
Updike's Way

In the fall of 1997, at the time John Updike's novel *Toward the End of Time* was published, the *New York Observer* featured a page headlined "Twilight of the Phalocrats," consisting of pieces by the critic Sven Birkerts and the novelist David Foster Wallace about the current state of American fiction. That state was not good insofar as it concerned what Birkerts called "our giants, our arts-bemedaled senior male novelists." He was referring to Updike, Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, and Saul Bellow, whose recent novels were "manifestly second-rate," yet who were not "getting called onto the carpet for it." Birkerts suggested that these eminent writers would be well advised to yield their crowns to a younger generation of "brothers," novelists such as Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Stone, and John Edgar Wideman, who had their eyes on politics and society, the "larger world" Updike and his contemporaries, in their obsessive preoccupation with the self, were neglecting. Wallace took a similar line in more abusive terms, declaring that readers under age forty—particularly female ones—had no time for what he termed the G.M.N.s (Great Male Novelists) and disliked Updike in particular. *Toward the End of Time* was a prime example of what these novelists shared—"their radical self-absorption and their uncritical celebration of this self-absorption both in themselves and in their characters."

This is aggressive, knockabout polemic of the emperor-has-no-clothes variety, and for both Birkerts and Wallace narcissism or "self-absorption" is an evil, simply and wholly a failure of moral imagination. I am not concerned here to defend the other senior male novelists from this charge, and I bring it up at the beginning of this discussion not to dismiss it but to see whether such absorption might be instead the mark of aesthetic power. From his earliest work, Updike's engagement with himself—with a man living a life—has been paramount and unabashed. There are and have been critics of his work for whom that concern, that engagement with a self, is not enough; who believe that something larger and more important has been neglected, is lacking. I am not of their number, since—forty-five years or so after it began—Updike's literary career seems to me exemplary and inspiring, one that has yielded up book after book full of artistic, human satisfaction. In the pages that follow, my aim

A version of this essay appears as the Introduction to *Updike, America's Man of Letters* by William H. Pritchard. Copyright © 2000 by William H. Pritchard. Used by arrangement with Steerforth Press.

is to situate him as a man of letters in relation to some American predecessors; also to situate myself as a critic of his work.

Although he had published short stories and poems, along with various humorous squibs, in high school magazines, in the newspaper of his home city Reading, Pennsylvania, and prolifically in the *Harvard Lampoon* (which he also edited), Updike's national career as a writer began in 1954, when *The New Yorker* published his story "Friends from Philadelphia." In that magazine the same year appeared "Duet, with Muffled Brake Drums," a poem about the fateful day when Mr. Rolls met Mr. Royce. The poem, accepted the month Updike graduated from Harvard, would open his first collection of verse, *The Carpentered Hen, and Other Tame Creatures*, published by Harper in 1958. A year later "Friends from Philadelphia" would similarly open his first collection of stories, *The Same Door*, which—along with his novel *The Poorhouse Fair*, also published in 1959—inaugurated a lifetime association with the firm of Alfred Knopf. In his twenty-eighth year, then, Updike had published books in the three major genres he would continue to exploit, with steadily expanding brilliance and authority, in fifty books. In the closing years of the 1950s, a literary career had been launched which over the next four decades would realize itself centrally in these three forms, but also in the steady work of reviewing and criticism, both of literature and painting; in memoirs; and in resourceful commentary on his own work—the stuff of many interviews and prefaces.

Now, four decades after he burst upon the scene, Updike has presented us with his fifth collection of prose essays and criticism (sixth, if you count the art pieces in *Just Looking*): *More Matter* comprises nine hundred pages of wide-ranging reflections on writers, on writing, and on America as he has perceived it for sixty-eight years. The range is from grand matters of state ("The State of the Union, as of March 1992") to trivia like suntanning or Lana Turner, all of them made interesting by the writer's sensibility and treatment. Overall, *More Matter*, in its terminal place at the millennium, makes a strong case for this writer as our preeminent man of letters. In suggesting what that phrase may mean, I quote some useful words of Denis Donoghue about an earlier collection of Updike's prose, *Hugging the Shore*. The old-fashioned-sounding phrase "man of letters," Donoghue wrote, referred "not to writers who regularly review books but to those who take the occasion of reviewing to reflect on the intellectual and moral issues that beset us." The man of letters, he went on, "admires knowledge but isn't intimidated by experts or disabled by the probability that in any particular area of knowledge he must yield to them in the end." He relies, said Donoghue, "upon nothing more than a cultivated intelligence and assiduous reading."¹

