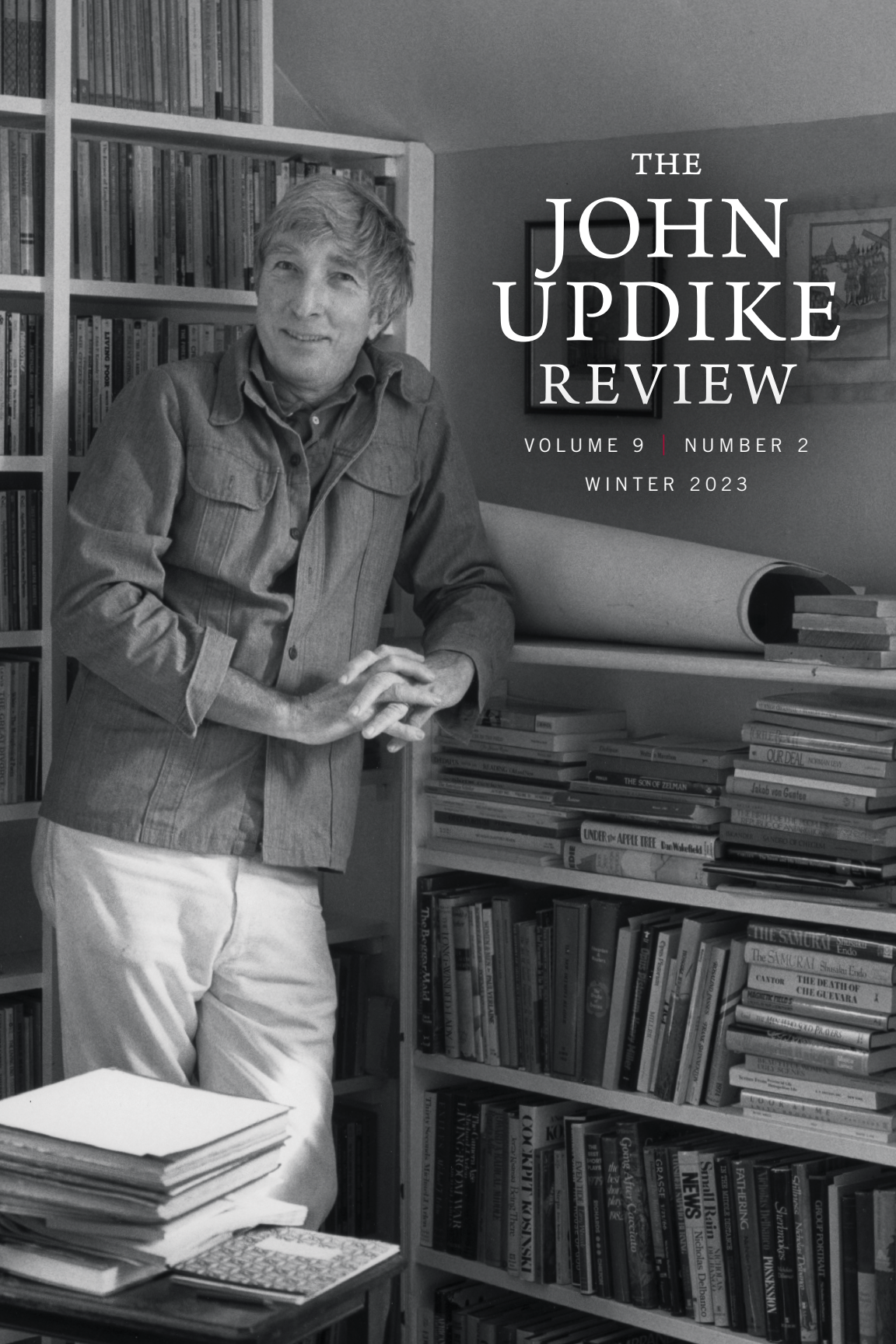

THE JOHN UPDIKE REVIEW

VOLUME 9 | NUMBER 2

WINTER 2023

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The John Updike Review is published twice a year by the University of Cincinnati and the John Updike Society and is based at the University of Cincinnati, Department of English and Comparative Literature, Arts & Sciences Hall, Room 248, PO Box 210069, Cincinnati, OH 45221-0069.

ISSN: 2160-097X

Designed by: Barbara Neely Bourgoyne
Cover Photo: Updike in his office at Haven Hill (photographer unknown)
Colophon: John Updike self-portrait.

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ESSAYS

REVIEW

John Updike: Novels 1959–1965; John Updike: Novels 1968–1975; John Updike: Novels 1978–1984, ed. Christopher Carduff. Library of America, 2018, 2020, 2021.

Updike's Epitaph

VICTOR STRANDBERG

In the Robeson Lutheran Church cemetery in Plowville, Pennsylvania, the opposite sides of John Updike's headstone display two portraits of the artist. One portrait is an actual picture: not a photograph on a ceramic tile, as is often found in modern cemeteries, but an image of the artist's face carved into the stone itself astride a large pair of wings, below which are John Updike's name and vital dates along with various handwritten versions of his name.

Front of Updike headstone, carved by his son Michael Updike.
Photo by Jameson Sempey, *Reading Eagle*.

On the back of the stone is the other portrait, rendered verbally in a poem of nine lines that appears between a large crow above and a line of telephone poles below. The poem, titled "Why the Telephone Wires Dip and the Poles Are Cracked and Crooked," reads as follows:

The old men say
young men in gray
hung this thread across our plains
acres and acres ago.

But we, the enlightened, know
in point of fact it's what remains
of the flight of a marvellous[1] crow
no one saw:
each pole, a caw.

Back of Updike headstone, carved by his son Michael Updike.
Photo by Jameson Sempey, *Reading Eagle*.

This could be the most curious epitaph of any major author since Shakespeare laid a curse on anyone who dug up his bones. We note at once that John Updike did not choose this poem for his epitaph. His son Michael chose it and, with consummate

care and craft, carved the words and images into the stone after consulting with his siblings.[2] Updike did write the poem, however, and published it in his first book, *The Carpentered Hen* (1958), which he republished in 1982 with a foreword claiming that the poem "was written in high school, under the influence of science fiction" (xiv).

This was a cryptic comment, to be sure, but one thing we know about science fiction is that those alien creatures, fantastic plot lines, and extraterrestrial landscapes are almost always thinly disguised versions of our human world here and now. So the "influence of science fiction" likely played a minor role compared to Updike's strong terrestrial focus. Certainly the crow and the telephone poles are mundane enough for such a reading, but the larger question remains: Is there any way to justify turning what seems a trifling piece of juvenilia into the epitaph of a miraculously prolific and eloquent writer?

I believe there is, but it will require allowing an initial premise (which a fair number of writers affirm) that the artist does not always know the meaning of his work at the time of its creation. Indeed, Updike himself, speaking of his "little buried allusions," told Charles Thomas Samuels, "It's funny, the things you don't know you're doing" (36). In this case, the teenage Updike, circa 1948, was inscribing meanings that became clarified only when the mature Updike composed a poem about the same material a dozen years later. The later poem, "Telephone Poles," was important enough in Updike's eyes to merit becoming the title of a whole new volume, which he published in 1963. But we will begin with the work of (alleged) teenage creativity itself: the epitaph poem (which I will call "Why the Telephone Wires Dip").

The imagery begins with the titular poles and wires—a mode of communication, such as an artist aspires to, across vast reaches of space and time ("acres and acres ago" clearly doubles as "ages and ages ago"), addressing multiple generations ("old men" and "young men"). The "marvellous crow" is a surrogate of the artist, traditionally a talking bird in medieval lyrics and elsewhere (e.g., Poe's "The Raven," Malamud's "The Jewbird"). The dipped wires and cracked and crooked poles suggest the imperfect means with which the artist must undertake communication, and bird's caw indicates the difficulty of reaching an audience, of being understood. These are pictorial versions, we might say, of T. S. Eliot's lament in *Four Quartets*, which also features a talking bird: "And so each venture / Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate / With shabby equipment always deteriorating" (128).

"Telephone Poles"—in contrast with "Why the Telephone Wires Dip"—first published in the 21 January 1961 issue of *The New Yorker*—makes the symbolism of its title overt. Though the telephone poles serve a utilitarian purpose, unlike

Keats's urn, they share with the urn a longevity that makes art superior to life: "They will outlast the elms." In typical Updike fashion—after all, this man wrote a poem titled "The Beautiful Bowel Movement"—these rough poles have their own somewhat stressed grandeur, "Like a race of giants that have faded into mere mythology." In royal fashion, too, they wear "fearsome crowns of bolts, trusses, struts, nuts [nice rhyme there!], insulators, and such," and, as the first stanza ends, they are capable of wielding kingly authority over life and death: "Each a Gorgon's head, which, seized right, / Could stun us to stone."

In the second and final stanza, the imagery expressly links the telephone poles to poetry. After applauding the craftsmanship of the poles—"[T]hey are ours. We made them"—the poem asserts once again the primacy of art over nature: "The Nature of our construction is in every way / A better fit than the Nature it displaces." (The unexpected capital "N" in that first "Nature" gives the word a bold claim of status vis-à-vis second "Nature" in that sentence.) And here the language of the birds acquires powers of communication that the crow's caw in the earlier poem only aspired to: "What other tree can you climb where the birds' twitter, / Unscrambled, is English?" Neither the birds' twitter nor the buzz in the wires is literally English, of course, but the imagery works well as a metaphor for the artist's hope of being understood. In a note he added to his *Collected Poems,* Updike explained these lines were "[b]ased on my understanding that many telephone conversations are simultaneously transmitted over the wires and unscrambled at the end" (360). Unscrambling—deciphering—at the end has been the aim of many other poets as well.

"Telephone Poles" concludes where it began, with a final tribute to the poles'—and poetry's—longevity. Though the poles do not have the "green" of living trees,

> . . . then again there is not that tragic autumnal
> Casting-off of leaves to outface annually.
> These giants are more constant than evergreens
> By never being green.

Both poems, then, portray the triumph of the artist. The teenage Updike, already heavily invested in writing and drawing for his high school publications, wrote a poem more prophetic of his own future than about the futurism of sci-fi. And as that future unrolled, it is striking how important the genre of poetry was to this man, who at times preferred his poems to even his greatest novels. In 1977 Updike told Helen Vendler, "[I] often reread my poetry and almost never look at my old novels. . . . It is always at the back of my mind to be a poet" (113–14). And,

after noting that his forthcoming book is the volume of poems called *Tossing and Turning* (1977), he harkens back to *The Carpentered Hen* with his final statement of the interview: "That was my first book, this is my 20th, and none in between has seemed more worth—how shall I say?—crowing about" (114). Or worth cawing about, perhaps, as voiced by a "marvellous crow." In any case, that is a mighty claim for two slender volumes of poems prevailing over such celebrated prose triumphs as *Rabbit, Run*; *Rabbit Redux*; *The Centaur*; *Couples*; *Bech: A Book*; and several prizewinning collections of short stories.

But regarding the epitaph poem, Updike was just getting started. In *Collected Poems* (1993), he assigned new gravity and a new point of origin to this poem. Unlike his earlier volume, in which "Why the Telephone Wires Dip" is the seventh poem in order of appearance, in *Collected Poems* it comes first, comprising the introductory poem for the whole book. Moreover, in his two-page preface to *Collected Poems*, it is the only poem from a forty-year harvest that he singles out for specific commentary. He no longer ascribes the work to a teenage high schooler; instead, he says he wrote it "not long after my 21st birthday," when he was soon to be a rising senior at Harvard (xxiv). The act of writing in itself sufficed to give him a nearly metaphysical shiver: "I still remember the shudder, the triumphant sense of capture, with which I got these lines down." He sensed in the poem a new level of aesthetic power, "a compression unprecedented in my brief writing career." And he erases any doubt about the imagery having larger significance, speaking of "the mythogenetic truth of telephone wires and poles marching across a stretch of Pennsylvania farmland" (xxiii–xxiv).

We may never know whether it was a teenage boy or an upperclassman at Harvard who wrote "Why the Telephone Wires Dip." The posthumously published *Selected Poems* (2015) makes a very strong case for the Harvard student; the notes to the poem read, "Completed in the spring or early summer 1953. Published, under the heading 'Footnotes to the Future,' in *The Harvard Lampoon* 142.7 (October 1953)"[3] (248). Even so, my own surmise is that the high school boy wrote the first version, or conceived of the initial image, which the college student perhaps revised with new infusions of craft and meaning. In the end, though, whether composed by a teenager or a 21-year-old college student, there is little reason to question its propriety as John Updike's epitaph. It may have emerged as an exfoliation of callow youth at the start, but it was a master artist in his sixties who, in *Collected Poems*, singled it out for profound aesthetic and personal significance. Perhaps his craftsman son, Michael Updike, portrayed more than he knew when he depicted his father soaring aloft, laughing, on the Wings of the Crow.

NOTES

1. With words like "marvellous," Updike preferred a double consonant spelling.

2. Michael Updike graciously disclosed this information to me in an email of 18 July 2022.

3. The notes for the *Selected Poems* were written by editor Christopher Carduff. Thanks to James Schiff for alerting me to this reference.

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Miranda Updike, Michael Updike, Elizabeth Updike Cobblah, and David Updike, behind their father's headstone, Robeson Lutheran Church Cemetery, Plowville, PA. July 8, 2011. Photo by Jameson Sempey, *Reading Eagle*.

~~Three~~ Five Writers on *Self-Consciousness*

This section of the *JUR* typically provides space for three writers to compose responses to a single Updike novel, short story, poem, or essay. The objective is to look closely at an individual work through varying perspectives, the hope being that over time we can chip away at the immense Updike canon.

The impetus for this exploration of Updike's memoirs was a panel discussion, arranged by the John Updike Society, on "Autobiography and Updike's *Self-Consciousness*" at the American Literature Association Conference in Chicago, May 26–28, 2022. Convened on the second morning of the conference, the panel was chaired by Matthew Koch and included brief papers from Peter J. Bailey, Sylvie Mathé, D. Quentin Miller, Robert Morace, and myself. Each of the panelists was then invited to extend and revise their paper for publication in the *JUR*. I'm pleased to report that all agreed to do so, which is why we're including five responses rather than the standard three.

Ever since the *JUR* featured, in its Fall 2018 issue, a discussion of "At War with My Skin," one of the six personal essays that make up *Self-Consciousness*, I had hoped we could publish a discussion of the entire book. Novels receive the lion's share of attention in literary criticism, and though Updike was a very good novelist, an argument could be made for his talents being even stronger in the short story and personal essay.

Self-Consciousness was published on March 18, 1989, with a first printing of 50,000 copies, large for a literary memoir. The first of its six essays, "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington," was conceived in 1984 and published, along with a drawing by Updike of his hometown, in *The New Yorker* on December 24, 1984. The second essay, "At War with My Skin," describing his lifelong battle with psoriasis, appeared the following year in *The New Yorker*. "Getting the Words Out," which addresses the sporadic affliction of a minor stutter, was published in the Fall 1986

issue of *Granta*. The final three essays—"On Not Being a Dove," "A Letter to My Grandsons," and "On Being a Self Forever"—first appeared in 1989 in the complete memoirs, though an adaptation of "On Not Being a Dove" was published contemporaneously in the March 1989 issue of *Commentary*.

Despite being in print for nearly thirty-five years, *Self-Consciousness* feels like a work whose surface has barely been scratched, so as you read these critical responses, I hope they not only lead you back to the text itself but also inspire you to join the conversation.

JAMES SCHIFF, EDITOR

Perched on "Proust's Dizzying Stilts of Time": Updike's *Self-Consciousness* as Return to the Self, Return to Sources

SYLVIE MATHÉ

As much as he was and is known as an autobiographical writer, Updike was one who tread cautiously around the subject of self-disclosure. Wary of exposing himself without filters, he instead opted for his fictive personas to simultaneously reveal himself while still hiding behind various masks. "[W]hat I create on paper must, and for me does, soar free of whatever the facts were," he insisted in his interview with Charles T. Samuels: "In other words, I disavow any essential connection between my life and whatever I write" (Samuels 27). Whatever his proffered disavowals and caveats, Descartes' saying *Larvatus prodeo* ("I advance with a mask" or "I go forward masked") could be said to be Updike's motto. When first asked for an interview by *The Paris Review* in 1966, he refused in terms that made clear his aversion to speaking about himself: "Perhaps I have written fiction because everything unambiguously expressed seems somehow crass to me, and when the subject is myself, I want to jeer and weep" (qtd. in Samuels 22).[1] How, then, did he eventually overcome his misgivings about writing his memoirs? The solution, in oblique fashion, was to adopt what he called "a mode of impersonal egoism." Some twenty years after explicitly declaring his rejection of autobiography, Updike, as a way to forestall the endeavor of a would-be biographer, did eventually venture into this allegedly "crass" terrain with *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* (1989), a book that Richard Eder for the *LA Times* called "an exercise in preemptive

autobiography." An exercise it is indeed, and Updike's take on autobiography retains an experimental and singular dimension.[2]

Self-Consciousness, in short, gathers what the author calls "elements of an autobiography" (xi). Composed of six rather heterogeneous chapters in a mosaic of sorts, the volume plays with different modalities, combining essays, memoirs, a letter, and autobiographical sketches. Beyond the generic variations, however, a single thread runs through these different chapters: that of the return to the self alluded to by the title. The ambiguity of the original title, suggesting both conscious knowledge of one's self and embarrassment of oneself, is reflected in a composite, hybrid work in which one chapter deals with the author's psoriasis, another with his stuttering—two cubistic self-portraits in the mirror—and a third with his patriotism and political opinions, in particular his "undovish views" (135) in relation to the Vietnam War. "A Letter to My Grandsons," addressed to the two dedicatees of the book, retraces the history of the different branches of Updike's family as a form of epistolary legacy. As for the first and last chapters, they frame this return to the self: the first, "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington," which probes the mystery of access to consciousness, reads as a search for the meaning of existence on the occasion of Updike's return to his hometown and his nightly walk through the streets; the last, "On Being a Self Forever," reflects on the evolution of the self in time, the permanence of being just ahead of the constant extinction of previous, ephemeral selves.

Why did Updike decide to collect these autobiographical fragments in the first place? As he explains in the foreword, having heard that a biography of him was in the making, he was so repelled by the idea that he might be cheated of the treasure of his life, his "lode of ore and heap of memories" (xi), that he decided to consign himself to what he deemed important in his own life.[3] The autobiographical design, however, may be seen as another form of coverup, masking an ambition of a more scientific nature, that of treating his life as a specimen, of giving the singularity of his narrative a representative and universal dimension:

> [T]hese elements of an autobiography. . . . record what seems to me important about my own life, and try to treat this life, this massive datum which happens to be mine, as a specimen life, representative in its odd unique-ness of all the oddly unique lives in this world. A mode of impersonal egoism was my aim . . . (xi)

Here one might recall David Foster Wallace's notorious quip about the great male narcissists—namely Roth, Mailer, and Updike—in his review of *Toward the End of Time*, and his more specific attack on Updike's "radical self-absorption . . . and

uncritical celebration of this self-absorption." For all the damage that this scathing criticism has done to the writer's reputation, it can hardly be said to apply to Updike's memoirs.

Self-Consciousness, being a highly atypical variation on the genre of autobiography, hardly lends itself to the charge of narcissism. If the Narcissus of mythology was in love with his image, *Self-Consciousness* by contrast shows the author less enamored of himself than critical of his faults—his skin affliction, his speech impediment, his political prejudices—so that the book reads at least as much as self-criticism as self-praise. More importantly, the mode of "impersonal egoism" that the writer claims as his aim is what allows him to explore the lode of memory with an attitude that he qualifies as one of "scientific dispassion and curiosity" (xi). If personal identity, the *autos* in autobiography, can refer only to the individual's differences on a backdrop of community similarities, Updike's exercise in "impersonal egoism" tends to revert the focus, in an autobiography of the self that in a sense defies its purpose and foils the expectations of the genre. Looking at himself as though from the outside—not so much after Rimbaud's "Je est un autre" ("I is another" / "I is [an] other") as almost entomologically or anthropologically—he endows the personal and the unique with a communal dimension in a process that combines egoism and community, individual self and collective identity. This recalls the interesting distinction that he draws in his other openly autobiographical sketch, "The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood" (1962), the one between childhood and boyhood: "The difference between a childhood and a boyhood must be this: our childhood is what we alone have had; our boyhood is what any boy in our environment would have had" (65). *Self-Consciousness* reprises this distinction by making the self the central access road to the other and to the universe: "A writer's self-consciousness is really a mode of interestedness, that inevitably turns outward" (24). The writer's self-consciousness is thus simultaneously a return to the self and an opening on the world.

"WHY ME? WHY HERE?"

The return to the self in these memoirs becomes the occasion to reprise the two fundamental questions recurrent in Updike's work: "Why me? Why here?" In the opening essay, "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington," these questions are phrased in the philosophical terms of Heidegger's *Dasein* ("being there") and of course one of the ironies of this opening essay is that the movie that his mother and daughter go to see on that soft spring night in Shillington while he himself wanders the streets is Hal Ashby's film *Being There* (1979), based on Jerzy Kosinski's 1970 novel of the

same name. An additional irony is the loss of his luggage, which is turned into the opportunity of reengaging with his self; finding himself, so to speak.

Just as he considers his psoriasis as the mark of his difference—"the horrible badge of whatever in me was worth honoring: the price, high but not impossibly so, I must pay for being me"—Updike's stuttering appears to be the reflection of his deep self, his obscure and complicated identity: "Who I am seems impossibly complicated and unobvious" (75, 82). The mystery of the self that these physiological affections betray remains for Updike irreversibly attached to the mystery of place: "*Dasein*. The first mystery that confronts us is 'Why me?' The next is 'Why here?'" (6). The former interrogation is one he asks in "Midpoint," a playful self-reflexive freeform poem from 1968: "The crucial question was, *Why am I me*?" (4). This question directly echoes another passage from "The Dogwood Tree":

> The mystery that more puzzled me as a child was the incarnation of my ego—that omnivorous and somehow preexistent "I"—in a speck so specifically situated amid the billions of history. Why was I I? The arbitrariness of it astounded me; in comparison, nothing was too marvellous. (80)

The same interrogation is conveyed by Rabbit toward the end of *Rabbit, Run*, though not so much in awe as in angst:

> Why does anyone live here? Why was he set down here; why is this particular ordinary town for him the center and index of a universe that contains great prairies, mountains, deserts, forests, cities, seas? This childish mystery—the mystery of "any place," prelude to the ultimate, "Why am I me?"—re-ignites panic in his heart. (243)

And "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington" explores this double mystery not under the sign of Pascal or Kierkegaard's angst, but as a form of miracle:

> Yet isn't it a miracle, the oddity of consciousness being placed in one body rather than another, in one place and not somewhere else, in one handful of decades rather than in ancient Egypt, or ninth-century Wessex, or Samoa before the missionaries came, or Bulgaria under the Turkish yoke, or the Ob River Valley in the days of the woolly mammoths?[4] (40)

Why me (John Updike)? Why here (Shillington)? If there are no answers to these metaphysical questions, it remains that the actual experience of Shillington in the '30s and '40s is central to his identity and an essential part of the mystery of self. The place and the self are in osmosis—"a town that was also somewhat my body" (40)—a town loved as such, because inseparable from body and consciousness:

"I loved Shillington not as one loves Capri or New York, because they are special, but as one loves one's own body and consciousness, because they are synonymous with being" (30). Back in Shillington, Updike thus embarks on an existential and metaphysical quest, "walking the sidewalks of Shillington, Pennsylvania, searching for the meaning of my existence" (3). The essence of the self and the meaning of existence are inseparable from the geographical place where that self was formed, where it acquired its identity. So the mode of "impersonal egoism" that he invokes in the foreword finds its embodiment in a form of geographical egoism: Shillington is the center of the world, the center of the universe, the *midpoint* from which everything radiates. Updike, in "The Dogwood Tree," had drawn a sort of map or geometric design of this geography of the self as perceived by his boyhood self:

> My geography went like this: in the center of the world lay our neighborhood of Shillington. Around it there was greater Shillington, and around that, Berks County. Around Berks County there was the state of Pennsylvania, the best, the least eccentric, state in the Union. Around Pennsylvania, there was the United States, with a greater weight of people on the right and a greater weight of land on the left. For clear geometrical reasons, not all children could be born, like me, at the center of the nation. But that some children chose to be born in other countries and even continents seemed sad and fantastic. There was only one possible nation: mine. Above this vast, rectangular, slightly (the schoolteachers insisted) curved field of the blessed, there was the sky, and the flag, and, mixed up with both, Roosevelt. (63)

Blessed among the blessed, miraculously placed in the center of the first circle, the child glories in his central position within this circular geometry. The poem "Midpoint" likewise accounts for the centrality of the I as embodied by "the eye/I pun" (95) dear to Emerson and the transcendentalists: "The eye is the first circle . . . Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn" (Emerson 279). From circle to circle, the exterior world springs to consciousness, radiating from a center that substitutes the sense of arbitrariness with subjective necessity: "feeling that our life is a story, with a pattern and a moral and an inevitability. . . . That our subjectivity, in other words, dominates, through secret channels, outer reality, and the universe has a personal structure" (227).

IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME

Perched on "Proust's dizzying stilts of time" (27) as he revisits the familiar spots of the past, Updike experiences in Shillington something which, with gross oversimplification, might be related to Einstein's discovery that space and time

are linked, and relative to one another: "It was exciting for me to be in Shillington, as if my life, like the expanding universe, when projected backwards gained heat and intensity. If there was a meaning to existence, I was closest to it here" (30). So the philosophical questions that punctuate the quest for self in *Self-Consciousness* open not only on a geography of the self but also on a memorial, almost archeological, dive into times past, from which his self arose. "When does the self dawn?" he asks in the final essay, "On Being a Self Forever," adding, "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. There . . . objects shine unaided, with a light of their own" (220).

This crucial passage, which lays emphasis on the Proustian dimension of Updike's work, reads like a summation of his Pennsylvania fiction. For Updike, as for Proust, the only real flowers are the flowers of the past.[5] To go back in time is to reach the living spring. The return to the self that lies at the core of *Self-Consciousness* takes its full meaning in this revival of the past where the self is no longer separated or alienated but instead adheres fully to its own essence. *Self-Consciousness* thus resurrects for Updike the child that he was, who seems more real to him than the adult he has become: the child from Shillington, Pennsylvania, who dreamed of a miraculous future—compared to which the author's present pales—remains the ultimate reference, the alpha and omega. Place and time are fused to form the locus where the key to the self lies buried.

And so it is that Updike's fiction gives pride of place to his deciphering of the past and his search for lost time. Shillington becomes Olinger in *The Centaur* and in the material gathered in his most directly autobiographical collection *Olinger Stories*. In this latter volume, the cycle of stories make up a kind of bildungsroman, ending on the author's adolescent persona leaving for his adult life.[6] Updike in the foreword to the collection describes the town as "hang[ing] between its shallow hills enchanted, nowhere, anywhere; there is no place like it" (viii)—a mythical place, therefore, as in *The Centaur*, wherein the Arcadian is superimposed on the quotidian, transfiguring the small Pennsylvania town into Olympus and making of the lost realm of childhood the kingdom of gods (or of God). This mythological counterpoint reveals the extent of the author's nostalgia for the lost paradise of childhood and the inaccessible mystery it embodies. The transmutation of Olinger into Olympus highlights the sacredness of a place where personal history becomes myth. The golden age of childhood thus remains one of the essential themes of Updike's fiction, one that has inspired him to write some of his most vibrant pages, saturated with nostalgia.

And just as the true essence of the self is to be found in the past, so is the engine of love. Love and nostalgia are two sides of the same coin, as explored in "More Love in the Western World," Updike's essay on the legendary character Iseult. Of this iconic prototype of the "inaccessible woman," Updike writes:

> What is it that shines at us from Iseult's face but our own past, with its strange innocence and its strange need to be redeemed? What is nostalgia but love for that part of ourselves which is in Heaven, forever removed from change and corruption? (170)

Love itself is but a form of nostalgia, that which prompts us to retrieve the memory of our first landscape—"We fall in love . . . with women who remind us of our first landscape," he writes in "The Bulgarian Poetess" (748).[7] As for writing, its matrix lies similarly in the lost paradise of childhood and youth:

> I really don't think I'm alone among writers in caring about what they experienced in the first eighteen years of their life. Hemingway cherished the Michigan stories out of proportion, I would think, to their merit. Look at Twain. Look at Joyce. Nothing that happens to us after twenty is as free from self-consciousness because by then we have the vocation to write. (Samuels 28)

The "vocation to write" finds its realization precisely in this motion of self-consciousness, of reflexivity, where the return to the past is primary.

PERMANENCE OF THE SELF: A "YEA-SAYING" TO THE WORLD

Foregrounded by the epiphanies of memory, those moments when past and present are fused in a timeless beatitude, is the transcendence of a deep self beyond the vicissitudes of the present. In "At War with My Skin," the chapter of *Self-Consciousness* devoted to his psoriasis, Updike evokes the process of desquamation entailed by this dermatological affliction, the dead skins giving birth to a new skin:

> And with my changeable epiderm came a certain transcendent optimism; like a snake, I shed many skins: I had emerged relatively spotless from many a summer and holiday, and the possibility of a "new life," in this world or the next, has been ever present to my mind. (75)

Here, psoriasis becomes the metaphorical image of the molts of life that are a source of renewal and optimism and give way to the possibility of a "new life."

"On Being a Self Forever," the final chapter of *Self-Consciousness*, explores this theme of the mortality of ephemeral selves that, like the phoenix, keep being reborn: "Not only are selves conditional but they die. Each day, we wake slightly

altered, and the person we were yesterday is dead." Updike then reviews the various avatars of his self—"my high-school self," "my Ipswich self," etc. (221)—distinguishing between those he finds aggravating, even loathsome, and those that by contrast remain dear to him, "the favorite, pet selves" (223). This catalogue of the avatars of the writer's self is here less a source of nostalgia than of joy, for the message of these little deaths is that of the permanence of the self: "Why, one could say, be afraid of death, when death comes all the time?" (221)—a message that echoes Whitman's "Song of Myself."

Updike thus closes his memoirs on a hymn to the perennial nature of the self and the joy of living in the world by quoting an old friend named Ted—"'Life is bliss.' . . . 'Ah, to be alive, on a June day, in Ipswich, Massachusetts!'" (247)—as well as the urgency of an Emersonian relationship with the cosmos: "The self's responsibility, then, is to achieve rapport if not rapture with the giant, cosmic other" (257). This transcendentalist message is a message of joy—*Gratia Dei sum quod sum*[8]—that returns us in the end to Updike's deeply religious aesthetic, that of wonder before the mystery of being in the world. The mediocrity of the quotidian, the *middleness* from which he writes, is invested with a transcendent quality. It's in this way that Updike's work, while centered on the mundane, suggests a form of glory.

However mediocre his subjects, Updike celebrates them in liturgical fashion and thereby sanctifies them. The transfiguration of the daily into the sacred is achieved through the detour of art, "[j]ust as a piece of turf torn from a meadow becomes a *gloria* when drawn by Dürer" ("The Blessed Man of Boston" 101). Updike's return to the self in *Self-Consciousness* fittingly concludes on an affirmative salute, a "yea-saying to the goodness and joy of life" (*Collected Poems* 272) that has been the core of his artistic and existential credo, one that he will sustain to the very end, as witnessed in his last poem "Fine Point 12/22/08" which closes on a reassertion of this crucial belief even as he lies in bed at the hospital, on the threshold of death:

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

NOTES

1. He eventually submitted to an interview with Charles Thomas Samuels in the summer of 1967, and the interview was first published in *The Paris Review* 45 (Winter 1968): 84–117.

