

THE  
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REVIEW

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John Updike Review

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# The John Updike Review

VOLUME 7 | NUMBER 2

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# The John Updike Review

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## Three Writers and One Editor on *The Maple Stories*

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Richard and Joan Maple first appeared in the short story “Snowing in Greenwich Village,” composed late in 1955 when Updike, with his first wife Mary, and daughter Elizabeth, had just moved from Manhattan’s Upper West Side to West Thirteenth Street in Greenwich Village. The story was published in the *New Yorker* on January 21, 1956. The Maples, however, did not materialize again in Updike’s fiction until 1962 (“Giving Blood”), though he later realized that a story published in 1960, “Wife-Wooing,” was indeed a Maples story. Most of the stories about this couple appeared in print between 1962 and 1976. By the late 1970s Updike had accumulated seventeen Maples stories, which were quickly assembled in 1979 and published in paperback to coincide with the release of a made-for-television movie, *Too Far to Go*, starring Blythe Danner and Michael Moriarty. In 1994 he added a final story, “Grandparenting,” which reveals the Maples in a new role, with new spouses.

A complete version of the Maples Stories was being readied for publication by Everyman’s Library when Updike was diagnosed with lung cancer in November 2008. During the final two months of his life, he read proofs and, in a letter to his Everyman’s editor on December 19, 2008, wrote, “These are some of my best stories, I feel, though they are a bit repetitive in their central motion, toward ever more convoluted suburban corruption.” Both assertions seem true, though their repetitiveness, typically a shortcoming in fiction, becomes instead a necessary component in a series of stories about two people who cannot overcome familiar patterns, which leads to their inevitable dissolution. In one of Updike’s final letters, written little more than two weeks before his death, he thanked his British editor for her “pleasant and cheering note,” but then, as was typical, sought to clarify a minor textual change with which he had been grappling: “Let’s make Joan Maple, instead of merely ‘a minister’s daughter,’ into ‘a liberal theology professor’s daughter.’” In his prior letter he had expressed concern about an inconsistency, though

couldn't locate his "reference to Joan's father, usually identified as a clergyman, as an Amherst professor," and suggested, "We might bridge the gap by making him a 'theology professor,' who are often ordained." During even his final days, Updike was striving, as always, to clarify inconsistencies and correct errors. Close readers of these stories, which were published on August 4, 2009, six months after his death, can see how this minor edit is reflected in various published versions of the story "Marching Through Boston."

While "Three Writers" has previously focused on individual Maples stories, "Gesturing" (*JUR* 3.2) and "Giving Blood" (*JUR* 7.1), this is our first look at the entire collection, which will hopefully inspire further discussion and commentary. In May 2019, a panel session devoted to the Maples was sponsored by the John Updike Society at the American Literature Association Conference in Boston. Among the critics who participated in that roundtable discussion, Marshall Boswell, Biljana Dojčinović, and Gail Sinclair agreed to write responses for the *JUR*. Boswell, who has written extensively and knowledgeably on both Updike and David Foster Wallace, while also publishing fiction, is familiar to readers of the *JUR*. So is Dojčinović, who has published in Serbian a critical study of Updike and served in spring 2018 as our gracious and adept host in Belgrade during the Updike Society's first international conference. Sinclair, who is an established Hemingway critic, is writing on Updike for the first time, and we welcome her to these pages. While this section of the *JUR* typically provides space for three invited writers to compose responses to a single Updike work, occasionally a fourth person is added to the mix. This happened in 2018 when cartoonist Arnold Roth joined three writers in responding to the short story "Bech Noir." Because of my deep affection for and interest in *The Maples Stories*, I couldn't resist, so I am joining my colleagues.

JAMES SCHIFF, EDITOR

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# *The Maples Stories* and the “Twilight of the Old Morality”

MARSHALL BOSWELL

To the best of my knowledge, John Updike’s eighteen stories about Richard and Joan Maple represent a unique achievement in US literary fiction. Although story sequences and, more recently, novels-in-stories have been literary mainstays going back to James Joyce’s *Dubliners* and Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, *The Maples Stories* is the only collection I can think of that was composed over the course of the same twenty years it dramatizes. Each individual story appeared in print more or less contemporaneously with the events it describes. As a result, the collection’s final form—while it possesses a firm continuity of style and provides readers with a satisfying narrative arc beginning with naïve marital bliss and ending with divorce—is an accident. As he composed each new installment of the Maples’ saga, Updike had no clearer sense of where their marriage would end up than he had of his own, which the Maples stories dramatize quite closely. In many respects, *The Maples Stories* anticipates Richard Linklater’s 2014 coming of age motion picture, *Boyhood*, which the innovative director filmed from 2001 to 2013 so as to capture the protagonist’s coming of age in real time. Yet whereas *Boyhood*, as a viewing experience, is fascinating but formless, *The Maples Stories* retains its shapely sense of purpose thanks to the tidy formal completeness of each of its constitutive parts.

Updike only gradually recognized the coherency and resourcefulness of the Maples as recurring characters. As he explains in his foreword to the collection, initially published in paperback as *Too Far To Go*, the characters first “presented themselves to the writer in New York City in 1956, dropped from his sight for

seven years, and reappeared in the suburbs of Boston in 1963, giving blood" (9). He does not single out the Maples stories per se until his 1972 collection, *Museums and Women*, which includes five stories from the sequence, the most from any of his collections, all of them clustered under a concluding section titled, simply, "The Maples." In the years following that belated acknowledgement of the Maples stories' status as a self-contained cycle, Updike would double the total number, his creative reliance on his perennial couple increasing as both their marriage, and his own, reached their same sad end.

Although Richard and Joan do seem to love each other, Updike tends to visit them during moments of marital strife, a concession to the unavoidable fact that fiction demands conflict; after all, as Tolstoy reminds us, all happy families are alike. What ultimately pulls them apart is adultery, both his and hers. In my experience as a classroom instructor, contemporary college-aged readers, coming to these stories for the first time, find this robust flowering of infidelity baffling, even disconcerting. It helps to remind them that Richard and Joan, while still operating within the governing social mores of their era, marry very young. According to the original collection's final story, "Here Come the Maples," the couple marries in 1954, when both Richard and Joan are barely twenty-one. Indeed, in the first description Updike provides of Richard, in the opening paragraph of "Snowing in Greenwich Village," we are told that Richard "was still so young-looking that people did not instinctively lay upon him hostly duties" (13). But I also point out to my students that the Maples marry at the tail end of the era in US social life when matrimony was the only acceptable venue for sexual exploration. Beginning with "Giving Blood," the second proper Maples story, Updike begins keeping a running tab of their marriage. The story's ringing opening line declares, "The Maples had been married now nine years, which is almost too long" (37). By that ninth year, Richard and Joan have only just turned thirty, the age when most contemporary marriages begin. But that ninth year also marks the beginning of what another Updike character calls "the post-pill paradise," wherein the newly available birth-control pill has eliminated the fear of unwanted pregnancies, one of the main reasons sexuality was quarantined to marriage in the first place (*Couples* 52). Seen in this context, students often come to understand the string of adulteries that characterizes *The Maples Stories'* rising action as roughly parallel with the normal, healthy pattern of sexual exploration that members of their own generation enjoy prior to marriage. The Maples' dilemma is that they were too old for the sexual revolution but still young enough to want in anyway, when it eventually exploded all around them.

Throughout the collection, Updike depicts this conflict between marital fidelity and sexual freedom as an inside/outside motif. Inside marriage lies the home, security, and reality but also confinement and resentment; outside the home is danger and adventure but also fantasy and illusion. In "Wife-Wooing," a lyrical meditation on marital sexuality that Updike retroactively inserted into the *Maples* sequence, his narrator is entranced by the sight of his wife of seven years as she sits lit by a fire, an allusion to Plato's cave, in which the shadows cast on the wall are mistaken for reality. The following morning, after having been rebuffed the night before, the narrator awakes to find that his wife is, to his "relief, . . . ugly" (35). Addressing her in the second person, the narrator admits, "I feasted with the coffee on your drabness. Every wrinkle and sickly tint a revenge and relief" (35). In "Waiting Up," which dramatizes Richard's long vigil at home while Joan visits the husband of one of his mistresses, Joan becomes in her absence precious to him again; once outside in the world, away from home, she reclaims her status as the erotic beloved. Yet when she finally returns, "his impulse of embrace, to socket her into his chest like a heart that had orbited and returned, was abruptly obsolete, rendered showy and false by his wife's total, disarming familiarity" (118). And in a late story titled "Gesturing," Richard tells Joan that his current lover, the one for whom he will finally end the marriage, is "still not real to me, the way—you are," to which Joan wearily replies, "She will be. . . . It's a matter of time" (227).

Updike enhances this inside/outside motif by infusing the cycle with prison imagery. In "Plumbing," Richard is conscious of "dramatizing his conception of himself as a prisoner," a projection that Updike biographer Adam Begley, in a lengthy exploration of this story, calls "an old complaint" for Updike (150; Begley 326). In "Giving Blood," Updike garlands this already blood-tinged story with gothic imagery of dungeons and underground prisons. As he and Joan maneuver through the hospital's fairy-tale hallways, "Richard seemed to himself Hansel orphaned with Gretel; birds ate the bread crumbs behind them" (42). Updike brings this motif to its conclusion in the collection's most celebrated story, "Separating," where Richard spends his final day at his home fixing the front door's broken lock. Upon leaving his family for another woman, the house that has been his prison will no longer be accessible to him.

*The Maples Stories* also occupies a unique place in the internal world of Updike's career-long exploration of adultery and marriage. One can profitably read the collection alongside his two paired novels of marital infidelity, *Couples* and *Marry Me*. As we now know from Begley, Updike began writing *Marry Me* around 1962, the

same year he officially returned to the Maples for the first time after their 1956 introduction, but ultimately decided to set the manuscript aside, owing to the story's stark autobiographical origins (Begley 259). *Couples*, published in 1968, reworks many of the basic themes and even some key plot elements of *Marry Me*, which finally appeared in 1976, the same year both the Updikes and the Maples divorced. Throughout the long creative gestation marking the publication of both novels, the Maples' saga continued to take shape in Updike's ever burgeoning oeuvre. Fascinatingly, in "The Red-Herring Theory," during one of their numerous fights about infidelity, Joan and Richard talk about another couple from their set named Jerry and Ruth, and although the Maples never supply the couple's last name, it would appear that they are the same Jerry and Ruth from *Marry Me* (158), thereby linking this novel even more intimately with the story cycle.

What distinguishes *The Maples Stories* from those two novels is the angle of vision. In *Couples*, Piet Hanema, the novel's hero, describes adultery as "a way of giving yourself adventures. Of getting out in the world and seeking knowledge" (343). Accordingly, the novel ranges widely in its various settings. We follow Updike's illicit lovers to cottages north of Boston, to ski resorts, to the lovers' homes, to various bedrooms and sunporches and bathrooms. In *Marry Me*, the adulterers make love on the beach and escape to Washington, DC. In the Maples narratives, conversely, Updike keeps the focus on the home front. The extramarital lovers remain for the most part unnamed, unseen, and in the periphery. When the stories venture from the Maples' Boston home, it is not to follow Joan or Richard on an illicit tryst but rather to check in on the couple as they try to repair their marriage. In "Separating," Richard is tasked with telling his children that he's leaving Joan. Although the ostensible reason for the separation is another woman, she is never named, nor does she appear. She gets referenced once, fleetingly, while Richard drives his son home from a concert: "The home of the woman Richard hoped to marry stood across the green. Her bedroom light burned" (208). The bedroom light suggests she is up, perhaps hoping for a call from Richard to hear how his announcement went down, and yet for Richard, at this moment, she has been reduced to a prepositional object. By the end of the story, when his son asks him why he's leaving, "Richard had forgotten why" (211).

The Maples sequence also complements those two big adultery novels in the way it portrays the wronged wife. Joan Maple emerges from this collection as one of Updike's strongest female characters, a fact that is easy to overlook given the stories' persistent use of Richard's point of view. In *Couples*, Updike depicts Piet Hanema's wife, Angela, as for the most part serenely remote and above it all, in

accordance with her heavenly name. Yet she also consistently complains that she's confused, that she doesn't quite know what's wrong with her. "I don't feel I'm a woman really," she explains at one point. "I'm a kind of cheerful neuter with this sex appeal tacked on as a kind of joke" (209). Similarly, Ruth Conant, the wronged wife of *Marry Me*'s lead adulterer Jerry, careens between passive accommodation and bewilderment as to her proper role. Her lover, Richard Mathias, the husband of Jerry's lover Sally and a precursor to *Couples*' villainous Freddy Thorne, tells her, "You fight being known" (93); later, as her husband's affair continues to take its toll on her and her marriage, she realizes, "She had ceased to understand herself" (185). Even her affair, which precedes Jerry's, makes no mark on her, perhaps because she feels that it was undertaken "less for herself than for [Jerry]" (95). In these instances, it's hard not to attribute the characters' confusion and inconsistencies to their creator. Both *Marry Me* and *Couples* imagine the sort of fatal marital blow that Updike avoided in his own life. One can feel Updike, in those long dialogues between his male lovers and their betrayed wives, testing the waters a bit, dry running a break he himself declined, at least for the duration of the 1960s, to make. In these projected worst-case scenarios, both Ruth and Angela remain forgiving and passive but also curiously unsure how to respond. Their uncertainty might also have been Updike's.

Joan Maple, conversely, has bite. She is forceful, consistent, and clear about her position. In "Giving Blood," her first real introduction, she pushes back against Richard's cruelty with grit and confidence—the story might also be titled "Drawing Blood"—and when Richard oversteps in the story's overture, she declares, "Now you've said things I'll always remember" (40). Later, in the rapturous "Eros Rampant," a story published during, and saturated in the milieu of, the 1967 Summer of Love, she reveals to Richard her own list of affairs, the news of which elevates her in Richard's eyes such that he dreams of her twisted like Shiva in impossible yoga poses, the most powerful of which has her standing "upright on her shoulders, her face flushed with the effort of equilibrium and the downflow of blood"; a moment later "her legs scissor open and shut," at which point she tells Richard, "Some men you don't know" (142). Yet she remains consistently nurturing: in several stories, Richard suffers various physical ailments—stomach trouble in "Twin Beds in Rome," a cold in "Your Lover Just Called," and so on—and in each case Joan, regardless of her various resentments, most of them earned, brings him back to health.

She also possesses a liberal, empathetic political conscience that contrasts sharply with Richard's scornful cynicism. It is Joan who compels Richard to give

blood and to join a civil rights march in Boston, and when, in “Nakedness,” a group of nudists invade their beach, Joan sides with the revolutionaries and against the arresting cop, whom she calls a “pig” (183). Conversely, the nudists inspire in Richard a much more mixed response: “political admiration grappled with an immediate social threat; pleasure in the sight of the female was swept under by hatred for the male, whose ally she was publicly declaring herself to be” (181). And although Richard agrees to join Joan on the civil rights march, he makes a spectacle of himself by affecting a tasteless, racist Negro dialect. Nevertheless, as he watches Joan dress for the day’s event, “he felt as people of old must have felt when greeted by an angel—adoring yet resentful at this flamboyant proof of better things” (76). Fittingly, when the two fill out their marriage license, Richard lists his profession as “Student,” while Joan lists “Teacher,” a role she plays throughout the collection, and in their marriage. As late as the original collection’s penultimate story, an otherwise unpublished piece titled “Divorcing: A Fragment,” he realizes, “She was, as always, right” (233).

*Too Far to Go*, the original version of *The Maples Stories*, ends with a divorce, and yet Updike cleverly depicts that dissolution as a replaying of the couple’s wedding vows, complete with an “I do” and a kiss that redeems the one Richard forgot to administer in the original ceremony, surely a bad omen. The neat irony of this ending encapsulates the abiding *betweenness* of the entire collection, a quality that touches almost all of Updike’s work. A member of the Silent Generation, too young for WWII but too old for the Baby Boomer revolution that upset the bourgeois social order, Updike depicts marriage as both a necessary safe haven and a boundary to self-expression. Richard and Joan’s twenty-year muddle arises from their refusal to resolve this contradiction. *Marry Me*’s Jerry Conant captures the Maples’ conundrum best when he tells his own lover, “Maybe our trouble is that we live in the twilight of the old morality, and there’s just enough to torment us, and not enough to hold us in” (*Marry Me* 53).

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# How Far to Have Come: Updike's Stories of a Marriage

GAIL SINCLAIR

I confess a past reluctance to embrace John Updike's work. Three degrees in English had, surprisingly, not produced assigned readings of a single Updike story, nor had I chosen to investigate his writings on my own. To be honest, until recently I based my impressions of his writing solely on secondhand information surrounding his most famous character, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, and I couldn't—or wouldn't—go beyond my negative assumptions to read even one of the four Rabbit novels. While many critics and fans touted Harry as a flawed but interestingly complex and masterfully created character, I simply judged him as fallen. My feminist leanings, oddly juxtaposed with a conservative religious upbringing, led me to this position: a man like Harry, a man who slept with his daughter-in-law, possessed a broken moral compass, and further literary fraternizing with him or his creator did not interest me. With that self-imposed high ground established, I avoided taking the plunge into the "Rabbit" tetralogy or anything else penned by Updike.

When my longtime friend Jim Plath, known to this reading audience as president of the John Updike Society, asked if I would be interested in participating on a Society-sponsored panel discussion about Updike's lesser known *Maples Stories*, my immediate response was, "I'm not familiar with this collection, and I'm not particularly interested in getting acquainted with Updike's writing." As with other joint endeavors to which I have initially said "no," Jim refused to be dissuaded. He reminded me that in *The 100 Greatest Literary Characters*, the book we co-authored with Kirk Curnutt, he had written of Harry: "Angstrom is uniquely average—a flawed, irrepressible, and often unlikeable human being who is still somehow so

endearing to audiences worldwide that one novel couldn't contain him" (10). This endorsement of Updike's ability to create characters that can be unlikeable and yet possess enough human warmth to warrant my consideration, along with Jim's assurance I might actually enjoy this book, which wasn't a long or difficult read, persuaded me to reconsider. Putting my intolerance on the backburner but still remaining skeptical, I accepted the challenge and dipped into the fiction. As it turns out, the chronicle of the Maples' marriage proved to be a captivating journey, an exercise in literary appreciation, and a psychological and sociological spelunking revealing much more than I expected. In this roundabout and less-than-graceful way, I profess myself an unexpected Updike convert with reverential admiration for his prowess as a writer.

Having survived the roundtable experience and fears about embarrassing myself in front of actual Updike scholars, I vowed to dig deeper into the author's oeuvre. What I didn't expect closely on the heels of the panel session was to be asked by editor James Schiff to publish my response to *The Maples Stories* in the *John Updike Review*. To demonstrate what such a piece might look like, Schiff sent me a copy of the journal's previous issue, which included not only three responses to Updike's personal essay, "At War with My Skin," but also a reprinted version of the essay itself. While the responses were all engaging, what mesmerized me was the essay, wherein Updike provided an account of his lifelong struggle with psoriasis. Through its remarkable verbal panache and candid confessions, the essay proved to be absolutely compelling. My growing respect for Updike's eloquence and skill, alongside the empathy that he slowly built for Richard and Joan Maple in their struggles to love each other and hold their family together, expanded my appreciation of Updike. I was now ready to provide a more open-minded view of the work rather than condemn it because of preestablished notions.

*The Maples Stories*, which illuminates the undercurrents driving Richard and Joan Maple's marriage, are extraordinary and offer the kind of emotional depth I had hoped to find in Updike's characters. The couple's vacillation between engagement and disengagement, the progression from love to waning interest, to physical lust, to loss, to rebooted attraction, and finally back to residual love, all serve as the vibrant fictional sparks unifying the Maples' lives together. Updike draws the complicated relationship between husband and wife so vividly, and Richard's internal angst and guilt as the marriage falls apart so poignantly, that I became hooked. As the events of their history unfolded, the Maples came to represent for me a symbolic story quilt whose colorful fabric swatches Updike had stitched into patterned blocks and then pieced together. The result is an integrated work

deriving its beauty from the individual sections, to be sure, but he reveals the fuller artistry ultimately through their composite form. Given the gaps between the stories' publication dates, Updike may not have intended such a unified plan for his collection, but by telling the tale of a marriage in parceled-out segments, starting in 1956 and ending in 1976 (the coda of "Grandparenting" followed in 1994), he composed a kind of novel form that must surely have felt right and true. It certainly resonates in a satisfying way for me.

The 1979 paperback book cover lauding the inaugural printing of these first seventeen of an eventual eighteen Maples stories tells us that *Too Far to Go*, which was the collection's original title, is "[t]he haunting story of a marriage that began with love—and ended with love." It is this strange and unexpected sequence, an intellectual and emotional archive of the engagement between a husband and wife as they progress through stages of love, that Updike masters so well here. But how do we make sense of this cycle when the ending of the Maples' professed love story is divorce? In one respect, we reflect Richard's dismay as some ten or so years into the marriage, and not quite ten years before its end, he tells Joan, "You're such a nice woman. . . . I can't understand why I'm so miserable with you" (58). We wonder this, too. Is it the routineness of marriage—the Maples' world anchored in the management of preparing and consuming family dinners, supervising homework, tucking in sleepy children, restocking groceries, repairing aging plumbing, and negotiating day-to-day minutiae? Is it proximity's familiarity that has dulled Richard's passion and led him to infidelity, or are we even sure his interest has dulled? How do Richard and Joan mesh the "calm parallelity" (34) in which they exist against the bone-jarring, family-shattering psychological weight of "till death do us part" promises broken? We trace with amusement, disbelief, and general dismay the ebb and flow of the marriage from Richard's perspective as the Maples demonstrate genuine affection, respect, and even continued love for each other while also acting as co-conspirators, wading deeper into the currents of infidelity. I want to step in and warn them of the peril into which they seem to be running headlong as they play a sort marital Russian roulette in increasingly dangerous rounds.

This peril begins with the collection's very first story, "Snowing in Greenwich Village," set with the ink not long dry on the Maples' marriage license. Updike introduces the possibility of infidelity with the couple's friend, and though staved off this time with the closing phrase, "Oh but they were close," marital waywardness infuses itself thereafter, first subtly, and then increasingly more overtly, until surfacing as a point of common discussion (25). The forthrightness of such un-

veiled conversation oddly unifies Joan and Richard, who seem invigorated, almost playfully sparring about whose lover has just called and hung up (“Your Lover Just Called”), who among guests at a party has been or could be a prospective lover (“The Red-Herring Theory”), and who Joan’s paramour or paramours might be (“Eros Rampant”). The twist in this moment of true confession is that Richard becomes aroused by other men’s interest in his wife, invoking this strange reaction: “Love, a cloudy heavy ink, inundates him from within, . . . ‘You whore,’ he breathes, enraptured. ‘My virgin bride. . . Who else?’ he begs, as if each name is a burden of treasure she lays upon his bowed shoulders. ‘Tell me all your men’” (122). Instead of unsettling Richard, this exchange, which comes as they dress for a party, causes him to see Joan as “newly treasurable and intrinsic to his own identity” (125). (A bit of my Harry Angstrom distaste seeps in here, but because Richard is emotionally unsettled and will later show signs of trauma as the marriage declines and fails, I work to keep an open mind.) At home afterward they make love, and while Richard sleeps restlessly beside her, he dreams of the conversation continuing in the kitchen as he presses Joan for more confessions while she routinely, as though nothing has happened, practices yoga positions. This convergence of the ordinary and extraordinary becomes increasingly more commonplace and damaging as the marriage disintegrates. The Maples’ initial forays into infidelity, followed by the full-fledged plunge they both take into those waters and their glossing over the severity of these actions, seal their unraveling. Richard and Joan’s failure to acknowledge the weaponizing of their unfaithfulness resembles the act of eating an elephant, bite by bite, without fully appreciating the damage the meal inflicts, until looking around to notice the harm has been done and the elephant is gone.

It is true that Richard and Joan, before they actually divorce, spent at least a decade engaged in marital analytics about whether they should stay together or separate. Updike’s narrative tone, however, portrays such exchanges as almost ridiculously civil. In “Twin Beds in Rome,” Richard thinks of the marriage as “Bleeding, mangled, reverently laid in its tomb a dozen times” (55), and yet he is troubled by having to sleep in separate beds and comforted when Joan volunteers to share hers. They often use the abbreviated endearment “Darley” to address each other, and in their normalized conversation about their failing marriage, Joan calmly surmises, “I know what was wrong with us. I’m classic, and you’re baroque” (64). Yet they stay together another decade. In a convoluted way, their relationship reflects the intent behind the punchline of a joke about a young boy working in the circus whose daily job is to empty buckets of manure. An onlooker asks why he doesn’t quit his job, to which the boy replies, “What? And give up show business?”

The Maples' marriage, bad as the consequences of infidelity might be, binds them to a life and roles in which they seem to languish yet, perhaps strangely, also relish.

It seems clear that Updike fully intends for the reader to perceive the Maples' love for one another regardless of the end result. But he also calls into question overuse of the word "love" and its resulting loss of meaning. "Eros Rampant" opens with the statement, "The Maples' house is full of love" (113), immediately followed by a cataloging of the word used in ways diminished from the more deeply invested emotional power it typically conveys. The youngest of now four children loves the dog, the next youngest boy loves his Creepy Crawlers and dinosaurs, the second oldest loves sports, and the oldest, nearly thirteen, loves her history teacher and pop stars. After dispensing with these cursory kinds of love, we are told in a simple declarative sentence, "Mr. Maple loves Mrs. Maple," but the description moves to the physical, "The sight of her body contorted by one of her yoga exercises, in her elastic black leotard riddled with runs, twists his heart so that he cannot breathe" (115). This in itself would be encouraging, especially when followed by the statement, "At night he tries to press her into himself, to secure her drowsy body against his breast like a clasp, as if without it he will come undone" (115). More than a decade into their marriage, after four children and thousands of domestic obligations weighing against sexual vibrance, Richard's retaining that level of passion for his wife seems assuring. But then we are told, "Also he loves Penelope Vogel, a quaint little secretary at his office . . . and he is in love with the memories of six or so other females, beginning with a seven-year-old playmate who used to steal his hunter's cap" (115). The power of the word "love" is supplanted with substitutes for genuine connection. Or maybe that's too simplistic, in Updike's view, where the two must intertwine for either to be valuable or lasting?

The original edition of these stories, titled *Too Far to Go*, closes with "Here Come the Maples," which sounds more like the announcement of a newly wedded couple than a freshly divorced one. As the story opens, Richard "conjured up a vision of himself and Joan breezing into a party hand in hand while a liveried doorman trumpeted their names and a snow of confetti and champagne bubbles exploded in the room" (219). Updike no doubt intentionally chooses "conjured" because these happy moments are not memories of the Maples celebrating their new status as husband and wife, but rather an envisioned party they will amicably attend together to celebrate their divorce. The cleverly melded scene serves as significant markers of both life-altering events. The courthouse that issues the divorce decree is the same one that had granted the marriage license; Richard and Joan now stand together before another officiant performing a different legal

act, this time untying the knot that matrimony had tied. Each is asked the same question: "And do you believe, as this paper states, that your marriage has suffered an irretrievable breakdown," to which they each respond individually, "I do" (233). The irony of conflating dissolution with the recitation of marital vows is delicious, and, to solidify it further, Richard remembers what he had forgotten to do after he and Joan were pronounced husband and wife two decades earlier: "he kissed her" (233). These final words, of both the story and the original collection, complete the Maples' marriage and the book's arc in an unexpected though artistically engaging way.

In working through discussion of the Maples' journey, I have thought about my own voyage as, dare I say, a virgin Updike reader. (Somehow I think he would like the phrase, maybe even the admission.) A primary question one might ask is why I can offer empathy for Richard when he shares similar flaws that others, and I through secondhand knowledge, found so distasteful in Harry Angstrom? Shouldn't I remain consistent in being repelled by him and his careless infidelities and his culpability in the breakup of a family? In "Separating," which comes near the book's end, Richard works on "battening down the house against his absence, replacing screens and sash cords, hinges and latches." His concern for his family is touching, though I can't ignore his self-description as "a Houdini making things snug before his escape" (179). Later at the dinner table Richard cannot stop weeping when he recognizes his children's assembly "a last time as innocents" before the news of the separation (181). His grief and guilt are genuine not just in a self-centered way but present a lovingly parental manner that goes far to engender some reader forgiveness, including mine. I do remember, too, that he isn't alone in being unfaithful, though Joan's infidelities, in contrast, may be more reactionary and self-preserving in nature; Richard's infidelities feel self-indulgent.

Even while drawn in by the sadness of love lost and the tragedy of family solidity dissolved, I hold steadfast in my critique that at times I find Richard and Joan troublesome. The way in which they mismanage their commitment to each other is cavalier and rashly negligent, or perhaps it exists more squarely in new school marital perimeters than my taste favors. Also, my literary inclinations tend toward star-crossed or tragically destroyed romance rather than the self-imposed implosion the Maples exact on their marriage. But while watching the destruction from the sidelines, I also revel in newfound joy at discovering the range of Updike's descriptive powers, his remarkable facility with language as he relays their deeply engaging journey. Putting aside the marriage itself as the focus, Updike's self-proclaimed *modus operandi* for writing these stories was to make artistic use of

the “million mundane moments shared” (11) in his “bright and hopeful attempt to bottle some small portion of the truth” over the twenty years he captures fictionally (Brown). Updike’s stories proliferate with examples of such brilliantly rendered moments, through which the author, using elevated language, makes the ordinary significant, transformative, and often archetypal.

“Wife-Wooing” beautifully illustrates this as Richard Maple returns home to Joan and their children on a cold New England night after foraging for their evening meal: “Back through the black winter air to the fire, the intimate cave, where halloos and hurrahs greeted me, the deer, mouth agape and its cotton throat gushing, stretched dead across my shoulders” (30). The captured glow of the familial scene before the fire radiates domestic tranquility while harkening back to an atavistic call for the male species to protect and provide for its offspring. The pull is magnetic and comforting, and Updike’s hyperbole heightens the banal act of Richard returning with a brown bag filled with burgers and fries that he had “wrestled warm from the raw hands of the hamburger girl in the diner a mile away, a ferocious place, slick with grease, sleek with chrome” (30). As payment for his bloody trophy, he offers coins, his value exchange earned through the sedentary act of putting words together on paper while sitting at a desk built from the subdued remains, not his subduing, of what likely was once a mighty forest oak.

In an earlier passage in the story Updike provides a free-form word association about the power of language itself as Richard emotes:

Splendid also to feel the curious and potent, inexplicable and irrefutably magical life language leads within itself. What soul took thought and knew that adding *wo* to man would make a woman? . . . The wide *w*, the receptive *o*. Womb. . . . Three children, five persons, seven years. Seven years since I wed wide warm woman, white-thighed. Wooed and wed. Wife. A knife of a word that for all its final bite did not end the wooing. To my wonderment. (29–30)

Updike harnesses language’s heft through his distillation of singular words, a practice most evident when associated with domesticity and Richard’s thoughts about the woman, now-wife, he describes with impassionate terms a few pages later, “Tall, fair, obscure, remote, and courteous” (32). He also characterizes their family life as one of “domestic muddle, softness, pallor, flaccidity” and laments that “Courting a wife takes tenfold the strength of winning an ignorant girl” once easily wooed by his “ornate words” (33, 31, 32). In “Eros Rampant,” set a few years later, he will distill these emotions again into single units he labels “the elemental constituents. Woman. Man. House” (123). These constructs stripped down to the nakedness of

simple utterances offer an emotional shorthand more poetically evocative for their simplicity than any pages of overindulgent descriptive commentary might provide.

