in *Sensational Designs* by Jane Tompkins for a more specific discussion of the domestic novel's popularity and influence during the mid-1800s.

6. *A Month of Sundays* predates renewed scholarly interest in domestic fiction, largely spearheaded by Nina Baym (*Woman's Fiction*, 1978) and Tompkins (*Sensational Designs*, 1985). The domestic novel had long been criticized for its supposed lack of literary merit. Both Tompkins and Baym argue for the reevaluation of domestic fiction as serious and incisive literature (see Baym and Tompkins).

7. Melville posed as a Virginian vacationing in Vermont.

8. See Parker, Hershel. *Herman Melville: A Biography (Volume 1, 1819–1851)*. Johns Hopkins Press, 1996, and *The Writings of Herman Melville*, Vol. 6: *Moby-Dick*, Historical Note. Edited by Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, Northwestern UP, 1988, pp. 581–762.

9. *Charlotte Temple* (1791) by Susanna Rowson and *The Coquette* (1797) by Hannah Webster Foster are examples of the seduction novel, which serve as didactic warnings to women against predatory

seducers. In *The Coquette*, Foster uses an epistolary narrative form. Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie or, Early Times in Massachusetts* (1827) combines elements of the epistolary novel and seduction novel in forming one of the earliest examples of the nineteenth-century domestic novel.

10. Scholars have noted the relationship between Melville's fiction and Kierkegaardian thought (though Melville had not read Kierkegaard's work). For an example, see Lorentz, Jamie. *Sober Cannibals and Drunken Christians: Melville, Kierkegaard, and Tragic Optimism in Polarized Worlds*. Mercer UP, 2010.

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Transatlantic Updike

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European Perspectives on John Updike, edited by Laurence W. Mazzeno and Sue Norton. Camden House, 2018, 220 pages.

European Perspectives on John Updike is just one reason 2018 has been especially noteworthy for Updike studies. The year has also seen the reissue, through the Library of America, of Updike's first four novels packaged in a single volume; the paperback releases of both Updike's *Selected Poems* and James Plath's *John Updike's Pennsylvania Interviews*; and the publication of several new critical volumes, including John Svoboda's *Understanding John Updike* and Scott Dill's *A Theology of Sense: John Updike, Embodiment, and Late Twentieth-Century American Literature*. In addition, for the first time the biennial John Updike Society Conference was held abroad, in Belgrade, on the fortieth anniversary of Updike's visit to the then Yugoslavian, now Serbian, city. Despite some understandable reservations about moving the venue from more familiar domestic environs, such as Reading, PA, or Boston, to a distant city Updike had only briefly visited, the conference, thanks to the dedication of organizer Biljana Dojčinović and her colleagues at the University of Belgrade, proved an enormous success and augured well for the future of Updike studies.

Amid all this renewed attention, *European Perspectives on John Updike* ranks high in terms of importance. Its editors, Laurence W. Mazzeno and Sue Norton, are seasoned Updike scholars: Mazzeno edited *Becoming John Updike: Critical Reception, 1958–2010*, and the pair have collaborated before on two essays: "Updike's Personal Essays in the Later Years" and "Old World Readings of a New World

Novel: European Perspectives on John Updike's *Terrorist*." The genesis for this new volume of essays, the editors explain,

is encapsulated in an observation Updike makes in the introduction to part 2 of *Midpoint*: "distance improves vision." We wondered if the statement applies to geography as well as time. The possibility that European critics might not be so heavily influenced as their American counterparts by prejudices against Updike's open profession of his religious faith, or by the (misguided) notion that he is politically conservative, prompted us to ask, How do European critics contribute to an understanding of Updike's work that could complement the work of Americans, who have certainly been most active in studying his fiction, poetry, and essays? Second, is it possible to note a distinctly European perspective in approaching Updike? Or has globalization affected literary study to the point where nationality no longer plays a discernible role in literary criticism? (2)

The volume seeks to answer these questions through twelve essays, evenly divided into four parts, composed by contributors from a range of European countries: England, Ireland, Portugal, Serbia, Germany, Austria, France, and Greece.

The essays of Part I, titled "Coming of Age, Aging in Time," deal with the theme of maturation. In the first essay, "Under His Skin: Reconstructing the Adolescent Longings of a Would-Be Terrorist," Terese Botelho (Portugal) notes James Wood's and Don DeLillo's divergent views on the post-9/11 novel, with Wood predicting a retreat from social realism and DeLillo the need for greater engagement with the new realities of the post-9/11 world. She then points to how *Terrorist* contributes to the post-9/11 novel genre in that it focuses on the titular character, the terrorist, rather than, as is usually the case, the victims, and emphasizes Ahmad Mulloy's mixed ethnicity: an Irish American single mother, an Egyptian exchange-student father. More importantly, Botelho reads Ahmad as another in a long line of Updike's adolescent protagonists, and she places *Terrorist* within the American adolescent novel tradition, especially as that tradition was reconfigured in the 1980s and 1990s, when such novels were no longer marked by rebellion but instead "by the young characters' nostalgia for the very adult authority their predecessors rebelled against" (21). In the next essay, "'At the other end of life's rainbow': Rabbit's Journey from Adolescence to Old Age and Other Transcendental Trajectories," Eva-Sabine Zehelein (Germany) reads the Rabbit tetralogy via an idea introduced by Marcel Reich-Ranicki, "the most influential literary critic and public intellectual of his time" and the one through whom Updike and Rabbit "reached broader audiences" in Germany (29). For Reich-Ranicki, "the motif of ephemerality that the writer created through exceptional concreteness

and intensity of atmosphere” is at the “core of Updike’s *oeuvre*.” Zehelein focuses on the geometric arc, as experienced in basketball, golf, and the moon shot, as a key thematic and structural metaphor in the Rabbit novels, and she reveals how Rabbit’s eventual failure to attain transcendence is cast through images of gravity, descent, sagging flesh, and death. Comparing the Rabbit novels to “the movements of a sonata or a symphony” (47), Sylvie Mathé (France), in the volume’s third essay, “Intimations of Mortality: Death’s Shadow in Updike’s *Oeuvre*,” finds something similar: “a *pentimento* of death, despite Updike’s celebrated yea-saying” (45). Her essay, Mathé explains, “[d]iverg[es] from the familiar readings in Updike critical studies that have tended to foreground the life-affirming, salvation-oriented aspects of his work” and “seeks to map Updike’s journey into night and to sound the grief that, like a *basso continuo*, accompanies author and readers alike up to, in Henry James’s phrase, ‘the point where the death comes in’” (46). Just as Zehelein agrees with Joyce Carol Oates in viewing the Rabbit books as a “surpassingly eloquent elegy for the country” (39), Mathé agrees with James Schiff’s assessment of the final volume: “the accomplishment of this elegiac novel was that Updike was able to make a depressing work vibrant, an age-old subject fresh” (49). So much agreement among four Updike readers—two American, two European—suggests a high degree of transatlantic unanimity worth testing in the next nine essays.

