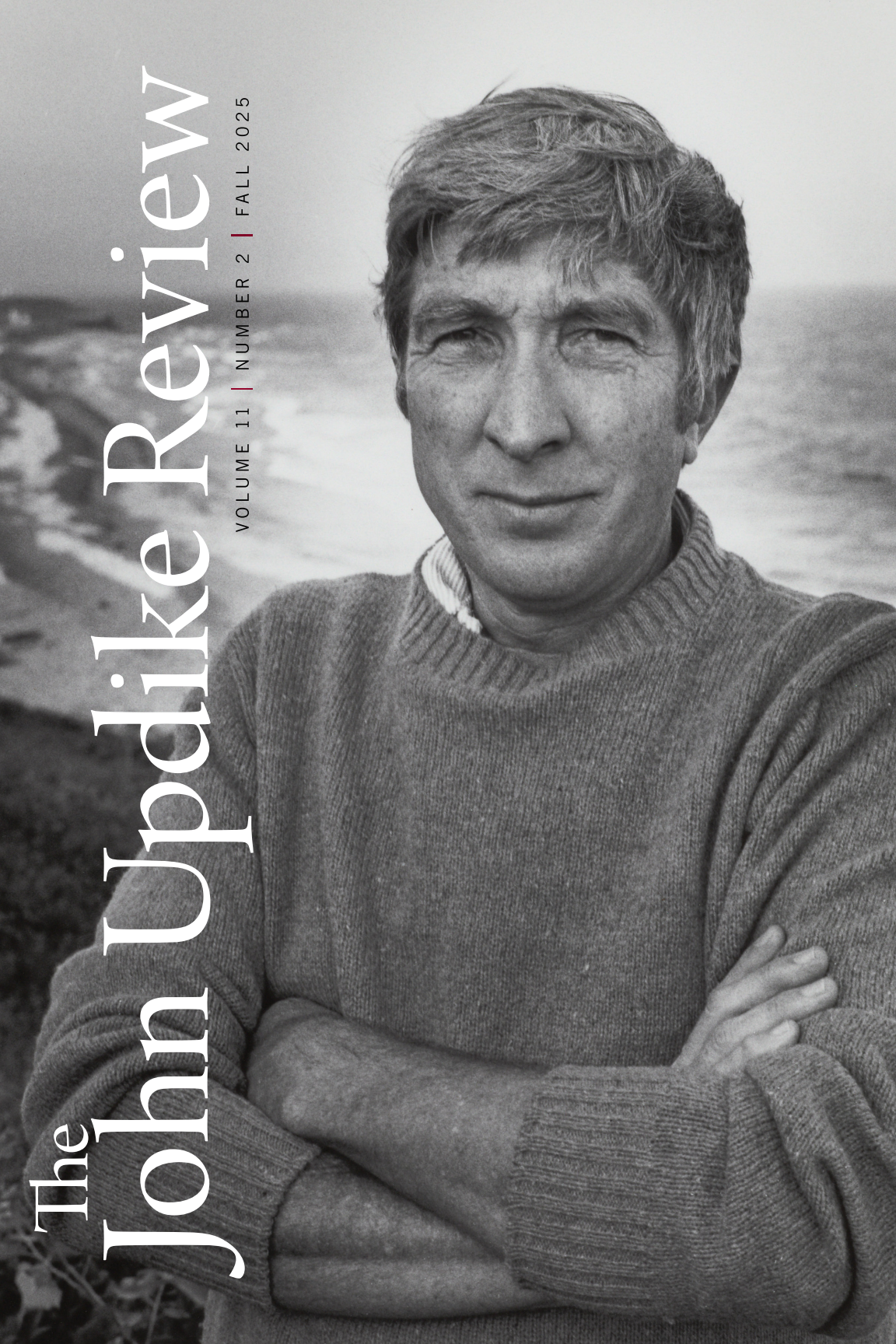


# The John Updike Review

VOLUME 11 | NUMBER 2 | FALL 2025





The  
John Updike Review

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# The John Updike Review

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# The Sacred & Profane in *Marry Me*: *A Romance*

NADIA SZOLD

To begin a book at all, you have to have some feeling for the kind of object you are going to produce, and a book is, among other things, a physical object, and it should have a certain objective shape in the mind so that the reader indeed remembers it.

—John Updike, 1966

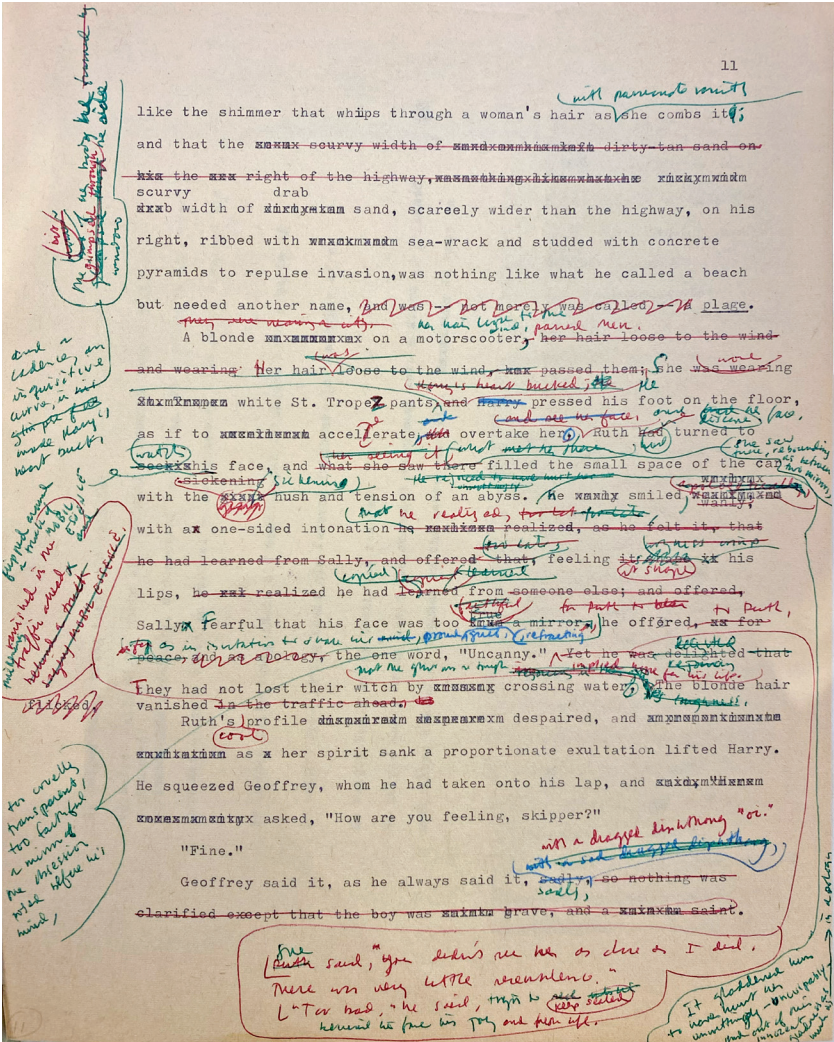
So, how is it that *Marry Me* has been forgotten? A novel too incendiary, John Updike kept the manuscript in his safe deposit box at the bank for twelve years before revising and then publishing it under the full title *Marry Me: A Romance*. A small, bright star in his constellation of work, the novel has succeeded in evading attention. Though he finished the first draft on May 4, 1964, two years after the events that inspired the book, the wounds were still too fresh to let them live in print outside the chambers of the hearts involved. Updike thought it wise to literally “hide his love away” under lock and key. When finally published toward the end of 1976, *Marry Me* did not receive the thunderous applause and attention prompted by earlier novels, such as *Rabbit, Run* or *Couples*. As a result, in part, of its tepid initial reception, the novel has been regarded as a “minor” work. Yet I believe *Marry Me* is due for reevaluation. Not only is it a better book than previously estimated; it is moreover a groundbreaking work in Updike’s oeuvre, important because it was the first novel in which he made the perils of falling in love outside of marriage his main subject. The subject he broke ground with in *Marry Me* was later to become the one with which he was most associated, putting him on the

cover of *Time* magazine with the headline “The Adulterous Society.” But *Marry Me* was where Updike first explored in depth the anatomy of a love affair and its repercussions on the family and the psyches of those involved.

There was something rough and raw about the young father who wrote *Marry Me* at the height of his literary powers, and in the depth of his own marital dilemma. The premise is simple, though the ramifications are far from neat. In a small town in Connecticut abutting Long Island Sound, a young illustrator, Jerry Conant, lives with his wife, Ruth, and their three children. Opening in medias res, with Jerry’s love affair with their friend Sally in full swing,, the novel takes us through the scenes leading up to his confession to Ruth and then jumps back in time two years and switches perspectives. There, the world is seen through Ruth Conant’s eyes as she navigates her way out of an affair with their friend Richard Mathias, who happens to be Sally’s husband. (Everyone is friends in this coastal town.) Ruth successfully breaks it off, keeping it under wraps. Yet the tranquility of home has been agitated, and Ruth’s conscience has her convinced that Jerry’s bizarre behavior is caused by his discovery of her affair, and not by him being embroiled in one himself. Torn between his wife and his lover but unable to let go of either, Jerry is both brash and cowardly, ready to make a scene but unwilling to act. Once Jerry tells his wife the secret of his happiness, though, she is more than willing to take on the burden of being the decision maker. Ruth forbids the lovers to see each other for the rest of the summer, buying her time to talk her husband out of this folly. Things don’t go as planned, and instead of deescalating the situation, she watches the imbroglio threaten to upend the lives of everyone involved, pushing Jerry to decide what he is willing to sacrifice—the stability of family or his grand amour.

Around the time he started the novel, Updike was also shooting off stories to his editor at *The New Yorker* related to the same quandary. Regarding the stories, he requested that William Maxwell put them on what Updike called “the shadow-bank.” This growing pile of shadowy stories, Updike believed, would see the light of day at some point—just not yet. This awareness that the work would likely exist in a future world but not the present shows the tension between self-preservation and art preservation. The various drafts and notes that Updike scribbled while working on the manuscript are held at Harvard’s Houghton Library, and (be)holding them conveys a sense of the book’s construction. Though there are entire swaths of dialogue and prose from the first draft that seamlessly entered the published book as they were first scribbled with a no. 2 pencil, there is also evidence that the drafts were worked and reworked. Some pages show as many as three different-colored pens crossing out lines, adding sentences, swapping out words, and rearranging.

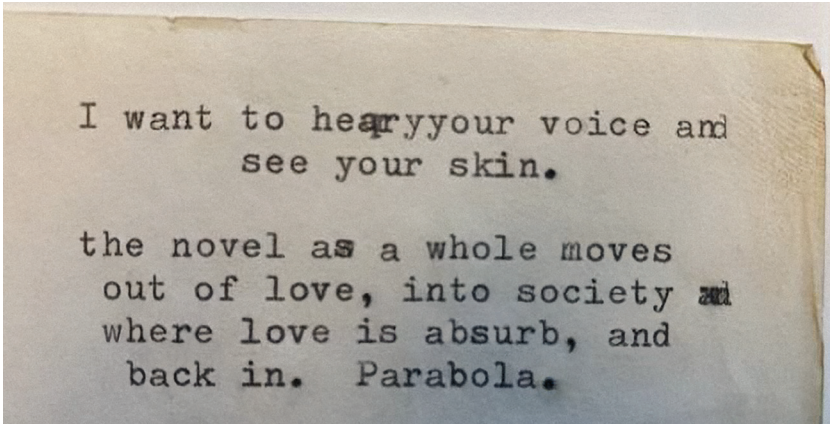
In one of the notes, Updike distills the book's shape according to the movement of the theme: "[T]he novel as a whole moves / out of love, into society / where love is absurd, and / back in. Parabola." With line breaks, this note reads almost like a poem. Perhaps only a writer who is also a visual artist would be so concerned with the shape of the book he was making.



A sample page from a draft of *Marry Me*, from Updike's papers at Harvard, revealing considerable revision using different-colored pens. Photograph by Nadia Szold. Courtesy of the John H. Updike Literary Trust.

When asked to introduce *Marry Me* for the First Edition Society, he returned to the shape, and how and why he designed it the way he did:

*Marry Me* was always a book in my mind, not a collection, or collage, and was written pretty much in a piece, with the five chapters symmetrically alliterative as I have them, and their lengths in the proportion of a diadem. The central chapter, cut down from the length of a novel in itself, is flanked by two longish, less inward, more spoken chapters, and these in turn by brief idylls, partaking of the same texture, between real and unreal.



A scrap of paper from Updike's notes and drafts of *Marry Me* at Harvard, in which he describes the parabola shape of the novel. Photograph by Nadia Szold.

Courtesy of the John H. Updike Literary Trust.

Parabola or diadem, the shape is similar. Beginning with love and its lyrical embrace of the unreal, driving up into the high-noon daylight of society, then receding once again into the watery realms of love, naturalism is framed by the idyll. As we see from the plot, the audacity of courtly love doesn't stand a chance against reality. And yet in *Marry Me*, it gets the first and last word. The tale makes one ask, is romantic love sacred, while bourgeois respectability is, in fact, profane? Or are the socially acceptable parameters of matrimony sacred, while love outside of the marriage bed, profane? The sacred and profane: their unholy, inevitable union courses through the novel, compelling the reader to consider what is indeed sacred and what profane. My aim is to share some insights into *Marry Me* in the form of a meditation on the book. I will explore how the sacred and profane play out their symbiotic relationship through the realms of Art, Pain, Children, and Love.

#### ART. "ART JUST ISN'T WORTH THAT MUCH"

Elizabeth Bishop infamously responded to her friend Robert Lowell with this quip in a letter after reading his manuscript of *The Dolphin*. What she took offense to chiefly was Lowell's use of the words of his wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, taken from transatlantic phone conversations and passages lifted from letters the soon-to-be-divorced couple exchanged. In *The Dolphin*, Lowell was using the primary sources of his life to weave a tapestry of dissolution and renewal that he chronicles through 104 sonnets. "It seems our insoluble lives sometimes become clearer in writing," Lowell wrote to Bishop, in defense. He did not take his friend's editorial advice. And in 1974, he won a Pulitzer for *The Dolphin*.

While Lowell chronicled the messiness of his life in poetry, Updike skated onto the thin ice of autofiction, years before the practice became one of the dominant literary styles of the novel. Yet he objected to *Marry Me* even being considered a novel. He insisted it was a "romance" and included that designation in the title, much like Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter: A Romance*. Born in the twelfth century, the literary tradition of the romance involved troubadours singing of the great exploits of knights engaged in impossible love, otherwise known as courtly love, as well as chivalry and disaster. Hawthorne described the romance as a "territory, somewhere between the real world and fairyland, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other." A spell-caster, often engaging in dress rehearsals for his life first in his art, Updike exorcised disaster by exploring it and then, in some cases, sidestepping it. The indigo ink of fiction mixed with the blood spilled from lived experience, each imbuing itself with "the nature of the other," is an intoxicating image. The author's liberty when writing fiction blooms when these two worlds, the real and the imaginary, commingle and corrupt the other. Saluting this union, Adam Gopnik notes, "The wires of poet and reporter cross in Updike as they do not even in his God, Nabokov. . . . Updike remains both conjurer and chronicler, each gift serving the other."

While the novel purports to present "the probable and ordinary course of man's experience," the romance aims to convey the "Marvelous." The temporary madness of falling in love and its effects on one's life and psyche do indeed fall under the "Marvelous." It is the fairy dust Shakespeare plays with in drawing such recognizable fools. Yet what in *Marry Me* could be seen as fantasy? It is firmly rooted in reality. It takes no leaps into magic realism or flights of fancy into the absurd. So perhaps its very subject, Love, is what distinguishes the book as an heir to the troubadour's tradition. In the aforementioned introduction to *Marry Me*, Updike

wrote, “That love is an illusion is commonly said; I think one of my intentions, in this book so full of air, of pauses, of spacy dialogue and vacant days, of sudden jumps in locale and time, was to show illusion as a component of our daily lives, wherein air and dreams are as essential as earth and blood.”

A true romance, *Marry Me* is narrow in scope. Hawthorne claimed that the romance aims to depict neither a community’s mannerisms nor its sociological reality. There’s a purity to *Marry Me*, almost as if it were a love letter—which the italic sections could be thought of as they shift to the first-person singular addressing a beloved “you.” This innocence doesn’t exist in *Of the Farm* or *Couples*. Unlike *Couples* (which Updike wrote later, though it was published earlier), *Marry Me*, with its focus on the two entwined pairs—their children running in and out of the narrow range—falls in line with Hawthorne’s definition of the romance’s aim. A portrait of an era it is not, though the tale is, indeed, of the era. The characters in *Marry Me* are young and green, living their lives in a world long-gone yet still indelibly etched on the American psyche. The world of early-1960s Massachusetts was almost a different country from late-1970s America, when *Marry Me* finally saw the light of day. Yet the sphere *Marry Me* depicts is not what one normally expects of midcentury suburban adultery—buttoned-up, inarticulate, repressed, drowning itself in pills and alcohol. No, this is the steamy, beachy world of roguish and randy parents of large families who, at barely thirty, are still children themselves. Not yet engaged in the bed-hopping that was to come and stay for a decade from the mid-1960s through the 1970s, their youthful innocence is on full display. The love crooned from the doo-wop hits on the radio courses through the veins of these characters and spurs them to do the twist with their neighbors.

Prior to its publication, Updike wrote that *Marry Me* “imitates reality in . . . a certain opacity, a proud opacity. It must come on not wearing its meaning on the sleeve of an introduction but embodying its meaning, or, rather, meaning its existence.” Any lessons in the story are subtle ones. Unencumbered by a more conventionally novelistic approach, it is possible that the romance is a vehicle for a deeper poetic truth. As Hawthorne wrote in his preface to *The House of Seven Gables*, “The Author has considered it hardly worth his while, therefore, relentlessly to impale the story with its moral, as with an iron rod—or rather, as by sticking a pin through a butterfly—thus at once depriving it of life, and causing it to stiffen in an ungainly and unnatural attitude” (2). Though Hawthorne preceded Nabokov by a century, the reference to a lepidopterist at once makes us think of Nabokov, Updike’s beloved butterfly-chaser, who in his own oeuvre was never a moralizer. And while Updike is likewise unwilling to “impale the story with its moral,” is

there something he is teaching us, however opaquely? With *Marry Me* under the microscope, what truth is that? Perhaps the title is a clue. The holiness of the marriage vows is tainted not only by venturing out of the marriage bed but by the strong desire to utter those two words—not a question, but a proposition—to someone else. Robert Lowell introduces his *Dolphin* sonnets with lines not aimed at expunging himself from blame but instead dissecting the twists and turns of the actions that brought his poems to life.

I have sat and listened to too many  
words of the collaborating muse,  
and plotted perhaps too freely with my life,  
not avoiding injury to others,  
not avoiding injury to myself—  
to ask compassion . . . this book, half-fiction,  
An eelnet made by a man for the eel fighting

Is there anything too sacred for art to touch? Is there something profane in the act of dredging intimacy into the light, transforming its pain into art? Perhaps there is something sacrilegious in the attempt to capture the essence of love or sex and render it legible to others who were not there in the bedroom or on the beach. Updike may have been aware of this and transgressed, nonetheless. After *Marry Me*, the subject seemed to call like a siren song, proving to be infinitely rich and rewarding. Yet how can the heart's stirring and the swirl of pheromones be captured without losing some of its original potency or sanctity? Of course, it is presumptuous to assume what the act of writing does for the author—whether the compulsion to write exorcises demons, organizes thoughts, or alchemizes pain, we can only guess at. But if the encounter with a book gives voice to unspoken reams of memory and desire, bruises black and blue, and scars tender to the touch and, in doing so, heals the reader, is art not worth it, Ms. Bishop?

#### PAIN. “[P]ROTECT US FROM PAIN”

In a 1966 public television special, Updike mused, “Santayana somewhere says that behind all the Biblical injunctions stands the specter of pain and so, in a sense, morality is what tries to keep us; to protect us from pain.” While *Marry Me* dwells on love, sacrifice, and loss, it also delves into our relationships to pain. How each character expresses pain shows us who they are. To understand the principal players in his life, Jerry tries to ascribe a word to each of the four. His wife Ruth's word is Freedom; his lover Sally's is Security; her husband Richard's might be

Responsibility; and Jerry's, true to his Kierkegaardian condition, is either Faith or Fear. What these words show is Jerry's perspective more than anything, that he is seeking a neat and tidy explanation and conclusion to the pickle he finds himself in. Yet each word has its shadow, which casts into relief each character's response to pain. Richard's pain comes from the sudden revelation that his kingdom has come crashing down. He's been made a cuckold, and everyone knows it but him. He is the butt of jokes at parties. And he stands to lose everything. As Sally asserts, "Ruth will have her children and Jerry and I will have each other but Richard doesn't get a Goddamn thing!" (228). Richard sedates his pain with a boatload of booze. He is described as "a bear on roller-skates," and he truly does come back with a roar in the final showdown, where the two couples meet at his house to duke it out. It is Richard's night, as Jerry states. This climax runs twenty-eight pages and is a spiritual cousin to Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Likely more a reflection of the Zeitgeist than a direct influence on Updike, Albee's play premiered on Broadway in October 1962, around the same time the actual couples would have staged their own theatrics. *Marry Me* flirts with the absurd only in this scene, the dialogue seemingly leaping out of the confines of naturalism.

When a transgression scratches the veneer of communal security, it is usually the woman who is scapegoated by the tribe. Sally, as the transgressor and the woman, is the one who is blamed. At the denouement, she is mocked by the secure couple bound even more strongly together by the realization that Sally is unstable, that Sally is a fool. Jerry, privileged in his maleness and status in the community, is not banished. The family's temporary exile is largely self-imposed. At the end of the book, Sally has been made a grass widow, that is, a woman who was never formally married to her lover. In some old English ballads, the woman is abandoned by her lover; in others, she leaves. Instead of black, she wears green. The green is to mask the grass stains on her dress, gathered from the illicit nature of her love, where forests and fields were her bed instead of lily-white sheets. When Sally's dream for a union dissipates, she lashes out. A violence takes over, and though we are granted only secondhand access to the scene, through Ruth's retelling to Jerry, the hysterics of a woman scorned are almost better left to the imagination: "She was wild. She was like an actress who'd suddenly realized she was no longer the star of the show. . . . She said you were the devil" (279).

If we love, we grieve. Grief can be seen as an exalted state where one becomes closer to the essence of what it is to be human. After the initial shock, the initiation of a broken heart often makes people more empathetic. Grief will gut the ego and blast it to bits, softening a person along the way. We awake and remember that

everyone is broken. The state of grace pain can deliver when one's heart is broken so wide open that love simply pours like a river in both directions can be seen as a gift. In *Love in the Western World*, Denis de Rougemont notes that "[s]uffering and understanding are deeply connected; death and self-awareness are in league" (51). Jerry loves both women. Updike in his story "Solitaire" draws a comparison between the two, which could as easily be an observation of Ruth and Sally: "His wife had the more delicate mind, but his mistress, having suffered more, knew more that he didn't know" (507).

In *Marry Me*, the beach is where lovers make out, where husbands and wives make up, where lovers break up, but also where mothers take their brood to whittle away the summer hours: "[T]wo packs of mothers discreetly formed, one around each, this summer's tragic queens" (151). Though let's not be fooled—Ruth reigns supreme. Sally is a mere interloper, an insurgent. Ruth is the Mother Earth archetype, and her urge to care for Jerry, almost like another son, becomes a detriment to their marriage. There is an eros-killing kindness in her. She makes herself available to talk about his heartbreak. She is there to soothe his worried mind. Ruth gives and gives. Her ability to hold space for Jerry's pain is extraordinary. She becomes his confidant, his therapist, his sister—Jerry hungrily turns her into all these things. And she puts up no boundaries. When she joins "this secret sorority of sadness," Ruth continues to hide her pain, even from her husband. Invisibility is her shield. She is so present that she has *become* invisible. She only ever acknowledges her pain when she is alone—in the kitchen pouring the remaining vermouth into a child's abandoned orange juice glass and downing it, playing Bach on the piano while the youngest naps, mowing the lawn in her errant husband's sweatshirt.

Though she is maternal and earthy, there is also a cool rationality to her. She is repeatedly relied on to "keep her head" and praised for seeing things so clearly. Although she is willing to discuss matters most wives would balk at, she maintains a certain reserve. There is an essential part of her being she keeps entirely for herself. No matter how hard Jerry tries to penetrate his wife's psyche, he cannot colonize her. She will never fully let him in. She is, in a sense, a frozen surface for others to skate across, just as she skates upriver, escaping her children, her husband, her lover, and disappearing into the winter sky.

Ruth insists that Jerry would be happier if she just died. After visiting Sally and politely telling her to keep her hands off her husband, she reports back to Jerry, giving him a blow-by-blow account of the scene: "I'm the one who should feel betrayed. But nobody seems inclined to let me feel anything. All the time I was talking to her; I had to keep telling myself I wasn't the one in the wrong.

You both seem to think it's terribly unkind of me not to drop dead" (136). Jerry translates this plea to be seen as a death wish. But when Ruth drives her car into the woods, calmly steering as she plows down sapling after sapling, is it a death wish or simply a cry for attention? Or could it just be an accident? Tossed on the horns of a furious dilemma, the woman is a mess. Emotions she has repressed in the attempt to keep it all together bubble to the surface and quite literally cloud her vision. Anyone who has driven when emotionally overwrought can attest to their being unfit to be behind the wheel. It would compliment Jerry's ego that his wife would throw herself into grave danger on account of his infidelity, but that might be giving him too much credit.

In an earlier draft of *Marry Me*, Ruth's reaction to the showdown at the Mathias' house is almost the polar opposite of what ended up in the book. The draft reads:

At the first curve in the driveway, Ruth began to cry, and at the bottom of the hill, beside the Mathias' mailbox, she began to scream. He had never heard her make sounds like these before; a kind of rattling pealing beat was pushed from her throat, pure and inhuman half-notes broken in their flow by precise eight-note rests as she took in air to renew the attack, the attempt to drill her way through some wall that had arisen around her mind. She battered the side of her face against the upholstered rear of the seat, and slipped to the floor, where she seemed able to gather herself into even more pointed and shrill screams.

This catharsis breaks the cool, collected, sharp-tongued mask she wears and gives us a response without wit or blasé detachment. Yet when Updike revised *Marry Me* before publication, he injected ice into her veins. Instead of having an animalistic breakdown, she simply smokes a cigarette and urbanely remarks, "At least I wasn't bored. Richard didn't talk about stocks and bonds" (231). In a case of the author stealing from himself, Updike gave his initial instinct to his novel *Couples*, which saw the light of day eight years before *Marry Me* would. In *Couples*, Piet and Angela Hanema are summoned to the house of Piet's mistress, Foxy, by her husband, newly hip to the affair. Yet in *Couples*, Angela's "breakdown" is placed in response to a sexual comparison Piet makes between Foxy and her. She is not screaming into the cataclysmic scene she is coming from as much as at the humiliation her husband has thrust upon her with his excessive verbiage: "[S]he shrieked, and kneeled on the rubber car floor, and flailed her arms and head in the knobbed and metal-edged space, and tried to smother her own cries in the dusty car upholstery" (*Couples* 403). There are many similarities in the showdowns—the *mise-en-scène*, certain dialogue, the intent—but they are outnumbered by the

differences. In *Marry Me*, the scene is absurd, piquant, dramatized—and funnier. Though it follows an intoxicated flow, it is distilled. *Couples*, on the other hand, demonstrates grittier prose, yet not without an air of exhaustion, as if the author wanted to be done with this well-trod climax.

Some have asserted, including Updike himself, that he has skimmed across the surface of pain—that he has never really suffered. Some even look to his face and claim that his is not the face of a man who has ever suffered. There is something highly suspect and superficial in this. Though the pain of a broken heart is not visible, it is a physical pain, an emotional one. We have the incredibly useful ability to forget physical pain. What purpose is served by carrying with us the reverberations of the pains of labor, for instance? If pressed, we can mentally recall the knifelike intensity of contractions, though our bodies do not shudder with sharp remembrance. Fortunately, it is the same with heartbreak. The resonance of heartbreak is keenly drawn in *Marry Me*, its truth perhaps derived from writing the story fresh on the heels of experience.

Tears abound in *Marry Me*. A common yet apt metaphor for grief is that it comes unbidden, like waves. Is it blue, or is it black? Maybe it's purple, like a wound. Its rhythm is the swelling rhythm of waves, cresting and crashing. Only the ocean can contain such sadness. Sometimes the ocean is blue, sometimes purple, and sometimes it's even black. Male tears sprinkle through the pages liberally, bringing Jerry down, quite literally, to his knees: "He inhaled again, did a little staggering act, and sat down in the Danish armchair so hard its fragile frame cracked; next, with a surge that seemed to gather behind his head and knock it forward, so that Ruth thought he was about to cough, he started crying. His sobs were tangled with loud sighs like the hissing of truck brakes and with the broken words of his attempt to keep talking" (141). Jerry is in a state of mourning for much of the tale. Yet, just as the Portuguese word *saudade* translates as "a longing and nostalgia for what could have been but never was," his mourning is prophetic in nature: he mourns the loss before the loss occurs. The grief he experiences is the agony of indecision. He knows he is losing—no matter what decision he makes. The loss of a person, not to death, but to life. A life not shared is a particular kind of loss that often gets swept away as trivial when compared to mourning a death, yet it is real and, as the source of most sad songs, universal. It does not exist merely in the realm of adolescence. In the face of loss, there is an opportunity to go either way. Obliterating grief can shut people down, make them resentful and self-involved, or it can transfigure them. Loss can be a creative, generative force that connects the mourner to something bigger than himself. Grief can bring one closer to the mystery.

CHILDREN. "I'VE DECIDED YOU'RE ALL A BUNCH OF—POOPHEADS."

One of the cruelest scenes in the book occurs early on. It's a Sunday lunch at the Conant household, and all hell breaks loose. Driven back from the beach early by rain, Ruth and the children interrupt Jerry's few hours of peace and quiet after church. He is brittle and annoyed by the intrusion, yet the fact that he is actually a powder keg isn't evident until they sit down to lunch. Ruth serves the family the roast still in her bathing suit, the children still in theirs. Jerry, wearing his suit from church, bows his head to say grace. Their youngest, Geoffrey, tries to join in. Mayhem ensues. Jerry's childish blowup at Sunday lunch could as easily be labeled a tantrum. Yet what brews under the surface has everything to do with the realm of adults. Jerry wants any excuse to crack. The affair, having grown unchecked so long, is ripe to break out into the open. Any little thing Ruth does will warrant a "you pathetic frigid bitch, don't touch me again," as he crushes the small bones of her wrist. That this explosion comes during grace, about the proper way to say it, pushes the profane right up against the sacred. Yet Jerry doesn't seem to see the irony.

"The child was trying to be good," Ruth said. "He doesn't understand the difference between grace and prayers."

"Then why the fuck don't you teach him? If he had any decent even half-ass Christian kind of mother he'd know enough not to interrupt." (106)

Jerry digs himself deeper and deeper into a hole. He equates sitting down to lunch with his "stark naked" family as no better than saying grace in a pigpen. The patriarch is behaving very badly. He slaps the back of the head of his youngest, he lunges at his eldest, a fork sails across the table over the head of his wife. The nasty words just keep flowing. It's an assault. Yet the scene's visceral strength comes precisely from its awful realism.

As Wordsworth laments in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality," childhood is closer to the celestial realms we are at times privileged to remember but can never return to:

It is not now as it hath been of yore: —  
Turn whereto'er I may,  
By night or day,  
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

That banishment is the first heartbreak. And perhaps that is why Updike returns and returns to his boyhood in Shillington, Pennsylvania. Even in the dreams

Jerry has in *Marry Me*, he is taken back to the playgrounds of his youth. One feels Updike's keen sense of loss in his depictions of this fall from grace—that is, growing up. Yet as acquainted as children are with the numinous, they are also inextricably drawn to the profane.

They are witnesses, sponges, but also the audience. They nonverbally sense when something is askew. The morning after the denouement, the kids sense a shift, or, as Ruth puts it, “they smell trouble.” And though the scene begins benignly enough with the children being observed “as soft moths bumbling at candles of milk,” a match is lit, and order melts (241). Jerry is conspiratorial, and he gleefully plays along. At this juncture, where it seems the family is on a precipice never to return to their blissfully innocent state of wholeness, breaking the taboo of potty-talk at the table is the most honest manner of communication. Jerry is a boy. In a way, the father is always a child. A perpetual Peter Pan, he can get away with behavior the mother cannot. Here, he is in fact the ringleader. The transgression, “I’ve decided you’re all a bunch of—poopheads,” leads to a chorus of childish profanity culminating in Charlie’s contribution of “Diddlespit.” Coming from the mouth of his middle child, a five-year-old, “producing so much evil glee that Jerry stopped laughing with them, not knowing what diddlespit was and unable to believe his guess” (242). The children are hitting the release valve on the marital tension. They are the Greek chorus chanting the play’s subtext. Yet while Ruth and Jerry think they can shield their children from the messy world of adults, it is the children in fact who know more than anyone. Toward the end of the book, when all is settled and Jerry has “come home,” he puts the three children to bed. His daughter Joanna asks if Sally is his girlfriend. “What a funny question. Grown-ups don’t have girlfriends. They have wives and husbands and little children.” To that Joanna retorts, “Mommy has a boyfriend.”

“Who?”

“Mr. Mathias.”

Jerry laughed at the absurdity. “They like to talk sometimes,” he told her, “but she thinks he’s a jerk.”

She looked at him respectfully. “O.K.” (283)

The grown-ups can try, but they’re not fooling anyone. Not only do children have keen eyesight and excellent hearing, but they also possess an intuitive sense much stronger than that of most adults, who rationalize away their gut feelings, who know better, and thus feel less—or try to.

LOVE. "HEY? MAKE YOURSELF HEAVEN AGAIN FOR ME."

To Jerry's request for another round of sex, Ruth shuts him down with a firm No. It's halfway through the summer, and instead of tearing them apart, the affair has woven them closer together. Bewildered and impressed by his wife's new lease on lovemaking, he describes the experience of coming into her as Heaven: "I had this very clear vision of the Bodily Ascension, of me going up and up into this incredibly soft, warm, boundless sky: you" (153). Ruth dares to inquire whether that's blasphemous, to which Jerry responds: "Because it makes my prick Christ? I wonder. They both have this quality, of being more important than they should be." By bringing God into the bedroom, is Jerry making the profane sacred? Or by dragging religion into the realm of the erotic, is he sullyng what is silently sacred in sex? There is a sanctity he seeks which refers to the book's title.