Writers sometimes disavow creative ownership by professing that characters and stories arrive of their own volition, as Updike notes in the foreword to *The Maples Stories*. He claims that Richard and Joan Maple “presented themselves to the writer in New York City in 1956, dropped from his sight for seven years, and reappeared in the suburbs of Boston in 1963” (11). But Updike’s third-person description of that authorial process subtly undercuts his active creative ownership, which he clearly cannot escape. He knows, as we do, that though he may be the medium through whom the characters present themselves, it is his artistry that brings them to life in a realistic though not always pretty way, with the signature Updike trademark of presenting the truth, warts and all.

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# “A beautiful disaster”: Marriage in Updike’s *Maples Stories*

BILJANA DOJČINOVIĆ

It felt like a nice coincidence to stay at the Westin Hotel at Copley Square in Boston in May 2019 in a room with a view of the former “John Hancock” building. I was attending the 30th American Literature Association conference as a member of the John Updike Society and a panelist discussing Updike’s *Maples stories*, one of which immortalizes this very skyscraper.

The story “Gesturing” tells us that Richard Maple, after separating from his wife and leaving the family house, finds an apartment in Boston with a view of the skyscraper, which he describes as “a beautiful disaster” (216). Beautiful because the architect had a vision of “an invisible building, though immense,” which would reflect the sky; and a disaster because the glass kept falling from it, making it dangerous. From Richard’s apartment, the building looks like a mirror of the sky and clouds, “a vertical cousin to the horizontal huge blueness of the sea” (216). In the vicinity, its base, due to all the temporary measures taken to protect pedestrians, is “hideous” (222).

*The Maples Stories* is a dynamic anatomy of a marriage, of a “beautiful disaster” in progress. However, I would not rush to say that the skyscraper is just a metaphor for the Maples’ marriage—it would be too reductive, too simple. The blue building literally stands next to Richard in the story as a character, witnessing the new life he is trying to establish. It is Richard’s companion, “a single grand spectator” (220). In fact, it was the skyscraper, which “reflected the clouds drifting across its face” (217), that drove Richard to rent the apartment, maybe because it symbolized his own vision of a fulfilled life or freedom. At one point, the building becomes

a part of the triangle in the relationship between Richard and Ruth, his lover. When Richard says, “I love that building. And it loves me,” she replies, “No. It’s me who loves you.” And, when Richard asks her if she could not share, her answer is straight—“No” (223).

This wish to possess the other, to control him or her, is at the core of *The Maples Stories* and the emotional hardship the book describes. In the collection there are essentially two currents: the first involves marriage vs. romantic love; the second is about desiring the unattainable. These two currents often overlap, generating the dialectics of the collection. Marriage is presented as a socially acceptable and recommended arrangement that does not support the ideal of romantic love. Actually, it kills it. Updike addressed this theme in his review of Denis de Rougemont’s *Love in the Western World*, and it explicitly emerges in every single Maples story. Already in his foreword, the author warns us that “if temporality is held to be invalidating, then nothing real succeeds” (20). Nothing in this world lasts forever, and marriage and love are not to be treated as a failure if they end. Of course, they may look beautiful when seen from afar, and not at all perfect when seen up close, and ultimately that is what these stories do—closely observe.

The first story, “Snowing in Greenwich Village,” shows how the collection’s ending is inherent in its beginning. This story sets the theme, tone, and perspective for all the later stories, which present a marriage from within, using naturalistic detail in the description of emotion but told exclusively from the male protagonist’s perspective. An important fact we should bear in mind when reading these stories is that they were first published in magazines, only to be collected in book form many years later. This means that, originally, readers would encounter the Maples every now and then, but could not have the sensation of following a dense, extended emotional chronicle that the collection ultimately yields. Gathered together in one book, these stories can be read as a kind of a “quasi novel,” like the Bech or Olinger stories, in which there is a strong unity of topics, characters, and perspective. We can discuss the characters and their developments, but the most important aspects are their relations to one another and how they change over time. Married young, Richard and Joan are like siblings who feel as if they were twins, as if they had been born together. This socially approved symbiosis makes Richard more and more unhappy as they progress in time—over seven, nine, eighteen years—as a couple, especially because Joan seems to be a sharp, strong woman. The pain Richard feels is not only the loss of an identity, it is also the loss of his idea of love.

Generally, stories have a narrower focus than novels, often describing only one event. Because of this, a handful of moments from the lives of the Maples

are highlighted, while the rest is implied or supposed. Collectively, the stories are similar in structure to modernist novels, whose hallmark is fragmentary narration. The importance of a modernist heritage in Updike's work is often overlooked. Maybe his "realism" or autobiographical obsession make this trait invisible, yet there is no contradiction between these aspects. A clear example of his modernist roots can be seen in the relatively brief story, "Wife-Wooing." Almost no events in the story are described, only the thoughts of the male character. The narration takes the form of inner speech or monologue, in which the husband uses candor to address his wife: "We sense everything between us, every ripple, existent and nonexistent; it is tiring. Courting a wife takes tenfold the strength of winning an ignorant girl" (33). After seven years of marriage, the husband is comfortable enough to engage in a Joycean experiment of verbal pleasure, which may also be a replacement for the emotional emptiness he feels. The wordplay involves the letters W and O, which are not only featured in "wooing" and "woman" but also in "we" and "ours." Beneath the surface of the wordplay, the story examines the Maples as a couple and family. At one point the narrator accuses his wife of loving the baby more than him, her husband. It's a stereotypical instance of a father jealous of his child, yet throughout we see Richard's honesty and openness. The story ends with a surprising kiss Richard receives from his wife, leading to a telling revelation: "An expected gift is not worth giving" (36). Novelty, surprise, excitement—this is what has been lost after seven years of marriage.

These themes are taken up once more in the story "Giving Blood," where the narrator states, "Romance is, simply, the strange, the untried. It was unusual for the Maples to be driving together at eleven in the morning" (54). A trivial matter like a car ride together at an unusual time of day changes the perspective, at least for a moment, and the mood of the story continually shifts and evolves. A similar rhythm is visible in "Twin Beds in Rome," where the couple travels to Rome to give their marriage a last chance, and finds themselves vacillating between feelings of closeness and distance. After considerable talk about separation, Richard tells Joan, "You're such a nice woman. I can't understand why I'm so miserable with you" (63). Ultimately, the story ends with the narrator's statement: "She was happy, and, jealous of her happiness, he again grew reluctant to leave her" (72). Richard is so connected to Joan that whenever she seems to "stroll away," giving the appearance of independence, his feeling of love (or his emotional dependence) intensifies. In most of the stories, Joan is presented to us through Richard's weary or envious eyes, yet we always see her as a capable woman. Often she is in charge of the situation, or leading their way. For example, in "Giving Blood" Joan and

Richard seem at times like a mother and son, and in “Twin Beds in Rome” Joan is once again taking care of Richard.

In “Marching through Boston,” Joan becomes involved with the civil rights movement, through which, Richard notices, she grows more confident and independent. As a result, his adoration for her intensifies, suggesting a hidden desire on his part to possess her when it appears he cannot “have” her. In the crowd at the march in Boston, Richard recognizes his “Harvard section man in Plato to Dante” (79), an allusion that may shed light on the Maples’ marriage. Consider Plato’s *Symposium*, where Socrates explains that Eros is actually our wish to have something that we lack, or perhaps Dante’s love for Beatrice, an ideal and unattainable woman in an archetypal romantic relationship. Obviously, there can be no Eros in a long-lasting marriage. Or maybe there can be? While Joan is comfortable with her role in the march, Richard is not—she seems distant from him and capable of enjoying herself without him. Absent and out of his reach, she becomes more desirable: “She was beautiful, in the style of a poster, with farseeing blue eyes and red lips parted in song” (86).

One of the most unusual and surprising stories is “Waiting Up,” wherein a worried Richard is waiting for Joan to return home late in the evening. Soon the reader realizes the strangeness of the situation: Joan’s absence is due to the fact that she is at the home of Richard’s lover, discussing Richard’s infidelity with the other woman and the other woman’s husband. Everyone in the story is so decent on the surface that the situation feels slightly incredible, with Joan playing the oddest role of all, representing her absent and mischievous husband and at one point concluding that the other woman had stolen her (Joan’s) identity. In the end, we witness the final turn in Richard’s feelings: “I hated your being out of the house tonight. I hated it more than I would have supposed.” And yet Richard simultaneously experiences, though only half articulated in his head, the desire for the one who is not there: “Joan’s safe return had uncovered within him the abysmal loss of, with her soothing steady voice, the other” (122).

We know Richard intimately; he is a reflector. We hear even the tiniest change in his mood. In contrast, Joan is for us only his image; she is “mediated.” However, we learn enough about Joan not to trust Richard completely. For instance, in “Gesturing” it is unjust to attribute to her “a discreet death wish” in contrast to Ruth, who is all “life” (219). Richard is an “unreliable reflector,” whose observations are clearly blurred by his infatuation with Ruth. Only in “Divorcing: A Fragment” do we hear from Joan directly and learn that she suffers considerably. In a dramatic dialogue, she tells Richard: “It’s just, just . . . I wake up every morning reciting

reasons to myself why I shouldn't jump in the river. You don't know what it's like" (233). Richard's answer is almost sarcastic: "Instead of me you have a freedom and dignity you did not have before. Tell me what I'm doing wrong" (235). The story ends with Joan trying to explain to him that he does not understand what guilt is. Looking around for an object that would be guiltless enough, she grabs the closest one and exclaims: "You feel about as guilty as a— . . . Bedpost" (235). They both laugh, and, thus, the dramatic moment is resolved. As for the children and their pain, it is only in "Separating," surely the most emotionally engaging story of the collection, that we clearly hear them, though at that point there is little resolution to the family drama.

In the final story of the collection, "Here Come the Maples," the dialectic of desire turns into a nostalgic recounting of the past. What begins as a story of Richard and Joan's "no-fault" divorce becomes a memory of their wedding and honeymoon. In the same building where he and Joan were wed, Richard must now sign the papers to "annihilate" that act. Among the many memories that overwhelm him, the strongest one seems to be how he, young and confused, forgot to give his bride a kiss. That missing kiss is the concluding moment of their divorce. Once the legal process has finished, Richard and Joan are standing next to each other when suddenly Richard remembers what he "owes" to the past. Thus, the story, and the whole collection devoted to a marriage as a "beautiful disaster," ends with a belated wedding kiss.

But this is not the end for the Maples; eighteen years later, in 1994, Updike published the story "Grandparenting." The tone here, funny and cheerful, is different from all previous Maples stories. The former spouses, both remarried, are reunited on a cold winter night when their eldest daughter gives birth to their first grandchild. On this occasion, Richard spends time with both Joan and her rather stiff second husband, Andy. Again, Richard is "the central intelligence," as we see events and other characters through his eyes. He makes fun of Andy's obsessive tidiness and is annoyed by his son-in-law's appearance and behavior. Observing Joan with hostile eyes, he takes note of every sign of her aging: her wide waist, gray hair, short lashes. Her voice is the only reminder of the youthful woman he once loved. This is, of course, ironic, as Richard himself has not grown any younger. In the end, and it is no surprise, Joan turns out to be the most rational and capable of all three: Andy absentmindedly lets their car be locked in the hospital garage; Richard, who offers them a ride, cannot remember where he parked his car, and so it is Joan who helps him find the vehicle. This is the "old" Joan from "Giving Blood" and "Marching Through Boston," the stout mother from "Separating,"

and the rational woman from “Gesturing.” She is also the one most excited about assuming the new role of grandparent, as well as the one who wishes to be by her daughter’s side at the birth. Seeing the baby, for her, is a kind of an “afterbirth,” while Richard, in his freezing cold hotel room, feels that “the universe wanted to crush him, to make room for newcomers” (321), which sounds like an echo of the lament from “Wife-Wooing.”

The story, however, ends more humorously. Richard receives the baby in his arms, and its body “adheres” to his own, reminding him of the birth of his own daughter, now the mother, who was the first baby he ever held: “The hot wobbly head, the wandering eyes like opaque drops of celestial liquid, the squinting little face choleric and muscular with the will to live” (306). The new baby, the baby of that baby, also “sticks” to him: “And the child’s miniature body did adhere to his chest and arms, though more weakly than the infants he had presumed to call his own. Nobody belongs to us, except in memory” (324).

The concluding sentence of the story, and of the Maple saga, “Nobody belongs to us, except in memory,” speaks to the desire “to have” other people, to appropriate and possess them. We have seen this desire expressed in all the stories discussed, yet if claiming “the other” is what bring us happiness, then we are doomed to hours and years of unhappiness, with only some brief moments of bliss. It turns out that only memory, the act remembrance, can give us this feeling of “belonging” and being, one that takes precedence over desire. Before this grand finale, “Grandparenting” reveals how Richard and Joan have finally regained their former balance, in which they act without bitterness, with neither bliss nor pain, given that there is no longer a need to search for a kind of mutual happiness. This may not sound promising on the psychological level, but it is very refreshing from a literary perspective, as the story ends with good humor, witty observations, and a memorable revelation.

The building I watched from my hotel window in Boston had also changed over the course of time. In 2019, more than forty years after “Gesturing” was published, the skyscraper looks perfect. Its façade is a smooth-looking glass reflecting both the sky over Boston and the city’s mundane life. Not a disaster anymore; only beauty of a disputable nature.

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# Updike's *Maples Stories* among Literary Depictions of Marriage

JAMES SCHIFF

Marriages in literature seem so much worse than the real marriages I know. To illustrate, I recently taught a survey class in post-1890 American fiction. We began the semester reading Frank Norris's *McTeague*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Hemingway's short stories, and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Though I've long been aware of how many bad marriages there are in literature, I was surprised at just how miserable and violent these marriages were. Consider *McTeague*, wherein the courtship of the eponymous protagonist and Trina Sieppe begins with her passed out from ether in his dental chair, while he considers raping her. The two soon marry. Eventually McTeague beats her, torturing her by nibbling her infected fingers, then he kills her for having selfishly hoarded her lottery money. Lest you think this an isolated example, the other central marriage in the novel, between the mad housekeeper, Maria Macapa, and the deranged junk dealer, Zerkow, also ends in physical abuse and murder. Though violence is seemingly absent in Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna and Leonce Pontellier are so detached from one another that she moves out of her husband's home and into a smaller house, where she engages intimately with other men before quietly taking her own life. In Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," Margot Macomber shoots and kills her husband, Francis, just as he is about to prove his courage. In Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie Crawford goes through three husbands, the first two being highly controlling and patriarchal. When she finally marries someone she loves, a man named Tea Cake, who treats her like an equal, she nevertheless suffers beatings and ends up killing him

in self-defense. For my thirty-eight students, eager to learn more about the adult world, including the institution of marriage, the lesson, augmented later in the term through novels by Cormac McCarthy and Junot Diaz, is essentially this: *Marriage is horrible, husbands control and abuse their wives, who simultaneously desire yet resist escape, and the unhappy couple moves inexorably toward violent death.*

Though the marriages I've known in real life are often less than ideal—some have brought considerable pain to both parties, and a significant portion have ended in divorce—not one, as far as I know, knock on all available wood, has turned to firearms. From what I've seen, marriage seems much worse in literature than in real life. That said, literature allows us entrée to a marriage in a way not possible when watching the marriages of family and friends. When reading about a marriage in a novel, we gain access to intimate details and interiority not generally available when observing others in real life. As Nancy F. Cott writes, "Marriage is like the sphinx, a conspicuous and recognizable monument on the landscape, full of secrets" (1). Most of these secrets and intimacies, of course, cannot be discerned by outsiders. In this regard, marriage would seem a particularly fertile subject for literary investigation, yet that's not entirely the case. Though marriage is central to the novel, it is more often romance or adultery that receives the lion's share of attention. Marriage may seem important in Richardson's *Pamela* or Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, but those novels are more about the courtship that precedes the marriage. Similarly, while Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* depict unhappy marriages, they are more memorable for rendering the adultery that threatens the marriage. In both of those famous novels, the heroine (Emma, Anna) finds herself in a marriage that fails to stimulate; confronted with the arrival of an attractive new man, she is pulled into adultery, which proves more engaging than her stale marriage. While Tony Tanner argued that "marriage is *the* central subject for the bourgeois novel" (15), David Shumway slyly countered by suggesting that marriage is "mainly left out of the novel, bourgeois or otherwise" (189). This is certainly true of much of canonical American literature, from *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Huck Finn* to *Beloved*, *Housekeeping*, and *Blood Meridian*. Adultery registers in only one of these six novels, and marriage is not really investigated closely in any of them.

Though marriage finds a larger place in the American fiction of W. D. Howells, Henry James, and Edith Wharton, it is not until we get to John Updike that we find confirmation of W. H. Auden's shrewdly perceptive remark: "Like everything which is not the involuntary result of fleeting emotion but the creation of time and will, any marriage, happy or unhappy, is infinitely more interesting than any

romance, however passionate” (89–90). In Updike’s writing, spouses do not generally kill or physically harm one another, though they may momentarily ponder such possibilities. Updike’s depicted marriages are often the site of problems and sadness, tensions and uncertainty. Threatened by adultery, which is pervasive, they gravitate toward painful decline and often divorce. Yet the marriages themselves are capable of withstanding setbacks and traumas, and the process toward dissolution takes place slowly, as the couple finds itself simultaneously incapable of severing or strengthening its bond. Updike’s reader is, thus, afforded an intimate view of the inner workings of a marriage, observing the painful push and pull that characters experience as they struggle with whether to leave or remain with their spouse.

While Updike treats marriage in considerable depth in his novels—the Rabbit novels, *Couples*, his *Scarlet Letter* trilogy, and later works like *Gertrude and Claudius* and *Villages*—it is in his *Maples Stories*, which also appeared on the syllabus of my American literature survey class, that we see his most interesting and singular depiction of a marriage. Traditionally the novel, rather than the short story, serves as the genre for chronicling a marriage because it better captures what can be most damaging and revealing—namely, the passage of time. Yet through a diachronic strategy, such as he employed in his Rabbit novels, in which the central story is told in serialized installments over several decades, Updike was able to bring the long passage of time to his short stories. In these eighteen stories, published between 1956 and 1994, Updike chronicles the unravelling of the marriage of Richard and Joan Maple. It has always been surprising to me that these stories do not have a more significant reputation or following. Individual stories, like “Giving Blood,” “Separating,” and “Gesturing,” are among Updike’s finest, displaying not only his customary wit, humor, and elegant prose, but an emotional depth that evokes real loss and pain. Viewed collectively, *The Maples Stories* rivals the strongest short story cycles of the early twentieth century—Joyce’s *Dubliners*, Hemingway’s *In Our Time*, Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*—and provides one of the most engaging portraits of a struggling marriage.

In chronicling the Maples, Updike, according to David Crowe, does not depict “the typical marital landmarks: ceremonies, holidays, anniversaries, the births of children and celebrations and their accomplishments” (111). This is generally true, though in his final two Maples stories Updike does explore ceremonies (wedding and divorce), and the birth of the first grandchild. Instead, as Crowe and others suggest, Updike looks mostly to moments of conflict and tension, occasions in which the couple must determine whether to continue together or split. The marriage itself becomes a kind of protagonist, which evolves through a series of phases

described by Robert Luscher: “early doubts, temptations, overtures toward separation; then moving into increasing frustration, demystification, and adultery; then arguments and stalemates; and finally culmination in legal separation that renovates their vision of their marriage’s enduring value” (110). What makes these stories so persuasive is their intimate credibility—they *feel* raw and real—while capturing a marriage as it passes through time. Composed over several decades, the stories reflect Updike’s first marriage and function like artistic, fictionalized diary entries, recording moods and attitudes at various moments during the marriage’s history.

But back to my students, who until we began reading the *Maples*, had come to see marriage as either a horrifically combusive enterprise, in which one partner seems destined to brutally kill the other, or a lifeless and stale arrangement, in which couples ignore one another and turn to adultery. Though the latter is far more applicable to the *Maples* than the former, these stories don’t quite fit either paradigm. Adultery certainly figures prominently in their marriage, yet Richard and Joan Maple also *like* and care about one another, and care about the family and home they’ve created, which makes leaving so harrowing. Unable either to separate from or commit fully to one another, the *Maples* are in a state of continual tension, which is what makes their situation so compelling. While there is tension between Hemingway’s *Macomber*s and between Norris’s Trina and McTeague, those authors resolve tension by having one character blow the other’s brains out. Updike, however, sustains and explores the smaller tensions that persist over decades.

What is also unique about the *Maples Stories* is that Updike, in contrast to other writers who have written about adultery, devotes almost no attention to the adulterous liaisons or much-desired lover. If the *Maples Stories* were more conventional, there would be as much attention devoted to Richard’s and Joan’s liaisons with their lovers as there is, say, in *Couples* or *Marry Me*. But Updike mostly ignores the lovers, as we see in “Separating.” While Richard is willing to sacrifice almost everything to join his lover, the lover is not named (she is in “Gesturing”) and is noted only once, when Richard drives past her house: “The home of the woman Richard hoped to marry stood across the green. Her bedroom light burned” (189). This is unusual. In almost any narrative dealing with adulterous relations, the focus turns toward the heat generated by the lovers. Further, most stories about adultery or intimate relations within a marriage include a good deal of depicted romance or sex, particularly if the author is Updike. Yet the *Maples Stories* are relatively sexless in comparison to Updike’s novels (surely the fact that most of the stories first appeared in William Shawn’s *New Yorker* has something to do with this). In composing these stories, Updike mostly resisted explicit description of those

elements that typically fuel narratives about marriage, romance, and adultery. We almost never see the Maples in bed, whether together or with others.

Our first glimpse of the Maples is in “Snowing in Greenwich Village” (1956), where the couple, married now for nearly two years, has just moved into their first real home, a Manhattan apartment. The story, among other things, tells us three important facts about the Maples. First, that marriage is, among other things, a performance. We see the Maples *perform* the roles of husband and wife in their new domestic arrangement: taking coats, pouring drinks, making toasts. Second, we recognize the significance of “the other,” in this case a woman named Rebecca Cune, who serves not only as the audience for whom the Maples can perform their “hostly duties” but as the triangular figure that threatens their marriage. Third, like most of the later Maples stories, the perspective and interiority come from Richard, and we see how much he enjoys this kind of metaphorical dance with the other woman while married to his wife. At the story’s beginning, we are told, Rebecca “allowed Richard Maple to slip off her coat and scarf even as she stood gently greeting Joan,” and a few lines later he “entered the dark bedroom, entrusted the bed with Rebecca’s clothes, and returned to the living room” (15). Removing a guest’s coat is a simple duty, as is, at the story’s conclusion, walking that guest home, but in Updike’s story, and in Richard’s mind, these duties carry a heightened eroticism. Thus, we see the prototypical Updike marriage: a couple comfortably playing the spousal roles while the husband is drawn to temptations that threaten their domestic stability. Unlike Rabbit Angstrom at the beginning of *Rabbit, Run*, however, Richard is not miserable with his wife, nor does he desire to leave her. He is simply and simultaneously attracted to other women.

Over the next six years Updike would write nearly three dozen short stories—yet none about the Maples, though he later determined that “Wife-Wooing,” published in 1960, was a Maples story. Unique in the collection, “Wife-Wooing” is a celebration of language and eroticism. Eating dinner with his family before a fire, the first-person male narrator is clearly attracted to his wife, whom he addresses as if in a dramatic monologue: “you allow this black skirt to slide off your raised knees down your thighs, slide *up* your thighs in your body’s absolute geography, so the parallel whiteness of their undersides is exposed to the fire’s warmth and to my sight. Oh” (29). That same evening he hopes to seduce her, but she instead wishes to read a book about Richard Nixon and then fall asleep. Clearly taken aback by his failure, he immerses himself the next day in other activities, only to be surprised that evening by his wife, who “come[s] with a kiss of toothpaste to me moist and girlish and quick; an expected gift is not worth giving” (34). The

story establishes a crucial reality about marriage and the Maples: that a couple is often not in sync. Yet the Maples, at this relatively early stage, remain attracted to one another and are still capable of surprise.

Things are different by the time "Giving Blood" and "Twin Beds in Rome" are published in 1962 and 1963. In "Giving Blood" the Maples have been married for nine years, which, the story's opening sentence explains, is "almost too long" (37). Driving to Boston on a Saturday morning to donate blood, the Maples engage in pointed dialogue about the party the night before and their attraction to other people. Affairs are suggested, with Joan stating, "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). Before Richard can reply, we are told, "Her reading his strategy so correctly made his face burn." This becomes a central feature of Richard's marital strategy: pair up Joan with another man to allow him guilt-free liaisons. Shortly thereafter, the Maples are lying on beds in a hospital lab as blood is drained from their bodies—a metaphor for what their marriage is doing to them. By the time we get to "Twin Beds in Rome" their marriage is in crisis: "The Maples had talked and thought about separation so long it seemed it would never come. . . . Bleeding, mangled, reverently laid in its tomb a dozen times, their marriage could not die. Burning to leave one another, they left, out of marital habit, together. They took a trip to Rome" (55). Richard, being more selfish and unsatisfied than his wife, has seemingly lost his desire for a deeper glimpse "into the secret woman he could never reach and had at last wearied of trying to reach" (56). By the story's end the couple have "parted," yet seeing Joan happy, Richard grew "jealous of her happiness" and "again grew reluctant to leave her" (64). As we see throughout these stories, whenever one of the Maples begins to pull away, the other reacts by moving closer. As Updike writes, "the seesaw of their erotic interest rarely balances" (11).

The ensuing stories deliver the same essential narrative, though not in a dull or repetitive manner, as Updike demonstrates the many ways to depict a couple in crisis. While not among the finest stories in the collection, "Your Lover Just Called" and "The Red-Herring Theory" introduce complications that clearly mystified many of my students. In the former story, Richard, home sick in bed, answers the phone only to hear the caller hang up, which leads him to tell his wife, "Your lover just called" (93). This game of positing a lover for the other continues whenever the phone rings and is made more complicated when Richard actually observes his wife kissing another man. The story builds, finally, to Joan's outburst, "Go to her! . . . Go to her like a man and stop trying to maneuver me into something I don't understand! I have no lover!" (100). These marital games deepen and become

more complicated in “The Red-Herring Theory.” While cleaning up after hosting a party, Joan accuses Richard of having a red herring: “Marlene is not your mistress. She’s your red herring” (142). According to Joan, a red herring “may have been his mistress once, or she may become one in the future, but he’s not sleeping with her now. You can tell, because in public they act as though they do.” As in “Snowing in Greenwich Village,” the characters perform a public role while hiding a secret life, yet now the secrets have become so much more labyrinthine. What seems most intriguing about this game of deception with lovers and red herrings is that the married couple continues to play it with one another, as if the primary audience for whom they perform is not their lover but their spouse. Again, Updike maintains his focus on the married couple rather than the lovers.

Perhaps the two finest stories in the collection, “Separating” and “Gesturing” mark an important transition in which Richard moves out of the family home. “Separating” is the collection’s most emotionally engaging and painful story, and its conclusion enacts a familiar pattern: each time Richard prepares to leave his marriage and family, the process of reassuring and comforting them reestablishes his love for them, which makes separating all the more agonizing. This push and pull between leaving and staying takes place most intensely in “Separating,” but as we see in “Gesturing,” Richard is able, at last, to leave and takes an apartment in Boston. Though his lover, Ruth, has a slightly larger role in “Gesturing,” it is again the wife, Joan, rather than the lover, whose character most deeply resonates. Getting together for a meal at the story’s conclusion, Richard and Joan share personal stories and intimacies, leading Richard to realize that Joan will continue gesturing within him forever.

What the Maples stories give us is not necessarily a good or bad marriage. As Updike states in his foreword, “That a marriage ends is less than ideal; but all things end under heaven, and if temporality is held to be invalidating, then nothing real succeeds” (11). Though divorce dissolves this marriage, to call it simply a failure feels wrong. What Updike creates through the Maples is a singular marriage, marked by their talk of multiple lovers and red herrings, yet also one that, through its repetitive patterns and vacillations, is universal and familiar. There is clearly something worth examining about the Maples’ marriage as they struggle, over nearly two decades, in a liminal, unresolved state. Marriage, as depicted in these stories, figures less as an institution or contract, though it is mentioned as both, and more like a living entity, an organism that requires continual nourishment and care. Though the Maples are unable to sustain what they have, the “musical pattern, the advance and retreat, of [their] duet,” provides one of the more deeply

compelling literary depictions of a marriage.

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# Will John Updike “Sink”?: Posthumous Reputation and the Fickleness of Literary Fame

DONALD J. GREINER

Literary reputations tend to dip for a decade or two after a writer dies.

—Robert Wilson, “Updike at Rest”

To keep an ever tottering reputation from sinking out of view.

—John Updike, “Then and Now: John Updike”

It has been a hard year or so for writers. . . . and now with the passing of John Updike at age 76, death has taken perhaps its biggest prize.

—Lorrie Moore, “The Complete Updike”

I was hoping to talk to America.

—John Updike, as quoted by Lev Grossman, “An Appreciation:  
Updike at Rest”

What happens to the reputations of important artists when they die? When John Updike died on 27 January 2009, the reaction in the print media was swift, respectful, and—given the extent of the responses—floodlike in the torrent of commentary expressing the laceration that his death meant to the cultural health of the nation. The general tone was gratitude for his keen-eyed, lyrical chronicling of the complexities of America over half a century. If ever an American author measured up to Henry James’s lofty exhortation to be “one of those on whom nothing is lost,”

that author was John Updike. For him a telephone pole had as much right to be here as a tree. Each specific detail of creation, the minute and the monumental, was to be noted, and thus he felt no contradiction between writing poems as various as “Seven Stanzas at Easter” and “The Beautiful Bowel Movement.” If a “thing” was “here,” it was worthy of his attention. Three of his comments are relevant in this context: “The self’s responsibility . . . is to achieve rapport if not rapture with the giant, cosmic other: to appreciate, let’s say, the walk back from the mailbox” (*Self-Consciousness* 257); “The timbrel creed of praise/gives spirit to the daily” (“Fine Point 12/22/08” 29); “If I can read this strange old guy’s mind aright, he’s drinking a toast to the *visible* world, his impending disappearance from it be damned” (“The Full Glass” 914, italics mine).

But what about *after* a major author disappears from the visible world? Honors and awards are permanent, not withdrawn when an artist dies, yet how permanent is the reputation? Is the author still discussed, debated, celebrated? Is the author still referenced in essays about or reviews of other writers? Is the author still relevant? More: is the author still *read*? Along with Saul Bellow, Updike was one of the two most honored American writers in the second half of the twentieth century. A multiple winner of the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Pulitzer Prize, he was one of only three novelists to garner two Pulitzers. The others were William Faulkner and Booth Tarkington, but merely mentioning their names today confirms the fickleness of fame: Faulkner’s star remains high while Tarkington’s has sunk into obscurity (despite inclusion in the Library of America). Decades ago, Robert Frost, himself a holder of four Pulitzer Prizes for poetry, codified in a few words the goal that all serious artists pursue: “the utmost of ambition is to lodge a few poems where they will be hard to get rid of” (“Introduction to E. A. Robinson’s *King Jasper*” 744). Frost and Faulkner lodged more than their share. Tarkington did not. Updike?