Updike's role in American letters has been performed by three major predecessors: Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Dean Howells, and Edmund Wilson. It is true that Hawthorne and Howells were principally novelists; Wilson a critic and essayist. But each was a writer with many strings to his bow, committed to speaking with conviction, wit, and authority about the intellectual and moral condition of his native land. By setting Updike in relation to these writers, rather than to our three most famous expatriate men of letters—Henry James, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot—I have in mind a common sense he shares with the "American" triumvirate. Like them, he mainly stayed home, thinking it his primary task to give us reports and bulletins on American

manners. He may have decided, as did his predecessors, that it does not make sense for an American writer to take up permanent residence in England, France, or Italy. But another “sense” Updike shares with Hawthorne, Howells, and Wilson is a social, ironic one: his invitation to the reader, often a humorous one, is to join in acts of human and artistic measuring that hospitably include us, rather than holding us off at arm’s length as the great modernists (James in his late novels, Eliot in *The Waste Land*, Pound in “Mauberley” and *The Cantos*) often do.

To illustrate: Hawthorne’s fiction is full of extravagance, of tall tales, of characters behaving in the most improbable, melodramatic, deranged ways. Yet the novels, and especially the stories in which these characters live, are subject to an unillusioned and reassuring narrative voice of sensible, even comic, social judgment. Edmund Wilson’s appeal throughout his work is to the generally intelligent reader, unencumbered by theories or distorting ideologies; yet those readers are asked to be wholly immoderate and extreme in their appetite for reading novels, histories, politics, religion. All we have to do to succeed, that is, is become as voracious as Wilson himself and devote our entire lives to reading everything, not just American but world writing. As for Howells—to my mind Updike’s single most inescapable analogue—here is a writer, most grievously neglected today, who spent his literary life making the best case he could for the vitality and interest of American life and letters. Yet he is too often remembered, and dismissed, as the source of an infamous pronouncement about how our writers perforce deal with the “smiling aspects” of life. From where Howells stood over a century ago, in *Criticism and Fiction*, there were no Dostoyevskian tribulations available in America: not even—in his witty example—the rigors of a winter in Duluth, Minnesota, would qualify. Analogously we might recall a moment in *Rabbit at Rest* when Updike’s hero, having successfully impersonated Uncle Sam in a Fourth of July parade in his Pennsylvania hometown, declares “that all in all this is the happiest fucking country the world has ever seen.” For a moment at least, the unsmiling aspects of life in these United States have been triumphantly, even belligerently, disregarded.

Unlike Hawthorne’s or Wilson’s, Howells’s career displays the perfect balance of literary modes: there are the poems, written early, and promising in their delicacy of observation; there are, early and late, the novels; there are dramatic compositions and many travel books; there are a number of delightful and important literary reminiscences, appearing at intervals over the career; there are the memoirs of childhood, especially *A Boy’s Town*, in which small-town midwestern life in the last century is lovingly rendered. And there is Howells the literary editor and critic. In *Criticism and Fiction* he pays tribute to what he calls “the realist writer,” of which he considers himself an instance:

In life he finds nothing insignificant; all tells for destiny and character, nothing that God has made is contemptible. He cannot look upon human life and declare this thing or that unworthy of notice, any more than the scientist can declare a fact of the material world beneath the dignity of his inquiry. He feels in every nerve the equality of things and the unity of man.