2. An earlier, shorter version of this essay has appeared (in French) in *Autoscopies. Représentation et identité dans l'art et la littérature* as "*Self-Consciousness* de John Updike: retour sur soi, retour aux sources." *Annales de l'Université de Savoie* 24 (September 1998): 233–41.

3. In the essay "On Literary Biography," Updike makes the following comment: "[*Self-Consciousness*] has been criticized as a parading of my wounds; but the wounds were mine to parade, and not some callow inquisitor's" (*Due Considerations* 11).

4. Ben Turnbull's alternate worlds in *Toward the End of Time* offer this "miracle" by way of fictional explorations that reimagine experience in quantum branchings.

5. « Mais c'est surtout comme à des gisements profonds de mon sol mental, comme aux terrains résistants sur lesquels je m'appuie encore, que je dois penser au côté de Méséglise et au côté de Guermantes. C'est parce que je croyais aux choses, aux êtres, tandis que je les parcourais, que les choses, les êtres sont les seuls que je prenne encore au sérieux et qui me donnent encore de la joie. Soit que la foi qui crée soit tarie en moi, soit que la réalité ne se forme que dans la mémoire, les fleurs qu'on me montre aujourd'hui pour la première fois ne me semblent pas de vraies fleurs. » (Proust, *Du Côté de chez Swann*)

"But it is preeminently as the deepest layer of my mental soil, as the firm ground on which I still stand, that I regard the Meseglise and the Guermantes ways. It is because I believed in this and in people while I walked along those paths that the things and the people they made known to me are the only ones that I still take seriously and that still bring me joy. Whether it is because the faith which creates has ceased to exist in me, or because reality takes shape in the memory alone, the flowers that people show me nowadays for the first time never seem to me to be true flowers." (Proust, *Swann's Way*)

6. See Robert M. Luscher, *John Updike: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Twayne, 1993.

7. Thus is Bech, the protagonist of the story and fictional alter ego of the writer, the author of an essay "on the orgasm as perfect memory" (748).

8. The quote—epigraph of Bishop West of Ely, in Ely Cathedral—is one of the epigraphs to *Self-Consciousness* and translates as: "By the grace of God I am what I am."

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Looking Inward and Outward: Existential Angst in *Self-Consciousness* and *Just Looking*

D. QUENTIN MILLER

It's evident that Updike was reluctant to publish an autobiography without the protective shield of the imaginative literary arts. There are many ways to explain this fact. One is that his fame not only stoked his ego but also magnified his essentially shy, introverted nature. Another is that he felt the job of a writer was not to showcase the self but rather to use selfhood as a launching pad for artistic exploration. "The Writer in Winter," the opening essay in the posthumously published *Higher Gossip*, begins with a statement that is both hopeful and defensive: "Young or old, a writer sends a book into the world, not himself" (3). He deflects attention from himself throughout this essay, going so far as to call himself a "word processor" (4), a writing machine rather than an individual with claims to selfhood. This essay is characteristically self-deprecating and humble; in four pages ostensibly devoted to himself (based on the essay's title), Updike trains his focus on publishing and namechecks more than a dozen other writers.[1] It could be argued that the bulk of his massive body of writing constitutes a careerlong autobiographical exploration, including his poetry (notably *Midpoint* and *Endpoint*), his fiction (*Of the Farm*, *The Maples Stories*), and even his volumes of essays and criticism, many of which briefly provide glimpses of the man behind the curtain before turning away from him, toward books. And yet, just as often as he leans into his life, he avoids or erases himself from his work. While most debut novelists rely on their own experiences, Updike's first published novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*, was set in the future rather than

the past, and focused on elderly men. His protagonists, rarely writers, include a car salesman, a preacher, an African dictator, a widow who married famous painters, and a radicalized would-be terrorist. Even his writerly alter-ego, Henry Bech, is in many ways not-Updike, starting with his ethnoreligious identity and continuing through the parodic interviews between the fictional Bech and his author, who yearns to be a mere "word processor" who "sends [books] into the world."

Though Updike was not a fan of life writing as a genre, after three decades of ever-increasing literary fame, he succumbed, in a sense, to the pressure to put his life's details down in print. In 1989, capping off arguably his most accomplished decade, Updike published two collections of nonfiction that are nearly unique within his enormous oeuvre: *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* and *Just Looking*. *Self-Consciousness,* by far the better-known volume, is as unusual an autobiographical project as one can imagine; it tends to focus on Updike's shortcomings, to hold up aspects of his self that showcase shame rather than pride. As biographer Adam Begley writes, "A lifelong habit of self-deprecation made the opposite unthinkable: he would never parade his triumphs—prizes, riches, accolades. When self-satisfaction spills out onto the page, he adopts a self-mocking tone" (428). Except in the case of the memoir that concentrates on genealogy, "A Letter to My Grandsons," it is as far from the archetype of American life writing (Benjamin Franklin's humble yet self-aggrandizing *Autobiography*) as possible. *Just Looking*, though, acts as a sort of counterweight to *Self-Consciousness*, balancing the self-dissatisfaction evident in the memoirs with the bristling confidence that animates most of Updike's prose. *Just Looking* stands out among his critical essay collections as it is focused on visual art, Updike's first aesthetic landing point.[2] Reading the two together offers the possibility that the subject of Updike's critical gaze in *Self-Consciousness* was not necessarily himself so much as it was the genre of memoir. *Just Looking*, especially the autobiographical first chapter "What MoMA Done Tole Me," suggests that Updike was willing to showcase a more flattering version of himself when he was looking outward rather than inward. A comparison of *Just Looking* alongside *Self-Consciousness* suggests that they are complementary in a way that explains an essential tension in Updike's work more broadly. In *Self-Consciousness* Updike looks inward; in *Just Looking* he looks outward. This point may be obvious, but what becomes clear is a difference in intent that helps complete the portrait of Updike, pointedly incomplete on the cover of *Self-Consciousness.* That collection's essays are persistently about mortality; *Just Looking*'s essays stretch in the direction of immortality. Understanding the balance of these drives is key to understanding Updike.

In contrast to his dozens of volumes of fictional and poetic work, photographs of Updike himself are featured on the covers of *Self-Consciousness* and *Just Looking*.[3] In contrast to the anxiety of the title of the former, the title of the latter collection sounds glib: "just looking" is what you say to a salesclerk when you don't want to buy anything. It suggests that the appreciation of art is a casual act, devoid of commitment. But like the title of *Self-Consciousness*, it also contains a possible double entendre: "looking" is "just," which is to say it is a profound, moral act. On the cover we see Updike as a museumgoer, facing away from the camera, implying that he is not the subject of the book. Yet in some ways he is, especially in the opening essay written for this volume. The emphasis is on the act of looking (and interpreting) rather than on the art itself. Art is valuable insofar as it affects the viewer. By turning away from the camera for this cover photo, Updike wants to deflect attention from himself, but he is equally in the frame, even dominating it.[4]

From the first paragraph of the first memoir in *Self-Consciousness*, mortality is on the author's mind.[5] He notes immediately that his daughter is twenty-five years old, though her age is seemingly irrelevant to the anecdote—that she undertips a porter who loses their luggage, thus giving Updike the opportunity to wander around Shillington. What's he doing there? "Searching for the meaning of my existence" (3). Just that. Just searching. A careful reading reveals that this paean to lost youth is actually a cliff walk at the edge of the abyss. Indeed, Updike spends the second paragraph of the essay talking about how lost luggage for him has always evoked "the terrible, the void" and, eventually, "death" (3). He explores this unlikely idea without explaining it, leaving the reader with a vision of the author as a ghostly presence, wandering around desolate streets without the material possessions that help to define him. Lost luggage connotes death for Updike at the outset of these memoirs because, well, everything connotes death at this stage of his life. He states his purpose in the foreword as a response to claim his own life story rather than ceding it to a would-be biographer. He phrases his repugnance this way: "I was told, perhaps in jest, of someone wanting to write my biography—*to take my life*, my lode of ore and heap of memories, from me!" (xi, emphasis mine). Writing a biography could be called "preserving a life," or "narrating a life," but for Updike in 1989, it was akin to taking a life, i.e., to murder.

In my reading, there's nothing soft about this spring night in Shillington. Everything is tinged with a feeling of ghostly gloom. In order to receive the errant luggage, Updike skips the movie: he's seen it already. Though it might seem no more important a detail than his daughter's age, he includes the film's title, *Being*

There. There's a hollow echo to the title given the existential crisis of Updike's autobiographical project: what is after the end of "being"? What if "there" becomes nowhere when we die? Updike stands alone under the movie marquee peering out into a decidedly eerie mist and writes, "I had nothing to do, here at the center of my earthly being" (4). "Earthly being" is fancy talk for existence that recalls the movie title. Updike also names the movie's star, Peter Sellers, who died a year after the movie was released at the age of 54.[6] This memoir was first published in December, 1984, when Updike was also in his early fifties. He twice invokes the German word "*Dasein*" in single-word sentences. The word is from Heidegger and is commonly translated "being there," the title of the movie, but more importantly, it is the cornerstone of the philosopher's inquiry into the meaning of existence. So this lyrical trip down memory lane is caused by a consciousness of the author's mortality rather than lost luggage. Again, in his current mindset, they're one and the same: lost luggage, he tells us, is a metaphor for death.

The memoir seeks to reproduce the vanished streets and buildings of Updike's youth as a way of showcasing the world he once knew, but in my reading, it has a different effect: the Shillington of the past is, like Updike, standing under the marquee, *ghostly*. That word crops up repeatedly, and at one point he describes himself as "virtually floating, a phantom" (27). As he leads us on his tour, the world he once knew is replaced by the world that now is, which is as succinct a formulation of existential angst as I can imagine. This feeling reaches a crescendo when he stands outside the cinema, "enjoying the rain and the passing traffic and the sensation that all this would be happening whether or not I was here" (32). This is just before he compares himself to Kafka's dissipating protagonist from "The Hunger Artist." The feeling that he is part of the spirit world destabilizes his faith in the solidity of his youth. Take for example this description of his old kindergarten: "My sneaking visit showed the large old room to be empty, a barren basement with a concrete floor. It couldn't, I felt, be the same place where such magic had taken place" (13). This is a veritable tomb, utterly devoid of the exuberant life of childhood to the point that he doubts it ever contained young children. If this memoir were a short movie, it could be called *Not Being Here*.

Photographs, like the one gracing the cover of these memoirs, are described as "treasures of lost time" (15), and Updike observes that the pictures his mother took of his youth were, like this book, crucial to his ability to access his own past: "Without these accumulating photographs my past would have vanished, year after year" (12). Once again, nothing is solid on this ghostly trip. As if to underscore the point, Updike doubts his own memory of a teacher's name and parenthetically

preserves his doubt: "Miss Tate (or was it Mrs. Fritz?)" (16). He repeats this type of self-questioning throughout the chapter.

The places of Updike's youth are described in terms of mortality, as in this description: "The ice plant *was no more*, the water *no longer* flowed, the trolley cars *had ceased*, and the tracks . . . had been torn up and paved over" (19, emphasis mine). All these vivid memories from youth are not only gone, but buried; "had ceased" sounds an awful lot like "deceased." He recalls a neighbor, Charlie Marx, "who always wore dark clothes," then he again distrusts his memory after he recalls that the poor soul was found murdered: "Did he really always wear dark clothes, or has my memory, knowing of his grisly end, dressed him appropriately?" (22). At another point he recalls "a man-high meat locker out of which [another neighbor] would haul a gory side of beef" (26). Death and silence haunt this stroll down what he calls "Proust's dizzying stilts of time" (27). He hasn't been here for thirty years, so change is inevitable, but all this change is presented as loss, or decay. Updike builds to a Zen-like observation about passivity that morphs into just the opposite: a fantasy of immortality. "The essential self is innocent," he writes, "and when it tastes its own innocence knows that it lives forever. If we keep utterly still, we can suffer no wear and tear, and will never die" (35). This is a dark joke, perhaps occasioned by the fact that he's just gotten back his lost luggage. The memoir culminates in his final meditation on Heidegger's "*Dasein*" concept in which he concludes that "consciousness," the word after the hyphen of the book's title, is both a "miracle" and an "oddity," but also that it puts us up against an "unthinkable truth," presumably that death's eradication of consciousness is the absolute end of the self (40). What can we do once we've realized it? According to Updike, "Scream or take refuge in God" (40). Belief in an afterlife is often a menaced concept in Updike. It seems especially flimsy here. I see this memoir as a muffled scream.

Religion is one of what Updike memorably called the "three great secret things," the other two being sex and art. I'll turn my attention to the third of these as a way of pivoting to his other memoir-like book of 1989, *Just Looking*. Like *Self-Consciousness*, it gathers previously published essays from the 1980s; in the interest of brevity, however, I'll concentrate on "What MoMA Done Tole Me," an introductory piece Updike wrote specifically for this collection. It's worth noting the italicized epigraph after the dedication to editor Judith Jones and four of Updike's art teachers: "*seeing is believing*" (front matter). If there's a crisis of belief in God implied in "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington," an alternative is suggested here. There are two ways of interpreting the epigraph: seeing is consciousness, and thus believing is faith in selfhood; or, believing is often equated with faith in

the *unseen*, but here it is firmly rooted in the world of visual art, which is clearly evident when we are just looking. Why bother imagining God when art is *right there in front of your eyes*?

The first three words of the essay are "Once I lived" (3). The rest of the phrase is "in New York City," but still: the afterlife or eternal self Updike longs for in *Self-Consciousness* seems to be located in these three words. The essay brims with rebirth. The pun of the title—"MoMA" for "Momma"—suggests that this is an origin story. In contrast with the portrait of a shy, insecure youth painted in "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington," here we initially encounter a twelve-year-old Updike, a Pennsylvania Pinocchio who is brought to life, intellectually, during his first visit to New York's Museum of Modern Art: his aunt "claimed that she had never seen a child so interested in the place" (3).[7] He quotes from earlier renditions of his first visits to the Reading Museum in the story "Museums and Women" and in the novel *The Centaur*. Both quotations allude to the lifegiving qualities of artistic creation. Here's an excerpt from the first, about a collection of bronze statuettes: "I itched to finger them, to interact with them, to insert myself into their mysterious silent world of strenuous connection" (4). And here's one from the second, about the statue "The Drinking Girl" who is poised to drink from a shell and whose "imagined thirst" troubles him: "I told myself that when darkness came . . . her slim bronze hand made the very little motion needed, and she drank" (5). He conceives of "art as a somewhat erotic mode of death." Here, eros animates art, just as Updike's childish imagination did. The Reading Museum is Edenic ("trees wearing tags, as if freshly christened by Adam" [3]) and MoMA is heavenly ("a shore of that radiant island open to the sky, that uplifted paradise of penthouses" [5]). In short, art is divine, immortal, eternal.

We flash forward to Updike in his twenties, working as a writer for *The New Yorker*, an exciting period of his life notably absent from the morose pages of *Self-Consciousness*. He describes the museum as "sophistication's toy shop" where he frequently goes "to clear my head, to lift my spirits" (7). More than that, he goes there to worship: "For me the Museum of Modern Art was a temple where I might refresh my own sense of artistic purpose, though my medium had become words" (7). There is nothing in the essay that recalls the haunted nostalgia of his spooky stroll through Shillington. He becomes a kid in a spiritual toy store, full of wonder: "I was young enough to find delight, still, in allusions to toys" (9). Though he's talking about modern art here, he turns to the oldest works in the place to unearth the wisdom that MoMA done told him:

> But it was among the older and least 'modern' works in the museum that I found most comfort, and the message I needed: that even though God and human majesty, as represented in the icons and triptychs and tedious panoramic canvases of older museums had evaporated, beauty was still left, beauty amid our ruins, and beauty curiously pure, a blank uncaused beauty that signified only itself. (9)

This epiphany comes across as a relief compared to the multiple, complex significations of selfhood he excavates in *Self-Consciousness*, even in the first chapter, but especially in the last (the ironically titled "On Being a Self Forever"). He gushes over Cézanne's simple landscape "Pines and Rock" using the following words and phrases: "ardor," "excited shimmer," "intensity," "leap free," "no heaviness," "oddly airy severity" (11). He can virtually feel the artistic exuberance that went into creating this modest canvas: "Cézanne's extreme concentration breaks through into a feeling as carefree and unencumbered as that which surrounds us in nature itself" (11). This is a moment of Romantic sublimity to be sure, born from the painter's powerful "observation . . . extreme concentration . . . contemplation" (11). All these skills or practices are transferred to the literary artist Updike, who is doing much more than "just looking." He is *becoming*, animated by art, much as Adam is animated by God's outstretched finger on the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

For Updike, Matisse's works also invoke Eden (13). He gives additional examples, but his summary of his aesthetic lesson should demonstrate the point clearly enough: "This old-fashioned idea of mine that art should body forth the idyllic found confirmation in many corners of the museum" (13). The odd phrase "body forth" connotes bearing, or birth, reinforcing the essay title and calling attention to the fact that a number of the works Updike contemplates in this essay are of mothers, women, or nude women of childbearing age, at least one of which, Gaston LaChaise's "Standing Woman," is visibly pregnant (Updike goes on to describe this figure's "naked hyperfemininity" [14]). Art is a type of birth, and a holy one at that. Earlier he called the museum a temple; later in the essay he describes "a sacred aura, which I imbibed as in a chapel" (15). He makes explicit the connection between artistic creation and spiritual questing: "I was looking for a religion, as a way of hanging on to my old one, in those years, and was attracted to those artists who seemed to me as single-minded and selfless as saints" (15). (Note the word "selfless," the veritable opposite of one of the meanings of "self-consciousness"). Using a quotidian still life by Juan Gris titled "Breakfast" as an example, Updike further explicates his new theology, calling it "[a] religion reassembled from the fragments of our daily life, in an atmosphere of gaiety and diligence" (17). This

sounds very much like his writing, and his sense of purpose as he establishes his claim on modern letters is validated: "I took away, in sufficient-sized packets, courage to be an artist, an artist now, amid the gritty crushed grays of this desperately living city, a bringer of light and order and color, a singer of existence" (18). This nearly rapturous sense of purpose, reminiscent of Stephen Dedalus's resolve at the end of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, casts Updike as a kind of aesthetic saint. It is lightyears from the gloomy guy standing under a movie marquee, musing on Heidegger's existentialism, imagining kindergarten classrooms as tombs and dressing adults in black for their entire existences because he was hyperconscious of their eventual deaths.

The end of the essay comes down to earth with Updike complaining a bit fussily about the expansion of the museum, both spatially and chronologically (in terms of the contemporary art it now houses), looking away from the self as much of his literary criticism does. Still, pairing these two opening essays brings us closer to an essential tension in Updike. The self is both subject and transparent eyeball[8] in his work. As a seer, a keen observer of the most minute details of his world, he is confident, exuberant, and in full control of his craft. When he looks inward into the depths of his consciousness and deeply reveals the self, he is anxious, chaotic, and dark, and his prose is driven along by an urgent intensity. I don't mean these pronouncements to be judgements of his individual works, but rather observations about the range or spectrum of his oeuvre. As this reading seeks to show, the eternity connoted by pure artistic concentration on the world is soaring; the deep inspection of the self is draining. Without a balance of the two, we wouldn't have a complete portrait of Updike.

NOTES

1. The writers named in the four-page essay: Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, Mary McCarthy, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Agatha Christie, Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing, P. D. James, Herman Melville, and Cormac McCarthy.

2. As a volume on art criticism, *Just Looking* isn't completely unique in Updike's oeuvre: he published two sequels, *Still Looking* (2005) and *Always Looking* (2012).

3. Updike is also featured on the covers of many of his volumes of nonfiction and poetry. It could be argued that the original cover of *Midpoint* is a version of a portrait of the author, but it is so distorted and magnified, as well as rendered in a flat ochre tone, that it is barely recognizable as such.

4. On the back cover he turns to face the reader, smiling broadly, as if to let us in on the coy joke of the front cover: "I'm the subject here."

5. All of the chapters in *Self-Consciousness* are saturated with a consciousness of mortality, even death-obsession. In the painful chapter on psoriasis, skin becomes "the integument a skeleton once wore" (78). In the chapter on stuttering, an asthma attack becomes a burial: "This is death," Updike

declares while describing one (94). In the chapter on his stance on Vietnam, there are a few notable quotations: "I had become sore at the world [for] its eventual victory over us in death" (151). Speaking of dentistry, he says, "It reminds me, as my father often used to say, of death," and, of the dental hygienists who peer into his mouth, he adds, "I must remind them of death, too" (162). In the conclusion of that chapter he writes, "We owe God a death" (163). In one particularly death-saturated paragraph in the genealogy chapter ("A Letter to my Grandsons") he describes "that curtained upstairs bedroom where my mother, as I write this, lies staring at the ceiling wondering whether to live or die" (174). The final section about the possibility of an afterlife, "On Being a Self Forever," conceives of death as something that happens constantly: "Each day, we wake slightly altered, and the person we were yesterday is dead" (221). All of this leads to our actual individual extinction, which is almost too great a fact to bear: "Even the barest earthly facts are unbearably heavy, weighted as they are with our personal death" (226).

6. He acknowledges the death of the movie icon later in the essay: "Sellers, so incredibly clever, so lively in his impersonations, so quick, and now dead" (35).

7. This aunt is mentioned in *Self-Consciousness*: "Aunt Mary . . . who once took me to the Museum of Modern Art. . . . She and [Uncle] Don lived the way I thought people should live, in a big house just an hour, by commuter train or the Merritt Parkway, from New York City, its towers and wonders and lights and noise. I wanted to become rich in this way" (169).

8. The "transparent eyeball" concept is from Emerson's 1836 essay *Nature*, from which Updike quotes in "On Being a Self Forever": "Emerson, in *Nature*, points out 'the total disparity between the evidence of our own being, and the evidence of the world's being'" (229).

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Updike's *Self-Consciousness*: Openings in the Text for Intimacies and Doubts

JAMES SCHIFF

The writing in John Updike's *Self-Consciousness*—its astonishing eloquence, seamless narration, and sheer abundance—is perhaps as good as anything the author ever wrote. If you don't believe me, consider what one of Updike's closest readers, longtime *New Yorker* fiction editor William Maxwell, said in a letter to the author: "I have tended to think that English prose reached its highest development in the seventeenth century . . . but I feel unhesitatingly that the last section of *Self-Consciousness* is the best prose I have ever read" (29 March 1989). Maxwell goes on to discuss the sustained intimacy Updike achieves throughout the memoir and suggests, as have others, that he was writing at his very best during this period of his life. Composing all six of the book's personal essays in his fifties, Updike was a mature, confident writer, at the top of his game, reflecting on what he knew best: his self and surroundings. In each of these essays he interweaves themes and motifs so deftly that by the end one is slightly startled by the writing, yet unable to recall precisely where that telling sentence about Ipswich, or the passage about hymning America, can be found. While I am tempted to explore the intricate stitching of the surface eloquence, in hopes of better understanding how it works, I'll leave that for another day. My focus instead is on what seems almost converse—namely, a handful of passages that briefly, sometimes comically, interrupt or undercut the smooth flow of narration. In these passages, Updike surprises us by creating an "opening in the text," where he draws our attention to what he feels compelled

to mention but not explore. In essence, we become aware of what Updike is not telling us. We also see how his memoirs, like his fiction, are very much a literary performance in which the author, elusive and clever, engages with us in play.

One such moment occurs in "On Not Being a Dove," wherein Updike detours slightly from his discussion of the Vietnam War to devote a full paragraph to Wednesday ski trips to New Hampshire with his Ipswich friends. The paragraph is unremarkable until we arrive at the closing sentence:

> I seem to remember, on one endless drive back home in the dark down Route 93, while my wife sat in the front seat and her hair was rhythmically irradiated with light from opposing headlights, patiently masturbating my backseat neighbor through her ski pants, beneath our blanketing parkas, and taking a brotherly pride in her shudder of orgasm just as we hit the Ipswich turnoff. (123)

Though Updike alludes to marital infidelity elsewhere in these memoirs, he does so from a distance. Here, he takes us closer, describing a specific scene, within a car, that arrests our attention. The sentence begins casually and vaguely—"I seem to remember . . ."—but then moves to the frank intimacy of "patiently masturbating my backseat neighbor" and "her shudder of orgasm." Both playful and shocking, it's a bit of a tease in that Updike offers a more intimate glimpse of his personal life, then pulls back. Essentially, he opens a window, then closes it just as quickly. Perhaps he feels an obligation to throw his reader a bone from time to time—he is, after all, composing a memoir and has, in other genres, been quite candid and explicit. Decorum and good taste, however, prevent him from going further. Who, for instance, is this woman? Were they having an affair? Or was this just a spontaneous gesture among friends? By giving us a peek, he cannot be accused of holding things back, but what he does, indeed, is hold things back. Updike had no desire to write a sordid, tell-all autobiography—that was one of many things he feared from a biographer—yet he needed to record this moment for various reasons: pride in both his role as a local Don Juan and his skill in successfully completing this covert act; duty to his lifelong objective of giving his reader the truth. But that was far enough. He would divulge truths about his psoriasis, stutter, and stance on the Vietnam War, but that would be sufficient—nothing more about personal sexual intimacy. It's a shrewd rhetorical approach: persuade the reader of authorial candor by revealing personal humiliations, which generates intimacy, but then hold much of it back, all the while giving a glimpse of what is there. Anyone who has read Updike's fiction can guess what intimate scenes may have occurred

in his personal life, but in this mode it's better to stop short, to write a respectable memoir that does not divulge names or detail personal intimacies.

Something similar occurs in "At War with My Skin," where Updike discusses how on his solo Caribbean trips, late at night, he would listen to the calypso bands in the bar and observe how "the black girls were mesmerizing, doing the mambo, with their understated, utterly certain little motions" (72). Commenting at some length on how little contact he had previously had in his life with Black people, he confesses his desire for "those stately rapt black girls" and writes, "*At last*, I can hear the reader sighing, *we're getting down to it*." Yet, in the same breath, he declares, "I never had a sexual adventure in all those solitary trips to the Caribbean." So while there was no secret Caribbean liaison, his confession of desire for Black women, in a memoir dedicated to his two multiracial grandchildren (he would later have more grandchildren, both multiracial and white), draws our attention, as does the meta-voice he adopts through the italicized words. Through this slight modulation of voice, Updike the commentator reveals how Updike the memoirist has been skirting issues, avoiding full self-revelation. The passage is playful and deepens our intimacy with Updike, yet at the same time, he is not really *getting down to it.* It's purely a rhetorical move.

Similar to these passages in which Updike plays with and hints at sexual candor are ones in which the otherwise confident and publicly polished narrator expresses personal indignation, defiance, and vengeance. Some of these moments can be found in his exploration of his position on the Vietnam War, where we see the degree to which his personal life shaped his public views, yet others pertain to family economics, his father's struggles, and the need to escape Shillington and become an artist. In "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington," he describes the quiet, patient snugness of his early life, in which he "had waited to be admired, . . . keeping . . . 'out of harm's way,"' and "burrowing in New York magazines and English mystery novels" (32–33). Yet beneath the surface is something quite different, as he admits:

> I hid a certain determined defiance. I would not teach, I would not farm, I would not (deep down) conform. I would "show" them, I would avenge all the slights and abasements visited upon my father—the miserly salary, the subtle tyranny of his overlords at the high school, the disrespect of his students, the laughter in the movie house at the name of Updike. . . . Shillington, in a sense, was where I waited in ambush to take my revenge. (33)

This passage stands out given how Updike presents himself as a child who is eager to please, accepts authority, respects establishment, and feels fortunate to have

been so much loved and lauded by family and community. This "I will show them" Updike, who confesses his anger and desire for vengeance, does not appear prominently elsewhere in these memoirs, though there are glimpses of him in "On Not Being a Dove." That he feels this way should not be a terrible surprise. Surely the farm kid who goes on to become one of the world's great writers, and who writes explicitly about sexual matters, must have been driven to some degree by defiance and nonconformity. And surely by observing his father's life at close range—his generous, comic father, whom "life had given . . . a beating" (33)—drove his desires, frustrations, and anger. Yet Updike admits to keeping these feelings hidden, which is where they largely remain in *Self-Consciousness*. I'm not suggesting that this is in any way problematic or inconsistent on Updike's part (though I would have enjoyed hearing more). What I am suggesting, though, is that this kind of passage adds complexity and layering to the volume, as we become more aware of aspects of Updike's self that he prefers to keep submerged.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in those passages in which the otherwise confident Updike expresses doubts, voiced at times in his career by critics, about his writing. Such passages appear both in the text, particularly late in "On Not Being a Dove," and in the original unpublished postscript ending appended to "On Being a Self Forever." What is so interesting here, in light of how instinctively fluid and deft Updike was as a writer, is to see him wrestle with doubt, from which he would otherwise appear to be immune. As he once stated in an interview, loosely paraphrasing Blake: "If a candle should doubt, it would go out" ("At Home"). Yet in trying to come to terms with his unpopular position on the Vietnam War, he questions his capacity to empathize—"Was it possible, really . . . that . . . I was less caring, less sensitive to suffering, than others? A man I had offended at the outset of the Sixties complained to my wife that my face showed no signs of having ever suffered"—and goes on to ask, "*Had* I suffered enough? . . . My skin made me suffer, and the hay fever that later became asthma, but these were trivial complaints. . . . The critics who found me callow might be right" (149, 151).

Over these pages Updike worries about whether he has suffered sufficiently and confesses to being "less than normally tolerant of others' handicaps," then reveals how, as a child, he relished torturing his toys. Such confession and self-questioning add complexity and drama, yet one struggles to determine the extent of his sincerity: are these doubts deeply felt and real, or simply a kind of performance? In trying to gauge the depths of his personal suffering, Updike lists those hardships he avoided—war, fatal disease, heartbreak, plane crashes—while recalling narrowly

averted disasters (a helicopter crash in Venezuela) and the experience of real pain (chronic dental problems). The helicopter crash is notable, yet when recounted one sees little suffering: the aircraft "plopped down on a nearby set of rocks shaped liked diagonally stacked loaves of bread," and the drama transitions to his having ignored his wife, who sprained her ankle jumping to the ground. That the rocks were "shaped like diagonally stacked loaves of bread" is a lovely image, but one that undermines any sense of danger, which often happens in Updike's writing. The volubility and verbal dexterity or, to put it more literally, the beautiful sentences, can sometimes interfere with the emotional and psychological temperature of a scene. The volubility certainly crops up again in the more than eight pages he devotes to "a long history of pain endured" through chronic tooth problems (154). Though Updike's dental struggles were difficult and unusual, the repairs, even at the periodontal phase, seem less than traumatic. Again, Updike seems to be playing with us, much as he was earlier when overstating his lifetime of humiliations from psoriasis and stuttering. Yet simultaneously there is something earnest here, particularly given his sense that human experience is shaped not by world-shaking international events but rather by our small daily experiences.

Other doubts and criticism surface in almost every chapter. For instance, in "Getting the Words Out," he echoes two prominent and early objections to his writing: "my first books met the criticism that I wrote all too well but had nothing to say: I, who seemed to myself full of things to say. . . . My own style seemed to me a groping and elemental attempt to approximate the complexity of envisioned phenomena and it surprised me to have it called luxuriant and self-indulgent" (103). That Updike repeats these criticisms is surprising. Not only did he feel great contempt for the critics who voiced such damning judgments—in "Bech Noir," his alter ego Henry Bech sets off on a killing spree of his harshest critics—but he detested how such remarks had attached to him like "burrs that your woolly socks have picked up and there's no getting rid of" (qtd. in Schiff 54). "Even the most respectful and positive" critical studies of his own writing, he lamented, were required "to quote, often in extenso, those critics who were not on your side. So adverse reviews or notices—whether by Harold Bloom or Frederick Crews or John Aldridge or a woman called Rabinowitz . . . have this terrible afterlife of being quoted again and again" (53–54). Which is what is odd about encountering these passages in *Self-Consciousness*: Updike does the very thing that annoys him when reading critical studies of his own work. Perhaps absorbing these criticisms was unavoidable. Clearly, they have, over time, become part of who he is, part of his self.