Soon after Updike’s death, Robert Wilson, editor of the distinguished journal *American Scholar*, titled his editorial for the Spring 2009 issue “Updike at Rest.” Lamenting that the man “who kept careful watch over all our doings has gone away,” Wilson praised Updike as

Someone who simply paid steady attention and steadily shared the fruits of that attention in his sterling and generally whimsical prose and verse. . . . Updike was unusual among our most acclaimed novelists in not retreating from the culture scene. Name me another major writer who reviews books regularly, writes about new art exhibits, and would turn an Olympian eye to book packaging or the dry cleaners. There was a generosity about this. It never occurred to me that it would stop. (2)

Yet in the middle of his remarks, an editorial that appreciatively parsed the flexibility of Updike's art, Wilson indirectly asked the key question: "Literary reputations tend to dip for a decade or two after a writer dies, and it is hard to know whether, after that, Updike's mastery of the physical and emotional texture of life in our times will date him (*Rabbit, Run* felt a little faded when I reread it a few years ago) or whether he will emerge as our Anthony Trollope (a wise comparison that Verlyn Klinkenborg made in the *New York Times* recently)" (2). Will Updike's bright star fade, only to reemerge, or, to cite Wilson's word, will it "dip" into a Tarkington-like black hole? The irony is that Updike made a similar point as early in his long career as 1964, the year he was honored with his first National Book Award (for *The Centaur*). A few days after his death, the (London) *Times Literary Supplement* reprinted his comments from its 4 June 1964 issue. *TLS* had asked for a response to "what English writing" had meant to him. Updike turned his remarks into an observation on the uncertainty of reputation, surely an unexpected concern for an already celebrated young author—32 years old at the time—who had published *Rabbit, Run*; *Pigeon Feathers*; and *The Centaur* in a span of only four years. Pointing to George Bernard Shaw and Joseph Conrad as English writers he admired, he conceded that while they were "no longer held in the esteem their living presences could command," they "have remained readable in a way true of no American writer between Henry James and Hemingway" ("Then and Now: John Updike" 16). No longer held in high esteem but still "readable": it's as if Updike, favored with so much praise so early, were already pondering the fate of his own career. He then turned his attention from Shaw and Conrad to American authors. Note that where Wilson wrote "dip," Updike wrote "sink": "In America, the strenuous task of being a writer always threatens the task of writing: the books of some of our fiction writers are indeed not so much a series of tales as a succession of self-aggrandizing protests, a row of hastily-hewn props to keep an ever-tottering reputation from sinking out of view" (16).

That *TLS* elected to reprint Updike's decades-old comment a week after he died suggests that the editors were already contemplating the question of his posthumous presence. As Claire Messud astutely observed in her memorial remarks about the writer she admired, "certain of his triumphs seem, now, to belong to the past. . . . Updike saw the riskiness of his younger work come to seem staid with age" (66). The general response to his work *after* the acclaim accorded *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) indicates that his enviable reputation was beginning to experience a slight decline. Except for *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996) and *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000), the latter novel applauded primarily by academic critics, his stature

wavered during the last decade or so of his life even though *Terrorist* (2006) was a best seller. Stephen Buckley noted in 2019 when discussing classical composers, “The process of canonization is often considered to be akin to evolution, whereby the fittest survive, and the cream rises to the top. The truth is more complex . . . and circumstances having little to do with artistry are often decisive in establishing an artist’s place in history. Do we like Mozart most because his music is superlative? Or because his portrayal as a towering genius is so pervasive in our culture that we listen to him with reflexive deference? It may be impossible to know” (Buckley 3). The key word in Buckley’s observation is “circumstances,” a dilemma Updike was aware of as early as 1960 when he selected a statement from Pascal for the epigraph to *Rabbit, Run*: “The motions of Grace, the hardness of the heart; external circumstances.” In the current debate about Updike’s posthumous reputation, the politics of present “circumstances” conflicts with the “grace” of art. Today, a bit more than ten years after his death, the general problem he posed in his comments to *TLS* applies to him: will John Updike sink “out of view”? A discussion of, first, the media responses to his death, nearly unanimous in their tone of respect and regret, and, second, of the widespread references to him during the ensuing decade will illustrate the challenge of answering the question. My emphasis is not on books about Updike or essays in academic journals, the kinds of material published primarily for scholars and advanced students, but on the serious newspapers and magazines that target the literate general audience, the readers who discuss books with other readers and thereby keep a deceased writer’s work alive.

I

The media coverage of Updike’s death was a mixture of praise of the oeuvre and lament for the loss. Reading the flood of tributes in American and British publications a decade later, one is struck by the nearly unanimous opinion that a literary giant, as opposed to a literary celebrity, had fallen, the heir to the mantle that Faulkner and Hemingway had worn until their deaths in the early 1960s, a mantle that was then passed to Updike whether he wanted it or not when he published *Rabbit, Run* in 1960, *Pigeon Feathers* in 1962, and *The Centaur* in 1964. He and Bellow shared the mantle for the remainder of the 20th century. If artists have the right to be judged on their best work—and they do—then Updike easily deserved the honors and awards. Yet the mantle can be heavy, a burden on a writer of whom much is expected and, worse, expected on a regular basis. As the anonymous commentator for *Newsweek* observed, “Probably even the author himself got sick of hearing how

gifted he was, [yet] he had no one but himself to blame. . . . Rabbit was ordinary; Updike's novels about him were anything but" ("Gone but Not Forgotten" 95).

He was celebrated in the memorials for his exceptional eye, for noticing, in the words of Wallace Stevens, a poet he admired, "not ideas about the thing but the thing itself," for things as they are, for, in effect, the real. His death was so unexpected and so regretted that the day after the loss was publicly announced, the *New York Times* began its eulogy on the front page and continued it for twelve columns covering two and a half pages, an unusually comprehensive response to a death. Updike was that important in 2009. Michiko Kakutani, who was often skeptical of what she deemed to be Updike's lesser successes, stressed his ability to *see*, remembering him as "[e]ndowed with an art student's pictorial imagination, a journalist's sociological eye and a poet's gift for metaphor. . . . and almost blogger-like in his determination to turn every scrap of knowledge and experience into words. . . . memorializing the everyday mysteries of love and faith and domesticity with extraordinary nuance and precision" (Kakutani A1). Printed beside her tribute, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt's overview similarly pointed to Updike as "the kaleidoscopically gifted writer . . . so vast, protean and lyrical as to place him in the first rank of American authors" (Lehmann-Haupt A22).

The thoughtful judgments by Kakutani and Lehmann-Haupt set the tone for the avalanche of obituaries to follow. The *New York Times* assigned parts of two additional issues to Updike's reputation. On 29 January 2009, the day after Kakutani's and Lehmann-Haupt's pieces, the paper commemorated Updike with an editorial, an Updike poem, and an op-ed by Lorrie Moore. Saluting him as an American Anthony Trollope, as two major writers who focused on the "social and cultural webs" that trapped their characters rather than on only the characters themselves, Verlyn Klinkenborg used his editorial to highlight an important contrast: "America likes its writers struggling. And if it's been at times puzzled by Updike, it's because his *grace* and his *facility* made him a little suspect in a culture that expects its writers—Hemingway and Mailer—to duke it out with the language and themselves" (Klinkenborg A20, italics mine). Grace and facility: to illustrate Klinkenborg's point, the *Times* printed Updike's "Requiem," a poem he wrote when he was dying. The final stanza expresses his wit:

For life's a shabby subterfuge,  
And death is real, and dark, and huge.  
The shock of it will register  
Nowhere but where it will occur. (A21)

Grace, yes, but framed in the guise of his typically wry grin, as if death, like a telephone pole or a tree, were just another part of creation to be perspicaciously *seen*. In her op-ed piece, Moore extended his witty quip about death, citing his “existential comedy”: “It has been a hard year or so for writers. The world seems to grow emptier and emptier, depletion without replenishment, and now, with the passing of John Updike at age 76, death has taken perhaps its biggest prize.” Yet the significance in her testimony was that, while saluting his gift “at describing everything,” Moore quietly challenged the standard feminist reaction to his canon. Note the “and” in “male and female”: “Mr. Updike’s novels wove an explicit and teeming tapestry of male *and* female appetites. He noticed astutely, precisely, unnervingly. His stories, some of the best ever written by anyone, were jewels of existential comedy, domestic anguish and restraint” (A21, italics mine). Her point? Updike’s probing of family particulars featured not just wayward men but also wives and lovers. Underlining the impact of his death, the *Times* included yet another full-page memorial in the 1 February 2009 issue. Like Klinkenborg, Charles McGrath linked Updike to Trollope, singled out his “eye and his sensibility,” and echoed Moore’s use of “jewel”: “his prose—that amazing instrument, like a jeweler’s loupe; so precise, exquisitely attentive and seemingly effortless. . . . He was an old-fashioned realist, with an unswerving belief in the power of words to faithfully record experience and to enhance it” (“Acknowledgments” 1, 7).

What was interesting about the multiple celebrations of Updike in the *New York Times* was the contrast with a key tribute in the widely read British publication *The Economist*. Remembering Updike as “an American subversive,” the anonymous commentator summarized his themes as encompassing God, sex, and America supported by an unbreakable foundation of Puritanism and guilt. The writer’s emphasis was the cultural separation between the United States and Britain—or, for that matter, between the United States and every culture—because only America could have given birth to Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom:

Champion of the great American loser, Mr. Updike used writing, not just for his readers but also for himself, to make sense of the guilt-ridden anxieties of Protestant middle America, with its residual self-righteousness mixed with the temptation represented by strip malls and motels. . . . His triumph lay in taking the puritanism and practicality of the early settlers, such “enigmatic dullness,” he called it, and making it shine. (“An American Subversive” 89)

This shrewd eulogy, a concise comment on the social differences that Updike’s precise exposition of America offered the world, highlighted the importance of

his work to readers in other countries not inundated by the lure of strip malls and motels.

Culturally akin to the anonymous writer for *The Economist*, Ian McEwan similarly noted Updike's appraisal of American guilt and dread. Along with Adam Gopnik's tribute in the *New Yorker*, McEwan's appreciation of Updike's achievement was one of the two most perceptive. Quoting Updike's dark assessment of the very art he committed his life to—"writing, in making the world light, in codifying, distorting, prettifying, verbalizing it, approaches blasphemy"—McEwan defined the significance of Updike's death: "And now this masterly blasphemer, whose literary schemes and pretty conceits touched at points on the Shakespearean, is gone. . . . we are coming to the end of the golden age of the American novel in the twentieth century's second half" (4). More precisely than the other memorialists in 2009, McEwan caught the unexpected combination of the darkness of guilt and the counterweight of wit in Updike's fiction. Death was always the looming shadow in his novels, stories, and poems: "[He] was constitutionally unable to 'make the leap of unfaith.' The 'weight' of personal death did not allow it, and much seriousness and dark humor derived from this tension between intellectual reach and metaphysical dread" (4). Gopnik concurred. Observing that Updike had no illusions about the power of America's postwar abundance to blunt the decline of religion or to "wish away mortality," Gopnik stressed that despite the lyrical style, "Updike was a realist, as comedians must be, and never even marginally a romantic. . . . He sang like Henry James, but he saw like Sinclair Lewis" ("Postscript" 36, 38).

Reading these testimonies ten years later, one becomes aware of how precisely the various eulogists agreed on the specifics, the foci, of Updike's work: style, wit, death, and sex. McEwan's and Gopnik's overviews were especially perceptive because they caught the complexity of his art. For Lev Grossman, however, the style itself was the bedrock: "What everybody always comes back to is the style—that thing Updike did with words that other writers couldn't. They loved it, they quoted it, they studied it, they tried to rip it off. Sometimes they just got sick of its relentless perfection" (9). Mark Feeney called the style "jeweled," an adjective that appeared in eulogy after eulogy: "Few writers have staged such elegant lexical ballets on the page" (A1). Messud called the style "lyrical and elegant": "He had a glorious facility with language" (66). McGrath called the style a "gift": "blessed with one of the greatest prose styles of the 20th century" ("John Updike" 165).<sup>1</sup> But for all the commendation of his enviable prose rhythms and metaphors, William Pritchard was surely correct in arguing that Updike's nimble touch as a comic writer was "not nearly appreciated enough. A mischievous humor surfaces in all his writings" (C5).<sup>2</sup>

The writers who saluted the wit did general readers a favor because, in Gopnik's words, Updike the humorist was "the least known or recognizable Updike of them all." Tracing his comic touch to the *New Yorker* in the days of James Thurber and Katharine White, Gopnik recalled "that bemused, ironically smiling but resolutely well-wishing anti-malicious comic tone. . . . Comedy was his default mode . . . and comedy is made of realism alloyed with love" ("Postscript" 36, 38). Mention realism, love, and Updike in the same sentence, however, and most readers are likely to think of Updike and sex. His explicitness about what happens in the bedroom sparked a controversy that surfaced with *Rabbit, Run* and dogged him the remainder of his career. To their credit, the eulogists did not dodge the issue in 2009. As Gopnik plainly stated, "His girls and women are real, with scratchy pubic hair" ("Postscript" 36). McEwan went further:

. . . that celebrated or infamous capacity for fastidious, clinical, visually intense, painfully and hilariously honest descriptions of men and women making love. . . . The ruthless recording eye made Updike unpopular with some women readers, especially back in the salad days of Theory, when talk of the "male gaze" was the fashion. . . . But in Updike as in life, bodies are rarely perfect, unlike in the movies. (4)

Brooke Allen was on the mark when she stressed that, contrary to D. H. Lawrence, Updike was no "Priest of Love" despite his mastery at conveying erotic passion in prose because he was "equally adept at calling forth the self-disgust following on sexual abandon" (D1). Ever the Protestant with the boyhood Lutheran background, Updike was all but primed from childhood to communicate guilt.

The sheer amount of praise, of gratefulness, in these commentaries might suggest that the authors consciously avoided the opportunity to utter, however gently, a negative thought about a literary giant recently fallen. Such was not the case. As one would expect, the complaints were largely about his portrayals of women and sex despite his acknowledged commitment to accurate depiction of the real. Allen, who concluded her appreciation with "we are grateful," deplored what she saw as his failing. She quoted his rueful admission: "I am a white male born at a certain time, probably with some of the sexist language of men of my age and vocation [but] I can't believe I am a misogynist. Bright, clever, good women have played a major part in my life" (66). Despite her gratitude, Allen insisted on the condescension she detected in "bright" and "clever": "he could not escape being a man of his time" (66). Katharine Weber was more dismissive. Quoted by Julia Keller, Weber charged Updike not with condescension but with contempt: "I had to work to admire him, because of his contempt for women. There's an ugliness there, a

willingness to regard women as ‘less than’” (qtd. in Keller D3). To the charges of “condescension” and “contempt” Kakutani added “crude”: S. was “a jumping off point for a crude attack on feminists” (A22).<sup>3</sup>

Confronting these reservations, a cynic might retort, “well, yes, but they were all written by women with a gender-based ax to grind,” yet the retort would be misguided. The larger question is whether, in a moment of identity politics and acerbic cultural divisions, strongly worded rejections of one part of an unusually prolific author’s work can derail the reputation of an artist who was steadily accorded the stature of “major” for half a century. From the point of view of academic and scholarly interest, the answer to the query is “no.” As James Schiff, editor of the *John Updike Review*, observed eight years after Updike died, “attention to Updike has remained fairly steady since the late 1960s. . . . a steady stream of scholarship has continued into the twenty-first century. . . . More recently, there has been an uptick in interest” (3). Schiff was correct in the matter of scholarly focus on Updike, but scholars speak primarily to one another. Unless they feature Updike in their seminars, they cannot introduce him to a new generation of readers. McEwan speculated about this issue: “The Updike opus is so vast, so varied and rich, that we will not have its full measure for years to come” (6). Recently, ten years after his death, I visited my local Barnes & Noble bookstore specifically to count the Updike volumes in stock and on the shelves. The store is located in a midsized city blessed with six institutions of higher learning and thus with a coterie of literate readers. Current bestsellers, mystery and romance novels, nonfiction, and delightfully illustrated children’s books were in abundance. On the Updike shelf? *One* paperback copy of *Rabbit, Run*. At stake is not the scholarly commitment that, as Schiff states, remains strong, but the interest of educated general readers, the segment of the population that has a significant impact on the longevity of a writer’s fame.

Between 2009 and 2019, two pillars of the Updike canon generated increased negative scrutiny: his prose style, particularly after *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), and his exploration of man/woman/sex. As the numerous and thoughtful memorials published when he died confirm, celebration of his gift for the metaphors and language that he fashioned to paint, as it were, his pictures of the minute and mundane he saw with his exceptional eye, was practically unanimous. Such was not the case after 2009. More eye-catching were the increased attacks on his unblushing depictions of erotic encounters. Many of the attacks were unabashedly scornful, written in a tone of condescension and anger, as if the authors (not unlike Norman Podhoretz and John Aldridge, Updike’s detractors of yesteryear) hoped not only to destroy his oeuvre but to erase Updike himself, to “sink” him into a black hole with

Booth Tarkington.<sup>4</sup> An examination of representative magazines and newspapers in which he was discussed between his death and 2019 provides a window on what McEwan called the “full measure” of his legacy. Anecdotal hearsay will not suffice. If we want to gauge the oscillation of his reputation since he died, we need to turn to the archives, to the public record, to the material that shapes public opinion and determines what the public reads. Robert Wilson asked in 2009, will John Updike “dip”? My answer: “Yes, he will. He already has.”

## II

The above observation in no way implies that Updike is on the brink of being unread. The question is not total obscurity but the relative stability of fame. To cite just two examples from American literature: Herman Melville was forgotten when he died, but he is revered today as the author of the greatest American novel. F. Scott Fitzgerald's books were ignored when he died, but two of his four novels are now read as masterpieces. For Joyce Carol Oates and Kate Webb, both writing in 2017, Updike's star has not even dimmed. Oates did not hesitate to define him as one of the four “great midcentury American writers” along with Faulkner, Bellow, and Vladimir Nabokov, a kind of canonical Mt. Olympus where only the most esteemed authors sit permanently as masters of “highly literary, intellectually driven, and symbol-laden work” (56). Webb concurred when she included Updike among “the big beasts of American literature” (22). As mockingly reported by Mark Singer, even Donald Trump must have agreed with Oates and Webb. Referring to a “delightfully deranged letter” Singer received from Trump, he explained how Trump bragged about his “credentials: ‘I’ve read John Updike, I’ve read Orhan Pamuk, I’ve read Philip Roth. . . . I’ve been a best-selling author for close to 20 years. Whether you like it or not, facts are facts’” (19).

Except for Trump's empty boast, these kinds of references can only enhance an artist's standing with the public, but in Updike's case they routinely raise the issue of the Nobel Prize, which, notoriously, he did not win. The reason appears to be political in the sense that the Nobel literature committee is routinely criticized for having an anti-American bias. As Updike once mentioned in casual conversation, the committee would not give the award today to “a white, Protestant, American male,” yet the question was periodically discussed after 2009 despite the Prize not being bestowed posthumously. Disparaging the Nobel as “a charade,” Dwight Garner nominated Updike as a writer who should have won and John Steinbeck and Pearl Buck as writers who shouldn't, but note his sense that in 2018 Updike would not be a favorite: “John Updike, though he is no longer popular to champion. I agree with

Martin Amis, who called him a ‘NORAD of data gathering and microintrospection’ (“Round Table” 16–17). Garner’s opinion extended a question he had asked four years earlier: was it “lofty Swedish idealism, as some have contended, that in the past kept James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov and John Updike . . . from this most elite creative-world” stage? (“The Nobel Prize Waiting Game” C1). My point is not the elite stage but the elite pantheon in which Updike was routinely included even if he was no longer “popular to champion.” It’s as if in a roll call of what Jennifer Krasinski described as “A-list contributors” his presence was automatic. His range of expertise was wide indeed and was particularly referenced after he died:

- *Architecture*: Krasinski was referring to architecture and to the A-list of people who wrote for *Architectural Digest*: Kurt Vonnegut, Judith Thurman, David Mamet, Martin Scorsese, and Updike (Krasinski 44).
- *Painting*: Reviewing an Andy Warhol exhibit in 2019, Stephen Metcalf nodded to Updike’s review of Warhol thirty years earlier (Metcalf 34). Anka Muhlstein even went so far as to quote Updike’s analysis of Degas from his 1994 review of the painter in her discussion of a Degas retrospective in 2016: “[Degas’s] formal manners belong in the nineteenth century, but his artistic ruthlessness and freedom to the twentieth” (qtd. in Muhlstein 16).
- *Film*: Eric Brown underscored the heft of Updike’s authority, recalling that when Updike read the screenplay for a proposed movie of *Paradise Lost* he attacked it in the *New Yorker*, “and that was that” (Brown 15).
- *Translation*: Commenting on Ellendea Proffer Teasley’s memoir of the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, Boris Dralyuk quoted Teasley’s stark judgment that of all the translations of Brodsky into English, only “those by [Richard] Wilbur and Updike . . . were really good” (Dralyuk 27).<sup>5</sup>

Updike’s breadth was extraordinary, his intelligence obvious, his eminence apparent, the Nobel committee mistaken—all this after 2009. Yet sharp disputes, especially about his intricate style and his fiction about male/female/bed proliferated, often falling to the low level of personal attacks but forceful nonetheless. *TLS* recalled his modest assessment of his prose: “If you’re lucky, you will live long enough to be able to say, as John Updike did of his legendary helpmeet at the *New Yorker*, ‘A lot of nice touches in my stories belong to William Maxwell. And I’ve

taken credit for all of them” (J. C., “Bog Standard” 36). But his witty putdown of his gift did not undercut McEwan’s succinct summation: “I love the intelligence of the sentences with that odd little hard-to-define spring . . . an extra beat that quickens my pulse. Who else does that? Shakespeare, Milton . . . Bellow does. . . . But never so copiously as Updike. One can open him at random and find some felicity on the page” (Cronin D7). Shakespeare, Milton, Bellow: John Banville added Fitzgerald. Praising an early scene in *The Great Gatsby*, he declared with the voice of authority, “American writing would have to wait on the coming of John Updike for a writer with a commensurate prose style and grasp of artistic form” (Banville 41).<sup>6</sup> Backlash, however, can mute voices of authority. In Updike’s case, the muting was particularly loud. In an essay-review of James Woods’ *Upstate*, Thomas Meaney cast a skeptical eye on Updike’s accomplishment and dismissed him as no more than one of those “genteel, mandarin presences whose names have disappeared along with the memory of their pieces. . . . Who now scours the archives to see what John Updike had to say about any novel of the period?” (Meaney 6). Siding with what Meaney called Woods’s “merciless . . . reputation crushing” of Updike, he agreed that Updike worshipped a “complacent God,” wrote in a style of “promiscuous, sensory overflow,” and failed to help readers “appreciate the arc of their own lives” (Meaney 6). This was strong stuff argued in a tone that approached shrill and was designed not to elucidate but to annihilate a major author long accorded major status. The goal was to erase Updike from the syllabus, the bookstore, and, finally, the canon. Meaney posited a provocative criticism of either/or, as in either Faulkner or Hemingway, Bellow or Updike, and his approach was not only effective but designed to lure readers into the dispute. The method was also difficult to counter, but it spotlighted the dip in Updike’s reputation. Deceased authors cannot challenge such a dismissal by publishing a highly praised new book. What was interesting about the sharp turn in appraisals of Updike was that the skeptics continued to place him with the giants but with a negative twist. Nathaniel Rich pointed to Amis’s detection of a stylistic decline in the later books: “Updike lost his ear”; Bellow did not (Rich 42). Thomas Mallon cited Amis’s judgment that Bellow and Nabokov were a “holy duo” who, in Mallon’s words, “have not had to admit *even* Updike to their ranks” (Mallon 65, italics mine). Mallon’s “even” was telling, a sarcastic reminder that, once, Updike’s prose was as admired as Bellow’s and Nabokov’s. The “even” nudged the reader to accept the elevation of Bellow and Nabokov as a final verdict. Setting Shakespeare aside, however, the game of ranking great writers is as fraught as ranking great films. Personal preference rules: what kinds of movies do you like? “Bellow

is the only abiding literary presence able to reduce Amis, amid much shrewd and illuminating study of him, to fanboy gush" (Mallon 64). James Camp stressed that Amis personified the burgeoning determination after Updike's death to downgrade him to one of the "slightly lesser eminences" (30). When highlighting Updike, Camp was smug, but he, like Mallon, stressed Amis's insistence on the deterioration of Updike's style: "Updike's prose, that fantastic engine of euphony, of first-echelon perception, and of a wit both vicious and all-forgiving, has in *this* book [*My Father's Tears*] lost its compass. . . . It audibly whimpers for a return to the drawing board" (30). In Camp's condescending view, "Updike, indeed, might have lived to regret" his final books (30).<sup>7</sup> One can understand Camp's disappointment. Except for *Rabbit at Rest*, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, and *Gertrude and Claudius*, the late novels are lesser accomplishments, yet they do not detract from the quality of the career just as *To Have and Have Not* and *Across the River and Into the Trees* do not detract from Hemingway.

Reading Meaney, Mallon, and Camp consecutively confirms what amounts to a posthumous broadside aimed at Updike. Echoes of Podhoretz and Aldridge ring, but with a difference. Aiming their barbs at the Updike of the 1960s, the decade when he was beginning to rack up literary awards, magazine features, and sales, Podhoretz and Aldridge were pointedly harsh but generally nudged aside as little more than the loudest of the relatively few naysayers. After 2009, however, the naysayers proliferated. The issue can be summarized in five words: male, female, sex, identity, and politics. Rejections of Updike's prose—too "glittering," too lyrical, too "lost his ear"—are one thing, matters of judgment or even just personal taste. But casting him into the cauldron of gender wars is quite another disagreement, a situation in which the aesthetic qualities are shoved aside as secondary to the political: style *versus* substance instead of style *and* substance. The #MeToo movement currently soars with the wind at its back. Kakutani's complaint that S. was a "crude" slandering of feminism now seems mild. Astutely displaying his usual skepticism of the grip that political correctness has on too many critics today, J. C. of *TLS* used a clever rhetorical query to express his scorn. He noted that 2018 marked the 50th anniversary of Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* and of *Couples*, and then provocatively asked, "Do they read 'correctly' in today's censorious climate?" ("The Turning Point" 36). The answer was implied in the question, as in: "No, in thunder, they do not, but so what? Both novels are important." An editor of *TLS*, J. C. was in a position to know about the gloom of censorious climates. Two months after his query, *TLS* published a letter to the editor in which Ann Thwaite referred positively to Philip Larkin in the context of sexual harassment and then turned on Updike:

“unlike (apparently) John Updike, Philip Larkin loved women, as many women have attested” (Thwaite 8). The “(apparently)” undercuts her point, inadvertently exposing that she had not read Updike closely enough to specify the causes of her distress. It’s as if she had listened to someone complain about Updike and felt compelled to stand in solidarity with women but had nothing more than a casual parenthesis to offer as evidence. Only the venue of her slight, the prestigious *TLS*, gave it a modicum of force, but it was nevertheless one more effort to chip away at Updike’s posthumous armor. Reading Thwaite’s letter, one readily hears J. C.’s question, which was implicitly asked again when Anne Enright identified herself in *TLS* as an adherent to gender politics. Denigrating Updike as one of those “boastful, damaged men” who are “honest in the wrong way,” she called him “both overrated but also good, but he is not so interesting to us, these days” (Enright 20). She did not define the “right way” to be honest, and, thus, her criticism was more personal umbrage than thoughtful judgment, but the puzzling phrase was, “interesting to us.” Who is “us”? Only women?

If that is the case, one wonders why Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1973), for example, was not also deplored as being “honest in the wrong way.” Updike boosted Jong’s best seller, published only five years after *Couples*, recommending it as “a notably luxuriant and glowing bloom in the sometimes thirsty garden of ‘raised’ feminine consciousness” (“Jong Love” 411). Christian Lorentzen’s account of “the roll call of liberations” included only male writers, particularly Bellow, Mailer, Roth, and Updike—but not Jong—writers who paved the way to a “golden age” illuminating arousal and consummation in American fiction (Lorentzen 19, 58). Liberated women writers such as Jong were presumably deemed safe from scorn by commentators who deplored detailed accounts of coitus when written by a male. Lorentzen cited Elaine Blair’s summons to female fiction writers everywhere to join hands in a unified proclamation to “punish” Updike:

We fervently promise, however, to avoid the mistakes of the late Updike novels: we will always, always, call our characters out when they’re being self-absorbed jerks and louts. We will make them comically pathetic, and punish them for their infractions a priori by making them undesirable to women, thus anticipating what we imagine will be your judgments, female reader. (Lorentzen 58)

Blair urged women to pledge their resistance to Updike and his kind. To judge fiction through the lens of gender politics and female solidarity, however, would make readers less likely to appreciate the juicy details or even the wry comedy of erotic encounters. Updike’s novels were being not so gently shelved, relegated to

the basement, to the care of Melville's "sub sub librarian," which is precisely what Adele Waldman did: "So many comic sex scenes hit the same note over and over again—the comedy is in how bad or embarrassing our character's performance is. The self-deprecation shtick becomes a kind of cliché" (28). She then answered Blair's summons and "called out" *Couples*. Granting the lyricism of Updike's depictions of sex, Waldman repudiated the scenes as "a bit gross." (She cites a line from *Couples*: "Sun and spittle set a cloudy froth on her pubic hair.") Her preference? Eroticism that does not resemble "the stuff of *Penthouse* letters" (Waldman 27). Lorentzen had a point when he concluded his remarks with humor: "Puritans after all have the dirtiest minds" (58).