This democratic gesture is peculiarly American and manifests the spirit with which, in his first nonfiction essay in autobiography, Updike describes his own project as a writer. In “The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood” (*Assorted Prose*) he tells us that as a young man

he saw art, whether drawing or writing, “as a method of riding a thin pencil line out of Shillington” (the small Pennsylvania town where he was born) “into an infinity of unseen and even unborn hearts,” and that he pictured this infinity as “radiant.” The radiance had to do, at least in part, with the solidity of the world’s body:

Blankness is not emptiness; we may skate upon an intense radiance we do not see because we see nothing else. And in fact there is a color, a quiet but tireless goodness that things at rest, like a brick wall or a small stone, seem to affirm. A wordless reassurance these things are pressing to give. An hallucination? To transcribe middleness with all its grits, bumps, and anonymities, in its fullness of satisfaction and mystery: is it possible or, in view of the suffering that violently colors the periphery and that at all moments threatens to move into the center, worth doing?

We scarcely credit him when he follows with the disclaimer, “Possibly not,” since such transcribings of the world’s body are what have so tirelessly occupied him in his writing career since “The Dogwood Tree.” He has never deviated from his conviction that we were put in this world to give praise and to pay attention.

In “The Dogwood Tree” Updike invokes Goethe, who tells us “to be wary of our youthful wishes, for in maturity we are apt to get them.” The sage also warned that being a man of letters is an incurable disease, and doubtless Thomas Mann, Goethe’s successor in that line, would have agreed, since in “Goethe’s Career as a Man of Letters” Mann connects the incurable nature of the ailment with Goethe’s capacity for wonder, and claims that his productivity was closely bound up with what Mann calls his “positive genius for admiration” (*admirare*: to wonder at). This capacity is also at the root of Updike’s endeavor, having everything to do with the affirming tone he takes toward things, a tone that has annoyed competitors for the American-man-of-letters sweepstakes. (Gore Vidal, for instance, wrote a long and disparaging review of Updike’s *In the Beauty of the Lilies* and of his “patriotic” attitude toward America generally.²) Rather than saying No, in Thunder as Herman Melville perceived Hawthorne to have done, Updike, in the eyes of more than one critic, has said Yes, in Sunshine to American phenomena on which they would prefer to cast a much colder eye. For example: Updike attends church, refused to condemn American involvement in the Vietnam War, and has even confessed satisfaction with Bill Clinton as president (he has later qualified that). Furthermore he is a highly successful writer with no literary agent, has stayed with one publisher throughout his career, and seems never to stop smiling. His many books, published at a rate of more than one per year, show no traces of agonized spiritual travail; they don’t, in W. B. Yeats’s words, suggest “beauty born out of its own despair/Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.” Instead it seems all casual elegance, effortless, an act performed with no hands, revealing first and last—in Robert Frost’s words—“what a *hell* of a good time I had writing it.”

At any rate it’s undeniable that Updike’s capacity for admiration, for paying unstinting attention to the things of this world, is at the center of his strengths as an artist. Philip Roth once remarked, with self-deprecating humor, that he’d just read *Rabbit Is Rich* and that Updike “knows so much, about golf, about porn, about kids, about America. I don’t know anything about anything.”³ A list of subjects Updike is interested in and conversant with would include the following: the graphic arts, in particular

drawing and painting; journalism and the mechanics of printing and newspaper life; geographical, topological, and botanical lore about the landscape of eastern Pennsylvania and the Massachusetts coast north and south of Boston; theological and philosophical inquiry, especially as it involves Protestant “crisis” thinkers from the nineteenth century and beyond; popular song lyrics listened to on the radio and celebrated in his own light verse. He possesses the inclination and ability to find out how things work, as well as what sort of work has preceded us—as revealed in natural history, the evolution of species, the world’s progress since prehistoric times (see George Caldwell’s lecture in *The Centaur*). There is a fascination generally with scientific, cosmological theories, especially “popular” ones, of the universe’s origins and its possible extinction. No writer is more intelligently acquainted with the details of plumbing, with how the frame of a house is constructed, how its boards fit together. Being put on earth to notice things, to give praise, carries with it the obligation to fathom the depths and dimensions of the nonhuman world that supports us. In the short sketch “Plumbing” (*Museums and Women*), as the plumber indicates a finely made joint in the man’s cellar, the man thinks, “He knows my plumbing; I merely own it. . . . We think we are what we think and see when in truth we are upright bags of tripe. We think we have bought living space and a view when in truth we have bought a maze, a history, an archeology of pipes and cut-ins and traps and valves.” Exploring the maze, this history, can add up to a lifework of writing, and the very homeliness of such materials is an incitement to Updike’s writerly ability to transform them into radiance, as in some lines from his poem “The Melancholy of Storm Windows”:

In need of paint, they heave
up from the cellar and back down again
like a species of cloud,

shedding a snow of flakes and grime.
They rotate heavy in our hands; the screwdriver
stiffly twirls; the Windex swipes evaporate
in air ominous of coming worse
or, at winter’s end, of Easter entombment,
of cobwebbed storage among belittling ants
while the grasshopper world above basks.