In the postscript ending, which he decided, at the strong urging of editors at Knopf, not to include, he composes a brief two-page dialogue, in which his Self and Oppositional Other engage in debate about the book just completed. The passage resembles the kind of thing Philip Roth does in *The Facts* (1988), published a few months earlier, though Updike had been engaging in similar kinds of dialogue between different selves ever since his alter ego, Henry Bech, interviewed him in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1971. In *Self-Consciousness*, the dialogue takes place at the close of his final chapter, "On Being a Self Forever," which, as mentioned, William Maxwell referred to as "the best prose I have ever read." Here, his Oppositional Self, after the preceding 257 pages of eloquent recollection, declares:

> *Pfaugggh!* Fearfulness and selfishness, that's all I've been hearing. What a little Fafner you are—"I have and I hold"! Clinging to a creed demolished everywhere you look, to a patriotism as obsolete as blood sacrifice, to a storybook small town that never existed, least of all in the dingy Thirties; toadying to any establishment that comes your way . . . ; so anxious to please and afraid of a little normal opposition your tongue and lungs can't get the words out. . . . What about the *big* picture! Where in all these millions of words you boast about is there any serious consideration of the large issues that concern humanity in the mass? (*Higher Gossip* 471)

His longtime editor Judith Jones and others at Knopf felt strongly, even vehemently, that the postscript should not be included in the memoir. In one internal memo, Knopf executive Nina Bourne writes: "You CAN'T let him include that OPPOSITIONAL OTHER-SELF dialogue at the end. It's all WRONG." Jones fully agreed, though she diplomatically told Updike: "Don't you love that 'You CAN'T let him'—as though you couldn't do anything you wanted to," then adds that Knopf Chairman Bill Koshland "was disturbed, too." To their eyes, Updike's postscript was too self-disparaging; it soured the rest of the manuscript and could, they feared, be an "open invitation" to Updike's critics. While they were mostly right, there is clearly something alive and engaging about this postscript, which could have been different had Updike reshaped it, perhaps even integrated some of this thinking elsewhere in the memoirs. As it stands, it's too disharmonious, too crudely constructed, as if simply an afterthought rather than a strategically constructed sendoff. Yet it was also the ending that Updike originally conceived for the volume, so it must have resonated with him on some level.

Surely part of the explanation for the postscript ending is comic relief. An instinctively funny writer, Updike was often drawn to self-deprecation, as a kind of default mode. More than 250 pages of sincere, exquisitely rendered self-reflection

was, perhaps, in need of comic rebuttal. Yet beneath the comic façade, one could argue, are real reservations. In "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington," he dives into nostalgia, resulting in a beautifully poignant personal essay expressing his love for the town; Shillington resonates for Updike in the same way Illier-Combray exists for Proust. Yet in his postscript, Updike describes Shillington as "a storybook small town that never existed, least of all in the dingy Thirties." It's a stunning declaration. It also aligns with what he wrote in a 1952 letter to Mary Pennington, his soon-to-be fiancée, during spring break his sophomore year of college: "I have just returned from an ill-advised expedition to Shillington, Pa., which just reasserted its right to the title of Dullest Town in the Whole Wide World. I encountered a few more or less pleasant people with whom, unfortunately, I have nothing in common except a fragment of my past" (31 March 1952). One doesn't hear such things in "A Soft Spring Night." But one must also remember that Shillington is a town his mother once said she hated; it's also the place from which he escaped. What I find most engaging about the aborted, unpublished postscript is how it complicates our notion of Shillington and Updike's past. It's not that "A Soft Spring Night" is a lie, but rather that it's shaped literary memory, and one that Updike, in another guise, would be prone to question and deride. While publishing the postscript would likely have been a mistake, it creates an engaging dialectic which deepens our understanding of the town and of Updike's recounted experience of it. In the postscript, as in a handful of other passages in the memoir, Updike creates openings in the text where he expresses doubts, reveals intimacies, and hints at how much he is not telling us, leading us to question what has been revealed, while bestowing layers of depth and complexity upon his self.

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Truth and Its Fabrications in *Self-Consciousness*: Updike's Misgivings about Memoir and Ambivalence about Audience

PETER J. BAILEY

> The true novelist is in love with reality. He is a mediator between reality and the reader, and not simply someone who operates in a world of printed words.
>
> —Charlie Reilly, "A Conversation with John Updike"

> Fiction, which does not pretend to be true, is much truer.
>
> —John Updike, "The Original Ending of *Self-Consciousness*"

"What small faith I have has given me what artistic courage I have," Updike wrote in the "On Being a Self Forever" chapter of *Self-Consciousness*:

> My theory was that God already knows everything and cannot be shocked. And only truth is useful. Only truth can be built upon. From a higher, inhuman point of view, only truth, however harsh, is holy. The fabricated truth of poetry and fiction makes a shelter in which I feel safe, sheltered within interlaced plausibilities in the image of a real world for which I am not to blame. (231)

As I understand these sentences, Updike denied he was being anti-Christian in describing "life as accurately as I could, with especial attention to human erosions and betrayals" (231), instead invoking truths with which God would not only

be familiar but in which He is arguably complicit—which accounts for why, for Updike, registering truth in narrative is "holy."[1] The subsequent assertion forges a tacit bridge between the previous sentences and itself; Updike succeeded in drawing upon his "artistic courage" because "the fabricated truth of poetry and fiction" provide cover, allowing him to project a world whose harshness is, simultaneously, existentially verisimilar and not his fault.

Particularly intriguing about this passage is the ostensive contradiction between "only truth is useful. Only truth can be built upon," and Updike's subsequent endorsement of "[t]he fabricated truth of poetry and fiction," which, at minimum, smacks of truth falsified, diminished, diluted. Interesting enough in itself, this distinction is essential to understanding why writing *Self-Consciousness*, manifestly one of the more literally truthful works Updike ever published, seemed such a burdensome task, and why for him fiction and poetry create so much more compelling an "image of the world." Lacking as it does the "interlaced plausibilities of fiction," *Self-Consciousness* allows us to grasp Updike's notion of the differences in rhetorical effects between memoir and his patently autobiographical fiction. Additionally, the text illuminates his vexed attitude toward both his literary audience and who he characterizes as "autobiography readers," who, he somewhat speciously claimed, dictated his writing of *Self-Consciousness*.

He discovered first that writing memoir made him uncomfortable in a way that writing poetry and fiction never had. Drafting *Self-Consciousness* instilled a sense of unease: "These memoirs feel shabby. Truth should not be forced; it should simply manifest itself, like a woman who has in her privacy reflected and coolly decided to bestow herself upon a certain man. She will *dawn* upon that man" (231–32). Updike continued, "My writing here about my religion feels forced—done at the behest of others, of hypothetical 'autobiography' readers" (232). What he expressed forthrightly about his religion provides a partial explanation for his conviction that nonfiction is necessarily inferior to literary prose: "One believes not only to comfort one's self, but for empirical and compositional reasons—the ornate proposed supernatural completes the picture and, like the ingredient that tops up and rounds out the recipe, gives reality its true flavor" (233–34).

Later in the chapter, Updike exemplifies one of his more remarkable spiritual/aesthetic proclivities, that of perceiving the workings of faith as a direct analogue of the workings of literature: "Similarly, in art one has to add in a little extra color, some overanimation, to bring the imitation up to the pitch, the bright roundedness, the repletion, of the actual model" (234). In writing, he told Jeff Campbell in their 1976 interview, "I try to adhere to the testable, the verifiable, the undeniable little

thing. I hope the pattern in the art will emerge, and I guess I must have some such hope cosmically" (99). In *Self-Consciousness*, he felt obliged to represent the "actual model" without the "extra color" or "overanimation" that literary prose imbues as an aesthetic reification of the subject, the effect of which was to diminish the power of the writing while simultaneously divesting him of the "shelter" that poetry and fiction afford. Additionally, Updike's discomfort at being accountable to "autobiography readers" by producing a version of a personal truth reflects his preference for literary plots that, however autobiographical, nonetheless rewarded him with feelings of blamelessness for the world he had delineated. Readers seeking to understand how this blamelessness eventuates in fiction might usefully turn to the *Problems* story "Guilt-Gems," a narrative in which the protagonist's evocations of painful divorce memories paradoxically absolve him of feelings of guilt.

More significant for my purposes are Updike's conspicuous misgivings about those "autobiography readers." It's fair to say that as of 1989, Updike's thirty years of produced poems, stories and novels were never written at "the behest of others," but arose largely out of Updike's experiences and his imaginative recastings of them. This distinctly remote relationship to readers was what he favored because it validates his memoirs' consistent celebration of the autonomy of the—that is, his—self: "I have absorbed the idea that when in doubt," he asserts on the final page of *Self-Consciousness*, "we should behave, if not like monkeys, like 'savages'—that our instincts and appetites are better guides, for a healthy life, than the advice of other human beings" (257). Consequently, in more than three decades of composing fiction and poetry that established a largely extrinsic stance toward readers, Updike felt comfortable, sheltered. In drafting *Self-Consciousness*, however, he clearly became abnormally self-conscious about "autobiography readers" and what he deemed their annoyingly intrusive expectations of his memoirs. He fulfilled those expectations, but only with reluctance and resentment. "I am in these paragraphs," he confessed, "struggling to expose what should be—in decency, to conserve potency—*behind*: behind the façade, the human courtesies, my performance, my 'act'" (232). Ever the devoted literary Modernist, Updike hoped that "the pattern in the art will emerge," for narrative without layers, without interiority, is, for him, no better than memoir.

"[M]y performance, my 'act'" was a phrase that came naturally to Updike because of his struggles with psoriasis. "Having so long carried a secret behind my clothes," he explains in the "At War with My Skin" chapter, "I had no trouble with the duplicity that generates plots and surprises and symbolism and layers of meaning: dualism, indeed, such as existed between my skin and myself, appeared

to me the very engine of the human" (75). Writing memoir, with its want of dualism and layers of meaning, came to seem tantamount to exposing to others skin insufficiently redeemed by the springtime sun. "Only nature can forgive psoriasis," Updike wrote, exposing his much-practiced antihumanism: "the sufferer in his self-contempt does not grant to other people this power" (45).

Elsewhere in *Self-Consciousness*, Updike invokes approvingly the "contracts" humorists and mystery writers establish with readers, endorsing the mutuality of expectations they produce; they do not, as Updike supposed "autobiography readers" do, oblige the writer to tell more, to expose more. Modifying somewhat that relationship between Updike and all audiences is the intervention of "the exhilarating, bourgeois-baiting lawlessness of modernism" (110), which, throughout *Self-Consciousness*, takes the form of an artful interweaving of thematic touchstones: his "placing" in Shillington, the war with his skin, overcoming his stutter, celebrating the Updike family line, and the complex relationship between his literary art and religious belief. The recurrence of these themes throughout the text constitutes the art of *Self-Consciousness*, one with which Updike seems to have remained largely dissatisfied. "What I have written here strains to be true but nevertheless is not true *enough*," he complained; "[t]ruth is anecdotes, narrative, the snug opaque quotidian" (234).

His one extended comment on reader reception of *Self-Consciousness* emphasizes how unsatisfactory they will find "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington," even if they happen to be residents of the town:

> Nothing I have described here has importance except to me, and to those few thousands who thanks to chance also live or have lived in Shillington; they will see that I haven't described it very well, for I haven't described *their* town—only mine, lost luggage by and large, a few scraps preserved by memory and used more than once, used to the point of vanishing like the wishing hide in the fairy tale, used up and wished away in the self-serving corruptions of fiction. (40)

Fiction, this sentence submits, has its own demerits in that the writer may return too repetitively to the same material, causing it to be "used up," prompting Updike's oft-expressed complaint that he had evoked Shillington with Olinger and Plowville with Firetown so often that he was no longer able to distinguish actual events of his existence from his fictional renderings of them (*Conversations* 27). Few readers, however, approach poetry, short stories, or novels with the expectation that sites dramatized will seem to be recognizably "*their* town": the yardstick that readers of literature are more likely to apply measures a work's believability not

according to its subjective geographical accuracy, but to its effectiveness in evoking characters' interior landscapes, the credibility of their dramatized psyches. For Updike, memoir invited a literalness of response ("I hadn't described *their* town") that even prose of his quality regularly failed to lift above mere subjectivity.

Updike's discomfort with his memoirs project is most vividly and humorously signaled by his publication of the "The Original Ending of *Self-Consciousness*," in which his "Oppositional Other" mercilessly parodies the solipsism of the memoirs as if Updike had masochistically internalized those "autobiography readers" and their imagined cavils.[2] "Oppositional Other" excoriates the author of *Self-Consciousness* for

> Clinging to a creed demolished everywhere you look, to a patriotism as obsolete as blood sacrifice, to a storybook small town that never existed, least of all in the dingy Thirties . . . so anxious to please and afraid of a little normal opposition your tongue and lungs can't get the words out . . . obsessed with a painless harmless skin disease as if without it you'd be a raving male beauty; and now in this present chapter ["On Being a Self Forever"] of egocentric rambling even slyly confessing to wanting, on the basis of medieval or at best eighteenth-century metaphysics, to preserve your miserable, spotty identity forever!(328)

Outside of the oblique self-parody of the Bech novels, Updike never wrote a more withering critique of one of his own texts, and it seems undeniable that the memoir genre, with its implicitly unliterary writer-reader nexus, motivated this self-assault. In publishing "The Original Ending of *Self-Consciousness*," Updike was providing the memoirs with what, to him, they so sorely lacked: an ironic subtext.

If *Self-Consciousness* offers a remarkably dour portrait of Updike's imagined relationship with his "autobiography readers," what, then, do his memoirs convey about his link to literary readers? Not much. One can search assiduously the pages of *Self-Consciousness* and never encounter an expression of gratitude from Updike to readers for reading his massive literary output, much less any suggestion of awareness of accommodating readers in drafting his works. In one of his memoirs' most markedly Modernist affirmations, Updike asserted that, having left his family in the 1970s, he

> continued, among the distractions of guilt and needy phone calls and the need to do my own laundry and feed myself, to get the words out—to get them out in the specialized sense of words to be printed, as smooth in their arrangement and flow as repeated revision could make them, words lifted free of the fearful imperfection and impermanence of the words we all, haltingly, stumblingly, speak. (102)

Amidst the disarray into which his life had descended, his devotion to redeeming "the fearful imperfection and impermanence of the words we all, haltingly, stumblingly, speak" continued unabated, but any acknowledgment of others benefitting from this lapidary artwork is entirely missing. Updike regularly depicts writing throughout *Self-Consciousness* as if it were a self-enclosed, autonomous activity, an interaction undertaken wholly with himself. "To be in print," he writes six pages on, "was to be saved. And to this moment a day when I have produced nothing printable, when I have not gotten any words out, is a day lost and damned as I feel it" (108). Writing, for Updike, seems never to have been a transactional verb.

In a 1974 lecture, "Why Write?" Updike made explicit the indifference to readership tacitly manifested throughout *Self-Consciousness*: after noting that, for most readers, books "are less often a flaming sword or a beam of light than a bedtime toddy," Updike added that,

> Whatever the use [of books], we hope that some members of society will find our product useful enough to purchase; but I think that it would be a hypocrisy to believe that these other people's welfare, or communication with them, or desire to ennoble or radicalize or terrify or lull them, is the primary reason why one writes.
>
> No, what a writer wants, as every aspiring writer can tell you, is to *get into print*. To transform the changing shadows of one's life dimly and fitfully into print . . .[3] (36)

That admission conveys clearly what supplanted readership in Updike's view of the literary exchange. He proceeds to wax lyrical about the offset: "[t]he papery self-magnification and immortality of printed reproduction—[is] a mode of self-assertion that leaves the cowardly perpetrator hidden and out of harm's way. . . . The printer . . . is the solid fellow, my only real partner, and everyone else a potentially troublesome intermediary between him and myself" (108). Later, Updike lauds the aspect of the publication process he enjoyed most:

> Out of soiled and restless life, I have refined my books. They are trim, crisp, clean, especially in the moment when they arrive from the printer in a carboard box, before the reviewers leave their smudges all over them, and I discover, like a tiny flower that insists on blooming in the expanse of a shining level salt flat, the first typographical error. (231)

One expects nothing less noxious of reviewers, of course, but even Updike's "only partner" was capable of introducing flaws into the refinements of "restless life" Updike had so scrupulously crafted. Earlier in *Self-Consciousness*, Updike had introduced his paean to presswork: "basically I was a cultural bumpkin in love not with writing but with print, the straight lines and serifs of it, the industrial

polish and transcendence of it" (110). Print cannot cure psoriasis, but what it can do is to redeem the "fearful imperfection and impermanence of the words we all, haltingly, stumblingly, speak" (102).

Readers get minimal play in these exchanges, and it seems obvious that Updike's attitude toward them partakes of his view of interlocutors when he is on the verge of stammering: "Other people—their eyes, their desires, their voiced and unvoiced opinions, their harbored secrets—make an atmosphere too oppressively rich, too busy; my sensation, when I stutter, is that I am trying with the machete of my face, to hack my way through a jungle of other minds' thrusting vines and tendrils" (85). Comprehending their ideas or perceptions seems not to figure significantly in this scenario. In the closing pages of *Self-Consciousness*, Updike offered a similarly dismissive take on his fellow humans: "at some point I acquired an almost unnatural willingness to make allowances for other people, a kind of ready comprehension and forgiveness that amounts to disdain . . . If I'm nice and good, you'll leave me alone to read my comic books" (256). Or, we might improvise: leave him alone to open the cardboard box of his books, its contents still largely unspoiled by reviewers or book buyers—to say nothing of those irksome, presumptuous "autobiography readers."

NOTES

1. "I've never understood theologies which would have absolved God of responsibility for earthquakes and typhoons, of children starving," Updike remarked: "A god who is not God the creator is not very real to me." "One Big Interview." *Picked-Up Pieces*. Knopf, 1975: 504.

2. For an explanation of the non-inclusion of "The Original Ending of *Self-Consciousness*" in *Self-Consciousness,* see James Schiff's essay, "Updike's *Self-Consciousness*: Openings in the Texts for Intimacies and Doubts," in this section of *JUR*.

3. There have been, admittedly, writers far more oblivious to or contemptuous of readers than Updike. Kafka wanted his works destroyed by Max Brod after the author's death ("Kafka's Complete Stories," 201–2). J. D. Salinger told a reporter who had withdrawn her novel manuscript from a publisher that her action was perfect: "If I wanted to write," Salinger told her, "I should write it all, put it in a drawer, and save it. The only important thing was the writing" (Salerno & Shields 299–300). Joan Didion claimed that she wrote "to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear. . . . *What is going on in these pictures in my mind?"* ("Why I Write" 49). In contrast, Stanley Elkin recalled a graduate student who asserted that writers write for emotional reasons, which led to his responding, "I said no, writers don't write for emotional reasons. They write because they want to make something. I asked her if she knew the Stephen Sondheim musical with the number about making a hat, 'A hat, a hat, I made a hat where there never was a hat.' . . . *that's* what writing is about, that's what all art is about: you've made a hat where there never was a hat! That's why people write" (qtd. in Bailey 22–23).

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Being (Here and) *There*: Updike's "Mode of Impersonal Egoism"

ROBERT MORACE

Looking back, three years after publishing his first extended autobiographical essay, "The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood" (1962), Updike observed that "Though there are some tenderly turned passages, my reminiscence in general, I fear, has the undercooked quality of prose written to order, under insufficient personal pressure" (*Assorted Prose* ix). Though the essays collected a quarter-century later in *Self-Consciousness* (1989) suffer from no such lack, there is a section in "The Dogwood Tree" that offers a particularly useful means for assessing what Updike later calls "the mode of impersonal egoism" of his memoirs (*Self-Consciousness* xiii). That section is titled "The Movie House," named for the Shillington theater on New Holland Street, a five-minute walk from the family home on Philadelphia Avenue, that Updike began attending with his parents when he was three, and often on his own from when he was six. "These were Hollywood's comfortable years," wrote Updike, who might as well have been speaking of his own childhood. "The theatre, a shallowly shaped hall too narrow to have a central aisle, was usually crowded. I liked it most on Monday nights, when it was emptiest. It seemed most mine then" (174). From his favorite seat—back row, extreme left—the young Updike watched, among others, the Pittsburgh-born actor Adolphe Menjou, famous for his moustache and vaguely European airs, and horror films, especially those featuring transformations. However, what Updike most fondly recalls from his early moviegoing is the Gatsby-like heightened expectancy that came just after the sound of the projector started, right before the movie began. A movie and a theater (not the one on New Holland Avenue, but the newer one a short

distance away, on Lancaster), also play a prominent role in the opening essay of *Self-Consciousness*, "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington," and more briefly in the closing reflection "On Being a Self Forever." This other theater, which opened in 1949, is of interest for two reasons. First, at 654 seats, it was much larger and therefore much less intimate than the one Updike frequented as a child; second, it occupied a transitional place in the history of moviegoing in Shillington, for once this new theater closed in 1983, townspeople would have to travel to the multiplex in Reading to see films, thus further precluding the kind of experience the young Updike had had. The film featured in these opening and closing sections—a kind of absent presence bookending Updike's memoirs—is Hal Ashby's *Being There* (1979), about which Jack De Bellis has much to say in his 1995 essay on Updike and movies, and about which I will have a little more to comment on later. Suffice it to say that, for now, cinema offers a useful starting point for disambiguating the oxymoron of "impersonal egoism," and one place to begin doing that is through Richard Dyer's *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (1986), published the same half decade that Updike wrote *Self-Consciousness*'s six essays.

Dyer begins his study with a close examination of one of Eve Arnold's photographs of Joan Crawford from the late '50s, which Crawford hoped would "show what hard work being a star was."[1] The photo shows Crawford before two mirrors: a large one on the wall, a small one in her hand. "In the former we see the actress's image at its most finished; she is reduced to a set of defining features: the strong jaw, the gash of a mouth, the heavy arched eyebrows, the large eyes." In the latter we see, in extreme closeup, "something of the means by which the smaller image has been manufactured": "the texture of powder over foundation, the gloss of the lipstick, the pencilling of the eyebrows." And it is this image "that we are likely to see as the real one," as representing the real Crawford. But Dyer then calls our attention to the existence of a third Crawford, hiding in plain sight, in the foreground and seen from behind, whose reflections we see in the two mirrors. "Is this third Crawford the real one," Dyer asks, "the real person who was the occasion of the images? This third view of Crawford establishes her as very much there, yet she is beyond our grasp except through the partial mirror images of her. . . . Which is Joan Crawford, really? . . . [I]t is the three of them taken together that make up the phenomenon Joan Crawford, and it is the insistent question of 'really' that draws us in, keeping us on the go from one aspect to another . . ." (1).

As Dyer states, "Stars are obviously a case of appearance. . . . Yet the whole media construction of stars encourages us to think in terms of 'really' . . . which

biography, which word-of-mouth story, which moment in which film discloses her as she really was?" (2). We can say something similar of writers: which story, novel, poem, interview, essay, biography or autobiography—or photograph—discloses them as they really are? At the time "The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood" appeared, Updike was the author of just four books, the most recent of which, *Rabbit Run*, marked him as a rising star in the literary firmament (to adapt Jean Hagen's character Lina Lamont's line about herself in *Singin' in the Rain*, MGM's self-reflexive satire on stars and celluloid illusions in general). By the time *Self-Consciousness* appeared, Updike was the author of thirty-five books and a bona fide literary star. The publication of his memoirs on his 57th birthday suggests that there the reader would gain access to the real John Updike, just as Crawford hoped Arnold's photographic *mise en abime* would do for her fans.

Like Arnold's portraits of Crawford, "The Dogwood Tree" is largely about space. *Self-Consciousness*, however, is largely about time—a vexing topic for a writer obsessed with death who had already reached his self-assigned "midpoint" two decades earlier, and who was, to use Laurence Mazzeno's chapter title for Updike's 1986–90 years, well into the period of his "Crowning Achievements." The '80s had begun with the deaths of two other literary stars named John—John Cheever, twenty years Updike's senior, and John Gardner, one year his junior—and the decade would end with the death of a different Updike: his mother Linda, already ailing in the ironically titled "On Being a Self Forever." Another form of death may have been on Updike's mind as he wrote his memoirs. This is the death of the book, and the kind of thinking associated with print culture, that Neil Postman warned against in his influential 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*.

In *Star Authors* (2000), Joe Moran explains that "book publishing's absorption into a global entertainment and information industry under the control of a handful of large conglomerates" over the previous decades had led to "the proliferation of an extraordinary range of activities aimed at publicizing and promoting American authors" and to the phenomenon of "Literary Celebrity in America," as his subtitle puts it (35). Updike had expressed concerns over this change nearly a quarter-century earlier in "The Cultural State of the American Writer," fearing that writers were increasingly becoming celebrities, literary stars rather than literary authors, composing, as Mailer did, advertisements for themselves.[2] Updike made the same point more forcefully in "The End of Authorship," an address to Booksellers at the 2006 Book-Expo America:

> In my first fifteen or twenty years of authorship, I was almost never asked to give a speech or an interview. The written work was supposed to speak for itself, and to sell itself, sometimes even without the author's photograph on the back flap. As the author is gradually retired from his old responsibilities of vicarious confrontation and provocation, he has grown in importance as a kind of walking, talking advertisement for the book—a much more pleasant and flattering duty, it may be, than composing the book in solitude. Authors, if I understand present trends, will soon be like surrogate birth mothers, rented wombs in which a seed implanted by high-powered consultants is allowed to ripen and, after nine months, be dropped squalling into the marketplace. (*Higher Gossip* 421)

Those fifteen or twenty years occurred just prior to "book publishing's absorption into a global entertainment and information industry" and to the "growth of 'serious' literature as a marketable commodity" in, for example, the creation of Vintage Contemporaries in 1984. We need to remember that the nostalgia-evoked era of pure, autonomous literature depended on the kind of "urbane, old-boy network" in which "a publisher like [Updike's] Alfred Knopf could say he preferred not to publish any author whom he would not want to invite to dinner" (Moran, "The Reign of Hype" 325). However, as Moran points out in *Star Authors*, Updike's attitude towards literary celebrity was more "ambivalent" than the remarks above suggest. In the course of examining this ambivalence, Moran briefly offers this mildly cautionary note: "Updike's own equivocal feelings about fame are brought together in a much more developed way in his autobiography, *Self-Consciousness* (1989), which claims finally to dispense with the fictionalized selves or anti-selves of his fiction and present the 'real' Updike" (90).

When Updike says, in the foreword to *Self-Consciousness*, that he came reluctantly to autobiography, we take him at his word that he was, as he said in a 1989 interview with Terry Gross, "risk[ing] being honest" (107) and, as Mazzeno put it, "writing openly about himself" (97). He did so in part to avoid what David Remnick, in his review of Blake Bailey's Philip Roth biography, calls "the predatory dimension of one person telling the story of another." In 1984 Susan Cheever published her memoir, *Home Before Dark*—a kinder, gentler *Mommy Dearest*, Christina Crawford's 1978 memoir of her relationship with her dysfunctional adoptive mother, Joan Crawford. (The 1981 film adaptation of *Mommy Dearest* was directed by Frank Perry, who also directed the 1968 adaptation of Cheever's "The Swimmer.") The rights and obligations of biographers and their subjects was much in the news in the '80s when the famously reclusive J.D. Salinger sued to prevent Ian Hamilton from quoting Salinger's unpublished letters, with the first court decision finding for Hamilton and his publisher, Random House (which

had acquired Knopf in 1960), but a second ruling overturned the earlier one. Also in the news was the Cheever family's legal case against the small publisher Academy Chicago over the latter's right to publish Cheever's early uncollected stories. But it was another Cheever matter that, while not in the news, would have likely piqued Updike's interest: the Cheever family's denying biographer Scott Donaldson access to Cheever's voluminous journals or permission to quote from his letters (Donaldson). Based on remarks made in 1999, it is not hard to discern where Updike would have stood on this issue:

> Which brings us to my own decided reluctance to be, were I ever invited, a subject of extended biographical treatment. A fiction writer's life is his treasure, his ore, his savings account, his jungle gym, and I marvel at the willingness of my friends William Styron and Joyce Carol Oates to cooperate in their recently published biographies. As long as I am alive, I don't want somebody else playing on my jungle gym—disturbing my children, quizzing my ex-wife, bugging my present wife, seeking for Judases among my friends, rummaging through yellowing old clippings, quoting *in extenso* bad reviews I would rather forget, and getting everything slightly wrong.
>
> ("One Cheer for Literary Biography")

If anyone was going to mine the "ore" of Updike's life, it would be Updike himself. The metaphors are themselves suggestive: mining, preying (so close to prying, as in the Crawford photo: a seeming violation of privacy that Crawford herself sanctioned). In the 1960s Updike would claim, misleadingly at best, falsely at worst, that his fiction was not autobiographical, hedging his position by adding "as far as things go nowadays" and disavowing "any essential connection" between his fiction and his life (Plath 7, 27). By the mid-'80s he was more open about the autobiographical nature of his fiction. In an interview published in 1984 in the Scottish journal *Cencrastus*, Updike told William Findlay that his short stories "are more confessional, are more ego-based than the novels. If anybody cared—and I'm not saying anybody should care—to reconstruct my life, they would do it better to look to the stories than to the novels" (33). The question worth asking is not whether the fiction is autobiographical; it is. The question is in what way or ways is the fiction autobiographical, and more importantly, to what extent do the essays in *Self-Consciousness* contribute to the phenomenon Updike described in his 1991 review of *Operation Shylock*: "Roth's oeuvre presents an ever more intricately ramifying and transparent pseudo-autobiography" (*More Matter* 293).

Nineteen ninety-one was also the year Peter J. Bailey, in "'Why Not Tell the Truth?': The Autobiographies of Three Fiction Writers," noted that Updike's,

Roth's, and Tobias Wolfe's memoirs had arrived at a time when "the distinction between autobiography and fiction has become sufficiently diluted as to facilitate their molding into a form that might be called *autobiografiction*" (211), or—to use the now more common, if less precise term—autofiction. According to Bailey, where "*The Facts* [Roth] and *This Boy's Life* [Wolfe] expose and examine the process that culminates in the transformation of life into art and that closely parallels the process by which masquerade is transformed into selfhood," *Self-Consciousness* ensures that "the division between fiction and autobiography remains inviolate, firm; [Updike] dictates that the 'private throes of imagination' generative of works of fiction and poetry remain private and that the act of writing memoirs be an act apart, a work of exposition different from that of literary creation." For Bailey, these disparate realms are connected only by "Updike's eloquence, the stylistic brilliance and linguistic precision that often make *Self-Consciousness* read like the best of his self-proclaimedly literary work" (221–22).