If Waldman's puritanical rejection of Updike was a sting from a BB gun, Christine Smallwood's diatribe about *Couples* was a full-bore explosion from a shotgun. Parts of the novel filled her "with rage." Her blast, written for the 50th anniversary of the novel, was the epitome of how to read a book through blinkered eyes.<sup>8</sup> Smallwood all but consolidated the attacks on Updike, particularly those by women who sought to puncture his high esteem after 2009. His gift for memorable sentences, metaphors, and descriptions did not matter: "He could describe a barn well enough [an obvious allusion to the lauded story "Pigeon Feathers"], but to what end?" (Smallwood 20). Her concern was for not quality of art but bluntness of declaration: "He had not made a major statement on the issues of the day." Citing Podhoretz and Aldridge by name, she sneered that with *Couples* he "served up a whole plate of suet"—as if she believed the decline of faith, the chaos of adultery, and the shattering of families were not "major statements" (20). Resembling an out-of-control linebacker, she piled on: the symbolism of *Couples* is "overwrought"; the novel is "unconvincing," too "smug," too "pompous," too humorless and "juvenile. . . . five hundred pages of people demonstrating again and again that they are incapable of turning down an invitation to a party at which they are guaranteed to have a bad time" (23). Gopnik's deliberately understated appreciation of Updike's "serene sexual relish" was drowned out by the thunderclap of Smallwood's "rage," but it pointed to a chasm between male and female readers of Updike that widened during the past decade (Gopnik, "Brush Up on Your Shakespeare" 88). Gopnik expressed a consideration that those who object, increasingly with hyperbole, to Updike's presence in the bedroom often forget: "In Updike, adultery is the most American of acts, being a form of pursuit of happiness available to otherwise constrained actors" ("The Patriot" 76). The allusion to the Declaration of Independence is unmistakable. Smallwood would scoff at Heather Havrilesky's more nuanced reappraisal. Defining "this feminist moment" as "about crawling out of

the haunted house and saying, 'I'm not going back in there,'" Havrilesky insisted that to remain "out," women had to jettison some of their "myths":

Rabbit is still my favorite protagonist in any book, and he is also a blatant misogynist. But I don't want to let go of my love for him. There's an idea right now [2019] that we can slough off everything that contains archaic messages. . . . But you can't scrub out things that have been in the culture for hundreds of years. Instead, I can decide what I love and what I don't love, what I want in my life and what I don't. I can keep these relics around and cherish them even though they stand for a lot of fucking complicated things. (Fitzgerald 5)

Havrilesky successfully dodged the common error of equating character with author. She understood that authors create characters and shape them by putting words in their mouths and thoughts in their heads. If the author is good enough, the words and thoughts are consistent with the character, but that does not mean that the words and thoughts are the author's. Updike is assuredly not Rabbit. Who today, after all, would confuse Jason Compson's denigration of or Flem Snopes's treatment of women with Faulkner? Faulkner's insight that the past isn't over, it's not even past, echoes in Havrilesky's calm assessment of Updike in 2019.

In 2019 the editors of *TLS* confronted head-on the conflict of past art vs. current circumstances when they printed on the front page of the 5 July issue a drawing of a basketball placed beside a garbage can and the following banner: "Poet of Domestic Mess: Claire Lowdon on Why We Should Still Read Updike." Lowdon's balanced essay did not shrink from Updike's perceived flaws but stressed his obvious brilliance. She threw down a weighty gauntlet when she pointed out that too many of today's readers expect renowned authors to exhibit exemplary careers: "But plenty of people (Bellow, Dickens, T. S. Eliot, etc.) have been tried and found guilty of failing to live the unblemished lives we increasingly require from our writers and role models. Updike, then Roth, then . . . Martin Amis? Ian McEwan?" (3, ellipsis in original). Note her puncturing, sarcastic thrust not at Updike but at narrowly focused complainers when she argued that too much fiction today is too readily trashed (the garbage can) by too many readers who elevate some short-lived notion of politically correct content above elegantly shaped art: "Updike chooses to write about an asshole with a penis [*Toward the End of Time*, 1997]: if you don't want to read a book about assholes with penises, then Updike has written a bad book." What she called "heated" debates about race and gender (i.e., "circumstances") may eventually be deemed quaint in a couple of decades (3-4). It is easy to turn ready disparagement of any artist's work into final dismissal, thus the urgency of

Lowdon's calm in the context of Smallwood's "rage": "Updike's apartment in the many windowed House of Fiction is a beautiful place, and it would be a great shame if people stopped hanging out there altogether" (Lowdon 3).<sup>9</sup>

When cultural emphases shift, consideration of the past alters. That a major artist such as Updike and a major novel such as *Couples* can serve as a steadily waving red flag today points to a change that demands notice. The positive glow generated by the praise, gratitude, and lament on the occasion of his death faded noticeably during the following ten years. It's not that he was universally dismissed to be buried in obscurity but that when he was read it was often with a jaundiced eye in a period of American culture when fewer people were taught to read serious fiction without political pressures or prejudices. Updike became a target once emphasis shifted from the text itself to the cultural politics surrounding the text. An unfortunate result was that the author of a novel became as much a target as the offending novel. Smallwood's "rage" reflected a collective anger, rephrased in a more nuanced voice by Havrilesky and Lowdon, that has unified divisions of class and age among many readers during the prominent societal moment of #MeToo. An obvious irony is that readers who direct their ire at sex scenes envisioned by such male novelists as Updike vent their anger toward authors renowned for staring down the grim puritanical glare of Mrs. Grundy, just as Erica Jong did. Yet Jong is not a target of current outcries of dismay from articulate female readers. Two questions unlikely to be answered soon apply: Is a gender-driven cultural dispute a valid reason to express disfavor toward a writer favored for half a century? Are the omission of Updike from the popular 2018 PBS television series "America Reads" and the decline in the number of his books in bookstores signs that the fate of his reputation goes beyond the limitations of identity politics? The answers will be determined not primarily by scholarly activity, which remains steady, unless the scholarship can persuade more professors to place Updike on the syllabus, which, in turn, might induce more publishers to include something other than the perennially popular "A&P" in anthologies organized for students. The more likely venue for keeping Updike in the reading public's eye is his presence in the public record where, regardless of ephemeral culture wars, references to and discussions about his work are featured in the serious newspapers and magazines such as those discussed here that help shape opinion, prompt curiosity, and determine what the public reads. Updike perceptively defined the troubling question of literary reputation as early as 1964, the year he was honored with his first National Book Award. His star was rapidly rising in what promised to be a never-ending ascent. Clearly affirming that some authors deemed major by an earlier generation—Shaw,

Conrad—remain “readable,” he understood the dilemma even then: but are they still read? Or, to quote his own word, have they [has he?] already sunk?

## NOTES

1. James Wood, no fan of much of Updike’s writing, dismissed the style as facile. Describing the prose as “sequined,” Lev Grossman quoted Woods’s disagreement: “It seems easier for Updike to stifle a yawn than to refrain from writing a book” (Grossman 19).

2. During boyhood he published cartoons in his high school newspaper and even submitted some to the *New Yorker*. His senior high classmates voted him “the wittiest.” At Harvard he was elected to the office of president (editor) of the *Lampoon* where he continued to publish cartoons and comic poems. Following graduation, he studied art in Oxford, England, at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art on a Knox Fellowship. He published comic poems in the *New Yorker* throughout his career, and in 1958 he published his first book, *The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures*, a volume of largely humorous verse.

3. Christopher Lehmann-Haupt quoted another of Updike’s defenses: “It’s in the domesticity, the family, the sexual relations that women interest me. I don’t write about too many male businessmen, and I’m not apt to write about too many female businessmen” (Lehmann-Haupt A23). For readers today looking to be offended, however, the wording of Updike’s defense makes it flimsy: “female businessmen” instead of “businesswomen.”

4. See Norman Podhoretz. “A Dissent on Updike.” *Doings and Undoings: The Fifties and After in American Writing*, Noonday Press, Farrar, Straus, 1964, pp. 251–57; and “Novels: Style and Substance.” *Reporter*, 22 January 1959, pp. 42–44. See also John Aldridge. “An Askew Halo for John Updike,” *Saturday Review*, 27 June 1970, p. 25.

5. It is also worth noting that Updike translated another Russian poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, a colleague of Brodsky. See Yevgeny Yevtushenko. *Stolen Apples*. Doubleday, 1971.

6. Rather than assert the greatness of Updike’s style, Claire Lowdon illustrated it by contrasting Updike with another author when both wrote about something as mundane as a glass of water:

Good literature takes something we’ve seen a thousand times and makes it new. When Burnside describes a jug of water on a bedside table, we glide right on by: ‘The condensation pearling on the glass; the tiny, perfect air bubbles forming on the inside surface.’ Here is John Updike giving the same image similar yet crucially different treatment: ‘A glass of stale water standing bubbled with secret light.’ Note the unexpected ‘stale’ and ‘secret’ instead of the routine ‘pearling.’ Note the comparative economy and restraint. We have to stop, and look, and see again.

See Claire Lowdon. “Stale Water,” (London) *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 February 2017, p. 22.

7. Jonathan Galassi denigrated not the fiction but the poetry. Conceding that Updike was a “writer of prodigious fluidity,” he faulted the poems as all surface: “He sees, he denotes, but he does not transform. His observations nearly always remain the beginning and end of his writing in verse. . . . What’s missing from the poems is, essentially, lift. They stay grounded on the page, locked in their abstract-personal selves.” See Jonathan Galassi. “Updike’s Violin.” *New York Review of Books*, 17 December 2015, pp. 73–4.

8. The *New York Times Book Review* also commemorated the 50th anniversary of *Couples* by quoting Wilfrid Sheed’s observation from 1968: “If this is a dirty book, then I don’t see how sex can

be written about at all." See Tina Jordan. "Inside the List." *New York Times Book Review*, 11 November 2018, p. 48. The contrast between Sheed's and Smallwood's reactions to the novel is stark, an indication not only of a male/female divide but also of a shift in the cultural milieu between 1968 and 2018.

To concur with Smallwood instead of Sheed would be to ignore—to blot out—the social context of *Couples*: the 1960s with the advent of "the pill" and the subsequent freeing of casual coitus from fear of pregnancy; miniskirts and pantyhose instead of girdles; the decline of religious authority; the rending of the family unit because of the increase of adultery. Future readers looking for a sharp-eyed novel that exposes the complexity of the swinging '60s in affluent suburbia will turn to *Couples*.

9. Meghan O'Giebly would agree with Lowdon. The title of her essay—"Paradise Lost: On (Finally) Reading John Updike"—set the context: "Like so many women who came of age after the turn of the millennium, I was warned about John Updike almost as soon as I became aware of him." Confessing to a facile gender bias—"it was easy for me to dismiss his oeuvre entirely" without bothering to read him—she pointed to *Couples* as her initiation. She picked up a used copy, read it, and discovered that "the reality of these conditions [the dilemma of the upper middle-class wives in Tarbox] is rendered with a sharp eye, through characters who are emotionally convincing." The graphic details of the couplings are not antifemale but accounts of how unmoored suburbanites in the United States of the 1960s turn to sex as "a kind of salve." As O'Giebly realized, *Couples* is about not endless orgies but existential loss. The specter of death rules. See Meghan O'Giebly. "Paradise Lost: On (Finally) Reading John Updike." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 21 April 2016, [lareviewofbooks.org/article/paradise-lost-finally-reading-john-updike/](http://lareviewofbooks.org/article/paradise-lost-finally-reading-john-updike/). Accessed 24 July 2019. Patricia Lockwood, however, would dismiss O'Giebly while attacking Updike. Admitting that her long essay-review of Updike's first four novels is a deliberate hatchet job, Lockwood titles her comments "Malfunctioning Sex Robot" and concedes in the very first sentence that "I was hired as an assassin" (19). Apparently, Lockwood rejects Updike's "rule" as expressed in the Foreword to *Picked-Up Pieces*: "Do not accept for review a book you are predisposed to dislike" (xvii).

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# Updike's David Kern Stories<sup>1</sup>

PETER J. BAILEY

Updike introduced adolescent protagonist David Kern in "Pigeon Feathers," the 1960 story whose ending, he admitted in 1996, he could "scarcely improve upon" thirty-five years after its publication by the *New Yorker* (MM 768). His faith shaken by an H. G. Wells account of Jesus and his family's move from Olinger to rural Firetown, Kern, in the story's concluding sentences, is examining pigeons he has shot at his grandmother's behest because they "fouled the furniture" in the Firetown barn:

And across the surface of the infinitely adjusted yet somehow effortless mechanics of the feathers played idle designs of color, no two alike, designs executed, it seemed, in a controlled rapture, with a joy that hung level in the air and behind him. . . . As he fitted the last two, still pliant, on the top, and stood up, crusty coverings were lifted from him, and with a feminine, slipping sensation along his nerves that seemed to give the air hands, he was robed in this certainty: that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy his whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever. (286)

Read one way, the ending of "Pigeon Feathers" suggests that through his own ceremony of creative destruction, David unwittingly reproduces the "argument from design" proof of God's existence, regenerating his faith, the orderly completion of the death and burial ritual reflecting, reconstructing, and revealing the hierarchical harmony of heaven and earth as his Sunday school theology has configured them; construed differently, the adolescent has in this culmination discovered in himself the linguistic perceptivity that, once applied to the creation of literary texts, will allow David to "live forever." Immortality achievable through artistic creation is, of course, a commonplace of literary modernism, and one that Updike devotedly

embraced: “To be in print was to be saved,” he wrote. “And to this moment a day when I have produced nothing printable, when I have gotten no words out, is a day lost and damned as I feel it” (*Self-Consciousness* 108). Whether David Kern is saved in the eyes of God or through his own vision is left to the reader to decide.<sup>2</sup>

For the purposes of this essay, it matters less whether the ending of “Pigeon Feathers” is interpreted as eschatological or aesthetic than that Updike had created in David Kern an adolescent alter ego through whom to dramatize his own spiritual hopes, conflicts, and doubts, embodying in him a fictional incarnation of belief imperiled and, in one instance, resurrected. “I think the most important ecclesiastical fiction I ever wrote was the story ‘Pigeon Feathers,’” Updike told Jan Nunley in their interview. Expanding upon the story by confirming its largely autobiographical basis, he added that “Pigeon Feathers” “reflects my own shock when it seemed to me that the well-intentioned, sweet, bright, liberal Lutheran minister who was confirming me didn’t really attach any factual reality to these concepts” (Nunley 249). Consequently, David Kern began life as an arbiter of faith and false faith, a young man who spends much of “Pigeon Feathers” “alone. In that deep hole” (279) of religious doubt and mortality terror.

Very conveniently, the spiritual/secular ambiguity closing “Pigeon Feathers” is reprised in the resolutions of two of Updike’s other great early stories, “The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother’s Thimble” (1960), and “Packed Dirt, Church-going, a Dying Cat, A Traded Car” (1961)—stories he “pieced together out of a certain desperation” and that he considered his best “perhaps because the words were attained through such an oppressive blanket of funk” (*Self-Consciousness* 97). If his reading in literature didn’t convince Updike that fiction writing is an effective vehicle for the author to conduct deeply personal spiritual dialogues with her/himself, then composing these three David Kern stories would have decisively completed that education.

Later in his career, when Updike presented characters bearing the names of protagonists from the *Olinger Stories*, he clearly did so with the purpose of carrying forward their personal traits and conflicts from earlier narratives to mark their older selves. In “Flight” (1959), Allen Dow and his mother stage pitched battles over her soaring vision of his literary future and the incompatibility, in her eyes, of that projection and his current infatuation with a Shillington girl, Molly Bingaman. “‘Don’t go with little women, Allen,’” his mother admonishes him, “‘[it] puts you too close to the ground’” (229). The story concludes on Allen’s angry threat, “‘All right. You’ll win this one, mother; but it’ll be the last one you’ll win’” (234). Accordingly, “His Mother Inside Him” (1992) reintroduces Allen Dow after his

mother's death, the sixty-year-old protagonist still struggling with the tension between gratitude toward her for inspiring his future and lingering resentment at the suffering she imposed on women who drew close to him. In *Of the Farm* (1964) and "The Sandstone Farmhouse" (1990), Joey Robinson's struggle continues between thankfulness to his mother for moving his father, his grandparents, and himself at age thirteen from Olinger to the Firetown farm where she had been born, and trying to forgive her for the bitterness that adolescent psychic dislocation generated in him.

David Kern is the *Olinger Stories* protagonist Updike resorted to most frequently, and although the nine stories in which Kern appears constitute nothing like the consistent narrative arc of *The Maples Stories*, in which Richard Maple acts as Updike's often ironically conceived alter ego, the later Kern stories ("The Lens Factory" [1988] through "The Road Home" [2004]) draw sufficient thematic and eschatological inspiration from "Pigeon Feathers," "The Blessed Man," and "Packed Dirt," making it illuminating to construe the David Kern stories as a coherent subcategory of Updike's short story oeuvre, as a group of narratives best understood intertextually within the thematic context of each other. As Updike's most autobiographical character, spanning stories from 1960 to 2004, David Kern offers a compressed depiction of the evolution of Updike's deepening apprehension of his past as well as his diminishing religious certainties. In the interim between the early and later David Kern stories, Olinger metamorphoses from a site of religious epiphanies to a place of nearly transcendental significance for the protagonist, the stories becoming, increasingly, textual compensations for lapsed belief. To establish the touchstone character of these two stories that Updike characterized as "fugal,"—"combining obliquely related incidents under the aegis of a presiding meditative voice" (*More Matter* 768)—I will give brief synopses of "The Blessed Man" and "Packed Dirt." These will be followed by readings of five later Kern stories "The Lens Factory," "Lunch Hour," "The Cats," "The Walk with Elizanne," and "The Road Home," in order to demonstrate that these narratives represent extensions or adult corrections of the issues dramatized in the three David Kern *Olinger Stories*.<sup>3</sup>

The religio-aesthetic resolution of "Pigeon Feathers" is most clearly echoed in "The Blessed Man."<sup>4</sup> That narrative repeatedly invokes the writer's urgent attempt to resurrect, via language, that which is gone: "The Blessed Man of Boston," whom David never reencounters after briefly glimpsing him at a Red Sox game; David's grandmother, who survived his childhood and died while he was away at college; and the men sentenced to extinction because there are no women among them

on “Fanning Island.” The three narratives of survival and endurance that David narrates in “The Blessed Man” should, he admits, have constituted “a story full of joy,” but because his “poor paragraphs” must necessarily fail, “in their vile ignorance to do [the Lord’s] work of resurrection” (343), the reader, like David, must take the premise that joy underlies our stories “on faith” (354).

In the story’s remarkable closing double entendre, we must take on faith that the three narratives we have read are happy stories, for if we lack that (Christian) faith, they’re not. What this complex story illustrates more effectively than any other Updike work is his own ambivalence toward the promises of his craft. The impulse exists in him, as it does in David Kern, to imitate exhaustively the details of lives, to use “my poor little art” to ensure that “The tasks, the grass, the weather, the shades of sea and air” he has known won’t disappear; but accompanying—and contesting—that impulse is the assumption that art cannot do what faith can: ensure the salvation or redemption of these lives and days. As Robert M. Luscher suggests, “what [Kern] discovers is that the past can no longer be grasped whole, only reconstructed in fragments that rescue isolated but relatable details and moments of bliss” (39). The causal connection implicit in “Pigeon Feathers” between perception and belief is severed in “The Blessed Man” because the transcendent truths of David’s subjects must be rendered linguistically rather than apprehended immediately as David experiences the divine beauty of the pigeons’ creation.

With its dramatization of both David’s and his father’s loss of religious faith, the best that David can offer in “Packed Dirt” is an affirmation of humanly conceived ceremonies: children packing the dirt of a construction site with their bare feet, churchgoing, commemorating the death of a stranger’s pet cat, and bidding farewell to cars (“the dreaming vehicles of unitary personhood” [362]) that have transported us safely through the world. Ceremonies, at least, allow us to remember and believe the human joys we have experienced, the cycles of beginning and ending that recur in our lives and provide them with the only order and coherence a secular understanding acknowledges. The need for ceremonies is the point of what David has written; the enactment of aesthetically constructed ceremonies is what Updike has delineated in “Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car,” his story reluctantly affirming a Modernist credo Updike quotes in his review of *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens*: “In an age of disbelief . . . it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief, in his measure and his style” (610). It is difficult to imagine a more perfect description of the David Kern stories addressed here, but other stories—“The Lens Factory” (1988), “Lunch Hour” (1995), “The Cats” (1996), “The Walk with Elizanne” (2001), and

“The Road Home” (2004)—all similarly seek to elevate personal recollection to the level of spiritual revelation, offering re-creational narratives as compensatory alternatives to lapsed faith.<sup>5</sup>

Written twenty-eight years later, “The Lens Factory” takes place two years after the close of “Pigeon Feathers.” Updike wrote it, “The Football Factory,” and “Part of the Process” in 1988 as antidotes to his sense that so few writers attempt to illuminate the lives of the “earthbound workers who, in factories and farms, produce the stuff of our daily lives”—and writers who do make the effort leave behind an “ineluctable flavor of condescension” (*MM* 771). In the story, sixteen-year-old David Kern is enduring his third day of a summer job in a lens factory and having a very tough go of it. Lunch break provides relief “from tending his machine, but not completely; there was a pocket of dread within him that he must carry back to the job and even out the other side. It made him feel lopsided, this sense of being plucked by unhappiness” (390). His job involves placing sunglass lenses in the “mud” and pulling them out again at the precise instant before they become “cooked.” “When I’m up there with the trough sloshing mud and everything timed to the exact second,” he tells a fellow worker, “it’s like I can’t breathe” (392). In his lunch bag, his mother added to his baloney sandwich an apple from his grandparents’ apple tree, and seeing it there nearly makes him cry: “The apple seemed something he could never get back to, from this abyss he was in, here, behind the towering brick factory, sitting on a plank under a scrawny weed tree. . . . David’s mind squeezed itself up there as if out of a deep well” (391). This is very much the David Kern who saw himself “in that dark hole” of mortality terror in “Pigeon Feathers,” and who perceived himself to be completely alone in his desperate quest for ascent.

Eddie, David’s coworker, prevents him from being utterly alone, but David’s attempts to confide in him keep running up against the fact that Eddie, a high school dropout, has worked here for years and isn’t just employed for the summer. David “longed to express the horror of life that this job had opened to him, but he didn’t know how to do it without insulting Eddie, whose life it was” (392). For younger David, his mother’s casual rejection of an afterlife seems similarly intolerable: “if when we die there’s nothing, all your sun and fields and whatnot are, ah, *horror*? It’s just an ocean of horror” (278). In both stories, David strives to liberate himself from a “horror” that has intruded upon the pleasure he habitually derives from ordinary life.

His reservations about other writers’ depictions of American blue-collar workers notwithstanding, since the laborer serves as the story’s antagonist, Updike

makes no attempt to present Eddie neutrally or uncondescendingly. Eddie is eating a cake with lemon-yellow insides, and the narrator observes that he

was faintly yellow himself as if the flickering factory lights had given him their own kind of tan. Smoke and crumbs were mixed in his mouth as he talked. . . . While [David] was staring off into space, feeling his childhood hovering just above him, like something from which he had just this moment fallen, Eddie's hand had come to rest on his thigh. It was a light, sallow hand, the nails rimmed with dried orange mud, a bit undernourished, like everything about Eddie. Even Eddie's mind, David imagined, was curled in there like a shriveled walnut, blackened." (391)

In "Pigeon Feathers," Reverend Dobson is identified with the pigeons David will kill by "his shapely hands that flickered like protesting doves" (273); consequently, the minister, and the pigeons that make David feel like "an avenger" in wiping them out, constitute composite antagonists of the story whom David must overcome to escape that "dark hole" of religious doubt. Just as Dobson and the pigeons unwittingly facilitate David's deliverance from faithlessness, Eddie, the embodiment of "how completely the factory seemed to eclipse everything else" (392), is unknowingly complicit in liberating David from it. David notes early in "The Lens Factory," set in the late 1940s, the anomaly of Eddie's appearing to have no friends in the factory; moreover, Eddie's enforced solitude is hinted at by his appraisal of Alton—"This city is dead. There's nothing in this city for anybody who wants to be a little different" (392). Discomfited by their isolation, David suggests that he and Eddie join the other workers in playing quoits, but the two stakes are occupied, stranding him with Eddie and his progressively intimate solicitations.

David pretends not to hear Eddie's question, "'You know what 'blow' means?'" (393), but he *does* notice his own dungarees, "filthy with dried mud especially around the fly, where he leaned against the trough to change the caps" (393). Feeling intimately soiled by the job, David fails to register how Eddie's affectionate questions keep pushing toward the issue of "the best things in life are free" and a promise to "let me show you what they mean by that." Having made this offer, "Eddie laughed in his ear, lightly, with the dried up delicacy he had, like that of a little old man already, the kind you see shuffling around train stations" (394). Updike's description sought to exploit homosexual cultural stereotypes of the late '40s, but all David comprehends is that he "wasn't ready for this, this pressure. He was feeling 'cooked'" (394). Confronted by this inchoate new threat, he becomes nostalgic for the route to his workplace, "a tunnel back to the safety of the metal stairs with their waffle pattern, the flickering bluish lights of his floor, his long

dirty patient machine waiting for him to bring it to life with the big lever that tied it into the overhead power” (394). David would not be conscious of the phallic implications of his reverie, but Eddie is pressing his correspondingly sexual agenda, which David perceives as coming from “outside the imagined tunnel” to which he longs to return: “‘Davey,’ Eddie asks, ‘was you ever blowed?’”

Eddie’s hand is on David’s thigh again, and David stands up in panic, knocking the cigarette from Eddie’s grasp. “‘Sorry,’ he said.” In the story’s final passage, “The other boy looked up, only mildly surprised and hurt. David discarded Eddie’s pale face like a wrapper, forever. He walked rapidly away. The quoits were being clinked into a stack by four men who were finished with their game, but to David’s relief there wasn’t time to play now, and he wasn’t going to be here tomorrow” (394–5).

In “Employments and Inklings: My First Job,” Updike acknowledged having had a summer job in a Reading lens factory that he quit after three days—“if this thrumming, churning misery marked the entrance to adulthood, childhood wasn’t so bad” (*DC* 666) was his expressed rationale for leaving. Since David suddenly feels affection for the tunnel back to his machine once Eddie comprises a greater threat, it is clear that Eddie (no version of whom appears in either of Updike’s recollections of his own lens factory experience<sup>6</sup>) makes all the difference between life and fiction. The reader intuits clearly that it is Eddie who is responsible for David’s determination not to return to the factory on Thursday; the “horror of life that this job had opened to him” might be “too big” for David to escape, but Eddie isn’t. The reader knows little about why David took this summer job, though the family’s circumstances in “Pigeon Feathers” (when David is two years younger) clearly suggest the Kern family’s need for extra income. David never gives a moment’s thought to how his quitting the job will be received at home; it’s very much as if parental approval were a given. The element of irony that transforms “The Lens Factory” from anecdote to short story is an autobiographical subtext missing from the narrative but likely operative in Updike’s mind and available via his biography.

In *John Updike’s Early Years*, Jack De Bellis observes that “Linda Updike was troubled by her son’s boyhood friends for three reasons: she dreaded her boy might become an athlete, a homosexual, or the battered loser of a fight” (3). De Bellis terms this second concern maternal “overprotectiveness” and, given Updike’s mother’s apprehensions about male influences on her son, it can be inferred that the presence of Eddie at the factory would be more than enough to earn David’s mother’s approval for him to quit the job; consequently, the antagonist of “The Lens Factory” is directly responsible, much as are Reverend Dobson and the pigeons in “Pigeon Feathers,” for liberating David from the deep gloom of a

precipitate fall into adulthood. Earlier in the story, the apple (which David never eats) “seemed something he could never get back to, from this abyss he was in, here, behind the towering brick factory, sitting on a plank under a scrawny weed tree. . . . David’s mind squeezed itself up there as if out of a deep well” (391). As of tomorrow, David’s entire being will have squeezed itself out of this “deep well,” and, ironically, he has Eddie to thank for precipitating his ascent out.

Decades later, in “Lunch Hour” and “The Road Home,” there are no antagonists; instead narrative compensations for lapsed faith are the prevailing plot drivers. These later stories express the lyrically fierce nostalgia Updike increasingly produced in fictionalizing his Pennsylvania home in the last years of his life,<sup>7</sup> and it is safe to assert that neither narrative seeks to scale the eschatological heights of the three Olinger David Kern originals because lyrical reconstruction of the past has nearly become its own end. In “The Blessed Man,” David sought to make literary rendering do the work of resurrection, only to realize that “we would-be novelists have a reach as shallow as our skins. We walk through volumes of the unexpressed and like snails leave behind a faint thread excreted out of ourselves. From the dew of the few flakes that melt on our faces we cannot reconstruct the snowstorm” (343). In the later David Kern stories, ‘reconstructing the snowstorm’ is the best the writer can attempt. Both “Lunch Hour” and “The Road Home” are thematically tenuous occasions allowing Updike to recall (or invent) with stunning precision David Kern’s high school years and his older self’s returns to Olinger for the reunions with classmates that engender these memories. As the narrator of “Lunch Hour” summarizes one of the story’s pervading themes: “The basic treasure of [David’s] life was buried back there, in the town of Olinger, and he kept hoping to uncover it” (601). “The basic treasure of [David’s] life” is very much the same treasure that Updike affirmed in *Self-Consciousness*: “I loved Shillington, not as one loves Capri and New York, because they are special, but as one loves one’s own body and consciousness, because they are synonymous with being. . . . If there was a meaning to existence, I was closest to it here” (30). “Lunch Hour” and “The Road Home” are both fictional attempts to uncover the treasure of David Kern’s Olinger/John Updike’s Shillington, and they represent the author’s sincere effort to approximate the “satisfactions of belief, in his measure and his style” (610).

Given the legacy of first three David Kern stories, what is perhaps most striking about “Lunch Hour” and “The Road Home” is how thoroughly uninformed they are by the existential/spiritual antinomies animating that early trio of narratives. “Lunch Hour” appears to be as resolutely unmetaphysical as its title. Its single foray into existential issues consists in proffering the bleak assertion that it is “illnesses

and disappointments that give life its final, fatal flavor" (26); otherwise, the story is very much confined to the social pleasures of adolescence and their survival into old age, invoking David Kern's happy recollections of being befriended by two Schenktown, PA, young women who had conferred on him the "happiness of being in a gang again . . . the pride of membership, of acceptance" (608). The lunch hour drives that the story illuminates are very probably, in younger David Kern's sense of the term, "ceremonies" of the kind "we in America need," but left there, the story seems more fictionalized memoir than short story.

All we know of David's life in this story (the David Kern stories make scant effort to present precise details about him or his family consistently from narrative to narrative<sup>8</sup>) is that he entered the Army after college and then moved to Connecticut, where he commutes to Manhattan for an unspecified job. In "The Lens Factory" David tells Eddie that he plans to do "Something stupid. Something where you sit at a desk in New York" (393), and none of the later David Kern stories depict the protagonist as the writer he was in "Blessed Man" and "Packed Dirt," a point to which we will return. Occupying the center of "Lunch Hour" is David's reunion with a classmate named Julia Reidenhauser, a "German beauty, sallow-skinned, carrying herself as if simply being herself was quite enough" (604). During high school, she and Doris and boys named Wilbur and Morris drove up and down Alton Pike with David after their lunch of hamburgers, and this is the "gang" for which he feels such gratitude at being included. Even before his mother moved him and the family outside Olinger, David felt that "there was a gang, and he was not in it. He had lost the trail he had been following since the walks to kindergarten" (605). When he encounters the two women at the reunion, David's anxiety over the event vanishes and he instantly feels "altered in the presence of Julia and little Doris. He became another self, calmer and taller. . . ." David wonders why he suddenly feels "so uncharacteristically relaxed and *at home*. Then he remembered: lunch hour. To these Schenktown girls, he had been another country person, a normal person. They had not minded his being torn from Olinger by a mother with absurd ideas; they had seen him as he was, a man-to-be" (604).