Around the time Updike began *Marry Me*, he had encountered Denis de Rougemont's *Love in the Western World*. De Rougemont's studies of the troubadour tradition, courtly love, and the birth of romantic love, in tandem with the birth of Western literature, relates to *Marry Me*'s themes of impossible love, as well as its imagery of the maiden, the knight, and the dragon. Yet Updike also uses *Marry Me* to explore and counter de Rougemont's arguments. Stranded at Dulles Airport because of an airline strike, Sally and Jerry, returning from a stolen night together, engage in a lengthy volley on love and the calculus of their predicament. Jerry ventures, "What we have is love. But love must become fruitful, or it loses itself. I don't mean having babies—God, we've all had too many of those—I mean just being relaxed, and right, and, you know, with a blessing. Does 'blessing' seem silly to you?" (53). Sally asks whether they can't give each other the blessing. To which Jerry replies that it must come from above.

*Marry Me* begins with a section titled "Warm Wine." The wine Jerry and Sally drink on the dunes is a sacrament. Yet he has no corkscrew, so he must break the bottle—performing violence to get to the sweetness within. When he breaks the neck of the bottle on a nearby rock, the green-tinted wine swirling inside is like an ocean. Wine is not drunk like this. Wine is tasted in stemmed glasses, civilized. There is nothing civilized in Sally and Jerry's union. They are feral. And yet, as feral beings unblessed, they receive the rewards of the wild. The wine tastes better this way. "It just tastes of itself," Sally asserts (9). The sex tastes better this way as well: "You get more oxygen" (10). One could say that it, too, tastes of itself. In a scribbled note found in the archive, Updike wrote, "with her, Love tasted right." In and a part of nature, their only witness, they are not judged. Making love on the dunes, they

are not observers or even admirers of nature, but part of nature itself. In the eyes of the civilized world, they are profane. They have tossed their marriage vows into the tide and bade them a tedious return. But nature judges not. In *The Scarlet Letter*, after Hester Prynne has ripped the letter from her clothing and thrown it beside a stream, the sun shines through the forest on Hester and Dimmesdale. “Such was the sympathy of Nature—that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth—with the bliss of two spirits! Love, whether newly born, or aroused from a deathlike slumber, must always create a sunshine . . .” (198). There is a purity and simplicity to what the outside world looks on as illicit. Jerry is original man, and Sally is original woman. Timelessness blesses them. In an earlier draft, Updike wrote, “She filled the expectance of his soul with the very clear wine of her existence.” This sentence, found upon Jerry and Ruth’s arrival at the Mathias house the night of the confrontation, didn’t make it to the final draft. Perhaps Updike found it too romantic or that its tone did not fit the carnage that was to come. Through the various drafts, and in notes scrawled using the initials of the real people who inspired the novel, it appears the author is grappling with the experience of being in love. And as a romance, *Marry Me* is, in a way, a meditation on love.

As lovers, Jerry and Sally both walk under the rose-light of immortality, despite or perhaps thanks to the shadow of cruel caprice that threatens to unveil them. In one of Ruth and Jerry’s many discourses, he tries to pinpoint exactly what draws him to his lover.

“[I]t’s more than what happens in bed. Whenever I’m with her, no matter where, just standing with her on a street corner waiting for the light to change, I know I’m never going to die. . . .”

“And with me?”

“You?” He was speaking to her as if to an audience he had ceased to see. “You’re death. Very calm, very pure, very remote. Nothing I can do will really change you. Or even amuse you, much. I’m married to my death.” (144)

What is striking in *Marry Me* is not what’s left unsaid; it’s the profusion of what is said. Though there are marriages where chasms of silence mutely bristle between the couple, this is not one of those marriages. This is the kind of marriage where too much is said. Once his secret is spilled, Jerry cannot shut up about it. And in the process, he blasphemes his love. When spoken aloud, it loses its magic. The erotic, exchanged between two people in love, is sacred. When aired for others, it oxidizes. By betraying the secret, he brings it into the light for Ruth, whose opinion

he respects, to scrutinize. The love loses its sacredness and becomes profane. By turning it into endless fodder for discussion with Ruth, he has brought it down to earth. The subject is the agony of falling in love outside of marriage, yet the story, in the end, is about sacrifice. *Marry Me* is a cautionary tale, a fall from grace—the ideal of love, pure and unadulterated, is dragged through the gutter. Their love is like the wine they take as sacrament: it tastes of itself.

Contemplating *Marry Me*, Updike once confessed, “The book is meant to be about religion.” In three postcard-like flashes of potential endings, we finally escape the claustrophobia of the small colonial seaside town. The brilliance of the ending imagines three different possibilities, or “test-moves” in the form of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven.

1. Hell—Wyoming, a kind of isolated nightmare vision of what running away with his lover could turn into.
2. Purgatory—The sojourn to France with his family, exiled by the community.
3. Heaven—A Caribbean island, his beloved, the proposal: the only reality in which the book title’s sentence could be uttered. It’s a fantasy, pure and heartbreaking in its impossibility.

The book ends by achieving the best of both worlds: we are denied the satisfaction of a union between lovers. Theirs is a doomed love, after all. And yet, by animating the dream, it succeeds in satisfying the romantic in all of us, even if it’s made abundantly clear that this is just a reverie. This stroke of mastery is what makes it incredibly sad, yet also emotionally rewarding. Our secret preference for the tragic is given its due, and yet what remains alive and well is the idyll, its existence as essential as water and air, its material as real as blood and sand.

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# “Eros Rampant” in Updike’s 1960s New England Trilogy: *Marry Me*, *Couples*, and *The Witches of Eastwick*

SYLVIE MATHÉ

John Updike, whose daring subjects and racy prose caused *furor* in the 1960s, has been called “America’s foremost writer of the bedroom” (Schiff, *Updike Revisited* 5). *Rabbit, Run*, the opening volume of the celebrated tetralogy devoted to Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom—*homme moyen sensuel*, in the French phrase, of the second half of the twentieth century in America—was thus expurgated, at the request of the publisher Knopf, of some explicitly sexual passages for its first edition (1960) in the U.S. as well as for the edition by Andre Deutsch the following year in England. Updike had to “knuckle under” and, in the company of a lawyer, make “the deletions and softenings” that were asked for in the text. “But the changes rankled,” he explains, and so, for the 1964 Penguin edition, he eagerly restored what had been excised, along with various other editorial changes:

In the interval, *Lady Chatterley*, *Lolita*, and *Tropic of Cancer* had all [...] been published, making a whole new ball game vis-à-vis Gutenbergian prudery. So, working ten pages a night, in France with my family that winter, I slowly amended the text of RR, putting back in some dirty bits [...] and making what other changes occurred to me . . . Only in this one instance have I delved back into a printed novel so thoroughly, and the main stimulant was to restore the censored bits. (quoted by Waldron 52–53)

What this episode reveals is that, indeed, as Bob Dylan famously sang that same year, “the times they are a-changin’.” When *Couples* appeared in 1968, inau-

guring the New England phase in Updike's oeuvre, censorship was no longer in the air, and Updike had become a cause célèbre. Though the critical reception was rather cool,<sup>1</sup> the novel—representative of the liberation movement of what *Time* magazine, in its cover story in April 1968 that featured Updike's photo, called the "Adulterous Society"<sup>2</sup>—was not only a *succès de scandale* but an immediate bestseller, earning its author \$1 million and remaining on *The New York Times* fiction bestseller list for thirty-six weeks.<sup>3</sup> Preceding by one year the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Couples* appears as the erotic blazon of this mythic year.

This essay<sup>4</sup> maps what turned out to be a pivotal nexus in Updike's fiction by revisiting the texts which, within his prodigious output, form a kind of subset that might be dubbed the tribulations of Eros in the bourgeois thickets of suburban America in the 1960s—namely *Marry Me* (published in 1976, but the first version of which dates back to 1964),<sup>5</sup> *Couples* (1968), and *The Witches of Eastwick* (published in 1984, but set in the late 1960s).<sup>6</sup> While the three novels trace a temporal line that spans the decade—the spring of 1962 to the spring of 1963 in *Marry Me*, the spring of 1963 to the spring of 1964 in *Couples*, and the first year of Nixon's presidency in *The Witches of Eastwick*—they also thematically converge around the question of adultery and sexual liberation. In the author's words, "All [three] deal with marriage, in progressive states of deterioration, [. . .] and people in deteriorating states of innocence, in smalltown Edens" (Campbell 159).<sup>7</sup> And though they belong to different genres—romance (emphasized by the subtitle) for *Marry Me*, the Victorian novel for *Couples*, and magic realism for *The Witches of Eastwick*—the three novels form a kind of trilogy in which the writer embroiders in different tonalities the mythical motifs that he holds dear against a more or less accented background of sociopolitical reality. The period marks a literary turning point for Updike: forsaking the Pennsylvania of his youth that inspired his first novels, including the lyrical eulogies celebrating his parents (*The Centaur* [1963] and *Of the Farm* [1965]), he turns to New England, his adopted region, for his exploration of the *tempora* and *mores* of what started as a utopia in 1960. Following the torpor of what Robert Lowell called the "tranquilized fifties," the arrival of the dashing Kennedys in the White House signaled the advent of a new era, one of change, hope, and progress. In his poem "Annus Mirabilis," Philip Larkin thus offers a paean to the climactic year 1963, a year that encapsulates the freedom and exaltation of the period (before its tragic shattering on November 22):

Sexual intercourse began  
In nineteen sixty-three

(Which was rather late for me)—  
Between the end of the Chatterley ban  
And the Beatles' first LP.  
.....  
So life was never better than  
In nineteen sixty-three  
(Though just too late for me).

Updike's fiction of the period reads as a barometer of this sexual revolution: "Couples, in part, is about the change in sexual deportment that has occurred since the publication of *Rabbit, Run*. [...] In *Rabbit, Run* what is demanded, in *Couples* is freely given" (Plath 34). The sexual utopia that forms the backdrop of *Couples* is modeled after the liberation of instincts advocated by Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and Norman O. Brown in *Life Against Death* (1959), two neo-Freudian thinkers calling for a new society based on polymorphous sexuality and erotic games as remedies to the repression of instincts and work alienation. The appeal to the Dionysiac, the suppression of inhibitions, the affirmation of the "gay science" of sexual liberation all partake, in different ways, of Updike's exploration of this erotic utopia of the 1960s in *Couples*, *Marry Me*, and *The Witches of Eastwick*. As was the case with *Rabbit, Run*, the three novels probe the issues of love, lust, and sex, domesticity and adultery, against the psychological and social consequences of this sexual utopia. As Updike wrote, "About sex in general, by all means let's have it in fiction, as detailed as needs be, but real, real in its social and psychological connections. Let's take coitus out of the closet and off the altar and put it on the continuum of human behavior" (Plath 34).

The integration of sexuality into the study of human behavior is Updike's signature, with this specificity that the radiography of eroticism is for him inseparable from a phenomenology of marriage.<sup>8</sup> This is what makes Updike a classical novelist, European in a sense, for whom the essential tension of romance is played out between adultery and marriage, in figures and permutations performed within legitimate and illegitimate couples.

#### MARRY ME

What is Eros for Updike? It is less the god of love and desire of Greek mythology than the tutelary figure of the Tristan and Iseult legend.<sup>9</sup> This chivalric romance, presented from the start in Joseph Bédier's version as "un beau conte d'amour et de mort" (a beautiful tale of love and death),<sup>10</sup> foregrounds the knot of love and death that is the substrate of the novelist's vision. Updike's perspective is here indebted

to the analysis of the Swiss thinker Denis de Rougemont as developed in *L'amour et l'Occident* (*Love in the Western World*) and its follow-up, *Comme toi-même* (*Myths of Love*).<sup>11</sup> In his famous 1963 review for *The New Yorker* of the latter work, entitled "More Love in the Western World," Updike expounds on one of the key concepts rehearsed by de Rougemont, namely "the inescapable conflict in the West between passion and marriage" that will become one of the leitmotifs of his fiction:

Eros is allied with Thanatos rather than Agape; love becomes not a way of accepting and entering the world but a way of defying and escaping it. Iseult is the mythical prototype of the Unattainable Lady to whom the love-myth directs our adoration, diverting it from the attainable lady (in legal terms, our "wife"; in Christian terms, our "neighbor") who is at our side. Passion-love feeds upon denial. (167, 169)

De Rougemont's argument—that the ceaselessly deferred satisfaction of desire is what keeps passion alive, and that possession equals the death of desire—is reactualized by Updike in an Eros of narcissism and desire conceived as confirmation of one's being. Transposed in the age of sexual liberation and dissolving of taboos, eroticism obviously does not preclude physical possession, but it nevertheless requires the ultimate inaccessibility of the loved one on account of preexisting bonds of marriage. These bonds are what guarantee the persistence of extramarital desire, just as their dissolution entails a kind of death of desire. The novel *Marry Me* thus focuses on two middle-class couples in the Edenlike small town of Greenwood, Connecticut—Jerry and Ruth Conant, Sally and Richard Mathias—whose affairs intercross in a symmetrical, alliterative structure. But while Ruth's liaison with Richard is but a momentary interlude, that of Jerry with Sally purports to be an impossible passion along the lines of Rougemont's analysis of the Tristan romance. The parallels in the novel are heavily reiterated and emphasized, even spelled out, as in this exchange: "What we have, sweet Sally, is an ideal love. It's ideal because it can't be realized. As far as the world goes, we don't exist. [. . .] And any attempt to start existing, to move out of this pain, will kill us" (46). In another passage, Jerry ponders the very meaning of the word "mistress" in the American context: "Our lives just aren't built for it. Mistresses are for European novels. Here, there's no institution except marriage. Marriage and the Friday night basketball game" (53). Given what is construed as the cultural impossibility of the very essence of romance, the plot can only flounder in ceaseless turnarounds and variable triangulations. And when, in the end, Sally eventually breaks free of her marriage, Jerry at once realizes that she is no longer the ideal and inaccessible lady of his dreams, but the woman that everything now conspires to designate as

his future wife. Backtracking in his footsteps, he spells out, to his wife this time, the intellectual and emotional process that he is experiencing, laying bare the mechanism of his turnaround: "I don't understand what quite happened. As an actual wife or whatever, she stopped being an idea, and for the first time I *saw* her" (284). The scales of passion have fallen from his eyes, and whatever follows can only be a form of death-in-life.

Opting for an open ending, Updike leaves the reader with a question mark, offering three possible outcomes to his rewriting of the Tristan legend: Jerry and Sally beginning a new life in Wyoming; Jerry and Ruth picking up the pieces together in Nice;<sup>12</sup> and, finally, Jerry alone in the Caribbean. The addition at the time of publication of the subtitle "A Romance" emphasizes the dimension of stylization of this novel, accounting also for its absence of sociohistorical anchoring, which makes of *Marry Me* a novel apart.<sup>13</sup> Placed in the larger scope of Updike's oeuvre, it registers as a minor transitional work, in which the author was tackling directly the issue of adultery for the first time in the context of a personal marital crisis, hence the delay in publishing. Had *Marry Me* appeared at the time of its composition, its reception might have been different.<sup>14</sup> Coming as it did after *Couples*, the novel suffers from the comparison and appears to be merely rehashing Updike's obsession with what Alfred Kazin called "the marital tangle."

#### COUPLES

Compared to *Marry Me*, *Couples* appears as a considerably more elaborate project, enlarging the theme of Eros and adultery to the scale of the community. Conceived as a Victorian novel, it purports to be at once a sociological study and a complex novelistic structure, "a sophisticated and ambitious novel about sexuality, marriage, religion, adultery, death, friendship, and gossip [. . .] [which] most importantly, leads us inside American homes, bedrooms, and marriages and reveals the intense, private scenes that take place there" (Schiff, *Updike Revisited* 67).<sup>15</sup> *Couples* may be seen as an extension of Jane Austen's project as described in a letter to her niece Anna: "Three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on" (quoted by Neary 148). Updike enlarges the field to depict the lives of ten couples in the small town of Tarbox, Massachusetts, a fictional transposition of Updike's hometown of Ipswich. While the Hanemas, Piet and Angela, may be seen as the central couple in the novel, they partake of a collective entity that functions as "a composite protagonist" (Detweiler, *John Updike* 135) within which the units appear as interchangeable. In other words, the center of the plot lies less in individual relationships than in group dynamics: as Detweiler notes,

“this is the age of solid state physics, of corporations, of Gestalt psychology, and *Couples* projects the fictional equivalent of that orientation” (“Updike’s *Couples*” 237). Similarly, the point of view in the novel varies, alternating between the editorial sequences of an omniscient narrator, third-person centers of consciousness, interior monologues, and dramatic scenes. The stress is laid on relativity, echoing modern physics: “Perspective in *Couples* suggests as its basis the atomic motions and electromagnetic force fields of the Einsteinian universe rather than the more simply ordered time and space of an old world picture” (“Updike’s *Couples*” 236). Like Mary McCarthy’s novel *The Group* (1963), *Couples* is a capsule of its time, centering on the new phenomenology of marriage, and exposing the couple in all its states, as a modality at once social, cultural, religious, and, above all, sexual. In Meghan O’Gieblyn’s words, “It appears to have captured that glinting moment in time before swinging became a lifestyle choice and seemed, instead, like a revelation—like something everyone should be doing all the time and from which no ill consequences could be conceived.”

At the opposite pole from Hemingway’s “Men Without Women,” Updike’s subject is always men with women (more so than women with men, except for *The Witches of Eastwick*). In the well-off, sociologically homogeneous milieu he describes, “the men had stopped having careers and the women had stopped having babies. Liquor and love were left” (19). The cards are laid on the table from the start, and the erotic roundabout unfolds on a backdrop of receptions, cocktails, picnics, and dinners, as the seasons go by with their corresponding recreational sports: touch football, basketball, tennis, sailing, skiing. Life is thus orchestrated around a community-based liturgy, with its calendar of sports and societal rituals that form the socially respectable façade of the libertine games deployed underhandedly. Inspired by Choderlos de Laclos’s eighteenth-century novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (*Dangerous Liaisons*), *Couples* stages adultery as the ultimate avatar of heroic adventure and the pursuit of knowledge, as “a way of giving yourself adventures. Of getting out in the world and seeking knowledge” (380). Among the multiple liaisons and permutations deployed by the different couples in what Margaret Gullette considers Updike’s “most energetic bed-hopper” (45), a few acquire a form of social recognition, close to legitimacy. Thus, the Applebys and “little-Smiths” come to form the Applesmiths, while the Constantines and the Saltzes combine into the Saltines. One couple, however, stands out in its privileged treatment, that of Piet Hanema and his mistress Foxy Whitman, the only two members of the community whose religious faith is explicitly displayed and whose erotic passion is elaborated in mythical terms. Piet, whose name is an amalgam of piety and Peter,

the rock on which the church is built, is presented as an heir both to Tristan and Don Juan,<sup>16</sup> simultaneously seeking the Unattainable Lady—the vertical quest of impossible love—and pursuing multiple conquests—the horizontal quest of the sexual revolution. Other than his wife, Angela, and his mistress, Foxy,<sup>17</sup> Piet is involved with three other married women in the plot. What Tristan and Don Juan have in common, of course, is a certain rapport with death. Tristan's passion for Iseult is less love of the presence of the other than an eroticism of absence and difference: “Il ne m'aime pas, ni je lui” (he does not love me, nor I him), Iseult confides, and the final consummation can only happen in death. As for Don Juan, his unbridled pursuit of desire is but a way to defy death, an antidote to mortality, and ultimately a mask of the death drive. Death and entropy thus combine to form the backdrop of the novel, and more than any other member of the group, Piet is prey to these forces, which makes him a more substantial character than Jerry Conant in *Marry Me*. If both perceive themselves as heroic knights and frantic courtiers hungering for seduction, Piet appears as a more credible persona in his mythic guise. Moreover, Updike makes him the voice of the metaphysical unrest that lies at the heart of his project, as attested by the two epigraphs to the novel. The first, from theologian Paul Tillich, interrogates the resurgence of religions: “There is a tendency in the average citizen [. . .] to consider the decisions relating to the life of the society to which he belongs as a matter of fate on which he has no influence—like the Roman subjects all over the world in the period of the Roman empire, a mood favorable for the resurgence of religion but unfavorable for the preservation of a living democracy” (*The Future of Religions*). The second is culled from Alexander Blok's poem “The Scythians,” an evocation of the barbarians heralding apocalypse:

We love the flesh: its taste, its tones,  
 Its charnal odor, breathed through Death's jaws . . .  
 Are we to blame if your fragile bones  
 Should crack beneath our heavy, gentle paws?

This double inscription offers a programmatic entry into the text, a kind of reading protocol for the essential question that was already at the center of Updike's first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959): “After Christianity, what?” In *Couples*, the answer to this question takes the form of an erotic theology which substitutes for God the double figure of Eros and Thanatos. Sex is indissociable from Updike's metaphysical questioning, and it is in *Couples* that the articulation of the religious and the erotic is most significantly developed. In the author's words, *Couples* is “about sex as

the emergent religion, as the only thing left” (Plath 52). If God has deserted, what is left is sex as a rampart against nothingness. “God is love” is transmuted into “sex is God,” and in the context of the 1960s, “Love thy neighbor” becomes “lay your neighbor” (*Couples* 158). The novel, a mirror of its time, thus echoes the top hits of the period: “Love your neighbor till his wife gets home” (the Doors), or “If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with” (Stephen Stills). Updike’s own music is pitched to the religious tunes through which he filters this moral revolution and the archetypal tonality he endows it with through the recourse to myths and biblical parallels.<sup>18</sup> Thus oral love becomes a sacred ritual and a substitute for incarnation: “We set our genitals mating down below like peasants, but when the mouth condescends, mind and body marry. To eat another sacred” (*Couples* 482).

In the erotic utopia of Tarbox, the community of couples form a kind of magic circle around its ringleader, the aptly named Freddy Thorne, “local gamesmaster” and “king of chaos”: a dentist by trade, therefore acquainted firsthand with the insidious decaying of entropy, Freddy Thorne is the high priest of the ceremonies and various games to which the couples lend themselves. An androgynous and maleficent figure, he presides over the couples’ secular church, a religious congregation dedicated to the cult of Eros and Thanatos: “He thinks we’re a circle. A magic circle of heads to keep the night out. [. . .] He thinks we’ve made a church of each other” (14). Freddy’s night with Angela, Piet’s wife, bartered against the abortion he arranges for Foxy, Piet’s mistress,<sup>19</sup> reveals at once his impotence and the morbid excitement aroused in him by the thought of death: “Death excites me. Death is being screwed by God. It’ll be delicious. [. . .] I believe in that one, Big Man Death. I smell Him between people’s teeth every day” (409). His actions, like his words, are presented as sacramental travesties, as when he carves the ham at dinner for the group: “Take, eat [. . .]. This is his body given for thee” (353). Yet this sacrilegious ritual does not rise to the dimension of a genuine transgression of the sacred; it remains but a travesty. The hedonistic subversion—“We’re a subversive cell [. . .]. Like in the catacombs. Only they were trying to break out of hedonism. We’re trying to break back into it” (168), in Freddy’s words—remains but a game, notwithstanding the mythical baggage attached to it. The town of Tarbox, whose topography and street names (Divinity, Prudence, Temperance) recall the Puritan origins of the town, as well as the morality plays of medieval times, is itself a biblical allegory, as outlined by its name, that of a “post-pill paradise” where sexual promiscuity is cultivated with religious fervor but where the erotic pastoral is nothing but paradise already lost.

The end of the novel exposes the devaluation of passion in this era of permissiveness, the failure of hedonistic paganism, as well as the dissolution of societal links and the accompanying distress that goes with it.<sup>20</sup> Between Foxy's abortion and the burning of the church, on which the novel closes as a nod to the genre of romance, death prevails in the end. The weathercock of the Congregationalist church, an ironic emblem of this sexual community, "with its pricking steeple and flashing cock," equated by the children of the town with God himself (24), is dethroned yet saved from the flames. And in Updike's strictly marital world, the transgression of adultery can but open onto a remarriage, signaling the reinstatement of the illegitimate couple into a newly found legality. But this remarriage is also a death—the death of the previous marriage,<sup>21</sup> the death of the erotic passion that is the privilege of forbidden love, and the dissolving of the newly formed couple into domestic normalization.<sup>22</sup> The exile of Piet and Foxy to another town, where they merge into another circle of couples, suggests less the sacrifice of the scapegoat than the defeat of the libertine utopia, the failure of the impossible quest, the reversal of the myth of Tristan. By marrying Foxy, Piet "becomes merely a name in the last paragraph; he becomes a satisfied person and in a sense dies" (Plath 34).<sup>23</sup>

#### THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK

After Greenwood, Connecticut, and Tarbox, Massachusetts, welcome to Eastwick, Rhode Island, where Updike pursues his investigation of Eros in New England in the Age of Aquarius. Once the refuge of Anne Hutchinson after her banishment from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Updike's Rhode Island remains the playground of witches. Abandoning the realistic and sociological vein of *Couples*, Updike resolutely ventures out into the realm of the fabulous to pursue his investigation of marriage, eroticism, and the quest for an ersatz religion in this age of neopaganism. The main difference, however, is that, in *The Witches of Eastwick*, he forsakes the masculine point of view, which had so far been dominant, and makes his three witches the center of female consciousness in the novel, flanked by a kind of collective chorus, the voice of Eastwick.<sup>24</sup> The witches, one of whom drives a pumpkin-colored Subaru, while another loves "devil'd eggs," and the third is a flamboyant redhead, are sculptress Alexandra Spofford, cellist Jane Smart, and gossip columnist for the local newspaper Sukie Rougemont. Having divorced and reduced their husbands to the states, respectively, of dust, dried herb, and plastic placemat, they have seized control of their lives by inventing alternatives to marriage and monogamy and, in so doing, rediscovering the rule of women and of

feminine solidarity. "This air of Eastwick empowered women" (8), the narrative voice announces in the opening pages, this very air which saps the vitality of men. What the novel foregrounds, in a kind of mischievous and fantastic tall tale, is feminist emancipation, as well as the relationship between feminism and witchery. Representative of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s, Jane, Alexandra, and Sukie embody the metaphor of witches frequently used by feminists.<sup>25</sup> In her review of the novel for *The New York Times Book Review*, entitled "Wondering What It's Like to Be a Woman," Margaret Atwood thus notes that "Mr. Updike takes 'sisterhood is powerful' at its word and imagines it literally" (40). Behind and beyond the satirical element, the author indeed ponders the nature of this power and the way it is enforced: "I was trying to explore, on the realistic level, the whole question of power in women. Would it become less murderous in female hands?" (Plath 264). While, contrary to Updike's usual habit, no specific date for the action is stated, we know that Nixon is in office and that, according to the original dust jacket of the book, "the action consumes a year during the national *Walpurgisnacht* of the Vietnam era." The war in Vietnam thus forms the backdrop on which the violence and death caused by the witches may be measured against the violence and death wielded by men. The intervention of the devil in the novel, in the person of Darryl Van Horne, will serve as engine to the plot as well as pretext to a debunking of the figure of Satan, akin to that of Tristan and Don Juan in the preceding novels. Mephistophelian and farcical, but in the end rather insipid, Darryl will seduce the three witches before abandoning them. In his portrait of Van Horne, yet another aptly named character, Updike plays facetiously on the clichés of popular folklore, from his ears half-hidden under his locks, his "incongruously small and pointy black loafers," or his trousers strangely "bagged at the backs of his knees" (34), all the way to his cold penis, unpleasant to the touch, "as if it were covered with tiny scales" (208).<sup>26</sup> Other than offering the opportunity for scenes of bacchanalia and ritual orgies that turn out to be more Sapphic than satanic, the irruption of Van Horne in the coven will wreak havoc on the group and unleash the forces of evil in the witches: having cast a deadly spell on their rival, Jenny Gabriel, for stealing the devil for herself, they accomplish their mortal vengeance, which will paradoxically lead them on the way to recovering a form of normality. Frightened by the power over death that they discover in themselves, and supplanted in Eastwick by another circle of women, they conjure up new partners for themselves and leave the town. Meanwhile, Van Horne, in yet another diabolical twist, disappears as he had appeared, having revealed himself to be "one

of those [. . .] swallowed by the Sodom of New York" (307). Order is restored to Eastwick, and only the fabulous rumor of the witches remains, hovering in the air "like smoke rising twisted into legend" (307).

Though Updike claimed that his "intention was not to put down feminism but to hold it up to the light" (quoted by Campbell 193), his mischievously irreverent approach was met with a mixed critical reception.<sup>27</sup> Yet no less a feminist than Margaret Atwood praised not only the novelist's craft but his vision, in which "witchcraft is closely tied to both carnality and mortality," in "a book that redefines magic realism" (40). Somber and comical at once, facetious and cruel, *The Witches of Eastwick*, written in the early 1980s, is the writer's retrospective and provocative tribute to a troubled period of history. If *Marry Me* and *Couples* present the solar, idealized side of the early 1960s, *The Witches of Eastwick* unveils the darker face of the end of this prodigious decade.<sup>28</sup>

The red thread that runs through this erotic trilogy of the 1960s is thus the equation of sexuality with religion, and the diverse forms in which this finds expression: the quest for a mythical dimension of love in *Marry Me*; the constitution of an erotic congregation in *Couples*; the metaphorization of sexual liberation in witchery and black magic in *The Witches of Eastwick*. All in all, the image of Eros that emerges in these texts is that of a Janus-like figure, at once celebrated and devalued. The dual motion of sacralizing and desacralizing may be seen in these novels to reflect the very essence of the "post-pill paradise," a world where transgression can no longer exist in the absence of a forbidden fruit. What the novels suggest in the end is that libertine utopia opens onto despair, "an exploration of a sadness so deep people must go in pairs, one cannot go alone" (*Couples* 499).

#### NOTES

1. See Mazzeno, "Couples: Controversial Bestseller, 1968" (*Critical Reception* 28–32): "Notable about reviews of *Couples* [. . .] are the extremes to which critics went in celebrating Updike's accomplishment or damning the book as a crass attempt at pandering to the public's base appetites" (50).

2. "View from the Catacombs," *Time*, Apr. 26, 1968, 66.

3. "Wife swapping was the book's unique selling point, as we might say today. Of course, today we wouldn't say *wife* swapping. The less gendered term *swinging* gained currency over time, as did the phrase *open marriage*" (Norton 58).

4. The title of this essay is a nod to Updike's short story "Eros Rampant," which is part of the Maples cycle (*Too Far to Go*). In his review for *The Spectator* of Updike's *Early Stories: 1953–1975*, Sebastian Smee writes: "I don't think I have ever read a better short story than 'Eros Rampant,' which describes a climactic episode in the Maples's marriage: a failed seduction on Richard's part, which, flippantly confessed to, provokes a confession of successful infidelities from Joan."

5. The manuscript of the novel, locked away for twelve years on account of its autobiographical transparency, was only published in 1976, after Updike and his first wife, Mary, were divorced (see Begley, "The Two Iseults," *Updike* 207–55).

6. An earlier, shorter version of this essay (in French) has appeared in *Éros en Amérique*, first issue of *E-rea*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2003, under the title "'Welcome to the Post-Pill Paradise': Variations sur quelques figures d'Éros dans la fiction de John Updike," <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.89>.

7. "In essence, I consider *Couples*, *Marry Me*, and *The Witches of Eastwick* to be Updike's marriage novels, such that various affinities exist between them: each is set in a small northeastern town during the 1960s; each demonstrates an attempt to create social and erotic alternatives to marriage; and each is concerned with how cultural changes, characterized as an ineffable something in the air, test and alter the institution of marriage, precipitating its temporal failure as well as its ultimate survival" (Schiff, *Updike Revisited* 67).

8. In Shumway's words, "adultery is seen as an aspect of marriage and a path, perhaps misguided and always painful, to the happiness and fulfillment sought in marriage" (188).

9. Updike's interest in the Tristan legend is evident in the recurrence of its more or less oblique adaptations in a number of texts other than *Marry Me*: "Four Sides of One Story" (1965, *The Music School*) is a courtly love conceit in the epistolary mode, transposing Updike's affair with Joyce Harrington in the early 1960s in the guise of the Tristan and Iseult legend; "Tristan and Iseult" (1994, *The Afterlife*) turns a dental appointment into an imaginary retelling of the Tristan legend; the novel *Brazil* (1994), set in modern-day Brazil, retells the Tristan legend through the tragic story of a poor Black ghetto dweller by the name of Tristão.

10. Of the many versions of the myth, the French Romanist Joseph Bédier's *Le Roman de Tristan et Iseut* (1900; translated by Hilaire Belloc, 1903) is the source that Updike relied on.

11. In *The Witches of Eastwick*, the surname of one of the witches is Rougemont, yet another wink to the Swiss philosopher.

12. This is what happened in real life to the Updikes in the fall of 1962, following the discovery of his affair in Ipswich with Joyce Harrington: after first declaring to her husband, Herbert, that he would marry Joyce, Updike then recanted and, bullied by Herbert, had to temporarily leave Ipswich with his family. The Updikes sailed to Europe in November 1962 and spent a few months in Antibes.

13. Farmer calls the novel "a morality play" (75).

14. See Mazzeno, "Dabbling in Romance: *Marry Me*, 1976" (*Critical Reception* 50–53): "Like its predecessors, it received mixed reviews, in part because Updike seemed to be covering well-trodden ground, in part because some reviewers did not understand his aims or his methods in employing the vehicle of romance" (50).

15. Retrospectively, Updike judged the novel to be too long and too "upholstered."

16. Elizabeth Tallent describes Piet as "a sort of knight of erotic errantry. His grail will be temporarily manifest in each of several women; he is a resolutely enchanted man finding his way through a forest of disenchantments" (45). The archetypes of Tristan and Don Juan have been the subject of many critical studies of the novel (see, in particular, Markle, Hamilton, and Detweiler).

17. The names all function as onomastic clues to the characters' nature.

18. In the *Paris Review* interview, Updike multiplies the mythical references for Piet's character: "Piet is not only Hanema/anima/Life, he is Lot, the man with two virgin daughters, who flees Sodom and leaves his wife behind" (Plath 35).

19. O’Gieblyn makes the point that “[m]ore often than not, women are forced to use sex as a kind of currency—for revenge, for equality—and when they need furtive abortions, they are compelled to trade prurient acts for medical assistance.”

20. The review of the novel in *Time* draws attention to this point: “All these goings-on would be purely lyrical, like nymphs and satyrs in a grove, except for the group of distressed and neglected children” (“View from the Catacombs” 67). Farmer, in his section called “Collective Hallucination in the Adulterous Society,” goes even further in his analysis of “an entire generation of parents—in Updike’s fiction if not in real life—who are so lost in the labyrinth of their own sexual exploration that they can barely register the suffering of their offspring” (68).