Self-Consciousness appeared on the cusp of both the post–*Death of the Author* memoir boom of the '90s *and* the shift in memoir and autobiography studies that forced a reconsideration of whether the division between Updike's fiction and his autobiography is as "inviolate" and "firm" as it seems. In *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (1992), which includes a lengthy discussion of *Self-Consciousness*, John Paul Eakin asks, "How do the characteristic strategies of autobiographical discourse—the use of first person, the employment of narrative—relate to the world of reference they are called on to represent." If the question posed in "The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood" is "Why was I I?" (182), then the question posed by *Self-Consciousness* is how does "I the writer" present, or rather represent, this "I": to whom, for what purpose, by what means, for whose profit, and with what distance? Consider, for example, those means. Though the book's subtitle, "memoirs," suggests a uniformity of approach, it is important to recognize just how multi-genre *Self-Consciousness* is: the opening night-journey ("A Soft Spring Night in Shillington"); two autopathographies ("At War with My Skin" and "Getting the Words Out"); an *apologia* ("On Not Being a Dove"); a family history in epistolary form ("A Letter to My Grandsons"), in which one of the most interesting observations is, "I am, it could be said, a New Jersey Updike who aspired to be a Rhode Island Updike" (210); and a concluding meditation ("On Being a Self Forever"). (Until his publisher advised against it, Updike had planned to end with a short, humorous dialogue between "Oppositional Other," identified as the author of the six essays, who now thinks, "I'll save myself a peck

of trouble and not publish," and "Self," who replies, "Oh, go ahead. It was written, after all, only by Updike; it has nothing to do with *me*" [*Higher Gossip* 471–72].)

Memoir studies has emphasized autobiographical writing's unreliability, selectivity, and incompleteness in a way that goes well beyond Updike's acknowledging that "memory is a great trickster" (*More Matter* 844) and that his "mind is becoming full of holes" (*Self-Consciousness* 250). Jerzy Kosinski, not surprisingly, contends that "[t]he remembered event becomes a fiction" (204), and William H. Gass has further noted that the self of autobiography (which constitutes half of Updike's hyphenated title) is in fact always double, divided into the shaping self and the self the shaping self presents, and that autobiography is "an intentional revelation that may in addition, and by its openness, conceal."

A good place to begin understanding autobiography's dialectic of revelation and concealment is with the film that Updike does not see on that soft spring night in Shillington. Having seen *Being There* before and after leaving his mother and daughter at the theater, Updike kills time—twice over: the two hours until the luggage arrives and the movie ends, and the decades between the "now" of this visit and the "then" of his childhood up to age fourteen—by revisiting Shillington, strolling its empty streets like one of Peter Ackroyd's or Ian Sinclair's psychogeographers, selectively reclaiming or reconstructing as he goes. (In effect, Updike reverses the film's course from the safe, timeless confines of the Old Man's house to the brave new world of the Rand mansion and Washington politics, media and power.) In Hal Ashby's comic adaptation of Kosinski's grimly funny existential satire of American videot culture, the gardener, Chance—later the celebrated Chauncey Gardiner—when asked if he can produce anything that can prove that he is, in fact, who he claims to be, responds, without irony, "You have me."[3] Where Chance is naïve and artlessly imitative—impersonal and egoless—Updike is ingeniously artful in his exploration, or exploitation of the self that Chance lacks. Where Chance, the videot *in extremis*, can only ever reflect American television culture—a copy of a copy, an anti-Bartleby who would never prefer not to—Updike's recursive autobiographical and autobiografictive explorations are both endlessly inventive and self-inventing. What Chance unselfconsciously accepts, which is to say reflects, Updike self-consciously sees as a danger to his fragile self-composed—or endlessly recomposed—sense of self, as in his telling a group of college students, "It's frightening, not to say alarming, to see yourself as the object of academic scrutiny," a remark that should give most of us reading this pause (Pinsker 429).

Being There is of course the English translation of Heidegger's *Dasein*, which, as Wikipedia usefully notes, "is revealed by projection into and engagement with a personal world, a never-ending process of involvement with the world as mediated through projects of the self." Chance's unselfconsciousness, his utter lack of a self other than how others define him, brings Updike and us to the actor playing Chance/Chauncey, Peter Sellers. Having retrieved his lost luggage, Updike knew "it was still a good half-hour until *Being There* would end, with that inspired addendum of outtakes, under the credit roll. . . . Sellers, so incredibly clever, so lively in his impersonations, so quick and now dead" (35). (*Self-Consciousness*'s deleted closing dialogue, a metafictional coda or pseudo-recantation, first appeared in a collection of "literary outtakes" [Dark].) Just as death was one of Updike's chief obsessions, so, I'd argue, was impersonation, just a suffix apart from "impersonal." In Ipswich, Updike wrote in "At War with My Skin," "my impersonation of a normal person became as good as I could make it" (54). And in "Getting the Words Out," he added that "[s]ome falsity of impersonation, some burden of disgrace or deceit forms part of my self, an untrustworthy part that can collapse at awkward or anxious moments into a stutter" (82). Though undertaken as an exercise in light imitation, "Updike and I" manages to outdo Borges in its dizzying display of another trait he shares with Sellers: improvisation, both in its modern meaning, as when he refers to "the national habit of improvisation" evident in the Rabbit novels (*More Matter* 820), and in its root sense, to improve on. As Irina Dimitrescu has written, "Improvisation looks like total freedom, at least from the outside. In many art forms . . . however, improvisation is the knack of brilliant play within limits."

The penultimate paragraph of "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington" begins,

> *Dasein*. Nothing I have described here has importance except to me, and to those few thousands who thanks to chance also live or have lived in Shillington; they will see that I haven't described it very well, for I haven't described *their* town, only mine, lost luggage by and large, a few scraps preserved by memory and used more than once, used to the point of vanishing like the wishing hide in the fairy tale, used up and wished away in the self-serving corruptions of fiction. (40)

Rather than assume Updike is using "self-serving" in its modern, pejorative sense, we should consider that he may have also intended it in its older, neutral meaning: to serve oneself, or better yet, to serve one's self. In the latter sense, "self-serving corruptions of fiction" may also be read as yet another of the "strategies of concealment" that psoriasis and stuttering caused him to develop (45), not unlike the makeup that made his television appearances less onerous and himself less

self-conscious, and that helped transform Lillian Fay LeSueur into Joan Crawford. Many of the writers who responded to *Granta*'s request, just after his death, to recall Updike commented on how polite, humble, and generous he was ("Updike Remembered"), not realizing that his public self was a pose, as carefully cultivated as his prose—part of what in *Self-Consciousness* he refers to as his "calculated modesty," his "public marketable self" (238). Edmund White has commented that "like many novelists [Updike] liked to hide behind his characters" in order to enjoy "the freedom conferred by masks." But why not extend the freedom of masks to autobiographical writing as well? If we do then we may think of Updike resembling biographer Stephen Galloway's description of the Laurence Olivier–Vivien Leigh marriage in which the two could never quite not act, in their marriage no less than on the stage. This may be the case even when, or even especially when, Updike is being most self-revealing, as in this passage, with its deft use of horror film imagery:

> Celebrity, even the modest sort that comes to writers, is an unhelpful exercise in self-consciousness. Celebrity is a mask that eats into the face. As soon as one is aware of being "somebody," to be watched and listened to with extra interest, input ceases, and the performer goes blind and deaf in overanimation. One can either see or be seen. (*Self-Consciousness* 252)

Updike's explanation, or excuse, for writing his "memoirs" notwithstanding, we should keep in mind that *Self-Consciousness* is, among many things, not only, along with the rest of his prodigious literary output, his way of "mask[ing] terror" by "keep[ing] constantly busy" (Begley 225); it is, as well, an exercise in self-promotion, a way of courting the celebrity Updike claims to abhor.

Updike manages to combine Whitman's going undisguised and naked (itself a pose) and Hawthorne's pose of keeping his inmost self behind a veil, not unlike the three images of the supposedly same person in Eve Arnold's photo of Joan Crawford, or Adam Begley's description of the Updike-Bech relationship as a "doubling [that] conjured up a receding infinity of mirror images" (296). The same applies to the relations between the elusive "Updike," his autobiographical fiction (a subset of his larger oeuvre) and his autobiographical nonfiction. We should think of the latter not in terms of how true, or false, they are to Updike's "real" life, but instead as mediated explorations of slightly altered, or even alternative selves—in effect, made-up selves, not unlike those intimate yet three artfully constructed images, or versions, of Crawford in Arnold's photo. In White's reading of *Self-Consciousness*, "Updike emerges as a man who thought he was monstrous because of his lifelong battle with psoriasis, who felt ashamed of his bad teeth and

his family's poverty, who sensed in himself 'some falsity of impersonation, some burden of disguise or defeat,' which may be nothing more than the reflexes of someone who lives through his characters and seizes every moment of his intimate life as material." "Falsity"? "Burden"? Why not "possibility"?

I want to end by going back to the beginning: to pictures, moving and still, starting with the movie house of "The Dogwood Tree." Picturing the young Updike happily alone in the New Holland Street theater, so close to his family home yet a world away, watching the made-up monsters of his favorite horror films and their fantastic transformations—Victor Frankenstein reanimating the dead; Lon Cheney Jr. playing Larry Talbot becoming the Wolf Man, a creature who has an embarrassing skin condition and, like Frankenstein's creature, has trouble expressing himself, his "real" self—I cannot help but think of the lonely projectionist in "The Phantom of the Movie Palace," the lead story in Robert Coover's 1987 collection, *A Night at the Movies: Or, You Must Remember This*. Comically haunted by memories of horror films shown in packed theaters, Coover's projectionist tries to bring back the old times, and give himself company, by frantically running together reels of old films, literally gumming up the works, and then, using multiple projectors, layering individual frames of one film on top of another in a desperate, Keystone Cops–like attempt to fill the void. Which brings us from moving pictures to still ones. The "Photos" section of *More Matter* comprises nine essays on photographs (including one that explores a shot of Updike at nine, the same age at which he frequented the New Holland Street theater). The last of the nine, "Nadar's Swift Tact," ends with this footnote: "The German newspaper *Die Zeit* in 1998 invited 'writers, actors, artists or politicians to select . . . a photo which at a certain time of their lives had an especially strong imprint on their conscience'" (676). Updike is of course among the most photographed American authors, and his varied deployment of photographs of himself makes selecting any single one as representative impossible. Most postwar writers have been represented by—reduced to—a very few frequently reproduced publicity photos, the "intentional" advertising images that Roland Barthes distinguished from the photos found in news stories (interviews, features articles and the like) that readers see as "natural," innocent, *real*. Photos of Updike play a more pervasive, profound, and teasing role, especially on the covers of his nonfiction: the pensive Updike of *Due Considerations*, the scholar of *More Matter*, the jaunty Jimmy Durante–ish of *Higher Gossip* (with a touch of gossip columnist Walter Winchell), the boatsman of *Hugging the Shore*, the outdoorsman of *Odd Jobs* (wearing the kind of watch

cap he disliked on his father), the museumgoer whose back we see on *Just Looking* as he views three paintings and then, on the back cover, the same shot, this time with Updike facing the camera. And *Self-Consciousness*: five-year-old Johnny on the front; a group shot from the very early twentieth century of his father's extended family (Updike comments on both in the book) on the front and back endpapers, and on the back cover Updike signing the title page of a copy of his 1963 novel *The Centaur*, with a photo of the younger Updike on the facing page. All of these are gone from the Random House paperback, replaced on the front cover by Updike, seen somewhere between closeup and medium closeup, head tilted to his left, but turned slightly to his right, eyes looking farther right into the distance, listening (one assumes) to something someone outside the frame is saying, his right hand against his right cheek, lit cigarillo between his fingers. Each photo is part of each book's paratext. Like the three images of Crawford in Arnold's photo, each is of Updike but none is Updike, the ever-present yet elusive master of the mode of impersonal egoism.

NOTES

1. Though I know of nothing directly connecting Updike and Crawford, there is a tenuous, though intriguing, indirect connection. When he was fifteen, Updike wrote a letter to cartoonist Milton Caniff, praising him for "Terry and the Pirates" and the then more recent "Steve Canyon," and asking Caniff to send him one of his illustrations. One of Caniff's characters, the infamous Dragon Lady, was partly modelled on Crawford (Heer).

2. Of all Updike's comments on celebrity, perhaps the most revealing appears in his essay on "the most celebrated image to emerge from the American involvement of World War II," Joe Rosenthal's photo of five Marines raising the U.S. flag on Iwo Jima. Updike misleadingly contends that Ira Hayes, a member of the Pima tribe and the best known of the five flag-raisers, "died at thirty-two of alcoholism, *as a kind of protest against his own post-war celebrity*" (*More Matter* 678; emphasis added).

3. It is not difficult to imagine how Updike, given his views on literary celebrity and the profession of author, would have responded to this exchange between *Being There*'s illiterate, literal-minded protagonist and Ronald Stiegler, of Harvard Books:

> STIEGLER: Mr. Gardiner, my editors and I have been wondering if you'd consider writing a book for us? Something on your political philosophy. What do you say?
>
> CHANCE: I can't write.
>
> STIEGLER: Of course, who can nowadays? I have trouble writing a post card to my children! Look, we could give you a six figure advance, provide you with the very best ghostwriters, research assistants, proof readers . . .
>
> CHANCE: I can't read.
>
> STIEGLER: Of course not! No one has the time to read! One glances at things, watches television . . .

CHANCE: Yes. I like to watch.

STIEGLER: Sure you do! No one reads! . . . Listen, book publishing isn't exactly a bed of roses these days . . .

CHANCE: What sort of bed is it?

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"More Ironic Windows": The Limits of Nostalgia in Updike's *My Father's Tears*

PETER J. BAILEY

The first installment of this three-part essay, "Digging Deep and the Value of the Superficial: Antinomies of *My Father's Tears*," closes with these sentences: "In recalling his days writing 'Talk of the Town' pieces for *The New Yorker*, Updike noted that in the middle fifties, 'I was looking for a religion, as a way of hanging onto my old one, in those years, and was attracted to those artists who seemed to me as single-minded and selfless as saints. . . . A religion reassembled from the fragments of our daily life in an atmosphere of gaiety and diligence: that was what I found in the Museum of Modern Art' (*Higher Gossip* xxi–xxii). That is what we also find in 'The Full Glass.'"

That essay addressed two *My Father's Tears* stories, "Personal Archaeology" and "The Full Glass," maintaining that the second and last stories of the collection adumbrated a thematic tension between depths and surfaces, psychic penetration and appreciation of the visible world, ironic detachment and a "fervent relationship" to external reality. In this second installment, I attempt to illuminate the extent to which other *My Father's Tears* stories constitute something bordering upon "a religion reassembled from the fragments of our daily life." "The Walk with Elizanne," "The Guardians," "The Laughter of the Gods," and "Kinderszenen" are among the most patently autobiographical narratives of Updike's final collection, stories which turned out to be the terminus of Updike's career-spanning attempt to recreate his lived experience in fiction. If readers notice familiar material from

The Olinger Stories, The Centaur, Of the Farm, The Afterlife stories, and *Villages* in these four *My Father's Tears* narratives, Updike expressed appreciation for that inescapable circumstance: "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).

For Updike, however, autobiography was not merely a source for fictional creation but a literary way of seeing. In reviewing *The Counterlife*, he observed that Philip Roth "should be commended for facing the fact that a fiction writer's life is his basic instrument of perception—that only the imagery we have personally gathered and unconsciously internalized possesses the color, warmth, intimate contour, and weight of authenticity the discriminating fiction-reader demands" (293). The assertion that "a fiction writer's life is his basic instrument of perception" may be Updike's most eloquent endorsement of autobiography as the central core of fiction. Updike proceeded to survey Roth's more autobiographical early works ("Goodbye, Columbus," *My Life as a Man, The Ghost Writer)* before adding, "In the post-Proust, postmodern, post-objective world of American fiction, Roth stands out as a working theorist of fictional reality; beginning as a marvellously [sic] precocious and accomplished realist, he has tested the limits of realism: he has feverishly paced its boundaries and played games with its presumptions. The act of writing has become his fiction's central dramatic action" (293).

Updike's approbation of Roth as an experimenter with the boundaries of autobiographical fiction commences his review of *The Counterlife*, in which the reader encounters Philip I and Philip II, if not additional Rothian alter egos, the self-multiplications evincing the author's deep-seated ambivalences about Israel and Jewishness. Other than his parodic self-interviews conducted by Henry Bech in *The New York Times Book Review* in response to the publication of new Rabbit novels and the essay "Updike and Me" in imitation of Jorge Luis Borges' "Borges and I," Updike seldom pushed autobiography toward postmodern self-parody, in part because Henry Bech afforded him ample opportunity to satirize writerliness. Another reason for Updike's not approaching autobiography postmodernally was his overall lack of ambivalence about his past.[1] None of Roth's autobiographical works reflects the intensity of affection for Newark[2] that Updike so frequently expressed for Shillington. In *Self-Consciousness*, for instance, Updike admitted that "I loved Shillington not as one loves Capri or New York, because they are special, but as one loves one's own body and consciousness, because they are synonymous with being. . . . If there was a meaning to existence, I was closest to it

here" (30). It isn't a long distance from the invocation of "a meaning to existence" to Updike's ascription of religious intensities to his relationship with Shillington and his childhood there in the final lines of the "Endpoint" section "Peggy Lutz, Fred Muth 12/13/08":

> The town forgave me for existing; it
> included me in Christmas carols, songfests
> (though I sang poorly) at the Shillington,
> the local movie house. My father stood,
> in back, too restless to sit, but everybody
> knew his name, and mine. In turn I knew
> my Granddad in the overalled town crew.
> I've written these before, these modest facts,
>
> but their meaning has no bottom in my mind.
> The fragments in their jiggled scope collide
> to form more sacred windows. . . . (27)

The section's closing stanza implicitly invokes a kaleidoscope; that its constantly changing patterns of color could be construed as "more sacred windows" is Updike's subjective enlargement of the device's effects, one that—characteristically—implies that ordinary colors in collision with each other can suddenly generate transcendence.

In addressing the aforementioned four autobiographical *My Father's Tears* stories, my purpose is—fully acknowledging the emotionally charged nostalgia of these narratives—to illuminate the substantially ironic stances enacted in each of them. These stories ("The Guardians," "The Laughter of the Gods," and "Kinderszenen" in particular) *do* embody the "sacred windows" metaphor Updike employed in "Endpoint" and seek to evoke the fervent relationship to the world he experienced as a boy in Shillington. It is probably true that the closest these narratives come to religiosity are metaphoric correlations, like Updike's *Self-Consciousness* observation that "To be in print was to be saved" (108), or the Modernist credo of Wallace Stevens he cited in a review of *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens*: "In an age of disbelief . . . it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief, in his measure and his style" (qtd. in *Hugging* 610). If there is anything sacred in these stories, its source is clearly to be found in Updike's "measure and his style," in his efforts with his final collection to join the company of "artists as singleminded and selfless as saints." For all these stories'

intense presentation of nearly devotional reminiscence, however, their depictions of the past are consistently pervaded as much by aesthetic sensibility and shaping irony as by nostalgic veracity.

I

At the fiftieth Olinger High school class reunion in "A Walk with Elizanne," David Kern[3] is introduced to a classmate attending her first reunion. He struggles to recognize her before realizing that she is Elizanne, fifty years older than he remembers her. Their initial conversation is inconsequential, but she approaches him at the evening's end to say that he is important to her for having been the first boy to kiss her. Initially, David has only indistinct recollections of the walk to her house of which the kiss was the culmination, but she goads his memory by "this remembrance of their young selves, their true, fumbling, vanished selves" (734). "It got me started, I must tell you," she confides, "on a lot of—whatever. Kissing, let's say," following this with an admission he doesn't quite catch about "what you all wanted." Instead of admiring her adult candor, the respect she pays him by speaking truthfully, David construes her confession as "a sadly cheap and standard sneer . . . about male sexuality, which in that place and era had been a massive, underpublicized impetus that most boys dealt with alone. But the sneer itself dated her, and took them back" (735).

In the days following the reunion, David works intently to reconstruct the walk and kiss, generating what seems a male version of Elizanne's "cheap and standard sneer" through perceiving the kiss in analogously initiatory terms: "Then the surface of femininity, that towering mystery in whose presence his life must be lived, had yielded to a slight pressure. Without a word, a word that he could remember, Elizanne had submitted to his inept attentions, and indicated a demure curiosity in what he might do for her" (736). In David's elderly present, that "towering mystery" has become his only defense against mortality: "As he had lived, he had come to see that for a man there is no antidote to death but a woman."[4] He is gallant enough to wonder, and to want to ask Elizanne, from where "does a woman draw this antidote, her cosmic balm? And does it work for her as well?" (738). He doesn't ask her this, perhaps because by that stage the story has already answered the question.

As his meditations upon the event deepen, David alternates between two extremes: on one end that "[i]n the distorting lens of old age [the walk with Elizanne] loomed as one of the most momentous acts of his life", and on the other that the relationship with her "was an adolescent flirtation that had come, like

most, to nothing" (737, 739). "The Walk with Elizanne" is a brilliantly conceived meditation on the human capacity to imaginatively recast experience, and upon the affect that the imaginer's awareness of impending mortality has upon the constructions of his conceptualizing. The last page and a half of the story is an extended evocation of the "walk," but Updike gives no indication whether the narrative reflects David's memory accurately reassembled, or is a fully imagined and thus fictionalized version of an event that may not have ever transpired.[5] As David attempts to recover "one of the most momentous acts of his life," an innocuous adolescent romantic event begets weighty existential questions. At the reunion, he wants to, but ultimately does not ask Elizanne, "[*W*]*hat does it mean, this enormity of our having been children and now being old, living next door to death*?" (738). This is, of course, the central question of "The Walk with Elizanne" (if not of all the *My Father's Tears* stories discussed here), and David's closing fantasia of the walk is his answer, one that Updike's opening to "The Walk with Elizanne" has already ironized. As Updike observed in his "Contributor's Note" to the story's publication in *Best American Short Stories 2004*, "'The Walk with Elizanne' is a religious story, of course—at least it tries to evoke that ineluctable strangeness of human existence in which religion takes root" (646).

In order to appreciate the story's exploration of the human predisposition toward wish-fulfilling recasts of experience, notice the narrative transition through which David moves from an idealized walk between adolescents to a preoccupation with eternity. The passage that introduces that idea invokes a character, Mamie Kauffman, whom David and his second wife Andrea visit at the hospital before attending the reunion: "If Mamie was right and we live forever . . . [David] could imagine no better way to spend eternity than taking that walk with Elizanne over and over, until what they said, how they touched, whether or not he dared to hold her hand in his, and every hair of the fine black down on her forearms all came as clear as letters deep-cut in marble" (738). The language of "The Walk with Elizanne" creates an imagined reality "as clear as letters deep-cut in marble," but the hospital meeting with Mamie has prepared the reader to be skeptical of even the most indelibly evoked fantasia.

At all previous reunions, Mamie, class of 1950 secretary and cheerleader, had been the energetic promoter/organizer, but when David and Andrea visit her, late-stage cancer has rendered her unable to sit up in bed. Nonetheless, Updike termed her the story's "presiding spirit" (*Due Considerations* 645). The scene is presented with minimal narrative commentary, and yet the reader intuits that, the generosity of their visit notwithstanding, David and Andrea are anxious to be

on their way, for, as David muses guiltily at one point, "[t]he reunion won't wait." Mamie, however, had been for many years a teacher of Olinger second graders and is unwilling to pass up this opportunity to educate her guests in the spiritual repercussions of her condition: "'What an outpouring of love this has brought on,' she told the couple. 'I was feeling sorry for myself and, I guess you'd have to say, not enough loved, until this happened'" (728).

Elizanne's reunion revelation to David may not be "an outpouring of love," but David responds as if it were, regarding the kiss as a lost remnant of erotic heat which is his to explore and resurrect. As Andrea responds generously to Mamie's confessions, David notices that "[i]n this overdecorated sickroom Andrea looked young, vigorous, efficient, gracious; David was proud of her. She was a captive from another tribe, from a state other than Pennsylvania" (729). That David takes pride in Andrea's health and energy as contrasted with Mamie's debility is one of those ugly human tendencies that Updike was unwilling to suppress in fiction. Andrea's marriage to David, very much like Elizanne's allowing him to kiss her, are fuel for the cultural propulsion which led him to fulfill what Mamie's admiring mother years ago predicted for him: "David will go places" (730). (A subtext of many of the stories in *My Father's Tears* is tacit pride in and/or gratitude for the Updike alter ego's having so impressively "gone places.") Mamie, however, has gone as far as she will go, and is genuinely seeking to find meaning in her terrible immobility. "At times I've felt a little impatient with the Lord, but then I'm ashamed of myself," she explains. "He doesn't give you more than He gives you strength to bear" (729). This familiar Christian formula of divinely inspired equivalences consoles her, but a simile she has derived from a Shirley MacLaine memoir is more troubling: "life is like a book, and your job is to figure out what chapter you're in. If this is my last chapter, I have to read it that way, but, you know, I've had a lot of time to think lying here, and. . . . I don't think it is" (729).

David Kern's literary legacy includes his adolescent terror of death depicted in "Pigeon Feathers" and his young married mortality nightmare evoked in "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, a Dying Cat, a Traded Car"; consequently, he is spellbound by Mamie's spiritual testimony. "'I'm not afraid of death,' she told the visiting couple, smartly dressed in their reunion finery. 'It's locked into my heart that—that—'" Mamie is struggling with issues of perishability and eternity, but she cannot quite ignore her guests' incongruous fashionability, and the scene never seeks to reconcile this terrible existential disparity. Subduing that moment's bleak intuition, Mamie resumes:

> "That I'll be all right," [she] concluded. She sensed the anticlimax, the disappointment even, and made an exasperated circular motion of her hand, with its flesh-colored hospital bracelet and IV shunt. "That when it comes, I'll still be there. Here. You know what I'm saying?"
>
> The visiting couple nodded in eager unison.
>
> "It's the getting there," Mamie admitted, "I don't look forward to." (729)

Consequently, David ascribes to Mamie the inspiration for imagining the walk through eternity with Elizanne: "If Mamie was right, and we live forever. . ." Mamie *does* affirm "That when it comes, I'll still be there. Here. You know what I'm saying?" but it is far from clear what she *is* saying. As Bob Batchelor notes, "Kern hopes that she will provide him with secrets revealing the keys to dealing with death, but is deflated when she falls back on small-town philosophies and worn thinking" (47). David longs to hear "live forever" in between her "there" and "here," and he therefore constructs his fantasia of eternity upon that imagined fulcrum. It never occurs to him to apply the question he wanted to ask Elizanne to Mamie's circumstance: "from where . . . does a woman draw this antidote, her cosmic balm? And does it work for her as well?" (Mamie's husband absconded years ago, leaving her with three young children, so "a man" is hardly her answer.) Updike's portrait of Mamie, conveyed largely through her dialogue, is deeply moving and thoroughly sympathetic, especially when she castigates herself for pessimism: "So I say to myself, 'Mamie, you stop complaining. You've had a wonderful life, and three wonderful children, and it isn't over yet'" (730). The best Mamie can manage is not the invocation of a "cosmic balm" or a Christian certainty of resurrection, but the consolation we will see another *My Father's Tears* protagonist—Lee in "The Guardians"—settling for in the face of mortality dread: "and it isn't over yet."

"The Walk with Elizanne" closes on that gloriously poignant walk, one which congratulates its fabulator not only through Elizanne's attraction to him and her willingness to "talk too much" to him on their excursion, but also for promoting David's "going places." When he confides in her that he hates his mother's having moved the family to the country, Elizanne sides unconsciously with many matriarchs in Updike stories who rationalize the relocation of their sons to Firetown on the grounds of "You can't stay in Olinger forever, David" (739). As Elizanne and David walk together, "These trees were higher, airier; there was more space and light in the section where Elizanne lived, as if you were ascending a hill, as indeed you were, but a gently sloping hill of money, of airy privilege" (737). Because she lived in a more expensive neighborhood than his family does, David at the time had

decided that "[s]he was not for him": "And yet she had let him kiss her, there by the thick-panelled front door, with its two-tone chime doorbell, and had remembered that kiss for more than fifty years, and spoke of it as her admission ticket to the wonderland of sex" (735, 737–38). Woven into this vivid fantasia of adolescent sexual initiation is David's first embrace by the world "of money, of airy privilege," to which he would ascend once he had left Olinger and commenced "going places."

At her door, Elizanne "pressed slightly into the kiss, looking for something in it. David felt caught up in a stream flowing counter to the current of everyday events, and began to run out of breath. . . . Then he kissed her again, entering that warm still point around which the universe wheeled, its load of stars not yet visible, the sky still blue above the streetlights." The fantasia concludes,

> "And there was even more," [Elizanne] said, giggling to show that she was poking fun at herself now, "that I wanted to say."
>
> "You will," he promised, breathlessly. His cheeks were hot, as if after gym class."

He has told her that he will soon be meeting his father at school for the drive home to the farm, and he is reminded of "his one weekend at the Jersey shore the past summer, when a wave carrying his surfing body broke too early and was about to throw him forward, down into the hard sand. 'I want to hear it all,' he told Elizanne. 'We have t-tons of time'" (740).

Lovely as the extended fantasia is, it is also fragile enough to be threatened by David's awareness of his father awaiting him, and his affirmation of its enduringness is countered by a feeling that, at any moment he will be pitched onto the hard sand of actuality, back into "the current of everyday events." As for his affirmation, "We have t-tons of time," Mamie gets the last word; at the hospital, she tells the couple about the odd coincidence that she will soon be moved to the same institution where her very elderly mother is being cared for. "This will amuse you, David," she glosses the anecdote, "you were always into irony." The story's sad fable conveys the existential irony: neither Mamie, nor the David Kern artificer of this powerfully elegant Elizanne fantasia, has "t-tons of time."

For most readers, the textual ironies in "The Walk with Elizanne" will always resonate less memorably than the story's poignant evocation of Mamie's dying hopes and David's translation of them into a thoroughly adolescent yet completely compelling projection of eternal life, one that seeks the sort of reconciliation of existential loss and the compensatory superflux of beauty expressed in "Peggy Lutz, Fred Muth 12/13/08":

. . . Perhaps
we meet our heaven at the start and not
the end of life. Even then were tears
and fear and struggle, but the town itself
draped in plain glory the passing days (27).

II

The best description of the three remaining *My Father's Tears* stories to which I now turn may be Updike's previously-cited observation that "only the imagery we have personally gathered and unconsciously internalized possesses the color, warmth, intimate contour, and weight of authenticity the discriminating fiction-reader demands." "The Guardians," "The Laughter of the Gods," and "Kinderszenen" possess in abundance the "color, warmth, intimate contour, and weight of authenticity" that Updike ascribed to Roth's early autobiographical works, but given the intensity of those foci in these stories—only one of which could be said to have a readily discernible plot[6]—it seems as if in them Updike sought to surpass his literary rival's nostalgic avidity. These stories, all of which dramatically fictionalize Updike's childhood in Shillington, go a long way toward validating the remarkable paradox Updike cited in "Endpoint": his, he suggested there, was "[a] life poured into words—apparent waste / intended to preserve the thing consumed" (8). The thing consumed in words was the homelife experienced by five inhabitants of 117 Philadelphia Avenue, Shillington, PA, between 1932 and 1945, recorded by the only surviving witness; what was literarily preserved in those stories is very much the same thing. If there are any stories in *My Father's Tears* that rise to the level of "More Sacred Windows," the fierce lyricism with which Updike reincarnates those families on the pages of three of his last stories is responsible for that preservation. But then, "The Guardians," "The Laughter of the Gods" and "Kinderszenen" are also, to recall Katie Roiphe's language, "invigorated by irony," stories that manifest both intense nostalgia and a pervasively critical aesthetic.