The inclusion of this "man-to-be" in the lunch hour gang does not alter David's future plans: "he was plotting a life for himself after Olinger, following his mother's lead after all" (608). "Lunch Hour" never expands upon this "lead" inspired by his mother, and the story thereby precipitates an ambiguity equally observable in "The Road Home." With the exception of "The Blessed Man," "Packed Dirt," and "Leaves," a story in *The Music School* collection, Updike never ascribed his profession to his short story alter egos, reserving his self-consciousness about

writing largely to the Henry Bech series. Speculating about why this was the case is chancy, but surely one explanation is that he was reluctant to write stories applicable only to those following aesthetic disciplines or possessed of artistic sensibilities. His lifelong devotion to middles and middleness (“My subject is the American small-town middle class,” he told Jane Howard. “I like middles. It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules” [Howard, 11]) dictated that his fiction tends toward evocations of American normalcy as opposed to artistic elitism. “Lunch Hour” affirms that mean for Olinger, which “retained, at least in the minds of his generation, a distinct sense of itself as a sane and blissful medium between the laughable rural innocence of a one-street, two factory town like Schenktown, tucked into bleak stretches of corn stubble and abandoned apple orchards, and the urban horrors of Alton, a big, depressed industrial town now increasingly dominated by its citizens of color” (603). Olinger’s middleness is part of the treasure that David seeks to uncover in “Lunch Hour.” Updike’s celebration of William Dean Howells cites a line from Howells’s *A Chance Acquaintance* in which Kitty Ellison describes the sort of story she would choose to write and the sort of place in which it would be set: “If I were to write a story, I should want to take the slightest sort of plot, and lay the scene in the dullest sort of place, and then bring out all their possibilities. . . . Nothing extraordinary, every-day things told so exquisitely and all fading away without any particular result, only the full meaning of everything brought out” (*Odd Jobs* 171). “Lunch Hour” and “The Road Home” seem to be such stories.

Contesting the everydayness and mundanity of these stories, of course, is Updike’s “measure and his style”—the capacity David Kern discovers in himself to visualize so evocatively in language the feathers of the pigeons he has killed. Updike described the sources and purposes of his style in response to a solicitation for “A Book that Changed Me”:

My discovery of Henry Green’s novels and of Scott Moncrieff’s translation of Marcel Proust served as revelations of style, of prose not as the colorless tool of mimesis but as a gaudy agent, dynamic in itself, peeling back dead skins of lazy surface notation, going deeper into reality, much as science does with accumulating formulations. My intoxicated imitations of these two writers marked the beginnings of a style of my own. (*Odd Jobs* 843)

The tension in “Lunch Hour,” then, is between the ordinariness of the occasion and the substance Updike makes of it—which means, put oversimply, the distance between David Kern and Updike. If all that David Kern’s lunch hour

experiences prepared him for was to be a commuter from Connecticut to Manhattan, “Lunch Hour,” in Kitty Ellison’s term, “all fades away with no particular result” (171). The allusion to David “following his mother’s lead after all” signals a confluence of David with Updike, whose mother raised him to have (and fulfill) the most serious of literary ambitions. And yet, Updike and David Kern aren’t identical. “Once I’ve coined a name,” Updike told Charles Thomas Samuels, “I feel utterly hidden behind that mask, and what I imagine and remember become indistinguishable” (Samuels 27). Consequently, passages like the following blend memory and imagination in a vital evocation of the psychic necessity of peer acceptance in mid-1940s high school:

By way of Julia’s magnetism and the power of the American automobile, [David] had made his way in, back into those mysterious, pointless, indispensable get-togethers that had been begun to exclude him in the fifth grade. The group went bowling, played canasta in clouds of cigarette smoke, watched infant television, drove to a pond where there was a dock and a diving board—flimsy excuses, all of them, for being together, and staying together, on the edge of those possibilities they felt, dimly, approaching to shape and limit their lives. (608)

Linda Updike had moved the family away from Shillington in part to remove John from these influences; in “Lunch Hour,” and much more explicitly in the *Endpoint* poem, “Peggy Lutz, Fred Muth, 12/13/08,” Updike expresses sincere gratitude to his classmates for inspiring his fiction, for providing a springboard for his career, and

for providing a  
sufficiency of types—beauty, bully, hanger-on, natural,  
twin and fatso—all a writer needs, and all there in Shillington . . . (26)

Julia Reidenhauser is remembered particularly affectionately in “Lunch Hour” because she embodies the tension animating the story: she clearly participates in the noontime rituals, but she does so with a demeanor that holds them at a distance. At the reunion, David wants her to meet his wife because “he was proud of knowing both of them, these women.” As the last line indicates, “Until Julia, he had only known growing girls” (610). She showed him how to be of Olinger while secretly plotting a life beyond it. (Ironically, Julia, unlike David, never leaves.) David’s wife confirms Julia’s role in the story by telling him that “She seemed a bit above it all” (610). “Lunch Hour” exploits that tension between imagination and memory, between ordinary middle-class experience and its elevation through

rendering in fiction. David is very much of the world of Olinger, but Updike's ability to write this verbally and visually evocative story places him, too, "a bit above it all."

The Fall 2015 issue of the *John Updike Review* includes an essay of mine, "Betrayal by Sandstone Farmhouse: Forgiveness in Updike's 'Pigeon Feathers' and 'The Cats.'" Planned as a segment of this David Kern project, which it quickly grew beyond, that essay perceives those two stories as thematically linked by the tension between David's commitment to civilization and his mother's loyalty to nature. Rather than reproducing the essay, I'll offer paragraphs that indicate how its argument incorporates some of the issues of David Kern stories I seek to illuminate here:

The story that comes closest to comprising a riposte to "Pigeon Feathers," however, is "The Cats" (1996), in which Updike heightens David Kern's negative take on the farm, inspired largely by the forty cats his mother had fed and, following her death, for whose existence he becomes responsible. While she was alive, neighbor Dwight Potteiger . . . [would ask his mother,] "'What's David going to do, in case you pass on, with all the cats?' She'd say, so serene-like, 'Oh, Davey will find a way. He always has. He's kept me here in style for twenty years'" (CLS 627). The autobiographical basis of this plot is confirmed in a 1984 Updike essay [called "Mother"] in which Updike acknowledged that [she] "has upwards of twenty cats to feed—to feed or to kill, for, in motherly fashion, her responsibilities toward her adopted dependents are conflicted. She began feeding a stray cat to spare the birds around the place; more and more cats appeared at her back door; and now the perplexities of mercy ask that she keep their feline herd thinned" (*Odd Jobs* 68).

Updike's version of this circumstance sounds remarkably less censorious than does David's. "Feeding these half-feral animals," David explains in "The Cats" with ill-concealed impatience, "amused and pleased her—quite improperly, I thought. Their mounting numbers seemed to me a disaster, which grew worse every time I paid a filial visit, in spite of the merciful inroads of various feline diseases and occasional interventionary blasts from the shotguns of interested neighbors." (CLS 625) . . .

"Moving [to Firetown] when I was a boy," David comments in the later narrative, "had indeed felt like the loss of civilization. No phone, no electricity, no plumbing: a terrible regress. . . . I could never shake my impression that the farm was a trap, set backward in time, from which my clear duty was to escape" (CLS 626–627). Escape he had: "I don't live here," he explains. "I live in New Jersey. I teach Eurolit at Rutgers, I have a four-bedroom house, an elegant wife called Evelyn, and two grown children, one of them with a child of her own. I don't want to be here, I never did." (625). Significantly, this declaration of independence from the farm is addressed to the cats

whose desperate circumstances he must resolve. (His mother had always insisted that the farm's birds were expressing themselves to her, so David is perversely following her anthropomorphizing example in communicating [the bad news to] the cats.) "And," he continues [to this audience], "if you can think of a better place, go to it, because, my fine feline friends, *the dole is ending*. The cat food is down to its last case, and I'm here for just two more days. What are you going to do then? Beats me—it's a real problem, frankly. Well, you shouldn't have gotten sucked into the system" (625; italics in original). They shouldn't have gotten sucked into a system, that is, in which humanity seeks to compensate them for the cruelties of nature, their benefactor in the end having become just another victim"<sup>9</sup> (22–23).

David's epiphany at the end of "Pigeon Feathers" reconciles his father's "kill-or-be-killed" view of nature with his mother's pantheistic sense of the spiritually predicated beauty of nature, while, at the same time, restoring adolescent David's ordered universe of meaning and purposefulness (that he knew before his mother moved the family to Firetown) by reinvigorating "a [Christian] promise that, in the most perverse way, made every good and real thing, ball games and jokes and big-breasted girls, possible" (276).

"Betrayal by Sandstone Farmhouse" concluded that, "For adolescent David, the sacrifice of the pigeons resurrects the good times of his childhood in Olinger; for his older self, robed in no certainty but attired instead in the old coat that was once his dead father's and [now] his dead mother's, [he] incarnates an illusion [for the cats] of the good times returned, [becoming] a fraudulent savior to the cats who seem to embody his mother's only immortality and whom he had futilely hoped had all died off. For adult David, the conflict between nature and civilization remains irreconcilable, terminal; it is a sadness from which he cannot finally hurry away" (27).

"A Walk with Elizanne" (2001) is the late David Kern story that seems most closely related to the early Olinger stories. In "Pigeon Feathers," David's crisis of faith, spurred by the move from Olinger to Firetown, coincides with the onset of a terror of death that teenage David experiences while using the outhouse. In "A Walk with Elizanne," Kern returns to Olinger with his second wife in order to attend his Olinger High fiftieth class reunion, but before going there, they visit a dying classmate of Kern's too ill to attend the event. Mamie Kauffman (who appears in good health in "Lunch Hour") gamely assures the Kerns that although her cancer is advanced, "[her life] isn't over yet" (730).<sup>10</sup> (The description of her bones being "so riddled with cancer" that she can't sit up in bed casts some doubt on her affirmation, "[The Lord] doesn't give you more than He gives you strength to bear" [729],

her possibly misplaced optimism warning the reader to view skeptically other acts of unfounded idealization in the story.) Despite its surface affability, David and his wife's meeting with Mamie corresponds to the H. G. Wells atheistic revelation and the experience of death terror in the outhouse that precipitate David's loss of faith in "Pigeon Feathers," both scenes significantly undermining Christian belief,<sup>11</sup> and both necessitating as well spiritual resolution of the narratives.

Once they have escaped to the reunion, Kern is reintroduced to Elizanne, a classmate with whom he shared a very brief infatuation, which, in the course of the narrative, begins to accrue intimations of immortality.<sup>12</sup> This iteration of David Kern who will imagine eternity walking with Elizanne is, clearly, the same protagonist who believed at the close of "Pigeon Feathers" that "God would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever" (286). Updike's assertion to Jan Nunley that, "I think the most important ecclesiastical fiction I ever wrote was the story 'Pigeon Feathers'" (249), does not exclude the potential ambiguity in that early story's concluding, densely evoked epiphany as to whether that teenager was regaining his belief in immortality or instead realizing the artistic vocation that would become his alternative path to eternal life. As I read the story, there's a similar ambiguity in "A Walk with Elizanne," which closes with a markedly variant version of eternal life realized. Earlier in the narrative, Kern reflects that if Mamie "was right and we live forever, . . . he could imagine no better way to spend eternity than taking that walk with Elizanne, over and over, until what they said, how they touched, whether or not he dared to hold her hand in his, and every hair of the fine black down on her forearms all came as clear as letters in deep-cut marble" (738).

Obviously, this is an older version of the emerging writer of "Blessed Man of Boston" who responded to his sighting of a Red Sox fan after a game by imagining that he would "write a novel, an immense book about him, recounting his every move, his every meal, every play, pitch, and hesitation of every ball game he attended, the number of every house he passed as he walked Boston's three-decker slums. . . ." (342). Here Updike was broaching the Howellsian substitute for religious belief that his work increasingly enacted ("The Road Home" is a remarkable example) but as frequently denigrated: David concedes in this early narrative, "From the dew of the few flakes that melt on our faces we cannot reconstruct the snowstorm" (343), negatively comparing the literary work he is undertaking with divine potencies: "Oh Lord, bless these poor paragraphs, that would do in their vile ignorance Your work of resurrection" (343). Elderly Kern fails in his mental work of resurrecting the walk with Elizanne because he can't recall it—she informs him

at the reunion that on that walk he had been her first kiss, but the experience has disappeared from his memory with age and also because “[it] was an adolescent infatuation that had come, like most, to nothing” (739). For the David Kern of “Pigeon Feathers,” the “apparatus of piety” are of no interest save for “the promise they held out, a promise that, in the most perverse way, . . . made every good and real thing, ball games and jokes and big-breasted girls, possible” (276). For his elderly avatar in “A Walk with Elizanne,” girls have become the whole point: “As he had lived, he had come to see that for a man there is no antidote to death but a woman” (738).

If in the culmination of “Pigeon Feathers” David is acting out the argument from design for God’s existence by envisioning and rendering, through language, the fact that “across the surface of the infinitely adjusted yet somehow effortless mechanics of the feathers played idle designs of color, no two alike, designs executed, it seemed, in a controlled rapture, with a joy that hung level in the air and behind him” (286), then the closing paragraphs of “A Walk with Elizanne” reprise this process of spiritual discovery by evoking in precise detail the adolescent experience that, if it ever occurred, has long since faded from Kern’s memory. Or, alternately, the story replicates the ambiguity of the close of “Pigeon Feathers” by representing Kern’s idealized fantasy of an adolescent event, imbued by the intimations of mortality provoked by his visit to a dying classmate, and rendered desperate (“In the distorting lens of old age, [the walk with Elizanne] loomed as one of the most momentous acts of his life” [737]) by his own awareness of the shortness of time remaining to him.

After a space break in the text, the teenagers’ walk is precisely described without identification of the source of the account, as if the passage were using language to bring to life in a telescoped version of Kern’s imagined “way to spend eternity . . . taking that walk with Elizanne” (738). In 1960, Updike allowed young David to conflate the epistemological with the eschatological in his transformative pigeon feathers vision to create a distinctly ambiguous resolution spanning the spiritual and the aesthetic; in “The Walk with Elizanne,” Updike concludes the visualization of eternal life that includes a hint of its illusory nature. (“In an intriguing meta-fictional twist,” Matthew Shipe argued, “the story’s final section presents David’s fictionalized version of the final kiss—the implication being that it is only through the art of fiction that he can mull over the feelings and unasked questions that his reunion with Elizanne occasioned” [78].) As they walk, Elizanne apologizes for the fact that her ease with Kern has loosened her tongue, making her “chatter,” to which Kern responds, “I want to hear it all . . . we have t-tons of time” (740). Tons of time

is what the characters in “A Walk with Elizanne” clearly lack: at the reunion, Kern wanted to, but refrained from, asking Elizanne, “*What does it mean, this enormity of our having been children and now being old, living next door to death?*” (738). “Pigeon Feathers” concludes on a note of reconcilability of belief and individual artistic perceptivity; in contrast, “A Walk with Elizanne” closes in a stunningly beautiful and very likely imaginary dramatization of the irreconcilability of time and eternity.

“The Road Home” very poignantly juxtaposes Kern’s visit to the land he inherited from his mother, now being farmed by tenants using technology his mother wouldn’t recognize, with a meeting with former classmates at the Alton Country Club, a place Kern could never have joined had he stayed in Pennsylvania because “there was no road up into it for a schoolteacher’s son” (188). Consequently, David is at home neither at the farm (where his Burberry raincoat is unequal to the rainy conditions and his thin-soled loafers sink into the muddy turf) nor at the country club, where his former classmates exchange local gossip, relegating him to the status of “the outsider.” Nonetheless, the story is very much about the distance between young Kern’s beginnings (he recalls his humiliation while standing on the road with his mother selling quarts of strawberries for forty cents a box to passing motorists) and the man who has returned to Firetown as the absentee owner of fifty acres of valuable farmland. As he travels through this homeland, “Kern felt the tracks of his ancestors all around him—generation after generation, laboring, eating, walking, driving within this Pennsylvania county’s bounds, laying down an invisible network of worn paths,” though the story emphasizes not that past but “how the region was changing, gradually consuming its older self, its landmarks disappearing one-by-one in the slow-motion tumult of decay and substitution as the newer generations made their own demands on the land” (822). It is those demands and the changes they have wrought that disorient Kern so thoroughly that he feels lost in his own home town and arrives late for the country club dinner reunion. “The geography of Olinger had been woven into him,” we are told in “A Walk with Elizanne,” “into the muscles that pushed his bicycle and pulled his sled” (737); the geography of nearby Alton is an urban maze he is somewhere caught in.

Kern is, of course, an older version of the character who, in “Packed Dirt,” imagined a dying cat in London was admonishing him to “*run on home,*” and who ran home quite efficiently in a soon-to-be-traded car when his mother alerted him that his father had suffered a heart attack. While seeking the country club, the narrator projects elderly Kern’s sense that “He was being punished: he had lived his formative years in this country while disdaining to learn its geography, beyond the sections proximate to his ego and his immediate needs. Now, in revenge, the

area manifested itself as a shapeless shadowy mire, experienced at perilous speed” (830). To ensure that he won’t get lost again, after dinner his companions insist upon ushering him back to his room at the Alton Motor Inn, and as Kern follows them, he recalls an all-night diner he patronized as a teenager where he might enjoy again the remembered treat of Dutch apple pie with butter pecan ice cream. The reader never learns whether the diner has survived the fifty years since Kern’s departure: the protagonist must follow the SUV leading to the motor inn—he can’t go home again even if that apple pie home continues to exist. “We in America need ceremonies” (377), certainly, but sometimes age and drastic alterations in the external world nullify our most ingenuous ceremonial impulses, consigning us instead to the drably secular refuge of the Alton Motor Inn.

In a 1993 poem titled “Downtime,” Updike asked, “Is there anything to write about but human sadness?” (*Selected Poems* 163), and “The Road Home,” its ordinary events notwithstanding, projects a similar dolorousness, especially when contextualized with the early David Kern narratives. In an argument between his parents in “Pigeon Feathers,” David’s father endorses scientific advances in farming techniques, while his mother insists tearfully that “the land has a *soul*” (266); Enoch Reichardt, a contemporary of David’s who cultivates the property David rents to him, explains that tomatoes are now grown hydroponically—“The plastic keeps the warmth in and allows for the solar effect; all the nutrients are trickled in from a hose. There’s no dirt.”

“‘There’s no dirt,’ David numbly repeated” (825). David is surely registering how cruelly his father’s technological take on agriculture had prevailed over his mother’s in the twenty-first century, or is musing upon how his devotedly pantheist mother would respond to tomatoes cultivated in isolation from the “*soul*” of nature. His father is not, however, the only betrayer of his mother’s vitalism during this doleful visit: “‘*Soil*,’ Kern thought, looking down. Ancestral soil, and to him it was just mud” (826).

The narrator of “Pigeon Feathers” notes that David “hated everything about [churches and their leaflets] but the promise they held out, a promise that, in a most perverse way . . . made every good and real thing, ball games and jokes and big-breasted girls, possible” (276). Among the classmates David meets for dinner at the country club is Sandra Bachmann Lang, whom David had had a crush on from kindergarten through high school, when she was “conspicuously vivacious, an athlete and a singer, as well as the class beauty.”<sup>13</sup> Additionally, she fulfilled one qualification for a “good and real thing”: “Except for her bust, abruptly outthrust in the eighth grade, her physical attributes were precise rather than emphatic”

(832). David notices an aluminum walker parked close to her seat and sees that Sandra's face betrays paralysis from a stroke; when he excitedly details for her his misadventure finding the country club, she explains that she doesn't hear well and that he must speak more slowly so that she can read his lips. "[S]ince his love for her had been born in kindergarten," we are told, "long before sex kicked in, it was impervious to bodily change" (832), but the fact that this high school social luminary has been so dimmed by age and illness ("Kern thought that Sandra kept up with the conversation pretty well, her calm, grey-green eyes darting from mouth to mouth, her own lips opening in a frequent laugh" [834]) typifies an evening during which a painful awareness of the disjunctions between past and present are pervasive for David. Leaving her at the end of dinner, David mouths, "Take care. You're the best," but, unsure that she understood, he makes "an absurd gesture: he gave her a thumbs-up, and then blushed" (835). The discrepancy between the ardor of David's adolescent crush and the awkwardness of this leave-taking exemplifies the gaping existential contractions at the heart of "The Road Home."

In "Lunch Hour," we are told that "The basic treasure of [David's] life was buried back there, in the town of Olinger, and he kept hoping to uncover it" (601); in "The Road Home" the "freshness and urgency of youthful memories" of Olinger for David are, for his friends, "buried beneath a silt of decades, of thousands of days spent in this same territory, maturing, marrying, childbearing, burying parents, laboring, retiring" (833). Amidst the story's awkward moments, its anchoring in ordinary life, its demystification of the Olinger past and the classmates' passive/aggressive insistence that David be escorted right to the door of the Alton Motor Inn, "The Road Home" inescapably dramatizes the temporal depreciations of David's treasure.

What, in microcosm, might these later David Kern stories (some of which are among Updike's very best) be argued to dramatize? For one, "modern fiction tends toward the autobiographical," Martin Amis remarked, "and American fiction more than most, and John Updike more than any" (qtd. in Greiner, "Updike in Love" 43). A sexual predator can turn out to be David's deliverance from "the horror of life that this job had opened to him"; the classmates of a future writer may inspire his work and serve as excellent models for his characters, but they, and the people who share with them the special town where "objects shine unaided, with a light of their own" (S-C 220), miss reunions, suffer, and die nonetheless. And then there is no answer to the questions David poses in "The Cats" ("Why had [the cats] been called into life" only to face starvation following David's mother's death?) or to "*what does it mean, this enormity of our having been children and now being old, living*

*next door to death?*" (738), which David never asks Elizanne. Perhaps the story's best answer to that latter question is the walk with and kiss of Elizanne that enact the idealized eternity in which one thanatophobic elderly man assumedly indulges himself; nonetheless, viewed from the perspective of the later David Kern stories, intricate feather formations of dead pigeons, even "those designs executed, it seemed, in a controlled rapture" (286), turn out to be revelatory of nothing beyond the very great artistic talent of a spiritually searching young writer.

## NOTES

1. This essay is an expanded version of a paper presented at the American Literature Association Conference, Boston, MA, 26 May 2009.

2. Robert Detweiler's reading of "Pigeon Feathers" alerted readers to "the possible irony of the whole performance," suggesting that the story "does not presume to convince [the reader] of the objective truth of Christian faith but does testify to an individual's achievement of it" (65). In *The Other John Updike*, Donald Greiner reads the ending of "Pigeon Feathers" as similarly ambiguous, although he construes the tension as existing between faith and restorative acts of violence.

3. "The Christian Roommates" (1963), Updike's one story set at Harvard, includes a Pennsylvanian named Kern: "A farm boy bent on urban sophistication, riddled with nervous ailments ranging from conjunctivitis to hemorrhoids, Kern smoked and talked incessantly" (487). He relentlessly struts his verbal cleverness before his Harvard classmates and otherwise occupies the background of the narrative as one of many dormitory neighbors of Orson Ziegler and Henry Palamountain, the story's split protagonists. Kern allowed Updike some self-parodic fun, but his loquaciousness adds little to the David Kern whose fictional evolution this essay is tracking.

4. Challenge the first to this project: In *Updike*, Adam Begley suggests that "The unnamed narrator [of 'The Blessed Man . . .'] could be David Kern but could just as easily be John Updike" (214), which I take to mean that, upon the narrative's publication in the *New Yorker*, Updike was content to leave ambiguous whether "Blessed Man" was fiction or, because of its thoroughly autobiographical content, essay. My rationales for designating "The Blessed Man" a David Kern story, despite the absence of his name in the narrative, are these: the two stories appear back-to-back, closing out *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories*; the narrator's voice is indistinguishable from that of "Packed Dirt"; the death of the grandfather in "The Blessed Man" accounts for his absence from "Packed Dirt," and because so many other details of the Olinger and Firetown history of the protagonist's family are identical to those in both "Pigeon Feathers" and "Packed Dirt," it seems reasonable to read "The Blessed Man" as a middle term between the first and third David Kern stories. That notwithstanding, Matthew Shipe finds that there "is little to be gained or lost" by assuming Kern to be the narrator of "The Blessed Man" (81).

5. Matthew Shipe's excellent "The Long Goodbye: The Role of Memory in John Updike's Late Short Fiction" makes a similar argument about aesthetic memorialization compensating for relinquished faith: "Art, in the end, may not be an adequate replacement for the promise of eternal life that Christianity espouses . . . but as Updike's massive body of work suggests, it is perhaps the only available response, the 'faint thread' of his fiction preserving not only the circumstances of his life, but also the essential experiencing self" (79).

6. “Foreword to *Love Factories*” (MM 770–2) and “Early Employments and Inklings: My First Job” (DC 665–6). “The Lens Factory” never appeared in an Updike story collection but debuted in *Higher Gossip* (2011) before being included by Christopher Carduff in *Updike: Collected Later Stories*, 2013, pp. 390–5.

7. Much of the purpose of three stories of Updike’s last collection, *A Father’s Tears*, conjures Updike’s locating the meaning of his existence in Shillington: “The Guardians,” “The Laughter of the Gods,” and “Kinderszenen” all evoke the perspective of a child for whom home is experienced as “the four adults [parents and grandparents] as sides of a perfect square, with a diagonal from each corner to a central point. He was that point, protected from four sides, loved from every direction” (722).

8. “. . . [E]very story, really, is a fresh start for me,” Updike told Charles Thomas Samuels, “and these little connections—recurrences of names, say, or the way that Piet Hanema’s insomnia takes him back to the same high school that John Nordholm and David Kern and Allen Dow sat in—are in there as a kind of running, oblique coherence” (Plath, 27). The question of why Updike didn’t choose to follow Hemingway’s lead in depicting a single protagonist—Nick Adams—as his childhood/adolescent stand-in rather than creating Dow, Nordholm, William Young, and Kern to fictionally represent himself seems answered by the foreword to *John Updike: The Early Stories*: “All the [Olinger] stories draw from the same autobiographical well . . . but no attempt is made at overall consistency” (xi).

9. “Betrayed by Sandstone Farmhouse: Forgiveness in Updike’s ‘Pigeon Feathers’ and ‘The Cats,’” *John Updike Review*, Fall, 2015, pp. 22–23. Page numbers within the block quotation refer to Updike’s *Collected Later Stories (CLS)*, edited by Christopher Carduff, Library of America, 2013. Final page numbers (22–23) refer to the *John Updike Review*.

10. In *John Updike’s Early Years*, Jack DeBellis observes that “Joan L. George (Zug) was suffering from cancer when Updike visited her in the hospital during his return to Shillington for the fifty-fifth reunion in 2005” (136). That would seem to make her the unmistakable model for Mamie Kauffman, save that “The Walk with Elizanne” was published four years before the fifty-fifth reunion.

11. David and his wife’s difficulty responding to Mamie’s grim prospects prompt this observation from the narrator: “In theistic Pennsylvania, David realized, people developed philosophies. Where he lived now, an unresisted atheism left people to suffer with the mute, recessive stoicism of animals. The more intelligent they were, the less they had to say in extremis” (729). The scene seems to suggest that the Kern couple have been influenced by that unspecified place, or perhaps the problem is not geographical but human: “we have no gestures,” the narrator of “The Blessed Man” explains, “adequate to answer the imperious gestures of nature” (345).

12. Jack DeBellis’s roster of Updike’s classmates provides a possible model for Elizanne, or for her name: Julette Eifert, whose French name may have contained, like Elizanne’s, the silent “et” of Chevrolet. Her *High Life* write-up, likely written by Updike, expresses great masculine admiration: “Jo . . . a lovely lady with a peaches and cream complexion, strikingly black eyes, and a whimsical air . . . a lilting laugh . . . feels the world is a lot of fun, and the feeling is mutual” (DeBellis 135).

13. Jack DeBellis’s description of Peggy Lutz, Updike’s classmate and class secretary to his class president, makes her seem the obvious model for Sandra Bachmann Lang in “The Road Home.” In the poem, “Peggy Lutz, Fred Muth, 12/13/08,” Updike described Lutz as “cheerleader, hockey star, May Queen, RN,” acknowledging that “she was too much girl for me.” The poem also notes that Lutz was “long stricken with Parkinson’s disease,” which corresponds to Sandra’s characterization in “The Road Home.”

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# Writing and Well-Being: Story as Salve in the Work of (More than) Two Updikes

SUE NORTON

John Updike's "Separating," first published in the *New Yorker* in 1975, is a short story—a work of fiction—widely known to be based on fact. In it, Richard and Joan Maple are faced with the dilemma of how to tell their four children that they are planning a marital separation. Though the couple formulates a strategy for this disclosure, Richard's tears during a lobster dinner with Joan and three of their four children reveal their secret prematurely. By the end of the story, the family, as well as the reader, are left feeling the emotionally raw effects of what has just happened and what is coming. Given that, as James Schiff writes, "the four Maple children are the same age and gender as the four Updike children, and the fictional family resides on a piece of property resembling the former Updike family home in Ipswich," and that a *New Yorker* galley of the story shows notations in Mary Updike's handwriting questioning how one of their children will react to a particular line in the story, "Separating" feels as real and true as does, potentially, any Updike story (Schiff 122).

David Updike's "Summer 1974, in Fiction and Memory," a seventeen-page essay published in the *John Updike Review* in 2017, is nonfiction. It recalls events from the same evening as depicted in his father's story, i.e., the night when his parents announced their separation. However, it is told from his own perspective as the eldest son, the child who was not at the family dinner, and it reflects on the imaginative embellishments of his father's story. While informing the reader of moments in

“Separating” where fact and fiction diverge, “Summer 1974” narrates the sequence of events that led to his parents’ decision. Like a story, it is also attentive to point of view, irony, and several other earmarks of fiction including intertextuality; thus, we might classify the essay as literary nonfiction in that it strives to please the reader with its own flourishes, not just offer exposition on a subject.

David, for instance, begins the essay by establishing setting: “It was a beautiful day in June 1974, clear and windless with the chill of late spring still in the air, held against the coming warmth of summer” (5). This opening incidentally mirrors the beginning of “Separating,” in which we are told: “The day was fair. Brilliant. All that June the weather had mocked the Maples’ internal misery with solid sunlight” (177). Having so established a calm before the storm, deploying pathetic fallacy as might a fiction writer, David proceeds to walk the reader through his movements as a seventeen-year-old on summer vacation on the day in question. He girl-watched, took a train to a jazz concert in Boston with his friends, wandered around head shops and tie-dye stores, and fell into an inexplicably dark mood. When unexpectedly met by his father at the station late at night, he was concerned. At this point in his essay, David offers a lengthy extract from his father’s story, in which the character of the son, Dickie, is told by his father, Richard, “Your mother and I have decided to separate” (7). David does not, at this point in his essay, dispute the fictionalized version of how the father in “Separating” informs his son of the impending split living arrangements; “Nothing legal, no divorce yet,” Richard tells Dickie. But in subsequent paragraphs, David explains that his father, in selecting details for his short story, left out much of what transpired between them in real life, especially while driving home: “things that came out in a blur of openness, of confession—something about how, during the course of their marriage, they both had had relationships, ‘affairs,’ but they had always been able to get past them, or through them, and back to their marriage, at least until now” (11). He also informs us that his father told him he had “fallen ‘in love’” with the woman who had moved into the house they had moved out of, which, David tells us, is “a curious detail, also not in the story.” David’s disclosure reveals that Updike’s biographer, Adam Begley, was mistaken when he claimed in *Updike* that “for the first fifteen months of the separation” John’s “affair with Martha was still a secret” from his children and mother (372).