21. “Updike has asserted that *Couples* ‘has a happy ending. It’s about a guy meeting a girl and the guy getting the girl in the end.’ Yet the guy gets the girl at enormous emotional cost. It is hard not to feel that the ending is as much Piet’s loss as it is his gain, and Updike said that ‘he wanted the loss of Angela to be felt as a real loss’” (Shumway 194).

22. Sue Norton writes of the ending, “We are therefore left with the question of whether the text suggests unwaveringly that open marriage—or polyamory, or swinging—as a way of life is patently infeasible in respectable twentieth-century American society, with its dentists, bankers, and academics, or whether Updike as author simply cannot imaginatively sustain or else morally countenance its endurance” (58–59).

23. The ending of *Couples* echoes that of *Tender Is the Night*, with Dick Diver’s dissolving into anonymity “in one town or another.”

24. Updike mentions in an interview that he was encouraged by the French novelist Robert Pinget to give voice to the gossip of the community (Plath 179).

25. See Newman (in particular 124–30, on the foundation in 1968 of the feminist group WITCH [Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell]) and Verduin.

26. On Halloween night around the hot tub, the witches together marvel at his “marvelously cold” semen (119).

27. For an overview of the novel’s critical reception, see Mazzeno, “Writing from a Woman’s Perspective: *The Witches of Eastwick*, 1984” (*Critical Reception* 75–79): “Every Updike novel generated controversy when it appeared, but none more so than *The Witches of Eastwick*” (75).

28. Updike’s last novel, *The Widows of Eastwick* (2008), is a sequel that picks up the story of Sukie, Alexandra, and Jane as “Lionesses in Winter” (Mazzeno 175), as they face old age, loss, and marginalization. In “A Second Look at *The Widows of Eastwick*,” Schiff judges the novel to be Updike’s “weakest” (85).

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## Packing My Bag: Deferred Valediction in *Licks of Love*

PETER J. BAILEY

We begin our inquiry into the valedictory character of *Licks of Love: Short Stories and a Sequel* with the closing pages of the “Sequel”—“Rabbit Remembered.” It is New Year’s Eve, 1999, and Nelson Angstrom; his until recently estranged wife, Pru; Nelson’s recently discovered half sister, Annabelle, the daughter of Ruth Byer and Harry Angstrom; and Nelson’s childhood friend Billy Fosnacht have had dinner at the Pinnacle Hotel (where Harry, in his final flight in *Rabbit, Run*, tries to call Reverend Eccles to assure him, “*It’s O.K. . . I’m on the way*” ([256–57])), watched *American Beauty* at a cineplex, and are traveling to the Laid-Back, a Brewer, Pennsylvania, bar where Nelson, in younger years, had obtained drugs to support the habit which, in the Angstrom family mythos, was “how he lost the agency up his nose” (349). What is transpiring inside Nelson’s Toyota Corolla, a survivor of the now defunct Springer Motors Toyota Agency inherited by Janice Springer Angstrom and which provided both Harry and Nelson positions on the sales floor in the 1980s, are conciliation and reconciliation: Annabelle and Billy are warming toward each other en route to becoming a couple via Nelson’s matchmaking, while Nelson and Pru are haltingly groping their way toward marital reunion. As Nelson drives them through West Brewer, they pass an upscale coffee bar once occupied by Jimbo’s Friendly Lounge, where Harry meets both Skeeter and Jill in *Rabbit Redux*; the Weiser Bridge is where Harry attempts to bribe Nelson to leave town so that his son can avoid marrying Pru and ending up as familiarly trapped as Harry believes he was; in Weiser Square they notice the Bradford pear trees that Harry finds so wrenchingly beautiful shortly after his first heart attack in *Rabbit*

at Rest; the intersection of Sixth and Weiser, now a construction pit, is where Kroll's Department store stood in the 1950s, the emporium having precipitated the tetralogy by uniting Harry and Janice, both employed there after graduation. This nostalgic trip down memory lane is much more for the benefit of Updike and his tetralogy reader than for the characters, for whom all these places constitute daily touchstones, and who are unaware of the relevance of the locales to the Harry Angstrom saga. In "Rabbit Remembered," the unusual (for Updike) sentimentality of the ending is a product of the two couples romantically coalescing, but even more significantly, it is generated by Updike's novella-spanning farewell to the fictional Diamond County, Pennsylvania, the Reading-inspired site of the four Rabbit novels which represent his best-known and most substantial contributions to American literature.

It is not my purpose to argue that the six other stories in *Licks of Love* addressed in this essay are as sentimental or nostalgic as the close of "Rabbit Remembered" with its poignant farewell tour of Brewer and deliverance of Nelson Angstrom from both 89 Joseph Street and Pennsylvania as well; what I maintain, instead, is that these stories can be read, similarly, as potential last stops at fictional sites, or valedictory visits with characters Updike had created previously in short stories. Billy Fosnacht in "Rabbit Remembered" is thoroughly obsessed with mortality ("I think about death, about being sealed in a little lead box and the whole universe going on, rotating, exploding . . . on and on, and eventually pooping out while I'm still in there, totally forgotten" [325]), and death anxiety is virtually the pedal chord of Rabbit Angstrom's 1,516-page existence. It seems incontrovertible that the creator of these characters (whose *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* and *Endpoint and Other Poems* are pervaded by thanatophobia) would begin closing accounts and saying goodbyes ahead of his final short story collection—*My Father's Tears and Other Stories* (2009)—in case *Licks of Love* (2000) turned out to be that terminus. Just as he concluded the Rabbit tetralogy in 1989 "because he wasn't sure he would be around to write another in a decade's time" (Begley 438–39), and he perceived *Memories of the Ford Administration* (1993) as "my *Tempest*, my valedictory visit to all my themes" (Begley 443), at least six of the *Licks of Love* stories can be illuminatingly read as provisional last stops at places Updike stories had been before, or as leave-takings of familiar Updike characters. Perceiving it as, partially, an assemblage of (as it turned out, premature) farewell fictions makes *Licks of Love* seem a more modally and thematically unified work than merely a selection of the shorter fictional works Updike produced between 1994 and 2000.<sup>1</sup>

Viewing these stories in the prism of valediction helps to account for a shared

tonality of “The Women Who Got Away,” “Lunch Hour,” “My Father on the Verge of Disgrace,” “The Cats,” “His Oeuvre,” “Natural Color,” and “Rabbit Remembered,” signaled in the closing novella: Nelson Angstrom wants to give his half sister, Annabelle, Harry Angstrom, “her father, his father, but when [Nelson] holds out his hands, the dust pours through them, too fine and dry and dead to hold. Time has turned the spectacular man to powder, in just ten years” (255). In the course of saying goodbye, Updike was also registering a pervasive sense of loss. After explaining at the end of his “Foreword to the Eaton Press Limited Edition of *Licks of Love*” that some of his age-peers have retired or died, Updike suggested, “I am packing my bag, it may be; at least my desk, as I write these words, is otherwise ominously clean” (644). That “ominously” pervades the six stories, although less so the sunnier resolution of the novella, “Rabbit Remembered.” This essay addresses those six short stories; a subsequent essay, provisionally titled “The Ominously Clean Desk,” will treat the Henry Bech farewell, “His Oeuvre,” and “Rabbit Remembered.”

The same impression of a largely diminished world that Nelson invokes is conveyed as well in *Licks of Love*'s first story, “The Women Who Got Away” (1995).<sup>2</sup> This narrative features no characters whose names we recognize but involves instead retrospective delineations of characters participating in entanglements about which Updike wrote many stories—what Martin, the story's narrator, refers to as “our sexual paradise,” or suburban adultery in the 1960s and 1970s. “The Sixties had taught us the high moral value of copulation,” Martin expounds, “and we were slow to give up on an activity so simultaneously pleasurable and healthy” (590). The libidinal participants differ from one Updike story to another, but the patterns of recalled sexual comminglings in Pierce Junction, New Hampshire, are highly predictable, so that even the social transgression aspect of communal promiscuity gets muted.

In “The Women,” Martin expresses only mild nostalgia for those bygone days;<sup>3</sup> his tone is weary, his retrospective vision not ecstatic but largely impassive. In taking leave of a subject so stimulating to Updike for story crafting, he (and Martin) discovered little vital eroticism surviving in their recollection of suburban carnality. Outside of Martin's admission that Winifred excites him into erection when they dance together at parties, there is very little sex represented in “The Women Who Got Away”—the story is almost sociological in its backward-looking preoccupation with the logistics rather than the erotics of adultery. One precept is to honor your lover's spouse whose bed you are despoiling/sharing, which is as close to a rationalization for Martin's ascription of the “high moral value of copulation” to

their culture as the narrative affords, and he acknowledges as well the unhealthy effects of “adultery’s risks and spasms of guilt, all those hoops of flame” (591). When Martin and his extramarital partner, Maureen, discuss divorcing spouses and marriage to each other, she rejects the prospect because of too many children, too many financial repercussions: “‘Don’t you see, Marty?’ she told me. ‘We’ve *done* it. We’d look at each other and all we’d see would be evidence of our *sin!*’” (598).<sup>4</sup>

“Sin” is not a word much bandied about among the conjunctioneers, but Maureen is imbued with an extratextual singularity the other characters lack. With her long red hair, disarming stare, and raucous sense of humor, Maureen invokes Joyce Harrington, for whom Updike nearly left his family in 1962 (Begley 228–30), and who is even more obviously the model for the protagonist’s former lover in a subsequent *Licks of Love* story, “Natural Color.” Martin is clearly as infatuated with Maureen as was Updike with Harrington: “When I try to recall our passion,” he confesses,

it comes not with X-rated images from our hours in bed but with a certain dull taste, the madeleine of an especially desolate minute in an idle day, the longing that made me, of a dull and hollow afternoon, insatiably crave the sound of her voice—lower and huskier over the phone, more thoughtfully musical, than it seemed when we were face to face. Her voice momentarily pushed aside the sore dread in which I lived in those years; her voice and its quick inspirations of caustic perception painted the world, which seemed to me rimmed with a vague terror, in bright, fearless colors (596).

His adoration for her prompts Martin into considering “the possibility that [Maureen]—and [his wife] Jeanne and all the women—had been suffering in our sexual paradise, stressed and taxed by the divergence from monogamy” (598). He doesn’t speculate about whether the divorces inexorably spawned by these infidelities affected women more negatively than men; instead, he offhandedly notes that Jeanne and he divorced later than most of the other couples had, and that he then moved to Nashua, the relocation resulting in his “losing track of the ins and outs in Pierce Junction.” Martin’s laconic description of his exchange of Jeanne and children for a Nashua woman, the new couple producing additional children, makes the process seem as mysterious as the logistics of Job’s replacement family.

Years pass, and Martin learns of the highway accident that kills Maureen, riding in a car driven by Audrey’s husband, a man Martin judges thoroughly unworthy of Maureen. “I could hardly believe that, after sublime us, Maureen could have taken up with this brute, this simpleton,” he complains. “Served her right, getting her neck broken . . .” (599). He hastily recants that callous dismissal, one com-

pletely incompatible with his deeply affectionate characterization of her voice as his merciful deliverer from dread, but this valedictory infidelity narrative, while acknowledging that real feelings can develop between partners amid spouse swaps, is ultimately highly critical of the culture of promiscuity. Unknowingly, Martin precipitates that critique in affirming that, "When I thought back to our hectic, somehow sacred heyday, it was, as I say, less in terms of the women closest to me, than of those in middle distance, relatively virginal, who had taken the siren call of the unknown with them as they disappeared over my horizon" (599). "This is an old device," Bottom objects to a scene the "rude mechanicals" consider performing in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Martin's deprivation erotics are, similarly, an "old device," a formula that Updike addressed in his 1965 review of Denis de Rougemont's *Love Declared*: "love becomes not a way of accepting and entering the world but a way of defying and escaping it. Iseult is the mythical prototype of that Unattainable Lady to whom the love-myth directs our adoration, diverting it from the attainable lady . . . who is at our side" ("More Love" 285). Updike often invoked this mythologically based endorsement of male subjectivity, but Martin's greater commitment to the women who "disappeared over my horizon" comes to a sorry resolution here.

A mall appropriately situated between Pierce Junction and Nashua that didn't exist during the era Martin characterizes as one in which the "hunger was not only mine, but pervaded our circle with the pathos of unsatisfied need" (597) is the site of that ethic's culmination and repudiation. Shopping for a grandchild's birthday in this "vast asphalt meadow paved with cars" that once was a dairy farm, Martin finds familiar the gait of a shopper "in the middle distance," and he ducks into a Gap store to conceal himself. Gazing out into the arcade, he watched as "Audrey, plumper and gray but still supple, passed" (600). The story's final paragraph effectively declares the dramatic consummation of "our sexual paradise," as Martin construed it, or its replacement by an alternative model: "Her companion, wearing trousers and a feathery short white hairdo and a quilted down vest, for a moment seemed a complete stranger, a solemnly pouting small man." Martin's gender assumptions, however, no longer correspond to actuality: "But then, with a stab of recognition that set off a senile stab of excitement behind my fly and jumped me a step farther back from the window, I saw; there was of course no mistaking the barrel-shaped owl body, the hooded dark eyes, the dainty extremities. Winifred. She and Audrey moved with the dreamy mutual submission of an old married couple. They were holding hands" (600).

Seeing the two "unattainable women" of his Pierce Junction days holding

hands not only verifies—his “senile stab of excitement” notwithstanding—their irremediable unavailability to him; it confirms as well Martin’s speculation of “the possibility that [Maureen]—and Jeanne and all the women—had been suffering in our sexual paradise, stressed and taxed by the divergence from monogamy” (598).<sup>5</sup> “The Women Who Got Away” got away for good, leaving our narrator in completely earned solitude, his “somehow sacred heyday” as lost to time as are his heterosexual entitlements. Martin’s latter-day expulsion from the “sexual paradise” anticipates that of Henry Bech in “His Oeuvre,” save that Bech, being a more culturally accomplished fellow, suffers his fall in triplicate.

Whereas Martin witnesses the passing of his sexual paradise from the vantage of a unisex Gap store in a mall, Frank, the protagonist of “Natural Color” (1998), glimpses the closing act of his affair with Maggie Chase from inside a drugstore, the anesthetizing merchandise surrounding him accentuating his bleak descent from the intensely physical affair they conducted twenty-five years before. Once Frank had with great reluctance terminated the relationship, he and his wife, Ann, moved from the town in which the affair transpired to one nine miles away, which explains why Frank is surprised to see Maggie in his present town while indicating that she has no ostensible reason to be here if not to encounter him. The story’s unanswered question—Updike’s stories nearly always contain at least one—is why Frank is so intent upon avoiding Maggie and the man with whom she has materialized. Frank’s rationale, “to spare himself the impact of confrontation, of introductions and chatter,” seems reasonable, but reason flees in the following sentence: “It was somehow an attack on him to have her striding about so boldly in his town” (677). Only someone overburdened with emotional baggage is likely to view Maggie’s appearance in town twenty-five years later as an “attack on him.”

In the hands of a less deliberate artist, the Joyce Harrington-inspired stories might convey predominantly the author’s discomfort with the closeness of these narratives to his own experience, and the early Harrington narratives *do* bear a complicated publication history.<sup>6</sup> Like “The Morning” (1964) and “The Stare” (1965), which seem to provide more details about Harrington than the other stories despite her fictional stand-in’s never—to both narrators’ deep disappointment—actually appearing in either story, Maggie exists in “Natural Color” only through Frank’s memories of her, his brief sighting of her from inside his drugstore bunker, and from Ann’s quick conversation with her at a Stop & Shop, which she subsequently shares with her husband for amusement he never experiences. As it turned out, “Natural Color” is not the last Updike story to derive at least partially from the Harrington relationship—Leila in “Free” (2002) lacks the prominent

red attribute (“Maggie considered her hair a glory” [676]), but she has the “lovely eyes” capable of intense stares and the ability to goad Henry into facing up to the uncomfortable truth of his double disloyalties. A semblance of her voice emerges discomfitingly to Fogel from a young female passenger on a flight in “Short Easter” (1988): “It had been a bath, her voice, in which he grew weightless, an iridescent bubbly uplifting in which floated always a question to which his maleness, uncomprehending and slow as it was, was the only answer” (414). Nonetheless, “Natural Color” exudes an aura of finality, one leavened by Frank’s frenetic need to avoid her and the paucity of his last sighting of her, while conveying a good deal of subtextual desolation that this terminus is so terribly meagre compared to the import of her cumulative meaning in Frank’s life. The art of “Natural Color” consists in the story’s dramatization of what Frank feels but cannot express in his wordless farewell to Maggie; ironically, as in “The Morning” and “The Stare,” the more distantly Maggie is framed in “Natural Color,” the more emotional weight she accrues for Frank and the reader.

For that reader’s benefit, Frank mentally rehearses details of their affair, including his termination of it, memories which stoke his resentment of her for recovering from that severance and moving on with her life: “Sexual jealousy of a wholly unreasonable sort raged in him as he blindly stalked between the cold tablets and the skin lotions, the sleeping tablets and the stomach-acid neutralizers” (677). In fact, it had been sexual jealousy which had first inspired him to sleep with her after she’d revealed to him her wanton promiscuity during a separation from her husband. “It was a kind of race,” he recalls, “in which he had fallen dangerously behind. The men she had slept with were each still in her, a kind of investment, generating interest while he had been chastely admiring her from afar” (678).<sup>7</sup> The story never establishes whether Frank is a financier, but his depository metaphors suggest as much, and once he has made his investment in her, he rails against every previous investor. “You’re *hard* on me, Frank,” she complains when he accuses her of staying with a husband Frank describes as “big, red-faced, his heavy head lowered with clumsy, shortsighted menace,” and he charges that her “remaining in the marriage was a sign of weakness, a meek acceptance of daily pollution.”

“You have anything better to offer?” Maggie wonders (678).

Their stay-together/break-it-off debate continues, culminating in her phrasing of a question that might usefully be posed to many of Updike’s self-absorbed amorists: “Frank . . . why does everything always have to come back to you?”

“‘Because,’ he could have answered, ‘you have made me love myself’” (679), his response only confirming the validity of her question.

The affair having ended, “Frank and Ann hunkered down in embattled, re-crematory renewal of their vows, mixed with spells of wearied humorousness.” Confusedly, Frank “found himself Maggie’s enemy, having failed to become her husband” (679), thereby relegating Ann to the contradictory status of Maggie’s partisan. “In truth, the marriage had in the short run fattened on the affair,” the narrator notes: “Ann was impressed that he had made a conquest of the spectacular Maggie, and [when Ann learned of the affair] Frank was impressed by his cool wife’s flare of jealous passion. It was as if Maggie, in her bereft, ostracized state, were a prize they had jointly dragged home” (680). He and Ann were “united, it seemed to him, in admiration of Maggie—two suppliants bowed beneath a natural force” (681). But then, experiencing the predictable male ambivalence toward anything “jointly dragged home” or connubially uniting, “Frank was divided between acquiescence in [Maggie’s social] exclusion [after her divorce]—her power over him, the grandeur she had for him, left no room for pity—and an impossible wish to reunite, to say the words to her that would lift them above it all and put them back in bed together” (681). So self-pitying are Frank’s post-affair musings that, at numerous points in “Natural Color,” the reader wonders whether the story’s presiding mode is skeptical sympathy or bemused irony.

The marital antinomies over Maggie established, all that remains is for Ann to entertain Frank with an account of her supermarket conversation with Maggie, one whose forthrightness is prefigured by a debate Ann and Frank had had when the affair had just begun. Ann insisted then that Maggie’s red hair was dyed; Frank was unable to counter that “if Maggie dyed [her hair] she dyed her pubic hair to match” (676). Ann has mischievously resolved that this conversation will be a delightful observance of the couple’s having survived the threat to their togetherness from twenty-five years ago. For his part, Frank, preparing to exit the drugstore, recalls Maggie, wearing a bathing suit or less, welcoming him when he drove to her house: “She would bound into his arms like a long, smooth, shivering puppy. He stared at the Sudafed and Contac, his whole body swollen by a stupid indignation at having lost all that” (683).

As he approaches it, his home seems “a weathertight box, a well-built tract house on a two-acre square of land” (683)—someplace, in other words, that affords security from the external world where, for Frank, all vitality resides; the foundation-masking shrubs, planted when they moved in, are now overgrown, “crowding the brick steps and front windows” in a way Frank construes as claustrophobic. “I saw an old friend of yours at the Stop and Shop,” Ann greets him

brightly, adding that she already has “scads” of the perfumed bath gel he purchased as pretext for having spent so long in the drugstore. Ann confides that Maggie’s companion resembled Sam, Maggie’s husband back then, who was “big and red-faced and take-charge,” reminding Frank that at “the height of their affair their spouses seemed small and pathetic beneath them, like field mice under a hawk, virtually too small to discuss” (684). Faced now with the possibility that Maggie’s “daily pollution” continues with this “big and red-faced” Sam substitute, the recollection sours his expression, prompting Ann to complain, “You’re no fun, Frank. I bring you this goodie, and you look constipated.”

Ann intuits that Martin actually saw Maggie, and she wonders why he didn’t approach her, assuring him that Maggie “would have been nothing but pleasant, I’m sure.” (Ann explains that she and Maggie conversed amiably about shopping malls and gluten-free flour, which likely flummoxes Frank with its irredeemable dailiness.) Frank’s admission that he “didn’t like the look of the thug she was with” makes Ann worry that his skittishness “doesn’t speak very well for *us*,” which prompts his interior reflection that “Infidelity . . . widens a couple’s erotic field at first, but leaves it weaker and frazzled in the end. Like a mind-expanding drug, it destroys cells” (685). Going unmentioned is the fact that those cells have had twenty-five years in which to expire. Eventually, Frank and Ann revert to where their Maggie exchange originally started: “I felt nothing, I felt repelled,” Frank insists about glimpsing her, but Ann decides that his description of Maggie—“I saw this flash of red hair down below the post office”—betrays more accurately his feelings.

“She’s dyeing it an impossible color these days” [Ann reports].

“You always said she dyed it.”

“And she always did. Certainly now.”

“I don’t think so. Not Maggie.”

“Oh, you poor thing, her hair would be as gray as yours and mine if she didn’t dye it. She looked cheap, cheap and whorish, which is something I couldn’t have honestly said before. You were smart not to allow yourself a look up close.”

“You bitch. I know Maggie’s hair better than you do” (685).

Ann is threatened by his anger, but “she was safe, he was not even seeing her. The woman he did see, stepping naked toward him across a sun-stripped carpet, was the one who, as long as he loved her, he must hate” (685).

Frank’s intimate knowledge of Maggie’s anatomy is reinvoiced here, but the

gender contestation between husband and wife goes beyond that. Frank continues privately to agree with Maggie that “her hair [is] a glory” (676), that its natural color is the effusion of her essential human beauty; to Ann, Maggie’s hair merely manifests what women do to attract men, one of their predictable erotic wiles men can’t see through. On this note of irreconcilability the story ends, the last line effectively explicating the story’s central premise of Frank’s continuing love for Maggie contending with his all-too-male incapacity to acknowledge that feeling to anyone but himself. How sympathetic should the reader be toward Frank’s future of protracted concealment, his aptitude for perceiving an image of a woman in his mind to the exclusion of registering his wife standing before him? Just as sympathetic as it makes us to realize that Frank hid in the drugstore not so that Maggie would not see him, but so that he would not have to see her—so that he could continue to image up the “spectacular” Maggie of his memory as opposed to the elderly, “cheap and whorish” Maggie whom Ann, in a distinctly retributive mood, claims to have encountered. He won’t hear this because, however much his nature is circumscribed by the confines of a drugstore, he nonetheless retains his desperate need to remain, all by his lonesome, “a suppliant before a natural force.”

Arguably, Joyce Harrington’s fictional stand-ins appear physically so seldom in Updike’s short stories because rehearsing the pain of her absence was so much more compelling than limning an actual woman liable to converse about shopping malls and gluten-free flour. In “Kodachrome,” songwriter Paul Simon contended that if one brought together all the women he knew when he was single, they’d never match his sweet imagination, because everything looks worse in black and white (88). That “flash of red” means far too much to Frank’s—and Updike’s—“sweet imagination” to view it in black and white or ever allow its fading to gray. “Natural Color” constitutes his concerted effort at *not* yet saying goodbye, and Updike’s as well.

Had *Licks of Love* been Updike’s final story collection, “Lunch Hour” (1995) would have comprised his farewell to Olinger. The densely textured evocation of his Olinger High School days would have made for an extremely effective fictive leave-taking, which is very much what the story is about. David Kern, the Olinger alter ego Updike selected for highly autobiographical stories (“Pigeon Feathers,” “The Blessed Man of Boston. . .,” “Packed Dirt, Churchgoing. . .,” “The Cats,” “The Lens Factory,” “The Walk with Elizanne,” and “The Road Home”) is not in love with Olinger classmate Julia Reidenhauser, but “Lunch Hour” reads like an intensely sincere acknowledgment of a classmate’s impact on his high school life. Given the absence of drama in “Lunch Hour,” what urgency the story achieves

seems generated by its need to express gratitude to Shillington through the continuing Olinger saga while Updike could still craft it. Unlike most of the Olinger stories, “Lunch Hour” contains a critical edge in its depiction of the town; Julia’s role in the narrative is to conduce in David a measure of opposition to it.

As in “The Egg Race” (1977) and “The Walk with Elizanne” (2007), the frame of “Lunch Hour” is an Olinger High School reunion. (Updike acknowledged never having missed a Shillington High reunion, nor returning from one without a short story [*Due Considerations* 644–45].) After years of nonattendance of the event, Julia, a “German beauty, sallow-skinned, carrying herself as if simply being herself was quite enough” (604), appears with her friend Doris, the narrator explaining that Julia “lived in Schenktown, six miles from Olinger, and hadn’t entered the school system until the ninth grade. She was not a slave to the old Olinger magic the way Mamie and Betty Lou and Ann were” (602). In most of the Olinger stories, David qualifies as an acolyte of that magic, and he requires this latecomer to help lift the spell, much as Annabelle Byer inspires Nelson’s liberation from his mother’s home in “Rabbit Remembered.”

*Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* predominantly celebrates Updike’s relationship to Shillington, as in his avowal, “My own deepest sense of self has to do with Shillington. . . . I become exhilarated in Shillington, as if my self is being given a bath in its own essence” (220). His memoirs contain as well, however, an undercurrent of ambivalence about Shillington which becomes a substantial thematic trope of David’s recollections throughout “Lunch Hour,” and in “My Father on the Verge of Disgrace” as well. Updike could not help but be influenced by his mother’s perception of Shillington, a place she needed to remove him from because of its “small minds, small concerns, small hopes” (*Self-Consciousness* 37), and he resented the vectors of politics and class there—“the central, power-laden Shillington transactions from which my own family, for all their originality and pretensions to quality, was excluded” (*Self-Consciousness* 221). To its credit, though, Olinger also constituted a “middle” of the kind that Updike often celebrated:

Olinger retained, at least in the minds of [Kern’s] 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 urban industrial town now increasingly dominated by its citizens of color. The people of Olinger were proud of being where they were, and David still felt his initial departure, set in motion by his mother, as a loss. (603)

The farm to which she moved the family represented the barrier through which “his mother had expected to place an irrevocable remove between her family and the town” (608). For his part, Updike’s greatest compliment to Olinger may be identifying it with his Olinger High School social studies teacher, a colleague of his teacher father who rescued him from choking and whom he could not regard in the classroom “without love, as the embodiment of the benign forces in Shillington that protected and preserved me for something beyond” (*Self-Consciousness* 92). Olinger High’s David has already committed himself to “something beyond,” “plotting a life for himself after Olinger, following his mother’s lead after all” (608), with Julia co-mentoring his incipient revolt.

Upon arriving at the reunion, adult David is “nervous, jittery, trying too hard to fit into the Olinger groove,” but he then becomes “aware of feeling altered in the presence of Julia and little Doris. He became another self, calmer and taller” (604). A central purpose of “Lunch Hour” is to interrogate the source of that alteration. 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). Before repudiating this passage as trivializing, the reader needs to remember Updike’s lifelong struggle with psoriasis (described in “At War with My Skin” in *Self-Consciousness*) and the threat that malady posed of excluding him from normalcy, as well as the trauma of the move to Plowville, which, in “Lunch Hour” is described this way: “He had gone from being an Olinger boy to being a homeless waif, a bumpkin clinging to the status of a student. Of his class, he came from the farthest away” (605). David’s insecurities, admittedly, are of a high school register, but “Lunch Hour” by virtue of its intricate and nuanced evocation of the teenage milieu lends authority to his narrow process of epiphany.

The positive aspect of the Kern family’s move to Firetown is that, because in tenth grade David earned his driver’s license, and he and his father daily drove to Olinger from the sandstone farmhouse, the car was always available at school for him to drive his friends around during the hour scheduled for lunch. The freedom of those drives (in which Julia was a constant partner) is partly responsible for David’s evolving perception of Olinger: at the time of the 45th reunion, the county roads had been improved, but in 1948 “they formed an empty maze that called these licensed adolescents out, out from the high school with its crammed halls and classrooms, its perfumed and slick-haired mobs in angora sweaters and corduroy shirts and saddle shoes and penny loafers, its whispering seethe of ro-

mance and breakup and calculated misbehavior, and its merciless gradations of worth by Olinger standards—the shining ins and the shadowy outs, the attractive and admirable versus the many more who were neither” (607).

Like “A Sense of Shelter” (1960), “Lunch Hour” dramatizes an adolescent liberating himself from sentimental thralldom to his high school;<sup>8</sup> that Updike at age sixty-three was able to invoke such a vivid depiction of a teenager’s gradually dawning capacity for thinking critically about his institution is remarkable. In the story’s account, David was a “shadowy out” (in *John Updike’s Early Years*, Jack De Bellis persuasively shows that Updike in Shillington was far more “shining in”), and his gratitude to Julia stems from the fact that a social group had formed around her, so that “he was happy to be in a gang again, and took with him into the world the pride of membership, of acceptance” (608).

Julia is particularly valuable to David because, although he may not grasp it at the time, she and the group formed around her are another “middle”: taken up by the popular Olinger High girls without any exertion on her part, Julia commutes from Schenktown, which diminishes her social standing, and thus she and her lunch hour crew can be described among those who are neither “admirable or attractive,” but who are together nonetheless. Probably as a function of masculine rivalry, David ascribes to the other male riders a “countrified softness . . . as if life were innocent of undercurrents,” but he comprehends the nuances of these trips fully: “as if these devil-may-care lunchtime excursions were not an exhilarating exercise in bonding, in nerve, in escape from the order imposed back in Olinger High and the surrounding tight community of semidetached brick houses. There was something negative, something refusing about Julia that David liked, without being tempted to improve upon the pleasant sexlessness between them” (608). Readers will peruse many Updike stories before finding another in which a central female has little to do with erotic attraction, or is aligned with cultural opposition.

Julia is not alone responsible for modeling social resistance for David; in *Self-Consciousness*, Updike attributes to Shillington his development of “a certain indignation and independence also acquired there” (109). Overall, Julia is an attempt to personify Updike’s conflicting feelings about Shillington/Olinger—communality and resistance, acceptance and revolt. She, and the group assembled around her, represent a middle, a reconciliation of desires for togetherness plus rebellion. “Until tonight [at the reunion],” the narrator explains, “he had not distinctly seen how much that acceptance had been a prize Julia had passed on to him. . . . So that was why [at the reunion] he had felt relaxed and tall and grateful, known for what he was, seeing Julia Reidenhauser again” (609). Julia is remembered particularly

affectionately in “Lunch Hour” because she embodies the tension animating the story: she participates in the noontime rituals, but she does so with a demeanor that holds them at a distance. For Updike, fiction fabrication would have the same effect upon his attendance at Shillington reunions.

At the reunion, David wants her to meet his wife because “he was proud of knowing both of them, these women.” As the closing line clarifies, “Until Julia, he had only known growing girls” (610). Julia helped him see how to be of Olinger while secretly plotting a life beyond it. (Ironically, unlike David, Julia never leaves Pennsylvania.) David’s wife confirms Julia’s role in the story by telling him that “[Julia] seemed a bit above it all” (610). 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.” Inclusion plus distance is precisely how Updike negotiated his literary career; as “Lunch Hour” depicts it, acceptance plus independence are what Julia tutors David in. With Julia’s help, in “Lunch Hour” David Kern effectively says goodbye to high school, and in that story, Updike, from the vantage of his writing life, bids a provisional farewell to Olinger at the same time.

David Kern reemerges as the narrator of “The Cats” (1996), a story dramatizing his clearing out and selling of his mother’s sandstone farmhouse after her death. The stories in *Licks of Love* most evocative of a valedictory impulse in Updike are the three autobiographical narratives set in Olinger and/or Firetown, “Lunch Hour” (1995), “The Cats” (1996), and “My Father on the Verge of Disgrace” (1997), stories that enact the narrator’s invocation in “Lunch Hour” of the trajectory that so many Olinger stories delineate: “The basic treasure of [David’s] life was buried back there, in the town of Olinger, and he kept hoping to uncover it” (601). Updike was able to keep excavating for that Olinger/Shillington treasure in *My Father’s Tears and Other Stories*, offering extended fictional portraits of his mother and father in “The Laughter of the Gods,” “The Guardians,” “Kinderszenen,” and “My Father’s Tears.” Had things transpired otherwise, “The Cats” and “My Father on the Verge of Disgrace” would have represented effective literary farewells to his parents. Of the three *Licks of Love* Olinger/Firetown stories, the most structurally coherent and artfully resolved narrative is “The Cats.”<sup>9</sup>

Whereas David Kern in “Lunch Hour” is a serious adult drawing unironized conclusions about his high school maturation, the Updike alter ego in “The Cats” seems faintly comical in his hapless attempts to do something useful with the forty cats his mother’s death has bequeathed to him. (For David, as for Frank in “Natural Color,” a local’s description of his mother’s feline dilemma applies equally: “It was just nature kept getting ahead of her” [633].) While she was alive, her neighbor

Dwight Pottinger 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’” (627).<sup>10</sup>

David, a reluctant transplant to the farm at thirteen and a lifelong dissident from his mother’s love of nature, is depicted as being markedly more impatient with these “perplexities of mercy” than was Updike. “Feeding these half-feral animals,” David huffily reports, “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” (625). The distance he has maintained between himself and the farm renders David particularly ill-suited to deal with this country dilemma, one exacerbated by his guilty awareness that “Davey” has never found a way of responding effectively to the cat population explosion or with his mother’s hope that he would move his family to the farm and prevent its succumbing to development. Underlying this narrative, of course, are Updike’s self-recriminations for abandoning his mother at the farm for twenty years, his ambivalence about selling the property, and his understanding that these cats are David’s mother, her belief in the sanctity of nature incarnated. For David, guilt is offset by resentment.