"The Guardians" is a third person narrative from the perspective of Lee, who emerges from birth in the story's evocative first sentence: "Little Lee's soft brain swam into self-consciousness in a household of four adults, with carpets that smelled of shoe soles, and a coal furnace that chuffed in the cellar, and dusty front windows that gave onto the back side of a privet hedge and a street where horse-drawn wagons sometimes clip-clopped along among the swishing automobiles" (720). The generous sense impressions (the sentence invokes three of the five senses) typify the "measure and style" of all three of these stories, which appear at

least as concerned with meticulously particularizing Updike's memories of childhood as they do with generating beginning-middle-end narratives. "The Guardians," however, differs from the late-1930s circumscription of "Kinderszenen," in taking its protagonist into adulthood and into a less than gratifying career as an artist.

The guardians of the title are the four adults with whom Lee lives, and after introducing his parents and grandparents, their characters, conditions, and avocations, the narrator observes that Lee "felt the four adults as sides of a perfect square, with a diagonal from each corner to a central point. He was that point, protected on all sides, loved from every direction" (722). There is a shadow on this sense of security that, even as a boy, Lee intuits: "It did occur to Lee, though not in words he could say, that he was a bright spot in a demoralized household" (722). (This same recognition fuels the plot of "The Laughter of the Gods," in which Benjamin Foster adamantly seeks by researching familial documents to disprove the notion that his boyhood was the only "bright spot" in an otherwise unhappy household.) Part of the purpose of "The Guardians" is to depict Lee's childhood in a way that balances his juvenile optimism and sense of security with the competing acknowledgment that his special place in the house produces significantly spoiled behavior. In *Self-Consciousness*, Updike registered doubts about the impact of this familial situation, wondering, "Had I in fact *too* successfully found a place for myself out of harm's way? Perhaps there *was* something too smooth in my rise and my style, something unthinkingly egocentric in my sopping up love and attention from my grandparents and parents and now my children" (149). These sentences effectively summarize the theme of "The Guardians," in which Lee is held to account for Updike's egocentricity qualms. David Foster Wallace famously charged Updike with being one of the "great male narcissists" (51); "The Guardians" exhibits Updike's tacit rejoinder: *Narcissism? Here's narcissism!*

Lee's mother encourages his artistic inclinations, coloring with him on the floor and praising "Lee's little drawings beyond, he felt, their worth—or, rather, she penetrated into that secret place within him where they were valued very highly" (723). She values much less highly his drawing of a girl she characterizes as one of his few friends, whom he depicts as a long-necked cut-out popping through a hedge—Betty Jean Halloran's preferred means of appearing to play with him. To Lee, this drawing is "a comic masterpiece," but his mother conveys her feeling that the drawing is cruel. Lee pays this critique little heed, because the "conspiracy about art" he and his mother have entered into against his father has already taught Lee that art can be "a way to push back at the world without touching it" (724). His father "dwelt high and clear among numbers" and therefore did not know

what Lee knew and his mother sensed: that "crayoning was Lee's way of getting away from her, from all his guardians, into a realm quite his own, where love did not fall upon him but descended from him, onto the little creatures, the humanoid animals, the comically unchanging comic-strip characters that he copied, his nose a few inches from the carpet that smelled of shoe leather" (724).[7] Updike's ability here to re-envisage the incipient literary Modernist he almost certainly was is thoroughly remarkable, but he determined not to mar the portrait created in "The Guardians" by transforming Lee from the narcissist his only child status among loving guardians had evolved him into inexorably.

Unlike the comic-strip figures, the guardians are not "comically unchanging"; consequently, Lee "had always dreaded one of his guardians' dying, disappearing into an unbelievable nothingness, ripping away a corner of his childhood shelter" (725). All four compass points of his "childhood shelter" graciously disappear while he is elsewhere, "protecting him to the last from anything that was too ugly or frightening" (725). Lee alone remains to tell the tale of his once foursquare family, and because the story reflects Lee's perspective exclusively, "The Guardians" accomplishes this disclosure largely without evincing that anyone but Lee had possessed human consciousness. At this point—if not before—the reader begins to understand that Lee's egocentricity complicates the story's central question of whether these memories have value to anyone but him.

In the story's single instance of misdirection, Lee proves himself willing to hazard his familial sense of shelter by pitting it against a completely disparate view of the world: "As part of his self-consciousness," the narrator writes, "while old age overtook [Lee's] once-infantile brain, he made occasional efforts to envision his situation as science proved it to be" (726). Lee imagines life as Darwin and his followers conceived it, "not as a ladder of being, climbing toward ever more complex and spiritual forms, but as a flat swamp, a diffuse soup of insensible genes whose simple existence, within however ignoble and grotesque and murderous and parasitic a creature, tended to perpetuation of those creatures, without the least taint of purpose or aspiration." A stunningly bleak articulation, but why is it included in "The Guardians"?

Because, as the next sentence asserts, "It was all in the numbers, as Daddy had said. What was was, and tended to be the same, generation after generation" (727). The "conspiracy of art" with his mother succumbs to the primacy of mathematics in "The Guardians" (in direct contrast with "Kinderszenen"), but Lee nonetheless manages to wrest comfort from this formulation of generational repetition. He construes it to mean that "[h]is guardians were still with him. They were within

him, extending their protection and care." Lee then propounds traits he has inherited from each of the guardians—longevity, country toughness, receding realism, and dissatisfied heat—which seem either too superficial to be credible inheritances or which are nowhere exhibited by Lee in the narrative. The story concludes, "His guardians were within him, propelling him like a tiny human crew within a tall, walking armature of DNA. They would not steer him wrong; his death would come tactfully, and was nowhere near close" (727).

Their communal smallness relative to him notwithstanding, in the end, he remains the only child of the Lee-centric family, convinced that the guardians will somehow deliver Lee to the same "tactful" death through which each of them politely departed him. If that's not consolation enough, Lee rationalizes that he is too far removed from that grim outcome to disrupt his condition of equanimity, though the narrative clearly implies that, for elderly Lee, it's later than he thinks. In *Self-Consciousness*, Updike worried that success had made him smug: "The critics who found me callow might be right: I had been lucky and, as the lucky will do, had become hard-hearted" (151). In "The Guardians," Updike denies his own professional success to Lee, depicting him as an itinerant academic artist whose University of Iowa M.F.A. has failed to secure him shows or jobs in Taos or San Francisco. The gratitude that Updike expressed to his family and to Shillington in "Peggy Lutz, Fred Muth 12/13/08" and elsewhere is nowhere to be found in Lee, to whom it never occurs to return the love he was so abundantly given. Clearly, Updike's nostalgia for his past provided no obstacle to his imagining an artist emerging from Updike's Shillington circumstances for whom being the favored only child is all that was required to make him narcissistic, artistically stunted, and hard-hearted. What is in *Self-Consciousness* a fleeting self-critique becomes in "The Guardians" an ironically conceived dramatization of incapacitating egocentricity. Jeet Herr's insight, registered in his review of Adam Begley's *Updike*, seems completely apposite to "The Guardians," if not to all three of these *My Father's Tears* stories: "To see Updike as primarily an 'autobiographical writer' is to miss the crafty witchery that he put into even the fiction that was closest to his experiences."

III

The ostensible purpose of Benjamin Foster[8] in "The Laughter of the Gods" is his pursuit of "an interest, once his father was dead, in how his parents had met, courted, and, deepest in the darkness, conceived him" (741). Like Craig Martin in "Personal Archaeology," Benjamin seeks to penetrate secrets of the unknown past, but—again like Craig—his success in doing so is equivocal. Benjamin's ulterior

objective, however, is to disprove the notion that, as "The Guardians" suggests about Lee, "he was the bright spot in a demoralized household" (722); "Benjamin had grown up," the narrator of "Laughter" explains, "with the impression that his parents' marriage had been a mistake, partially redeemed by his birth" (749). What each protagonist fears is that he alone experienced his childhood as pleasurable, that guilt is the inescapable harvest of acknowledging his parents' marital trials. The narrator of "Laughter" observes that Benjamin "had hungered, throughout his childhood, for the signs of happy union that he saw in the parents of his friends, a secret physical prosperity that oozed into society as respectability's hard-earned good cheer" (746). Benjamin's association of parental physical warmth with prosperity and respectability suggests that for him a familial "happy union" meant economic stability, and this the Fosters never had. "That was our tragedy, if your father and I had one," Benjamin's mother tells her son: "we didn't know how to make money" (750). "[H]is parents didn't radiate sadness," the narrator comments, "though their misery and helplessness—their state of being *trapped*—was a frequent theme of their conversation" (748).

Few of Benjamin's mother's reminiscences about her marriage to Earl Foster invoke "signs of happy union." They dated at Agricola College, she recalls, because "[n]obody else would have anything to do with us. That was our feeling. That was our fear. We were held together by fear, your father and I, a fear that nobody else would have us. We were freaks, Benjy" (741). "*Was* there an attraction [between herself and Earl]?" she later asked herself rhetorically, "[o]r were we just looking for people who would maintain the suffering that we figured we deserved?" (750). She is also the narrative's most devoted source for the Benjamin-as-familial-redeemer mythos:

> "We hadn't had happy childhoods, either of us. Now you, you did. We were both amazed to see it. We didn't understand how you did it."
>
> "I had loving parents," Benjamin gallantly suggested. Parents, he didn't say, who had no one else to love.
>
> "No," she argued, perversely, "it was something in you, you produced it out of yourself, in this miserable household." (750)

In order to contest the overwhelming evidence of familial joylessness to which his own "parents who had no one else to love" interjection contributes, Benjamin opts for the couple's shared laughter. When his mother describes her courtship with Earl, she claims that from the moment their eyes met in the registration line at Agricola College, "we started laughing. And we didn't stop laughing for the whole

four years" (741). Benjamin recalls as a child hearing the two of them murmuring in their bedroom, his father's mumbles eliciting gales of laughter from his mother. "It's not so much what your daddy says as how he says it that sets me off sometimes," she had told Benjamin then, "I don't believe he even means to be funny at first; his life has really been a sad one" (748). Even Benjamin's most compelling evidence trails off dismally into contradiction.

The next testimony Benjamin cites is a selection of excerpts from his father's letters to his mother before their marriage, letters Benjamin characterizes as "ardent, stiff, earnest." "[*C*]*ertain you are the mate the good Lord meant me to have*," Earl assured her: "*be with you on the old cane-back sofa in Olinger and kick back my heels and share a good laugh.*" "*I'm still your Sheik*," he affirms in a late excerpt, invoking the 1921 silent film classic *The Sheik*, "*and you my Agnes Ayers*" (751). It is difficult to tell whether these excerpts can compete with the narrator's earlier admission that "Benjamin never doubted that his mother loved him better than she loved her husband. This knowledge gave him with his father the tolerant good humor with which one treats a defeated rival" (744). Benjamin's discovery of his father's varsity football sweater from Agricola College in an old cedar chest offers his best hope for resuscitating that rivalry. The sweater represents what Benjamin could never have given his mother, while evoking for him "young couples strolling the campus with open coats and unbuckled galoshes, their laughter making small white clouds" (752). It isn't impossible that his parents were one such couple, but it isn't certain either. Because tiny Agricola College competed against major football powers like Cornell and Columbia, they were thoroughly overmatched, and "The Laughter of the Gods" closes on this note: "His father had given his mother his all. He had clothed her in his pain, and their son tagged on behind, uncertain what was so funny, but happy to be jealous" (752).

Because Earl considered himself too tall and thin for the violent collisions of football,[9] his letter sweater "clothed" Benjamin's mother "in his pain." Unathletic Benjamin cannot compete with that woolen insulation his father's sweater provided her, but the metaphor also echoes one of Benjamin's mother's bleakest recollections of Earl: "Your father was such a kidder, so good-humored around people who didn't know him, it shocked me at first when he'd get these terrible bouts of depression. 'The blues,' he called them. He'd sit in a chair and not move. Everything disappointed him, especially me" (749). One of her resentments in the marriage, clearly, was being "clothed . . . in his pain."[10] Benjamin's optimistically self-effacing conclusion to "Laughter" notwithstanding, the reader is unsurprised to encounter in "Kinderszenen," the third "childhood scenes" story, this sentence:

"Toby [the child protagonist] feels the wonder of all the world's arrangements for his happiness, where Daddy feels money sliding away" (860). Benjamin may have persuaded himself in "The Laughter" that there was pervasive laughter in his childhood home, but the reader hears instead an echo of Lee's mother's insistence that any cheerfulness "was something in you, you produced it out of yourself, in this miserable household" (750). As an adult, Benjamin is still seeking to imbue with his inner cheerfulness a family narrative marked by deprivation, fractiousness, and disappointment for much the same reason that Alvy Singer does in the ending of Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*: "You know, you know how you're always tryin' to get things to come out perfect in art because . . . it's so difficult in life" (Allen 102).

IV

"Kinderszenen" is German for "scenes of childhood" (Carduff 992), and in the story, more than in "The Guardians" or "Laughter of the Gods," Updike cleaves consistently to Toby's juvenile vantage point, much as he did in the 1960 Olinger story "You'll Never Know Dear, How Much I Love You," which dramatizes the dispiriting experience of five-year-old Ben at a carnival. "[H]e's been gypped. Forty: he had the quarter and dime and nickel," that story's narrator explains, "and they gave him back only six nickels: thirty. The injustice. They pretend he's too little to lose and then keep a dime. The waste. The lost dime seems a hole through which everything in existence is draining" (310). As in Faulkner's "Barn-Burning" and Lorrie Moore's "A Kid's Guide to Divorce," Updike is providing his young protagonist with words to which the child lacks access; the idea throughout all four of these stories is that children intuit what they cannot articulate, and that literature can effectively translate their feelings into language without distorting their personalities or talking over the characters' heads.

By the time he wrote "Kinderszenen" in 2006, Updike had become ever more effective at precisely recalling or psychically resurrecting a child's emotional life. "And yet, safe inside his own house, his grandfather's house," as the narrator invokes the boy's perspective, "Toby looks out one of the few windows in that direction and feels sorry for the side yard, it looks so unused and unvisited. It is as still as the toadless terrarium at elementary school. It brims with the adult sadness he feels at his back, in his family" (859). Toby does indeed feel the "wonder of the world's arrangements for his happiness," but the story foregrounds his consciousness of the "adult sadness" that pervades the family, projecting it outward on an ignored side yard or onto dark spaces of the building because of the boy's recognition that "[t]he five human lives in the house are not enough to crowd out these menaces, to

oust the terrors in the coal-dark cellar and in the attic with its aromas of mothballs and cedar chests. . . . Throughout the house Toby is aware of little-used closets and creepy spaces under the bed. He avoids a back stairs whose doors are never unlatched, as if a mummy or a maniac is locked in there" (861). In "The Guardians," the four adults provide security for Lee; in "Kinderszenen," Toby prefigures the author, who would later acknowledge that his story "A Sandstone Farmhouse" "is about *things*—how they mutely witness our flitting lives, and remain when the lives are over, still mute, still witnessing, still resolutely themselves and nothing else" (*More Matter* 775).

The emphasis in "Kinderszenen" upon dark thoughts and "creepy spaces" serves Updike's purposes of humor while also contributing one of two intertwined motifs organizing this *tour de force* of nostalgic recreation. Toby introduces them in reflecting, while gazing out a window, that "[t]he thin glass divides the world outside, which is ordinary, from inside the house, where something is out of the ordinary and feels sad and wrong" (852). Toby is preternaturally sensitive to familial manifestations of "out of the ordinary" and "sad and wrong"—so much so that he seems to intuit his own complicity in these conditions: "The worst thing he does is torture his toys. . . . When he is playing this game [bowling with his rubber dolls as pins] just by himself, . . . as he sets them up again he threatens them with what he will do to them if they don't obey him and fall down." After "holding the edge" of a razor blade to the neck of a Donald Duck toy "to get him to confess" and pressing "deeper than he had meant to," he is confronted with the sight of a permanent slash in the toy's throat, and "[t]his evidence of his own cruelty shames Toby to see" (862).[11] His guilt over bullying the dolls is exacerbated by his friend Warren's previous ridicule of Toby for personifying his playthings "as if the toys had feelings, which they don't and which [Warren] said was sissy to imagine" (855). Toby also suffers hazing at school, fifth-grade boys picking on him because "he just has the annoying air of a boy with too many answers. Kids sneer to him, 'You think you're much,' when all he wants is to blend in, to be an ordinary boy" (863).

In Updike's "Flight" (1959), Allen Dow's mother construes his attraction to Molly Bingaman as symptomatic of his willingness to abandon his and his mother's aspirations for his future—"The entire town seemed ensnarled in my mother's myth, that escape was my proper fate" (230)—in favor of dating Molly, a path in direct opposition to his mother's spiteful counsel: "Don't go with little women, Allen. It puts you too close to the ground" (229). Toby is more than a decade away from needing to escape Olinger, but the tension between him and his mother parallels that between Allen and his mother: each of them wants "to be an ordinary

boy," while each mother perceives that reflex as contemptible Olinger loyalty, as an inexcusable desire to be ordinary.

Lacking a Molly to heighten the conflict, Toby's tension between being ordinary and his mother's agenda for him is more inchoate and internal. The sensitivity that Warren derided benefits Toby when he begins (assumedly with his mother's intervention) to appreciate color coordination:

> [H]e discovered that green and yellow go together in a way some colors don't. Black and orange also go together, as at Halloween, and purple and gold at Easter, and red and green at Christmas. Red, white, and blue together in the American flag are like three notes on a brass trumpet. Discovering such harmonies excites him, more than it does other children." (854)

An incipient artist would obviously see benefit in cultivating this capacity.

This conflict comes to a climax when Toby's mother gets angry over the males in the house urinating in the narrow space between the garage and the chicken house on their property—for her, an obnoxious example of indulging human nature, which, to her mind, is also what her husband subsequently does on a nearby baseball diamond in passively spectating a fight between Toby and Warren. She slaps Toby's antagonist, and "[t]hen, not missing a beat, holding Toby tightly by the hand, she wheeled and with the same amazing accuracy reached out and slapped Daddy in the face, for just standing there and letting nature take its course" (865).

After David Kern has killed the pigeons that had been "fouling the Olinger furniture" in the family barn in "Pigeon Feathers" (1960), his mother regrets this violent contravention of nature's course, immediately missing their cooing, which had been "such a comforting noise." Wishing she had not acceded to her own mother's request that the pigeons be exterminated, she leaves David to bury his kill: "Unlike his usual mother, she did not look up, either at the orchard to the right of her or at the meadow on her left, but instead held her head rigidly, tilted a little, as if listening to the ground" (285). Like so many of the Olinger Stories mothers (see "The Cats" and the poem, "My Mother at Her Desk" in particular), Elsie Kern's love of nature is confounded by her abhorrence of nature red in tooth and claw, and in stilling the pigeons' cooing, David has silenced nature's comforting noise and cruelly blunted her receptivity to the nature around her. What David derives from this experience—the conviction "that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever" (286)—is explicitly evoked in the story's closing, a passage about which Updike confessed, "At the age of sixty-two, I can scarcely improve on the vision

and affirmation of the last paragraph" (*More Matter* 768). Something comparable, though more clearly secular, is being created in "the vision and affirmation" of the ending of "Kinderszenen." "Why, Toby wonders," in the story's closing paragraph,

> at the center of this scene (the softball field fading behind them, the white house and side porch and grape arbor drawing closer, the asparagus bed on their left already beginning to turn frothy and go to seed, his tears warping everything like bubbles in windowpanes), does he have to be the one with a mother living so close to the school grounds, a mother so magical and fierce and unwilling to let nature take its course? (865)

That highly cinematic parenthesis deserves full quotation because it comprises the last description Updike published of what is now The John Updike Childhood Home, and it seems highly unlikely that Toby was the only one to witness that location fading away through tears.

The concluding paragraph of "Kinderszenen" continues: Toby's "arm feels pulled from its socket. He begins to resign himself to the fact that with such a mother he can never be an ordinary, everyday boy" (865). In the previous stories considered in this essay, irony arrives at the expense of one of the characters or their perspective; in "Kinderszenen," the closing sentence invites the reader to understand that Toby's subjective lament is, ironically, the very source of the narrative's celebration: only as a consequence of having a mother "so magical and fierce" could Toby have been prevented from "letting nature take its course," or becoming ordinary; only by having a mother so committed to cultivating his sensibility to the exclusion of self-gratification could Toby have become a writer capable of crafting a story so intensely evocative of childhood as "Kinderszenen." (Perhaps unconsciously emulating Philip Roth, Updike in "Kinderszenen" created a story in which the "act of writing has become his fiction's central dramatic action" [293].) Whatever "inside the house is out of the ordinary and feels sad and wrong" (852) turns out to be the inspiration for much of Updike's most substantial and memorable fiction, the tension between social conformity and personal aspiration pervading his literary output. Updike did not often congratulate himself in fiction, but at the end of "Kinderszenen" he seems to be tacitly acknowledging the tour de force he has completed while expressing sincere gratitude to his mother for twisting his arm towards being so far from ordinary that he could create stories memorializing the guardians, recording the laughter of the gods (or its absence), and limning the scenes of childhood which approximate "sacred windows" while simultaneously generating

ironic ones. As in "Pigeon Feathers" (the ending of which can be read as David Kern's realization of his nascent aesthetic sensibilities) so in "Kinderszenen": the resolutions of both stories ultimately offering for the reader's admiration the artistic gifts of both narratives' creator—gifts which are anything but ordinary.

We recall that in "The Guardians," Lee imagines his situation as science would conceive it, concluding that "It was all in the numbers, as Daddy had said. What was was, and tended to be the same, generation after generation" (727). Because scientific interpretations of existence figure nowhere else in "The Guardians," the story's thematic pivot in that direction is disorienting, the conclusion endorsing Lee's father's outlook seeming somewhat gratuitous—a round the father wins but never earned. In "The Laughter of the Gods" does Benjamin actually abandon the conviction that his mother loved him more than she did her husband, which "gave him with his father the tolerant good humor with which one treats a defeated rival" (744)? The highly ambivalent relationship between son and father evoked in the three childhood narratives re-emerges, augmented, in the collection's title story, "My Father's Tears," which will be discussed in "More Distorted Mirrors: Ironic Self-Portraits in Updike's *My Father's Tears and Other Stories*," the forthcoming and final installment in this essay triptych.

For all the miraculously nostalgic evocation and emotional compellingness of "The Walk with Elizanne," "The Guardians," "The Laughter of the Gods," and "Kinderszenen," these stories nonetheless evinced Updike's assertion that he had "inherited a skeptical temperament" (*Self-Consciousness* 257), one which, even in stories he knew to be among his last, provides them with a foundational aesthetic irony. From whence did this capacity for emotional/artistic double vision derive in Updike? From his skin, of course. "Only psoriasis," he confessed in *Self-Consciousness,* "could have taken a very average little boy, and furthermore a boy who loved the average, the daily, the safely hidden, and made him into a prolific, adaptable, ruthless-enough writer. . . . Having so long carried a secret behind my clothes, I had no trouble with the duplicity that generates plots and surprises and symbolism and layers of meaning; dualism, indeed, such as existed between my skin and myself, appeared to me the very engine of the human" (75).

There is, however, another source as well. Benjamin Foster's lordly assertion that he viewed his father as a "defeated rival" notwithstanding, "A Traded Car," *The Centaur*, *Self-Consciousness,* "My Father on the Verge of Disgrace," and the poem "Outliving One's Father" offer all the testimony of Updike's non-fictional affection for his father a reader could ask for, but as the three "scenes of childhood" stories imply, it was his mother who influenced his career and work

most. Recalling "My Mother at Her Desk," Updike mused upon his mother's publication disappointments, confiding that "Mine was to be the magic gift instead, / propelled to confidence by mother-love / and polished for the New York market by / New England's wintry flair for education" (231). In "The Laughter of the Gods," Benjamin Foster affirms his inheritance from his mother: ". . . and as he grew old he looked more and more like her—faintly shapeless in the face, with a sly, flirtatious expression to the mouth, as if he were prepared to take back what he had just said. From his mother he learned the social arts of teasing and sidestepping" (742–43). From his own mother, arguably, Updike learned the literary artist's most important rhetorical tool: irony.

NOTES

1. For a comparison of Roth's and Updike's autobiographies, *The Facts* and *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs*, respectively, see Bailey, "'Why Not Tell the Truth?': Autobiographies of Three Fiction Writers."

2. One of Roth's later novels, *The Plot Against America* (2004), depicts young Philip Roth attempting to run away from home when his parents, prompted by an anti-Semitic presidential administration, threaten to move him from Newark to West Virginia as part of a federal effort to isolate and divide American Jews into territories where none live. Since that administration is headed by President Charles A. Lindbergh, the reader cannot be certain how accurately the actual Roth family depicted in the novel is, either. A Roth scholar/reader of this essay cited this quotation from "Goodbye, Columbus" to demonstrate that the disparity between Roth's and Updike's attitudes towards their hometowns was not as great as this essay suggests: Neil writes, "Sitting there in the park, I felt a deep knowledge of Newark, an attachment so rooted that it could not help but branch out into affection" (31).

3. David Kern appeared first in Updike's "Pigeon Feathers" (1959) and "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car" (1960) and made final appearances in "A Walk with Elizanne" (2003) and "The Road Home" (2005). For a consideration of the thematic consistencies that Kern allowed Updike to carry from story to story throughout his career, see Bailey, "Updike's David Kern Stories."

4. Keeping in mind that the David Kern who attributes this capacity to woman is a fictional character—an Updike alter ego—it is nonetheless interesting to compare Updike's disparate take on an antidote to death in *Self-Consciousness*: "In the light, we disown [God], embarrassedly; in the dark, He is our only guarantor, our only shield against death" (229).

5. "In an intriguing metafictional twist," Matthew Shipe argues, "the story's final section presents David's fictionalized version of the final kiss—the implication being that it is only through the art of fiction that he can mull over the feelings and unasked questions that his reunion with Elizanne occasioned" (78).

6. T. Coraghessan Boyle's substantial and predominantly positive *New York Times* review of *My Father's Tears* expressed reservations about two of the three "childhood scenes" narratives:

> Among all the writers of our time, [Updike] was the most gifted in illuminating the phenomenological world. But in these stories, like David Kern at his reunion ["The Road Home"],

> he presents details in a testimonial way, as a feat of recollection, and sometimes—as in "Kinderszenen" and "The Guardians," which both present a young child's perspective on Updike's familiar world—the details tend to overwhelm the artistry of the stories themselves.

My purpose in addressing those two stories is to elucidate the artistry undergirding the remarkable "feat of recollection."

7. Perhaps invoking this love that descended from him from above the cartoons he created and copied, Updike asked himself in *Self-Consciousness*, "Have I ever loved a human being as purely as I loved Mickey Mouse, or, a bit later in latency, Captain America and Plastic Man?" (256).

8. Foster's surname fits the protagonist naming pattern Updike explicated in commenting on "Personal Archaeology" for its publication in *Best American Short Stories 2001*:

> My hero's inexplicably German name, 'Fritz,' holds the 'F' that, some time ago in in a lazy code I began to foist on short story heroes who were conspicuously alter-egoistic. The device created a sort of brother, not a twin but close in age and outlook to me and, though freed from any obligation to plead my case, able to shoulder, with brotherly good humor, some of my circumstances. (644)

9. One of Updike's memories of his mother invoked in *Self-Consciousness* is of her as "the young mother in the Shillington backyard with the fireflies and flowering cherry trees, the tall laughing college girl with my father in his letter sweater . . ." (235). Updike's poem "In the Cemetery High Above Shillington" recalled that "My father always called football a crime/for still maturing bodies" (163).

10. In his adolescence his father, Updike wrote in *Self-Consciousness*, was "caught in some awful undercurrent of discouragement" (173) which carried over into his maturity. Updike's 1979 story "Son" attributes Ben's father's dejection to his own father's failed religious calling. Ben describes his father visiting a Missouri town in which he had been a seminarian: "The town was a sepia postcard mailed homesick home and preserved in an attic. My father cursed: his father's old sorrow bore him down into depression, into hatred of life" (787). "More Distorted Mirrors: Ironic Self-Portraits in Updike's *My Father's Tears*," a forthcoming essay I have written, will appear in the next issue of *The John Updike Review* and will address the father's desolation and his son's incapacity to respond effectively to it in "My Father's Tears."

11. At significant risk of belaboring the autobiographical nature of "Kinderszenen," here is Updike in *Self-Consciousness*: "As a child, I had tortured my toys, talking aloud to them, fascinating and horrifying myself" (150).

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U and I and Me: Rereading Nicholson Baker Reading John Updike

DONALD J. GREINER

> . . . for though I think about Updike a lot I seldom read him:
> surely a true obsessive would read all the available works.
> —Nicholson Baker, *U and I*

> "I don't believe a word of it is true."
> "What do you expect of autobiography?"
> —Paul Auster, *Burning Boy*

Thirty years ago, in 1991, Nicholson Baker published the most eccentric, perspicacious, witty, and well-written study of John Updike and his influence yet available. At the time, he was a relatively unknown author with only two books to his credit. Today he is an admired writer of fiction and nonfiction with a National Book Critics Circle Award for *Double Fold* (2001). Applauded for his deep focus on the little things of this world—say, a shoelace or a paper clip (see *The Mezzanine*, 1988)—and both cheered and challenged for his explicit and comic descriptions of sexual liaisons (see *Vox*, 1992, and *House of Holes*, 2011), Baker has earned his way to the "big time" that his fictional persona pursues in *U and I*, even if his conjuration of John Updike gives only a mere nod of recognition. That nod may seem as insignificant as a shoelace, but its value to the fictionalized Baker, not to mention its utility to the fledgling author himself, is high. Recognition would be a laying-on of hands, gifting him a foothold to the sacred door where literary giants reside.

With *U and I*, Baker initiated an entirely new way of not so much studying John Updike, but creating John Updike. The dust jacket of the American edition all but shouts an ironic warning to the befuddled potential buyer that, though the author of a volume about a celebrated writer, Baker had read fewer than five pages of *Rabbit Is Rich*, *S.*, *Buchanan Dying*, *Tossing and Turning*, and *Telephone Poles*; less than half of *The Witches of Eastwick*, *The Coup*, and *Trust Me*; and most or all of such gems as *Rabbit, Run*, *Of the Farm*, and *Pigeon Feathers*. Equally eye-opening, the jacket announces that Baker had met Updike only once, in 1984: while hovering near the snack table during a *Lampoon* party at Harvard, he deliberately maneuvered himself to block Updike's effort to escape the room, even to the extent of implying that he, too, had studied at Harvard (he hadn't). Born in 1932, Updike published his first book, *The Carpentered Hen*, in 1958, when Baker was one year old. In 1984, however, Baker fit the role of starstruck acolyte meets star-power artist. His British publisher was apparently so taken with the audacious jacket material of the American edition that the editor printed the humorous disclaimers about Baker's meager homework in easy-to-read outline form on the back cover and then summarized with a statement that an innocent reader must have noticed with a double take: "Nicholson Baker has written a book about John Updike. That's not true: Nicholson Baker has written a book about John Updike and Nicholson Baker." What can browsing readers do with the stark announcement, "That's not true"? Because on the front of the American jacket they will see, in gaudy rose, yellow, blue, orange, and black, a declaration: *U and I* "*A True Story*." Irony prevails. Outrageous, erudite, and groundbreaking, *U and I* both intrigues and challenges before the reader turns to the first page.