As David continues his essay, the reader is made aware of various points of departure between real life during the summer of 1974 and what happens in “Separating.” These points of departure are not so much “corrections” to the circumstances as presented in his father’s story, but elaborations on details that were left

out, such as how David was startled by his father's phrase "in love." He also tells us about his own escapades in love that summer, most memorably with "a pretty Greek American girl" two years his junior, and how "in a small act of rebellion" he quit his low-paying beach job and took up house painting with one of his friends (11, 13). They named their shared crop of marijuana "Republic Gold" after their ugliest shade of yellow paint (13). Soon, he returned to prep school, leaving his mother and two younger siblings to "fend for themselves." He understood that it would be they who would bear the "emotional brunt" of his father's departure.

Though focused on diverse aspects of the Updike marital separation, both story and essay make liberal use of what the writer and critic Barrie Jean Borich refers to as *actuality* in such a way that "the actual" functions as character. People who really lived (what she calls, "bona fides lives"), occurrences that really happened ("factual events"), and places that really exist ("mappable locations")—these elements inform the work of writers of fiction and nonfiction alike (3). They serve as fact-based referents, whereby "the actual is as much character as subject" (1). As regards nonfiction, she elaborates:

Whether a nonfiction work is made of literal facts or the more diffuse shades of impression, emotion, and interpretation will depend on the subject and the artist's approach to the subject, as long as something of the referent itself retains presence and integrity within the work. Fiction and poetry may too possess an actual referent, but are not dependent upon that referent. (5)

She regards the mission of the nonfiction writer as, specifically, one of artistic render, so that what unfolds on the page can be classified as "literature of witness," as is the case with David Updike's "Summer 1974" (1). Not only has he borne witness to the events surrounding his parents' separation, but he accepts the task of the nonfiction writer, which Borich outlines thusly:

Our job as nonfiction writers seeking to artistically represent and explicate the feel of our own experience, as well as that of the times in which we live, is not to fabricate plots and situations, but rather to select from the breadth of memory, research, and observation already set out for sale. Creative selection, more so than invention, is the province of creative nonfiction. (2)

But crucially, she adds, "the line between the prose genres [fiction and nonfiction] cannot be merely that of so called 'truth,'" nor of the bearing of witness (3). "All literature is about some aspect of human life," Borich writes, "and seeks to reveal the truth of human living." In such a light, both John Updike's "Separating" and David

Updike's "Summer 1974" pursue the revelation of truth, each shedding light in its own distinct ways on the pain of marital dissolution and its familial consequences. The short story offers verisimilitude: it feels like life, appears real, but it alters facts as its author sees fit. The essay, by contrast, alleges facts but is most interested in qualifying them, interpreting them, and, as I will conclude, offering compassion to the reader as a way forward in this—neatly phrased by Borich—"human living."

Both John Updike's "Separating" and David Updike's "Summer 1974" share the same referent: the painful separation of John and Mary Updike in 1974. In each text, we discern writers attempting to make sense of this single traumatic experience in order to achieve understanding through their acts of narration and composition. But regardless of genre, whether fiction or nonfiction, these two works, which exist symbiotically (David's essay depends for its existence on his father's short story), offer more than the navigation of trauma. Along with the work of one more Updike, to whom I will soon refer, they establish a convincing causality between writing well and being well.

This causality is deftly encapsulated by a simple and indisputable assertion that appears on the inside jacket of the aforementioned Begley biography, *Updike* (2014). It says that John Updike was "a private person compelled to spill his secrets on the printed page" (Begley). It is this word "compelled" that interests me because it goes directly to the soothing potential of writing. John Updike regularly divested himself of personal "secrets" in his work—usually fictively but sometimes in his essays too. And for many writers, what is writing if not a compulsion? David Foster Wallace famously came to a similar conclusion in his 1997 review of Updike's *Toward the End of Time*, writing that the author, whom he had long admired, was radically self-absorbed and, as he memorably declared, one of American literature's Great Male Narcissists. Wallace did not object to self-absorption in a writer, Updike or any other. He was simply observing that many younger readers of Updike's work, often female readers, *had* begun to object to the uncritical self-absorption of his central characters, who allegedly resembled Updike himself.

In a July 2019 article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, journalist Claire Lowdon also defends Updike's right to be self-absorbed, along with our right as readers to be uncritical of writerly self-absorption. In her view, Updike's major gift to his readers was "the courage to draw directly from life," and she asks rhetorically, "Is self-absorbed fiction always narcissistic, or only if it's written by a straight white male?" implying that the excavation of personal experience is tolerated better by literary critics and reviewers when the writer in question is more marginal, less mainstream, maybe female or ethnic, or possibly less middle class.

Like Wallace and Lowdon, I also wish to ask whether as readers and critics of literary works, it is incumbent upon us to deem self-absorption—or perceived self-absorption—a negative aspect of writing. If John Updike felt compelled to spill his personal secrets in his stories, must we deem them somehow less worthy than more patently fictional literary works such as Ursula LeGuin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” or Shirley Jackson’s “The Lottery,” both of which depict scenes that seemingly have little direct correspondence with the lives of the writers? Surely it would be unfair to regard all writing about the self as “self-absorbed,” with the egotistical and therefore negative connotations of that phrase. Writing is quite different from, say, medical experimentation or suburban landscaping, two activities where self-absorption will likely yield disappointing results. Doctor Frankenstein comes to mind, as does Edward Scissorhands. But for the writer, self-absorption, or—if we must—narcissism, can open up channels of creativity that both comfort the writer and please the reader.

In this light, a story’s reliance on truth or actuality should not be held against it or be perceived as some sort of cheat sheet or crutch. In her work on nonfiction and consequence, Borich has argued that the purpose and intention of a genre defines that genre. Similarly, John Updike once urged book reviewers to “try to understand what the author wished to do, and [not] blame him for not achieving what he did not attempt” (*Picked-Up Pieces* xviii). Borich believes, and I think most devoted readers of literature would agree, that fiction writers write “the truth” in that they make things up so as to render more effectively the emotional realness that might be obscured by mere facts. Consider the passage in “Separating” when the father looks up at the lit windows of his mistress’s house as he passes the church with his older son in the car. David Updike tells us in his essay that this could not have happened because her house was on a different route “perhaps a quarter mile away” (10). Nevertheless, in the story John Updike offers a very close fictive approximation of the events the night that he and his first wife, Mary, informed their four teenage children that they would be splitting up, effective immediately, in Ipswich, Massachusetts, church and all, after twenty years of marriage. “Separating” is deeply relatable and rather heart-breaking to move through.

For readers who have experienced separation, the story is probably cathartic, as it very likely was for John Updike to write it. We might go so far as to speculate that catharsis was its very fuel, the emotional energy that generated such sympathetic portraiture, as when the exiting husband, Richard Maple, “had become obsessed with battening down the house against his absence, replacing screens and sash cords, hinges and latches—a Houdini making things snug before his escape”

(“Separating” 179). I’ve heard my college students draw in their breath at that passage. And, indeed, David Updike remembers how after his father left the home, he would “drift back” and resume some household project, shingle the barn, or build a chicken coop for his sister (11). David believes that his father was “tormented by confusion and guilt and the curious fact that he no longer lived with us.”

Reading both story and essay, I come to the conclusion that in writing “Separating” John Updike sought to build compassion not only in himself and for himself but also in others close to him. Whether he did so successfully, and to what extent, can be known only by those closest to him. However, we do not just have these two versions of the event to rely on: there is a third. In “Summer 1974” David reminds us that his grandmother, Linda Grace Hoyer, was also a fiction writer and that her short story “Unlike Girls” is circuitously about the very same event, i.e., the separation of John and Mary Updike. (These stories and the essay are like Russian nesting dolls, one inside the other, inside the other.) In Linda’s story, the middle-aged son, Christopher, visits his elderly mother, Ada—just as John visited Linda—and tells her elliptically that he is ending his marriage because “Girls are not like boys” and “[t]here are ways of getting a man to leave” (34). Ada, who has been seen to extend compassion repeatedly to neighbors and townsfolk throughout the narrative, is saddened. She probes Christopher as to why he is abandoning his children, telling him that she herself never left her own marriage. But all he can offer is “the time has come when I must do something for the boy I used to be.” She asks, “And what can I do for him? He was such a good boy,” to which Christopher answers, “Just love us all” (34).

David concludes his essay with those words, “Just love us all,” a direct quotation from his grandmother’s story. The immediate effect on the reader is one of compassion for his father, who, in his fictive imagining of himself (and also in his mother’s fictive imagining of him) sought that compassion. The rendering of the departing husband and father in all of the texts in question does not shy away from the accusation of abandonment but also tempers that accusation with the greater priority of sympathetic comprehension.

David’s essay offers comfort, as does his father’s story, his grandmother’s story, and David’s own 2009 semiautobiographical story, “In the Age of Convertibles,” which also takes as referent his parents’ separation. Here, we find a number of gentle and compassionate exchanges between the father and son characters, each of whom feels self-recrimination for a car accident that neither has caused, yet for which both are willing to assume responsibility. The son, Pete, informs the police and his parents that he was behind the wheel when the Mustang crashed in the

woods, when in fact it was his underage girlfriend, for whom he wishes to spare any blame. He tries to console her “in the shadow of an enormous Maple tree” (36), yet another allusion to “Separating.” His father, who owns the convertible, is so guilt ridden by his recent exit from the household that he dissolves into “something of a state, pacing around and blaming himself for trusting his kids so much with the cars. In the web of his ramblings, he sounded like he was blaming his own marital troubles for the crash.” All of these representations of the eventual and now historic Updike divorce—as viewed in “Separating,” David’s essay, Linda’s story, and David’s story—appear to have been composed to understand crisis, while gesturing toward the alleviation of suffering, if only because each one minimizes accusation in favour of understanding.

In “Toward a Theory of Literary Nonfiction,” Eric Heyne identifies two different kinds of truth: accuracy and meaning. Accuracy relates to facts that can be corroborated among individuals; meaning is “much more nebulous” (486). In Heyne’s view, as in Borich’s, both fiction and nonfiction can deliver truthful meanings, however nebulous, i.e., meanings that can be agreed upon or corroborated. This sort of corroboration of truth, both fictive and nonfictive corroboration, occurs in each of these four Updike texts. Biographical facts and elements of plot may vary. Names are altered to suit purpose: Richard, Christopher, my father. Mistresses are, or are not, implicated to accommodate narrative priorities and, most likely, to protect loved ones. Streets maps are redrawn in the service of symbolism—a lit window not far from a church. Yet all of these texts corroborate meaning: they offer a kind of palliative care to a dying organism, a marriage of more than twenty years duration. They extend sympathy and understanding. They thematically foreground compassion.

But, of course, this element of compassion does not *a priori* make them good. Literary value is, like truth, also challenging to corroborate, and, as Heyne succinctly argues, though many have tried to describe it, establish it, put parameters around it, literary value has no empirical definition. It will always depend upon taste and trends. Nevertheless we—readers, people—are all “students of human constructions shaped by human purposes,” and “we need not be afraid to talk about truth” (Heyne 489). In other words, texts of all genres strive for shared understanding. Texts serve multiple functions in society. “[W]e will continue to look for authors,” Heyne writes, “who can find striking, enduring patterns for that unwashed mass of facts,” and there are few better collective examples of this than in the intertextual writings of John Updike, his son David, and his mother Linda.

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# From Irony to Empathy and Back in John Updike's *Terrorist*

ADEL NOUAR

John Updike's genius is best excited by the lyric possibilities of tragic events that, failing to justify themselves as tragedy, turn unaccountably into comedies.

—Joyce Carol Oates, "Updike's American Couples"

Post-9/11 fiction is a genre that has left many critics unsatisfied. Whether failing to render the scale of the trauma inflicted on America on September 11, 2001, or failing to represent the intricacies of terrorism, it seems the fiction responding to this event presents, at least for critics, a great number of blind spots. John Updike, of course, faced high expectations from the public when he published *Terrorist* (2006), a novel that sold well but drew severe criticism, as described by Peter C. Herman:

Commentators have by and large not liked Updike's penultimate novel very much. For many reviewers, Updike had simply written a bad, even a very bad, book, and literary critics have generally followed suit. At worst, Updike is accused of racial profiling; at best, we have tepid, almost patronizing approval. Most critics, however, have largely chosen to ignore the book, or give it only minimal consideration. Richard Gray, for example, devotes less than a page to *Terrorist* in *After the Fall: American Literature since 9/11*, ultimately concluding that *Terrorist* "never really fits together as a meaningful story." (691)

Updike's post-9/11 novel drew a critical response that illustrates the cultural tensions born of the attacks, the need for a means to alleviate the shock 9/11 produced,

and the desire for discourses that would reestablish a semblance of cognitive safety. Although the specific dilemmas born of September 11 are highly relevant, it is in the light of Joyce Carol Oates's statement on tragedy and comedy that *Terrorist* should be addressed. I will not assess the novel's relevance in regard to its representation of terrorism or its specific discourse on 9/11; instead, I will focus on how these issues are exploited by Updike as fictional material in line with other works from his oeuvre.

*Terrorist* relates the story of a multiracial teenager, Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, the son of an Irish American woman and an Egyptian exchange student; the mother raises her son after her partner abandons both her and the unborn child. In his adolescence, Ahmad embraces Islam, which he practices in an austere and rigorous way, adopting a literal understanding of the Qur'an in his search for a strong cultural identity, one that would transcend his mixed ethnicity: "Ahmad feels his pride of isolation and willed identity to be threatened by the masses of ordinary, hard-pressed men and plain, practical women who are enrolled in Islam as a lazy matter of ethnic identity" (177). As the title suggests, the novel depicts his transformation into a terrorist, where he is recruited by a dormant cell (itself infiltrated by a double agent) in order to blow up the Lincoln Tunnel. Although September 11 is not ostensibly central, the terrorist plot is planned for the third anniversary of 9/11, and the event itself serves as a crucial factor in Ahmad's identity crisis. Post-9/11 America provides a background to Ahmad's descent into terrorism, and the youth's escape into religious extremism during the war on terror becomes a comment on American society; Ahmad represents a nation that has been shaken to its very core. As noted by John-Paul Colgan, *Terrorist* is first and foremost an investigation of contemporary American society: "the novel once again sees [Updike] engaged in a ventriloquization of America's self-criticism, through characters granted a critical perspective on the nation by their immersion in multiculturalism" (126). Consequently, despite an unequivocal title, *Terrorist* is a novel that aims at "imagining al-Qaeda-style terrorism as a type of severe critique of an America that has lost its way" (126).

*Terrorist* was the first attempt by a major American writer of fiction, in the post-9/11 context, at depicting and even inhabiting the skin of a terrorist. Unlike other later attempts, such as Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) or *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid (2008), Updike's novel aims at debating the question of homegrown terrorism, unravelling America's role in manufacturing its own enemies, on its own soil, from its own citizens. Perhaps this is what led to Updike's novel being critiqued as a failure by many commentators, as if the author

failed to meet preconceived conceptions of the terrorist as fundamentally alien. The rigidity of Ahmad's character, for instance, struck many critics as being at odds with the fluidity of Updike's previous novels. Among such critics, Michiko Kakutani, in reviewing the novel for the *New York Times*, wrote:

Unfortunately, the would-be terrorist in this novel turns out to be a completely unbelievable individual: more robot than human being and such a cliché that the reader cannot help suspecting that Mr. Updike found the idea of such a person so incomprehensible that he at some point abandoned any earnest attempt to depict his inner life and settled instead for giving us a static, one-dimensional stereotype.

Kakutani's comment centers on Ahmad's credibility not only as a "would-be terrorist" but also as a person. She claims that Ahmad's character is flawed because of his automaton-like nature; however, such a comment ignores the question of indoctrination and brainwashing, two processes to which Ahmad willingly submits himself. Therefore, although we may agree with Kakutani's critique, we nevertheless disagree on the reasons behind such a characterization. Where Kakutani argues for Updike's inability to grasp the intricacies of what being a terrorist entails, I see Updike creating, through Ahmad, a broken robot, a failed soldier. One of the consequences of Updike's characterization is to open a space for debate, where we can explore the cracks in the monolithic figure of "the terrorist." Furthermore, to deny Updike's representation of his terrorist in the making raises the critical question, "what is a believable terrorist?" Kakutani does not answer this question. Updike, for his part, is in line with DeLillo, who deals with similar questions in his seminal essay composed in the wake of 9/11, "In the Ruins of the Future": "The terrorist, planted in a Florida town, pushing his supermarket cart, nodding to his neighbor, lives in a far narrower format. This is his edge, his strength. Plots reduce the world. He builds a plot around his anger and our indifference" (34). In order to reduce a plot to its simplest pattern, writers must opt for minimal characterization (in his essay DeLillo conceives the writer and terrorist as similar in that both are plot builders). Such a characterization is inherent to terrorism itself, and it is my conviction that Updike, through Ahmad, sought to make this fundamental mechanism of terror crystal clear, to lay bare an archetype. If we inscribe Updike's novel as part of the counternarrative to terror that DeLillo called for in his essay, *Terrorist* becomes a satire that places the relevance of Ahmad's credibility, as both terrorist and human being, on another level.

Sylvie Mathé, in "Imagining the Perpetrator: Reflections on the Terrorist as Other in Updike, DeLillo, and Amis," highlights the counterproductive effect of

Updike's immense research for his novel: "Yet, while Updike's abundant display of the suras of the Qur'an testifies to his thorough background research for *Terrorist*, the novel paradoxically suffers from this scholastic exhibition" (16). In contrast to his other novels, where his research can deepen the verisimilitude, Updike's "Quranic research feels laborious in *Terrorist*. His characterization for once suffers from it, as do his dialogues" (17). Dialogue in *Terrorist* is, indeed, problematic, largely because of Ahmad's excessively formal speech or whenever Arabic comes into play. In the awkward and difficult communication between Ahmad and others, I see evidence of a cross-cultural divide, not only within Ahmad's own psyche, but between America and the world, Islam and the secular West, religion and modernity. Here, I am guided by Mathé, who investigates areas and domains removed from the sole topic of terrorism to propose a new understanding of Updike's choices for his protagonist:

Moreover, what Updike chose to privilege in his novel is less the political dimension of Islam than its religious impact. Returning to his familiar territory of Middle Atlantic, Middle America, but shifting his focus to the Arab American community, the novelist thus deliberately set out to explore what Hartnell identifies as "the unnamed source of America's post-9/11 fear: the Islamist enemy within." The genesis of the novel, as revealed by the author in several interviews, lays bare the religious concern that lies at its core. (18)

Updike's characterization of Ahmad, considered through the prism of religion, opens the possibility of finding new meanings to the character's apparent stereotypical one-dimensionality. The youth's entire identity is shaped by the religious impact of Islam, specifically Islam in the context of post-9/11 America. In his pursuit of a pure and rigid practice of Islam, Ahmad is trapped by certain determinisms and also by the confusion he himself experiences between Islam and terror in post-9/11 America. In spite of its weaknesses, Updike's novel remains highly relevant on the social and religious levels, arguing that terrorists are not born *ex nihilo*. Though many critics view the characterization of Ahmad as a failure, I see instead the subtle acknowledgement that terrorists, at a fundamental level, are the products of intrinsically human inner conflicts, rendering the robotlike character simultaneously relatable and alien.

#### AN ALMOST ORDINARY AMERICAN TEENAGER

Ahmad's family fits into an archetypal situation in contemporary urban America. The only child of a hardworking single woman, the high schooler is not inclined

toward social relations, isolating himself from people his age but also from the school's staff, whom he deems hypocritical and mediocre. Ahmad is a teenager in line with literary clichés, a rebellious child in search of authenticity and moral guidance in a world in which he does not feel he fits. Ahmad's common teenage crisis nonetheless takes on a particular aura as it meets the post-9/11 American context. Evoking the disaster, Ahmad attempts to tone down the impact the attacks had on his life: "No big deal. Most people were cool. I mean, I was only fifteen when it happened. Who could blame me?" (79). This statement occurs relatively late in the novel; the events of 2001, until then, have never been mentioned in an explicit manner. The plot of *Terrorist* posits the attacks of three years previous as a spectre, a ghostly presence that haunts America's cultural life. The use of the pronoun "it" stretches the contours of 9/11, making it an event that is still being felt and keeps producing terror.

9/11, thus, is represented much like Ahmad, a living entity in perpetual evolution and caught in self-examination about its identity. Ahmad's adolescent crisis, just like 9/11, begs for answers and opens up within the boy's mind a need for meaning and certainties. For the last three years of his life, Ahmad has been living with the daily implicit memory of the attacks and their impact on the nation; 9/11 forms the scaffolding of Ahmad's identity. Ahmad becomes 9/11's living representative, an embodiment of the terrorist attacks and of the larger conflictual encounter between America and the "Islamic Other."

Despite this overwhelmingly heavy cross to bear, Ahmad's social and emotional isolation is not entirely due to his cultural identity and connection with 9/11. In rare moments he interacts with people his age, displaying the typical behavior of teenagers antagonizing their whole world in a defensive move to hide their vulnerability. When Joryleen, one of his classmates, tries to reach out to him, Ahmad pushes her away:

"You're looking so serious," she tells him. "You should learn to smile more."

"Why? Why should I, Joryleen?"

"People will like you more."

"I don't care about that. I don't want to be liked." (8)

In this first exchange, before any considerations of 9/11, race, ethnicity, or religion, Ahmad is depicted as the prime instigator of his social alienation. By their stark simplicity, his clothes—"white shirt, narrow-legged black jeans"—show the wall of self-righteousness Ahmad intends to create between himself and others (8). His attempt at dissociating himself from the vanity and vacuity displayed by the

colorful outfits worn by his classmates makes clear that Ahmad despises them in the same manner Holden Caulfield, in *The Catcher in the Rye*, despises “phonies.”

Other similarities with Salinger’s character can be found, strengthening the indirect lineage between the two teenage boys, both archetypes of the American teenage angst of their respective times. Ahmad and Holden are, indeed, both disgusted by American society. Their rebuke primarily stems from their assessment of the behavior of adults around them, who are deemed hypocritical, ungenue, and morally bankrupt. Ihab Hassan describes the reasons behind Holden’s rejection of the world: “it is once again the same story of creeps and hypocrites. . . . Holden is motivated by a compelling desire to commune and communicate, a desire constantly thwarted by the phoniness, indifference and vulgarity that surround him. He resents the conditions which force upon him the burden of rejection” (149). Just like Salinger’s protagonist, Ahmad is an antihero motivated by the need to transcend the vulgarity that characterizes his immediate environment. He even acknowledges this need as the source of his rejection of society and as the primary cause for others’ hostility towards him: “beauty [is] an affront to the brutes of the world” (97). Ahmad’s inability to find redeeming beauty in the vulgar is what brings him eventually to embrace radical Islam, his frustration thus morphing, as with Holden Caulfield, into a self-destructive impulse. Such a descent from noble aspirations to self-destruction, even though proceeding from an immature self-romanticizing, produces a tragic momentum, thus triggering reader sympathy for a child in search of soothing certainties.

Ahmad’s revolt is conservative in nature. He does not resent the world for being too oppressive; instead his rebellion is a call for order and authority, something terrorism will opportunistically answer to, with the promise of filling the void in an American teenager’s life. The reader faces not only an aspiring terrorist, but also a young American who has lost his way and can no longer commune with his nation. Though initially presented in radical opposition to American identity and values, Ahmad resembles, in his social alienation, Holden Caulfield. Ahmad’s situation also suggests that the genesis of a terrorist is more complex than the mystique of otherness.

In this regard, one can better understand criticism the novel initially received for subverting the social consensus that terrorists are absolute monsters born of blind hate. In a posthumously published interview, Updike explained his novel:

I thought I was in a position to understand, or at least imagine the other side. To see through the eyes of a devout, young, somewhat naïve Muslim. To see through his eyes,

America, as it must look as an impure, not to say obscene and disgusting morass of overeating and oversex[ed]ness and, well, everything, everything. And also a kind of dead end. The city of New Prospect, named in a mood of American hope, proved to be a pretty dreary prospect, at least as far as the young men of Ahmad's generation. So anyway, I thought I could write a sympathetic novel about a terrorist, a homegrown terrorist who is seduced, it's true, by others into contemplating favorably an act of mass murder. But you know, the point of my book is that I'm not writing about an evil terrorist, or really writing against terrorism. I'm trying to see it from a terrorist's point of view. And in the end, he's one terrorist, and maybe a kind of unique case. It's an American terrorism. (Zanganeh)

In the context of post-9/11 America, Ahmad builds his religious identity out of a defensive impulse, finding in Islam a way to quench his thirst for absolute certainties and transcendence. However, his religion quickly turns into a shield against a society that assumes his otherness is inherently hostile. Such social attitudes aggravate Ahmad, whose antagonism eventually morphs into a passion for death. This vicious circle thus becomes the main driver of the plot, making Ahmad's fundamental need for spiritual comfort secondary. By aiming at representing such a drift, Updike depoliticizes Islam and relocates the cause of the radicalization process in religious problems he had been investigating his entire career. *Terrorist* symbolically rehumanizes Americans who belong to the Muslim minority and who, in the wake of September 11, are denied communion with the rest of the nation. In addition, it offers a rational and accessible account of the radicalization process by means of religious sociology.

While rationality allows for intellectual empathy, the possibility of looking at the world through the eyes of the Other, it also opens space for debate and contradiction, casting an ironical light on the protagonist's self-romanticization of his murderous enterprise. Ahmad goes through an existential crisis that brings him to willingly choose to become a terrorist: in reaction to how Muslims are too easily labelled terrorists, he decides to embrace the very same Islamophobic tropes and representations that cause him to feel excluded in American society. Ahmad's "counternarrative" turns out to be modelled on cultural clichés and stereotypes, his rebellion proving to be not at all subversive. On the contrary, the self-absorbed Ahmad, like a picaresque hero, fails to see how his revolt ends up fitting the many narratives that shape American public opinion about Muslims.

*Terrorist* oscillates between empathy and irony. In his Quixote-like delusion, Ahmad becomes an object of pity and mockery. For instance, Ahmad fantasizes early on about an omnipresent being who figures as a loyal companion, thus em-

phasizing his loneliness as a fatherless child. However, as he begins to embrace terrorism and his mission, Ahmad displays a more romantic perception of God rooted in narcissism: “Ahmad’s every minute has taken on the intimate doubleness of prayer, the self-release of turning aside and addressing a self not his own but that of Another, a Being as close as the vein of his neck” (252). By turning to a superior being who is radically different yet also inhabits his own body and mind, Ahmad is guilty of blasphemy. His desire to reach Godlikeness instead of godliness is ironic: the youth considers his relationship with God as a symbiosis instead of an absolute submission that is supposed to make him tremble in awe before Allah’s almightiness.

Ahmad’s religious experience can also be read ironically, with his “fakeness” a reminder of the absurd expectations for a Muslim in America. In his performance as a Muslim and later as a terrorist, Ahmad serves to illustrate his high school counsellor Jack Levy’s views on social laws: “The docility of human beings, their basic willingness to please. Europe’s Jews dressing up in their best clothes to be marched off to the death camps” (111). We may wonder whether Ahmad’s practice of Islam is a fully subjective act of rebellion or constitutes, ironically, a performance that fits the cultural representations of Islam in his country. The novel never allows a definitive answer. Such ambiguity is recurrent in Updike’s work, as noted by Colgan: “Updike’s own writing from the late 1960s onward increasingly becomes a vehicle for these negative reviews, as the inherently nostalgic idea of America as a nation in irreversible decline from the prosperity and vigor of the 1950s to an enervated and second-rate present begins to recur” (123). *Terrorist* is no exception. Ahmad’s descent into terrorism can be attributable as much to a decaying America that has betrayed its values as to the pure hatred of Islamic radicals.

Early in the novel, Ahmad mentally describes his relationship to American society in simplistic terms: “*The world is difficult*, he thinks, *because devils are busy in it, confusing things and making the straight crooked*” (11). Although such a statement sounds caricatural of Islamic fundamentalism and of groups such as Al Qaeda, it nonetheless sketches a character who struggles with doubt and is not beyond the influence of the outside world. Once again, counsellor Levy, as a sympathetic observer, offers a way of viewing the teenager’s escape into radicalism as a very American phenomenon:

All I’m saying is that kids like Ahmad need to have something they don’t get from society any more. Society doesn’t let them be innocent any more. The crazy Arabs are right—hedonism, nihilism, that’s all we offer. Listen to the lyrics of these rock and rap stars—just kids themselves, with smart agents. Kids have to make more decisions

than they used to, because adults can't tell them what to do. We don't *know* what to do, we don't have the answers we used to; we just futz along, trying not to think. Nobody accepts responsibility, so the kids, some of the kids, take it on. . . . You know what they wind up being, the worst discipline cases? They wind up being cops or high-school teachers. They want to please society, though they say they don't. They want to be worthy, if we could just tell them what worth is. (205–206)

Levy's analysis normalizes Ahmad's situation, making of him yet another example of aimless American youth. Such a cultural drift is, for Levy, proof of how American adults have deserted, ethically and morally, the younger generation, providing them with little more than consumerism. Levy's comment tones down the "terrorist" nature of Ahmad's rebellion, making him just another teenager looking for meaning and certainties. His hostility toward American society stems from its social failures; thus, his terrorist activities require a sociological rather than political explanation. Through Ahmad, Updike focuses less on terrorism and more on how American society fails to uphold its core values and promises.

By choosing an Arab American protagonist, Updike draws attention to a fringe of the American population, which, in the years following 9/11, is excluded from discourse except that pertaining to terror and religious extremism. Thus, he sketches the dilemma for the American Muslim community. Their own cultural and discursive isolation shapes his notion of what is the right way of being a Muslim in America. His alignment with negative stereotypes constitutes a defensive reaction or, paradoxically, a manner of pleasing the majority by displeasing it with hostile behavior. The novel, indeed, often displays propaganda for future jihadists whenever Ahmad or the narrator expresses the youth's antagonism with his country: "*America wants to take away my God*" (39, emphasis in original); "Already I have lived longer than many martyrs in Iran and Iraq" (175); "*Be ruthless to unbelievers. Burn them, crush them, because they have forgotten God*" (294, emphasis in original).

When rendering terrorist opposition to America, however, the text sometimes offers moments of self-awareness. For instance, consider how the novel explores and deconstructs sexuality. Terry, Ahmad's mother, and Jack Levy, with whom she has an affair, speculate that Ahmad's escape into radical Islam is, perhaps, the fruit of a repressed homosexuality. Fully aware that his monastic and austere way of life is bound to trigger such speculation, Ahmad declares: "Mom. I'm not gay, if that's what you're implying" (140). Ahmad stands in contrast to those real-life terrorists whose sexual repression, as discussed in the media, is presented as an explanation for their descent into terrorism.<sup>1</sup>

Whether it is about perpetuating or deconstructing stereotypes, Ahmad is a character whose discourse and religious practice are shaped by the gaze of others. Although he tries to be a good Muslim, he is perpetually linked to the figure of the terrorist by the world around him. In that regard, Ahmad is a child of September 11. After 9/11, America saw, indeed, a rise in ethnic crispation that shook the multiculturalist model of the nation. The Arab and Muslim communities in the US underwent hostile scrutiny, resulting in the amplification of tropes and stereotypes already decried, for instance, by Edward Said in the late 1970s. A similar diagnosis was reached by many scholars in the aftermath of 9/11, such as Jo Lampert, who provided these remarks about contemporary American children's fiction, such as the Parvana books, which deal with a young Afghani girl living under Taliban rule:

The Parvana books attempt to balance "civil liberties and national security, fear and reason, compassion and anger" (Giroux, 2002, p.5), but as in the picture books this was complicated after 9/11, when the discourses of multiculturalism and tolerance of a pre-9/11 West continued, but the enemy was nevertheless ethnically identified as Middle Eastern or Arab. The balance between tolerance toward all ethnic groups and rage against some groups in particular appears increasingly complicated. Despite a general liberalism in these books the stereotypes are still, though ambiguously, present. (63)

Lampert shows how the post-9/11 context challenged writers to produce balanced world views, and she reveals a trend that runs deep in American culture in the wake of September 11. In particular, she identifies negative ethnic stereotypes, including those dealing with Arab people, that are paradoxically used in texts aimed at promoting a progressive agenda. As an astute observer of American life, Updike reproduced this ambivalence in his novel, portraying a stereotypical radical Muslim while also challenging that character's simplistic nature.