“Moving [to Firetown] when I was a boy,” David recalls, “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” (626–27). Like his namesake in “Lunch Hour,” 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,<sup>11</sup> and two grown children, one of them with a child of her own. I don’t want to be here, I never did.” Significantly, this declaration of independence from the sandstone farmhouse and environs is being addressed to the cats whose desperate circumstances he must resolve. (Begley’s *Updike* briskly registers that Updike “negotiated with the county humane society to gas the cats” [433], but there’s no compellingly Oedipal literary narrative there.) “And,” David continues to his audience, “if you can think of a better place, go to it, because, my 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). They shouldn’t have gotten sucked into a system, that is, in which humanity seeks to redeem them from the brutality of nature, thereby eventually confronting the victims with an

amplification of that cruelty, their would-be benefactor in the end having become just another system casualty.

Throughout the story, David alternates between a desire to rid himself of these ravenous animals and the recognition that they represent his mother's final interaction with the natural world she loved so intensely. Pottinger tells David about the cats learning how to climb the stable doors to get at the barn swallows nesting there; David's response is, "I hurried on, away from such sadness" (628). In his most sympathetic rumination upon them, David acknowledges that "the persisting fact of the cats gnawed at me; at night I would wake up with my mother's ghost wavering in the room, over where Evelyn had dropped her white bathrobe on the back of a chair, and want to scream, in shame and helplessness. The runny-eyed kittens, staggering with hunger. Why had they been called into life?" (642).

In addition to contending with his mother's devotion to nature, David must face his wife's peevish identification of him with it. His "elegant wife Evelyn," brought to the farm with her children for the funeral, ridicules him for indulging the cats: "Maybe they'll stop yowling once we turn off the lights," she said. "Isn't it time they faced reality?" (631). Reluctant to echo his mother, David suppresses the reply that cats can't "face reality" in any other way than starving to death. Determining that the "last case" of cat food not be final, David suggests that someone drive to get more. Evelyn nominates him: "'He's the country boy,' my wife told [David's daughter's husband] Hiram, with a collusive smile. 'Let's let him go.' To me, she said, 'You love those windy old roads. You can commune with your mother'" (631). He returns with pretzels, a boyhood treat, and wishes he had bought ice cream to complement them. "'Goodness,' my wife said, from the overstuffed wing chair my mother used to sit in, watching one inane program after another, 'You are really reverting'" (634). It's almost funny that David's past and present keep colliding with each other, but his incapacity to react effectually to either deceased mother or live wife points up his own failure to reconcile himself with nature. But then, he may be only validating his mother's core belief: "People had always struck her as inept, compared with animals" (636).

Further compounding David's frustrations with his penultimate visit to the sandstone farmhouse, he discovers in his mother's desk on the morning of the funeral a letter addressed to him, outlining her final wishes. She asked that her burial be very simple, that David buy the least expensive casket available, and that donations be made to the Boone County Humane Society in lieu of flowers. "I had done it all wrong," David acknowledges, having arranged for a Lutheran ceremony, bought the second-most-expensive coffin in the undertaker's basement,

and made no announcement about flowers. Although her letter never mentions the cats, David uses the Boone County Humane Society address she cites to seek assistance with his dilemma. Because every positive action of David's sparks an opposite reaction of rebuke, at the humane society Amy Stauffer fondly remembers his mother: "She always spoke of you as the one who'd take charge. She'd say to me, 'Amy, I know the neighbors think I'm crazy, but I'm just holding the fort for Davey'" (639). In fact, it is Amy Stauffer who takes charge, offering to have a local man set Havahart traps at the house and to bring the captives to the humane society. Delivered gratefully from the fort he had no intention of holding, David contributes \$250 to the humane society, thereby fulfilling his mother's donation request, which he calculates to be about six dollars per cat.

David imagines that he's fallen in love with Amy Stauffer for offering the solution to his problem, but over the weeks her would-be trapper never appears, and Amy suggests that there's nothing to do but let the cats die off from natural causes. In the months that follow, David negotiates from New Brunswick the farm's sale: "I felt guilty, selling the place," he explains. "My mother believed it to be a piece of lost Eden and wanted me to live on it for my own good. . . . 'Tell Evelyn,' she said, 'that I've never felt right, as a woman, off this place. There's magic in the soil, I do believe it'" (641). David's deflated tone throughout the narrative suggests that he finds magic nowhere. His one solace while the house is being readied for sale: those on-site assure him that the cats have vanished.

David's last trip months later to the farm he inherited and has now sold re-sounds of balked resolution, of emotional regrets. He completes a few last chores on the property no longer his, calling them "Busywork. To salve my conscience and the wound left when a piece of your life is removed." Donning a coat his father wore on weekends and his mother used subsequently during the winters, he finds that his dilemma has not resolved itself: "As I drifted in my inherited coat across the lank grass, . . . a few shadows filtered out of the orchard and flickered toward the house, eagerly loping. Several more materialized from the direction of the woods. These cats had survived. They thought I was my mother and that good times had returned" (644).

"Your mother wouldn't want you to do the impossible" (639), Amy tells David when he expresses guilt over departing Firetown, but in feeding the cats and thereby protecting the birds from feline predation, his mother had accomplished the nearly impossible feat of reconciling the human and the natural. Because he wears the coat she used when feeding them, the cats take David for her, but he's only a counterfeit savior, one who has arrived at no answer to the question, "Why

had they been called into life?” nor to the corollary question, what are their lives worth measured against his familial/professional life in New Jersey? For neither David nor these animals have good times, embodied in his mother, returned. David seeks to say goodbye to his mother in “The Cats,” but the title characters just won’t let him.

With the exception of “The Sandstone Farmhouse,” nowhere in his fiction other than in “The Cats” did Updike depict more effectively his deep affection for his mother balanced with the challenges to his peace she posed in life and after it; submitted to *The New Yorker* five weeks after “The Cats” appeared in the magazine, “My Father on the Verge of Disgrace” seeks to accomplish an analogous illumination of Updike’s father.

In “Lunch Hour” we noticed a relatively new emphasis in Updike stories of political critique leveled against Shillington/Olinger for the leadership of the town which excluded the Updike family from participation. This critical stance becomes one of the motivations for “My Father on the Verge of Disgrace.” “In this present day of strip malls and towns that are mere boundaries on a developer’s map,” the unnamed narrator of “My Father” posits, “it is hard to imagine the core of authority that existed then [1940s] in small towns, at least in the view of a child—the power of righteousness and enforcement that radiated from the humorless miens of the central men.” Certain local merchants, the druggist and the school principal, “projected a potential for condemnation and banishment. To have this power, you had to have been born in the town, or at least in the locality, and my father had not been” (646). All his father knows of power, in other words, is being politically subject to it.

This shift is significant because, in his “Note” for the *Best American Short Stories* 1998, Updike admitted, “No doubt about it, this story has something to do with my real father. It took me back into the mythic territory of memory out of which I wrote my novel *The Centaur* more than thirty-five years ago” (776). *The Centaur*, arguably, depicts George Caldwell so movingly and exhaustively that Updike modeled characters on his father infrequently after that 1963 novel, especially in comparison to stories based on his mother, who survived her husband by seventeen years, thereby generating new plots like those in *The Afterlife and Other Stories* and “The Cats,” stories addressed elegiacally to her death and its aftereffects. Notwithstanding Updike’s comment—“An aging writer cannot but notice how the events he keeps remembering change over time, generating new stories, for which he is grateful” (*Due Considerations*, 645)—even *his* past is subject to the laws of attrition. “My Father,” while being an effective fictional appreciation of Wesley Updike, feels

short on drama, its plot seeming more pretext for the literary farewell to Updike's father than a narrative like "The Cats," possessed of its own aesthetic dynamic. "My Father" has the characteristics that William Pritchard ascribed to stories in *The Afterlife and Other Stories*: "Like many of his stories over the decades, the best of these last ones don't read like 'stories' with a beginning, middle, and rousing end, but like reflective essays that explore a feeling, an inclination, in the direction of a clarifying moment." The semipolitical slant to the story constitutes the change in "My Father" that "generated a new story," as Updike put it, memories of the narrator's father's being "on the verge of disgrace" deriving from the local powers lording it over him and creating the social declivity into which he is (his son fears) at risk of slipping.

The narrator's recollections of "a child's sense of peril, of his and his family's inferiority within the perceived social system" (777), comprise the most evocative moments in "My Father," as in his overhearing his parents' conversations in their bedroom: "I could hear them talk at night, even when the words were indistinct, the hiss of unhappiness, of obscure hot pressures, came through the walls. '*That son of a bitch,*' my father would say, of some man whose name I had missed. '*Out to get me*'" (647). His father, he notes, "needed people, believed in their wisdom and largesse, as none of the rest of us who lived in the house did: four recluses and an extrovert. Imitating my mother, I early developed a capacity to entertain myself, with paper and the images it could be made to bear" (647). "My Father" is structured by the depiction of three "scandals" in which the father's actions threaten the family with disgrace, only the middle one of which seems a thoroughly credible threat to this educator's respectability.

A teacher colleague at a neighboring high school develops a relationship with an Olinger High student, and the narrator's father (who remains nameless) agrees to serve as go-between, passing on notes from his friend Otto Werner to the young woman in his class. Werner, a German, has a reputation for eccentricity, having shouted "*Heil, Hitler!*" from the steps of the University of Pennsylvania Library, but the narrator's father suspects nothing untoward in the notes he is conveying. When they are revealed to be love letters, he fears being charged with aiding and abetting the corruption of a minor. The family stewes over possible repercussions, his son acknowledging that the gesture "was like him; he was always doing people unnecessary favors" (648). This is the first instance in "My Father" of what Stanley Elkin conversationally termed a "pulled-punch catastrophe"—here, "The scandal with the girl somehow died away" (648), in part because, once the student graduated, Werner married her. Disgrace kept its distance.

The scandal that more fully justifies familial anxiety results from the father's penchant for skimming a few dollars off the ticket receipts from Olinger High athletic events when family finances fail to meet expenses, the father making up the difference when his paycheck arrives. (George Caldwell does the same in *The Centaur*.) His wife, Lucy, sees this as embezzlement, to which her husband responds, "What can I do, Lucy? We live poor as dump dogs anyway" (651). The story makes clear that "Daddy" "brings home the bacon," which casts in a mildly critical light the mother's unremunerated literary work upstairs and the son's conviction: "Paper, I felt, would protect me" (647). Not during the Depression it wouldn't, so the narrator hopelessly reconciles himself to jeopardy: "My father had to go on stealing from the school, and would someday be chased in his barrel down the Town Hall steps" (652). This never happens, either, though Updike admitted feeling anxiety about publishing these misdemeanors of decades past, "as if some surviving members of the schoolboard in the 1930s might demand from me the long-due reckoning" ("Note" 777).

The third scandal is one only the sensitive son of a "faculty clown" would sweat. The narrator's father volunteers to join other faculty at an assembly playing out the Pyramus and Thisbe scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Wearing a wig with pigtails, the narrator's father climbs the ladder to kiss Pyramus through Wall's chink, terrifying his son that this will precipitate the moment in which his father topples from respectability. The student audience howls through the scene, and the next day "my father loped through the halls with his head high, his hair parted in the middle as usual, in his usual shiny suit, and school life continued" (654).

Once the narrator as a seventh-grader enters the building in which his father teaches, the narrator's anxieties pivot from the fear that his father will be "brought low" to discomfort over rumors sifting down to him about his father devoting entire chemistry hours to "life lessons"—"you can't get something for nothing, there are no free rides" (652)—consisting of the same sayings that Updike ascribed to his father in *Self-Consciousness* (77). What students would prefer chemistry to such instruction?

At the end of the war, Lucy moves the family to her childhood farmhouse in the countryside, and the accounts of father and son commuting to school, "thrown together in a state of daily exile" (655), suffering car breakdowns and having to stay overnight on fellow teachers' couches or in fleabag hotels, are *The Centaur* without Greek myth. "We became, over those years of joint commuting, a kind of team," the narrator recalls—"partners in peril, fellow-sufferers on the edge of disaster"

(655), but neither peril nor disaster materializes. Often, the narrator's apprehensions of social retribution reveal more about him than they do about his father.

Updike closes off the "Verge of Disgrace" trope by having the narrator describe his father's allowing him to smoke in the car driving to school: "His tacit permission, coming from a schoolteacher, would have been viewed, we both knew, as something of a disgrace. But it was my way of becoming a human being, and part of being human is being on the verge of disgrace" (657). Perhaps so, but very few of Updike's other fictions dramatize protagonists on the verge of disgrace, largely because—with the significant exception of *Couples*—so few of the works create a complex social realm capable of defining and inflicting on characters accusations of disgrace.

Its title notwithstanding, "My Father on the Verge of Disgrace" is only glancingly about disgrace and the fear of victimization by it; like "A Traded Car," *The Centaur*, "The Gun Shop," and "My Father's Tears," this story dramatizes the narrator's ambivalent feelings toward his father's extroverted, socially oriented personality. (Updike's young alter egos are so consistently aligned with the mother figure, with her reclusiveness and her literary ambitions for him, that they are never completely comfortable with their fathers' unrestrained gregariousness.) The narrator suggests that "It was no mistake that [his father] had wound up in education; he believed that everyone had something to teach him." Encountering Olinger teachers relaxing between classes in Updike's magnificently re-created boiler room of the school, the narrator realizes that "Teachers were human. I was expected, eventually, to become one of them" (655). The story offers no evidence that he ever became one, and reconciling his own lack of enthusiasm for the profession with his father's avocation/occupation is one of the narrator's major challenges. "His suppliant air humiliated me," he continues, "but I was fourteen, fifteen; I was at his mercy, and he was at the mercy of the world." That humiliation remains so vivid in his mind that it generates a tellingly evocative simile: "I saw him rebuffed and misunderstood. Flecks of foam would appear at the corners of his mouth as he strove to communicate; in my helpless witnessing I was half-blinded by impatience and what now seems a fog of love, a pity bulging toward him like some embarrassing warpage of my own face" (655–66).

In "My Father on the Verge of Disgrace," the oblique tension exists between the narrator's real affection for his father and his awareness that his father's lack of dignity and his guileless trust in other people seem nearly inexcusable—in part because they place the family at risk of being disgraced, but also because the son

favors his mother's values of composure, self-containment, and skepticism toward others. Despite that preference, the narrator so internalizes his father's desperate striving to communicate with others that it actually warps his face in a way not dissimilar to Updike's *Memoirs* description of his own face when stuttering (80–81). A "fog of love" for his father competes with a "pity" that he can neither deny nor repress.

Like "The Blessed Man of Boston . . ." with its anonymous narrator, the narrator of "My Father on the Verge of Disgrace" is identified only as his father's son, which means that the narrative can be read as fiction (Updike's father taught math, not chemistry, and he never sold dishware ["Note" 777]) or as a lyric essay largely lacking in the resolution of the short story. Updike's "Note" on "My Father" provides testimony for this equivocality: "In truth I scarcely know what in this story is made up or not; it delves into a layer of my earthly duration so ancient and fraught that truth and fiction are interchangeably marvellous" (777). "My Father's Tears" (2006), the story which became the final narrative modeled on Updike's father, achieves a more marked closure because of the story's thematic ironizing of its narrator. When the story concludes, "My father's tears had used up mine" (851), the line draws together all the other evidence it provides that the narrator has been too preoccupied with his rise in the world beyond Alton to sustain deep affection for his father. Far more than "My Father on the Verge of Disgrace," "My Father's Tears" dramatizes the sensibility of a narrator more devoted to social advancement than he is to filial loyalty.<sup>12</sup> The last sentence of "My Father on the Verge of Disgrace" strikes a much more sincere and affectionate note: "Living his life beside him for five years, I had seen that his flirtation with disgrace was only that, not a ruinous infatuation. Nothing but death could topple him, and even that not very far, not in my mind" (657). In this instance, Updike was willing to sacrifice the closure of his narrative if doing so more movingly memorialized his feelings for his father.

Half of the stories in *Licks of Love*—"New York Girl," "Oliver's Evolution," "Licks of Love in the Heart of the Cold War," "How Was It, Really?," "Scenes from the Fifties," and "Metamorphosis"—contribute little to the valedictory themes I've been tracing here, but "The Women Who Got Away," "Lunch Hour," "My Father on the Verge of Disgrace," "The Cats," and "Natural Color," compellingly epitomize an author—prematurely, fortunately—intent upon saying goodbye. If a story or two seem to lack closure, a passage from "How Was It, Really?" suggests that the fault inheres less in artistic shortfalls than in human inattentiveness: "That was how it was, how it had been," the story's narrator explains, "the living moment

awash with beauty ignored, in the quest for a better moment, slightly elsewhere, with some slightly differing other, while the weeds grew in the peony beds, and dust balls gathered beneath the sofa, and the children, unobserved, plotted their own escapes, their own elsewheres" (693).

## NOTES

1. Even for a writer as prolific as Updike, 1994–2000 proved a remarkably productive six years. Following *The Afterlife and Other Stories* (1994), he published twenty stories, four of them Henry Bech narratives in addition to "His Oeuvre," included in *Licks of Love*; "Rabbit Remembered" (2000) was excerpted twice in *The New Yorker*, and A. A. Knopf published the novels *Brazil* (1994), *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), *Toward the End of Time* (1997), and *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000). *More Matter: Essays and Criticism* appeared in 1999, and *Licks of Love: Short Stories and a Sequel*, in 2000.

2. The story's title performs an entirely relevant gender reversal on the bluesy song Judy Garland renders in *A Star is Born*, "The Man Who Got Away."

3. That era Mr. Farnham, the protagonist of "Atlantises" (1978), the final story in Updike's *Problems and Other Stories* collection, perceives as a "lost continent": "Odd moments of his life there, as detailed and difficult of explanation as religious visions or archaeological finds, returned to him" (67). So desperately nostalgic for this lost world is Farnham that memories of the women he knew there, Mrs. Farnham insists, literally turn his eyes green. On Atlantis, he affirms sans irony, "Every woman was a priestess" (*Collected Later Stories* 68).

4. Craig Martin's wife in "Personal Archaeology" (2000) painfully recalls a party she and Craig attended in the midst of their affair, experiencing the same retrospective guilt that Maureen anticipates if she and Martin marry: "But it was so *wrong*. That time upstairs at the Rosses', the way you loped toward me in the hall, you were scary—like a big wolf out of the shadows. Your teeth gleamed" (709).

5. Updike made a similar point in a story collected in *Trust Me and Other Stories*, "The Lovely Troubled Daughters of Our Old Crowd" (1981), which poignantly dramatizes the daughters' trouble (their unmarried status) as a product of their parents' negative modeling of matrimony.

6. Adam Begley recounts the headaches Updike caused *The New Yorker* with stories such as "The Stare," "Leaves," "Avec La Babysitter," "The Morning," "Four Sides of One Story," "Solitaire," and "Museums and Women"—stories which, once the magazine had accepted them, had to be held back from publication, placed in the "shadow bank" because of their autobiographical contents, their fictionalizing of elements of the Joyce Harrington affair (233–35).

7. In a predominantly negative review of *Licks of Love*, James Wood objected that "Bech's crudity [the most marvelous lay] is not just his own, unfortunately. Of course, the prose trusses things in very pretty ribbons, but the hard, coarse, primitive, misogynistic worldview of these stories is a little astounding, even by Updike's standards."

8. Interestingly, William Nordholm in "A Sense of Shelter" similarly needs the example of a woman's—Mary Landis's—distancing from Olinger High to motivate his own volitional separation from it.

9. The critique of "The Cats" in these pages draws from, abridges, and revises that in Bailey, "Betrayal by Sandstone Farmhouse: Forgiveness in Updike's 'Pigeon Feathers' and 'The Cats.'"

10. The autobiographical basis of "The Cats" is substantiated in a 1980 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” (68).

11. Between the December 9, 1996, publication of “The Cats” in *The New Yorker*, and the version printed in *Licks of Love*, Updike made numerous revisions, primarily to names. The narrator is initially Frank, but in *Licks of Love* he is David, which prompts me to identify him in this essay as David Kern. The narrator’s wife in *The New Yorker* is Andrea; in *Licks of Love*, she is Evelyn. Given an unsympathetic portrait of Evelyn, Andrea may have seemed too close to Martha. Amy at the humane society in *The New Yorker* is Amy Reidenhauser, which Updike likely altered to Stauffer because in “Lunch Hour” (1995) he had named David’s Schenktown mentor Julia Reidenhauser. A more substantial revision was adding to Evelyn’s acerbic dismissal of her husband when he heads out for cat food, “You love those windy old roads,” the comment, “You can commune with your mother.” Evelyn and her children consistently express their disenchantment with the farm, and David resents that the family “failed to rise to the occasion” during the funeral.

12. Robert Milder persuasively argues in “Apologies to His Father (and Others)” that “My Father’s Tears” constitutes Updike’s apology to his actual father. See also Bailey, “More Distorted Mirrors: Updike’s Ironic Self-Portraits in *My Father’s Tears and Other Stories*.”

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# Who's Crying/Laughing at What, and Why? Notes on Autobiography and Fiction, with Reference to "My Father's Tears" and "The Laughter of the Gods"

ROBERT MILDER

## BIOGRAPHY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY, FICTION, CRITICISM

In his insightful *JUR* essay on *My Father's Tears* (2023), Peter J. Bailey generously credits my own essay on its title story but points to a difference. Where Bailey sees the story as "too fictional to be an apology to anyone real" ("More Distorted Mirrors" 100), I find interest in what I take to be its representation of Updike's continuing feelings of guilt toward persons and about life events. In my reading, Updike is not simply drawing upon private experience as material for fiction; through character, structure, and narrative technique he is imaginatively working through unresolved problems of his own even as he stands at a distance from his semi-autobiographical narrator.

At issue, practically and theoretically, is how to approach a literary work that has a known or evident basis in authorial experience and that, as I suggested in "Apologies to His Father (and Others)," confounds Wayne Booth's careful distinction between the "*dramatized author*" ("the 'I' who purportedly narrates much fiction"), the "*implied author*" responsible for the narrator and everything else in the text, the "*career author*" evidenced by "a sequence of implied authors," and the

“*postulated writer*” or “*flesh-and-blood person*” known so far as possible through extraliterary materials and the work of biographers like Adam Begley (Booth 269, 270, 268; Milder, “Apologies” 64). “The short stories are probably the most me, the most autobiographical,” Updike said of his fiction, but “almost always there is an extra twist. I mean you slightly exaggerate, you sometimes combine experiences, you often combine experiences you had with ones you didn’t have” (Plath, *Conversations* 195). Fiction and autobiography, as he and others have recognized, are not distinct categories but endpoints on a generic spectrum across which a writer may freely move from one work to another, as he himself did.

Bailey’s term for the “twists” in some of Updike’s late stories is “distorted mirrors” (87). Citing Updike’s reference to Philip Roth’s idea of fictional “impersonation,” Bailey sees impersonation at work in the volume *My Father’s Tears* as Updike ventures further from his lightly disguised “alter ego[s]” in previous writings “for the purposes of drama and thematic coherence” (87, 88). Impersonation, however, isn’t restricted to stories like those Bailey discusses or even to fiction; autobiography itself is a form of impersonation. In *The Facts* (1988), Roth’s announced effort “to restore [his] experience to [its] original, prefictionalized factuality” (3), the writer has his alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, deliver a scathing critique of the manuscript, which Zuckerman finds lacking in Rothian *brio*: “Your gift,” Zuckerman chides the author who created him and is now putting words in his mouth, “is not to personalize your experience but to personify it, to embody it in the representation of a person who is *not* yourself” (162). Worse yet, Zuckerman charges, Roth’s putative account of himself is self-serving and evasive, a “telling in order not to tell” (164). “Is this really ‘you,’” Zuckerman asks, “or is it what you want to look like to your readers at the age of fifty-five? . . . Are you not aware yourself of [your book’s] fiction-making tricks? Think of the exclusions, the selective nature of it, the very pose of fact-facer? Is all this manipulation truly unconscious or is it pretending to be unconscious?” (164). With Zuckerman as its literary conscience, *The Facts* becomes an arrangement of mirrors that playfully subverts the autobiographer’s stance of veracity. “Personification,” it implies, is everywhere.

A criticism like Zuckerman’s might be made of Updike’s claim of “impersonal egoism” in his Foreword to *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* (xiii).<sup>1</sup> Even as he presents himself as stepping outside his fictional personae to “touch honestly upon the central veins” of his life “with a scientific dispassion and curiosity” (xiii), Updike is aware of the incompleteness, even the factitiousness, of his facts. “Merciful forgetfulness” (a charitable euphemism for Zuckerman’s “exclusions”?) “has no doubt hidden many other echoes from me, as well as eroded the raw material of

autobiography into shapes scarcely less imaginary, though less final, than those of fiction" (xiii). In his self-consciousness about the "prefictionalized" truth of *Self-Consciousness*, Updike is in accord with modern autobiographical theory, which, as Paul John Eakin remarks, views "memory and imagination" as "so intimately complementary in the autobiographical act that it is usually impossible for autobiographers and their readers to distinguish between them in practice" (6). The vacancies and erosions Updike cites can be imaginatively productive insofar as they allow the writer to fill gaps and organize events in ways of his choosing. Where once there had been discrete memories with sketchy connections, there is now the harmony of personal myth, aesthetically satisfying but for that reason epistemologically suspect. Cognizant of this, the autobiographer may turn against his enterprise, as Updike wryly did in the dialogue between "SELF" and "OPPOSITIONAL OTHER" with which he originally thought to end *Self-Consciousness*. Weary of his book and feeling it less truthful than fiction, "which does not pretend to be true," the OPPOSITIONAL OTHER wonders if it should be published at all—to which SELF replies, "Oh, go ahead. It was written, after all, only by Updike; it has nothing to do with me" (Updike, *Higher Gossip* 472). "Me" is John Updike the "flesh-and-blood person," "Updike" the verbally created personality offered to the public as if it were his genuine self.

Late in *Self-Consciousness* Updike acknowledges the shortcomings of the most reflective of its chapters, "On Being a Self Forever," which "strains to be true but nevertheless is not true enough. Truth is anecdotes, narrative, the snug opaque quotidian" (234); in other words, truth is in the circumstanced particularity of fiction. Where autobiographies are apt to become "Advertisements for Myself" (as Norman Mailer titled a book), novels and stories provide the writer license and cover and may have a displaced autobiographical truth too intimate to be disclosed in memoir. This was the opinion of William Dean Howells as he reflected upon the subject in one of his own late memoirs: "Let [the autobiographer] not be afraid of being too unsparing in his memories; the instinct of self-preservation will safeguard him from showing himself quite as he was. No man, unless he puts on the mask of fiction, can show his real face or the will behind it. For this reason the only real biographies are the novels, and every novel, if it is honest, will be the autobiography of the author and biography of the reader" (127).

Autobiography as a self-protective fiction offering itself as truth; fiction as covert self-revelation whatever its literal relationship to a writer's life; and reading (or literary interpretation) as itself an autobiographical act to the extent that it is refracted through a "phenomenological" lens that "influence[s] how we position

ourselves in relation to the texts we encounter and what strikes us as most salient” (Felski 22). Like Henry James’s house of fiction, the house of criticism has numerous windows of varying shapes and sizes facing outward upon a text, at each of which stands a viewer with his or her “unique instrument” for “observation” (James 7). There is no privileged window and no observer free from what Emerson called the “colored and distorting lenses which we are” (487).

In *Rabbit (Un)redeemed* Bailey’s chosen window is “single author literary criticism” as it “illuminates the human drama of an individual novelist’s book-by-book struggle” with the “preoccupations” and themes that characterize his or her work (Bailey, *Rabbit (Un)redeemed* 13). The author Bailey attends to with *My Father’s Tears* is a more limited figure, Updike as “implied author” extending outward at times toward “career author” but stopping short of the “postulated writer” from whose life the writing emerged and in whose context it has its fullest resonance. While we can’t, with a given work, know an author’s “intention” in the sense of “design or plan in the author’s mind,” as Wimsatt and Beardsley argued in their classic brief against “the intentional fallacy,” we can turn their critique against itself through a textualism that regards the form of the work as itself indicative of what the writer “was trying to do” (1015). “The problem of structure” with any literary work, R. S. Crane wrote, is how “its material elements of whatever kind—words, images, symbols, thoughts, character-traits, incidents, devices of representation”—are “related to its formal nature,” and “it is answered” for the work when we can formulate a “cause without the assumption of which, as somehow effective in the writing,” the various parts of the work and “their arrangement,” “proportioning,” and “interconnections cannot be adequately understood” (166).

Insofar as such an approach is wholly textual, its inferable “cause” will be internal, pertaining to the choices of content and technique made by its “implied author.” To pass from the intentionality manifest *within* a work to the writer responsible for it, one might draw upon Kenneth Burke’s notion of literary texts as symbolic actions on the part of their creator rather than simply artistic creations. “The motivation out of which [a writer] writes,” Burke theorized, “is synonymous with the structural way in which he puts events and values together when he writes, however consciously he may go about his work” (18). A story may be autobiographical or semi-autobiographical—this is a matter of content—but it may also be “autobiomorphic” in that its form and relatedly its meaning derive from pressures in the writer to address a problem extraneous to the work. This is the “human drama” more inclusively evidenced in and by a literary work. Beyond attending to the details in a text as they function to shape the reader’s response and

prompt an interpretive hypothesis, the question I would ask of a text is, “What is being enacted here, and why?”<sup>2</sup>

Consider the following a preliminary meditation on this subject—on Updike, directly, but through him on the subtle and varying relationship between autobiography, fiction, and critical interpretation as suggested, first (as an example), by “My Father’s Tears,” then, more complexly, by one of Updike’s most problematic stories, “The Laughter of the Gods.”<sup>3</sup>

#### APOLOGIES ACTUAL AND IMAGINED

Bailey notes, as I did, how little of “My Father’s Tears” is devoted to narrator James Werley’s father (“More Distorted Mirrors” 100; Milder, “Apologies” 63). A section is given to James’s father-in-law, a gentle Unitarian minister, and a longer one to his first wife, Deb, one of the many fictional incarnations of Mary Pennington. Bailey sees the story as an example of (in Updike’s words) “the fugal form, combining obliquely related incidents under the aegis of a presiding meditative voice” (99). If so, the interpretive issue becomes one of the story’s unifying interest. Were I to do a purely formal analysis of the story, I might argue that its organizing principle is James Werley’s sense of guilt and need to air his felt transgressions, atone for them so far as he can, extenuate himself when he cannot, and in one way or another come to terms with feelings from the past that continue to rankle and, as he discovers at the story’s end, have dried up his tears. By itself, however, such a reading neglects too many issues raised by a work filled with autobiographical details and allusions familiar to Updike readers. Missing from its discussion of the *What* of the story (its themes and motifs; James’s psychology) and of its *How* (structure and language as they body forth these things) would be a consideration of its *Why*: the “motivation” (to use Burke’s word) that might have led Updike to write such a story at all and handle its subject in the particular way he does.

In “Getting the Words Out,” a chapter in *Self-Consciousness* about speaking and writing, Updike attributes his occasional stutter to his sense of being “in a false position” and urgently needing to right (or write?) himself before others (80). The “false position” for James and Updike in “My Father’s Tears” is their awareness of injuries done to three innocents—the deceased father, the deceased father-in-law, and the discarded wife. In the memoir Updike notes that having left his wife and family for another woman, he “began to stutter with my own children. . . . Suddenly I was afraid, again, of being misunderstood, of being mistaken for somebody else” (102). Decades after the divorce and the deaths of his father and father-in-law Updike is still morally stuttering. “Critical and imaginative works,” Burke remarked,

are “strategic answers, stylized answers” to “questions posed by the situation[s] in which they arose”; they “size up the situations, name their structure, and name them in a way that contains an attitude towards them” (3). The “situation” in “My Father’s Tears” is the fictional James’s, but since his transgressions are a lightly fictionalized version of Updike’s, the “situation” is vicariously Updike’s as well, and the “strategies” James uses to negotiate it are vehicles for the writer.

The strategies vary according to the nature of the injuries and the readiness of character and author to acknowledge them and make verbal amends. With Updike’s father, the wrongs are evidenced both dramatically by autobiographically based characters in the fiction (notably, by Peter Caldwell in his attitude toward his father in *The Centaur*) and descriptively in Updike’s fictional representations of the father as hapless, prone to seriocomic disaster, and not to be taken as seriously or related to as intimately as the mother.<sup>4</sup> In “My Father’s Tears” apology expresses itself in James’s nostalgic appreciation of his father, filled with a love that neither he nor other Updike sons were able to voice when their father was alive. The father-in-law is a kind of second father for James and Updike but impaired for them by his rivalrous status as father-in-law and by his theologically objectionable Unitarianism, derided elsewhere in Updike’s fiction and essays. “They were quite quarrelsome and I was shocked,” Mary remembered of her husband’s and her father’s exchanges, “he [Updike] was insulting my father, who took it pretty calmly” (Begley 107). Apology to the father-in-law takes the form of James/Updike’s mild self-upbraiding for his “graceless” behavior, by a tribute to the father-in-law’s character (I loved him, in fact. . . . He was a transparently good man who took himself with a little Maine salt”), and by a rueful recognition applicable to the paternal father as well: “It is easy to love people in memory; the hard thing is to love them when they are there in front of you” (LS 844, 845).

With Deb/Mary, the situation is more complicated, and in place of apology Updike has James tread lightly on the subject and seek to justify himself. A paradox in Updike’s fictional portraits of his marriage is that its betrayed wives (Deb, Ruth Conant in *Marry Me*, Angela Hanema in *Couples*, Phyllis Mackenzie in *Villages*, the unnamed girl/wife in “Museums and Women,” Joan Maples in a succession of stories) are portrayed more favorably than their husbands, whose infidelities (which parallel Updike’s) have eroded their character and made them devious and insincere. Even when the wives have also been unfaithful, they are committed to the marriage and anxious to repair it, as Mary was; the husbands want the mistress(es), or an ideal of personal and sexual freedom associated with the mistress(es). Whether from gallantry, respect, or a wordsmith’s rare inability

to find the right words, Updike leaves the shortcomings of the wives obscure other than a self-withholding in and out of bed that the husband is unable to penetrate and the wife powerless to help him do so. Whatever their cause, the wives' failings are always lesser than their husbands', as Updike said of himself and Mary: "When young I had wanted a wife who would be attractive, and motherly, and artistic, and quiet, and she materialized. We wanted children, and they obediently came, healthy and lovable and two of each sex. Now, through no fault of their own, they composed a household whose walls seemed to be shrinking around me, squeezing my chest" (SC 99).