Stacked, they savor of the crypt,
of the unvisitable nook
and the stinking pipe, irreparable.

What are the challenges and hazards that confront the writer seeking to address the Updike phenomenon? First perhaps is the man’s fearsome articulateness, at all moments, on all subjects, in all forms. An amusing example of how his powers in this regard can overbear and frustrate aspiring novelists occurs in Nicholson Baker’s *U&I*, when Baker remembers watching a documentary on Updike in which,

in one scene, as the camera follows his climb up a ladder at his mother’s house to put up or take down some storm windows, in the midst of this tricky physical act, he tosses down to us

some startlingly lucid little felicity, something about “These small yearly duties which blah blah blah,” and I was stunned to recognize that in Updike we were dealing with a man so naturally verbal that he could write his fucking memoirs *on a ladder!*

Baker’s book, while advertising itself as a “true story” of his obsession with Updike, is also the best book on the writer that has appeared. The others have been written by academics quite properly concerned with describing and analyzing their subject’s oeuvre; Baker’s wholly unacademic gambit is to put himself front and center, as he treats us to a display, from the opening chapter on, of his decision to write about his hero. So *U&I* is a book rich enough to make any critic of Updike hesitate. A related cause for hesitation is that Updike’s interviews and his many introductions to his own books, as they are reprinted, have resulted in a dauntingly impressive body of commentary. One is of course rightly wary about trusting an author on the nature and quality of his own work; still, Updike’s self-commentary seems notably dispassionate, full of sound and untendentious judgments.

But there is a further, more individual challenge to the attempt on my part to speak disinterestedly about this writer’s achievement, to give it what Matthew Arnold in “The Study of Poetry” called a “real estimate” rather than one that is primarily historical or primarily personal. In speaking of the dangers of succumbing to a merely “personal” estimate of a writer Arnold wrote as follows:

A poet or a poem may count to us on grounds personal to ourselves. Our personal affinities, likings, and circumstances, have great power to sway our estimate of this or that poet’s work, and to make us attach more importance to it as poetry than in itself it really possesses, because to us it is, or has been, of high importance. Here . . . we over-rate the object of our interest, and apply to it a language of praise which is quite exaggerated.

To what extent can a non-novelist professional critic like myself presume to speak truly about a contemporary writer, the stuff of whose work is, to a large extent, the stuff of his—my—own American life in the second half of this century? Even though this is an age, as the phrase goes, of identity politics, it may still be that with writers such as, say, George Herbert or Jane Austen, someone addressing the task of writing about either would not need to begin by producing his credentials or confessing her limitations. He or she would not, at least arguably, need to mention biographical data, gender, sexual preference, religious belief or lack of it before setting out to write a clear-headed, useful book about Herbert’s poetry or Austen’s novels. Is it any different when we are dealing with a contemporary writer? Probably so, inasmuch as there are intelligent, serious readers of fiction who do *not* spend time reading Updike, indeed find him uncongenial, trivial, “narcissistic,” male-chauvinist. The case is significantly different from that of Herbert or Austen—or James Joyce. There may, that is, be card-carrying academics who dislike Herbert’s lyrics or find Austen’s novels dull, or who think *Ulysses* is a fraud, but I don’t know any willing to make such confessions. Is it not, however, the case that considerations of gender, race, and politics *are* important constituents of one’s sense of what’s important or not so important in contemporary fiction? Can one imagine a lively argument among three readers about artistic superiority when the first’s notion of a great work is Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, while for the second it is Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*, and for the third Updike’s *Rabbit at Rest*? Most likely

these readers would politely or rudely go their ways rather than attempt to persuade each other of their favorite's preeminence.