The entertaining—and enticing—irony extends even to a real-life exchange. In 1992, a year after *U and I* was published, a graduate student asked me to inscribe for Baker a copy of a book about Updike. Pleased to do so but unaware of the student's plan, I handed him the inscribed volume, which he then forwarded to Baker with, I later learned, a request that Baker send an inscribed *U and I* to me. I had read *U and I* when it first appeared and was thus aware of Baker's mastery of tone, so I grinned when I saw the inscription: "Fellow fan, far more careful reader." The irony of the jacket material shaped the spirit of the inscription. Generous? Yes, but I laughed, as I hoped Baker had intended. And more: enclosed with the volume was a holograph letter in which Baker's delightful wit was delightfully present. Explaining that he had "learned a lot—for example, that lots of people like *Of the Farm* best, including you! I thought I was alone," he concluded with "your scholarship puts my ostentatious dilettantism to shame." Not so, I knew. Fiction writers create;

scholars pontificate. Underscoring Baker's amusement is the epigraph from Cyril Connolly he selected for *U and I*: "It may be *us* they wish to meet but it's themselves they want to talk about." Baker mocks himself. Lingering by the finger food at the *Lampoon* gathering, enticingly near the glow that Updike generated, Baker the first-person persona in a book about Baker and Updike that Baker the author wrote, hopes for a blessing in the guise of a nod. "That's not true." "*A True Story*." Irony.

The year 2021 marks the 30th anniversary of *U and I*, but the book continues to generate fresh ways of thinking about Updike even as it also continues to amuse. Baker designed *U and I* as a dissection of "Nicholson Baker" pursuing "John Updike," yet picking up the book again in 2021, I became the scholar rereading "Nicholson Baker" reading "John Updike," or fellow fan reading acolyte reading literary giant. What do readers learn about Updike when rereading *U and I* thirty years after its initial publication, particularly in the context of the current debates about Updike's standing more than a decade after his death, the challenge of autofiction, and his "progressive obscurity"?

I

Adam Begley's description of the Baker–Updike connection is on the mark: "Nicholson Baker, whose *U and I* is easily the strangest homage [Updike] ever received, declared 'unreservedly' that Updike was a genius (but rightly conceded that the word had no useful meaning)" (*Updike* xii). As a sign of the respect Baker had in the Updike circle, in 2009 he was invited to speak at a memorial service for the artist he revered, held at the Kennedy Library in Boston (Begley 484). Later, in 2017, he contributed to *John Updike Remembered*, extending his all-but-obsessive contemplation of Updike with a short excerpt from *U and I*. Self-deprecatingly conscious of the moment when he dared to coerce an introduction while his hero was attempting to leave the room, he satirizes his vision of soaring toward glory by ironically commenting on Updike's praise of one of his stories, rejected by the *New Yorker*, as "a lovely thing"—ironic given Updike's long, successful identification with the magazine. He concedes that Updike did *not* say, "Congratulations on being you. You are going to *fly*!," but as an eager novice finally conversing with the literary legend, he knowingly italicizes the key word "fly"—complete with an exclamation point—that he wished Updike *had* uttered (De Bellis 119). The little word is significant because with it Baker claims large meanings based on an unacknowledged allusion to a pivotal moment in Updike's early story "Flight," when Allen Dow's possessive and impulsive mother lashes out at him for wishing to be ordinary: "There we are, and there we'll all be forever. . . . Except you,

Allen. You are going to fly" (219). Baker's irony is that, while Allen resents his mother's insistent pressure to accomplish great things, Baker *longs* for the dazzle of recognition and, thus, for Updike's blessing.

This section of *U and I*, reprinted as an introduction to Baker's original contribution to *John Updike Remembered*, segues smoothly into an account of his brief sighting of Updike several years later. The location is the Boston Public Garden on "a cold, overcast late afternoon, in the eighties," near the statue of George Washington as Updike walks toward him: a triangle of two giants and a wannabe (De Bellis 120). Titling this section of his reminiscence "The Nod," he knows that whatever relationship he and Updike have remains a matter of "being" and "becoming." Another irony surfaces. Just as Updike was trying earlier to get away from a crowded room, only to be interrupted by Baker's need to "fly," this time he is again in a hurry: "He was wearing a tweedish jacket buttoned up and a scarf and hat and he obviously had somewhere to go. . . . He was on his way somewhere. So I decided instead that I would just nod." But a blessing descends. "Updike returned the nod, a little uncertainly, I think. He wasn't sure: maybe he knew me? And then later, in a letter, he said, didn't we meet once on Arlington Street? He remembered my nod" (121). With this understated moment of joy, Baker gestures to the epiphany in the unacknowledged final line of "Wife-Wooing": "an expected gift is not worth giving" (*Collected Early Stories* 262). A nod on a cold afternoon becomes an unexpected ceremony that nudges him toward flight—soon after the encounter he published *U and I*. The reader hears an echo of Updike's explanation at the conclusion of "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, a Traded Car" of why writers are driven to write: "We in America need ceremonies is, I suppose, sailor, the point of what I have written" (377).

Updike's published reaction to *U and I* is short, but it broadens the context and recalls his response to Walter Abish's equally eccentric *Alphabetical Africa* (1974), which he described as "remarkable": "'a masterpiece of its kind' does not seem too strong an accolade for a book apt to be the only one of its kind" ("Through a Continent, Darkly" 349, 350). *U and I* is a similar oddity, a masterpiece of its kind, prompting Updike's recognition of Baker as a "precisionist" ("Excellent Humbug" 303). With notable modesty, he devotes only one paragraph to *U and I*, but with a winking title: "Him or Who?" Defining *U and I* as a "book-length essay" of "delightful mini-realism," he points to Baker's "close and self-pitiless examination of his relationship with a mental figment derived from a fractional perusal and a few personal glimpses of author John Updike" ("Him or Who?" 311). The distance

between Baker, the younger author who needs Updike not in order to learn how to write but to understand how to be an anointed writer, and Updike, the esteemed and established author, generates the sophisticated humor. Yet as Updike observes, Baker's general point is serious: "out of the books of others we sift a book of our own, wherein we read the lessons we want to hear" (312).

With understated precision, Updike points to a parallel. As he reads Baker reading Updike, he recalls when he was reading Joyce, Proust, and Henry Green to "sift" what he needed for his own books by reading the lessons he wanted to hear. T.S. Eliot's succinct account of author-reading-author rebounds here, as Updike assuredly knew. Baker's rollicking celebration of Updike is a witty play on Eliot's theoretical precepts, first enunciated by Ezra Pound before being elaborated upon by Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). Particularly significant in this context is Eliot's observation about the literary past: "Some one said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know" (6). Though Updike was not a "dead writer" when Baker wrote *U and I*, he was part of the past in the sense that he was "prior" to the much younger Baker. Baker's wit shines when considered in the setting of Eliot's pronouncement: "What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (7). But Baker does *not* seek such Eliotic "extinction." Yes, Updike is "that which [he] knows," yet Baker's implied allusions to "Tradition and the Individual Talent" are ironic. He seeks, through Updike, not to jettison his own personality, but to enhance it by consciously gleaning from an immensely successful artist. To permit himself to be subsumed by Updike would signal an extinction he does not pursue, though he is well aware of the lure of absorption: "The great enterprise of literature doesn't move forward unless each writer profits from all the different tiny discoveries made by all of his or her predecessors" (Baker qtd. in Saltzman 12). His argument that imitation is theft itself pilfers William Faulkner's reputed quip that writers don't borrow; they steal. Baker is equally blunt: "There's a lot of sneaking that goes on and has always gone on. Not plagiarism, but just a lot of quiet imitation. Imitation is not the sincerest form of flattery. Imitation is a kind of theft" (Baker qtd. in Miller 8). The links between Baker and Updike are clear: the high quality of the prose, the delight in the quotidian, the precise descriptions of the commonplace, the agreeing with Updike's observation that "details are the giant's fingers" ("The Blessed Man of Boston" 354).

II

Arthur Saltzman quotes Baker as insisting, "I want the reader to be happy. At some basic level, I want to be writing entertainment" (5). If so, he succeeded, because for the Updike aficionado the entertainment is also part of the challenge of revisiting *U and I* after thirty years and then rereading Updike. To do so is to enter the murk between autobiography and fiction. Rereading Baker reading Updike, I began to speculate whether the first-person persona—the "I" of *U and I*—should be in quotation marks as a clear indicator of the fictional, just as Allen Dow, Peter Caldwell, David Kern, Richard Maple, etc., should be named John without quotation marks as a clear indicator of the autobiographical. Was Updike writing what today is defined as autofiction in both first and third person?

Autofiction has its detractors. D. T. Max points to Colm Toibin: Toibin "has distanced himself from the trend of autofiction by declaring, 'The page you face is not a mirror. It is blank'" (Max 50). Assuming that Updike would have assented to Toibin's abrupt opinion, would he have done so to distract readers from digging too deep? The title of Max's essay underscores the question: "Secrets and Lies." It may indeed be that Updike was so attached to the particulars of his own life—his "Olinger years," his "Tarbox years"—that to unveil the mirror would be to defile the "truth." Better to hide the secrets in the "lies" of splendidly rendered fiction that, he hoped, shined the light on a different kind of truth: Art. Note, for example, that the key phrase "my life" in the last line of "Fine Point 12/22/08", the final poem he wrote when he was dying, is repeated and italicized:

> . . . *Surely*—magnificent, that "surely"—
> *goodness and mercy shall follow me all*
> *the days of my life,* my life, forever. (*Endpoint* 29)

The emphasis on "my life" at the *very* end of his life suggests that Updike insisted on revealing details of his biography as he, and only he, saw fit. Like Emily Dickinson, he turns to art to tell it slant.

Baker's subtitle "A True Story" is a clever oxymoron insofar that "story" means "made-up." In *U and I* the narrative is "true" in the sense that it is understood as a tale told by a narrator, the "I," who is an alter ego for the author. Though many of the opinions and experiences related by the "I" may be confirmed as true, the point remains that *U and I* is easily categorized as both fiction and nonfiction. Baker describes himself indirectly when he refers to his first-person persona as "really and truly me this time, though only a tiny transverse slice of me (*U and I* 86). Reading this disclaimer, an amusing appeal to the reader to accept both "yes,

this is true" and "no, that's not true," I turned again to *Self-Consciousness*. In *U and I*, Baker is not so much reading *the* John Updike as fashioning *a* John Updike, an Updike who has an all-but-mesmerizing impact on Baker's notions of the archaeology that lingers beneath the details, the expansive openness to all of life that an artist exemplified by Updike is blessed with in abundance.

Memory is not factual, but creative. Baker's "I" insists that he does not want to read much of Updike before creating his Updike. Specific passages and details would damage the need of the "I" to shape a writer who has indirectly created the "I" merely by being that particular writer: the "U of *U and I*. "Our lives submit to archaeology," writes Updike in the ringing first line of "Harv Is Plowing Now," but archaeology is the science of recovering the past, putting the pieces together, and then interpreting—that is, remaking—the past (*Collected Early Stories* 516). Baker's "I" must duck beneath the implications of Updike's "Plumbing": "We think we have bought living space and a view when in truth we have bought a maze, a history, an archaeology of pipes and cut-ins and traps and valves. . . . the eternal presences of corrosion and flow" (693). Updike and Baker would agree with Alison Light: certain kinds of novelists are "detectives and anthropologists. They are also hoarders, stashing away the debris of life" ("Some Sad Turtle" 12). Reading Baker reading Updike in this context committed me to rereading Updike because, while the pleasure of the art remains, the little details that led to the artistic rendering of the archaeological particulars assumed increasing importance after Updike's death. I took another look at "Harv Is Plowing Now" and "Plumbing" and asked whether the admirable art was designed with such care for vocabulary and image so as to obfuscate the specifics once Updike submitted his life to archaeology. After all, he was the most autobiographical of 20th-century American fiction writers. Because of Baker, I now better understood Updike's determination to write *Self-Consciousness* as a means of blunting would-be biographers, the archaeologists of the literary world. Remembering Faulkner's dilemma is pertinent here. The engraving he apparently chose for his tombstone was, "He wrote the books and he died." His request was denied. Life may be the "eternal presences of corrosion and flow," but archaeological scraps and treasures will surface regardless of the author's resistance.

And yet, again alluding to "Wife-Wooing" without naming it, Baker indirectly argues that Updike writes autobiography. In the words of Baker's "I," Updike "knows that people are going to assume that the fictional wife of an Updike-like male character corresponds closely with Updike's real-life wife. . . . How can Updike have the whatever, the disempathy, I used frequently to ask myself, and ask myself

right now, to put in print that his wife appeared ugly to him that morning, especially in so vivid a way? It just oughtn't to be done!" (*U and I* 115). Baker highlights this celebrated story as evidence of his insistence that, contrary to prevailing opinion, his idol is *not* genteel: "he is much too smart, too sneaky, too sexually appetitive, and too *mean* to fit that bill. . . . Mean? Yes, he is mean. He seems at times to admire meanness" (*U and I* 112–13). Returning to this passage in 2021, I asked an under-investigated question that I had previously ignored: do Updike's consistently admired prose style, his sharp eye for the overlooked detail, his exposure of the radical diminishment of domestic life in America, his portrayal of an adulterous society and the simultaneous waning of religious surety, and his keen-eyed—and often humorous—rendering of the goings-on behind the bedroom door deliberately distract his audience so that the "meanness" is shuffled to the sidelines? Baker prompted me to look again, particularly at the male characters, in the context of what a "genteel" Updike admirer might skip over as merely unbecoming behavior. Meanness? Harry, Joey Robinson, Piet, Richard Maple, Marshfield, Dale—the list goes on. The return to *U and I* clarified that, rather than another examination of his characterization of women, a fresh discussion of his male characters is called for, to confront their thoughts and actions in terms of the national, familial, and social pressures that drive them. *Why* the meanness? As Baker points out, Updike "teaches even in his transgressions," well aware that all fiction is imperfect (*U and I* 117).

Updike's observations in "On Biography" assume increased relevance when reread in the context of *U and I*. The probing by Baker's "I" prods the reader to learn more about Updike's archaeology—not which shards and bits of detritus were exhumed to be refashioned as foundational particulars of story or novel, but which pieces were discretely covered over and left to molder as part of the "eternal presences of corrosion and flow." How would readings of the fiction be altered if this shuttered emotion or that curious fact had been exposed? Updike's dismissal of biography is pointed, often acerbic (mean?), and swift. Prefacing his putdown with an epigraph from F. Scott Fitzgerald—"There never was a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn't be. He is too many people, if he is any good"—he hurls down the challenge in the very first sentence: "The main question concerning literary biography is, surely, Why do we need it at all" ("On Literary Biography" 3). Conceding that *Self-Consciousness* has been criticized as "a parading of [his] wounds," he counters that at least he describes "in sometimes embarrassing detail what seemed to *me* significant or curious about my life. . . . the wounds were mine to parade, and not some callow inquisitor's" (11). Interestingly, he never publicly

accused Baker of inquisition. Baker must avoid this dilemma if he is to write *U and I*. Details may be the giant's fingers for Updike, but for Baker the specifics of Updike's art will overwhelm the story he needs to tell. I now recognized the trap. Admiration for Updike's accomplishment swamps clear-eyed reading of the context. Art is all that matters, but what led to the art?

Baker longs for a touch from certified greatness, so he creates a verbal wizard who turns out to be the kickstart that leads to the creation of his book. The echo of *Buchanan Dying* is clear. James Buchanan, routinely dismissed as the worst of the nation's half-dozen failed presidents, is assuredly not Updike's Buchanan, despite the impressive gathering of source material included in an eighty-page afterword adorned with thirty-one fleshed-out footnotes. Updike needed to write about Buchanan because he associated the former president with his home state of Pennsylvania. It's as if he conjured a historical ghost so that he could exorcise the specter and get on with his work. Confessing, however, that he had read no more than five pages of *Buchanan Dying*, Baker's "I" again refuses to get bogged down in the archaeology of his model's oeuvre for fear of letting the bits and pieces come between him and the lofty artist he has imagined: "No, I couldn't possibly read Updike chronologically through right now: it would irreparably harm the typography of my understanding of him" (*U and I* 32). So, is it "true" when Baker declares his ignorance of the substrata of Updike's books even as he pursues not an embrace but a nod from the man who will be the "U" and counterpoint of his "I"? No thirty-one footnotes for him.

Reading this demurral, I returned to *The Coup*, a book caught between "A True Story" and "That's Not True." Metafiction abounds. The final lines of the novel compound the trap: "The man [Colonel Ellelloû] is happy, hidden. The sea breeze blows, the waiters ignore him. He is writing his memoirs. No, I should put it more precisely: Colonel Ellelloû is rumored to be working on his memoirs" (299). But, of course, Updike's first-person "I" has *not* put it more precisely. The "I" dismisses the exactness of "he is writing his memoirs" in favor of a slippery rumor that he himself has started. Baker claims, as broadcast on the dust jacket of *U and I*, that he read no more than half of *The Coup*. Even if the claim is "true," he would have read the following clarification of the novel's narrative voice before he reached the tenth page, clearly designed to confound the reader: "There are two selves: the one who acts, and the 'I' who experiences. This latter is passive even in a whirlwind of the former's making, passive and guiltless and astonished. The historical performer bearing the name of Ellelloû was no less mysterious to me than to the American press . . ." (7).

Again, the question arises, planted by Baker as he attempts to elucidate his awe of Updike: is it true that he read no more than a modicum of Updike's large canon? Baker, the historical performer, is no less mysterious to Baker, the erudite probing "I," than to me when I reentered the labyrinthine puzzle of who Updike was when he wrote in first and third person. Cleverly and with typical aplomb, Baker latched on to the idea of Ellelloû's two selves: the Baker who acts by writing and the "I" who experiences when molding a John Updike to accommodate his own needs. Though the "I" does not include *The Centaur* among the volumes he at least turned a few pages of, had he dipped into *The Centaur* he would have again collided against another two selves that he, in Eliot's and Faulkner's sense of the word, could "steal": the adult Peter who writes the tale and the adolescent "I" who lives it.

Updike's reliance on the "two selves" is an ideal component of his need for coverup. Baker emulates—steals from—Updike. Rereading Baker, I raised a skeptical eyebrow at his excuse that *U and I*, delightful and demanding as the book is, could be conceived by a Baker whose grasp of the particulars of Updike's fiction was next to nil. Two selves: the one who retains more than he concedes of his reading of Updike; the other who dances around the lure of Updike's achievement in hopes of evading being stunned, a proverbial deer in the headlights, by the very giant he visualizes. Irony prevails. To do otherwise would be to highlight yet another two selves, those in Baker's aforementioned letter: scholar and dilettante. Returning to *U and I* in 2021 radically broadened my understanding of a similar duality in Updike, that of the autobiographer and fiction writer. What is "true" and what is "not true?"

III

Baker knows that he cannot match Updike despite the proximity of their interests, not to mention other shared qualities like psoriasis. Yet what he can do is maintain the gap between adulation and avoidance by resorting to witty but bogus declarations of superiority. Take psoriasis. On the jacket of *U and I*, he does not mention *Self-Consciousness* (published in 1989, two years before his book appeared) among the Updike volumes he had read fewer than five pages of, or less than half of, or most or all of; yet no astute reader can miss his nod in *U and I* to "At War with My Skin" in *Self-Consciousness*. A subtle humor sets the tone. Early in the essay, Updike comically exaggerates his compulsion to advertise the flakes and the shame: "It pains me to write these pages. They are humiliating—'scab-picking,' to use a term sometimes levelled at modern *autobiographical* writers" (*Self-Consciousness* 48, emphasis mine). I now merged his autobiographical book with his fiction. By

the end of the chapter, he and his skin have signed a peace treaty: "To my body, which has no aesthetic criteria, psoriasis is normal, and its suppression abnormal. Psoriasis is my health" (77). Baker seizes the moment. Though implying that he is more or less unfamiliar with *Self-Consciousness*, he cleverly sets up *his* reaction to Updike's psoriasis with his fiancée's reply to his question of whether he is a better writer than Updike: "I think you're smarter than he is, but that he's a better writer than you" (*U and I* 132). Partly elated, he shifts his wit into high gear with an exuberant, unacknowledged retort to *Self-Consciousness*:

> And so I got several years of self-propulsion out of thinking that I was, if not a better writer, at least smarter than Updike. When my psoriasis turned inward, arthritizing first one knee and then a hip and ankle joint, I took this to be a manifestation of our difference: he had the surface involvement—style—while I had the deep-structural, immobilizing synovial ballooning of a superior mind. This psoriatic opposition still sometimes helps me to go on, but I am increasingly unsure what it means. It means something. (133)

No mere smile here; the laughter pours forth. Groveling adulation and confident avoidance topped by the final comic dodge: "It must mean something." I then reread *Self-Consciousness* and agreed with David Hicks: "In 'Skin,' which is ostensibly about [Updike's] psoriasis but expands into a consideration of his utter identity, Updike . . . discovers how *it* defined *him*, as a person, as a writer, as a citizen of this world, as a sensual and sexual being" (Hicks 30). Once again, the archaeology of authorship, the autobiography of fiction. The line between teller and tale in Updike narrowed to the point where, for me, *Self-Consciousness* was now understood as just another fiction disguised as autobiography.

Baker's goal to be acknowledged as "finally a pro, finally getting the hang of it" is exacerbated by his "sense of being detached from the literary and academic communities": the outsider longing to be welcomed to that room at the *Lampoon* reception (*U and I* 3, 4). At stake is the greater question of how to become a writer who matters, a writer with immortality in his future. Explaining on the first page that he has recently completed and submitted his second novel, he admits that he is "curious to watch firsthand the microbiologies of upward revaluation or of progressive obscurity" (*U and I* 8). In this instance, he refers to Donald Barthelme, John O'Hara, and John Gardner, three writers once highly praised but around whose legacies the specter of "progressive obscurity" now lingers. Such speculation about Updike was unlikely in 1991, the year *Rabbit at Rest* earned him his third Pulitzer Prize and his second National Book Critics Circle Award.

Yet rereading *U and I*, I was struck by what I never foresaw thirty years earlier: the downturn that Updike's posthumous reputation has undergone since 2017 and the birth of an overzealous "cancel culture." Baker, of course, wrote *U and I* when Updike was on the verge of Olympian status following the completion of the Rabbit Tetralogy as the pinnacle of his award-studded career, when, as Baker notes, authors were evaluated on whether "the writing . . . was good or bad, no matter whether the writer was here or not" (*U and I* 8). Rereading, I realized I had overlooked—ignored?—what should have been clear: not every scholar, reviewer, commentator, and general reader accepts the argument that art and artist should be judged separately. And what happens when death intervenes, or when the accolades, awards, and applause cease?

Baker turned me once again to Updike's later fiction, the fiction that postdated *U and I*. The general high quality of the short stories was still evident, but most of the novels provoked a different reaction, a more firmly felt feeling of disappointment. Though Baker's reflections about "upward revaluation" and "progressive obscurity" refer to other authors, he wrote them in the context of the decades when Updike was riding high. From the point of view of 2021, it is clear that Baker was already indirectly musing about the eventual fate of his literary hero's reputation. One need only recall Patricia Lockwood's preening boast in 2019—"I was hired as an assassin" of Updike by the *London Review of Books*—for an example of visceral negative reactions to a long-esteemed artist(Lockwood 19). Baker's prescience in 1991 was not of Updike's vast enduring readership. His indirect connection of "progressive obscurity" with Updike seemed unlikely, a mere speculation readily neutralized by his admission of "how disassembled and undirected and simply bereft I would feel if I were to learn suddenly through the Associated Press of Updike's death. All I wanted, all I counted on, was Updike's immortality: his open-ended stream of books, reviews, even poems. . . . He was, I felt, the model of the twentieth-century American man of letters: for him to die would be for my generation's personal connection with literature to die"(*U and I* 13). Baker has in mind Updike's literary immortality, but his concern, even if overlooked by readers like me in 1991, is striking two decades later. Most fame wanes. I was not alone is assuming that Updike's reputation would join those of Faulkner and Hemingway as one of the few granted permanent immortality upon death. Baker's implied "progressive obscurity" for Updike and its eventual impact on his legacy now looms large.

A series of commentators targeted Updike's unblushingly exact imaginings of sexual acrobatics in what he defined as the adulterous society. The catalyst for this new society was the wide availability of the "pill" after 1960; or, as Georgene

enticingly quips in *Couples*, "welcome to the post-pill paradise" (52). Hinted at in *Rabbit, Run* (1960), tentatively explored in *Of the Farm* (1965)—"I love your cunt." / "Love my cunt, love me."—Updike's position that sex had become the new religion was from then on thoroughly displayed (*Of the Farm* 650). Bestseller sales and a portrait on the cover of *Time* were the result when stacks of *Couples* were unwrapped in bookstores in 1968. Commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of this breakthrough novel in 2018, Tina Jordan of the *New York Times Book Review* recalled Wilfred Sheed's conclusion from 1968: "If this is a dirty book, then I don't see how sex can be written about at all" (48). Most readers readily agreed. So did the courts. *Couples* was published soon after the American judicial system reversed the ban on D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, not to mention willfully overlooking the 1959 reprint of Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County* even though it had been banned in 1947 in a decision upheld a year later by the Supreme Court. Baker is gleeful in his celebration not only of what Updike's renderings of coitus expose but also of the freedom that the publication of *Couples* represents:

> . . . after all of Updike's lively and shocking and un-Emersonian writing about nakedness, fucking in piles of laundry, pubic hair like seaweed, dirty Polaroids, his next-door-neighbor's pussy. . . . Updike was the first to take the penile sensorium under the wing of elaborate metaphysical prose. Once the sensation of the interior of a vagina has been compared to a ballet slipper . . . the sexual revolution is complete. . . . In grieving for Updike, the somber, predominantly female citizens would be grieving for their own youthful sexual pasts. . . . they would be mourning the man who, by bringing a serious, Prousto-Nabokovian, morally sensitive National-Book-Award-winning prose style to bear on the micromechanics of physical lovemaking, first licensed by their own moans. (*U and I* 18, 19)

Gleeful, indeed. Updike reacted to this passage when he spoke with Terry Gross in 1997: "It's a very jaunty piece of criticism . . . and not untrue. . . . It seemed to me important, in writing about people, to be able to try to describe the sexual transactions between them. For many people, the height of what they see of ecstasy and poetry is in their sexual encounters, and furthermore, human personality does not end in the bedroom, but persists" (Gross 190).

In 1968, when I first picked up *Couples*, and then again in 1991 after reading *U and I*, recommending *Couples* was no different from saluting Joyce for the Molly Bloom soliloquy, Lawrence for *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Nabokov for *Lolita*, Wilson for "The Princess with the Golden Hair," or Erica Jong for *Fear of Flying*. Art was art. The freedom of the artist negated the moral and political qualms of the

reader, which was a more courteous way of saying, "if a novel offends you, don't read it." In 2021, the key line in Baker's bow to Updike's approach to sexuality in fiction is that Updike brought "a serious, Prousto-Nabokovian, *morally* sensitive, National-Book-Award-winning prose style to bear on the micromechanics of physical lovemaking" (emphasis mine). Updike was not writing smut or reducing men and women to their sexuality but rather observing what he defined as his "only duty": "to describe reality as it had come to me—to give the mundane its beautiful due" (Foreword xv). My primary reservation after first reading *U and I* was that the lyrical accounts of what Baker calls "physical lovemaking" would become repetitive as Updike's books piled up because there are only so many ways of describing woman-man-bed. A case in point is *Villages*, a novel I enjoy, but with an insistent sense of déjà vu. From the perspective of 2021, however, I now suspect that Baker's candid description of Updike's plunge into the specifics of heterosexuality is both a rousing *Yes!* to the sloughing of Puritan prudery and a deliberate overstatement of the difficulty of describing various prose photos of rolls in the hay, what one might call Baker's gift for celebratory parody. Recalling Updike's skill in merging the lyric and the comic when perusing the bedroom, he offers over-the-top particulars, as in the eye-catching "penile sensorium," to direct the reader back to the real thing: Updike.

Cancel culture rises and takes aim at Updike, but Baker plunges delightfully and graphically on. *Vox* and *House of Holes* are so explicit (much more so than Updike in *Couples*) that it's as if he were delivering a dare. He roars past mere realism to expand the "penile sensorium" into a novel-length account of a phone sex conversation (*Vox*) and a hilarious adventure through a fun house in which nearly every opening is an orifice (*House of Holes*). One example will illustrate:

> We're actually talking! If you come on this phone with me, it will be, as far as I'm concerned, it will be the top item on *Washington Week in Review* . . . because you get it, you understand, you have a complicated response to things . . . but I mean orgasm in an intelligent woman is like a volcano in a mountain with a city built on a slope—you feel the alternative opportunity cost of her orgasm. . . . You still there? (*Vox* 126–27)

The man and woman talk until the inevitable explodes. The increasing pressure generated by the explicitness of the lengthy conversation results in laughter. One might even say comic relief: "You still there?" Baker takes cues from Updike, but his method leads to raucous laughter; albeit without negating humor, Updike presents sex as the new sanctuary, the union of body and soul, necessary in an age when the formal church is little more than a formality. My return to *U and I* spurred

a rethinking of the seriousness Updike assigns to sex, the need for *something* to replace the once–agreed upon value system in a culture of unbelief. No wonder the church burns at the end of *Couples*.

Rereading Baker returned me to *Couples*, *The Witches of Eastwick*, and *Villages*—as well as to such poems as "Fellatio" and "Cunts"—not to do an about-face and censor them for luxuriating in coupling, but to continue to value them while trying to read from the perspective of those who object in the name of a changing culture. The problem, understandable given the extremes of the current social climate, is that some of the objections are just as radical as Baker's celebration. On the one hand, Michiko Kakutani and Joyce Carol Oates stress Updike's high points. Never one to ignore what she judges to be the author's lesser achievements (for example, *S.*), Kakutani salutes him as "endowed with an art student's pictorial imagination, a journalist's sociological eye and a poet's gift for metaphor. . . . and almost blogger-like in his determination to turn every scrap of knowledge and experience into words. . . . memorializing the everyday mysteries of love and faith and domesticity with extraordinary nuance and precision" (Kakutani A1). The key phrase in her evaluation is "memorializing the everyday mysteries of love and faith and domesticity with extraordinary nuance and precision"—that is, Updike's acutely detailed snapshots of woman-man-home-bed or, as Baker would have it, woman-man-home–laundry pile. Oates sets Updike among the four "great midcentury American writers," alongside Faulkner, Bellow, and Nabokov, breathing the rarefied air of the immortal masters of "highly literary, intellectually driven, and symbol-laden work" (Oates 56).

Adele Waldman and Christine Smallwood, on the other hand, would proclaim "No, in thunder!" and then dismiss Ann Patchett's assessment: "There was John Updike, the great man, whose work was irretrievably out of fashion. Was there a college student anywhere who cut her teeth on those Rabbit novels now? Probably not. . . . If I could stop time, it would be to read all of his books . . . the ones I'd read before and the ones I'd never heard of. I wouldn't care what anyone had to say about them" (Patchett 55). Indirectly rejecting Kakutani's praise of Updike's nuance and precision with the mysteries of love, Waldman dismisses the love scenes as "a bit gross": "So many comic sex scenes hit the same note over and over again—the comedy is in how bad or embarrassing our character's performance is. The self-deprecation shtick becomes a kind of cliché." She calls for descriptions that are not "the stuff of *Penthouse* letters" (Waldman 28, 27). Smallwood's attack is direct*: Couples* fills her with "rage" (20).[1]

Updike's counter was clear: "Not all lovemaking is alike. Anyway, it seems a

writer should clearly be free to describe it . . . and one didn't entirely lack models for sexual realism, even in the late fifties and early sixties. . . . My prose style was heavily influenced by Proust . . . and maybe I did try to bring to certain couplings a Proustian eloquence, just as I would bring that same eloquence to anything I was describing" (Gross 190–91). Baker would have promptly dismissed the naysayers, but his applause for the "penile sensorium" predates the current situation, in which moralizing dissents from critics receive just as much, if not more attention than the art being criticized. Revisiting the targeted novels after rereading *U and I* did not resolve the conflict, but it did widen my perspective. Is freedom from Mrs. Grundy with her eyes firmly shut worth the "rage" and eventual loss of readers who highlight only the gender implications of artistic performance? M.C. of the (London) *Times Literary Supplement* summarizes the current impasse with a grin:

> Why, even at this moment, people are furiously unfollowing one another on Twitter, or *even blocking one another*, for thought crimes against humanity—such as failing to keep up and realize that yesterday's literary hero is today's satanic wrong 'un. . . . A former editor of *TLS*, Ferdinand Mount, was right to discern a likeness between the early twentieth-first century and the eighteenth. We are indeed condemned now to relive the *Dunciad* in full-pissing contest and all.[2] (M.C. 31)

"Yesterday's literary hero," Updike becomes today's "satanic wrong 'un"; and a return to *U and I* prompted the query of whether, in the majority of his work after *Rabbit at Rest*, Updike was running out of material and thus looking back to the "penile sensorium" in a late-age bid to recover the spark that had fired his rapid ascendency to the top.