Though conscious of being in the wrong, Updike husbands share this feeling of constriction. Breaking bonds becomes for them a kind of Emersonian imperative; it seems the way of life and growth, marriage the way of spiritual stagnation. Infidelity makes for guilt, however, even when its religious dimension has waned and with it the fear of damnation so strong with Jerry Conant in *Marry Me*. Divorce requires self-justification. "When is it right for a man to leave his wife?" Updike has the adulterous Reverend Tom Marshfield ask himself in *A Month of Sundays*, published in the period between Updike's separation from Mary and their divorce in 1976. Marshfield's answer: "When the sum of his denied life overtops the calculated loss of his children, the grandparents if surviving, the dog, and the dogged *ux.*, known as Fido, residual in himself"—"ux" as the Latin "uxor" (wife); "Fido" as fidelity (192). Wise, steady, and sympathetic as Updike makes Deb in "My Father's Tears," to James she represents the denied life. James alludes to Emerson twice—first, casually, when he happens upon Emerson's essays in his father-in-law's library and recalls "Self-Reliance" from college days (LS 841), and again when he feels obliged like Marshfield to explain the divorce: "Why? It's hard to say. 'We boil at different degrees,' Emerson had said, and a woman came along who had my same boiling point" (LS 848).

In constructing the passage to show James's evasiveness and discomfort, Updike the writer positions himself in silent, quizzical judgment on James/Updike the marriage-breaker. Updike is at once the offending party, the conscience squirming at the offense, the artist crystallizing the situation into what he elsewhere calls a "guilt gem," and the ironist aware that in doing so he is compounding the initial wrong by turning his guilty feelings into "a few baubles he could, as it were, put in his pocket and jingle" ("Guilt Gems," LS 64, 65). To assuage James's moral uneasiness, Updike has him assume the role of his ex-wife's chivalric champion, as he himself did with Mary in "Getting the Words Out." "My reflex," James says, "is always to come to Deb's defense, even though it was I who wanted the divorce"

(LS 848). What follows in the account of a high school reunion is anything but defense. Digressive as it seems within James's narrative (and self-indulgent on the part of Updike, who enjoyed reunions and drew stories from them), the scene touches on a recurring grievance in Updike marriages: the feeling of provincial husbands (James, Richard Maple, Jerry Conant, Piet Hanema, Owen Mackenzie, William Young in "Museums and Women," Updike himself in "On Not Being a Dove") of being patronized by their more cultured wives, in Updike's case by the Cambridge-born-and-bred Mary. Although Updike married into New England, lived there for more than fifty years, and came to love the region, he never felt he belonged to it or, in its higher echelons, was accepted by it. Among the things he listed his stutter as an "unspoken apology for" were his "humble origins"; among the groups in which he stuttered were "New Englanders of many generations" (SC 86, 85). In the reunion scene Updike turns the tables on New England breeding and reserve. He has James tell us that on such occasions his former classmates much prefer his second wife, who "really mixes it up with them," to his first, who "shyly didn't" (LS 848). Through this ostensibly neutral bit of reporting, James/Updike is saying, in effect, "See? My new wife is a better fit. She mingles easily with Pennsylvanians, accepts the world I came from, and understands its importance to who I am. Wasn't I right to leave my home and family?"

I dwell on this scene as it follows James's (non-)explanation of the divorce because it illustrates in miniature how meaning can be established through structure even, or especially, when structure departs from chronology and apparent thematic focus. The defense of Deb with its air of innocent digression is James/Updike's studied *self*-defense, all the more effective for James's professed shock at his classmates' preference. "My Father's Tears" is indeed a "fugue" whose principle of unity (which encompasses moments like this) needs to be discovered through inductive inquiry. Self-contained and fictively satisfying as the narrative of the invented James, the story radiates outward in circles of extended meaning when set within an "Updike" drawn from pertinent elements in other writings and in his known life. In this context, "My Father's Tears" seems Updike's attempt not simply to construct a story from guilts of the past but to reinhabit and rhetorically manage them even as he knows (self-ironist as he fundamentally is) that symbolic action is only symbolic and that artistic fabrications do not solve real problems.

#### *MASKENFREIHEIT*

"Once I've coined a name . . . I feel utterly hidden behind that mask, and what I remember and what I imagine become indistinguishable," Updike told an

interviewer, casually blurring the relationship between fiction and life while “disavow[ing] any essential connection” between the two (Plath, *Conversations* 27). The disavowal is itself a mask worn for the occasion. A mask enables or facilitates self-expression; it conceals; but it also draws attention to something *being* concealed, as with the minister’s black veil in Hawthorne’s story of that title. Himself a master of the game of authorial hide-and-seek, Hawthorne donned a veil in his autobiographical prefaces, then announced its presence to the reader. “I am here, behind the veil; find me if you can,” he seems to say. Updike, too, plays hide-and-seek, disclaiming autobiographical reference in public statements while beckoning readers with fictive parallels to persons and situations in his life sometimes so explicit that one novel, *Marry Me* (1964, 1976), and several *New Yorker* stories could not be published until years after the time of events.

Benjamin Foster, the protagonist in “The Laughter of the Gods,” finds “a certain formal, distant resonance” in what he considers his “ungainly name,” “as if he were a foster child” (*LS* 741). As such, he is another of what Updike referred to as his “conspicuously alter-egoistic” F-named characters (*Due Considerations* 641) but “distorted,” in Bailey’s view, for dramatic reasons and therefore further along the fictional side of the generic spectrum, away from the autobiographical. I would argue differently: that Updike’s pointed distancing from Benjamin, a foster child of his own, allows him to tunnel more deeply into his subject than he could with a more closely identified persona like David Kern, even when events in the story may be partly or wholly imagined. The remedy for physical and moral stuttering—an inability to get the words out from “shame . . . at *being* yourself”—is “*Maskenfreiheit*, the freedom conferred by masks” (*SC* 87).

Cordoned off from Benjamin, Updike is able to take calculated risks in exploring what had been his most emotionally fraught, if beclouded theme in fiction and memoir, his relationship to his mother. The story begins when, after his father’s death, the adult Benjamin becomes curious about “how his parents had met, courted, and, deepest in the darkness, conceived him” (*LS* 741). As a child, leafing through their college yearbook to “reassure himself that his parents had not been freaks,” he had found early evidence of their mismatch—the girl attractive, well-dressed, athletic, and a good student “especially adept in Latin”; the boy of modest social and intellectual accomplishments and known chiefly for his “jovial disposition” (*LS* 741, 742). What had held them together in college, his mother tells him, was their “fear that nobody else would have us”; what kept them together in a time when people were expected “to hang on to each other” was a fear that hanging on “was all there was” (*LS* 741, 750). Like Peter Caldwell in *The Centaur*,

Benjamin “had grown up with the impression that his parents’ marriage had been a mistake, partially redeemed by his birth,” and with the certainty that “his mother loved him better than she loved her husband,” whom he regarded with “the tolerant good humor with which one treats a defeated rival” (*LS* 749, 744). This was his myth of the triangular family romance; in rough outline it is Updike’s recurring myth of his own fictionalized family across the span of his career.

Moving at thirteen with his parents and grandparents from the town to a farmhouse eleven miles away, as Updike had, Benjamin found himself in “smaller quarters” in which “bodies were placed in closer proximity” and whose “walls were thin” (*LS* 743, 744). In the autobiographical poem “Midpoint” Updike recalls his parents’ “shouting and their silences / in the hissing bedroom dark” (*Midpoint* 8); in “The Laughter of the Gods” the sounds become those of “creaking bedsprings,” followed by the father’s “‘Ooo-oooh,’ in appreciation, Benjamin gathered in the dark, of his mother’s bulk” (*LS* 744). We’re not told how much the borderline adolescent might or might not have understood. Instead, Updike eroticizes the situation through his dispositioning of materials, first by introducing a wisecrack of the father’s oft repeated in his fiction—“Your mother should have gone onto the burleycue stage . . . instead of marrying me. She had the figure for it, but not the temperament” (*LS* 744)—which takes on a leeringly sexual edge in this new context. Then, with the freighted words “under the permissive blanket . . . of their country intimacy,” he moves to Benjamin’s discovery of masturbation (*LS* 744). He doesn’t say that Benjamin was prompted by what he has heard; he lets the contiguity of his paragraphs suggest what it will: juxtaposition, evasion, insinuation, and ambiguity will mark his handling of Benjamin’s sexuality throughout the story. Skipping ahead, he informs us that nothing in Benjamin’s later sexual life, either “alone or within the body of a woman” would match the initial intensity of those early orgasms (*LS* 744). An imprinting of early sexual experience upon adult sexual life? We don’t know.

The story takes an unexpected turn shortly after his father’s funeral when his mother, “her tongue more reckless than ever” in old age (*LS* 741), upends his view of the marriage as incompatible but otherwise commonplace. “You don’t want to hear it,” she tells him after letting it fall that his outwardly saintly father had a darker side. “Or do you? Maybe you should,” she adds (*LS* 745). Despite Benjamin’s protest she presses on, telling him of a horrible wedding day and night; of living in “cheap boarding-houses that were really cathouses”; of feeling unable to “compete with your father’s ideas of those girls on the stairs”; and of the father’s “language when it was just the two of us stuck together, like dogs in a rut” (*LS* 746). The

scene builds upon another Updike had staged, a few months after his mother's death in 1989, in "A Sandstone Farmhouse," the longest and most detailed of his semi-autobiographical stories in which he described the relationship of mother and son (here Joey Robinson from *Of the Farm*) as being "unusually, perhaps unnaturally close" and yet, for both, "not close enough" (LS 439). As with Benjamin, "there were things [Joey's mother] had offered to tell him he had not wanted to hear" (LS 442), but she, too, persists: "Oh Joey . . . It was unspeakable," she says of her married life. "Well, maybe you're old enough," she tells her fifty-something son: "Maybe I *should* speak it" (LS 443). "Oh no, no thanks, that's all right," Joey objects, thinking "*Poor Daddy. . . . Let the dead alone*" (LS 443). What he means, as well, is *Let me alone*.

In most other respects, the husband/father in "A Sandstone Farmer" and "The Laughter of the Gods" is a variation on the familiar Wesley Updike-based father in Updike's writing. We cannot know what, when, or even if Updike's mother may have told him about her sexual life with her husband any more than in Melville's *Pierre* we can know whether Allan Melvill, the model for Pierre's father, had an illegitimate daughter and Melville came to learn of it. The pertinent question in both cases is why, if the father was not the saint the world and the son took him to be, the writer should air the fact in public, and why, if the father were blameless the writer-sons should besmirch his memory, in effect morally kill him off. One needn't appeal to extrinsic theories of the father as a source or symbol of the superego to explain this; the writers themselves broach the idea—Melville in identifying Pierre's father with "the entire one-pillared temple of his moral life" (68), Updike in declaring in fiction and memoir that he could not have divorced his first wife as long as his father was alive, as happens with James Werley in "My Father's Tears" (LS 848).

In some of Hawthorne's tales, the death or dethroning of the literal or figurative father serves to liberate the son from his example and judgment, unleash long-suppressed desires, and allow for a riotous indulgence, followed in recoil by conscience reasserting its sway and the rioter returning to everyday life with or without a chastened wisdom. In a loose sense, this is the pattern in "The Laughter of the Gods" as Updike organizes its sections according to a thematic rather than a narrative rationale. Departing from chronology, he places Benjamin's late conversation with his mother almost midway through the story, after which—the father having been vilified as a "street angel, house devil" (LS 745)—he inserts two flashbacks bearing upon the incest theme. The first involves Benjamin's mother's graying hair, a locus of her sexuality bound up tightly in self-suppression like Hester Prynne's

and frightening to young Benjamin when she unpins it and “walk[s] around the upstairs in her slip, looking like a graying witch” (*LS* 747). Years afterward the situation replays itself in Benjamin’s encounter with a full-figured prostitute who, “when they were done, . . . put her silvery minidress back on, and walked around his room, combing out her hair, long and uncontained,” looking to Benjamin “how a woman was supposed to look, like Eve or Mary Magdalene in an admonitory old woodcut” (*LS* 747). Without indicating anything further about Benjamin’s thoughts, feelings, or recognitions, Updike makes it clear that this incarnation of womanhood Benjamin has just bedded mirrors his mother; the finger-wagging admonition in the woodcut has a special application to him.

“There was a hint of admonition, too,” Updike goes on, more pointedly, “in the underwear drawer of his mother’s bureau” with its tumble of “flesh-colored straps,” girdles, and “stocking fasteners” with “flesh-colored buttons, and wire loops” that “left cruel dents in her flesh” (*LS* 748). Once again, an erotic passage is notable for what it avoids saying. We’re not given to see Benjamin rummaging through his mother’s drawer or even to be certain he did. The focus is upon objects to be found in the drawer, with suggestions of Benjamin having seen his mother wearing them, rather than upon the activity of a finder. This may be self-protectiveness on Updike’s part even with a foster self, but I take the obscurity of the passage to be meaningful in itself. Updike seems less interested in anything Benjamin might be shown to have done than in a state of mind too muddled in its mix of curiosity, lust, guilt, and denial to be understood by Benjamin then or later or represented by Updike in narrative action, through a rendering of Benjamin’s consciousness, or by omniscient analysis. The muddle itself is what interests Updike because it was and continues to be his own even as he writes.

Context is illuminating here. In “At War with My Skin” Updike recalls being “embarrassed by something” while sunbathing “not quite naked” with his mother to alleviate their common psoriasis, but the nature of this embarrassment, he claims, “is not clear” to him “in this mottled recollection” (*SC* 42). Why include the memory at all only to leave it dangling and invite a knowing wink from the reader? Embarrassment about parental sexuality, or about one’s own sexuality in the presence of a parent, is common among children whatever their age, but the discomfiture of Updike sons (and here of Updike himself) suggests something deeply personal and only hazily understood but demanding literary expression. Embarrassment is among Joey Robinson’s feelings in “A Sandstone Farmhouse,” when, visiting his widowed mother in a local hospital a few months before her death, he finds her in “slightly dishevelled, revealing gowns” and with “sex on her

mind" (LS 433). Sex is also unwillingly on his mind as she talks freely about bodily things, including an incident shortly after her marriage in which a young doctor "told me to take off my clothes" and "looked me over for the longest time" (LS 433). Although he himself is middle-aged and his mother in her eighties, Joey finds "her femininity . . . upon him," and he recalls his father's (and Updike's) timeworn joke, "I should have put her on the burleycue stage" (LS 433). In "The Laughter of the Gods" Benjamin is discomposed as he recalls how his mother had shared a bathtub with him ("to save hot water," she had said) until his body grew too large to accommodate it and how, at a slightly later age, her response to his childish question about female anatomy ("in a woman" did "weewee c[o]me out of the same place as babies did"? ) provoked an "embarrassment . . . so intense [that] it quite blotted out her answer, leaving his question to hang in memory as a perpetual humiliation" (LS 743, 750–51).

Whether or not incidents like these have an autobiographical source, they establish an aura of eroticism within their respective texts and suggest an authorial will to display son-mother eroticism before the reader, however ambiguously and with the greatest care. In "The Laughter of the Gods" the care shows itself in the finely tuned adjustment of revelation and obfuscation with which Updike manages the incest theme and its now-you-see-it-now-you-don't presentation in the story's closing pages. Following a textual break after Benjamin's youthful "embarrassment and "humiliation," Updike has the older man open "a small cedar chest" after his mother's death and come upon premarital letters of his parents, which he "could not bear to read continuously" (LS 751). In their cozy matter-of-factness, the letters attest to a bond between them that predated himself, inklings of which he had incomprehendingly seen in moments of family life, as when, "describing the adventures of his day," his father "goaded" his mother into "a half-suppressed shriek, an escape like that of steam, ending in a whimper begging for mercy" before, continuing his droll story, he would join her "in the contagion of her renewed glee" (LS 748). Asexual as the letters are, they affect Benjamin "like his mother's too detailed answer to that childish question of his [about female anatomy]; his mind shied away" (LS 751), intimacy of almost any kind having a disconcertingly erotic quality to those excluded from it. After his father's death, it had seemed from his mother's talk "as if her son . . . had always been the only man in her life" (LS 749), but as Benjamin delves deeper into the chest his myth of the family triangle is challenged. His father now appears the prime male and he himself a would-be interloper. Among the objects he discovers in the chest is a "thick coil" of his

mother's hair (*LS* 751), a fetishized survival of her sexual self. Updike had used the detail a decade earlier in "The Brown Chest" (1992), in which his unnamed protagonist comes upon "coils of [his mother's] auburn hair startlingly silky to the touch" (*LS* 509). In "The Laughter of the Gods" the moment is rewritten as one of sexual trespass: "Experimentally, [Benjamin] touched [the hair], and moved his hand quickly, as if he had presumed to stroke something alive" (*LS* 752). The admonitions in the old woodcut and his mother's underwear drawer have become a palpable rebuke: *Noli Me Tangere*.

Updike might have ended his story here, on the incest theme, but he goes on. At the bottom of the chest, on its deepest level, Benjamin finds an Agricola College pennant, a varsity football sweater, and a game program with the school's football schedule, which included, "amazingly, Cornell and Columbia and Rutgers" (*LS* 752). The sleeves of the sweater had been pinned to fit a slender body; it was a gift, Benjamin realizes, "that he could never have given his mother but that his father did" (*LS* 752). He imagines how it might have been for them at college, where "young couples stroll[ed] the campus with open coats and unbuckled galoshes, their laughter making mild white clouds" (*LS* 752). The boy who had looked upon his father with "the tolerant good humor with which one treats a defeated rival" (*LS* 749, 744) is made to see himself as the defeated rival. Everything in the story will now depend on how Updike has Benjamin respond to this recognition. With devastation and bitterness? hostile jealousy? epiphanic self-irony? Any of these responses would have been consonant with Benjamin's character. Instead, Updike performs a tonal and thematic about-face. In his final three sentences he effectually banishes the story's incest theme by transforming the father from the "house devil" of his mother's telling into the genial, bumbling Updike father we know so well and by recasting Benjamin as his appreciative sidekick and eulogist. "Overmatched" by his more intelligent, strong-willed wife as "the little college" Agricola had been overmatched on the football field (Updike has Benjamin think to himself), "his father had given his mother his all. He had clothed her in his pain, and their son had tagged on behind, uncertain what was so funny, but happy to be jealous" (*LS* 752). Nothing could be further from the story Updike has written.<sup>5</sup>

#### SLIDING DOORS

How to account for "The Laughter of the Gods"? Far from being a solitary outlier in Updike's fiction, the story is an offshoot of themes in earlier writings from *The Centaur* through *Of the Farm* and "Museums and Women" to "A Sandstone Farmhouse" and beyond. If, as Burke says, we can infer the motivation for a literary work

from the way in which it is put together, the impulse in and behind “The Laughter of the Gods” seems Updike’s decision to out with the semi or quasi-eroticism of his relationship to his mother more prominently than ever before: to make the reader sensible of it without knowing its substance, clearly understanding it, or being able to attach a name to it any more than he himself could—and, having accomplished this, to override it with an ending that controverts nearly everything that preceded it, as if unwilling to leave the incest theme as the story’s resounding note. The question left unanswered is why the need for the devastating accusation of the father, which might pass for a fictional extravagance pertinent to this story alone were it not for a similar accusation in “A Sandstone Farmhouse.”

Not knowing—about one’s family and therefore about the origins of one’s self—may ultimately be what “The Laughter of the Gods” is about. Who are these familiar but unknown and unknowable Updike figures, Benjamin’s parents? Was his father the “house devil” his mother claims or the harmless, ineffectual kidder of the college yearbook and his own recollection? Was his mother with her erratic moods and tangled relations to her husband and son a reliable source of information? Was Benjamin the center of her life, as he liked to believe? And despite their intimacy, did Benjamin understand his mother at all?

Questions like these extend beyond “The Laughter of the Gods” to cast a back-light on Updike’s representations of the family. In the photographs he included in *Midpoint* he pixelated those of his parents singly and together as if to suggest the blur they were to him as a child and are still for him as an adult; “the poet strives to conclude,” he comments, “but his aesthetic of dots prevents him” (*Midpoint* 38; see Milder, “Museums and Women” 35). The writer of “The Laughter of the Gods” also cultivates an aesthetic of dots. Bailey is right to see stories like this as “contesting the assumptions of previous Updike stories” (Bailey, “More Distorted Mirrors” 88), but the reason for this is not, I think, simply artistic; it’s epistemological and personal. Just as James Werley finds it easier “to love people in memory” than “when they are there in front of you” (*LS* 845), so for Updike it’s easier to know them when they are gone, though even then knowledge is partial (in both senses of the word) and judgments uncertain. To the child Allen Dow as the adult remembers himself in “His Mother Inside Him” (1992), his mother’s “unhappiness, which would vent itself in sudden storms of temper,” was terrifying and unfathomable, as the angers of Updike’s mother were to him (*LS* 513; *SC* 84). Only when Allen’s mother is dead and “her input had ceased” and he himself is near sixty (Updike’s age when he wrote the story) is Allen able to think about her with a degree of equanimity and wonder about the cause of her unhappiness.

“Being a woman had no doubt frustrated her, keeping her at home, tying her to the fortunes of men less intelligent than herself, denying her a career,” he speculates; or perhaps the problem, as she herself said, was “something timid” or “lazy and self-indulgent” in herself that kept her from doing what other “women of her generation” were able to do (*LS* 516); perhaps, too, her frustrations stemmed from “the fanciful, self-defeating obliquity” in her thought and conversation that had “irritated” Allen as a child and that he recognizes “in his own dealings” with people (*LS* 514). “Perhaps” is as far as Allen can go toward explaining the character of his mother, which, he realizes, has gone into forming his own.

As Updike’s late-career sons discover, the more but still fragmentary and possibly apocryphal information we receive about parents, the deeper and more complex their otherness becomes. The subtitle Melville gave *Pierre*, a tragic melodrama about its hero’s quest for familial truth, is *The Ambiguities*. Benjamin is also led into ambiguities, but the stance Updike’s story takes toward him, established by its title, is ironic. The words are from a remark of Einstein’s: “Whoever undertakes to set himself up as a judge in the field of Truth and Knowledge is shipwrecked by the laughter of the gods” (28).

What is the truth-status of this late skeptical variation upon a family theme and, by extension, of any of Updike’s semi-autobiographical writings in relation to his life? By “sliding doors” I mean the interface between memories of the past and their representation in fiction or memoir. In one of the earliest and still most useful studies of life writing, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960), Roy Pascal focused upon the tension between the writer’s fidelity to what happened, or experience of what happened (“truth”), and the artistic need to impose “a pattern” upon that experience and make “a coherent story” of it (“design”), a tension compounded for Pascal by the fact that recollected experience is itself fluxional (“an interplay, a collusion, between past and present”) and therefore not stably or definitively true (9, 11). As Updike put it in his Foreword to *Self-Consciousness*, “a lifeview by the living can only be provisional.” It “solidifies the past and creates a gravitational body that wasn’t there before. A background of dark matter—all that is not said—remains, buzzing” (xiv). What we call “truth,” he had Joey Robinson observe in *Of the Farm*, “is constantly being formed from the solidification of illusions” (135). Everything in the halls of memory has a quality of illusoriness; “truth” consists in picking out a reflection, contextualizing it in a particular way, and holding fast to it for a time to the exclusion of other reflections, whether we do this mentally in life or materially in a work of art.

The past as remembered versus the past as fictionalized—this is Updike’s literary analog to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle as explained by another Benjamin (Turnbull) in *Toward the End of Time*: “each time that we measure either the position or momentum of an elementary particle, the other specific becomes . . . unknowable” (16). “Momentum” in Updike’s autobiographical writing is the fluidity of memory; “position” is the fixity a given memory assumes when crystallized in a work of art. Momentum and position each has its particular authority within its respective domain, but when we plant ourselves on one side of the sliding door, we lose sight of the other. From the standpoint of the work of art, memory is a shapeless succession of moments; from the standpoint of fluid memory, the artwork is a static artifice of words.

The sliding door of memory and art has its own sliding door in that the metaphor itself cuts two ways. It can make for pyrrhonism since we can never know the complete, non-provisional truth about any piece of experience, but it can also stimulate the imagination, as Updike’s friend and mentor William Maxwell reflected in *So Long, See You Tomorrow* (1980), a hybrid work combining autobiography, fiction, and reportage:

What we, or at any rate I, refer to confidently as memory—meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subjected to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion—is really a form of storytelling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling. Too many conflicting impulses are involved for life ever to be wholly acceptable, and possibly it is the work of the storyteller to rearrange things so that they conform to this end. (27)

To apply Maxwell’s thought to a simile in *Self-Consciousness*, memory and art are like photographs “loose in a set of shoeboxes, in no order” (12).<sup>6</sup> We reach in, pick out one deliberately or randomly, and hold it at some angle to the light. Our eyes are caught by a detail we may never have attended to before, and from that detail, in that light, on that day, and in that state of mind, the photograph links itself with others out of sight but alive in memory, suggesting a connection and the beginnings of a pattern, which, for the occasion, becomes the meaning of the photograph. The possibilities are limitless because each of the readings, while having an aesthetic integrity and thus an internal truthfulness of its own, falls short of the never-to-be-exhausted potential meanings of the photograph. This is what I take Maxwell to have meant when he said, hyperbolically, “in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw” (27).

The reappearances of persons, places, and incidents in Updike's semi-autobiographical fiction are repetitions of the shoebox moment, prompted in some cases by a known event (his attendance at a high school reunion; his return to the Pennsylvania farmhouse to wrap up affairs after his mother's death), in others by their lasting place in his life-mythology, and in still others by thoughts or feelings whose immediacy at the time of a work's composition can only be a matter of conjecture.<sup>7</sup> The death of Updike's mother might have spurred, certainly enabled him to write of the marriage as he did in "A Sandstone Farmhouse" shortly thereafter, but it doesn't explain why he returned to the subject a dozen years later in "The Laughter of the Gods."<sup>8</sup>

In these stories the "dark matter" buzzing on the margins of family life is indeed dark, but while the stories cannot be taken as autobiographical truth, neither can they be detached from the life entirely and seen as disinterested fictional exercises. They are photographs from the shoebox viewed in a crepuscular light and at an angle in which certain details leap to the fore and, it may be, attach themselves to fragmentary recollections of words or events, which, when combined with materials artistically exaggerated or invented (as Updike said of his stories), give the whole a qualified emotional truthfulness, irrespective of whatever factual truthfulness it might have. The father in these stories, now dead, can no longer bear witness to himself and is subject to the charges of the mother in what Benjamin recognizes as "a dangerous mood" (*LS* 745) and Joey Robinson as a highly sexed one (*LS* 433). With both characters, the exchange between mother and son takes place within an erotically charged relationship extending over decades and still further complicates the son's puzzlement about that relationship and how it may have affected him in later life. Like William Young's mother in "Museums and Women," Benjamin's and Joey's mothers (like Updike's) are at once "a mystery so deep it never formed into a question" and "the index, inclusive and definitive, of women" (*ES* 435, 434). Benjamin, we're told, is twice divorced, Joey thrice.<sup>9</sup>

I don't believe Updike had anything secretive to reveal beyond the heated, confused feelings toward his mother he had dramatized elsewhere in his writing, yet these feelings themselves apparently called out for veiled expression. "The Laughter of the Gods" is a late outlet for them, with foster child Benjamin supplying the veil. Personal in its origins, depersonalized through its strategies of presentation, the story is also transpersonal in what I regard as a second application of its title. Although Benjamin's situation is distinctively his own, it exemplifies for Updike a version of the human family situation as experienced by a type of mother-centered son. The hero of Melville's *Pierre*, having grown up with an emotionally incestuous

relationship to his mother and entangled now in a literally incestuous one with his half sister, is brought to recognize the horrifically absurd condition of human beings implanted with such impulses and made to writhe under them. “Let the gods look after their own combustibles,” Pierre cries out in protest: “If they have put powder-kegs in me—let them look to it! Let them look to it” (273). The gods in Melville’s book, if they exist at all, are silent. The gods who tacitly preside over Updike’s story are amused; they laugh at the tragicomedies or farces played out by baffled mortals below. In titling his story as he does, Updike the distanced observer joins the gods in laughing at Updike the implicated man. In a formulation like this of the story’s motive and principle of organization, fiction, biography, autobiography, and critical interpretation might be seen to converge.

#### NOTES

1. The following Updike works will be abbreviated in parenthetical page citations in the text: *Self-Consciousness* (SC), *Collected Early Stories* (ES), *Collected Later Stories* (LS). My thanks to Matthew Shippe for comments on an early version of this essay and to Gail Milder for her critiques at various stages of composition.

2. In defense of the ungainly coinage “autobiomorphic,” I’m aware of no existing term for an idea I find illuminating with Updike and other writers. Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is autobiographical in its depiction of persons (Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay as Leslie and Julia Stephen), place (the summer home in the Hebrides as the Stephens’ summer home in Cornwall), and incidents, but it’s also autobiomorphic, especially in the last of its three sections. It uses the voyage to the lighthouse by Mr. Ramsay and his teenage children Cam and James as a vehicle for Woolf to work through her mingled love and rage toward her father (long deceased), and the interwoven scenes of Lily Briscoe at her painting to address Woolf’s ambivalent feelings of loss and resistance toward her mother (also long deceased) and the ideal of womanhood she signifies. In her unfinished memoir “A Sketch of the Past” (1939–1941; post. 1985), Woolf speaks of her novel as therapeutic in freeing her from her “obsession” with each of her parents (Woolf 80, 108): “I suppose that I did for myself what psychoanalysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and laid it to rest. But what is the meaning of ‘explained?’” (81)—and how successfully, she might have added, did she lay it to rest, given her return to the subject now in the memoir? Like the two Updike stories considered here, *To the Lighthouse* is autobiomorphic so far as portions of it owe their narrative and thematic shape to the writer’s effort to resolve conflicts rooted in the past. In Burke’s terms, this is the “motivation” behind the literary work, the “symbolic action” played out within it, and the source of its aesthetic form.

3. In a trenchant critique of literary interpretation, James R. Kincaid argued that while “the reading of literature is in large part a search for the organizing patterns that . . . will make coherent the numerous details or signals we pick up along the way”—Crane’s view, exactly—the texts themselves are “demonstrably incoherent” in lending themselves to “multiple organizing patterns” (783). As a matter of theory, I share Kincaid’s skepticism about the authority of any particular interpretation of a text, but I find Crane’s idea of a shaping “cause” useful on practical grounds. It focuses attention on

the function and effect of textual details and invites us to look for coherence so long as the pattern we identify is recognized as one among many possible patterns. It's with this codicil to Crane's formalism and Burke's symbolic action that I hope the following will be read.

4. Updike's son Michael "never understood why my father didn't respect *his* father more" (Plath, "Updike Family Panel" 87). The attitude of the Updike son toward his father—a mix of mute affection, exasperation, and non- but not disrespect, set against the warm enjoyment of the grandfather by the grandson—is exemplified in "The Gun Shop" (1972), submitted for publication a few months before Wesley Updike's death in 1972.

5. The *JUR* reader of this essay wondered whether "Benjamin's delight in trailing behind his parents enacts authorial irony or writerly autobiographical self-delusion." I'd incline toward a version of the former; Updike the writer was not self-deluded about much, including his own rationalizations, evasions, posturings, and leaps of faith. In "The Laughter of the Gods" I see Updike the artist using a verbal eraser to half-obliterate what he has revealed, and, through its inefficacy (the patent incongruity of the story's ending) to have his ideal reader recognize this and laugh with him at the self-defensive effort. The "authorial irony" of the ending, that is to say, is directed not simply at the denial of the character Benjamin; it's directed at the implied author of the story (Updike himself on one level) by the Olympian Updike conscious of the artist's literary ruse.

6. Matthew Shipe, who read an early version of this essay, reminds me that he, too, has cited the shoebox passage. He and I have discussed Updike many times over the years, and I have no recollection of who might first have mentioned the shoebox to whom. In any case, let this note stand as an acknowledgment.

7. The photographs in the shoebox are not only of Updike's family. Two girls/women reappear in one context or another across five decades—a freckled, bony-faced, reddish-haired, broad-hipped woman modeled upon Joyce Harrington, Updike's lover of the early 1960s, who makes a curtain call in Updike's last published story, "The Full Glass" (2008), and a tomboyish classmate who steals the hero's schoolbag in childhood, becomes his high school crush, and remains on Updike's mind through his deathbed poem "Peggy Lutz, Fred Muth," published posthumously (2009).

8. "Fiction, like life, is a dirty business," Updike observed in *Self-Consciousness*: "Parents, wives, children—the nearer and dearer they are, the more mercilessly they are served up" (231). Did Updike's mother late in life impart something about the marriage to her son, who was too much the opportunistic writer to let it go unused, however he may have questioned its truth?

9. In *Of the Farm* Joey Robinson's former mistress, now his second wife, is overshadowed for him and for readers by his domineering mother. Updike's son Michael considered *Of the Farm* "a pretty damning account of my grandmother. . . . [I]t's just amazing how much he nailed it. He knew exactly her conniving, manipulative ways, and he just lived with it and wrote about it" (Plath, "Updike Family Panel" 87).

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## Three Writers on “My Father’s Tears”

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This section of the *JUR* provides space for three writers to compose responses to a single Updike story, novel, poem, or essay. The objective is to look closely at an individual work through several different perspectives. “My Father’s Tears,” which was submitted to *The New Yorker* on November 14, 2005, and published in the issue of February 27, 2006, was suggested by Quentin Miller. I then invited Sue Norton to write a response, and when we were less than two weeks away from our publication deadline without a third essay in sight, I stepped in and composed the final piece. Meanwhile, and somewhat serendipitously, Robert Milder submitted a compelling essay that has a good deal to say about “My Father’s Tears.” While it was not quite right for this section of the journal (it discusses another Updike story as well), it can be found within this issue, and I hope you’ll see it as part of this same discussion.

JAMES SCHIFF, EDITOR

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# My Father's Tears

JOHN UPDIKE

I saw my father cry only once. It was at the Alton train station, back when the train still ran. I was on my way to Philadelphia—an hour's ride ending at the 30th Street terminal—to catch, at the Market Street station, the train that would return me to Boston and college. I was eager to go, for already my home and my parents had become somewhat unreal to me, and Harvard, with its courses and the hopes for my future they inspired and the girlfriend I had acquired in my sophomore year, had become more real every semester; it shocked me—threw me off track, as it were—to see that my father's eyes, as he shook my hand good-bye, glittered with tears.