Arab characters in the novel, indeed, display awareness of the exotic caricature they embody in the eyes of a large part of the American public. For instance, Habib Chehab, the owner of the secondhand furniture store in which Ahmad works part-time, summarizes his business plan and marketing strategy in lucid terms:

"They want Oriental rugs, as if Lebanese are from Armenia, from Iran. So we keep selection downstairs, and any on floor you can buy and we clean. There are special carpet places along Reagan, but people believe in our bargains."

"They believe in us, Papa," Charlie says. "We have a good name." (150-151)

Habib explains American ignorance of the Middle East, underlining that Arabness (and therefore Islam) is plural and multifaceted. He comments on how much

the word “Oriental,” for the majority, serves as a homogenizing term loaded with preconceived notions of a monolithic Middle East culture. Unlike Habib, Charlie was born in the US and embraces American culture to the extent that he dreams of becoming a film director (at the novel’s end the reader discovers Charlie has been working for the US government as a double agent in the terrorist cell that plans on using Ahmad as a martyr). Charlie’s use of the verb “believe” shows how the pair is aware of the myths the American public hold as truths about Arabs. If we place Ahmad’s situation in the context described by Lampert, one of prejudice toward Arabs and Muslims, we can but conclude that Updike’s novel is attempting to point out the failings of multiculturalism. In the end, Ahmad’s transformation into a terrorist is not the sole result of an exacerbated religiousness; it is also born of a performance of his identity as shaped by culture. As a biased majority gazes upon him, his practice of Islam bends toward a form of radical fundamentalism.

Ahmad’s identity is, indeed, perceived by non-Arab characters in the novel through a syllogism that equates Arabs to Muslims and Muslims to terrorists. Tylenol, for instance, the local bully at Central High, constantly reduces Ahmad to his ethnic identity by systematically calling him “Arab” when he does not use more violent racist slurs: “Don’t you talk to me of foolish—you so foolish nobody give you shit, Arab” (16); “We laugh about you . . . a flying fuck is when you do it to yourself, like all you Arabs do. You all faggots, man” (98). Consequently, the novel suggests that Ahmad’s radical rebellion is not the mere product of adolescent angst. It is also born of a cultural climate, post-9/11 America, that exacerbates the traditional and negative representations of Middle Eastern people. Such an amplification of stereotypes results in the conflation of the categories of Arab, Islam, and terror. In that sense, Ahmad’s embrace of terrorism is depicted as a domestic, homegrown phenomenon. The youth turns out to be an American terrorist, as he himself declares at the beginning of the novel: “I am not a foreigner” (35). The impact of America’s inner conflicts on Ahmad’s religious identity is nothing new in Updike’s fiction. Despite all of his flaws and inconsistencies, Ahmad embodies familiar Updikean concerns, and his struggles illustrate themes that run deep in Updike’s writings.

#### RABBIT’S DILEMMA

As 9/11 distorts and tests American multiculturalism, Ahmad responds by adopting a rigid practice of Islam with an equally rigid language. Formal and emphatic, Ahmad’s speech reflects his righteousness. For instance, during one of his conversations with Joryleen, he presents his faith as a moral duty: “I am a good Muslim,

in a world that mocks faith” (69). The adjective “good” takes the reader into the realm of ethics, a domain Updike explored throughout his career. What is a good Muslim? What is it to be good? Such questions haunt Updike’s novels, beginning in 1960 with *Rabbit, Run*, wherein one tries to distinguish between “feeling good” and “being good.” Like Ahmad, Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom is caught in an existential crisis that produces an unavoidable clash between moral imperatives and the satisfaction of one’s true desires. A young father, Rabbit feels trapped in a mediocre life and decides to desert his son and his pregnant wife. Here, we can find a structural point that brings the two novels closer together: Ahmad’s father did the same thing to his family: he left without warning. The figure of the absent father, of the father escaping responsibilities, makes of *Terrorist* an exploration of the life of the betrayed son. Such a configuration can also be observed in “Rabbit Remembered,” in which Nelson, Rabbit’s son, becomes, after rehab, a self-righteous mental health counselor.

During his short-lived escape in *Rabbit, Run*, Rabbit becomes convinced that the universe is trying to tell him something, deliver to him a profound secret. Both Ahmad and Rabbit launch themselves into a metaphysical quest in order to come up with an ethical system that will allow them to endure the frustrations and the cruelty of the world. Ahmad, however, in opposition to Rabbit, chooses a path of strict religious observance, as he is convinced that through moral discipline he will find the mysterious “something” he yearns for: “there’s something that wants me to find it” (127). Ahmad, for his part, hears a similar call from beyond: “*This beauty*, Ahmad thinks, *must mean something*—a hint from Allah, a foreshadowing of paradise” (188). In pursuing this hidden cosmic truth, Rabbit feels alive, to the point he forgets his duties as a father and husband. Acknowledging the unethical nature of such a behavior, Rabbit nonetheless leaves others to pay for his new freedom. The tension generated between these two fundamental aspects of human existence, “being good” and “feeling good,” is also central to the plot of *Terrorist*. Unlike Rabbit, Ahmad denies himself earthly pleasures and decides to follow a path of righteousness and morals. Fifty years after *Rabbit, Run*, Updike probes once more the realm of ethics, this time from the perspective of the abandoned son: “‘Instead of being good, don’t you ever want to *feel* good?’ Joryleen asks. In his severe faith he is a puzzle to her, a curiosity. ‘Perhaps the two go together,’ he offers. ‘The feeling and the being’” (69). Ahmad tries to convince Joryleen that his religious commitment is for him a source of balance and peace, a compromise between moral imperatives and personal happiness.

In order to solve Rabbit’s dilemma, Ahmad embraces Islam, which constitutes, for the young man, an ethical system and road map to inner peace. It is through

a total submission to Islam and its ethics that Ahmad finds a substitute for the absence of authority:

Ahmad's every minute has taken on the intimate doubleness of prayer, the self-release of turning aside and addressing a self not his own but that of Another, a Being as close as the vein of his neck. More than five times a day he finds the opportunity, most often in the store's barren parking lot, to spread his mat in the eastward direction and touch his forehead to the earth, each time receiving, through the concrete, the close comfort of submission. (252)

In his final phase of transformation into a terrorist, Ahmad has reached an ecstatic state he used to find only in prayer. The narrator exposes how prayer is for Ahmad both an escape and, paradoxically, a desperate search for something to submit to, a way to surrender to a higher power. The rigorous practice of Islam and the perpetual need for spiritual relief push Ahmad toward a state of submission, which for some readers renders him a programmed robot who follows a precise behavioral script.

The mechanization of Ahmad through his submission to God is palpable in his language. Both formal and archaic, Ahmad's speech reflects his desire to follow an automatic mode of thinking. Although Ahmad deeply despises the staff of his school, he always addresses adults in a formal, respectful manner. Even with Charlie Chehab, Ahmad maintains a vocabulary and syntax unusual for an American teenager: "I do not find that television encourages clean thoughts" (172). Charlie, on the other hand, replies in a more casual manner: "Hell, no. Wake up: it's not meant to. Most of it is just crap they put out to fill in between the commercials" (172). Throughout the novel, Ahmad's speech obeys strict syntactical and grammatical rules, reflecting the discipline of his religious mission.

Ahmad forges for himself such a discourse to keep the vanity and emptiness of the outside world at a distance: "In this devilish society there is nothing fit for man and his last hour to hear. Silence is better. Silence is God's music" (286). *Terrorist's* protagonist prefers the deafening silence of the divine to the cacophony of a world that has nothing to promise. Here, again, there is irony. In his quest for authenticity, Ahmad ends up sounding as disingenuous and fake as the consumerist discourses he so despises.

#### LINGUISTIC EMPATHY, DRAMATIC IRONY

Language is crucial in the novel, particularly in Updike's use of foreign languages. Spanish, French, and Arabic appear frequently in the novel. Textually speaking,

the novel, like Ahmad, is a mix of conflicting cultural codes and signs. Arabic is used as a metonymy of Islam to make the reader feel the enthralling potential of this religion that Updike himself defined, in an interview with Charles McGrath, as a mystery:

A lot of the Koran does not speak very eloquently to a Westerner. . . . Much of it is either legalistic or opaquely poetic. There's a lot of hellfire—descriptions of making unbelievers drink molten metal occur more than once. It's not a fuzzy, lovable book, although in the very next verse there can be something quite generous. . . . Arabic is very twisting, very beautiful. The call to prayer is quite haunting; it almost makes you a believer on the spot. My feeling was, "This is God's language, and the fact that you don't understand it means you don't know enough about God."

Arabic in his mind is linked to mystery and the spiritual realm. Romanized transcriptions of suras taken from the Qur'an pepper the novel, particularly during lessons with Shaikh Rashid. These lessons generate moments of connection between Ahmad and the reader, who also finds himself in a process of learning something. The best illustration of this can be found when Rashid and his student read a sura titled "The Elephant":

Ahmad recites the invocatory formula "*bi-smi llāhi r—rah-māni r-rahīm*" and, tensely because of his master's demand for a feeling rhythm, tackles aloud the long first line of the sura: "*a-lam tara kayfa fa'ala rabbuka bi-ashābi 'l-fil.*" . . . Stress the last syllable, the rhyming syllable. Remember the rule? Stress falls on a long vowel between two consonants, or on a consonant followed by a short vowel followed by *two* consonants. Proceed, please Ahmad." Even the master's pronunciation of "Ahmad" has the soft knife-edge, the soulful twist, of the pharyngeal fricative. (101–102)

The instructions given by the teacher are highly didactic (rhythm, stress patterns, pronunciation), and the Romanized Arabic sentences are an invitation to the reader to join the lesson and try to produce the sequence of these foreign sounds. However, these few verses are more than a mere cultural curiosity. Reading the Arabic text out loud constitutes more of a game than an actual tutorial for the receptive reader. And by setting his reader up for failure, Updike draws him closer to Ahmad, where the reader symbolically sits next to Ahmad in the classroom. In these tutorials Ahmad also displays timid doubts toward the radical teachings his master conveys. As the passage is delivered through internal focalization, the description of Ahmad's point of view shows he is not entirely unaware of the hid-

den agenda of his master. The way Ahmad perceives Rashid's pronunciation of his name, with "the soft knife-edge, the soulful twist, of the pharyngeal fricative," betrays a certain uneasiness in the student's mind, as if he did not fully trust the Shaikh. Rashid is, indeed, the one who will convert Ahmad to terrorism and push him to embrace martyrdom.

The rest of the lesson follows the same logic and stretches it further. Rashid promotes the excitement any good Muslim should feel when thinking about getting into paradise, especially when access is granted through a noble feat:

"And what do these superb verses tell us?"

"They tell us," Ahmad ventures, blushing with the shame of sullyng the holy text with a clumsy paraphrase, which furthermore depends less on his sight-reading of the ancient Arabic than on a surreptitious study of English translations, "they tell us that God loosed flocks of birds, hurling them against the stones of baked clay, and made the men of the elephant like blades of grass that have been eaten. Devoured."

"Yes, more or less," said Shaikh Rashid. "The 'stones of baked clay,' as you put it, presumably formed a wall which then came down, under the barrage of birds, which remains mysterious to us, though presumably as clear as crystal in the graven prototype of the Qur'an that exists in Paradise. Ah, Paradise; one can hardly wait."

... Ahmad asks, "Sir, are you suggesting that the version available to us, fixed by the caliphs within twenty years of the Prophet's death, is somehow imperfect, compared with the version that is eternal?"

The teacher pronounces, "The imperfections must lie within ourselves—in our ignorance." (104)

In this passage, the lesson takes a more political turn. The American reader, in the context of a novel dealing with terrorism in 2006, is likely to see in the birds hurling themselves against walls of clay a metaphorical evocation of the attacks of September 11. Such a metaphor necessarily acts, on the reader, as a moment of disconnection from Ahmad, with whom he previously felt a connection. Further, this severance occurs at a moment when the teacher leaves linguistic concerns behind to evoke the necessity for any good Muslim to crave paradise, and to rejoice at the coming of death and, if possible, the achievement of martyrdom. Besides the rift that opens between Ahmad and the reader, this passage provides one of the rare moments when Ahmad asks his teacher a question, one that casts a skeptical light on his master. When Ahmad points out inconsistencies in Rashid's suggestion that the earthly version of the Qur'an might not be perfect, the imam tries

to convince his pupil that any difficulty of interpretation of the Qur'an is proof of man's limitations, an argument he will later refute:

The exact meaning of the word *abābil*, for example, remains after all this time conjectural, since it occurs nowhere else. There is a term in Greek, dear Ahmad, for such a unique and therefore undeterminable word: *hapax legomenon*. In the same sura, *sijjil* is another mystery-word, though it occurs three times in the sacred book. The Prophet himself foresaw difficulties, and in the seventh verse of the third sura, 'The Imrans,' admits that some expressions are clear—*muḥkamāt*—but others are understood only by God. These unclear passages, the so-called *mustashābihāt*, are sought out by the enemies of the true faith, those 'with an evil inclination in their hearts,' as the Prophet expressed it, whereas the wise and the faithful say, 'We believe in it; it is all from our Lord.' (105)

The lesson drifts further away from the content of the holy scriptures to the necessity for a good Muslim to accept them without questions. Rashid equates questioning the Qur'an with the "enemies" of Islam. The teacher's sudden politicization of the holy book exposes Rashid as a hypocrite. What is asked of Ahmad—blind and total unquestioning loyalty to words not even the highest dignitaries of Islam fully can grasp—feels unnatural and counterintuitive: "the student feels an abyss is opening in him, a chasm of the problematical and inaccessibly ancient" (106). However, Ahmad does not dare question his teacher and, by lesson's end, he prefers to let Rashid's eloquence take him away from obvious and embarrassing questions. The title of the next sura the pair is studying is "Mutual Deceit," which emphasizes the dramatic deception these meetings with Rashid constitute. "Mutual Deceit" is, indeed, the sixty-fourth chapter of the Qur'an, whereas "The Elephant" is the 105th sura. Such a sequence illustrates how the birth of a terrorist relies on the usurpation and corruption of the holy text and of language. Furthermore, the scene shows that the teacher can never really silence doubt in the mind of his pupil and, therefore, that Ahmad willingly participates in the comedy of lies of his indoctrination. Using Arabic allows Updike to educate his reader on Islam and to make apparent that Islamic terrorism necessitates a bending of words and reason that, in the end, has little to do with the holy text itself. *Terrorist's* Arabic lessons, in that regard, insert themselves in the plot as a play within the play, a *mise en abîme* in which the strings and workings of various *dei ex machina* are made obvious, and show how this rhetorical deception needs both a director and a docile actor. The reader then jumps from the symbolic position of being Ahmad's classmate to being witness of his self-deception; in Ahmad, Updike provides both a relatable teenager and an antagonist caught in denial.

## METAPHYSICAL TRICKERY

Updike uses Arabic as a tool to reveal the deceptive nature of the radicalization process. However, simultaneously he wants Arabic to convey a sense of the divine. *Terrorist* has metaphysical concerns. The nature of God and his presence in the physical world are of prime concern for Ahmad, as they are for Updike, whose original intent was to make his protagonist a young Christian, like David Kern in "Pigeon Feathers," who finds himself betrayed by a clergyman: "I imagined a young seminarian who sees everyone around him as a devil trying to take away his faith. . . . The 21st century does look like that, I think, to a great many people in the Arab world" (McGrath). In "Pigeon Feathers," David is a fourteen-year-old boy, caught in a deep and frightening struggle to come to terms with his own mortality. In search of answers, he reads H. G. Wells's *The Outline of History* (1922) and is appalled by the trivialization of the life of Christ, his last refuge when contemplating the unavoidability of death. Like Ahmad, who follows the teachings of Shaikh Rashid, David seeks comfort and answers to his ontological angst with Reverend Dobson. The man of God, however, proves incapable of helping the boy in his crisis. In fact, David realizes his spiritual guide is battling the same questions and contradictions, leaving David with a strong sense of betrayal. Ahmad experiences similar disappointment with his mentor, finding it unpleasant when Rashid conveniently switches from a literal to a metaphorical interpretation of the Qur'an: "It seemed to Ahmad that, as with the facts of Paradise, his teacher resorted to metaphor as a shield against reality" (77).

Ahmad and David are also terrorized by the absurdity of death and the possibility that the afterlife could be nothing more than a fantasy meant to reassure. Yet in both stories, the protagonist is given an eventual glimpse of the beyond. In "Pigeon Feathers," David reaffirms his faith after slaughtering pigeons in his family's barn. Examining the feathers of the dead birds, he discovers a mysterious pattern, a redundancy of shapes, light, and colors, that offers him proof of the divine and an eternal life: "[T]he God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole creation by refusing to let David live forever" (150). Ahmad arrives at a similar mystical conclusion through prayer: "More than five times a day he finds the opportunity, most often in the store's barren parking lot, to spread his mat in the eastward direction and the concrete, the close comfort of submission. The dark weight nagging within him skews his view of the world, and bedecks each twig and telephone wire with jewels he has never noticed before" (252). In the dilapidated urban landscape, Ahmad discovers beauty and divinity.

This receptiveness to the hidden beauty of daily life pushes Ahmad to observe his surroundings even more closely in the days prior to his planned mission:

Saturday morning, before the store opened, he sits on a step of the loading platform, observing a black beetle struggling on his back on the concrete of the parking lot. The day is September eleventh, still summer. The early sun slants off the rough, pale surface with a mildness that holds in it the eventual blossom. The concrete in its cracks has permitted weeds to flourish, the tall weeds of the dying season, with their milky spittle and fine-haired leaves, wet with autumn's heavy dew. The sky above is cloudless, but for some dry shreds of cirrus and a disintegrating jet trail. Its pure blue is still somehow soft, powder-blue, from recent immersion in darkness and stars. (252)

On this concrete surface, Ahmad is witness to nature's resilience: plants stubbornly grow between the cracks in the tar. American transcendentalism is present here and can be felt in the description of the sky: "[i]ts pure blue is still somehow soft, powder-blue, from recent immersion in darkness and stars." The early morning is depicted as a threshold, where earth and sky come into contact and, for a moment, reveal their secrets. At that precise moment, the narrator then chooses to mention September 11. In other words, this spiritual opening in the fabric of reality occurs on the anniversary of the attacks. Ahmad's metaphysical contemplation becomes an occasion to evoke the memory of 9/11, a day famous for its splendid weather, and he inscribes in the sky a symbolic representation, with its "dry shreds of cirrus and a disintegrating jet trail." The reference is ambiguous, yet the very presence of this trail testifies that, three years after the catastrophe, planes keep flying in the American sky, a tangible sign of freedom. As Updike wrote in a "Talk of the Town" piece in a *New Yorker* issue dedicated to the attacks: "American freedom of motion, one of our prides, has taken a hit. . . . Weird, too, the silence of the heavens these days, as flying has ceased across America. But fly again we must; risk is a price of freedom" (29). Such moments constitute proof of the everlasting beauty of life. It is in this symbolic context that Ahmad will glimpse what he has been desperately searching for in Islam and, at the very end of the novel, in terrorism—namely, a manifestation of the divine.

The climax of this mystical experience of prayer comes when Ahmad returns his attention to the ground and focuses on a beetle apparently caught in agony. Given Ahmad's ancestry, it is tempting to interpret this emblematic insect in ancient Egyptian mythology as an allegory for Ahmad himself. In the same way this bug is out of place in a parking lot, Ahmad feels like a misfit in post-9/11 America. Further scrutiny of the beetle's description reinforces this symbolic association:

The beetle's tiny black legs wave in the air, groping for a purchase with which to right itself, casting sharp shadows elongated by the sun at its morning slant. The legs of the small creature wiggle and writhe in a kind of fury, then subside into a semblance of thought, as if the beetle seeks to reason a way out of its predicament. Ahmad wonders, *Where did this bug come from?* How did it fall here, seeming unable to use its wings? The struggle resumes. How precise the shadows of its legs are, cast with an all-loving fidelity by photons that have traversed ninety-three million miles to this exact spot! (252–253)

Like Ahmad, the beetle is struggling to find something to hold on to in order “to right itself.” The association between the beetle and Ahmad opens the possibility for Ahmad to have a metaphysical experience, one not mediated by Islam or his master. As insignificant and as helpless as this insect might be, Ahmad, indeed, realizes that it is still linked to the greatness of the cosmos.

The light of the sun imbues this helpless creature with sharp contours, which remind one of how David Kern in “Pigeon Feathers” views the details in the feathers of the dead birds: “Sunlight strikes sparks of iridescence, purple and green, from the biform shell of folded wings” (253). Again, symbolism is of crucial importance here. In ancient Egyptian mythology, the sun and its rays are the personification and attributes of Ra, the mighty god of the sun. Mobilizing elements from an ancient mythology, a religion that predates Christianity and Islam, Updike puts his character face-to-face with an event that is banal but also deeply mystical, beyond monotheistic decorum. Aware that everything he is witnessing has something to do with him and feeling that something of the true nature of life is being revealed, Ahmad attempts to rescue the bug, using his driver's license to put the insect back onto its legs:

But the bug, right side up, its shiny body minutely hoisted on its six legs above the rough concrete, merely creeps a fraction of its length and then remains still. Its antennae searchingly wave, then they too stop. For five minutes that partake of the eternal, Ahmad watches. He returns his license with its burden coded information to his wallet. Cars blaring rap music rush by out of sight on Regan Boulevard, the noise swelling and receding. An airplane gaining altitude out of Newark rattles in the hardening sky. The beetle, paired with its microscopically shrinking shadow, remains still.

It had been on its back in its death throes and now is dead, leaving behind a largeness that belongs not to this world. The experience, so strangely magnified, has been, Ahmad feels certain, supernatural. (254)

Exhausted, the beetle dies, leaving its body as sole testimony of its existence. Yet this minuscule death allows, for a brief moment, eternity to be, leaving Ahmad

persuaded that he has just witnessed a supernatural event, the very thing he has been looking for throughout the novel. At the same moment, the sound of an airplane taking off from Newark, on this Saturday morning, September 11th, 2004, can be heard, thus linking this tiny insect, Ahmad, and victims of 9/11. From the microrealm of insects to the larger experience of humans, the mystery of life and death makes itself known as proof of the supernatural. Again, though, Updike deploys irony: the one thing that Ahmad feared and tried to escape, that led him to embrace terrorism and the concept of mass murder, turns out to be the very cosmic truth he has been looking for all along.

It is here that a crucial difference between Ahmad and the protagonist of “Pigeon Feathers” arises. In Updike’s short story, a glimpse of the divine proves cathartic for David Kern, as it renews his faith. Ahmad, on the other hand, fails to turn his revelatory experience into a meaningful self-appropriation of God. His failure to recognize his own experience of the metaphysical as a legitimate religious one leads him to descend even further into his terrorist mission, which he continues to believe is the only way to paradise. At the end of the novel, Jack Levy manages to stop Ahmad by convincing him that his mission is intrinsically evil. However, this one good decision also constitutes an act of apostasy since Ahmad loses, at this precise moment, his faith and the special link he forged with death, his personal God:

All around them, up Eighth Avenue to Broadway, the great city crawls with people, some smartly dressed, many of them shabby, a few beautiful but most not, all reduced by the towering structures around them to the size of insects, but scuttling, hurrying intent in the milky morning sun upon some plan or scheme and hope they are hugging to themselves, their reason for living another day, each one of them impaled live upon a pin of consciousness, fixed upon self-advancement and self-preservation. That, and only that. *These devils*, Ahmad thinks, *have taken away my God.* (310)

The novel’s last paragraph is highly evocative of the scene we analyzed earlier: people are compared to insects. However, unlike the beetle that offered Ahmad a glimpse of the supernatural, *they* are alive and determined to remain in this world. The vision of such a chaotic and baroque activity, in which the skyscrapers around him are signs of a society that has placed its faith in the material world, makes Ahmad instantly regret not carrying out his mission. Although the narrator instills in the people of New York bits and pieces of the same grace that shone upon the dying beetle, Ahmad remains blind and his opportunity to commune with the

divine is now forever lost. Such an ending points to Ahmad as a tragic character, a pathetic hero who fails to fulfill his dreams of grandiosity and bliss.

While it is difficult to depict the complex workings of terrorism and indoctrination, Updike managed to demystify the figure of the terrorist by creating in Ahmad a protagonist who reflects many of the problems of contemporary American society. And Ahmad's religious experience, from its ethical dimension to its metaphysical implications, gives his character depth and an inner life. Through Ahmad, Updike seeks to recognize the American self in the Other and vice versa, and wishes to allow, through the very basic human impulses of pity and rejection, the neutralization of the mystique of terror.

#### NOTE

1. Consider two recent examples. First, Omar Mateen, the Orlando nightclub shooter in 2016. Revealing Mateen's closeted gayness, the press presented his self-hatred as a prime motive for his action, as important as his sworn loyalty to ISIS. The second example is that of Salah Abdeslam, a key figure in the Paris terrorist attack of 2015. Abdeslam was also rapidly outed as a closeted homosexual whose ventures in Brussels's gay scenes were exhibited as evidence of yet another sexually repressed gay Arab.

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# The Political Dimension of Updike's Writing

LAURENCE W. MAZZENO

*Updike & Politics: New Considerations*, edited by Matthew Shipe and Scott Dill. Lexington Books, 2019, 268 pages.

If asked to describe the importance of politics in John Updike's work, most scholars—even specialists in American literature—are likely to respond with a blank stare or offer one of two comments: "I didn't think Updike wrote about politics," or "He was essentially a conservative." Both replies are understandable, though not necessarily excusable. The first is attributable to the subtle ways in which Updike introduces matters of politics into his writing. Updike is best known for writing about the individual; if he has any 'class consciousness,' it's of the American middle class, the members of which are often considered too focused on getting ahead—or keeping up—in their everyday lives to be overly concerned about larger political issues. The second conflates the writer with his work and stems from a readiness on the part of many scholars—particularly Americans—to "focus on the headlines," which often encapsulate complex attitudes into a soundbite. In the case of Updike, that soundbite comes from a comment he made on the Vietnam war: "I'm for it, if it does some good." That reply to a question put to him in 1966 has been conveniently truncated to "I'm for it" and used for five decades by some critics and fellow writers to brand Updike as some kind of Nixonesque conservative out of step with the predominant liberal ideology espoused by American writers since the end of the Second World War.

The contributors to *Updike & Politics: New Considerations*, Matthew Shipe and Scott Dill's new collection of essays, adroitly address and debunk both of these myths. Joining Quentin Miller's *John Updike and the Cold War: Drawing the Iron Curtain* (2001) and Yoav Fromer's *Burning Down the House: The Political Imagination of John Updike and the Decline of New Deal Liberalism* (2020), this collection establishes beyond doubt the important role politics had in shaping Updike's writing. Covering the spectrum of Updike's work, the fifteen essays in *Updike & Politics* address an array of issues including "traditional aspects of power, rights, equality, justice, [and] violence," and more controversial ones such as "race, gender, imperialism, hegemony, and the rise of neoliberalism" (1). Contributors include established and rising Updike scholars, literary critics who have made their reputation writing about other figures in American literature, and political scientists who provide a different approach and professional vocabulary to critiquing Updike's writing. Half the contributors are from outside the United States, giving the collection a truly international perspective. What should be especially heartening to scholars and readers of Updike is that the book has been ably edited by two young academics who, along with contributors Yoav Fromer and Michial Farmer, have rapidly made an impact on Updike studies in the past decade. It appears the future of Updike studies will be in capable hands for years to come.

In addition to providing the obligatory review of the volume's contents, the editors' introduction makes a compelling case for Updike's importance as a chronicler of the changing American political landscape since the 1950s. Their brief overview of Updike's attitudes toward politics lays a strong foundation for the essays that follow. Although Updike claimed in a 1985 interview that he was "not much interested in politics" (qtd. 2), Shipe and Dill point out that this remark reveals Updike's suspicion about being labeled a politically partisan writer; instead, they argue, he "explores the multi-faceted aspects of political experience without reducing them to any one narrowly defined ideology" (2). The idea that anyone—but particularly a white male living a semiprivileged life in suburban New England—can escape 'ideology' might be questioned (especially by a Marxist critic), but the contributors to *Updike & Politics* do justice to this claim, representing Updike as a careful observer of the American political scene who offers in his prose and poetry a running commentary on the impact of politics on a changing society.

The collection is divided into three major sections. The five essays in Part I, "The Presidency," focus on Updike's characterization of various US chief executives from the historical past as well as those in office during the years in which he wrote. Part II, "The American Scene," consists of six essays on works that chronicle

the effect of politics on American life (particularly middle-class American life) and culture. In the final section, "Updike Abroad," four contributors look at what Updike has to say about politics in novels and stories set outside the United States. As one might expect in a book on Updike and politics, certain texts are featured throughout. *Memories of the Ford Administration* is the principal subject of one essay (Newman), a major focus of two others (Boswell and Farmer), and an important component of a fourth (Schiff). Updike's play *Buchanan Dying* also receives extended analysis. The Rabbit novels, particularly *Rabbit Redux*, are cited repeatedly as examples of the strategy Updike employed throughout his career, to link larger political events to the lives of his characters. One can find in these essays evidence of Updike's lifelong interest in and use of events in America's political history—and its involvement on the world stage. A brief review of the contributions to *Updike & Politics* reveals the importance politics played in Updike's writing from his earliest publication, *The Carpentered Hen and Other Poems*, to his final novels, stories, and poems.

The first essay in this collection, James Schiff's "Updike and the American Presidency," offers a thumbnail sketch of the development in tandem of Updike's fiction and the American presidency. American presidents figure in many of Updike's novels and stories, most notably in the Rabbit novels and *Memories of the Ford Administration* but also in *Couples*. Schiff's analysis of "Rabbit Remembered" is particularly noteworthy for the connections he makes between the beleaguered Bill Clinton and the deceased Harry Angstrom. In his discussion, Schiff offers a useful review of previous scholarship on and ongoing interest in the political dimension of Updike's fiction. One of the most valuable contributions Schiff makes is in reinforcing the notion (carried forward throughout most of the essays in *Updike & Politics*) that politics was for Updike a useful tool in exploring individual lives. "On the most basic level," he writes, American presidents "function as historical markers for organizing and discussing one's personal past" (16). Schiff's essay sets the tone for every one that follows: for Updike, politics is a means of exploring the personal.