Answering a question put to him by James Kaplan—"has [he] disburdened himself of Nicholson Baker?"—Updike dodged the implications about his "meanness," about his determination to avoid a full-scale archaeological dig of his life, and about his male characters as cover for problematic behavior:

> Reading about myself is generally disconcerting, since it all seems so "off," without anything I can put my finger on. But when I did settle to *U and I*, I realized it wasn't about me and my work at all, or hardly at all—it was about the way we construct writers in our minds, to serve our own purposes. Having thus concluded, I found the book both lively and jolly. (Kaplan 126)

Yet Galen Strawson objected to Baker's musings about Updike: "[*U and I*] may be an act of love. But it is also highly ambivalent, and it is astoundingly egocentric" (Strawson 20). Perhaps, but a more accurate point is that thirty years

after initially publishing the book, Baker still challenges initiated readers to rethink Updike's fiction and then to ask whether "fiction" is an adequate term for his novels and tales. The objective is not to quibble over definitions but to reevaluate the complexity of Updike's art when he grounded so much of his work on the excavated shards of his life. Autobiography deliberately obscured as fiction? Coyly confessed autofiction? Baker floated the threat of progressive obscurity eighteen years before Updike died, but today *U and I* turns readers back to the novels and to a fresh engagement with the multifaceted, controversial, and much-honored writer.

NOTES

1. For a more thorough discussion of gendered posthumous critiques of Updike, see Donald J. Greiner, "Will John Updike 'Sink'?: Posthumous Reputation and the Fickleness of Literary Fame." *The John Updike Review* 7.2 (Spring 2020): 31–51.

2. Mia Levitin quotes Maggie Nelson, holder of a MacArthur "genius grant" and a winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award, on the acerbic state of current commentary about the arts. The discussions increasingly focus on "how certain transgressions in art should be 'called out' and 'held accountable.'" The public has the right to be offended, but "the world doesn't exist to amplify or exemplify our own preexisting tastes, values, or predilections. It simply exists" (23).

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"I'll Get Urinary Impotence": Updike's Double Reference to Nabokov in "Bluebeard in Ireland"

HARUKI TAKEBE

As is well known, John Updike greatly admired Vladimir Nabokov's oeuvre. Since his first encounter, via a *New Yorker* excerpt from *Pnin* in 1953, Updike remained an appreciative reader and, later, a constant reviewer of the Russian writer, whom he dubbed, in his famous review of *The Defense* (1964), "Grandmaster Nabokov." Nabokov's artistic influence on Updike has been frequently pointed out by critics. One of the earliest examples can be found in *Bech: A Book* (1970), as Jonathan Raban observes, "The book is studded with small acts of homage to Nabokov, and comes rigged out with spoof appendices, a bibliography and a commendatory introduction by Bech himself" (494). Updike once told an interviewer that he had Nabokov in mind when he assembled his first volume of Bech stories: "The idea of putting together a kind of half novel out of short stories about a single character came to me from Nabokov's *Pnin*, which I love" (Salgas 179). Nabokov's shadow is also palpable in *A Month of Sundays* (1975), a confessional novel with a postmodern twist, wherein the narrator-protagonist Reverend Tom Marshfield composes a manuscript describing his sexual profligacy and resulting therapy at a motel[1] for ministers-gone-astray. Here, Nabokov's *Lolita* comes to mind; that novel is narrated by Humbert Humbert, a murderer and pedophile who composes, while in prison, his own confession about his past behavior. Moreover, some critics, including James Schiff, perceive Nabokov behind Marshfield's voice: "With his verbal playfulness and dexterity, his lurid sexual intensity and anxious mocking

voice, Nabokov's Humbert Humbert is the most obvious precursor" (31). But perhaps the most obvious instance of Nabokov's influence is the entirety of *The Coup* (1978). Narrated by Colonel Ellelloû, an exiled dictator of a fictional country in Africa, the novel immediately brings to mind Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), in which Charles Kinbote, a self-proclaimed exiled king of the fictional country of Zembla, recounts the story of his life in the form of an extensive commentary on the titular poem. In an early review, Joyce Carol Oates observed that "Nabokov's presence is felt throughout" *The Coup*, suggesting that the novel's basic structure—the exiled ruler's narrative of his removal from power—parallels that of *Pale Fire* (32).[2] Oates' statement is corroborated by Updike himself, who said in an interview with Iwao Iwamoto that "*The Coup* is kind of an attempt to have a Nabokovian unreality, a made-up country and other things" (121).

All of these are from the 1970s, after which Nabokov's influence might seem to have diminished in Updike's oeuvre. In fact, Nabokovian references and devices continued to appear in his later work, just in a more complicated or obscure fashion. The 1993 short story "Bluebeard in Ireland," which portrays an American couple, George and Vivian Allenson, on a visit to the southwest region of Ireland, is an example.[3] Jack De Bellis notes that *Pale Fire* is mentioned in the couple's conversation: "Nabokov's novel of deception and betrayal makes an ironic comment on their troubled relationship" (297). But what happens here is not as simple as it seems. The story opens as the protagonist is trying to play along with his wife:

> "Yes, the people are wonderful," George Allenson had to agree, there in Kenmare. His wife, Vivian, was twenty years younger than he, but almost as tall, with dark hair and decided, sharp features, and it placed the least strain on their marriage if he agreed with her assertions. (520)

These opening lines efficiently convey their delicate situation, which is partly due to Vivian being George's third wife. They are haunted by his two ex-wives, Jeaneanne and Claire, and for this reason they already disagree about the planning of their itineraries: "Vivian was so irrational that, because her predecessor wife had been called Claire, she had refused, planning the trip, to include County Clare" (523). Now in Ireland, George and Vivian are again divided on the schedule for the day. While he wants to drive south, she flatly refuses, because she had been scared to death of his driving the day before: "Vivian had twisted in her seat and pressed her face against the headrest rather than look, and sobbed and called him a sadistic fiend" (520–21). Again attempting to avoid an argument, he gives in to her plan for a short hike along high country roads. Nevertheless, she complains of his poor

sense of direction as well as her newly bought shoes, and they almost end up in a quarrel. As she declares that she won't take another step, he harbors "murderous thoughts" (531), imagining that her body is going to weaken, die, and be scattered over the Irish dust. He even has a vision of yet another wife: "What would she be like, this fourth Mrs. Allenson?" (530).[4] He is indeed a Bluebeard figure. But they finally find their way to the planned route—or their way to delay making the crucial decision about their marriage—and come near to the highest point of the road.

The reference to Nabokov appears when Vivian here expresses her urgent need to urinate. Since there is no toilet around and she has a poor sense of balance, George gives his hand to her, jokingly suggesting that splashing her shoes "might soften them up": "'Don't make me laugh. I'll get urinary impotence.' It was a concept of Nabokov's, out of *Pale Fire*, that they both had admired, in the days when their courtship had tentatively proceeded through the socially acceptable sharing of books" (533). The reason why Nabokov is invoked isn't revealed until the conclusion of the story. Walking back to where their car is parked, Vivian says, "You haven't asked me if *I* like Ireland," and when he asks her, she asserts, "I do" (534, italics in original). Hence the concluding sentence: "They were back where they had started" (534). On a base level, this simply means that the couple has returned to the starting point of the tour, where they had parked their car. However, the line also implies the story's structural resemblance to *Pale Fire*. Nabokov's novel mainly consists of two parts, John Shade's poem "Pale Fire" and its line-by-line commentary prepared by Charles Kinbote. Written in heroic couplets, the poem has 999 lines, ending in the last line—"Trundling an empty barrow up the lane" (69)—which remains unmatched in rhyme. But the fact is, it does rhyme with the first line of the poem: "I was the shadow of the waxwing slain" (33). The poem thus makes a full circle. Similarly, the last line of "Bluebeard in Ireland" harks back to the story's beginning, where George reluctantly agrees to Vivian's appreciation of Ireland: "Yes, the people are wonderful" (520).[5] The reference to *Pale Fire*, therefore, is a self-explication of the story's structural design as well as an ironic commentary on their ever-troubled situation.

This is not the whole story, however. As far as I am aware, there is no such mention of "urinary impotence" in *Pale Fire*; only a vague parallel when Kinbote describes his newly hired gardener: "He was awfully nice and pathetic, and all that, but a little too talkative and completely impotent which I found discouraging" (291). Here Kinbote, a self-described gay man, suggests that he has somehow deduced his male employee's sexuality. The quote hardly seems comparable, though the word "impotent" faintly echoes the line in "Bluebeard in Ireland." On the other

hand, *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974), Nabokov's last novel published before his death, does offer the very phrase when the narrator declines to "repair for a leak" with his male friend: "because I knew by experience that a talkative neighbor and the sight of his immediate stream would inevitably afflict me with urinary impotence" (69). Thus, there arises a puzzling problem: why did Updike embed an obscure reference to *Look at the Harlequins!*, assuming he did not uncharacteristically misattribute the quote? To address the question, we need to examine this other Nabokov novel.

Like "Bluebeard in Ireland," *Look at the Harlequins!* presents a man who experienced several marriages—as the first sentence reads: "I met the first of my three or four successive wives in somewhat odd circumstances" (3). The narrator seemingly does not bother to count his own wives. But as we go on reading, we understand that this strange utterance is just one instance of the novel's general evasiveness. The narrator often makes excuses for his own unreliability throughout the text: "In fact, those first days at Villa Iris are so badly distorted in my diary, and so blurred in my mind, that I am not sure if, perhaps, Iris [his first wife] and Ivor [her brother] were not absent till the middle of the week"; "I believe that much of the confused impressions listed here in connection with doctors and dentists must be classed as an oneiric experience during a drunken siesta" (17, 19). The slippery descriptions are an inherent characteristic of his account, though some of them can be explained by his chronic mental illness.

Such a narrative strategy is further enhanced by what might be called the novel's pseudo-intertextuality, that is, the elaborate system of oblique allusions to other texts. The narrator, Vadim Vadimovich N., is a Russian-American author like Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov himself, and Vadim's oeuvre is almost transparently a self-parody of his creator's. To quote Updike's review of *Look at the Harlequins!*: "*Tamara* (1925) is surely *Mary* (1926); *Camera Lucida* (*Slaughter in the Sun*) replicates *Laughter in the Dark* (*Camera Obscura*); *The Dare* mistranslates *The Gift* [*Dar*]; *See under Real* and *Dr. Olga Repnin* openly conceal *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Pnin*; and *Ardis* (1970) is scarcely even a pseudonym for *Ada, or Ardor* (1969)" (216). If Nabokov's works are neatly arranged chess problems, Vadim's world is as oblique as a harlequin's habit: "As the jacket design reminds us, a harlequin's traditional lozenge-pattern is a chessboard made oblique" (220). Moreover, *Look at the Harlequins!* contains a number of references to these fictional texts, which are in fact oblique allusions to actual Nabokov titles, as anyone familiar with Nabokov easily understands. The plot of *See under Real* is, for example, described as follows: "An English novelist, a brilliant and unique performer, was

supposed to have recently died. The story of his life was being knocked together by the uninformed, coarse-minded, malevolent Hamlet Godman. . . . The biography was being edited, rather unfortunately for its reckless concocter, by the indignant brother of the dead novelist" (*Harlequins* 121). This is a variation of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, where the narrator V. tries to rewrite the distorted biography of his half-brother Sebastian Knight, itself written by a Mr. Goodman. Throughout his 1974 novel, Nabokov stretches a web of pseudo-intertextuality that ultimately leads us to reread his own oeuvre.

As we have already seen, the reference to *Pale Fire* in "Bluebeard in Ireland" is no less unreliable than the oblique allusions in *Harlequins*. If we overlook the title or fail to consult the text, the detail may be read as no more than a token of Updike's respect for Nabokov. But if we examine Nabokov's works as well, the pseudo-intertextuality brings us to the oblique world of *Harlequins*. Updike thus seems to imply that George Allenson's cherished memory of his and Vivian's courtship is also unreliable: when Vivian cites *Look at the Harlequins!* George mistakes it for *Pale Fire*, just as he mistakes the cause of their troubled relationship for their age gap or the baby that she wants but he feels too old to afford. The true problem lies in their romantic incompatibility, as is indicated in the prequel story "Aperto, Chiuso" (1991), in which the couple takes a trip to Italy, and also which introduces the theme of underlying tension between a chauvinist husband and a feminist wife. This tension is reintroduced in the very first paragraph of "Bluebeard": "Vivian, a full generation removed from [George], was an instinctive feminist, but to him any history of unrelieved victimization seemed suspect" (520). As the narrative structure suggests, their basic disagreements remain unresolved at the end of the story. The ambiguous reference to *Look at the Harlequins!* thus gives an additional layer of irony to George and Vivian's relationship.[6]

Brian Boyd, a distinguished Nabokov scholar, suggests that the author, with his "reputation for teasing his readers for the sake of teasing," in fact "teases us to test us":

> He knows that there is no substitute for the excitement of a discovery we make ourselves, and he encourages us to exercise our curiosity and imagination in a world that may often resist the mind but that can afford endless rewards to those who approach it in a spirit of inquiry and confidence that it has worthwhile secrets to yield. (426)

If such is the case, Updike performed a truly Nabokovian teasing/testing for us in "Bluebeard in Ireland." If we are curious enough to reread Nabokov for the source of the citation—"one cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it" is his famous quote (*Lectures* 3)—we are surely rewarded for it. With this in mind, it's

quite possible that Updike built a Nabokovian puzzle out of the precariousness of marriage, one of his own stock materials for a story. Not surprisingly, Updike appreciated Nabokov's handling of women in *Look at the Harlequins!*: "The manner in which these three wives . . . travel in fictional space, enlarging from first glimpses into love objects and marriage partners and then diminishing through disenchantment into death or abandonment, is no mean feat of projection" ("Motley But True" 218). We can say, then, that Vadim's three or four wives bore Updike the story "Bluebeard in Ireland," the offspring of the happy marriage of a Nabokovian trick and an Updikean topic.

NOTES

1. Though the narrator of *A Month of Sundays* calls it a "motel," he acknowledges that this is not fully accurate: "The motel—I resist calling it a sanatorium, or halfway house, or detention center—has the shape of an O, or, more exactly, an omega" (4).

2. For a comparative study of the narrative structures of *Pale Fire* and *The Coup*, see Joyce B. Markle, "*The Coup*: Illusions and Insubstantial Impressions." *Critical Essays on John Updike*, ed. William R. Macnaughton. G. K. Hall, 1982: 281–301.

3. The short story was first published in the January 1993 issue of *Playboy* and later collected in *The Afterlife and Other Stories* (1994), along with another story about the Allensons, "Aperto, Chiuso." In this paper, citations refer to the Library of America edition of the *Collected Later Stories*.

4. This sentence does not appear in the *Playboy* version of the story. Moreover, the passage that follows, speculating on a fourth Mrs. Allenson—"Jewish, with a rapid, humorous tongue and heavy hips and clattering bracelets on her sweetly hairy forearms? Black, a stately fashion model whom he would rescue from her cocaine habit . . . ? A little Japanese, silken and fiery within her kimono . . . ? Or perhaps one of his old mistresses, whom he couldn't marry at the time, but whose love had never lessened and who was miraculously unaged . . . ?" (530–31)—was added in the later texts. Updike probably intended to highlight the parallels between his story and the folk tale.

5. When the story first appeared in *Playboy*, the opening line read: "The people *are* wonderful" (94, italics in original). Updike later added the word "yes," slightly emphasizing the implicit continuity of the couple's conversation.

6. The name "Vivian" might be another instance of Updike's homage to the Russian writer. As is well known, Vladimir Nabokov relished embedding partly anagrammatic versions of his own name in the texts, such as "Vivian Badlook" (*King, Queen, Knave* 153), "Vivian Darkbloom" (*Lolita* 4, *Ada* 591), and "Vivian Bloodmark" (*Speak, Memory* 218). The name also appears in *Look at the Harlequins!* without a family name (249).

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Editing Updike's Revisions: Christopher Carduff and the Library of America

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John Updike: Novels 1959–1965; *John Updike: Novels 1968–1975*; *John Updike: Novels 1978–1984*, ed. Christopher Carduff. Library of America, 2018; 2020; 2021.

In March 1974, while delivering a speech in Adelaide, South Australia, titled "Why Write?," John Updike singled out Henry James as the benchmark for novelists who set their sights on greatness: "*To remain interested*—of American novelists, only Henry James continued in old age to advance his art; most, indeed, wrote their best novels first, or virtually first" ("Why Write?" 39). The stumbling block for novelists, Updike argued, was not losing their genius, but that they eventually confuse the role of the artist with the pose of the great opinion maker. Pointing to Sartre and Faulkner who, as they aged, succumbed to the lure of the public commentator, he noted how a "well-intentioned garrulity replaces the specific witness that has been theirs to give" (31). Updike's careerlong admiration of James was shaped by a conviction that The Master never faltered when pursuing the elusive but ultimate goal: to become a consummate artist. Advancing his art to the point where his final three completed novels were the pinnacle of his career, James avoided both the garrulity and the allure of the ever-brightening spotlight. The lesson of The Master became the figure in the carpet for Updike. He admitted that the challenge "*to remain interested*" nagged at him, too: "To become less and transmit more, to

replenish energy with wisdom—some such hope, at this more than mid-point of my life, is the reason why I write" (39).

A quick glance at the careers of four twentieth-century American giants already illustrates Updike's point: Edith Wharton's last great novel, *The Age of Innocence*, was published in 1920, but she lived until 1937; Willa Cather's last great novel, *Death Comes to the Archbishop*, was published in 1927, but she lived until 1947; Ernest Hemingway's last great novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, was published in 1940, but he lived until 1961; William Faulkner's last great work of fiction, *Go Down, Moses*, was published in 1942, but he lived until 1962. All four writers, justly celebrated, continued to publish fiction for roughly two decades after their masterpieces were completed, but their later books never equaled their best. James's *The Golden Bowl* (1904), though never Updike's favorite, was both his last great novel *and* his last novel. Stressing that only James "advanced" his art throughout his life, Updike set the bar dauntingly high for the novelists who followed—including himself. Did he attain these heights after what he defined as his "midpoint"?

A key element when debating this question is the complexity of defining "advancing an art." A general critical consensus about the greatness of a particular title is, of course, a standard measure, but so might be the success of an author's commitment to improving texts already published in a never-ending quest to approach perfection. Two extremes come to mind. The more radical example—no surprise—is Henry James. To use Updike's language, James "continued in old age" by rewriting most of his many novels for what became known as the New York Editions, thereby causing headaches for scholars and general readers when deciding which version to read: the first edition or the New York Edition? On the other end, the more desperate example is F. Scott Fitzgerald. When *Tender Is the Night* (1934) failed to generate the reviews and consequent sales needed to match the applause of his golden years, Fitzgerald cut through the binding of his copy, removed and reordered the three sections of the text, and then left a note to the effect that *Tender Is the Night* should be republished with a more straightforward chronology. In 1951, Malcolm Cowley edited a new edition based on Fitzgerald's instructions, but the revision advanced neither the sales nor the art.

Rejecting the extremes of James and Fitzgerald, Updike rethought his novels not by making dramatic alterations but by focusing his attention on what eventually turned out to be a surprising number of emendations, often unnoticed at first glance even by an initiated Updike scholar. He changed individual words and phrases, revised single sentences, and added or deleted entire paragraphs. And he

did so, we now know, from the very beginning of his emergence as an artist. Nearly every time a first edition was followed a year or so later by a paperback reprint, Updike saw an opportunity to revise. The same held true when his publisher authorized a later printing of the first edition, or a British firm purchased the rights to print from the sheets of the American edition. How do we know? Because of Christopher Carduff and the Library of America.

Carduff's understanding of the often arcane complexities of textual bibliography, his focused editor's eye, and his skill at tracking down pertinent introductions, forewords, and speeches for inclusion in the volumes make the Library of America editions of Updike's novels indispensable to serious readers and, particularly, to scholars of his fiction. As of this writing, three volumes in the series have been published, covering the years from *The Poorhouse Fair* (copyright 1958 but published in 1959) through *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984). A fourth volume comprising *Roger's Version* (1986) and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) will likely be published before this review appears in print, and a fifth and final volume, comprising *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000), and "Rabbit Remembered" (2000), is scheduled for 2023. Each volume contains a thorough thirty-page chronology, but even more important are the ancillary materials, in which Carduff includes a note on the composition and publication of each novel, multiple pages of notes primarily consisting of useful annotations, and an appendix, which features related essays, forewords, and other relevant documents.

To illustrate the effects of Carduff's decision to pair the text of a specific novel with documents in which Updike reflected on the book, a look at *The Witches of Eastwick* is instructive. The selected materials expand the text's contemporary relevance beyond just its commentary on gender. Many of the documents are not readily located outside of the volume, even by Updike devotees, because Updike wrote them for expensive limited editions or to deliver at ceremonies. They offer suggestions about what he had in mind prior to drafting *Witches*. Further enhancing the intellectual stimulation and scholarly value of the Library of America edition is Carduff's inclusion of the "Special Message" Updike wrote for the First Edition Society in 1984. The "Message" is pertinent to discourse about the novel because Updike used it as a platform to summarize his own research into paganism and, more importantly, to define his understanding of witchcraft: "My heroines are not members of these organizations; their witchcraft is an intuitive and fitfully articulated collusion, sprung from their discovery that husbandlessness brings power. Witchcraft is the venture, one could say, of women into the realm of power"

(947). Equally significant, however, is his acknowledgment of a "literary debt" to the French writer Robert Pinget (1919–97) whom he highlights in the final paragraph of the message:

> His [Pinget's] novels admirably capture the spookiness of communities that hold in the crevices of faulty, shifting communal memory a whiff of sulfur, a whisper of the unspeakable. Emboldened by Pinget's example, I have tried here [*The Witches of Eastwick*], in my own style, to give gossip a body and to conjure up human voices as they hungrily feed on the lives of others. The appetite is not trivial; we write and read novels to satisfy it. (948)

But why Robert Pinget? Following the clues that Updike distributes, and that Carduff highlights, as if they were breadcrumbs consciously sprinkled on a forest trail, one thereby discovers how Updike indirectly nudges the reader to identify Pinget as central to understanding the background of the novel. Those who accept the invitation will track down the next clue and learn that Updike wrote the introduction to an edition of Pinget's *Trio* (2005), for which Pinget added a short preface to define his methods and aims (with a wink or two):

> And so it was a fascination with the possibilities, the absolute freedom of creation, an intense desire to abolish all the constraints of classical writing, that made me produce these exercises which neither the logician, nor the philosopher, nor the moralist, will find to his taste. That doesn't mean to say that the imaginative reader will not be able to find something in them to *his* taste. (Pinget 5)

In his introduction to *Trio*, Updike salutes Pinget for locating "us in the gently moldering, nowhere solid hell of communal remembering, of mutual awareness, never exact, never obliterated" (xii). It's as if Updike is leading his readers through Pinget-land before setting them down in Eastwick. The trail is no yellow brick road. Carduff pointed the way when he assembled the appendices for this volume of the Library of America: continue on the trail and learn that Updike began reviewing Pinget's work as early as 1978–79, several years *before* beginning to draft *The Witches of Eastwick* in 1983. Most of these reviews and commentaries are collected in *Hugging the Shore* (1983) and *Odd Jobs* (1991). Three relevant comments illustrate Updike's interest in Pinget:

> For all his flouting of conventional expectations and all the sly comedy of his rambling village talebearers, Pinget strikes one as free of any basically distorting mannerism or aesthetic pose. ("Robert Pinget" 423)

> He is a dark author, placidly settled amid his favorite village odors of damp stone and rotting wood [. . .], and mysteriously content to churn and rechurn the chronic garbled rumors of perversion and homicide. ("Between Pinget's Ears" 389)

> An atmospheric reality emerges all the more forcefully for the vibrant uncertainty of details; the decay and banality of provincial rustic life blur, at their margins, into something hellish, and also something redeeming. ("Back to the Classics" 437)

Updike's observations about Pinget are important for the reader who wants to probe *The Witches of Eastwick* beyond the surface sensationalism of its eroticism, the humor of its gender relations, and the miasma of the disease, decay, and death nurtured on the wings of gossip in a small town. The significance of the unexpected Updike–Pinget connection is that it indirectly urges readers to reexamine Olinger and Tarbox, Updike's primary examples of "provincial rustic life," from a different angle. Olinger may appear to be an ideal fictional town to nurture the heart of Updike's lyrically expressed nostalgia, but the other side of his insistent peering beneath the decorum of smalltown America does not always offer what he movingly describes in the last lines of "The Persistence of Desire": "where life was a distant adventure, a rumor, an always imminent joy" (203). Tarbox and (especially) Eastwick harbor a "whiff of sulfur" that encourages the unspeakable and reeks of both spiritual cannibalism and damaging gossip. When Updike inscribed a copy of *The Witches of Eastwick* for fellow novelist John Hawkes, who taught at Brown University in Providence (the fictional Eastwick was also located in Rhode Island), he pointedly located himself in the environs of this less-than-ideal community: "for Sophie and Jack here in the suburbs of Eastwick."[1]

This kind of expanded discussion of an Updike novel, made possible by Carduff's astute decision to include the special messages and introductions, confirms that the Library of America volumes are *not* the same familiar editions, dressed up in different dust jackets, that readers and students once perused and that now rest undisturbed on shadowed shelves, or that scholars once taught and referenced when coordinating seminar notes. They are, rather, impeccably edited texts based on Updike's final emendations inserted into later reprintings published decades after the first editions were initially available in the corner bookstore. For example, *The Witches of Eastwick* was first published in 1984. The first paperback printing, most likely the issue familiar to the majority of readers, appeared in 1985. Yet the text Carduff selected for the Library of America is the eighth printing of the Knopf hardcover, dated April 2007, and based on Updike's final list of changes. Updike died in early 2009; in other words, he was perfecting his art into old age,

even to the threshold of death. Readers turning to this much-debated book need to consult the Library of America version. There, they will find not only the *final* revision but also, thanks to Carduff, the subordinate material in which Updike expressed his thoughts about the novel, and which indirectly set the clues, for those curious enough to follow, to an unexpected new way of thinking about the text.

Carduff applied the same meticulous editing to every novel included in the first three Library of America volumes. A foundational question for engaged or critical readers of an author is *What do/did they write?* (And, inversely, *What did they* not *write?*) The question is not trivial.[2] Prior to the use of computers to "set the type" for a volume, errors accumulated as paperbacks or even new hardcover printings of first editions appeared. The result was that students and scholars were trained to consult the first edition and ignore subsequent printings unless hard evidence confirmed that the author approved or was involved. Because first editions of most Updike novels were published before computers revolutionized the process, a shift similar to that in earlier centuries when the invention of the printing press negated reliance on scribes, Updike's first editions were designated the most reliable texts. As important textual points began to be uncovered, however, the question of which edition or issue to quote became acute. The Library of America version of *The Witches of Eastwick*, for example, illustrates the dilemma: the accuracy of the text of a novel originally published in 1984 was not established until 2007. Only now do we know, thanks to Carduff's spadework, that similar states of affairs have been a troublesome but under-the-radar problem since the appearance of Updike's first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*, in 1959.

As Carduff explains, Updike revised *The Poorhouse Fair* three times: for the Modern Library edition in 1965, for the twentieth-anniversary Knopf edition in 1977, and for the Ballantine trade paperback edition in 2004. The Library of America certifies the Ballantine paperback as the authorized edition since it is the last version that Updike oversaw: forty-five years passed between the first publication and the establishment of the official text. Ever the sharp-eyed caretaker of his talent, Updike added a commentary to each of the revised editions. Carduff includes all three statements. A sample of Updike's observations confirms the seriousness of his commitment to the textual particulars of his entire oeuvre. For instance, in the foreword to the Modern Library Edition, he writes, "I meant the future [*The Poorhouse Fair*] portrays to be less a predictive blueprint than a caricature of contemporary decadence . . . that the future did not radically differ from the past; and this notion now seems itself a product of the entropic years of the Eisenhower lull" (744). Then, in the lengthy introduction to the Knopf reprint,

Updike links *The Poorhouse Fair* to H. G. Wells, George Orwell, Henry Green, and Aldous Huxley: "The novel was written in 1957, as a deliberate anti–*Nineteen Eighty-Four* . . . But I wanted it to fall short of that year [1984], as its political ambiance fell short of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'s dire absolutism . . ." (735). Finally, from a "Note" to the 2004 Ballantine edition: "Nevertheless, I did not resist changing a word or adding a touch here and there, if these small improvements seemed to arrive from well within the spirit and architectonic plan of the fledgling novelist" (743).

Interestingly, Updike mused and wrote more about *The Poorhouse Fair* than the award-winning *The Centaur* (1963) or the intricately observed gem *Of the Farm* (1965). In his "Remarks upon accepting the National Book Award for *The Centaur*," he stressed the concept he called "word by word":

> The book as well as the hero is a centaur. Anyone dignified with the name of "writer" should strive, surely, to discover or invent the verbal texture that most closely corresponds to the tone of life as it arrives on his nerves. . . . we should proceed in the humble faith that, by taking pains, *word by word*, to be accurate, we put ourselves on the way toward making something useful and beautiful and, in a *word*, good. (751–52, emphasis mine)

For the authorized text of *The Centaur*, Carduff identified the ninth printing of the Knopf hardcover (October 1979) because it was the final printing to include Updike's changes. Yet Updike's emendations went further. On the front endpaper of his personal copy of the first edition, first printing of *The Centaur*, housed in the Houghton Library at Harvard, he jotted down seven additional corrections that had not been inserted in any later edition. All seven were individual words as opposed to sentences or sections. Unsurprisingly, Carduff incorporates the seven word-changes into the Library of America text.

In his introduction to the Czech edition of *Of the Farm*, Updike revealed that the working title of the novel "was simply *The Farm*, but that had a monumentality that seemed bogus to me". He explained that he saw the novel as a kind of short story—"a continuous action, a narrow setting, a small cast"—but he defined the central metaphor as chamber music with the four voices of the central characters serving as the musical instruments (753). During a weekend of conversation, the quartet gropes its way not to harmony but at least toward an uneasy cohesion. By publishing Updike's introduction to the scarce Czech edition, Carduff set down a clue inviting further research by the initiated reader: both Updike and his first wife Mary played the recorder and belonged to a local musical group in Ipswich, Massachusetts, that occasionally performed concerts for the public. The metaphor

of music and its centrality to the novel waits to be explored. Carduff again uses the last printing that Updike revisited, the 2000 Ballantine paperback.