Part II, “Love, American Style,” which addresses heterosexual love, opens with an essay by editor Sue Norton, an American critic long based in Ireland, and takes a fresh look at *Couples*, a novel Reich-Ranicki dismissed as a potboiler. Although published in 1968, *Couples* is “fortuitously set early enough in the decade to preclude its characters sufficient twentieth-century societal precedent for sexually hedonistic behavior, never mind its aftermath” (57). What the characters see as a utopia, Updike, from the perspective of decade’s end, sees very differently, as “a circle of friends who sexually embody the reputed American drive toward individualism” and American exceptionalism, and “who try as they may to imbue their ‘decadence’ with good intentions, repeatedly do harm to each other” (62–63). Brian Duffy (Ireland) continues the examination of longing and sexuality in the next essay, “Women in John Updike’s *Villages*: Back to the Madonna and Whore.” Here, Duffy “explores the way charges of misogyny made against Updike early in his career may have affected his later writing”—in particular, *Villages*, “the author’s final lengthy fictional exploration of his great subject, middle-class adultery in the second half of the twentieth century” (5, 72). Although he acknowledges that Updike had recourse to archetype and myth, such as the Tristan and Iseult legend, in creating his female characters, Duffy considers how Updike’s awareness of his

feminist critics may have influenced *Villages*, which he chooses to read through the interpretive lens of the Madonna and whore. As Duffy explains,

Updike had been well aware of the decades-long feminist criticism of his portrayal of women, yet he represents them in *Villages* in the very terms that drew such criticism in the first place. We may reasonably conclude, then, that the village wisdom that emerges from Updike's final lengthy reflection on men and women—in the explicit context of the appraisal of life—represents his considered view of the worth of women, which surely leaves an awkward question hanging in the air about this celebrated writer: Where in Updike is the love of women? (85–86)

And yet the essay, if not its author, leaves a Bakhtinian loophole; casting a sideward glance of sorts, Duffy's claim that "the sexual behavior [in *Couples*] is accorded a spiritual and sociological dimension that absolves it from mere debauchery" (79) is not so much at odds with Norton's well-argued view in the earlier essay as in dialogue with it. And it is precisely this sort of interpretive dialogism across essays that proves especially stimulating.

Such dialogism becomes more pronounced in Karin Ikas's (Germany) "The Art of Love: Pierre Bourdieu, Cultural Production, and *Seek My Face*," a Bourdieu-inspired reading of one of Updike's late novels. As Ikas writes, "Bourdieu's sociology of cultural production and symbolic power can serve as a framework to open up avenues of analysis to *Seek My Face* that are less likely to come into view through the more usual, less European modes of critical literary discourses that tend to circulate around the work" (92). Approaching *See My Face* via Bourdieu, Ikas reaches a very different conclusion about this other later minor work than Duffy does about *Villages*:

Thus Hope's critical ideation about the reductionist and sexually charged perception of women and women artists lends itself to the possibility that Updike is pointing the finger at himself, he of the phallic imagery, and the one-sided presentation of sexual life. His rendering of male desire has long troubled female readers and feminist critics alike. Against this background of alleged misogyny, and given that Updike, as Wilson Kaiser notes, "has often been accused of . . . emphasizing commercial success above other considerations" . . . we might well read the O'Keeffe scene as a *mea culpa* effort by Updike to enhance his own economic, social, and cultural capital.

Time will tell whether such a reading will prevail. Feminist critics, and all critics interested in gender, may return to such scenes in an effort to challenge the conventional and reductionist perception that, in the words of Mary Allen, for Updike "a woman is sexual and stupid (human) or she is frigid and intelligent (inhuman)." . . . Certainly

neither Hope nor Kathryn validates this dichotomy. Perhaps a Bourdieu-inspired approach will offer a profitable new path for gender-minded studies of Updike's work, providing alternative ways to think about the insistent questions posed by scholars . . . about Updike's understandings of the meaning—and in particular, the power—of love. (100–101)

In Part III, “Amazing Grace, American Faith,” the volume turns to religious belief as Andrew Tate (England), in “Psalmist of the Everyday: Late Updike, Aesthetics, and the Language of Praise,” puts a new spin on James Wood's frequently invoked (and much debated) objection to “the absence of intensity” in Updike's work. “Wood's dismissal of what he terms ‘mild gratitude’ . . . implies an incomprehension regarding the primacy of thankfulness in Updike's writing and world-view” (105). The writing from Updike's final decade, specifically *Seek My Face* and *My Father's Tears*, Tate contends, “may be read as a part of a long tradition that the Biblical scholar Walter Bruggemann has named ‘psalmic spirituality’” (107). Tate views Updike's “predilection for admiration” as “one form of a much deeper commitment to a language of praise and blessing” (106–107) and an appropriate means for expressing belief in a secular age. Aristi Trendl (Greece and France), in an essay titled “Guilt, Shame, and Hope in Updike's Short Fiction: ‘The Music School,’ ‘Guilt-Gems,’ and ‘Deaths of Distant Friends,’” examines the abiding role these three emotional experiences play in short stories composed across three decades. Trendl not only lends credence to Updike's claim, in a 1978 interview, that “The short story may be what I do best” (119); she also makes a strong case for an Updike who is less self-involved and solipsistic than is often claimed. As she states, “the stories’ reach goes far beyond a strict preoccupation with the self and embraces moral behavior” (120). As if in response to Tate's and Trendl's essays and indeed to much Updike criticism, the question Biljana Dojčinović (Serbia) poses in “Signs of Omission? Socialist Erasure of Religion in John Updike's Work,” is this: “Is it possible to read, understand, and interpret John Updike's work without making reference to the religious themes within them? Would such a reading inevitably shed one dimension of his fiction and make it flat, deprived of some of its essence, significance, and beauty?” (134). The answer is yes. Or rather, yes, but. For what interests Dojčinović is the way that Serbo-Croatian translations of Updike's work were presented to Yugoslavian readers at a time when discussion of religion was barred. She pays careful attention to the translations and more specifically to how translators' remarks shaped readers' understanding of Updike and his work (readers who were, she notes, mainly intellectuals and academics, not the general reader) and how the “religious dimension,” never entirely missing because smuggled in,