I blamed it on our handshake: for eighteen years we had never had occasion for this social gesture, this manly contact, and we had groped our way into it only recently. He was taller than I, though I was not short, and I realized, his hand warm in mine while he tried to smile, that he had a different perspective than I. I was going somewhere, and he was seeing me go. I was growing in my own sense of myself, and to him I was getting smaller. He had loved me, it came to me as never before. It was something that had not needed to be said before, and now his tears were saying it. Before, in all the years and small adventures we had shared, there was the sensation, stemming from him, that life was a pickle, and he and I were, for a time, in the pickle together.

The old Alton station was his kind of place, savoring of transit and the furtive small pleasures of city life. I had bought my first pack of cigarettes here, with no protest from the man running the newstand, though I was a young-looking fifteen. He simply gave me my change and a folder of matches advertising Sunshine Beer, from Alton's own brewery. Alton was a middle-sized industrial city that had been

depressed ever since the textile mills began to slide south. In the meantime, with its orderly street grid and hearty cuisine, it still supplied its citizens with traditional comforts and an illusion of well-being. I lit up a block from the station, as I remember, and even though I didn't know how to inhale, my nerves took a hit; the sidewalk seemed to lift toward me and the whole world felt lighter. From that day forward I began to catch up, socially, with the more glamorous of my peers, who already smoked.

Even my stay-at-home mother, no traveler but a reader, had a connection to the station: it was the only place in the city where you could buy her favorite magazines, *Harper's* and *The New Yorker*. Like the stately Carnegie-endowed library two blocks down Franklin Street, it was a place you felt safe inside. Both had been built for eternity, when railroads and books looked to be with us forever. The station was a four-square granite temple with marble floors, a high ceiling whose gilded coffers glinted through a coating of coal smoke. The tall-backed waiting benches were as dignified as church pews. The radiators clanked and the caramel-colored walls murmured as if giving back some of the human noise they absorbed day and night. The newsstand and coffee shop were usually busy, and the waiting room was always warm, as my father and I had discovered on more than one winter night. We had been commuters to the same high school, he as a teacher and I as student, in second-hand cars that on more than one occasion failed to start, or got stuck in a snowstorm. We would make our way to the one place sure to be open, the railroad station.

We did not foresee, that moment on the platform as the signal bells a half-mile down the tracks warned of my train's approach, that within a decade passenger service to Philadelphia would stop, and that eventually the station, like railroad stations all across the East, would be padlocked and boarded up. The fine old building stood on its empty acre of asphalt parking space like an oversized mausoleum. All the life it had once contained was sealed into silence, and for the rest of the century it ignominiously waited, in this city where progress had halted, to be razed.

But my father did foresee, the glitter in his eyes told me, that time consumes us—that the boy I had been was dying if not already dead, and we would have less and less to do with each other. My life had come out of his, and now I was stealing away with it. The train appeared, its engine, with its high steel wheels and long connecting rods and immense cylindrical boiler, out of all proportion to the soft little bodies it dragged along. I boarded it. My parents looked smaller, foreshortened. We waved sheepishly through the smirched glass. I opened my book—*The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton*—before Alton's gritty outskirts had fallen away.

At the end of that long day of travel, getting off not at Boston's South Station but at Back Bay, one stop earlier and closer to Cambridge, I was met by my girlfriend. How swanky that felt, to read Milton all day, the relatively colorless and hard-to-memorize pentameters of *Paradise Regained*, and, in sight of the other undergraduates disembarking, to be met and embraced on the platform by a girl—no, a woman—wearing a gray cloth coat, canvas tennis sneakers, and a ponytail. It must have been the spring break, because if Deb was greeting me the vacation had been too short for her to go back and forth to St. Louis, where her home was. Instead, she had been waiting a week for me to return. She tended to underdress in the long New England winter, while I wore the heavy winter coat, with buckled belt and fleecy lining, that my parents had bought me, to my embarrassment, to keep me from catching pneumonia way up in New England.

She told me, as we rode first the Green Line and then the Red back to Harvard Square, what had happened to her that week. There had been an unpredicted snow squall, whose sullied traces were still around us, and, at the restaurant where she waited on tables some evenings, she had been given, because she was the only college student, the assignment of adding up numbers in the basement while the other waitresses pocketed all the tips. She was angry to the point of tears about it. I told her what I could recall of my week in Pennsylvania, already faded in memory except for the detail lodged there like a glittering splinter—my father's tears. My own eyes itched and burned after a day of reading in a jiggling train; I had lifted them from my book only to marvel at the shining ocean as the train travelled the stretch of seaside track around New London.

In the years when we were newly married and still childless, Deb and I would spend a summer month with each set of parents. Her father was an eminent Unitarian minister, who preached in a gray neo-Gothic edifice built for eternity near the Washington University campus. Each June he moved his family from the roomy brick parsonage on Lindell Boulevard to an abandoned Vermont farmhouse he had bought in the Thirties for five hundred dollars. That June, Deb and I arrived before her father's parish duties permitted him and the rest of his family, a wife and two other daughters, to be there. The chilly solitude of the place, with basic cold-water plumbing but no electricity, high on a curving dirt road whose only visible other house, a half-mile away, was occupied by another Unitarian minister, reinforced my sense of having moved up, thanks to my bride, into a new, more elevated and spacious territory.

The lone bathroom was a long room, its plaster walls and wooden floor both bare, that was haunted by a small but intense rainbow, which moved around the walls as the sun in the course of the day glinted at a changing angle off the bevelled edge of the mirror on the medicine cabinet. When we troubled to heat up enough water on the kerosene stove for a daylight bath, the prismatically generated rainbow kept the bather company; it quivered and bobbed when footsteps or a breath of wind made the house tremble. To me this Ariel-like phenomenon was the magical child of Unitarian austerity, symbolic of the lofty attitude that sought out a primitive farmhouse as a relief from well-furnished urban comfort. It had to do, I knew, drawing upon my freshly installed education, with idealism, with Emerson and Thoreau, with self-reliance and taking Nature on Nature's own exalted terms. A large side room in the house, well beyond the woodstove's narrow sphere of warmth, held a big loom frame that had come with the house, and an obsolete encyclopedia, and a set, with faded spines, of aged but rarely touched books entitled *The Master Works of World Philosophy*. When I broke precedent by taking one of the volumes down, its finely ridged cloth cover gave my fingers an unpleasant tingle. It was the volume containing selections from Emerson's essays. "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact," I read, and "Everything is made of one hidden stuff," and "Every hero becomes a bore at last," and "We boil at different degrees."

Deb used this large room, and the vine-shaded stone porch outside, to paint her careful oils and pale watercolors. When the day was sunny, and heating the tub water in a kettle on the kerosene stove seemed too much trouble, we bathed in the mountain creek an easy walk from the house, in a pond whose dam her father had designed and built. I wanted to photograph her nude with my Brownie Hawkeye, but she primly declined. One day I sneaked a few snapshots anyway, from the old bridge, while she, with exclamations that drowned out the noise of the shutter, waded in and took the icy plunge.

It was in Vermont, before the others arrived, that, by our retrospective calculations, we conceived our first child, unintentionally but with no regrets. This microscopic event deep within my bride became allied in my mind with the little rainbow low on the bathroom wall, our pet imp of refraction.

Her father, when he arrived, was a father I wasn't used to. Mine, though he had sufficient survival skills, enacted the role of an underdog, a man whose every day, at school or elsewhere, proceeded through a series of scrapes and embarrassments. The car wouldn't start, the students wouldn't behave. He needed people,

the aggravating rub of them, for stimulation. Reverend Whitworth liked Vermont because, compared with St. Louis, it had no people in it. He didn't leave his hill for weeks at a time, letting the rest of us drive the two miles of dirt road to the nearest settlement, where the grocery store, the hardware store, and the post office all occupied one building, with one proprietor, who also managed the local sawmill. We would come back with local gossip and a day-old newspaper, and my father-in-law would listen to our excited tales of the greater world with a tilted head and a slant smile that let us guess he wasn't hearing a word. He had things to do: he built stone walls, and refined the engineering of his dam, and took a daily nap, during which the rest of us were to be silent.

He was a handsome man, with a head of tightly wiry hair whose graying did not diminish its density, but he was frail inside from rheumatic fever in his Maine boyhood. Rural peace, the silence of woods, the sway and flicker of kerosene light as drafts blew on the flaming wick or as lamps were carried from room to room—these constituted his element, not city bustle and rub. During his hilltop vacation months, he moved among us—his wife, his three daughters, his son-in-law, his wife's spinster sister—like a planet exempt from the law of gravitational attraction.

His interactions came mostly with games, which he methodically tended to win—family croquet in the afternoons, family Hearts in the evening, in the merged auras of the woodstove and the mantle lamp on the table. This was a special lamp, which intensified and whitened the glow of a flame with a mantle, a kind of conical net of ash so delicate it could be broken by even a carelessly rough setting-down of the glass base on the table. Reverend Whitworth was ostentatiously careful in everything his hands did, and I resented this, with the implacable *ressentiment* of youth. I resented his fussy pipe-smoker's gestures as he tamped and lighted and puffed; I resented his strictly observed naps, his sterling blue eyes (which Deb had inherited), his untroubled Unitarianism. Somehow, in my part of Pennsylvania blue eyes were so rare as to be freakish—hazel was as far as irises ventured from the basic brown the immigrants from Wales and southern Germany had brought to the Schuylkill Valley.

As for Unitarianism, it seemed so milky, so smugly vague and evasive: an unimpeachably featureless dilution of the Christian religion as I had met it in its Lutheran form—the whole implausible, colorful, comforting tapestry of the Incarnation and the Magi, Christmas carols and Santa Claus, Adam and Eve, nakedness and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the serpent and the Fall, betrayal in the garden and Redemption on the Cross, “Why has thou forsaken me?” and Pilate washing his hands and Resurrection on the third day, posthumous suppers

in an upper room and doubting Thomas and angels haunting the shadier margins of Jerusalem, the instructions to the disciples and Paul's being knocked from his donkey on the road to Damascus and the disciples talking in tongues, a practice at which the stolid churchgoers of Alton and its environs did draw the line. Our public-school day began with a Bible reading and the Lord's Prayer; our teachers and bankers and undertakers and mailmen all professed to be conventional Christians, and what was good enough for them should have been, I think I thought, good enough for Unitarians. I had been conditioned to feel there would be no joy in life without religious faith, and if such faith demanded an intellectual sacrifice, so be it. I had read enough Kierkegaard and Barth and Unamuno to know about the leap of faith, and Reverend Whitworth was not making that leap; he was taking naps and building stone walls instead. In his bedroom I spotted a paperback Tillich—*The Courage to Be*, most likely—but I never caught him reading it, or *The Master Works of World Philosophy* either. The only time I felt him as a holy man was when, speaking with deliberate tenderness to one of his three daughters, he fell into a “thee” or “thou” from his Quaker boyhood.

He was to be brought low, all dignity shed, before he died. Alzheimer's didn't so much invade his brain as deepen the benign fuzziness and preoccupation that had always been there. At the memorial service for his wife, dead of cancer, he turned to me before the service began and said, with a kindly though puzzled smile, “Well, James, I don't quite know what's up, but I guess it will all come clear.” He didn't realize that his wife of forty-five years was being memorialized.

With her gone, he deteriorated rapidly. At the nursing home where we finally took him, as he stood before the admission desk he began to whimper, and to jiggle up and down as if bouncing something in his pants, and I knew he needed to urinate, but I lacked the courage to lead him quickly to the lavatory and take his penis out of his fly for him, so he wet himself and the floor. I was, in those years just before my separation from Deb, the eldest son-in-law, the first mate, as it were, of the extended family, and was failing in my role, though still taking a certain pride in it. My father-in-law had always, curiously, from those first summers in Vermont, trusted me—trusted me first with his daughter's well-being, and then with helping him lift the stones into place on his wall, where I could have pinched one of his fingers or dropped a rock on his toes. For all of my *ressentiment*, I never did.

I loved him, in fact. As innocent of harm as my own father, he made fewer demands on those around him. A little silence during his nap does not seem, now, too much to ask, though at the time it irritated me. His theology, or lack of it, now seems one of the spacious views I enjoyed thanks to him. His was a cosmos from

which the mists of superstition had almost cleared. His parish, there in the Gateway to the West, included university existentialists, and some of their hip philosophy buffed up his old-fashioned transcendentalist sermons, which he delivered in a mellow, musing voice. Though Unitarian, he was of the theist branch, Deb would tell me in bed, hoping to mediate between us. I wasn't, as I remember it, graceless enough to argue with him often, but he could not have been ignorant of my Harvard neo-orthodoxy, with its Eliotic undercurrent of panic.

In Vermont, my household task was to burn the day's waste-paper, in a can up the slope behind the house, toward the spring that supplied our cold water. One could look across twenty miles of wooded valley to the next ridge of the Green Mountains. With Reverend Whitworth's blessing, I had been admitted to a world of long views and icy swims and New England reticence. He was a transparently good man who took himself with a little Maine salt. It is easy to love people in memory; the hard thing is to love them when they are there in front of you.

Pennsylvania had its different tensions for Deb and me. We had gotten off to a bad start. The first time I brought her home to meet my parents, we disembarked at the wrong train station. The train from Philadelphia was a local. One of its stops was a hilly factory town seven miles from Alton, also along the Schuylkill and closer by a few miles to the country farmhouse to which we had moved, at my mother's instigation, after the war. We were among a handful of passengers to get off the train, and the platform in its tunnel of trees soon emptied. No one had come to meet us. My parents, in spite of arrangements clear in my own mind—I was trying to save them mileage—had gone to Alton.

Now I wonder how, in that era before cell phones, we managed to make contact. But in that same era even little railroad stations were still manned; perhaps the stationmaster telegraphed word of our plight to Alton and had my parents paged in the echoing great station. Or perhaps, by the mental telegraphy that used to operate in backward regions, they guessed the truth when we didn't disembark and simply drove to where we were. I was a young swain, and Deb, so securely in her element in St. Louis or Cambridge, seemed lost in my home territory. I kept failing to protect her from our primitive ways. Blamelessly, she kept doing things wrong.

Though we were not yet married, she had put some dirty socks and underwear of mine through her own laundry, and packed them, clean, in her suitcase. When my mother, helpfully hovering in the guest bedroom, noticed this transposition, she let loose one of her silent bursts of anger, a merciless succession of waves that dyed an angry red V on her forehead, between the eyebrows, and filled the little

sandstone house to its corners, upstairs and down. The house of my childhood, in the town of Olinger, a mere trolley-car ride from Alton, had been a long narrow brick one, with a long back yard, so there were places to escape to when my mother was, in my father's tolerant phrase, "throwing an atmosphere." But in the new house we could all hear one another turn over in bed at night, and even out-of-doors, buzzing with insects and seething with weeds, offered no escape from my mother's psychological heat. I had grown up with her aggrieved moods, turned on usually by adult conflicts out of my sight and hearing. She could maintain one for days until, coming home from school or a friend's house, I would find it miraculously lifted. Her temper was part of my growing up, like Pennsylvania mugginess and the hot spells that could kill old people in their stifling row houses and expand the steel tracks on the streets enough to derail trolley cars.

Whispering, I tried to apologize for this climate to Deb, while my mother's sulk, which had frozen all of our tongues during dinner, continued to emanate from her bedroom down into the living room. The click of her latch had reverberated above us like a thunderclap. "You didn't do anything wrong," I assured Deb, though in my heart I felt that offending my mother was wrong, a primal sin. I blamed Deb for mixing up my underwear with hers; she should have anticipated the issue, the implications. "It's the way she is."

"Well, she should wake up and get over it" was Deb's response, so loud I feared it could be heard upstairs. Amazed, I realized that she wasn't tuned as finely as I to the waves of my mother's anger. She wasn't built from birth to receive them.

Near the sofa where we sat, my father, dolefully correcting math papers in the rocking chair, said, "Mildred doesn't mean anything by it. It's her femininity acting up."

Femininity explained and justified everything for his sexist generation, but not for mine. I was mortified by this tension. That same visit, perhaps, or later, Deb, thinking she was doing a good deed, on Sunday morning began to weed the patch of pansies my mother had planted near the back porch and then neglected. Deb stood uncomprehending, her feet sweetly bare in the soft soil, like Ingrid Bergman's in *Stromboli*, when I explained that around here nobody worked on Sundays; everybody went to church. "How silly," Deb said. "My father all summer does his walls and things on Sundays."

"He's a different denomination."

"Jim, I can't believe this. I really can't."

"Sh-h-h. She's inside, banging dishes around."

"Well, let her. They're her dishes."

“And we have to get ready for church.”

“I didn’t bring church clothes.”

“Just put on shoes and the dress you wore down on the train.”

“Shit I will. I’d look ridiculous. I’d rather stay here and weed. Your grandparents will be staying, won’t they?”

“My grandmother. My grandfather goes. He reads the Bible every day on the sofa, haven’t you noticed?”

“I didn’t know there were places like this left in America.”

“Well—”

My answer was going to be lame, she saw with those sterling blue eyes, so she interrupted. “I see now where you get your nonsense from, being so rude to Daddy.”

I was scandalized but thrilled, perceiving that a defense against my mother was possible. In the event, Deb stayed with my grandmother, who was disabled and speechless with Parkinson’s disease. My rudeness to Reverend Whitworth was revenged when, baptizing our first child, his first grandchild, in a thoroughly negotiated Unitarian family service in the house of her Lutheran grandparents, he made a benign little joke about the “holy water”—water fetched from our own spring, which was down below the house instead of, as in Vermont, up above it. My mother sulked for the rest of the day about that, and always spoke of Catherine, our first child, as “the baby who didn’t get baptized.” By the time the three other babies arrived, Deb and I had moved to Massachusetts, where we had met and courted, and joined the Congregational Church as a reasonable compromise.

We are surrounded by holy water; all water, our chemical mother, is holy. Flying from Boston to New York, my habit is to take a seat on the right-hand side of the plane, but the other day I sat on the left, and was rewarded, at that hour of mid-morning, by the sun’s reflections on the waters of Connecticut—not just the rivers and the Sound, but little ponds and pools and glittering threads of water that for a few seconds hurled silver light skyward into my eyes. My father’s tears for a moment had caught the light; that is how I saw them. When he was dead, Deb and I divorced. Why? It’s hard to say. “We boil at different degrees,” Emerson had said, and a woman came along who had my same boiling point. The snapshots I took of Deb naked, interestingly, Deb claimed as part of her just settlement. It seemed to me they were mine; I’d taken them. But she said her body was hers. It sounded like second-hand feminism, but I didn’t argue.

After our divorce, my mother told me, of my father, “He worried about you

two from the first time you brought her home. He didn't think she was feminine enough for you."

"He was big on femininity," I said, not knowing whether to believe her or not. The dead are so easy to misquote.

My reflex is always to come to Deb's defense, even though it was I who wanted the divorce. It shocks me, at my high-school class reunions, when my classmates bother to tell me how much they prefer my second wife. It is true, Sylvia really mixes it up with them, in a way that Deb shyly didn't. But, then, Deb assumed they were part of my past, something I had put behind me but reunited with every five years or so, whereas Sylvia, knowing me in my old age, recognizes that I never really left Pennsylvania, that it is where the self I value is stored, however infrequently I check on its condition. The most recent reunion, the fifty-fifth, might have depressed Deb—all these people in their early seventies, most of them still living in the country within a short drive of where they had been born, even in the same semi-detached houses where they had been raised. Some came in wheelchairs, and some were too sick to drive and were chauffeured to the reunion by their middle-aged children. The list of our deceased classmates on the back of the program grows longer; the class beauties have gone to fat or bony cronehood; the sports stars and non-athletes alike move about with the aid of pacemakers and plastic knees, retired and taking up space at an age when most of our fathers were considerably dead.

But we don't see ourselves that way, as lame and old. We see kindergarten children—the same round fresh faces, the same cup ears and long-lashed eyes. We hear the gleeful shrieking during elementary-school recess and the seductive saxophones and muted trumpets of the locally bred swing bands that serenaded the blue-lit gymnasium during high-school dances. We see in each other the enduring simplicities of a town rendered changeless by Depression and then by a World War whose bombs never reached us, though rationing and toy tanks and air-raid drills did. Old rivalries are rekindled and put aside; old romances flare for a moment and subside into the general warmth, the diffuse love. When the class secretary, dear Joan Edison, her luxuriant head of chestnut curls now whiter than bleached laundry, takes the microphone and runs us through a quiz on the old days—teachers' nicknames, the names of vanished luncheonettes and ice-cream parlors, the titles of our junior and senior class plays, the winner of the scrap drive in third grade—the answers are shouted out on all sides. Not one piece of trivia stumps us: we were there, together, then, and the spouses, Sylvia among them, good-naturedly, applaud so much long-hoarded treasure of useless knowing.

These were not just my classmates; they had been my father's students, and they remembered him. He was several times the correct answer—"Mr. Werley!"—in Joan Edison's quiz. Cookie Behn, who had been deposited in our class by his failing grades and who, a year older than we, already had Alzheimer's, kept coming up to me before and after dinner, squinting as if at a strong light, and huskily, ardently asking, "Your father, Jimbo—is he still with us?" He had forgotten the facts but remembered that saying "still alive," like the single word "dead," was somehow tactless.

"No, Cookie," I said each time. "He died in 1972, of his second heart attack." Oddly, it did not feel absurd to be calling a seventy-four-year-old man on a pronged cane "Cookie."

He nodded, his expression grave as well as, mildly, puzzled. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said.

"I'm sorry to tell you," I said, though my father would have been over a hundred and running up big bills in a nursing home. As it happened, his dying was less trouble to me than Reverend Whitworth's.

"And your mother, Jimbo?" Cookie persisted.

"She outlived him by seventeen years," I told him, curtly, as if I resented the fact. "She was a happy widow."

"She was a very dignified lady," he said slowly, nodding as if to agree with himself. It touched me that he was attempting to remember my mother, and that what he said was, after all, true enough of her in her relations with the outside world. She had been outwardly dignified and, in her youth, beautiful or, as she once put it to me during her increasingly frank long widowhood, "not quite beautiful."

My father had died when Deb and I were in Italy. We had gone there, with another couple in trouble, to see if we couldn't make the marriage "work." Our hotel in Florence was a small one with a peek at the Arno; returning from a bus trip to Fiesole—its little Roman stadium, its charming Etruscan museum built in the form of a first-century Ionic temple—we had impulsively decided, the four of us, to have an afternoon drink in the hotel's upstairs café, rather than return to the confinement of our rooms. The place, with its angled view of the Arno, was empty except for some Germans drinking beer in a corner, and some Italians standing up with espressos at the bar. If I heard the telephone ring at all, I assumed it had nothing to do with me, but the bartender came from behind the bar and walked over to me and said, "Signor Wer-iei? Call for you." Who could know I was here?

It was my mother, sounding very small and scratchy. "Jimmy? Were you having fun? I'm sorry to disturb you."

"I'm impressed you could find me."

“The operators helped,” she explained.

“What’s happened, Mother?”

“Your father’s in the hospital. With his second heart attack.”

“How bad is it?”

“Well, he sat up in the car as I drove him into Alton.”

“Well, then, it isn’t too bad.”

There was a delay in her responses that I blamed on the transatlantic cable. She said at last, “I wouldn’t be too sure of that.” Except when we talked on the telephone, I never noticed what a distinct Pennsylvania accent my mother had. When we were face to face, her voice sounded as transparent, as free of any accent, as my own. She explained, “He woke up with this pressing feeling on his chest, and usually he ignores it. He didn’t today. It’s noon here now.”

“So you want me to come back,” I accused her. I knew my father wouldn’t want me inconvenienced. The four of us had reservations for the Uffizi tomorrow.

She sighed; the cable under the ocean crackedled. “Jimmy, I’m afraid you better. You and Deb, of course, unless she’d rather stay there and enjoy the art. Dr. Shirk doesn’t like what he’s hearing, and you know how hard to impress he usually is.”

Open-heart surgery and angioplasty were not options then; there was little for doctors to do but listen with a stethoscope and prescribe nitroglycerin. The concierge told us when the next train to Rome was, and the other couple saw us to the Florence station—just beyond the Medici chapels, which Deb and I had always wanted to see, and were destined never to see together. In Rome, the taxi driver found us an airline office that was open. I will never forget the courtesy and patience with which that young airline clerk, in his schoolbook English, took our tickets to Boston the next week and converted them to tickets to Philadelphia the next day. More planes flew then, with more empty seats. We made an evening flight to London, and had to lay over for the night. On the side of Heathrow away from London there turned out to be a world of new, tall hotels for passengers in transit. We got into our room around midnight. I called my mother—it was suppertime in Pennsylvania—and learned that my father was dead. To my mother, it was news a number of hours old, and she described in weary retrospect her afternoon of sitting in the Alton hospital and receiving increasingly dire reports. She said, “Doc Shirk said he fought real hard at the end. It was ugly.”

I hung up, and shared the news with Deb. She put her arms around me in the bed and told me, “Cry.” Though I saw the opportunity, and the rightness of seizing it, I don’t believe I did. My father’s tears had used up mine.

# U and Eyes: Grieving and Reading Updike's "My Father's Tears"

D. QUENTIN MILLER

I've heard about the seven stages of grief, but I'm not sure I believe in them. Psychological taxonomies are convenient ways to organize human experience, but if I've learned anything in more than fifty years as a human, it's that each relationship is unique. I imagine my grief reaction to virtually everyone I know would be markedly different. It could be argued that literature is based on relationships, or at least that it persistently tries to illustrate the complexities of relationships. The best literature declines to answer any questions, instead showing its readers the range of what might happen when you combine imagination with language. Literature leans into mysteries, endlessly. Grief is one of those mysteries.

The most common phrase one hears when a loved one dies is, *Sorry for your loss*. It's the best phrase we've come up with, but it's not adequate. *Loss*. We can lose car keys. We can lose a basketball game. We can lose the fortunes we once gained. We can lose our way. But the way the word approaches death is a kind of deflection. Loss implies an empty space in the lives of the living but fails to come to terms with the grand conundrum of existence, namely, what's the point of it? It might be argued that we're primarily here to leave a legacy for the living, but something's missing from that viewpoint. Even the young John Updike who wrote *Rabbit, Run* (1960) brooded vis-à-vis Harry Angstrom about the hollow comfort of existing only to procreate: "The fullness ends when we give Nature her ransom, when we make children for her. Then she is through with us, and we become, first inside, and then outside, junk" (237).

Part of what complicates grief and loss is memory. There's a saying that people die twice, first when they actually die and second when they're no longer remembered. Cemeteries exist in defiance of that principle, as do photographs, archives, paintings, and art in general, which can be understood to extend life's reach. Updike was certainly interested in the way art could outlast life, and it could be said that memory is a persistent concern. One of his novels—*Memories of the Ford Administration* (1992)—even highlights the term in its title. His novella *Rabbit Remembered* (2000) reanimates his most famous protagonist as a ghost in the minds of his survivors. *Seek My Face* (2002) is a story told in memories. It's natural to turn to Updike for explorations of the subjects of memory and the staying power of artistic achievement, but he might be a less likely source of wisdom when it comes to grieving. The funeral scenes in the Rabbit novels, for instance, are painful illustrations of a man too self-absorbed to realize the gravity of the ceremony. At his infant daughter's funeral in *Rabbit, Run*, in place of tears, he blurts out a wild assertion of blame aimed at his wife. In *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) at the funeral of his former lover Thelma he engages in a masculine display of aggression with Thelma's widower, Ron Harrison. Nonetheless, as I said, relationships are infinitely more complicated than people are, and it is impossible to predict how individuals are going to react to the death of someone they knew. Grief is irrational and can be expressed in ways that don't fit neatly into seven stages.

Relationships extend to people you don't technically know. I never met Updike, but I wrote my dissertation on his work in the mid-1990s, and I managed to network my way into his mailbox. My grad school colleagues sometimes raised an eyebrow at my project, but I sensed that there was a bit of jealousy folded in. While they were combing through mountains of dusty scholarship on long-dead authors, I was bouncing to my mailbox hoping for (and often receiving) letters from my living subject who generously replied to a PhD student's questions rather than responding as his cranky fictional alter ego Henry Bech would have, by returning such letters with the rubber-stamped message "It's your Ph.D. thesis; please write it yourself" (*Bech* 134). Updike's letters were thrilling arrivals in my mailbox, and I was equally thrilled with the weekly arrival of *The New Yorker*, the magazine I felt (and still feel) compelled to read as a scholar of contemporary literature. The issues that contained a review, story, essay, or occasional poem by Updike seemed to greatly outnumber those that didn't. When he died in 2009, I had a temporary feeling that I no longer wanted *The New Yorker*. I bought the posthumously published story and poetry collections *My Father's Tears* and *Endpoint* that year, and

yet it took a while before I was ready to read them. They sat on my bookshelf until I accepted the fact that there wouldn't be any more stories or poems.

It strikes me now that my reluctance to read them was a form of grief.

After a couple of years, I read both books a little wistfully. When my own father died in 2019, their titles seemed to glow faintly on my shelves, beckoning me back. As I tried to process this new chapter in my life, I had plenty of emotional support from loved ones, but I craved a little literary guidance as well. Updike in those last two books was confronting the end of his journey, and I knew that rereading them would offer some crucial wisdom. My father, born in 1930, was Updike's contemporary, but the two men were different in many ways, including their divergent attitudes toward mortality. Based on his fiction, it could be argued that Updike thought about death constantly, even as his characters tried to evade its inevitability. Biographer Adam Begley describes death as one of "his two enduring preoccupations" (474), sex being the other. My father, by contrast, denied his mortality throughout his life and refused to go gentle into that good night during his final decline. Receiving the ultimate bad news from a doctor in his last year, he turned to my mother with a sheepish smile and said, "Well, I thought we had longer." In a eulogy his good friend pointed out that, even in the bad times, he would never complain to friends about his suffering because it would only bring them down. Don't talk about death, he seemed to think, and it will stay away forever. Updike, on the other hand, seemed to think that giving death or the fear of it an outsized role in his fiction might also keep it at bay, but only temporarily. It was always lurking, troubling him.

From the beginning of his fiction-writing career, Updike had one eye on the Pennsylvania of his youth and the other on the hereafter. In a highly unorthodox move for a debut novelist, his first novel, set in the future, was about old men. The topic of death coupled with the setting of his hometown coalesce beautifully in "Pigeon Feathers" (1961), one of his most celebrated early stories. The Rabbit novels, as I argue elsewhere, are death-obsessed, which may explain Harry Angstrom's need for constant motion and also the present-tense mode of the narration. (Note the body count in the tetralogy, beginning with the infant Rebecca in the first book and Jill in the second, followed by Thelma in the fourth and Harry himself at that novel's conclusion. It's no wonder Ruth refers to him as "Mr. Death himself" in *Rabbit, Run*, framing the nickname by claiming he has "the touch of death" and that he "wander[s] around with the kiss of death" [320].) Two works from late in his career are titled *Toward the End of Time* (1997) and *The Afterlife* (1994). Consistent

with this handful of examples, the title *My Father's Tears*—his final, posthumous collection of stories—indicates grief, death, and memory.

In addition to addressing Updike's persistent concern with death, the story takes up a familiar Updikean theme of nostalgia, sometimes translated according to its Greek roots as "the pain of returning home." The establishment of Updike's childhood home as a museum in Shillington, and the public marker erected in front of it by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 2021, had me thinking about the ongoing importance of that place to his long project of translating his childhood experiences into fiction, often converting Shillington into Olinger. Some of Updike's most moving, honest works—including stories in *Pigeon Feathers* and the novella *Of the Farm* (1965), for instance, as well as the first memoir in *Self-Consciousness* (1989)—utilize a first-person narrator and read like the genre we've come to call autofiction, or what Robert Milder describes as "displaced memoir with altered or invented details" (64). Since the stories in *My Father's Tears* are arranged according to their publication dates, the title story is arguably the last Olinger story he wrote in the first-person mode. One could arrange this long skein of stories chronologically, beginning with "The Happiest I've Been" from *The Same Door* (1959) and ending here, as a way of observing the evolution of all the author's concerns. The 1964 collection *Olinger Stories* only begins this project. Toward the end of "My Father's Tears" the narrator shares his author's essential connection to his hometown: "I have never really left Pennsylvania . . . it is where the self I value is stored, however infrequently I check on its condition" (207).

"My Father's Tears" is a story about perspective. The tears of the title call attention not only to grief but to the eyes that produce them. The story's emphasis on "eyes" also indicates its homophone, the plural of "I." The story starts with the word "I," which is not unusual in a first-person narrative, but the pronoun is repeated so many times at the beginning of the story that it indicates an almost desperate inability to construct and maintain selfhood. The reader is conscious that the "I" at the beginning of the story is not the same "I" we encounter at the end, and all the I's along the way signal new selves. "I saw my father cry only once," he begins, and he ties the moment to a period of self-transformation: "I was eager to go, for already my home and my parents had become somewhat unreal to me" (193). At the same time "Harvard, with its courses and the hopes for my future they inspired and the girlfriend I had acquired in my sophomore year, had become more real every semester" (193). What would seem a natural progression from adolescence to adulthood, from one "I" to another, is arrested by the tears of the title and the eyes that produce them: "it shocked me—threw me off track, as it were—to see that

my father's eyes, as he shook my hand goodbye, glittered with tears" (193, emphasis mine). It's noteworthy that this shock is attached not directly to James's father's tears but to the infinitive verb "to see," underscoring the theme of perception I've identified. It's also noteworthy that the opening paragraph doesn't contain the phrase from the title but rather splits it: "my father's eyes" which "glittered with tears." The tears are not the story's true focus; the way the narrator, James Werley, sees them is.

Many factors contribute to how an individual sees the world: one's observational powers, interpretive capacity, background, experience, and personality are just a few of them. To a large degree, how we see dictates who we are. The second paragraph calls attention to the narrator's sense of self by repeating the word "I" to an almost distracting degree, as in this excerpt: "He was taller than I, though I was not short, and I realized, his hand warm in mine while he tried to smile, that he had a different perspective than I. I was going somewhere and he was seeing me go. I was growing in my own sense of myself, and to him, I was getting smaller" (193–94). The insistence on "I" (used seven times in three sentences, including two that conclude and begin a sentence to form a pair of I's) is a defense of what the narrator calls "my own sense of myself," which is another way of insisting on the existence of individual identity. At this crucial moment, the progression of that self is momentarily arrested by his father's eyes, which see things differently. Just as the place of his youth and the people who inhabit it are becoming "unreal" to the narrator in the first paragraph, so a sense of through-the-looking-glass unreality affects this departure. Because father and son have "different perspective[s]," the younger sees this departure as growth, but the elder sees it as the very opposite, "getting smaller."