It is time, then, to unpack my bag and declare the circumstances in my own life that might make for a sympathetic reading of Updike's work. I was born in 1932, eight months after he was, into a world which, as he puts it in "The Dogwood Tree," was "made tranquil by two invisible catastrophes: the Depression and World War II." I grew up in Johnson City, New York, a small industrial town of twenty thousand inhabitants (an "incorporated village" officially), located just north of the New York-Pennsylvania state line, some 150 miles north of Updike's Shillington. My equivalent, in a neighboring large city, to his Reading was Binghamton, three miles away, which contained the record stores and movie houses I frequented. Like Updike, though not as an only child, I had the benefit of parents convinced of my giftedness and—especially in my mother's case—actively bent on seeing those gifts develop, insofar as encouragement, sometimes vigorously applied, could do so. (Updike has left ample written testimony to the centrality of his mother's influence.) His gifts were literary and pictorial ("riding a thin pencil line out of Shillington"); my own were literary and, to an even greater extent, musical. Updike lived with his parents and maternal grandparents for thirteen years in a house on Shillington's Philadelphia Avenue, then in a sandstone farmhouse ten miles into the country beyond Shillington. My earliest years were spent in a house shared with my paternal grandmother and aunts; when I was four my parents built their own house, but were joined some years afterward by the grandmother and aunts who built a house three doors away. Like Updike's father Wesley, who taught mathematics in the Shillington high school, my mother was a public-school music teacher; my father, a lawyer, became president of the Johnson City board of education. There was never a thought in our family, as I presume there wasn't in Updike's, of sending the son to any place other than public school in preparation for college.

Updike has written eloquently about his twin afflictions of psoriasis and stammering; the closest I can come to that is the eczema that from infancy visited my skin periodically. His list of the three "great secret things" of boyhood—sex, religion, and art—were likewise the ones that counted most for me. The sex was mostly a matter of fantasizing, the religion was low-church Episcopalian, as compared to Updike's Lutheran upbringing. We were equally children of the radio and the movies, the former providing a hit parade of popular songs to be drawn on forever, the latter giving us a weekly infusion of Hollywood heroics (admission: eleven cents) as observed in the gods and goddesses of the silver screen. Updike remembers his mother saying that, in his boyhood, they were "poor," but that feeling doesn't come through strongly in his writing, and I doubt he quite believed it. My parents worked hard and unstintingly to put themselves in an economic bracket they thought of as middle, even upper-middle class. Finally, to draw a curtain over this doubtless unseemly display, we were both high school valedictorians, were admitted to prestigious schools of higher education (both of us turned down by Princeton, he went to Harvard, I to Amherst). We were married in our early twenties, to Radcliffe girls who gave us children young—four in his case, three in mine.

My purpose in listing these circumstantial similarities is not to claim that I am therefore

the ideal person to write convincingly about and judge accurately Updike's work. Indeed the opposite might be more plausibly maintained, especially with Arnold's warning about the personal estimate in mind: that such "identification" between critic and subject makes the necessary detachment unlikely if not impossible to achieve; any comparisons with other writers are weighted in advance, and in Updike's favor. Yet it's also the case that an excursus into autobiography is not something I've engaged in when writing about other literary subjects, nor do "the times" command it any more than they ever did. Rather, the impulse comes unbidden, is prompted by no clear motive or design. It comes, I'm convinced, from some sense of affinity, deep, not quite explicable, with a writer whose vision of things seemed immensely attractive to me—also a writer, but one who has never produced a novel, short story, or "serious" poem. A recent book of my essays was titled *Talking Back to Emily Dickinson*. With Updike, I find that impulse to talk back strong and persistent; and so I have followed it.