became more pronounced after Yugoslavia's breakup a decade later. Dojčinović also cautions against drawing conclusions for the whole of Communist Eastern Europe from the Yugoslavian example; Yugoslavia was socialist but separate from the Soviet Bloc and therefore open to the arts and on friendly terms with the US—until, of course, the US-led NATO air war against Serbia in 1999, seven years after the breakup. Among the important questions Dojčinović raises for future study: “What was it that made Updike’s work so interesting in Serbia, so far away from its original cultural context” (146) and “What did . . . increased [postsocialist] freedoms mean to Updike’s literary reputation in the region?” (144). But most important,

The question now is: Will readers in Serbia (and other countries that were formerly part of Yugoslavia) continue to show interest in Updike’s work? This discussion argues for his continuing relevance to academics, but one has to wonder if he will sustain a readership among those who are not part of academia. The political changes during the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium led the republics that once made up this country to become autonomous, claiming their own language even when these were obviously variants of a single language. The social context was changed deeply, locally, and globally; reading habits may change as well. Of course, it is possible that Updike’s talent as an observer and writer may make him a great discovery for new readers in the region once known as Yugoslavia and now called the western Balkans. What can be said with some certainty is that a completely new research effort will be required to trace Updike’s reception in the former republics of Yugoslavia after 1990. (147)

The collection’s final section, “Old World Myths, New World News,” deals with matters of influence as well as Americanness, intertextuality, and the news. In the collection’s only previously published essay, “‘Hey, Come On, We’re All American Here’: The Representation of Muslim-American Identity in John Updike’s *Terrorist*,” Ulla Kriebeneegg (Austria) responds to the negative reviews of *Terrorist* by using Zygmunt Baumann, Homi Bhabha, and Stuart Hall to demonstrate that Updike’s awareness of cultural diversity was in fact much greater than the novel’s reviewers and critics have claimed. In “Intertextual Updike: *Gertrude and Claudius*,” Judie Newman (England) uses de Rougemont’s and Erich Kochler’s contrasting views on the relationship between courtly love and society to explore two questions: Can love survive marriage? And which model of love is better for society? Whereas Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* comes down firmly on the side of social order, Updike’s *Gertrude and Claudius*—with its characters caught in a social net—is more open-ended or uncertain. In the volume’s final essay, “Rabbit and the News,” Kasia Boddy (England) begins with John William DeForest’s well-known 1868 essay on

the Great American Novel, then rejects Frederick Karl's criticism of the Rabbit novels as merely a "reprise of newspaper and magazine stories." Building instead on Judie Newman's 1988 McLuhan-inspired reading of the tetralogy, and effectively noting James W. Carey's distinction between communication as transmission and communication as ritual, Boddy charts the ways Updike deploys news and news media to dramatize Rabbit being "stranded" in the typographic world (184). In the glut of information that increases with each novel, Rabbit comes to realize that he is disposable, or as Reich-Ranicki would say, ephemeral. As important as what Boddy says is her deft use of archival material from the Updike papers at Harvard, another way this essay and this collection is transatlantic.

Harking back to questions posed by the editors about the utility of a European perspective in approaching Updike, what then are we to make of the fact that, contributors' countries and academic affiliations aside, there is relatively little that is specifically European about the perspectives offered in this collection? (The essays by Ikas, Zehelein, and especially Dojčinović are the most noteworthy exceptions: the first drawing on Bourdieu, the second on Reich-Ranicki, and the third on Yugoslavian translations.) Perhaps European perspectives, while present in the other essays, are more implicit than explicit. Or perhaps there is simply a great deal of transatlantic unanimity when it comes to what Updike's work means and how it should be approached, especially in a globalized "small world." Or, as Dojčinović suggests and Ikas argues, there is much to be gained by studying Updike in what I am tempted to call a less essentialist Anglo-American way, one that is more oriented to the local and serves, when necessary, to reveal cultural differences rather than obscure them. Indeed, the collection's editors, Mazzone and Norton, have themselves already made just such a contribution—and an important addendum as it were to Mazzone's *Becoming John Updike: Critical Reception, 1958–2010*. Not surprisingly, *The John Updike Review* has been in the vanguard of this movement, starting with Sylvie Mathé's 2011 essay on Updike's ambivalent reception in France in the journal's very first issue, and followed by a range of essays by international scholars, some dealing with international subjects, such as Ward Briggs and Dojčinović's 2015 essay on the biographical and historical facts behind "The Bulgarian Poetess."

European Perspectives points to an important sea change in the transatlantic Updike, a stepping eastward. In contrast to Fiona M. Green's *Writing for the New Yorker: Critical Essays on an American Periodical*, where the editor and all eleven contributors are British, or even Stacey Olster's *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike*, where all but one of the twelve essays were written by eminent American

Updike scholars, Mazzone and Norton's collection offers a range of voices from a variety of countries. But this is more than a numbers game. There are important, if still largely invisible, issues to be sorted out, especially when it comes to matters of local context. For example, while religious issues may have been suppressed in Yugoslavia, thus playing a role in translations of and commentary on Updike's work there, that was not the case in the Soviet Union at the same time. Further, as Orhan Pamuk says of *Rabbit, Run*, Updike provided a new understanding of America for Europeans:

the first Updike novel I ever read [was] *Rabbit, Run*, published in Turkish translation in 1971. This was a completely different, less dramatic but more believable and more intensely felt America than the one inhabited by Steinbeck's California fruit pickers or Hemingway's war-loving and assertive heroes, far from Faulkner's gothic atmospheres crumbling under the weight of the past and of problems of race. The dirty words and sexually explicit passages that were a problem for Knopf (and for the editor of the British edition) were less pronounced in the Turkish translation, but even from that distance, the reader could perceive that the latest news from America was all about the fragility and the fury of the individual, about sexual freedom, guilt and small-town life.