James, being an Updike protagonist, is fated to see the world in great detail, and also to examine it from different angles, implicitly comparing his young eyes to his current ones. The train station that indicates this turning point in his life thus had "an illusion of well-being" to his young eyes and "looked to be with us forever" (194). His adult eyes see these illusions for what they are: "We did not foresee . . . that within a decade passenger service to Philadelphia would stop, and that eventually the station, like railroad stations all across the East, would be padlocked and boarded up" (195). Indicating the encroaching inevitability of death built into the scene, "The fine old building stood on its empty acre of asphalt parking space like an oversized mausoleum. All the life it had once contained was sealed into silence" (195). This imagery spills into the next paragraph, which crucially foreshadows the story's conclusion: "But my father did foresee, the glitter in

his eyes told me, that time consumes us—that the boy I had been was dying if not already dead, and we would have less and less to do with each other. My life had come out of his, and now I was stealing away with it” (195). It is again his father’s eyes that have the ability to foresee the future; the tears are just glitter in them. At this moment of departure, as the narrator realizes that he is growing smaller in his father’s eyes, the same thing happens to him: “My parents looked smaller, foreshortened” (195). He waves goodbye with a minimum of emotion and picks up his book before he leaves the city proper, a book which he takes pains to name: “*The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton*” (195). Milton, of course, went blind. This detail functions ironically to highlight the story’s thematic preoccupation with seeing and its relationship to being.

The cliché runs that hindsight is 20/20, and the narrator does see the scene of his departure for college more clearly in retrospect than he did at the time, or at least he is now in a position to understand its significance. He reads in his father’s eyes the observation “that the boy I had been was dying if not already dead.” This is an unusual way to express aging: it is more common to say that boys grow and age into men than that boys die as they become men. Implicit in the phrase is the narrator’s sense of his own mortality. The story covers his whole life following the hometown departure at the train station, including marriage, divorce, remarriage, the death of his father-in-law from his first marriage, the birth of his own children which ushers in his period of fatherhood, a fifty-fifth high school reunion, and finally the death of his father, told out of order chronologically. As Robert Milder points out, “The surprising thing about ‘My Father’s Tears’ is how much of it is given to subjects other than its titled one” (63). As James revisits key moments in his life, he becomes aware how much he has changed, mellowed, or grown when it comes to relationships; he concludes, “It is easy to love people in memory; the hard thing is to love them when they are there in front of you” (202). This is more evidence that the story’s main concerns are with perception, hindsight, and the power of the past.

The quest to see clearly in “My Father’s Tears” is intertwined with the quest to see things that aren’t quite there or are ephemeral illusions. The narrator quotes one of Emerson’s essays, “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact” (198), and his father’s tears seem to call him to consider their spiritual equivalent, which might be considered the soul. His father’s death toward the story’s end is described as a simple, natural fact. James is not even there to witness his father’s passing, having tried and failed to fly home from Italy in time to say goodbye. His mother narrates the moment of death almost without emotion: “Doc Shirk said

he fought real hard at the end. It was ugly” (211). When a classmate at the high school reunion asked James if his father is still alive, he also responds factually that he had been long dead, and privately muses that if he were still alive, “my father would have been over a hundred and running up big bills in a nursing home” (208). This type of pronouncement is one of the reasons Peter Bailey argues that, with one close rival, “Updike never wrote a more compelling paean to the perspectival transformations of high school reunions than this one” (102).

James’s cool, practical assessments of his father’s life in retrospect tend to obscure the elder man’s spiritual existence, but that dimension of his life years to be examined. The glittering tears that give the story its title fold together with other tricks of sunlight and water that indicate the existence of an invisible spiritual world. The first is an illusion that animates the Vermont house of his first wife’s parents:

The lone bathroom was a long room, its plaster walls and wooden floor both bare, that was haunted by a small but intense rainbow, which moved around the walls as the sun in the course of the day glinted at a changing angle off the bevelled edge of the mirror on the medicine cabinet. When we troubled to heat up enough water on the kerosene stove for a daylight bath, the prismatically generated rainbow kept the bather company; it quivered and bobbed when footsteps or a breath of wind made the house tremble. (197)

This “haunting” takes on a mystical life of its own when James reveals that their first child was conceived in this house: “This microscopic event deep within my bride became allied in my mind with the little rainbow low on the bathroom wall, our pet imp of refraction” (198). Later in the story, narrating an incident that occurs later in his life, James sits on the opposite side of a plane from his usual seat and says he “was rewarded, at that hour of midmorning, by the sun’s reflections on the waters of Connecticut—not just the rivers and the Sound, but little ponds and pools and glittering threads of water that for a few seconds hurled silver light skyward into my eyes. My father’s tears for a moment had caught the light; *that is how I saw them*” (206, emphasis mine). Just as the refracted rainbow produced by sun and water indicates the imminent mystery of birth, so too does this moment indicate the mystery of the sublime. At this moment, he connects the glinting light in his father’s tears to this evidence of the spiritual world in a paragraph that begins, “We are surrounded by holy water; all water, our chemical mother, is holy” (206).

Why, then, is the narrator unable to cry in the story’s conclusion when his first wife gives him permission to do so after he learns of his father’s death? The concluding paragraph reads, “I hung up, and shared the news with Deb. She put

her arms around me in the bed and told me, 'Cry.' Though I saw the opportunity, and the rightness of seizing it, I don't believe I did. My father's tears had used up mine" (211). Milder asserts that these final words "are ambiguous enough to allow for many readings (77), and Bailey concurs (100). For Milder, the final words "express a world-sorrow that 'lodged' itself in James's mind as he returned to college, that he has since come to understand, but that he can no longer genuinely feel . . . whatever was 'dewy' in him has dried up" (77). Bailey sees James's inability to cry as a slightly guilty reaction to his own success: "Crying over his father's death would mean repudiating his own hard-won ascent from the dissolution of industrial Alton while betraying the 'lofty attitude' his father-in-law inspired in him" (105). These are sound, illuminating interpretations, and yet my current reading shifts the focus from his own personal shortcomings—the life-water that no longer flows through his tear ducts—to the muted vitality of his father. Amid the story's emphasis on perception, the narrator destabilizes this crucial memory: "I don't believe I did." Rather than an extension of both his and his father's stereotypically masculine inability to express emotion—even a handshake is awkward for them at the story's beginning—I read this final line as an homage.<sup>1</sup> The phrase "used up" might make it seem as though James does not feel strongly enough about his father's death to cry, but it's possible that his father's tears had just been so eloquent that his own tears are unnecessary. When he first sees his father's tears, he says, "He had loved me, it came to me as never before. It was something that had not needed to be said before, and now his tears were saying it" (194). To reiterate what he says later in the story, "My father's tears for a moment had caught the light; that is how I saw them" (206). The tears catch the sun and are seen by the son. In their glittering moment, the tears indicate an acknowledgment of the transience of life and the bonds between the living and the dead. They speak for themselves; there is nothing to add.

Rereading "My Father's Tears," I'm conscious of my own multiple selves. I would have once thought "evolving self" would be a better term, but the story leads me to the first term. Like James Werley, I have seen the world differently at different points in my life, and with a bit of effort, I can see myself at those earlier stages and engage in self-evaluation. I've never been one to dwell on the past—few who've met me would describe me as even remotely sentimental—but revisiting the past is a necessary part of what makes us human. Another key part is seeing the world through the eyes of another, a practice that leads to empathy, the opposite of judgment. James's subtle homage to his father's eyes has the effect of preserving him, of giving him an afterlife that is neither fully formed nor clichéd. His father is not watching over him from some vague heaven, nor does James ever imagine

he will join him again when he dies. And yet his father's importance is spiritual, and tangible, and ultimately private. The way I see it, grief does not get any more eloquent than that.

#### NOTE

1. Robert Milder also uses the term "homage" (69) to describe the father-son relationship in the story but more often uses "apology" (63, 65, and three times on 69).

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# His Story's Verbs: Character and Doing in John Updike's "My Father's Tears"

SUE NORTON

At the close of one of his late-in-life poems, Updike wrote, "life is more than viewing; it's to do" (*Endpoint* 80). He seemed to be referring to the psychic necessity for action, even in the awareness that observation is important too.

His 2006 semi-autobiographical short story "My Father's Tears" involves much doing on the part of its few characters and much observation on the part of its first-person narrator, James. James's family members are presented dynamically, for the most part, meaning we come to understand their mentalities through their actions, which are often set in juxtaposition to each other. The father of James does fewer things than the father of his first wife, Deb, in the story, but the mother of James does many more things than the mother of Deb, who barely appears at all. Both Deb's father and James's mother are presented as having more dominant personalities than either of their spouses, and both are more animated at the level of plot, but the plot is less a tight sequence of events than the assemblage of recollected scenes drawn from particular points in the lifespans of its handful of characters.

We note some striking verb choices early on. James refers to Deb as the girlfriend he had "acquired" (193) in his sophomore year, revealing a commodifying impulse. Indeed, we come to see that, as his eventual wife, Deb offered James some social advancement, "a sense of having moved up" (197), at least for a while. We learn, as well, that Deb's father, Reverend Whitworth, "was ostentatiously careful in everything his hands did" (200), such as when he set down a special lamp on

a glass table or “built stone walls, and refined the engineering of his dam” (199). By contrast, James describes the first-ever handshake he shares with his father as a matter of awkwardness: “for eighteen years we had never had occasion for this social gesture, this manly contact, and we had groped our way into it” (193). It is a grope of congenital uncertainty. Mannerisms serve as metaphor: the father is clumsy in his masculinity; the father-in-law precious in his.

How the characters in “His Father’s Tears” physically “do” things suggests their deepest preoccupations and insecurities. While such a technique of show-to-tell is not unusual in prose fiction, it is conspicuously significant in so short a story that is more about psychological revelation than it is about situation, reversal, resolution. There is no climax and denouement in “My Father’s Tears,” just a gradual understanding on the part of the narrator and on the part of the reader that, even as time is busy taking its toll on all of us, we who diligently observe the behaviors of others will gain perspective on the motivations and impulses of those closest to us, especially our elders. We may then come to understand our own preoccupations and insecurities as having evolved from our childhood and adolescent formations. Once sufficiently self-aware, we can seek out relationships with those who, in James’s Emersonian logic, share our same “boiling points” (206), which is how he characterizes his agreeable relationship with his second wife. She, Sylvia, attends his fifty-fifth high school reunion with him and—more crafty verbs—“mixes it up” with his former classmates and will “good naturedly applaud” their nostalgia because she is not disconcerted, as Deb had been, by James’s regard for Pennsylvania as the place where “the self I value is stored” (207, 208).

His novels *The Centaur* (1963) and *Of the Farm* (1965) offer extended meditations on the psychological compositions of his father and his mother, respectively, and in “His Father’s Tears,” Updike again reckons with the legacy of his upbringing. Like the novels, the story reveals his symbiotic empathy for each parent. In *Of the Farm*, for instance, the son Richard laments how frail his elderly mother has become, but nevertheless describes her “atmosphere” as “a volatile pressure system to which I am more sensitive than weather itself” (20). In *The Centaur*, the son Peter is also attuned to the “atmosphere” of his father, which he describes as both mournful and full of “such laughter” (269). Though “puzzled” by him, Peter comes to appreciate the depth of his father’s struggles and the dignity in his modest life (269).

Decades later, the son we find in the character of James in “My Father’s Tears,” published when Updike was in his seventies, possesses a seemingly innate theory of mind for each of his parents, so that in every interaction in which he feels disap-

pointment or frustration with their behavior, he also confronts his unavoidable compassion for them, a compassion that seems to break his heart at times. Robert Milder sees the story as, indeed, something of an apology from Updike to his father, Wesley, because, in recalling his father's tears at the train station, James, as a stand-in for Updike, seems to be saying, "Now I understand. . . . We may as well all cry" (Milder 66). James describes the tears as having "glittered" (193, 195, 196), a verb suggesting refraction, which is the redirection of a wave as it passes from one medium to another, here from father to son. James absorbs his father's grief, which days later will not fade from his memory. They remain "like a glittering splinter" so that his own eyes, doing verb-things themselves, "itched and burned" (196). James realizes, as he prepares to board the train, that his father "had a different perspective than I. I was going somewhere, and he was seeing me go. I was growing in my own sense of myself, and to him I was getting smaller. . . . It was something that had not needed to be said before, and now his tears were saying it" (193–94). It is a passage that brims with compassion, as eyes can brim with tears, and it signals to the reader that the narrator-protagonist is going to elaborate on this "all." Updike proceeds to provide a variety of scenes featuring James living in tension with others, scenes that position him to observe, respond to, and take actions of his own. Among the first of these is his "stealing away" (195) to further pursue what he will refer to in utilitarian, vaguely cynical language as his "freshly installed education" (197). He grasps that he and his father "would have less and less to do with each other" (195), and his chosen verb "stealing" suggests his understanding that the parents he leaves behind at the train station have, in effect, been robbed. Whether James's use of "stealing" is meant to be understood by the reader as conscious or unconscious hardly matters: Updike is masterful at such liminality. Either way, the parents appear "smaller and foreshortened" (195) in the receding distance as their son rides the rails to accrue cultural capital in the world by dint of Harvard. Yes, as Milder suggests, we may as well all cry.

In a 2009 *New York Times* review published shortly after Updike's death, Michiko Kakutani mentioned "His Father's Tears" as evidence of Updike's mature telescopic capacity as opposed to his younger microscopic capacity. She felt that he possessed in his seventies a sharp rear view of the life he had lived, and that he was writing in "complete control of his craft." Certainly, the story delivers subtlety of effect as, again and again, revelation of character is distilled through actions and courses of action. For all of James's adjectival description of his father-in-law Reverend Whitworth as "a handsome man, with a head of tightly wiry hair whose graying did not diminish its density" (199) and who had weekend aspirations

toward self-reliance inspired by transcendental poets, we understand Whitworth best by his minimalist religiosity. James, having read Kierkegaard and Barth, is prepared to take the “leap of faith, and Reverend Whitworth was not making that leap; he was taking naps and building stone walls instead” (201). He was also playing card games, “which he methodically tended to win” (199). As to the manner of his interactions with his family, Reverend Whitworth “moved among us . . . like a planet exempt from the law of gravitational attraction” (199)—remotely, in other words. We are left to regard it as indicative of his temperament that, verb-wise, the Reverend does not “leap” for faith; he takes naps, builds stone walls for pleasure, plays parlor games to win, and exempts himself at will from the pull of family. He is self-preening, we see, and quite different from James’s father, who, says James, “enacted the role of an underdog, a man whose every day . . . proceeded through a series of scrapes and embarrassments” (198–99).

But it is James’s mother, Mildred, whose behavior most potently conveys the confounding double binds that James has experienced his whole life when caught between the opposing sensibilities of one person and another, usually hers. He recalls a vivid episode involving him and Deb before they are married, visiting his parents’ farm. In sight of Mildred, Deb casually packs into her suitcase some of James’s socks and underwear that she had washed with her own laundry. Mildred had been “helpfully hovering” (203), James says, as though any kind of parental intrusion into the guest bedroom could be welcome, or even innocent. The adverb “helpfully” betrays how profoundly befuddled he (and maybe Updike) is by the mother as claimant, the mother who struggles to know her place while still expecting her due. Having noticed the socks and underwear, which she starchily regards as intimate apparel, Mildred lets loose “one of her silent bursts of anger” (203), the kind she can maintain for days. The manner in which characters behave in this story, as here, is so deftly presented as to position the reader vicariously into the given psychological dynamic at play. James, we see, is utterly betwixt and between Mildred’s unreasonable emotions, Deb’s reasonable emotions, and his own fearful exhilaration. He perceives that “[b]lamelessly, [Deb] kept doing things wrong” (203), for which he nevertheless blames her, and that his mother was petulantly, in his father’s words, “throwing an atmosphere” (204). Mildred, we see, is perfectly capable of “banging dishes around” in the kitchen, and Deb perfectly capable of remaining unperturbed by such a display: “Well, let her; They’re her dishes” (205). James marvels at Deb’s equanimity in the face of the “waves” (203) of his mother’s anger, which his father explains away by saying, “It’s her femininity acting up” (204). Updike’s verb choices for conveying his younger alter ego’s emotions are

telling in their juxtaposition. James says, “I was scandalized but thrilled, perceiving that a defense against my mother was possible” (205). The reader is made to think of James as simultaneously suffering a loss and recovering from it, as in the plot of Milton’s *Paradise Regained*, which he had been reading on the train in the opening scene. Updike’s “complete control of his craft,” in Kakutani’s phrase, is evident throughout the story in the preternatural ambivalence with which James must navigate home, the place where his valued self is stored. Clearly, the downstream “holy water” (206) of rural Pennsylvania had gotten to him long before his Ivy League education had been installed.

Our sense of the quality of the marriage between James’s father and his mother is one of *détente*. James says they conducted their “adult conflicts out of my sight and hearing” (204) when he was growing up. We intuit the Werleys’ well-wrought tolerance for each other’s ways, a natural extension of the kind of “mental telegraphy that used to operate in backward regions” (203). By this mechanism, they easily correct their error one time when they mistakenly travel to the wrong train station to meet James and Deb. We note that, with their shared sense of occasion, trips to the station are reflexively undertaken as a pair. The station itself is a “four-square granite temple” that, much like a rural Pennsylvania marriage, was “built for eternity” (194). The Werleys also have a shared sense of generational duty. One set of grandparents stays with them. In the Plowville of Updike’s youth, this was his maternal grandparents. But the story doesn’t specify, suggesting that it hardly matters. In the time and place presented, whether “backward” or not, eldercare is simply a by-product of marriage. Deb (James’s eventual *ex-wife*) says she didn’t know “there were places like this left in America” (205). James’s parents are not confused about vows, and James is not confused about the other critical thing that holds them together: conscious bias. He says of his father, “Femininity explained and justified everything for his sexist generation” (204). His mother, he says, was “dignified” especially “in her relations with the outside world” (209). These two parental stances indicate that Mildred and her husband would have stayed married under any circumstances, however dire, as a matter of deliberate adherence to social convention, entirely to be expected in “a town rendered changeless by a Depression and then by a world war whose bombs never reached us” (207). James’s comprehension of his parents’ relationship is entirely knowing, thoroughly convincing, and rendered with the kind of descriptive analysis that a young man familiar with the epic poets and the great philosophers could easily muster. What he finds difficult to do is keep his own marriage intact. In accounting for its demise, he reverts to words not of analysis, but of doing and undoing.

Specifically, we learn that James and Deb went to Italy to try to make their marriage “work” (209), a verb suggesting it deserved a practical approach, an old college try. After all, the utilitarian education, once “installed,” must have served rather well, given the affluence required to holiday abroad. While enjoying views of Florence and the Arno with “another couple in trouble” (209), a phrase implying the less granitelike vows typical of his own generation, James receives a phone call from his mother to tell him that his father has suffered a second heart attack. Their exchange involving the verbs “disturb,” “accuse,” and “enjoy” is teeming with latent content that conveys the tenor of their relationship with greater poignancy than any degree of ponderous reflection might have achieved. A late-in-life Updike, drafting this story, perhaps wished the reader to understand that it is wise to course correct in our journeys through life with loved ones while we still have the chance. The alternative is to suffer regret for what might have been. These are the relevant lines from the phone call, extracted from their conversation:

“Were you having fun? I’m sorry to disturb you.” (209)

and

“So you want me to come back,’ I accused her.” (210)

and

“Jimmy, I’m afraid you better. You and Deb, of course, unless she’d rather stay there and enjoy the art.” (210)

Mildred’s passive-aggressive “sorry to disturb” and “unless she’d rather enjoy the art” are met with James’s decidedly more hostile “accusation.” Their utterances are laced with disappointment in each other. But when James and Deb arrive in London and phone home, Mildred reports factually and with no guile, “Doc Shirk said he fought real hard at the end. It was ugly” (211). The mother-son word games cease for death, we see, and Deb encourages James to cry, which he cannot do because, “My father’s tears had used up mine” (211). We also swiftly apprehend that if James has any regrets, they are his to keep. Tears are for sons who have given priority to the lifelong comfort of their parents, not for ones who boarded trains and planes, not for ones who were “going somewhere” (193).

In reviewing *My Father’s Tears and Other Stories* in 2009, Brooke Allen reflected, “Throughout his life Updike was self-involved in the pleasant manner of a child; he was aware of others’ pain but happy, most of all, to be cocooned in their love and approval” (525). Whether or not Updike had the temperament of a child in some

respects, he certainly had the psychological acumen of an adult, an unflinchingly observant, thoroughly articulate adult who at all times understood his craft. So it is surely with deliberation that in the final scene of “My Father’s Tears,” he does not shrink from allowing his alter ego, James, to accept the various ways he has played his role in the family drama. Milder, in his analysis of the story, sees James’s dry eyes as antithetical to the sobbing of the father, Richard, in “Separating” (1975). Richard has a self-indulgent outburst of emotion upon informing his children that he would be leaving their mother and their family home, privately knowing his new life would include not just a new place to live, but a new wife too. James, by contrast, is, with his dry eyes, more “emotionally honest” (Milder 77) than Richard. He is also, in this closing moment in Heathrow, yet to have left Deb for Sylvia, and therefore yet to have availed of divorce as a measure to alleviate marital suffering, something his parents would never have considered. Updike’s method of plotting the story through nonchronologically shifting scenes has allowed us to register that James has been moving through life with a solid understanding about the high emotional cost of a cast-iron marriage, for all its enviable, granitelike solidity. Thus, we are allowed some sympathy for James, James who has told us that his mother’s temper when he was growing up was “like Pennsylvania mugginess and the hot spells that could kill old people in their stifling row houses and expand the steel tracks on the street enough to derail trolley cars” (204).

Kill, stifle, derail. These are the kinds of emotionally fraught terms upon which the story is, literally, predicated. Through action words like these, we are shown—James shows us—the formation of each of the characters. We know Deb’s Unitarian upbringing; we understand the Werleys’ provincial, Lutheran origins; we observe James’s triangulation between two parents with uneven “boiling points.” In one especially tender line, he tells us that his father had thought “life was a pickle” and that, for a time, the two of them were “in the pickle together” (194). By such figurations, we have been made to understand that, while there are enough tears to go around in this story, there is very little blame. Updike repeatedly harkens us back to deep causation in “My Father’s Tears.” Much as “the cable under the ocean crackled” (210) during the call to Italy in which Mildred asked her son to come home, we all experience psychological reverberation in our interconnectedness, especially in our primal relationships. The story is fablelike. It tells us that we cannot get away from the reasons for why we do the things we do, but “do” we will. If we can prevent some regret along the way, that would be smart. Maybe not Harvard smart, but smart like the kind of handshake that will keep you thinking back on it for a lifetime.

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# Updike's "My Father's Tears": A Retrospective Reshaping of Past Inadequacies

JAMES SCHIFF

"My Father's Tears," one of the final half-dozen short stories John Updike published, is the kind of fiction his detractors might point to as an example, despite passages of exquisite prose, of what is wrong with his writing. Here, as elsewhere in his oeuvre, Updike returns to the same well of autobiographical material, delivering another variation upon a familiar story. His narrator is, once again, a fictional depiction of the author: a highly intelligent, observant only child from Pennsylvania, who attended college in Cambridge, where he met his first wife and ultimately settled into a socially elevated New England existence. The cast is also familiar: the father, a much-loved though stressed teacher and man of the people whose life is marked by self-sacrifice and goodness; the mother, an imposing presence in their rural farmhouse, prone to silent bursts of anger; and the first wife, the serene and lovely daughter of a Unitarian minister whose family summers in a remote Vermont farmhouse. As if the familiarity of the material wasn't enough of an issue, they might argue that nothing really happens. By its conclusion, the people the narrator once knew and remembers—his mother, father, father-in-law, and first wife—have either died or been divorced, with the drama occurring offstage. In addition, the story is composed in what appears to be straightforward realism, a mode that, in the words of one well-known critic speaking of the Rabbit novels, "scarcely sustains rereading" (Bloom 1). Despite Updike's many gifts and resources, "My Father's Tears," such critics might claim, displays a failure of imagination,

along with the author's refusal to get outside himself and do anything more than retell another version of a much-told tale. Given that "My Father's Tears" was written only three years before his death at age seventy-six, one might speculate that Updike was running out of gas and material. I may have even felt that way to some degree when I first read the story in *The New Yorker* in February 2006. All I know is that narrator Jim Werley's story of his father's tears and the passage of time didn't stick with me. I more than likely felt I had heard it all before.

If I did indeed feel that way nineteen years ago, when I was in my forties, shame on me for my laziness as a reader, though in my meager defense, this story may speak more keenly to an older reader, which is what I've become. While "My Father's Tears" covers familiar Updike territory, it is also a remarkably deflective, clever, and poignant story, very much alive and full of small surprises and reversals. Everything is woven together in a retrospective narration that moves as seamlessly between characters, selves, and time periods as those chapters of remembrance in *Self-Consciousness* (1989), a memoir that displays the author clicking on all cylinders. Updike wrote many good stories in the 1950s and 1960s, but the best of his short fiction from his later years, which often relies upon retrospection, reveals a command and ease of craft suggesting artistic genius. "My Father's Tears" also generates a series of subtle ambiguities and questions that challenge the reader—to the point it's not even clear by the end, though hardly problematic, who or what precisely the story is about. As much, perhaps, as a more outwardly difficult story like "Harv Is Plowing Now," "My Father's Tears" is an eloquent puzzle that resists closure and cries out to be reread. And if, in light of my previous laziness as a reader, you don't believe me, I understand, though I would urge you to consider no less an authority on the short story than Alice Munro. A week after "My Father's Tears" appeared in *The New Yorker*, she wrote a rare letter to Updike, explaining how the story "brought me to tears of gratitude, and though I'm grateful for your writing far too often to keep shooting off messages of thanks, this time I had to" (Munro).

"My Father's Tears" is a three-part, or triptych story told retrospectively by Jim Werley, a man in his early seventies. Part 1 is set in the early 1950s in the train stations of two cities: Alton, Pennsylvania, where Jim bids farewell to his father, and Boston's Back Bay, where Jim is greeted by his college girlfriend Deb. The eclipsing moment in this section is Jim witnessing, at the Alton station, his father's tears. Part 2, the longest and most complex section, is set mostly a year or two later, during the summers he and Deb, newly married and childless, spent with each set of parents; these episodes take place in farmhouses in Vermont and Pennsylvania and occasionally lurch forward into the 1970s. Much of the reminiscence involves

Jim's relationship with his clergyman father-in-law, Reverend Whitworth, and the triangular relationship among Deb, his mother, Mildred, and himself. Part 3 then jumps to the present, the early 2000s, when Jim attends his fifty-fifth high school reunion and, prompted by a question from a classmate, recounts his father's death of more than thirty years earlier. This final section stands as a bookend to the opening section—think of the story as a sandwich, with considerable meat in the middle and thin slices of bread on either side—and concludes with Jim, upon hearing the news about his father, being unable to cry. The story is mostly chronological, though it doesn't always feel that way, and it surprisingly covers the arc of Jim's life, from being a young man in Pennsylvania to returning home, as an old man, for his class reunion.

Robert Milder and Peter J. Bailey, two of the finest critics of Updike's late short fiction, have published intelligent and thoughtful essays about this story in *The John Updike Review*: see Milder's "Apologies to His Father (and Others)" (vol. 7, no. 1) and Bailey's "More Distorted Mirrors: Ironic Self-Portraits in Updike's *My Father's Tears*" (vol. 10, no. 1), along with Milder's new essay that appears in the current issue (vol. 11, no. 2). Both critics at some point speak of "My Father's Tears" as fugal in nature, a term Updike supplied early on to describe a story "combining obliquely related incidents under the aegis of a presiding meditative voice. . . . Close to the essay, yet with fiction's liberties and amplitude, such a story might be called Emersonian" (*More Matter* 768). Well-known expressions of this compound story, cited by Milder and Bailey, are "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, a Dying Cat, a Traded Car," and "The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother's Thimble, and Fanning Island." In these two "farraginous narratives" composed in the early 1960s, Updike "piece[d] together a montage of aborted ideas," his strategy being to weave together various fragments dealing with the same theme but which, on their own, were unable to carry the narrative (Updike, *Hugging* 851). As he wrote in a 1985 letter to his son David, who was having trouble getting his more recent stories published in *The New Yorker*, "Have you thought of combining several of the not-much-of-a-story stories into one; I did that years ago, when I was about your age, with good success." While I agree that "My Father's Tears" is fugal or farraginous in nature, it is different, I think, from those earlier stories, largely because the assembled pieces are more organically rather than obliquely related. If pressed to name a useful precursor or complementary story, "Deaths of Distant Friends" (1982) is the one I would choose, though more on that later.

I'd like to go through the story again, but this time more slowly, with attention to the questions, peculiarities, and subtle mysteries that emerge. As we begin in the

Alton train station, Jim Werley, about to return to college in Cambridge, watches something we have all seen before: a father tearing up at his son's departure. The moment is so familiar it would be cliché were it not for the fact this narrator has *never* before seen his father's cry: "it shocked me—threw me off track, as it were—to see that my father's eyes, as he shook my hand goodbye, glittered with tears" (838). Their handshake, rather than a hug, may also throw off some contemporary readers, who have been conditioned by years of television to see father-son hugs as a healthy, familiar gesture upon greetings and partings. The moment is one of consequence and revelation for the narrator: "He had loved me, it came to me as never before. It was something that had not needed to be said before, and now his tears were saying it" (838). This moment also serves as a revelation for the reader: the relationship between this father and son, though loving, has not, to this point, been openly expressive—rather, it has been repressed, a behavior perhaps more common among earlier generations of American men. It does feel odd, though, to be confronted with this absence of expressive love given how Updike, forty years prior, had written an entire novel, *The Centaur* (1963), expressing his love for (and embarrassment of) his father.

Two other points to note in this opening section. First, Updike is continually making us aware of transition, change, movement, and the passage of time. The train itself is a vehicle of transportation, and the immense train station, like the nearby library, was, Jim tells us, "built for eternity, when railroads and books looked to be with us forever" (839). Yet a few lines later he counters, "We did not foresee, that moment on the platform. . . , that within a decade passenger service to Philadelphia would stop, and that eventually the station, like railroad stations all across the East, would be padlocked and boarded up. The fine old building stood on its empty acre of asphalt parking space like an oversized mausoleum." In a story that highlights the changes wrought by time, that phrase—"did not foresee"—serves perhaps as a warning or reminder: what else will the narrator not foresee? The second point to note in this opening section, focused ostensibly on his father's tears, is that there is an awful lot about Jim: the pronoun "I" appears eighteen times on just the first page of the Library of America edition, and the train station is singled out for its importance not so much in his father's life but in Jim's own coming-of-age story: it is where he bought his first pack of cigarettes, which signaled his start "to catch up, socially, with the more glamorous of my peers, who already smoked." The station is also where his mother could purchase her favorite magazines, *Harper's* and *The New Yorker*, whose pages he (the author) would someday fill. And once Jim leaves Alton, his father is hardly mentioned again until the story's conclusion.

In this first section, alert to transitions and temporality, the action concludes with Jim's arrival in Boston, where he is "met and embraced on the platform by a girl—no, a woman," Deb, who will become his first wife (840). His father's tears are mostly forgotten as his focus has turned to Deb, Milton's *Paradise Regained*, and his future. Later that evening Deb, recounting what happened at work that week, will become "angry to the point of tears," upon which Jim notes that his "own eyes itched and burned after a day of reading," though they nevertheless remain dry (840). Over the course of that day, Jim did not, it appears, reciprocate his father's expression of emotion and love.

Part 2 recalls how he and Deb, when they were married yet childless, would spend a summer with each set of parents. The first pages of this section deal largely with Deb's father, Reverend Whitworth (there is, oddly, almost no mention of Deb's mother), who purchased an abandoned Vermont farmhouse where he and his family summered. The farmhouse is memorably described, particularly the "prismatically generated rainbow" in the bathroom (841), and Jim recalls how he and Deb resorted on occasion to bathing nude in a nearby pond, created by a creek that Reverend Whitworth had dammed. In contrast to his own father, who needed contact with other people, Jim's father-in-law enjoyed the rural peace and silence of the woods, and during his time there "moved among us—his wife, his three daughters, his son-in-law, his wife's spinster sister—like a planet exempt from the law of gravitational attraction" (842). While the reverend is mostly kind and good, the narrator is clearly annoyed by him: "Reverend Whitworth was ostentatiously careful in everything his hands did, and I resented this, with the implacable *ressentiment* of youth. I resented his fussy pipe-smoker's gestures as he tamped and lighted and puffed; I resented his strictly observed naps, his sterling blue eyes (which Deb had inherited), his untroubled Unitarianism" (843).

Years later, Alzheimer's strikes his father-in-law and deals a terrific blow to his memory and dignity. Jim recalls a scene from that period at the nursing home's admissions desk when the reverend, having become antsy, displays a pressing need to urinate. Jim, however, does nothing, later confessing, "I lacked the courage to lead him quickly to the lavatory and take his penis out of his fly for him, so he wet himself and the floor" (844). Recognizing his hesitancy as a personal failure, Jim surprises us by stating of his father-in-law, "I loved him, in fact. As innocent of harm as my own father, he made fewer demands on those around him. A little silence during his nap does not seem, now, too much to ask, though at the time it irritated me. His theology, or lack of it, now seems one of the spacious views I enjoyed thanks to him" (844). This passage surprises us because it comes on the

heels of Jim stating how much the man annoyed him. Time, it would seem, has brought on this softening and change of attitude. Dead now for thirty years, Jim's father-in-law is now viewed as "a transparently good man" (845). Perhaps this change of heart has something to do with Jim having become roughly the same age as his father-in-law when he was undone by Alzheimer's. Or maybe it's simply a moment of self-deception, a way for Jim of smoothing out the past, couching his guilt so it doesn't rankle. As Jim writes: "It is easy to love people in memory; the hard thing is to love them when they are there in front of you" (845). Does Jim now believe he actually loved his father-in-law? Perhaps, though I'm not entirely persuaded, and it doesn't seem as if he is, either.