Comparison and analysis, says T. S. Eliot, are the critic's tools. This means that, prior to any question of valuing and weighing, we must engage with the writer's pages, paragraphs, and sentences—with, in Updike's case, the famous style that has, from the beginning of his career, received mixed reviews. Nicholson Baker's obsession, a competitive one, is with Updike the writer of sentences as he makes them up either on or off a ladder. Whether or not he will be judged to have written a masterwork, one single book that unquestionably qualifies for such an accolade, he has given us, from the beginning to now, sentences unsurpassed in their witty, rhythmic, intelligently turned and tuned performance (along with, now and then, some outrageous ones, the fruit of overreaching). Accumulated after four decades, they make up a writer whose claim to genius is located in the small (the particular paragraph or sentence) and the large (the production of these sentences throughout a career). In my judgment, more than sufficient attention has already been paid by critics of Updike to something other than his writing: to themes, to religious significances and existential questionings, to their subject's attitudes toward women, toward sex, toward politics. We see a similar focus on "content," on thematic socio-political concerns, in university and college English classrooms directed by teachers who claim their main concern is with language, but who may really be interested in something they think more significant. No one would claim these matters unimportant in judging a writer, but it's likely that by focusing concern elsewhere they may usurp the place of art. In other words, the particular novel or short story is treated as a vehicle for conveying ideas to be applauded or deplored, rather than as the very thing to be experienced for itself. And if you don't think—as an early critic of Updike, Norman Podhoretz, did not—that his work contained any ideas worth talking about, then "style" can be treated as a substitute for having something to say. In either case, for the critic who admires or who disparages Updike's "content," the style, the sentences can be ignored or dismissed. This is unfortunate.

Mention of the academy reminds us that Updike, more than his contemporaries Bellow and Roth, has—except for a single summer teaching a writing course at Harvard—stayed away from it, perhaps sensing how hostile it was and would increasingly become to the kind of generalist aspirations his life as a writer has embodied. It wouldn't be overstating, I think, to say that we begin a new millennium in which the very

idea of a life in letters, or of a passionate, “general” reader across fields, is virtually extinct. We hear talk on all sides about the balkanization, the professionalizing of academic instruction, in “English” as in other disciplines. In the preface to the second edition of John Gross’s authoritative survey, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*, Gross writes, somewhat bitterly, about the kind of closed shop the academy has become, departments of literature now consisting wholly of various specialists doing their own thing while getting along with their colleagues in one way or another. Updike’s assumption that, in these late days, one can write and talk about writing to an audience that is homogenous, even “universal,” is a throwback to what some might feel was a bad old time of exclusion and hierarchical assumptions. And indeed, in that sense Updike, like Edmund Wilson before him, is such a throwback, perhaps to an idea whose time may have come around again.

I should want to say of him what he once wrote about Vladimir Nabokov (in *Assorted Prose*), whom he called “the best writer of English prose at present holding American citizenship, the only writer . . . whose books, considered as a whole, give the happy impression of an *oeuvre*, of a continuous task carried forward variously, of a solid personality, of a plenitude of gifts exploited knowingly.”⁴ The *only* American writer? (I speak now of Updike.) One thinks immediately of those other aging males, of Philip Roth in particular, whose sequence of astonishing novels over the past decade—*Operation Shylock*, *Sabbath’s Theater*, *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, *The Human Stain*—may outdistance the fiction Updike has given us in the years since *Rabbit at Rest*. But it is as the supremely gifted *novelist* that Roth strikes us almost entirely. Except for his two memoirs, he has chosen not to perform his “continuous task” as a writer on a number of fronts, confining himself to the novel. Thus his books, distinguished as they are, add up to an identity somewhat different from that of the man of letters who knowingly exploits “a plenitude of gifts.” Then there is Bellow, who has given us major fiction, three or four matchless novels; and Mailer, whose cultural commentary from the 1960s and 1970s is unparalleled in bite and brilliance. There may be no need to insist upon Updike’s preeminence in this very impressive company. But his continuous task of writing has added up to nothing less than the unfolding of a self, over a career of books. And, *contra* those who talk about narcissism, the unfolding of that self has been also the unfolding of a society and a nation—America in the second half of our century.

NOTES

1. Denis Donoghue, “The Zeal of a Man of Letters,” *The New York Times Book Review*, September 18, 1983, 1.
2. Gore Vidal, “Rabbit’s Own Burrow,” *Times Literary Supplement*, April 26, 1996, 3–7.
3. *Conversations with Philip Roth*, ed. George J. Searles, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1992), 151.
4. Quoted by Dean Flower in his useful monograph *John Updike in American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Molly Weigel, (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1998), 317–338.