We need to ask in what contexts Updike has been read, for what reasons, by which audiences, to what ends, and under what constraints (if any). How was his writing translated, packaged and received, in its time and over time? While there is certainly reason to continue to explore *what* "Updike" means on his own personal and on American (and Anglo-American) terms, there is still a great deal to explore in regard to *how* that meaning is contextual and contingent, and there is perhaps no better place to start than abroad. At a time when concerns about Updike's posthumous reputation continue to surface, *European Perspectives*, along with the success of the 2018 Updike Conference in Belgrade and the Updike Society's decision to alternate future biennial conferences between the US and abroad, bodes well for the future of Updike studies.

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Updike's Aesthetic

JUDIE NEWMAN

A Theology of Sense: John Updike, Embodiment, and Late Twentieth Century American Literature, by Scott Dill. Ohio State UP, 2018, 204 pages.

Scott Dill's intelligent and engaging new study of Updike issues from the Ohio State University Press series "Literature, Religion, and Postsecular Studies," edited by Lori Branch, and although Dill is careful to point out from the start that he understands Updike's work as neither wholly secularist nor wholly sacramental, he appears broadly speaking to support Branch's contention that postsecular studies offer a valuable approach to literature. A caveat is in order here. Dill rigorously avoids suggesting that any one key idea will explain Updike and, very properly, frequently presents his arguments with careful qualifications and modifications. As the volume has no footnotes or endnotes, this makes for a rather less crisp style than one might wish, since all acknowledgments to other scholars and thinkers have to be made in the text itself, slowing the argument, but it allows Dill to make the fine distinctions necessary to his overall argument.

The term postsecular, something of a contemporary buzzword, appears to have taken off after the millennium, influenced primarily by the work of Habermas and by the perception of a need for compromise between secularism and religion, which is reinforced by the events of 9/11 and the continuing sense that uncompromising religious creeds, together with their forthright rejection by modernity, have contributed to terrorist outrages. There are, however, critics who argue that the term makes no sense at all, since most of the world never became secular in the first place. Certainly the figures for religious belief in the United States bear

this out, given the country has the largest Christian population in the world, some 60% of whom are actively churchgoing. In less tolerant societies, of course, embracing secularism would be dicing with death, as Salman Rushdie discovered. In Dill's reading, Christian theology occupies center stage. Updike's narrative style is characterized as "apparently secular but fundamentally theological" (25), and is understood in relation to Karl Barth's concept of secular parables, secondary forms of witness to divine truth that are not sacramentally related to the Word of the deity. The influence of Barth has been well documented by Updike scholars, notably George W. Hunt and Stephen Webb. Updike himself wrote in "Remarks on Receiving the Campion Medal" that the importance of grace as eclipsing good works is the central tension in *Rabbit, Run*, a conflict dramatized fairly obviously in the warring preachers, Eccles and Kruppenbach, for example. What is strikingly new, however, in this study is the close attention paid to the aesthetic consequences of Updike's beliefs. Dill expands on Barth's idea that human experience flourishes and becomes most fully human in expressing gratitude to the creator for the glories of the world, and he argues that gratitude, lyricism, and love are fundamental aspects of Updike's approach to the senses. As a result, the volume tackles one of the criticisms that has dogged Updike's entire career: the idea that his writing is overwrought, too fine-grained, overly attentive to the minutiae of daily experience. As J. A. Ward said, "the subjects he chooses to write about seem undeserving of his scrupulous care" (27). Joseph Epstein lamented that Updike "simply cannot pass up an opportunity to tap dance in prose" (55). Dill's argument provides a solid and intelligent rationale for Updike's particularization and a response to the charge that he is merely a consummate stylist, that he has nothing really to say.

The book is elegantly structured, written with some stylishness, and ambitious in its aims. Dill's overall goal is to understand more fully how literature shapes our sense experiences. Devoting one chapter to each of the five senses (plus a short epigraph on death), he argues that Updike's writing provides specific instances of sense experience that celebrate "God's good creation" (xiii). As a result, he develops a new aesthetic in which conventional "good taste" is rejected in favour of the joys of an abundant creativity. Nature's plenty becomes the foundation of an aesthetic. Rather than judging according to abstracted, universal standards, this new aesthetic depends upon experiencing the world's particularity, in all its manifold and changing detail. Taste becomes an embodied, experiential quality, developed more through repetition and variety, than through refinement and exclusion. The taste for the world is never fully formed; life surprises us all the time. In the discussion of taste (Chapter Three) a nicely turned analysis of three stories—"The Gun Shop,"

“The Music School,” and “The Full Glass”—brings out the idea that the world is an acquired taste, that taste does not and should not place a distance between the one tasting and the thing tasted, and that the relationship between material and immaterial is more of a continuum than it might seem. Chapter Four focuses on hearing, concentrating on music and the idea of grace as a physical experience, evoking moments when the individual is “in sync” with the world. Chapter One draws upon a sermon in *Toward the End of Time* that distinguishes between touching (Thomas to Jesus) and being touched (Mary Magdalene by Jesus) in order to consider the ways in which touch orients a sense of self. Writing about touch opens up new ways of being touched. Dill draws usefully here upon the autobiographical writings.

A vigorous case is also made for the inclusion of smell in aesthetics (Chapter Five). Accepting the body and its smells is an essential element in a sense aesthetic, even when (especially when?) the smells are not particularly enticing or are linked to sex or death. Dill also underlines the politics of smell, contrasting the deodorised, effaced bodies of a consumer society to those inhabiting countries less wedded to the idea of pure spirit or some other form of odourless ideal disconnected from embodied sense experience. In the example of *The Coup* (the subject here, along with *Couples* and *Villages*), the critique of American capitalism emerges through the smells of American bodies. Just as the Vietcong could reputedly detect US forces by the scent of toilet soap wafting through the jungle, Colonel Ellelou sniffed out capitalist infiltrators. Dill sometimes underplays the comedy here. Bech (“Bech Panics”), an urban Jew translated to a pastoral setting in Virginia, is driven to panic by the unfamiliar, all-pervading scent of horse manure, which he alone can smell. Dill draws the moral that the good is not necessarily immediately pleasant and the smell of rot and death may be a precursor to new life (in the fields and in the image of resurrection or spiritual rebirth.) But perhaps Bech, peddling his literary gifts in a girls’ school for a fat lecture fee, is getting a whiff of his own corruption. The evocation of horse manure in relation to pontificating literary celebrities is not unknown. Updike’s satiric gifts are not much in evidence in Dill’s argument, presumably because they sit ill with celebration.