Also particularly useful is the first Library of America volume's account of the tangled textual history of *Rabbit, Run* (1960). In his introduction to *Rabbit Angstrom* (1995), an omnibus of the four Rabbit novels without "Rabbit Remembered," Updike commented, "*Rabbit, Run*, in keeping with its jittery, indecisive protagonist, exists in more forms than any other novel of mine" (790). Immediately following this quip about the "jittery" novel, Carduff offers a summary of the zigzag:

> *Rabbit, Run* was published by Knopf on November 2, 1960. A British edition, offset from the Knopf pages, was published by Andre Deutsch Ltd., London, in the winter of 1961. A revised text, "corrected and reset," was published by Penguin Books (UK) in 1964, in the Modern Library (in an omnibus volume with *The Poorhouse Fair*) in 1965, and in a Knopf hardcover (fifth printing) in 1970. Two deluxe, limited editions based on the corrected text were privately printed by Franklin Library, Franklin Center, Pennsylvania (1977), and the Easton Press, Norwalk, Connecticut (1993). (790)

Yet (one might exclaim, "of course"), Updike was not through. In 1993–94, he again revised the four Rabbit novels collected in *Rabbit Angstrom*, admitting in his introduction that "for this fresh printing, apt to be the last I shall oversee, I have tried to smooth away such inconsistencies as have come to my attention" (790–91). But though "apt to be the last," it was not the last. For the two-volume Ballantine paperback (2003), Updike used the text of *Rabbit Angstrom* with "a few additional revisions by the author" (791). He then explained to his bibliographer Jack De Bellis that the Ballantine trade paperbacks were the "least incorrect" versions of the four Rabbit novels—and thereby Carduff's choice for the version of *Rabbit, Run* in the Library of America. The phrase "least incorrect" all but guarantees that Updike would emend again if afforded the opportunity.

Textural accuracy is the bedrock of literary scholarship; thus, the value of Carduff's succinct summary of the zigzagging text. Scholars now have confirmation as to which edition of *Rabbit, Run* to cite. But what was the initial catalyst for all the textual turmoil? By including Updike's statements about his most well-known book, Carduff clarifies the context for the puzzled reader. But the short answer to the question is "sex." The red flag was initially hoisted by the man who would become Updike's consistently supportive publisher, Alfred Knopf. As Carduff shows, Updike's revelations about what he called his "angst-ridden Everyman, fertile and fearful and not easy to catch" were spread over thirty years (745). Drafting the novel in 1959 and publishing it in 1960, Updike inadvertently placed the distinguished

firm of Alfred A. Knopf in a quandary. The fear of sex in literature in 1960 with its threat of judicial censorship raised its ugly head. Though Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) and Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) had recently cleared the American courts and, thus, what Updike called "the notice of hypothetical backwoods sheriffs vigilant against smut"—and though Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) would soon join them in exposing "our delicate verbal surgery" (Updike's words) as absurd—Knopf was nearly as jittery as Rabbit himself as he pondered the potential threat to his firm (742). Curiously, Updike did not refer to a likely challenge by "backwoods sheriffs" when he wrote the short foreword to the Modern Library edition in 1964. He merely commented in general terms on the major emendations he made to what would have been the setting copy of the original text: "I felt impelled to rework all proofs heavily and, after the book was published, to make further revisions for the Penguin edition printed in England four years later" (744).

But who "impelled" him—*not* "compelled" him—to slash the typescript of the book that would soon bring him both literary fame and public notoriety? Indirectly, Alfred Knopf himself; directly, the attorneys who worked for the firm of Alfred A. Knopf. As Updike recalled, in 1959 he received a "basically heartening letter" from Knopf indicating "acceptance with reservations," reservations so touchy that the publisher requested a face-to-face conference to discuss what in 1959–60 would have been deemed sexually explicit passages (789). Thanks to the Library of America, we now have ready access to a once-elusive, especially important document, published in 1990, thirty years after *Rabbit, Run*, that most readers were unaware of until Updike collected it in *Odd Jobs*. Bearing a title now supplied by Carduff—"Reminiscence of Alfred A. Knopf and the publication, 1960, of *Rabbit, Run*"—this intriguing statement was originally known as "AAK and I" in the June 1990 *Borzoi Reader*, part of the celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of Knopf publishers (793). Carduff's inclusion of the "Reminiscence" in the Library of America series is a revelation for readers because it reveals the extremes the fledgling author was willing to go to see his second novel into print, even to the extent of bowdlerizing his own typescript. (One wonders whether the young Updike—he was twenty-eight at the time—was already planning to reinsert the cuts should *Rabbit, Run* succeed to the point that a second edition would be required, but it is important to understand that the "Reminiscence" conveys Updike's memory of the dilemma thirty years after the fact.) He first quotes from Knopf's acceptance letter before turning to his recollection of the occasion. Note Knopf's judicious understatement: "There are one or two little matters to discuss in connection with [the typescript]. . . . It would be best, I think, not to correspond,

so I am wondering when you could have a brief visit with us at the office" (747). In other words, no correspondence in order to avoid a written record. The understated "one or two little matters" raises eyebrows given that Knopf planned to sit Updike next to a company attorney for the purpose of protecting Knopf, his firm, and the new novel from censorship. Yet from the point of view of three decades later, Updike recalled accepting the radical surgery with equanimity. Now that Carduff has made "Reminiscence" readily available, some readers may disagree with my position that Updike did not object to the cuts too vehemently because he was already planning to restore them. His more determined goal was to nurture *Rabbit, Run* to publication. His instinct was correct. The expurgated *Rabbit, Run* landed him on the literary map:

> [Knopf's] lawyers had advised him that, in view of some of the novel's sexually explicit scenes, its publication might land us both in jail. . . .
>
> I think what Alfred captured at that moment [with a photo of Updike] was the relaxed visage of a man who has decided to sell out. . . . I agreed to go along with the legal experts, and trim the obscenity to the point where the book might slide past the notice of hypothetical backwoods sheriffs vigilant against smut. . . .
>
> None of the excisions really hurt, though I did restore them to later editions. . . . Alfred, present for some of this lengthy operation, at one point explained . . . "How the hell can you have fucking without contact?"
>
> . . . I have never regretted sailing on with *Rabbit, Run* and its slightly trimmed sails. Many books followed. When *Couples*' turn came to raise eyebrows, it was 1968, and the text went to the printers just as I had submitted it. (747–49)

Though Updike is not normally associated with D.H. Lawrence or Henry Miller, *Rabbit, Run* stood with their books on the front lines of the mid-twentieth century censorship wars.[3] With its explicit accounts of the particulars of small-town adultery, *Couples* (1968) landed Updike on the cover of *Time* magazine and drove him with his family to England for a year to escape the widespread publicity. Virtually a primer for what Updike memorialized as a "post-pill" paradise, *Couples* began as a failed short story rejected by *The New Yorker* in May 1963. Though the immensely successful novel was first in bookstores in 1968, Updike did not return to the original story until 1976, when he prepared a scarce limited and signed edition of 267 copies, titled *Couples: A Short Story*, for the small press publisher Halty Ferguson, aimed at the rare book market. He also wrote a foreword to accompany the special edition of the originally rejected tale. Because of the limited

number of copies of the foreword to the story, the two texts were all but unavailable until Carduff placed them in the 2020 volume of the Library of America. Though Updike had reprinted a slightly revised version of the Foreword in *Hugging the Shore* (1983), he (and later his literary estate) kept "Couples: A Short Story" under wraps for forty-four years, from 1976 until 2020. This previously unknown material is invaluable for those who wish to study *Couples*. Updike reveals in the Foreword that he wrote the short story in the spring of 1963 and that, once *The New Yorker* turned it down, he identified his own qualms: "It was, above its incidental faults of sentimentality and vagueness, too crowded. . . . [My] first attempts to write about suburban adultery, a subject that, if I have not exhausted it, has exhausted me" (950). Robert Pinget hovers in the background: more smalltown devilment. For the authorized text of the novel *Couples*, Carduff identified the eleventh printing of the Knopf hardcover (2003), the last Updike approved.

Updike was always mindful of the impact of revisions, even those likely to be deemed "minor." For readers like me, however, who question whether *any* emendation is minor, such careful attention to his art certified a career commitment to perfecting his books, and the Library of America volumes nudge the reader to notice that attention. Generally, Updike's emendations were minor: changing a single word or two, or altering a first-edition wording when preparing a new edition, only to reinsert the original wording into the final, authorized text. On rare occasions, however, the alteration could be more significant, requiring the addition, say, of several key sentences to clarify the fate of a central character, which is what happened with a later version of *Gertrude and Claudius*.

In a 7 November 2004 letter to me, Updike commented, "*Of the Farm*, as you probably know, is out in a paperback that was lightly revised by me—so don't teach from your old hardcover text, and involve your conscientious students in minute textual squabbles." An example of a significant difference between the Ballantine trade paperback of *Of the Farm* (2004) and the first edition (1965) is a mere single, but revealing, word in Joey's denigration of his sexy, long-limbed, bikini-clad second wife Peggy. In the first edition, Joey, speaking to his domineering and clinging mother, dismisses Peggy:

> "She *is* stupid." I am always a little behind my mother, always arriving at the point from which she has departed. She smiled, seeing me sitting upright, excited like a boy by my discovery of the obvious. "Remarkably stupid." (141)

But in the Ballantine edition, Peggy is "simpleminded":

> "She *is* simpleminded." I am always a little behind my mother, always arriving at the point from which she has departed. She smiled, seeing me sitting upright, excited like a boy by my discovery of the obvious. "She sees with one eye." (*Novels 1959–1965* 708)

With this change of one word—"stupid" to "simpleminded"—Updike altered the reader's understanding of Peggy. "Stupid" suggests the dominance of her alluring physical presence over an untutored mind, whereas "simpleminded" signals her inability to spot nuance: "She sees with one eye."

More than a few words concerned Updike when he had an opportunity to finetune *The Poorhouse Fair*. As noted earlier, the dilemma was naming the appropriate President of the United States so that he could avoid identifying the ninety-four-year-old John Hook with *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The problem began when the aged Hook, reminiscing about his early years as a teacher, recalls, "In those days—it would have been in the fat Taft's administration—when he had freshly come, direct from normal school, to teach . . . (6). For the 1964 Modern Library edition, however, Updike decided that associating Hook with President Taft placed his protagonist too close to Orwell, so he emended the text: "In those days—it would have been in the first Roosevelt's administration—when he had freshly come, direct from normal school, to teach . . ." (5). Yet forty years later, for the Ballantine edition, he again changed his mind and returned to the language of the first edition . Updike explains his final decision in the "Note to the 2004 Ballantine edition of *The Poorhouse Fair*":

> In the matter . . . of the exact time when my fair takes place, I have decided to go with the original text, and have restored Taft . . . First inspirations are generally the best. Nevertheless, I did not resist changing a word or adding a touch here or there, if these small improvements seemed to arrive from well within the spirit and architectonic plan of the fledgling novelist. (743)

For the Library of America, Carduff designated the Ballantine trade paperback edition as the authorized text, last overseen by Updike. His apparent uncertainty for nearly a half-century about which president to identify before finally returning to the original name reflects not indecision but precision. Most authors publish a novel and move on. Not Updike.

As a final example of his care, I point to several clarifying sentences that Updike added in 2002 to a different edition of *Gertrude and Claudius* that was originally published in 2000. The emendation was first made in the Bulgarian edition, translated by Bulgarian scholar Alexander Shurbanov. Carduff has not yet published

his edition of *Gertrude and Claudius*, but I comment on the textual crux here to indicate the importance of future Updike novel volumes by the Library of America.[4] In the "Special Message" for the first edition of the Franklin Library publication of *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000), Updike directly explained his defense of Gertrude, thus indirectly suggesting the rationale for later emending his overview of her troubled marriage and thereby of her future life. Conceding that the usurping King and his Queen are the villains, he nevertheless absolves Gertrude of complicity. His argument is that, while Shakespeare appears to taint her with lust—damned as a deadly sin during the era when *Hamlet* is set—she embodies in his eyes "queenly dignity, wifely loyalty, motherly concern" (unnumbered pages). Stressing his purpose to "narrate the romance that precedes the tragedy," Updike sees Gertrude not as a lustful, betraying schemer but as an unfortunate "pawn in the hands of ambitious men."

After Knopf published *Gertrude and Claudius* in 2000, Updike was apparently concerned that he needed to strengthen his exoneration of Hamlet's mother. When in 2002 Professor Shurbanov requested permission to translate the novel into Bulgarian, Updike agreed, provided he could insert toward the end of the text three seemingly insignificant sentences that, on careful perusal, enhance Gertrude's character:

> She was happier wed. Like a broad-beamed ship she lightly rode in the safety of harbor. Her venture into the defiance and protest of adultery had been, like his years of Southern wandering, an excursion, an exploration of her nature that, its destination achieved, need never be resumed.[5] (*Gertrude and Claudius*, 2012, 208)

The Bulgarian edition was published with the additions in 2003, but English language readers had to wait until 2012 for the Random House paperback. Those familiar with this kind of bibliographical complexity can only benefit once Carduff edits *Gertrude and Claudius* for the Library of America. Updike revised his novels by employing several approaches. Carduff knows all of them.

Three of the projected five Library of America volumes have been published under Carduff's editorship. Scholars and collectors will continue to search for first editions in original dust jackets, but for *all* readers, these versions of Updike's novels, as Carduff has selected them from the various printings, must now be designated "authoritative." His work is that reliable, that good. The notes, the significant dates, and the general composition histories of the books are carefully assembled, clearly expressed. Just as important, the ancillary items that he includes—the forewords and "Special Messages"—indirectly offer clues to

additional research about a specific topic that might not have been noticed when reading the novel without them (just one example being *The Witches of Eastwick* and Robert Pinget). What can be done to improve Carduff's volumes? Very little. Yet if I were invited to recommend "something," I would suggest including in the back material, along with the notes and chronology, an Updike poem or short story especially relevant to a particular novel. Doing so would broaden the contexts by demonstrating how Updike continued to respond in fiction to his characters—for example, Harry Angstrom, the mother, the father, the girlfriend, the mistress, the aging male protagonist—as he reimagined them throughout his career. An extended perspective on the characters, and thus indirect new detail on the novels, would be useful. That said, were such a suggestion even possible, Carduff has already edited Updike's short stories in two Library of America volumes as well as a *Selected Poems* with Knopf.[6] Given the unlikelihood that appropriate tales or poems will be included in future volumes of the Library of America series, I offer a short list of stories and poems to be hypothetically considered:

—With *Rabbit, Run*: "Ex-basketball Player" and "Ace in the Hole";
—With *The Centaur*: "Home" and "My Father on the Verge of Disgrace";
—With *Of the Farm*: "Flight" and "His Mother inside Him";
—With *Couples*: "Leaves" and "Your Lover Just Called."

After reading the texts and notes, and after contrasting the emended passages with the originals, I am reminded of an adage normally associated with poets: "A poem is never finished. It's abandoned." Only death forced Updike to abandon advancing his art.

NOTES

1. This item is housed in the Donald J. and Ellen Greiner Collection at the University of South Carolina.

2. Most emendations are designed to improve an already acceptable text, as illustrated by the care Updike took with his publications. Yet none of his alterations were as dramatic as the most famous emendation in English language literature. This emendation concerns a nonsensical word that puzzled readers for a century: Lewis Theobald's (1688–1744) correction of one word in the 1623 First Folio printing of Shakespeare's *King Henry the Fifth*. During a discussion of Falstaff's death, the baffling phrase "and a Table of greene fields" (ii, 3, 17) is uttered. A century passed before, in 1733, Theobald altered the nonsense to "and 'a babbled of greenfields." The emendation is now widely accepted, appearing in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. George Lyman Kittredge. Ginn and Company, 1940, 623. Kittredge was the most respected Shakespeare editor of his era.

3. See Greiner, "John Updike, Edmund Wilson, and the Displacement of Pornography." *The John Updike Review* 7.1 (Summer 2019): 39–62; and "Story into Novel: The Genesis of Updike's *Couples*." *The John Updike Review* 2.1 (Fall 2012): 1–10.

4. For a discussion of the context framing the emendation, see Greiner, "Updike Revised: The Authoritative Edition of *Gertrude and Claudius*." *The John Updike Review* 3.1 (Spring 2014): 1–14.

5. With this alteration, I wonder whether Updike was also exonerating his own "venture into the defiance and protest of adultery," thereby adding a subtle but personal undertone to a story of home and family radically disoriented. Updike readers will welcome Carduff's edition of *Gertrude and Claudius* when it appears in a future Library of America edition.

6. *Collected Early Stories* and *Collected Later Stories*, ed. Christopher Carduff. Library of America, 2013; John Updike, *Selected Poems*, ed. Christopher Carduff. Knopf, 2015.

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Contributors' Notes

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

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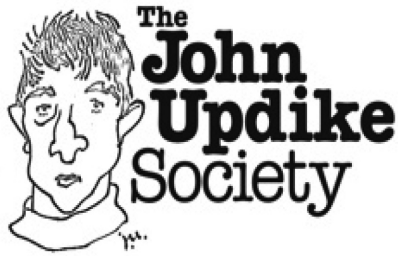

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BIBLIOGRAPHICAL CITATIONS

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

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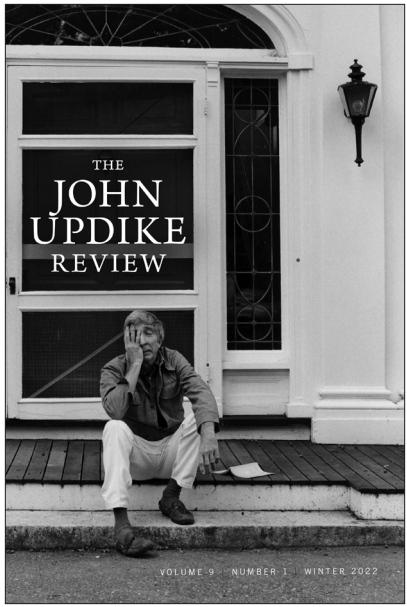
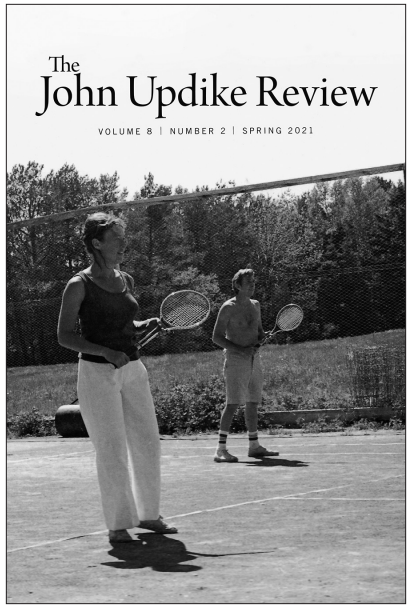


JUR 9.1 (Winter 2022).
Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Olga Karasik-Updike, Donald J. Greiner, and Pradipta Sengupta. Responses to *Toward the End of Time* by Marshall Boswell, Biljana Dojčinović, and James Schiff. Review by Sue Norton.



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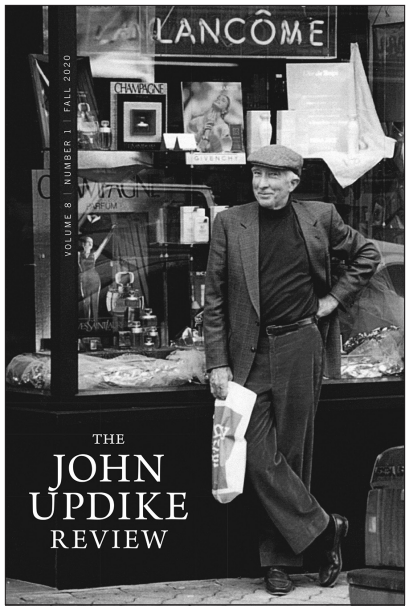
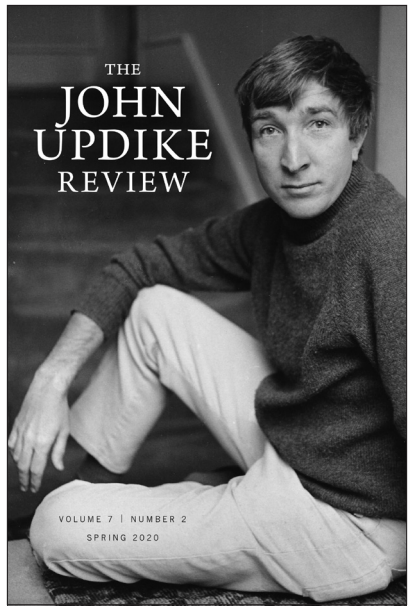
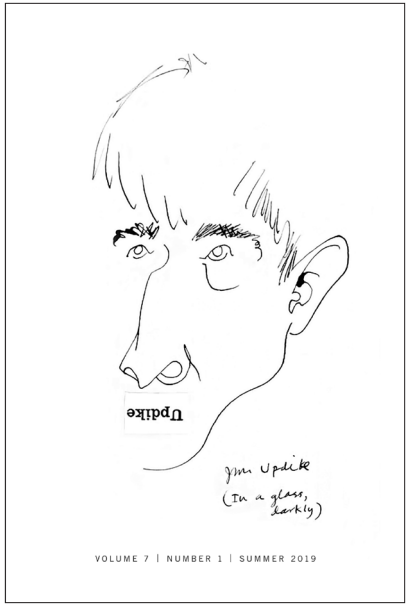
Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Cornelius Dieckmann, Donald J. Greiner, Thushara Perera, James Plath and David Updike. Includes Updike's story "Harv Is Plowing Now" and responses by Jason Namey, James Schiff, and David Lerner Schwartz.



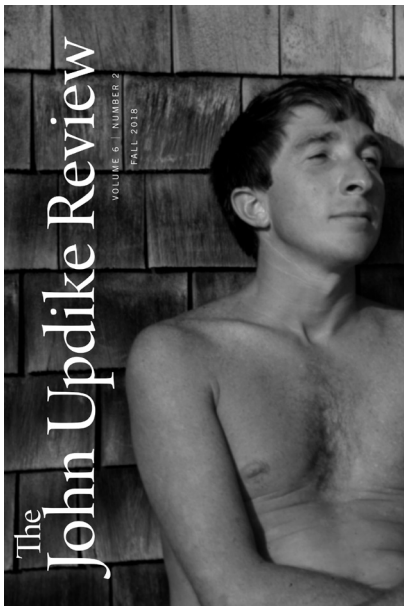


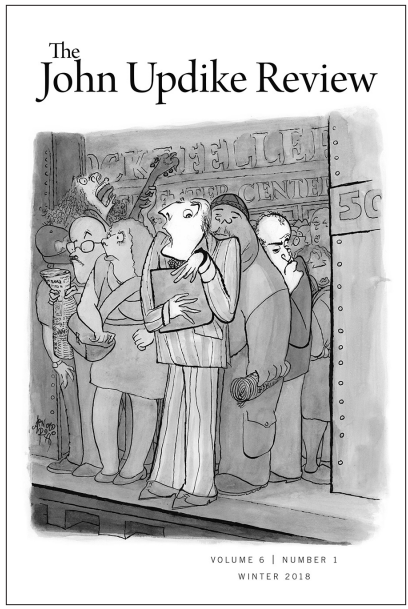


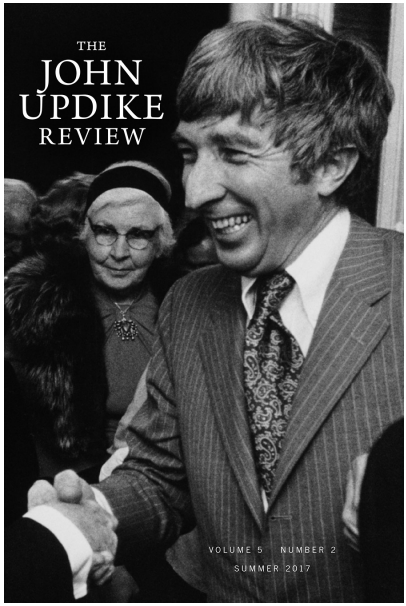
***JUR* 8.1 (Fall 2020).**
Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Donald J. Greiner, Robert Milder, and Haruki Takebe. Responses to *The Coup* by D. Quentin Miller, James Schiff, and Matthew Shipe. Review by Laurence W. Mazzeno.

***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 Dočjinović, 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.



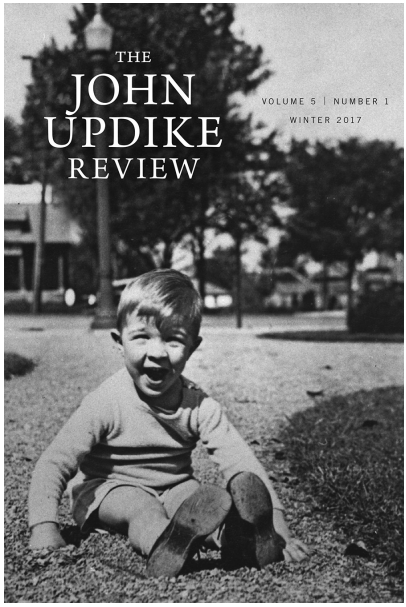


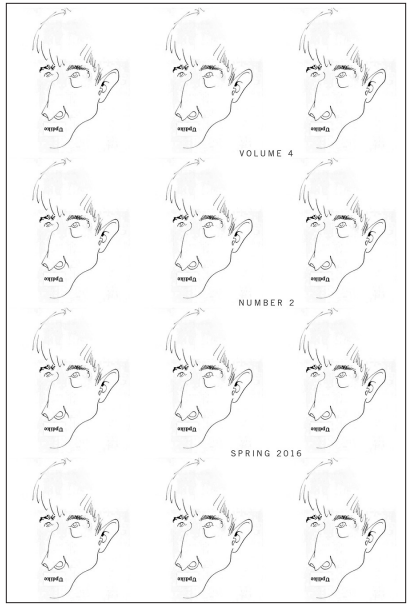


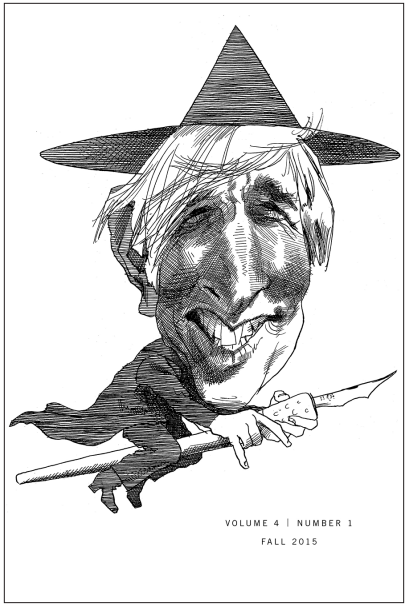
***JUR* 6.2 (Fall 2018).**
Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Donald J. Greiner, Robert M. Luscher, and James Plath. Includes Updike's essay "At War with My Skin" and responses by David Hicks, Elizabeth Hornsey, and James Seitz. Reviews by Judie Newman, Michial Farmer, and Sue Norton.

***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 Julialicia Case, James Schiff, and Gary Weissman. Review by Sue Norton. Drawings by Arnold Roth.

***JUR* 5.2 (Summer 2017).**
Essays by Peter J. Bailey, Donald J. Greiner, Sylvie Mathé, Laurence W. Mazzeno and Sue Norton, and Robert Morace. Includes Updike's story "His Mother Inside Him" and esponses by Jennifer Glaser, Robert M. Luscher, and Molly Reid. Reviews by Matthew Shipe, Aristi Trendel, and Antonio J. Ferraro.



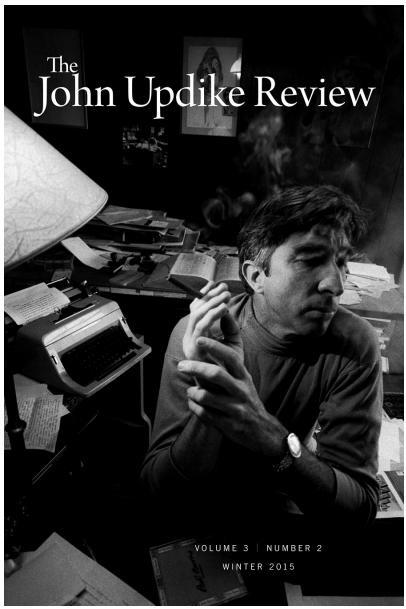


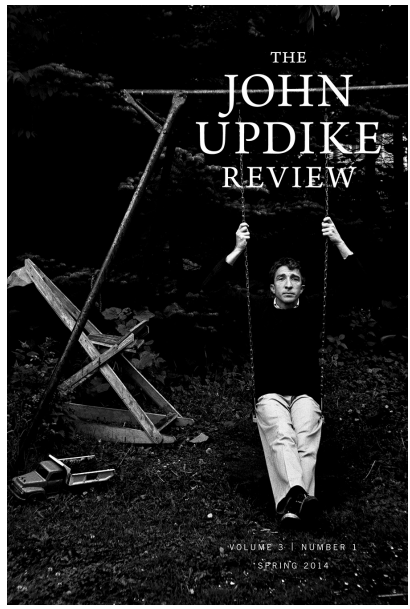


***JUR* 5.1 (Winter 2017).**
Essays by David Updike, Ward Briggs and J. Alexander Ogden, John Philip Drury, and Donald J. Greiner. Responses to *Villages* by Marshall Boswell, James Schiff, Aristi Trendel. Reviews by Sue Norton and Laurence W. Mazzeno.

***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.

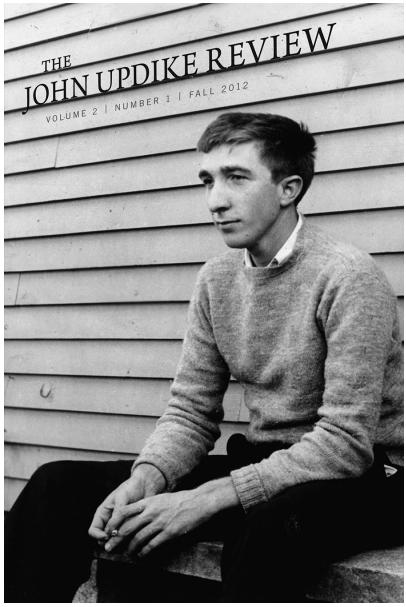




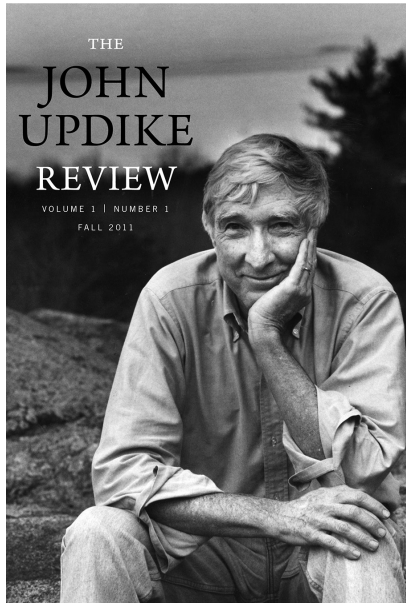
***JUR* 3.2 (Winter 2015).**
Essays by Ward Briggs and Biljana Dojčinović, Donald J. Greiner, Matthew Shipe, and Pradipta Sengupta. Responses to "Gesturing" by Robert M. Luscher, Dario Sulzman, and Kathleen Verduin. Review by Matthew Shipe. Includes Updike's story "Gesturing."

***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.

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

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