The story then transitions to Pennsylvania, during a summer when he and Deb visited his parents during college. The central event here is the tension between Deb and his mother, Mildred. While Deb was secure and knowledgeable when in her element, she "seemed lost in my home territory," and Jim writes how he "fails to protect her from our primitive ways" (845). Thus, another failure on Jim's part. The initial tension in this section of the story arises from Jim's mother's discovery that Deb, not yet married to her son, had put some of his dirty socks and underwear through her laundry, then packed them clean in her suitcase: "When my mother, helpfully hovering in the guest bedroom, noticed this transposition, she let loose one of her silent bursts of anger, a merciless succession of waves that dyed an angry red V on her forehead, between the eyebrows, and filled the little sandstone house to its corners, upstairs and down" (846). Consider, however, the narrator's language. When his mother was "helpfully hovering" while Deb unpacked, was she being helpful or instead controlling, something we associate with "hovering"? His "mother's psychological heat" quickly transforms the small farmhouse, and Jim's response is not to confront her for behaving this way in front of his girlfriend. Rather, he offers Deb a "[w]hispering" apology, assuring her, "You didn't do anything wrong" (846). Yet in the next breath Jim writes, "in my heart I felt that offending my mother was wrong, a primal sin. I blamed Deb for mixing up my underwear with hers." When he explains to Deb, "It's the way she is," Deb responds, "Well, she should wake up and get over it" in a voice "so loud I feared it could be heard upstairs" (846). On another occasion, Deb, trying to do a good deed, decides to help weed the garden, unaware that in the narrator's family no one is allowed to work on Sunday, which leads his mother, in another fit of temper, to begin "banging dishes around" (847). Jim is "scandalized but thrilled" by Deb's behavior and sees, perhaps for the first time, "that a defense against my mother was possible" (847). At the conclusion of this second part of the story, Jim draws a

chain of causality linking himself to his father-in-law as well as to his mother: “My rudeness to Reverend Whitworth was revenged when, baptizing our first child, his first grandchild, in a thoroughly negotiated Unitarian family service in the house of her Lutheran grandparents, he made a benign little joke about the ‘holy water.’ . . . My mother sulked for the rest of the day about that” (847). This section leaves us with questions. How noticeable was Jim’s rudeness to his father-in-law? Was his father-in-law, however subtly, enacting revenge by the provisional baptism? Did Jim fail Deb in her interactions with his mother, and did it in any way doom his marriage? Or is all of this simply a way for Jim to organize and explain the past?

The third and final part of the story begins as a meditation on water, which has figured as a central motif, from the tears shed by his father and Deb, to bathing in the Vermont bathtub and pond (naked with Deb), to their oldest child’s baptism, and now to his view, from an airplane, of “the sun’s reflections on the waters of Connecticut—not just the rivers and the Sound, but little ponds and pools and glittering threads of water” (848). Jim then reveals that he and Deb divorced, though instead of elaborating, he makes a little joke about Deb wanting him to return his naked photos of her, and recounting how his mother, following the divorce, had shared that his father was worried about the marriage, believing Deb was not “feminine enough” for Jim (848). Uncertain about whether to believe his mother, Jim adds, “the dead are so easy to misquote,” suggesting that one is free to make up the past when the dead are no longer around to confront or challenge us.

The final section proceeds to two recounted events: his recent fifty-fifth high school class reunion, and his father’s death in 1972 while he and Deb were in Europe. The reunion, where “the class beauties have gone to fat or bony cronehood” and the athletes have acquired “pacemakers and plastic knees,” is meant, like every other component in the story, to remind us of how things are changing as time passes (849). Yet, in spite of the effects of time, the narrator writes of how he and his classmates “don’t see ourselves that way, as lame and old. We see kindergarten children—the same round fresh faces, the same cup ears and long-lashed eyes. . . . We see in each other the enduring simplicities of a town rendered changeless by Depression and then by a world war whose bombs never reached us” (849). Theirs is a kind of double vision, in which they see one another both candidly and through a nostalgic lens. When a classmate, also hampered by Alzheimer’s, asks Jim about his father, the story transitions to its final event: Jim learning, by telephone, at a hotel near London’s Heathrow Airport, that his father has died. The story that begins in a Pennsylvania train station with Jim saying goodbye to his tearful father concludes near a British airport with another, more final, goodbye to his father.

Jim's then wife, Deb, puts her arms around him and tells him, "Cry," but he can't: "Though I saw the opportunity, and the rightness of seizing it, I don't believe I did. My father's tears had used up mine" (851). It's an ambiguous final sentence. Perhaps because he is supposed to cry, he can't. Or maybe his inadequacy in the moment is an indication of an inherent coldness, another failure on his part to feel and emote. By suggesting, however, that his father's tears somehow used up his own seems self-serving, or at least self-exonerating, with Jim making an excuse for failing to express emotion at his father's death.

By the time we've arrived at this sad, ambiguous ending, a series of questions have accumulated, to the point one wonders what exactly the story is about. In addition to its running commentary on the changes and transitions wrought by time, the story says much about memory—how we continually reshape the past, how it is possible to lose one's memory (several characters suffer from Alzheimer's), and how we can see the past through different lenses simultaneously. Jim, for instance, views Reverend Whitworth as both annoying and as a good man; and Jim's classmates, now in their seventies, appear both elderly and with their kindergarten faces showing through. By virtue of retrospection, we can reshape the past, and by doing so, ease our guilt and failure. In some ways, "My Father's Tears" reminds me of Updike's "Deaths of Distant Friends," another triptych story in which the narrator describes sequentially the lives of three distant "friends"—a golf partner, an elderly woman, and the family's golden retriever—each of whom died during a period when the life of the narrator, who was between marriages, was in "disarray." The description of each is marvelously done, and it isn't until the end that we realize the story is not entirely about these three "friends." After eloquently eulogizing each figure, the narrator discloses, "how terrible to acknowledge—all three of these deaths make me happy, in a way" (162). The confession is startling and potent in light of the loving care he lavished upon them in recounting their lives. As he reminds us, the time when he was interacting with all three "friends" was when he was between marriages, and not at his best: "Witnesses to my disgrace are being removed. The world is growing lighter. Eventually there will be none to remember me as I was in those embarrassing, disarrayed years when I scuttled without a shell, between houses and wives, a snake between skins, a monster of selfishness, my grotesque needs naked and pink, my social presence beggarly and vulnerable" (162). It's a beautiful but devastating conclusion that reminds us of the absolute prevalence of self-interest.

The ending of "My Father's Tears" does not quite provide the same degree of neat closure and epiphany, though there are similarities. Jim's story, as we come

to see, is not only about these people in his life—it's just as much about him, and how he remembers them. Amid his meditation upon transition and change, and how things are remembered or misremembered, a central connective tissue is how Jim has subtly failed these people who were all meaningful in his life. He failed his father-in-law through his resentment and rudeness, along with his lack of courage and will to take him to the bathroom. He failed his first wife, Deb, by not protecting her from his mercurial mother, and from eventually leaving her for another woman. And he failed his father by being unable to cry at his death, and perhaps even earlier by failing to appreciate or reciprocate the man's tears fifty years previous in the Alton train station. Though not glaring, egregious failures, they are small, muted ones, and in each case he retrospectively reshapes events to make himself feel better, soften his guilt. To some degree, "My Father's Tears" quietly reveals Jim's lifelong inability to empathize, protect, and emote, along with his facility for allowing his memory to accommodate and temper the impact of these shortcomings.

But even as I complete this response in Cincinnati in late May 2025, I regret not having the time or ability, prior to this writing deadline (I was a last-second addition to this trio of writers), to travel the 872 miles to Harvard's Houghton Library, where Updike's papers, including drafts, revisions, and proofs of the stories from the collection *My Father's Tears and Other Stories* are housed. A quick glance at the archive's digital pages indicates that among the folders are "page proof with manuscript annotations and revisions by Martha Bernhard Updike" from September and November 2008. I'm curious as to what those pages and revisions might reveal. I'm also curious about Updike's decision, late in the story, to depict Jim's second wife, Sylvia, as being preferable, in the view of his classmates, to Deb. There was something about that passage that sounded odd, though it could also be part of Jim's retrospective strategy to justify his decision to leave Deb for Sylvia. Mostly, though, it would be useful to examine those drafts in light of what Updike wrote in his letter of response to Alice Munro of April 6, 2006, composed a month after her note of gratitude:

I don't know how it is with you, but I used to know where my stories were headed before I began them. But "My Father's Tears" had quite another ending, which *The NYer* didn't like, nor did I in my heart, so I looked into my heart and found that memory of my first wife giving me permission to cry, which of course was what the story had needed all along. Also, the plane problems picked up on the theme of transportation. But it frightens me, to have my work so much at the mercy of accident. But maybe it always was. Looking back, the past seems much firmer than it really was.

With writing, as with memory, events are always being reshaped, and I am hopeful that some curious Updike reader will soon travel to Cambridge, consult those drafts, and deepen our understanding of this exquisitely well-crafted story that, sadly, took me nearly twenty years to appreciate.

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**ROBERT MILDER**, Professor of English, Emeritus at Washington University, St. Louis, is the author of *Reimagining Thoreau* (Cambridge, 1995), *Melville and the Life We Imagine* (Oxford, 2006), and *Hawthorne's Habitations* (Oxford, 2013). More recently he has published on Updike, Philip Roth, and Alice Munro, and he is currently working on a book on Emerson.

**D. QUENTIN MILLER** is Professor Emeritus of English at Suffolk University, where he taught for twenty-five years. He is the author, editor, or coeditor of sixteen scholarly books and textbooks, most recently *The Routledge Introduction to the American Novel* and the 13th edition of *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*, coedited with Michael Meyer. He is shifting his focus back to creative writing, including a novel.

**SUE NORTON** is a lecturer of English at Technological University Dublin. She was the inaugural recipient of the John Updike Casitas Fellowship in 2024. Her article “Somewhere Between Feminism and Misogyny: Classic Updike on the Modern Syllabus” will be published in *Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice* later this year.

**JAMES SCHIFF** is Professor of English at the University of Cincinnati. He is the author or editor of six books on contemporary American fiction, including *Understanding Reynolds Price* (1996), *John Updike Revisited* (1998), and *Selected Letters of John Updike* (2025). His work has appeared in *American Literature*, *The Southern Review*, *Tin House*, *Critique*, *Studies in American Fiction*, and elsewhere. He is currently working on a biography of Updike.

**NADIA SZOLD** is an American filmmaker, writer, and forest kindergarten teacher. Her narrative feature films include *Joy de V.*, with Claudia Cardinale, and *Mariah*, with Evan Louison. A Film Independent Fellow, Szold premiered her first documentary feature, *Larry Flynt for President*, at the 2021 Tribeca Festival to critical acclaim and subsequently picked up multiple jury and audience awards. Her most recent documentary is a portrait of the poet Geoffrey Young titled *The Figures*. Szold has adapted John Updike’s *Marry Me: A Romance* into a feature screenplay and looks forward to developing it into a film. She lives in Ojai, California, with her husband, Steven Prince, and their son, Sydney.



# The John Updike Review

## A Prize for Young Writers

*The John Updike Review's* Emerging Writers Prize

Past and present winners:

Domenic Cregan, Cornelius Dieckmann, Scott Dill,  
Yoav Fromer, Jeffrey Ludwig, Sean Madden, Gideon  
Nachman, Adel Nouar, Joseph Ozias, Vidya Ravi, and  
Matthew Shipe.

**ELIGIBILITY** Anyone under 40 years of age

**PRIZE** \$1,000, along with publication in the journal

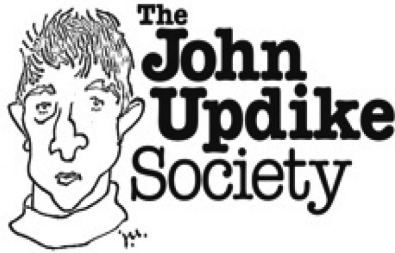
**GUIDELINES** *The John Updike Review* is looking for an essay by a young writer or critic that deepens our understanding of the work of John Updike. The writing may be scholarly or *belletristic* in nature. Academics, critics, graduate students, assistant professors, novelists, poets, and short story writers are encouraged to submit an essay of any length.

**DEADLINE** Submissions are open and rolling. Depending upon the submissions, one or more winners will be announced, usually on an annual basis.

**SEND  
SUBMISSIONS TO**

Professor James Schiff  
Editor, *The John Updike Review*  
james.schiff@uc.edu  
(513) 556-0930

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



JOHN UPDIKE SOCIETY

# Prizes, Grants, Scholarships

(NEED NOT BE A CURRENT SOCIETY MEMBER TO APPLY)

## **THE JOHN UPDIKE REVIEW EMERGING WRITERS PRIZE**

A \$1,000 prize plus publication in *The John Updike Review*, awarded to writers under 40 years of age. Depending upon the quality of submissions, one or more winners will be announced, usually on an annual basis. The review is looking for an essay by a young writer or critic that deepens our understanding of the work of John Updike. The writing may be scholarly or *belles-lettres* in nature. Academics, critics, graduate students, assistant professors, novelists, poets, and short story writers are encouraged to submit an essay of any length. There is no deadline; submissions are rolling. Send submissions via attachment to: Prof. James Schiff, Editor, *The John Updike Review*, james.schiff@uc.edu. For more information about the journal, visit the website.

## **THE ROBERT M. LUSCHER SCHOLARSHIP FOR UPDIKE RESEARCH**

A \$1,000 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. Rolling submissions, so feel free to apply at any time. To apply, send a one-paragraph bio and a one- to two-page proposal describing the project and how specifically special collections research is expected to help. Send submissions via attachment to: Peter Bailey, pbailey@stlawu.edu.

### **SCHIFF TRAVEL GRANTS**

Up to five \$1500 travel-to-conference grants for scholars 40 years of age or younger to enable them to attend the next John Updike Society conference, and up to three \$1000 grants for society members needing assistance to be able to participate in the conference program. The grants are funded by the Robert and Adele Schiff Family Foundation, whose generosity enabled the society to purchase and maintain the John Updike Childhood Home. Both grants are merit- and need-based, and interested scholars should check the John Updike Society website for more information, or email James Plath at jplath@iwu.edu.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHICAL CITATIONS**

Jack De Bellis and Michel Broomfield are updating their 2007 Updike bibliography and have asked anyone who has recently published on Updike to send citations of their work to bjd1@lehigh.edu



# The John Updike Review

## The John Updike Tucson Casitas Fellowship

**PRIZE** \$1,000, along with a residency at Mission Hill Casitas

**GUIDELINES** Beginning in 2024, The John Updike Society administers the John Updike Tucson Casitas Fellowship, in which the selected recipient is awarded a two-week residency, over the last two weeks of May, at the Mission Hill Casitas within the Skyline Country Club in Tucson, Arizona. The fellowship also includes a \$1,000 prize provided by The John Updike Society. The casitas stay is made possible by a generous donation from Jan and Jim Emery, owners of the casitas, which will have a collection of Updike books on site for use by fellows. Updike wrote in all genres, so writers with any type of literary project are welcome to apply, as are scholars working on Updike criticism. Since Updike was an artist as well, multimedia projects will also be considered.

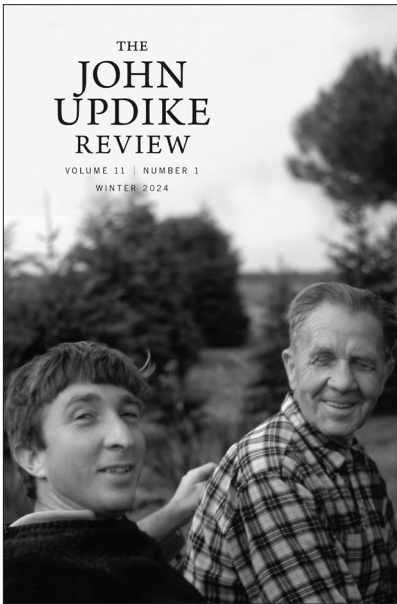
**DEADLINE** Applications are due November 1 of the previous year, with the winner and other applicants notified by January 1.

**SUBMISSIONS** To apply, send a one-page proposal that describes the project and where it currently stands, along with the writer's hope for what final form the project will take (e.g., where it might be published, or whether it's part of a larger work). In addition, the application should include a one-paragraph biography or artist's statement. Creative writers should also provide a five-page (and only five-page) writing sample. Send everything in a single PDF attachment to Robert M. Luscher: [luscherr@unk.edu](mailto:luscherr@unk.edu).

# The John Updike Review

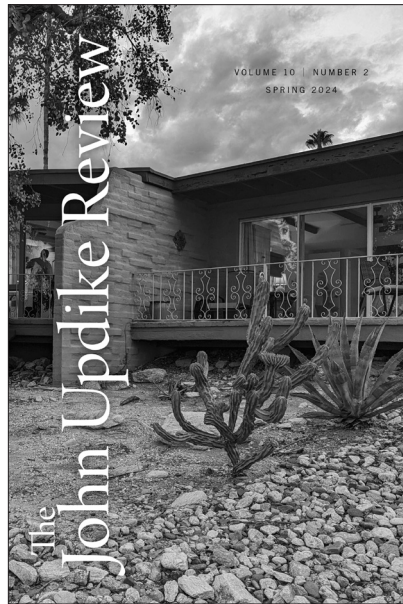
BACK ISSUES AND LIMITED EDITION

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



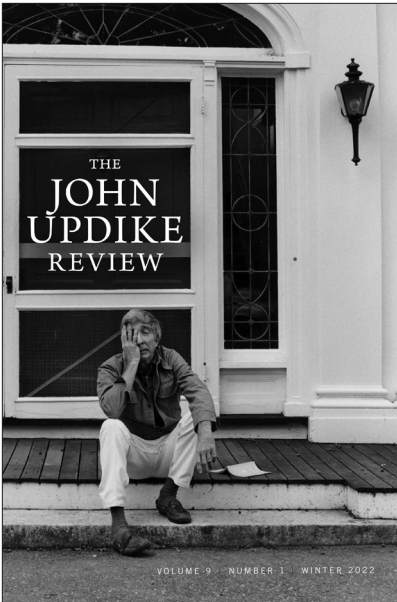
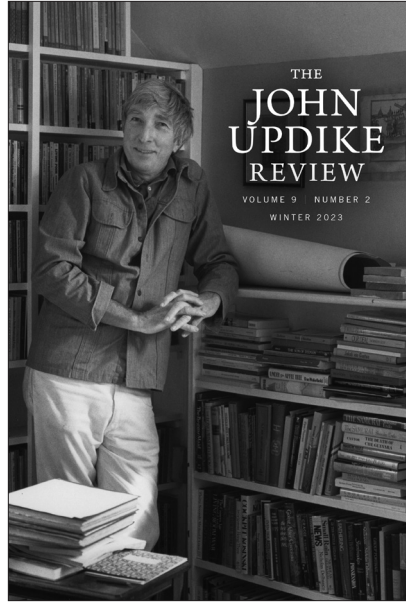
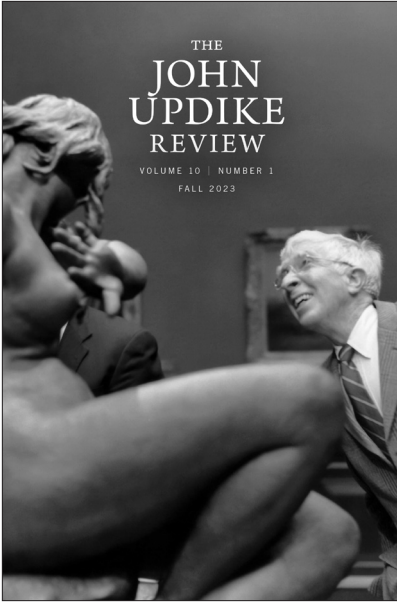
**JUR 11.1 (Winter 2024).**

*The Centaur* at Sixty: James Schiff, Sylvie Mathé, David Updike, D. Quentin Miller, Matthew Shipe, Biljana Dojčinović, and Peter J. Bailey. Responses to *The Witches of Eastwick* film by Robert Morace, Adam Reid Sexton, and Olga Karasik-Updike. Essays by Joseph Ozias, Peter J. Bailey, and Sue Norton.



**JUR 10.2 (Spring 2024).**

Updike and the West: Jan Emery, Christopher Love, Sue Norton, James Schiff, and Matthew Shipe. Includes Updike's story "A Desert Encounter." Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Louis Gordon, Donald J. Greiner, Presleigh-Anne Johnson, and Jan Schütte.



**JUR 10.1 (Fall 2023).**

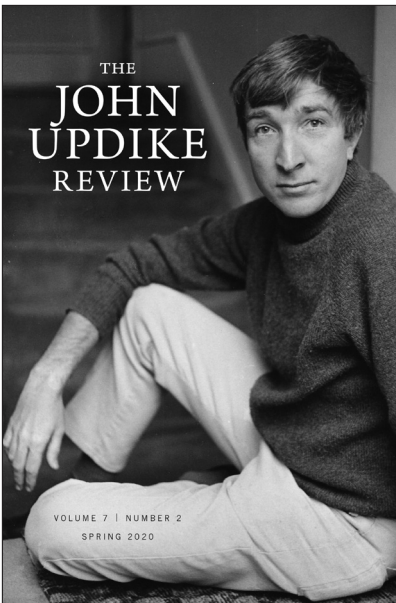
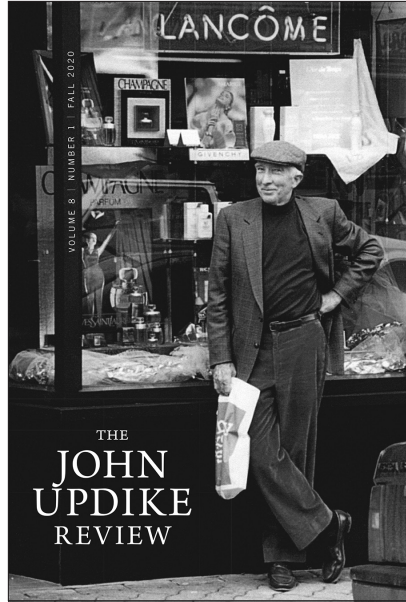
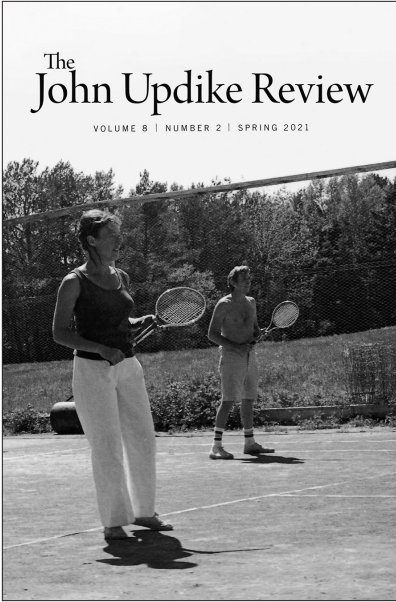
On Women and Sex in the Works of John Updike: Marshall Boswell, Biljana Dojčinović, Olga Karasik-Updike, Matthew Koch, Sue Norton, and James Plath. Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Domenic Cregan, Carla Alexandra Ferreira, and James Plath. Tribute to Christopher Carduff.

**JUR 9.2 (Winter 2023).**

Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Donald J. Greiner, Victor Strandberg, and Haruki Takebe. Responses to *Self-Consciousness* by Peter J. Bailey, Sylvie Mathé, D. Quentin Miller, Robert Morace, and James Schiff. Review by Donald J. Greiner.

**JUR 9.1 (Winter 2022).**

Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Olga Karasik-Updike, Donald J. Greiner, and Pradipta Sengupta. Responses to *Toward the End of Time* by Marshall Boswell, Biljana Dojčinović, and James Schiff. Review by Sue Norton.



**JUR 8.2 (Spring 2021).**

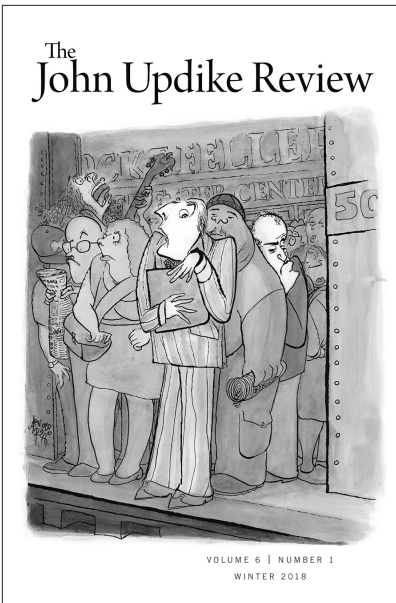
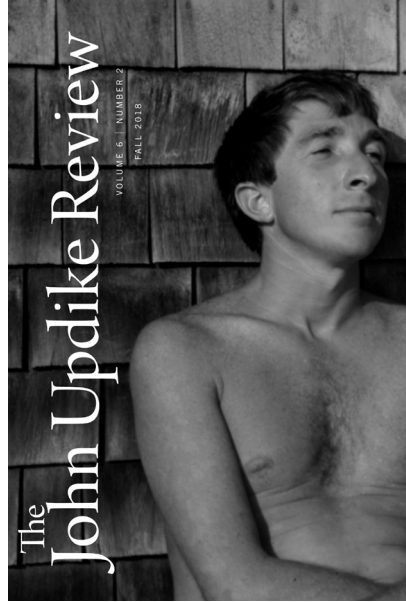
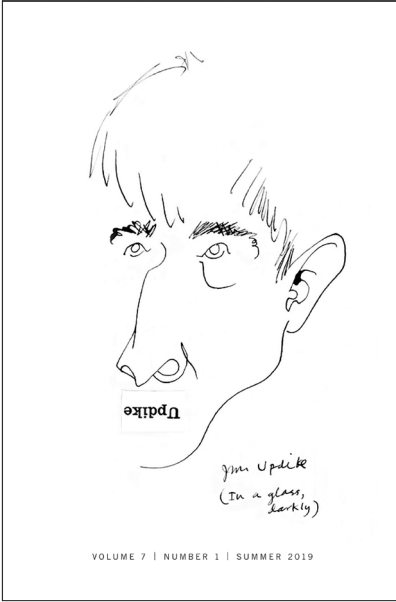
Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Cornelius Dieckmann, Donald J. Greiner, Thushara Perera, James Plath, and David Updike. Includes Updike's story "Harv Is Plowing Now" and responses by Jason Namey, James Schiff, and David Lerner Schwartz.

**JUR 8.1 (Fall 2020).**

Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Donald J. Greiner, Robert Milder, and Haruki Takebe. Responses to *The Coup* by D. Quentin Miller, James Schiff, and Matthew Shipe. Review by Laurence W. Mazzeno.

**JUR 7.2 (Spring 2020).**

Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Donald J. Greiner, Sue Norton, Adel Nouar. Responses to *The Maples Stories* by Marshall Boswell, Biljana Dojčinović, Gail Sinclair, and James Schiff. Review by Laurence W. Mazzeno.



**JUR 7.1 (Summer 2019).**

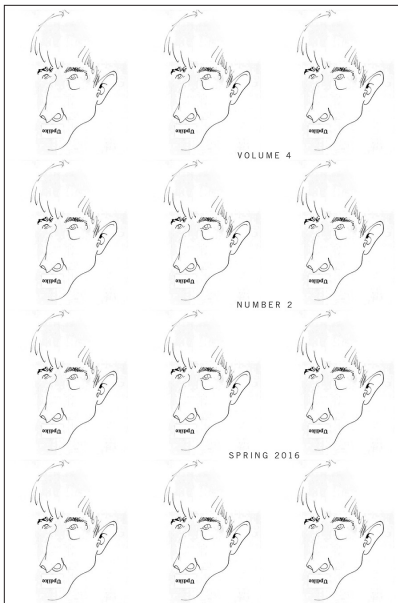
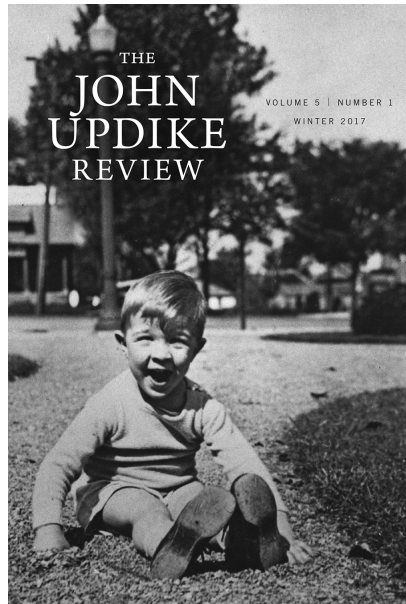
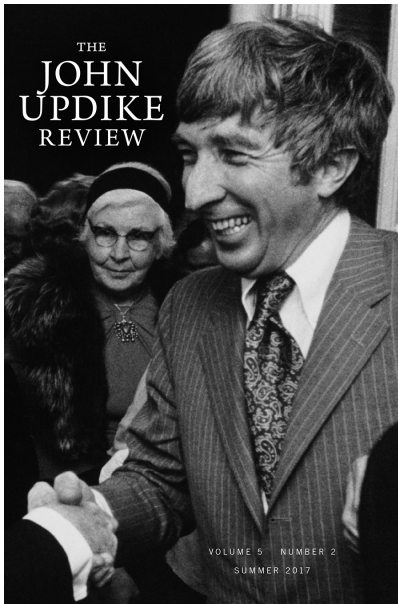
Poetry by Valerie (Markos) Paavonpera.  
Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Donald J. Greiner, Christopher Love, Robert Milder, and Jeffrey Pusch. Includes Updike's story "Giving Blood" and responses by Sakinah Hofler, Toni Judnitch, and Maggie Su. Reviews by Robert Morace and Judie Newman.

**JUR 6.2 (Fall 2018).**

Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Donald J. Greiner, Robert M. Luscher, and James Plath. Includes Updike's essay "At War with My Skin" and responses 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. Includes Updike's story "Bech Noir" and responses by Julia Case, James Schiff, and Gary Weissman. Review by Sue Norton. Drawings by Arnold Roth.



***JUR 5.2 (Summer 2017).***

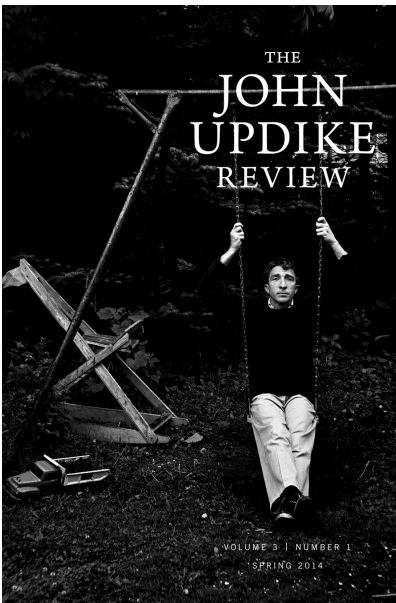
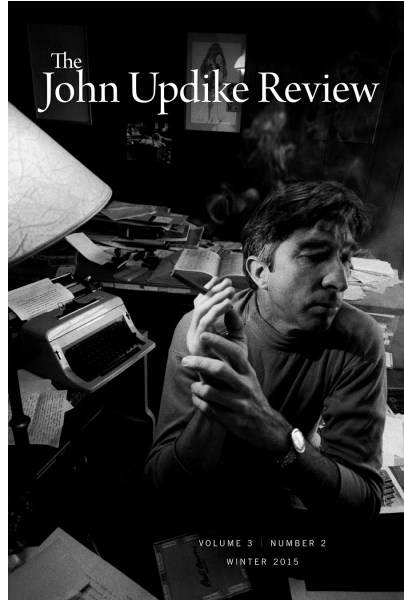
Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Donald J. Greiner, Sylvie Mathé, Laurence W. Mazzeno and Sue Norton, and Robert Morace. Includes Updike's story "His Mother Inside Him" and responses by Jennifer Glaser, Robert M. Luscher, and Molly Reid. Reviews by Matthew Shipe, Aristi Trendel, and Antonio J. Ferraro.

***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, and 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).**

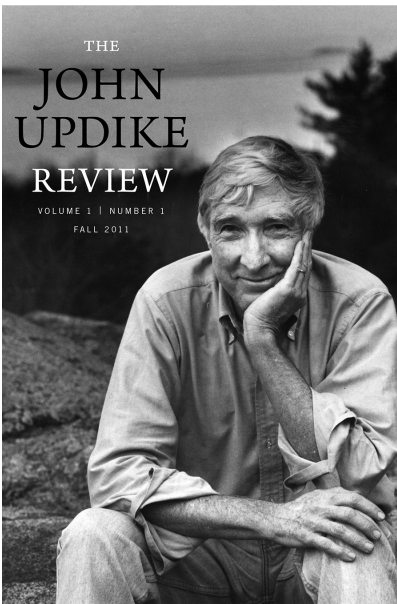
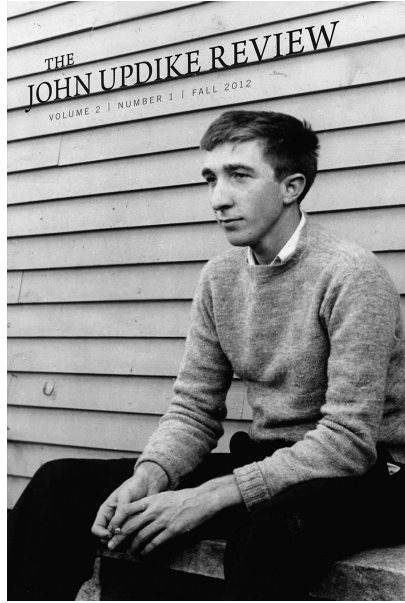
Essays by Brian Duffy, Peter J. Bailey, David Penn, and Donald J. Greiner. Responses to *The Widows of Eastwick* by Judie Newman, James Plath, and James Schiff. Includes Updike Bibliography, 2009–2015 by James Schiff.

**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. Updike family panel discussion moderated by James Plath.

***JUR 1.1 (Fall 2011).***

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

**LIMITED EDITION**

A limited edition of our inaugural issue, *JUR 1.1*, was published in cloth with a book jacket and an attractive slipcover. The edition was limited to one hundred copies. The price for this volume is \$25, or \$15 for members of the John Updike Society.

**THE JOHN UPDIKE REVIEW  
IS ACCEPTING SUBMISSIONS**

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

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

**ESSAYS AND INQUIRIES SHOULD BE ADDRESSED TO:**

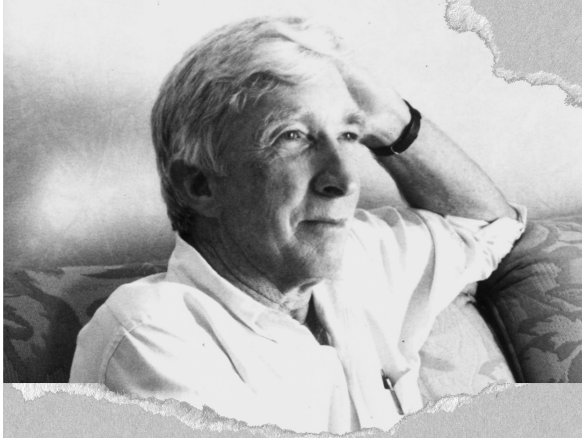
Professor James Schiff, Editor  
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Cincinnati, OH 45221-0069  
EMAIL: james.schiff@uc.edu  
TELEPHONE: 513-556-0930

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Peter J. Bailey

Sue Norton

Sylvie Mathé

James Schiff

Robert Milder

Nadia Szold

D. Quentin Miller