The chapter on sight (titled “Seeing,” an important distinction that evokes an active participant) was at first less surprising to the present reader. As Martin Jay has amply demonstrated, the opposition between Word and Image has a long and fraught history, as has antiocular discourse, and the dominance of the visual image in the contemporary world is a constant feature of Updike’s writing (Newman *passim*). Updike’s characterisation of Rabbit as “spectacular man” in “Rabbit

Remembered” points explicitly to the influence of Guy Debord (*The Society of the Spectacle*) and the latter’s emphasis on the effects on modern individuals of the reign of the visual. There is, of course, an underlying theological foundation for antiocular discourse, in the opposition between Word and Image, the association of idols with paganism or heresy, and the tendency of the deity to be heard but not seen. Seeing is never neutral; Sartre, Foucault, Derrida, Laura Mulvey, bell hooks, and a host of others have explored the respective male, feminine, oppositional, imperial, and postcolonial gazes in classic works of critical thought. That sense of how we look, how that may distance us from the world, and how we can negotiate the difficulties of looking, permeates much of Updike’s fiction: from the picture windows of suburbia to racial politics in *Brazil*, the movie business of *In the Beauty of the Lilies* to the art world of *Seek My Face*. Here, however, Dill breaks new ground by focusing on Updike’s essays in art criticism, bringing out the sense of plenitude as a central concept in his aesthetic, and thus offering an original reading well worth considering. Basing his argument on Augustine’s dictum that love alone is capable of seeing, he understands Updike’s lyrically descriptive prose as a means of rendering the reader open to seeing the thing itself in all its specificity. Plenitude (a term with its origins in Plato and Plotinus) may be glossed as amplitude. Cézanne’s “Pines and Rocks” (Updike’s example) conveys the sense that there is so much to see, to know, and to love in the pines and rocks, as to constitute an ideal of inexhaustibility and therefore creativity; the sense of the world’s infinite forms as part of its goodness to which the artist pays homage by adding something new. Updike’s art criticism thus reveals a sense of the artist’s creative relationship with sense data. Whether the reader agrees with specific analyses, each chapter offers a fresh approach to the particularity of Updike’s style, fleshing out the aesthetic intentions inherent in the much-noted Updikean concern for detail in the evocation of ordinary life. There are judicious comparisons with his contemporaries (notably Don DeLillo, Susan Sontag, Flannery O’Connor, Patricia Highsmith, and Wendell Berry), and the analyses themselves always benefit from close and percipient readings of texts. At the beginning Dill raises the question of whether certain kinds of literature can create specifically religious affects. For readers steeped in Christian tradition this evocation of the Creation in all its variety probably can.

Unfortunately, however, much the same might be said of the major characters of *The Witches of Eastwick*. The theology of the senses seems not so very different in some respects from the witches’ neo-paganist emphasis on the centrality of the body and its smells and tastes in their worship of the Goddess, though the results in their case are disastrous. Indeed, Updike himself seems to have had second

thoughts about the novel; the sequel turns black magic into white and details the repentance of at least some of the group. In a more comic mode, *S.* also explores a group saturated in sensual theology (Tantric, Hindu, and a shopping basket of other beliefs) that does real damage to both its own disciples and the surrounding community. The celebration of the body (especially his own) by the cult leader in *In the Beauty of the Lilies* culminates in unmitigated disaster and a massacre. Even the bodily emphasis of *Couples* stands corrected at the close. Whether in coven, cult, or suburban clique, the celebration of the body often tends as much toward dystopia as to the expression of religious gratitude. Updike may chasten his ecstatic cultists at close of play, but he gives pagans and neo-pagans a fair run for their money, often as part of an anti-Manichean plot.

Dill's argument works best for short stories, where the emphasis tends to be upon the individual and the small space allows detailed close-ups and epiphanies. But the social world of the novel produces a much more conflicted, ambiguous message. The emphasis on accepting the Creation with gratitude becomes harder to sustain over the long timeframe of a novel; suffering and evil are more prevalent than in shorter works. There are, perhaps, elements in Updike's writing that make for a rather less grateful relation to the deity. Ann Coleman's long descent into madness and death in *Memories of the Ford Administration* comes vividly to mind. Arguably, too, death is less of a test of the good than is prolonged suffering, such as that of Jenny in *The Witches of Eastwick*, whose body slowly succumbs to cancer. Or, less dramatically, the large group of elderly and ailing characters from *The Poorhouse Fair* as well as from other works, including James Buchanan, Ben Turnbull, and Hope Chavetz. The problems are inherent in the nature of the novel itself, which is dynamic, time bound, irremediably social, dialogic, and saturated in characters. Dill describes himself as mystified by the fact that he is a more thoughtful, pleasant person when reading about Updike's self-centred, sexually repellent heroes. In his novels Updike often does villains better than heroes. Rabbit, Ben Turnbull, Darryl Van Horne, and even the murderous Feng are all decidedly more attractive to readers than their respectable but lackluster opponents. But this is generally true of literature. Milton's Satan is the real hero of *Paradise Lost* for readers who engage with the poem. Becky Sharp, Moll Flanders, Tom Jones, Heathcliff, Ahab, and even Shere Khan—the list of fictional rascals is a long one. Nobody prefers Fanny Price to self-centred, sharp-tongued Emma, or Tom Sawyer to Huck. Despite the argument for the mimetic effects of reading, readers gripped by the Rabbit novels are not likely to emulate Rabbit any more than readers of Melville plan to take up whaling. The relation between fiction and readers, the question of whether fiction

can create moral or religious affects, remains mysterious. Affect theory in itself is notable for its imprecision. “Real readers,” unschooled in literary orthodoxies, are scarcer than hen’s teeth in most works of criticism. However, affect depends not only on the real reader and author but also the implied readers and authors, narrators, and the sequence of events in time. Knowing Rabbit’s backstory alters our reading of him, for example. If *Rabbit, Run* began with a proleptic evocation of the outcome of his story, the reader’s response to him would be rather different.