Marshall Boswell's "'We're None of Us Perfect': Watergate and Adultery in John Updike's *A Month of Sundays* and *Memories of the Ford Administration*" is a useful companion piece to Schiff's more general review of the role the presidency plays in Updike's fiction. Boswell argues cleverly and persuasively that there are numerous connections between the two novels in his title, one written as a reflection by a Protestant minister on his sexual transgressions during the period when Richard Nixon was falling from grace, the other a novel about the failure of a historian to

resolve his own marital and sexual conflicts while writing a book about James Buchanan's failed presidency. Borrowing terms from Edward Vogel's "Updike, American History, and Historical Methodology," Boswell argues that these parallels help bring into focus one of the strategies Updike uses throughout his career: to link the "'macro-' and 'microworlds'" (31) of personal and national interest.

Like Boswell, Judie Newman in "Presidential Politics as Sexual Politics" takes as her principal text *Memories of the Ford Administration* but examines it through theories of sexual politics developed in the 1960s and 1970s, which were critiqued somewhat stridently by Camille Paglia in her controversial 1990 study *Sexual Personae* (Updike reviewed a different collection of Paglia's essays in 1992). Paglia's central thesis in *Sexual Personae*, Newman argues, is that competing impulses, described as an Apollonian drive for order (associated with males) and a Dionysian celebration of disorder (associated with females), influenced Updike's creation of characters and shaped his presentation of the political dilemmas Buchanan faced in wooing the Southern states while trying to maintain amicable relations with northern voters, particularly his fellow Pennsylvanians. Newman makes her case in a prose style that is both learned and entertaining—a rarity in today's world of jargon-filled, theory-based, abstruse argumentation that often does more to obscure a creative work than to offer insights that will make reading it a source of pleasure.

Jo Gill's "John Updike's Poetics of Hope" is likely to be of great value beyond its immediate purpose, which is in itself admirable: "to restore Updike's work as a poet to critical attention and to suggest that it is through reading his poetry that we are best able to track his lifelong engagement with cultural, historical, and political change" (61). Gill explicates several poems from Updike's eight volumes of published poetry, defending his use of light verse by showing how, even in apparently trivial or mundane verse ("Bendix" and "Thump of Doom," among others) he is able to comment on matters of serious national interest. Thus, she says, Updike can turn a poem like "Fireworks," which on the surface describes a Fourth of July celebration, "into a critical evaluation of some of the old saws of American political life" (65). Gill's lengthy analyses of "Icarus" and "Oblong Ghosts" not only reveal Updike's skill in connecting the intensely personal with the broadly political, but they are also models of explication that could be put to good use in undergraduate and graduate courses on reading and interpreting poetry.

"Updike on Demagoguery: Reconsidering *Rabbit Redux* in the Age of Trump," is arguably the most overtly political essay in the volume. Written by Ethan Fishman, a retired political science professor who has previously published on the relationship between contemporary literature and American politics, the

essay uses Updike's second Rabbit novel as a kind of case study to explain why "a volatile demagogue" could have been elected by a supposedly free and rational electorate. Because Updike was unusually adept at chronicling the changes to American society in his fiction, Fishman argues, his fiction, particularly the novels of the 1960s and early 1970s, "offers a fascinating portrait of some of the political and cultural forces that, fifty years later, would help produce the conditions that propelled Trump to the presidency" (81). Fishman's close reading of the novel, based on the theories of sociologists Emile Durkheim and Erich Fromm, explains how alienation and powerlessness lead people who crave order—especially ones whose notions of order are being challenged—to find in demagoguery an acceptable alternative to social and political chaos. Although Fishman concentrates his analysis on a single Rabbit novel, he hints that the body of Updike's work might serve, alongside that of Durkheim and Fromm, as effective antidotes for "resisting demagogues by recognizing the sources of their attraction" (87). Fishman's essay gives substance to the editors' claim in their introduction that Updike's work is "politically prescient" (3).

The opening essay of Part II, Sylvie Mathé's reading of *Rabbit Redux* in "'Love It or Leave It': America in Red, Gray, and Blue in *Rabbit Redux*," is more conventional literary criticism, focusing on "the chromatic values" in the portrait of America that "emerges from the novel, and on the ways in which Updike plays with his palette to engage himself not only as historian or chronicler, but also as a visionary painter" (94). In a book dominated by images of black and white that 'color' the racial conflict at the center of the narrative, Mathé traces Rabbit's gradual awakening to the presence of 'gray' in his world, the validity of the stances taken by forces opposed to his own clichéd view of America, and his unthinking embrace of American exceptionalism. Mathé is a careful reader who is able to tease out of key scenes the references to color that stand as markers—dare we say symbols?—of the various ideological stances of the principal characters and by extension the interest groups they represent. Additionally, Mathé offers an ingenious explanation of how the color scheme that graced the cover of the first edition of *Redux*—vertical stripes of red, gray, and blue—mirrors the troubled times depicted in the narrative and might serve as a model for those interested in the relationship of book design to text.

While most of the contributors to *Updike & Politics* argue that the author had a lifelong interest in politics, none does so more insistently—or more ably—than Yoav Fromer. In "'Mail Chauvinism': John Updike's Postal Fetish and the Unrealizable Vision of American Democracy," Fromer exposes the central paradox at

the heart of Updike's political vision of America: a commitment to "republican virtues" (122) that often "tangibly dissolves under individualistic pressures" (113). For Updike, the postal service becomes a symbol for the benign role of the federal government in uniting its citizens, providing them the means for staying in touch and thus remaining a community. Fromer traces Updike's praise for the postal service through essays stretching from the 1960s to the end of his career, quoting long passages in which Updike lavishes praise that celebrates postal workers as unsung heroes. Yet, Fromer argues, this idealistic and essentially conservative vision of American democracy, founded on the principle that promotion of community is a primary virtue, is exploded in Updike's fiction, where the drive for personal freedom causes many of his characters to abandon their role as citizens of the state. Fromer's political readings of *The Poorhouse Fair*, *Couples*, and *Rabbit Redux* reveal that in postwar America, where big government has become detached from the governed, ordinary citizens have decided to opt out of participation in democracy. Updike's lifelong interest in the mail system, especially as it operated in Shillington and Plowville when he was growing up, is not merely a form of nostalgia. Rather, Fromer argues, it reflects "a genuine concern with the fate of American democracy in light of increasing bureaucratization, consumerism, solipsism and political disengagement," offering clear evidence that Updike was always "deeply concerned about political life and the civic traditions that help animate it" (126).

In "The Failure of Moderation in *Buchanan Dying* and *Memories of the Ford Administration*," Michial Farmer examines the two Updike works that deal directly with political figures. Both feature Updike's favorite president (from a sentimental standpoint), fellow Pennsylvanian James Buchanan, whom Updike admired for his middle-ground stance in trying to stave off civil war in America. This 'middleness' is the subject of Farmer's essay, reflecting Updike's own belief in political moderation. Yet, as Farmer notes (paraphrasing Yeats), "since the center, as it were, cannot hold, the political and social worlds of the two works come crashing down, with disastrous results for their characters" (131). The lead-in to his discussion of the play and novels is of particular interest, given that one of the projects undertaken by contributors of this collection is to rescue Updike from charges of misguided conservatism and naïve loyalty to the national government. Identifying Updike's own statements on his political views (especially in his essay "On Not Being a Dove") and citing more than a half dozen novels and stories, Farmer explains how Updike was both liberal and conservative at the same time, holding down that nebulous middle ground that seems to leave his critics on the political left and right dissatisfied.

As Matthew Shipe acknowledges, *Roger's Version* is most often read as a novel dealing with matters of "ecclesiology and particle physics" spiced up by "a dash of pornography" (146). Yet in "Inside Reagan's 'Placid, Uncluttered Head': *Roger's Version* and the Rise of Neoliberalism," Shipe makes a compelling argument that the novel is an important critique of the policies of the Reagan administration. These policies are described by some political theorists as neoliberalism, a series of political practices that stress individual entrepreneurship supported by governmental policies that promote property rights, free markets, free trade, and—says Shipe, as a corollary (whether intended or not)—limit state support for many social services programs, the so-called social safety net that evolved from the 1930s through the 1970s. Shipe adeptly identifies passages in *Roger's Version* in which Updike, through his characters, lays out the deleterious consequences of these policies on the economically disadvantaged. Updike's portrait of America in the 1980s, Shipe argues, is that of "a nation in disrepair that is also teeming with energy" (149) that could prove redemptive but could just as well plunge the country into chaos. Furthermore, the novel "marks an important transition for Updike, helping introduce a more pessimistic vision of our national prospects" (149). As Shipe demonstrates, this darker vision carries through in much of his later fiction and nonfiction. Possessed not only with exceptional skill as a literary critic but also a scholar in command of the historical milieu about which Updike wrote, Shipe has provided critics a model for exploring the Updike canon from a historical and political perspective.

A different kind of politics is the focus of Biljana Dojčinović's "The Politics of Vulnerability in *The Afterlife and Other Stories*." In close readings of three stories from this 1994 collection, Dojčinović traces Updike's fascination with different forms of vulnerability. These stories, she says, which all relate to mundane activities of daily living, nevertheless have a political dimension when read from a feminist perspective. Dojčinović tests these three stories against the concept of vulnerability described by feminist critic Judith Butler, whom she paraphrases: "life is precarious and that precariousness is a fundamental state that emphasizes the fragility of our existence"—a common condition of humankind that "represents the ground for positive social obligation" (161–2). Collectively, Dojčinović argues, Updike's stories reveal "the human need for care, bonding and love, for which his characters indeed yearn, but, at the same time, often fail to provide for others" (162). Dojčinović's methodology might serve as a blueprint for reading Updike's later work, written over his final twenty years, wherein vulnerability brought on by aging becomes a recurring theme.

Aleksandra Vukotić's "John Updike's *Terrorist* and the Politics of Hygiene" adds to the growing body of criticism on a novel that is likely to continue generating criticism for years to come. After offering a brief but useful review of what's been written about this controversial view inside the mind of a would-be terrorist, Vukotić argues persuasively that Ahmad Mulloy isn't the only terrorist in the novel. *Terrorist* explores "the political implications of purity beliefs" (183) to reveal how US government authorities justify their restrictive and intrusive actions, that is rooting out those who are not fully committed to American ideals, in order to keep the nation secure and 'pure.'

Part III opens with Louis Gordon's "Updike's Middle East: A Neoliberal Approach to Conflict Resolution." Like Fishman, Gordon is a political scientist who has previously published on the political dimensions of Philip Roth's fiction. Gordon finds that Updike's *Terrorist* "provides a political framework that the United States might employ" as a way of responding to future terrorist attacks (201). That framework is based on Updike's version of neoliberalism—not to be confused with the liberalism associated with the US Democratic party—and incidentally rather different from the description of neoliberalism in Matthew Shipe's essay on *Roger's Version*. Gordon explains that in international relations theory, neoliberalism is "the proposition that individuals and institutions, promoting good will, can mitigate the crisis presented by the state of 'anarchy' or an international system with no central authority" (202). Updike extends this theory, Gordon says, to include government institutions such as, in *Terrorist*, the Department of Homeland Security, which he paints in a much more favorable light than Vukotić does in the previous essay. Gordon argues that Updike, in works like *Terrorist*, "The Holy Land" (a story in *Bech Is Back*), and his reviews of Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*, offers a neoliberal approach to conflict resolution that has the potential to yield positive results in the real world.

One of the most intriguing essays in the volume is Kirk Curnutt's "Updike Third-Worlds It," an extended reading of *The Coup* as political satire. Curnutt posits that the negative reviews of the novel and many later critiques are in some sense misreadings of a work Updike intended as satire. *The Coup* presents a satiric portrait of third-world dictators; the Islamo-Marxist philosophy that ostensibly guides the actions of the protagonist, Colonel Hakkim Ellelou; and US efforts to promote the stability of postcolonial governments (particularly in Africa) at the expense of supporting leaders whose regimes were often marked by brutality and corruption. However, as Curnutt notes, "identifying satire demands reconstructing the 'horizon of expectations' by which readers would have judged" the ideologies

and political activities in the novel. Curnutt outlines the historical and political circumstances that would have initially affected criticism of the novel when it was released, as well as subsequent historical events such as the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran that led to new (and equally misguided) interpretations. His own reading deftly identifies the various parodies, overstatements, and burlesques that mark the novel as satire rather than political commentary. Curnutt's defense of Updike's portrait of Islam may raise some eyebrows; however, he insists *The Coup* does not satirize the religion but only the absurd steps political leaders have taken to enforce practices ostensibly endorsed by the Koran.

In "The Three Mile Island Accident and 'the Man from Toyota,'" Takashi Nakatani brings a fresh perspective to *Rabbit Is Rich* and *Rabbit at Rest* to "illuminate the ways in which the later two Rabbit novels imagine the ramifications of the Cold War's conclusion" (235). The two novels portray Rabbit's (and America's) fears that the Japanese are turning the tables, so to speak, on their more powerful ally. The centerpiece of Nakatani's essay is his analysis of the character Mr. Shimada, "the Man from Toyota," who comes to Brewer to tell Rabbit that Springer Motors will lose its Toyota franchise. Shimada is the embodiment of the resentment the Japanese felt at being made a kind of junior partner in America's attempts to bring democracy and free market economics to the world while refusing to allow their allies to succeed fully in the enterprise. Nakatani says Updike's travels abroad led him to understand what many Americans did not: America's Cold War allies often grated under the demands made by the United States and were only too eager to move out from under a protective umbrella that quickly became a straitjacket.

The final chapter in *Updike & Politics*, Pradipta Sengupta's "John Updike and the World," is a study of identity politics in *Brazil*. One of Sengupta's goals is to rescue Updike from charges that in *Brazil* he relies on racial stereotypes to create flat characters who lack interest. Sengupta's central premise is that *Brazil* is an exposé of the ways "the rankling politics of identity" (247) arises from racial differences that divide people and create hierarchies within society. Like Mathé, Sengupta focuses on Updike's use of color imagery (predominantly black and white) to heighten racial differences or (in his use of other colors) to promote the postcolonial enterprise of blurring those differences.

The foregoing summary gives some indication of the breadth of coverage and quality of scholarship in *Updike & Politics*. Of course, one could always wish for more. Among essays that might have been included: an essay on *In the Beauty of the Lilies*; one on *Couples*, extending the brief sketch in Schiff's contribution; an essay devoted to the political dimensions of the Bech books and stories; further

discussion of the nonfiction; and a critique of *Gertrude and Claudius*, certainly a novel with a strong political subtext. I believe these would have made the volume 'more comprehensive' (if that's an acceptable grammatical term to describe what I'm suggesting). But given the limits publishers set on the length of scholarly books, it's unlikely that Shipe and Dill could have had a longer manuscript accepted by any reputable publisher. Lexington Books has done a fine job in bringing out a collection that is certainly sufficient to prove the editors' point that "Updike's immense body of work illuminates the central political questions and problems that troubled American culture" (1) in the half century during which he wrote. *Updike & Politics* is likely to shape criticism of Updike—not merely criticism of the political dimensions of his work—for years to come. Fully aware that academics are urged to avoid hyperbole and journalistic enthusiasm in their writing, I believe it's possible to describe this collection in a single word: *indispensable*.

## 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.

**MARSHALL BOSWELL** is the author of *John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy: Mastered Irony in Motion, Understanding David Foster Wallace*, and *The Wallace Effect: David Foster Wallace and the Contemporary Literary Imagination*. With Stephen Burn, he co-edited *A Companion to David Wallace* and served as editor for *David Foster Wallace and "The Long Thing."* He is also the author of two works of fiction, the story collection *Trouble with Girls* and the novel *Alternative Atlanta*. An expanded and revised edition of *Understanding David Foster Wallace* will be published later this year. He is a professor of American Literature at Rhodes College in Memphis, TN.

**BILJANA DOJČINOVIĆ** teaches at the Department of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory, Faculty of Philology, Belgrade University, in Serbia. She is the director of the national project Knjiženstvo—theory and history of women's writing in Serbian until 1915 ([www.knjizenstvo.rs](http://www.knjizenstvo.rs)) and editor-in-chief of *Knjiženstvo, A Journal in Literature, Gender and Culture* ([www.knjizenstvo.rs/magazine.php](http://www.knjizenstvo.rs/magazine.php)). She has published seven academic books, including the first and, to date, the only monograph on Updike in Serbian: *Cartographer of the Modern World* (2007). In addition, she has published numerous articles on Updike in both Serbian and English.

**DONALD J. GREINER** is Carolina Distinguished Professor of English Emeritus as well as Dean and Vice Provost Emeritus at the University of South Carolina. He has published three books and numerous essays on John Updike in addition to books on Stephen Crane,

Robert Frost, John Hawkes, Frederick Busch, James Dickey, and others. He is executive editor of *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* and curator for modern American literature in the rare book library at USC.

**LAURENCE W. MAZZENO** is President Emeritus of Alvernia University, Reading, Pennsylvania. He is the author or editor of more than twenty books on British and American literature and history, including *Becoming John Updike: Critical Perspectives 1958–2010* (Camden House, 2013) and (with Sue Norton) editor of *European Perspectives on John Updike* (Camden House, 2018). He has also published numerous reference essays and reviews of Updike's fiction, poetry, and nonfiction.

**SUE NORTON** is a lecturer of English at the Technological University Dublin. Her work on John Updike has appeared in *The John Updike Review*, *The Explicator* and, with Laurence W. Mazzeno, in *The Irish Journal for American Studies*. Their co-edited volume, *European Perspectives on John Updike*, was published by Camden House in 2018. Her most recent academic article, "When Literature Scholars Write for General Readers: A Two-Person, First-Person Essay," was also a collaboration with Professor Mazzeno and appeared in *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* in 2019.

**ADEL NOUAR**, a PhD in American studies, is currently affiliated with the LERMA (Laboratoire d'études et de recherche sur le monde anglophone), a research unit from Aix-Marseille Université, France. His doctoral dissertation is titled "September 11th and American Fiction: The Writing(s) of a Counternarrative" (2019). It is a panoramic study of American fiction born of the 9/11 attacks. Literature and its relation to history, globalization, terrorism, and alterity are his prime areas of research, which led him to devote a full chapter of his PhD dissertation to the study of Updike's *Terrorist*.

**JAMES SCHIFF**, Professor of English at the University of Cincinnati, has published five books on contemporary American fiction, including *John Updike Revisited* and *Understanding Reynolds Price*. His work has appeared in *American Literature*, *The Southern Review*, *Tin House*, *Critique*, *Studies in American Fiction*, and elsewhere. He is currently editing a volume of Updike's selected letters.

**GAIL SINCLAIR** is Executive Director and Scholar-in-Residence of the Winter Park Institute at Rollins College. She has coedited two books on Ernest Hemingway and has published numerous articles, essays, reviews, and pedagogical approaches on twentieth-century writers including Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edith Wharton, Norman Mailer, and Kate Chopin. Her latest publication is *The 100 Greatest Fictional Characters*, coauthored with James Plath and Kirk Curnutt.



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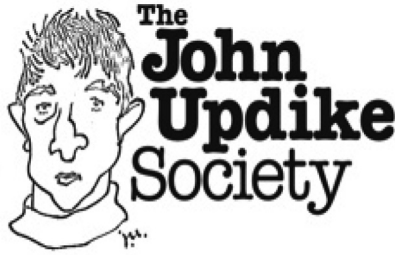
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## THE ROBERT M. LUSCHER SCHOLARSHIP FOR UPDIKE RESEARCH

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.

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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

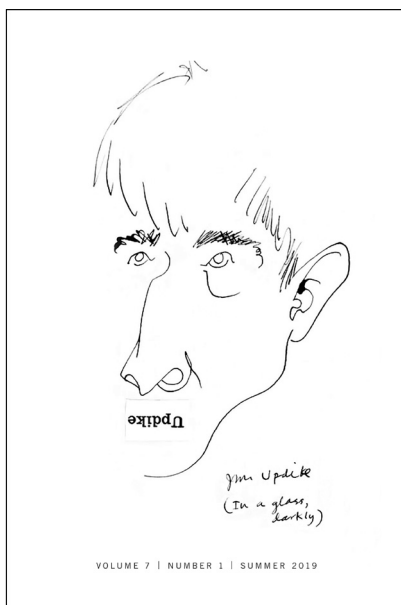
The John H. Updike Literary Trust named James Schiff as editor of a volume of John Updike's letters. Mr. Schiff, who expects to complete the project in 2020, has begun collecting letters from institutional libraries and requesting them from private owners and recipients. If you have letters, postcards, 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.

James Schiff  
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Cincinnati, OH 45208  
(513) 284-6012  
updikeletters@gmail.com  
james.schiff@uc.edu

# The John Updike Review

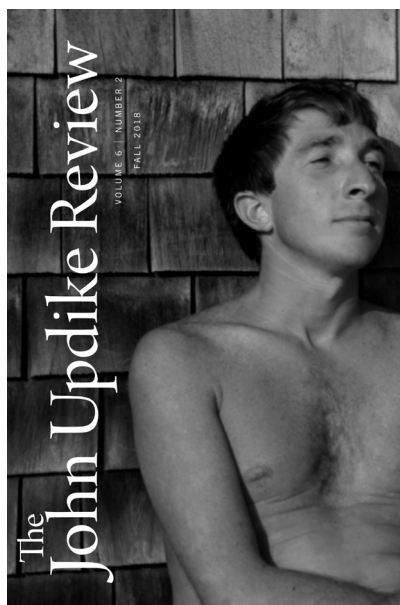
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Back issues of the *John Updike Review* are available for \$12.50, or \$10 for members of the John Updike Society. To order back issues, please contact James Schiff at either: james.schiff@uc.edu, 513-556-0930, or 248 McMicken Hall/Department of English/University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



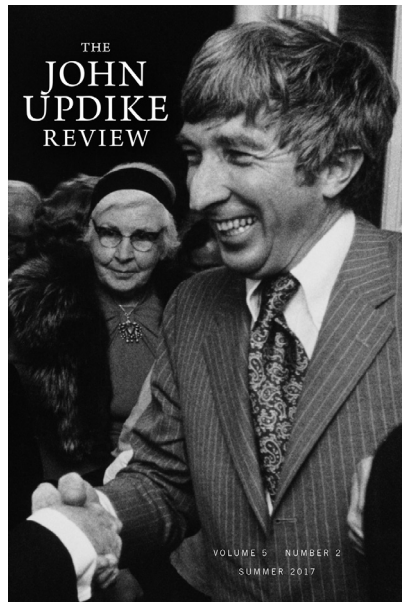
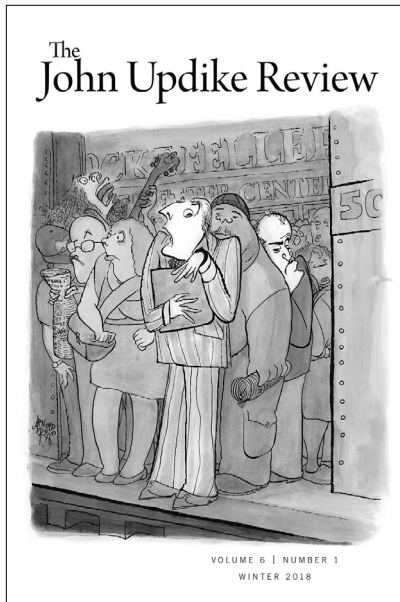
## **JUR 7.1 (Summer 2019).**

Poetry by Valerie (Markos) Paavonpera. Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Donald J. Greiner, Christopher Love, Robert Milder, and Jeffrey Pusch. Responses to "Giving Blood" by Sakinah Hoffer, Toni Judnitch, and Maggie Su. Reviews by Robert Morace and Judie Newman.



## **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).**

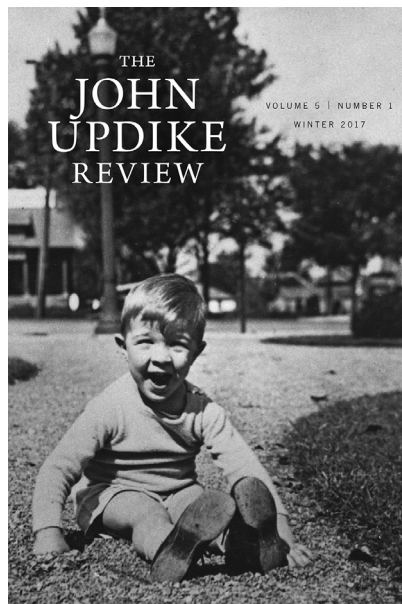
Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Donald J. Greiner, Sean Madden, D. Quentin Miller, Gideon Nachman, and Alex Pitofsky. Responses to “Bech Noir” by Julialicia Case, James Schiff, and Gary Weissman. Review by Sue Norton. Drawings by Arnold Roth.

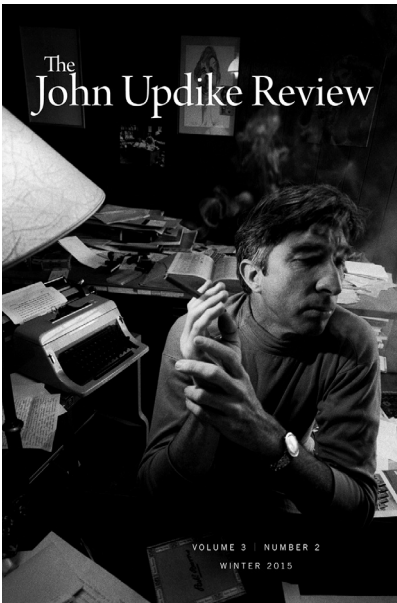
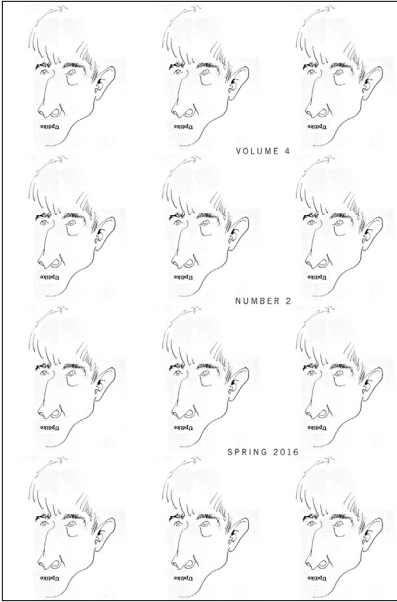
**JUR 5.2 (Summer 2017).**

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).**

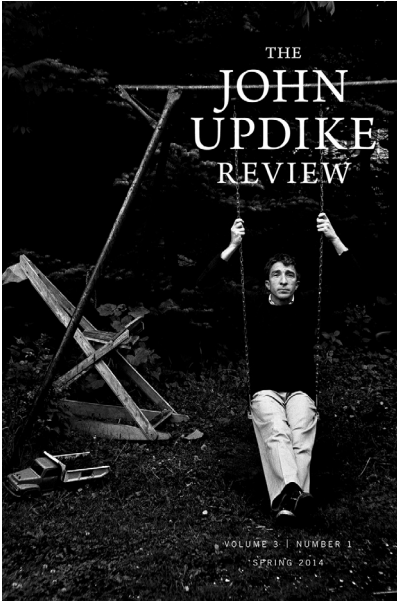
Essays by Scott Dill, Yoav Fromer, James Schiff, and Donald J. Greiner. Responses to “Trust Me” by D. Quentin Miller, Daniel Paul, and Mical Darley. Reviews by William H. Pritchard and Robert M. Luscher. Includes Updike’s story “Trust Me.”

**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).***

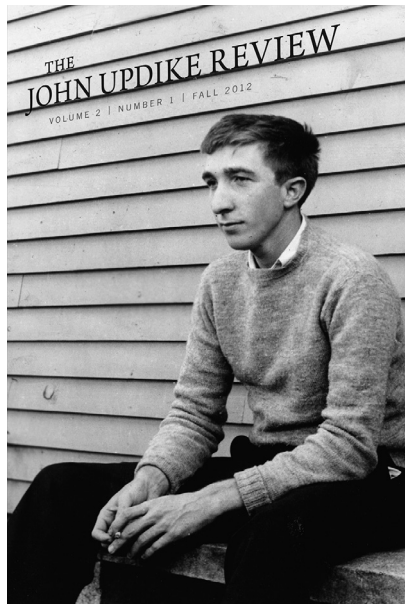
Essays by Donald J. Greiner, Kazuko Kashihara, Sue Norton, and James Schiff. Responses to "Leaves" by Donald J. Greiner, Sarah A. Strickley, and David James Poissant. Reviews by Judie Newman, Peter J. Bailey, and Bob Batchelor. Includes Updike's story "Leaves."

***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).***

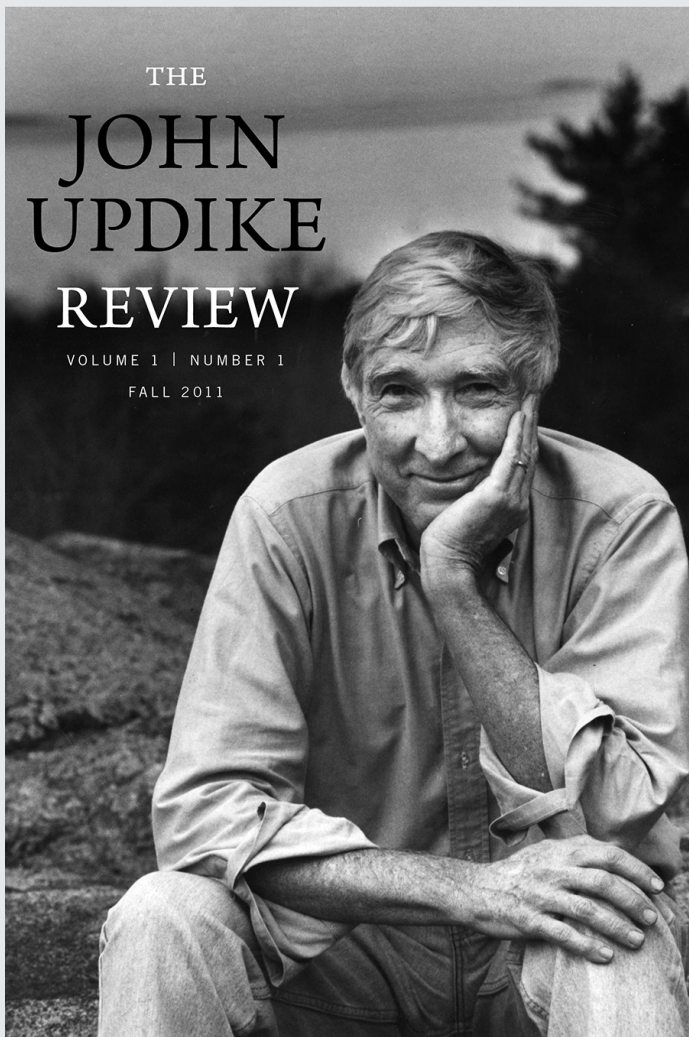
Essays by Donald J. Greiner, Avis Hewitt, Brian Duffy, and Aristi Trendel. Reviews by Leonard Cassuto and Sylvie Mathé. Family panel discussion moderated by James Plath.



THE  
JOHN  
UPDIKE  
REVIEW

VOLUME 1 | NUMBER 1

FALL 2011



***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.

## CALL FOR PAPERS

# 6th Biennial John Updike Society Conference

Alvernia University, Reading, Pa. | September 30–October 4, 2020

Lorrie Moore, Keynote Speaker

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](mailto: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/>.

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*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*

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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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