A related problem concerns the role of ideas in fiction. Dill portrays Updike as a writer whose novels “don’t make arguments; they imagine ways of feeling” (10). Updike “assiduously avoids abstract ideas” (10). This sits ill with Updike’s own discussions of Kierkegaard and Barth in his work, together with other theologians (e.g. Elaine Pagels, Paul Tillich), and a mere glance at the index of any of his voluminous collections of nonfiction will produce references to most of the major thinkers of the twentieth century, often in lengthy essays. Perhaps he just uses ideas rather well? Some ideas run right through his work, notably those of Denis de Rougemont on courtly love, animating the plots of *Brazil* and *Gertrude and Claudius* among others. Dominant ideas or intertexts (the works of Hawthorne, for example) often create the narrative scaffolding that supports the flourishing detail of his style. Because the theology of the senses focuses on style and particularity, it has less to offer in relation to novelistic structure, plot, narrative point of view, time schemes, or any of the elements of fiction that contribute to narrative muscle. In *Toward the End of Time*, for example, the political plot, set in 2020 against a backdrop of Manichean images of global conflict and involving brutal murders and suffering children, finds a counterweight in the protagonist’s daily notations of local conditions in a seasonal diary of a calendar year, replete with closely focused, often lyrical descriptions of local fauna and flora as they impinge upon his senses. But would either element make a novel on its own? Novels are dynamic and thrive on conflict and opposition; their structures of imagination drive their meanings as much as their style does.

Nonetheless, Dill’s argument is powerful enough to make this reviewer argue with him, and there is little doubt that others (religious or not) will be engaging seriously with his study for years to come. This is not only a good book but, indeed, one of the best on Updike I have read in recent years. The case is made comprehensively across a broad range of Updike’s works so that students of any aspect of his oeuvre will find it relevant to their interests. Dill also avoids using selective quotation to buttress his views; works are considered in their entirety. In the epilogue, for example, he admits that Updike is first and foremost a fiction

writer, then a prose stylist, and a poet last, with his poetry often tending toward light verse or even farce. He nonetheless argues (to my mind successfully) for the centrality of the body and of bodily resurrection to his poetic works, as exemplified in the imagery of rotting, decomposing, and reprocessing in “Seven Odes to Natural Processes.” Two poems, “Fine Point” and “Creeper,” are analysed meticulously on their own terms as well as in the context of his other works. As poems written very shortly before their author’s death, it makes for an affecting close.

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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 the secretary of the John Updike Society.

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SAKINAH HOFLEr has won the Manchester Fiction Prize and the Sherwood Anderson Fiction Prize. A writer of poetry and prose, her work has appeared in *Mid-American Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and *Philadelphia Stories*, among others. She received her MFA from Florida State University, where she was a recipient of the Edward H. and Mary C. Kingsbury Fellowship. Currently, she's a PhD student and an Alfred C. Yates Fellow at the University of Cincinnati.

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CHRISTOPHER LOVE is the author of various articles, short stories, and a novel. He has published articles on writers such as Robert Frost and William Wells Brown. His stories

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ROBERT MORACE, Distinguished Professor of English at Daemen College in Amherst, New York, is the author and editor of six books and numerous articles on contemporary literature and is on the editorial board of *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* and *Symbiosis: A Journal of Transatlantic Literary and Cultural Studies*. He is completing a book on Post-Devolution Scottish Fiction.

JUDIE NEWMAN, OBE, is Emeritus Professor of American Studies at the University of Nottingham, and Honorary Fellow of the British Association for American Studies. She has published a book and a dozen scholarly essays on John Updike and was a founding director of the John Updike Society. Her recent publications include *Utopia and Terror in Contemporary American Fiction* (Routledge, 2013), and *Fictions of America: Narratives of Global Empire* (Routledge, 2007). Together with Celeste-Marie Bernier and Matthew Pethers she has edited the *Edinburgh Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Letters and Letter-Writing* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016). Her *Contemporary Fictions: Essays on American and Postcolonial Narratives* is forthcoming from the Modern Humanities Research Association/Legenda in 2020.

VALERIE (MARKOS) PAAVONPERA was raised in Ipswich, Massachusetts. A poet, writer, and communications professional, she has written for television and print in the United States and Australia. The last few years she has been living and writing in Vermont, and is currently working on a new collection of poetry for publication later this year.

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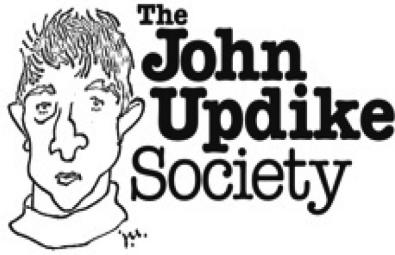
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THE ROBERT M. LUSCHER SCHOLARSHIP FOR UPDIKE RESEARCH

A \$1000 travel-to-collections scholarship awarded annually to enable students and researchers to study manuscripts and materials at one of many John Updike archives (see The John Updike Society website for a complete list of Special Collections). Preference will be given to students working on theses and dissertations and to those whose research focuses on Updike's short stories. Scholars from all nations are invited to apply. The scholarship is provided by Julia Thompson and Aurora Sharrard in honor of their father, an Updike scholar and current board member of The John Updike Society. The society will determine the winner and

may, depending upon the quality of proposals, choose not to award the scholarship in some years. Deadline for submissions is October 1 of each year. To apply, send a one-paragraph bio and 1-2 page proposal describing the project and how specifically special collections research is expected to help. Send submissions via attachment to: Peter Bailey, pbailey@stlawu.edu.

SCHIFF TRAVEL GRANTS

Up to five \$1500 travel-to-conference grants for scholars 40 years of age or younger to enable them to attend the next John Updike Society conference, and up to three \$1000 grants for society members needing assistance to be able to participate in the conference program. The grants are funded by The Robert and Adele Schiff Family Foundation, whose generosity enabled the society to purchase and maintain The John Updike Childhood Home. Both grants are merit- and need-based, and interested scholars should apply by April 3, 2020 for grants to attend the October 2020 conference. To apply, send a one-page proposal for a 15- to 20-minute paper presentation appropriate for the conference, along with a one-paragraph note about yourself, what grant you are applying for, and why the grant is important to you, to society president James Plath, jplath@iwu.edu. The selection committee will make their decisions and announce successful applicants by the end of the second week of May 2020.

THE JOHN UPDIKE
Letters Project

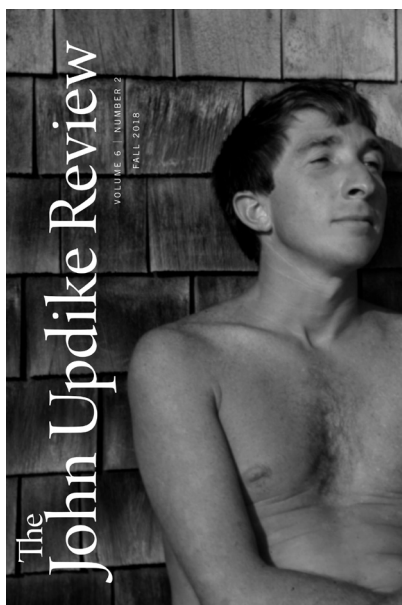
The John H. Updike Literary Trust named James Schiff as editor of a volume of John Updike's letters. Mr. Schiff, who expects to complete the project in 2020, has begun collecting letters from institutional libraries and requesting them from private owners and recipients. If you have letters, postcards, or other materials that you are willing to share, he would welcome photocopies or digital scans. All materials and inquiries will be handled with care and discretion.

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The John Updike Review

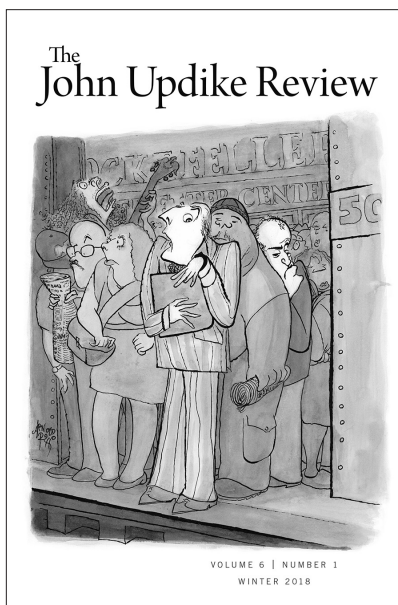
BACK ISSUES AND LIMITED EDITION

Back issues of the *John Updike Review* are available for \$12.50, or \$10 for members of the John Updike Society. To order back issues, please contact James Schiff at either: james.schiff@uc.edu, 513-556-0930, or 248 McMicken Hall/Department of English/University of Cincinnati/Cincinnati, OH 45221-0069.



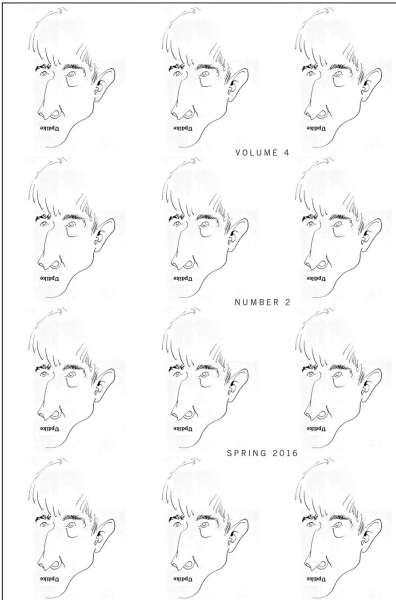
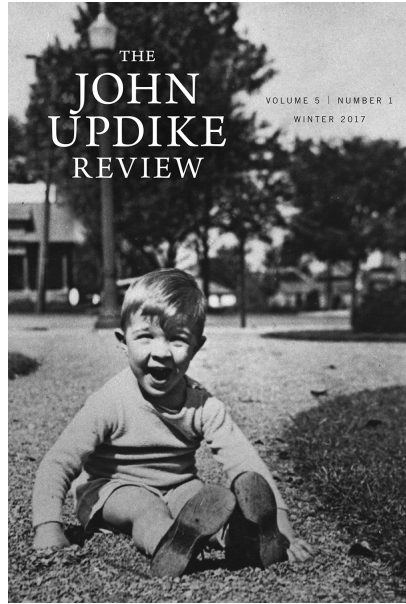
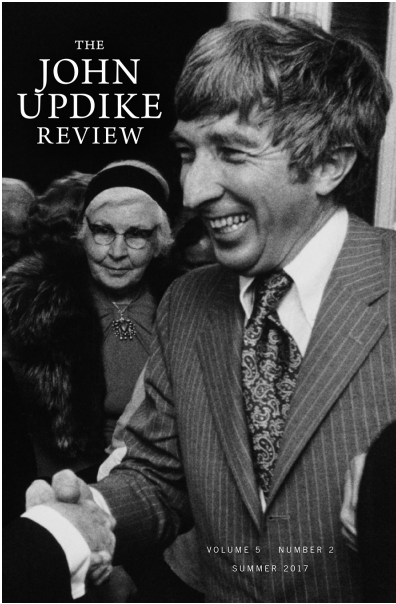
JUR 6.2 (Fall 2018).

Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Donald J. Greiner, Robert M. Luscher, and James Plath. Responses to "At War with My Skin" by David Hicks, Elizabeth Hornsey, and James Seitz. Reviews by Judie Newman, Michial Farmer, and Sue Norton.



JUR 6.1 (Winter 2018).

Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Donald J. Greiner, Sean Madden, D. Quentin Miller, Gideon Nachman, and Alex Pitofsky. Responses to "Bech Noir" by Julialicia Case, James Schiff, and Gary Weissman. Review by Sue Norton. Drawings by Arnold Roth.



JUR 5.2 (Summer 2017).

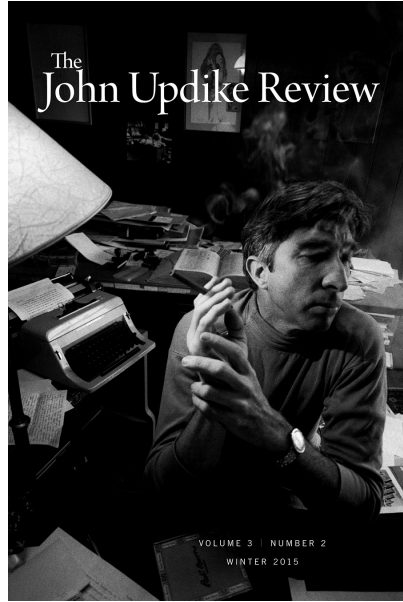
Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Donald J. Greiner, Sylvie Mathé, Laurence W. Mazzeno and Sue Norton, and Robert Morace. Responses to “His Mother Inside Him” by Jennifer Glaser, Robert M. Luscher, and Molly Reid. Reviews by Matthew Shipe, Aristi Trendel, and Antonio J. Ferraro. Includes Updike’s story “His Mother Inside Him.”

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).

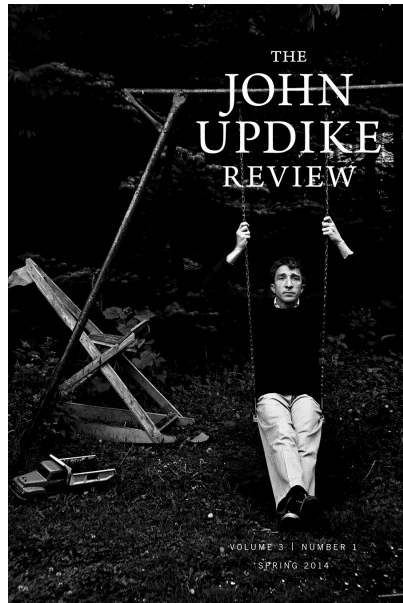
Essays by Brian Duffy, Peter J. Bailey, David Penn, and Donald J. Greiner. Responses to *The Widows of Eastwick* by Judie Newman, James Plath, and James Schiff. Includes Updike Bibliography, 2009–2015 by James Schiff.

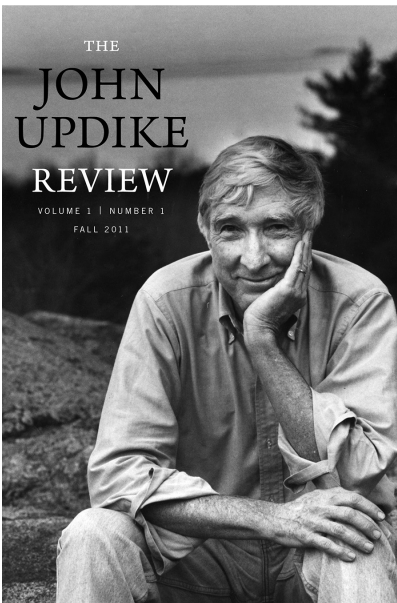
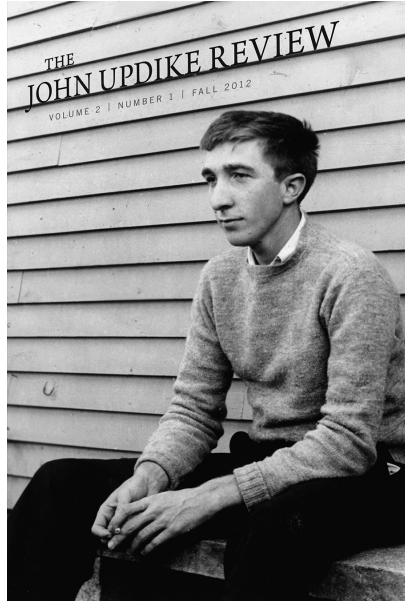
JUR 3.2 (Winter 2015).

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.

LIMITED EDITION

A limited edition of our inaugural issue, *JUR 1.1*, was published in cloth with a book jacket and an attractive slipcover. The edition was limited to one hundred copies. The price for this volume is \$30, or \$25 for members of the John Updike Society.

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6th Biennial John Updike Society Conference

Alvernia University, Reading, Pa.—September 29–October 4, 2020

The John Updike Society is now accepting proposals for papers to be presented at the 6th Biennial John Updike Society Conference at Alvernia University, Reading, Pennsylvania, in fall 2020. The conference will coincide with the October 3 historic marker dedication and grand opening of the newly restored John Updike Childhood Home in Shillington, Pennsylvania, which the Society purchased in 2012 and has turned into a museum. Attendees will also be able to take group trips to Updike sites in Berks County and a day trip to Philadelphia.

We welcome one-page proposals for 15-20 minute papers on all aspects of Updike's life and work, but especially seek proposals on:

- Works dealing with Updike's childhood as described in his fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, including *Midpoint*, *Pigeon Feathers*, *Self-Consciousness*, *The Centaur*, and *Olinger Stories*.
- Updike works celebrating a milestone anniversary in 2020: *Rabbit, Run* (60th), *Bech: A Book* (50th), *Rabbit at Rest* (30th), and *Gertrude and Claudius* (20th).
- *Toward the End of Time*, since 2020 is the year in which the novel is set.

We will also entertain proposals for panel discussions focused on individual works, groups of works, or themes in Updike's fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. Scholars who have recently published a book or are in the process of writing a book on Updike are especially encouraged to submit proposals for panel discussions.

Send proposal and a brief one- or two-paragraph bio to:
Program director Larry Mazzeno: larry.mazzeno@alvernia.edu.

Successful proposals will be acknowledged within two weeks of receipt. To present a paper or moderate a panel at the conference, participants must be members of The John Updike Society and register for the conference. For more information: <http://blogs.iwu.edu/johnupdikesociety/>.

THE JOHN UPDIKE REVIEW IS ACCEPTING SUBMISSIONS

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

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

ESSAYS AND INQUIRIES SHOULD BE ADDRESSED TO:

Professor James Schiff, Editor

The John Updike Review

P.O. Box 210069

Cincinnati, OH 45221-0069

EMAIL: james.schiff@uc.edu

TELEPHONE: 513-556-0930

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

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THE
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REVIEW

IN THIS ISSUE

Peter J. Bailey

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Paavonpera

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Maggie Su

Robert Milder