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## Introduction

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WRITTEN in 1959 when Updike was only twenty-eight and published by Knopf one year later, *Rabbit, Run*, Updike's second novel, was still the one he was best known by the author somewhat ruefully remarked nearly twenty years after its publication. By the end of the first year, it had sold more than twenty thousand copies. To date, including paperback editions that have gone through over fifty printings, the figure has climbed to more than 2.5 million.<sup>1</sup> Updike acknowledged the book was written with no thought of a sequel and only after some experiments with an autobiographical poem, "Midpoint," and a play about James Buchanan did he decide to return to the novel form. The agitation of the sixties persuaded him that "Rabbit Angstrom of Pennsylvania, about whose future some people had expressed curiosity, might be the vehicle in which to package some of the American unease that was ranging all around us."<sup>2</sup>

Updike has indicated that his initial intention was to contrast *Rabbit, Run* with a companion novella, *The Centaur*, both to be published in a single volume, one novel illustrating a more responsible pattern of behavior, the other more that of instinctual gratification.<sup>3</sup> The rabbit book proved too large to include with that of the horse and the compelling force exerted on Updike's imagination by its central character is evidenced by the three other books he has written at roughly ten-year intervals chronicling Rabbit's adventures, increasingly a mirror of the time and place in which they occur. Yet though *Rabbit, Run* reflected the Eisenhower era, or perhaps because of it, its emphasis was at least as much on Rabbit's struggle to liberate himself from the sexual customs and social attitudes of the period as on its history. Like the

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writers of the fifties, Updike explained, he tried to find excitement in the normal, everyday life, "the quality of things at rest." Accordingly, he focused "on investigation of the quotidian, whereas the generations older and younger than mine have been more economic and political in their orientations."<sup>4</sup>

The novel was written in pencil, then typed by the author, in a second-story corner room of a house in Ipswich, Massachusetts, to which, supported in part by a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation, he had moved his family after giving up a job with the *New Yorker* he had held for two years. Although somewhat removed from the scene of the novel, Updike nonetheless called attention to the fact that it was written coterminously with the public events it depicted. Updike described its structure as a zig-zag pattern, reflecting the motions of a rabbit, motions his hero duplicated, but the book was written consecutively. "I have never made it my habit to skip a scene and then come back to it," Updike has explained. "You are in danger of losing the music, or the thread, in that way."<sup>5</sup> Some episodes did disturb Updike, however. He was concerned about the scene in which Janice drowns the baby, which was composed in what he describes as a little hot attic room at his then wife's parents' summer place in Vermont. "I wrote all day, smoking profusely, and when I came down at tea-time, dizzy with nicotine and vicarious anguish, I announced, 'I killed the baby.'"<sup>6</sup>

With *Rabbit, Run* Updike moved beyond the brilliant promise of *The Poorhouse Fair*, and looking back, he may have felt as though all his work from then on was judged against this second novel. Despite widespread acclaim for the precision of the language and for its evocative power, initial response to the novel was decidedly mixed. Stanley Edgar Hyman remarked on the author's intelligence, learning, honesty, and creative imagination, and regarded him as "the most gifted young writer in America." David Boroff in *The New York Times* found the subject "the stuff of shabby domestic tragedy," and its milieu one of spiritual poverty in which "the old people are listless and defeated, the young mostly empty." Even Boroff, however, noted that the unusually graphic treatment of sex revealed something of "the erotic sophistication of the post-war generation."<sup>7</sup>

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Reviewers seemed offended, not, as might have been expected, by the explicit sexuality, but by the character of the central figure, by the fact that the author seemed neutral toward his self-indulgence, and by the consequent ambivalent ending of the novel. Taking note of the inconclusive ending, Richard Gilman placed the novel in the tradition of French antiliterature associated with Alain Robbe-Grillet or Nathalie Sarraute and described *Rabbit, Run* as a “grotesque allegory of American life with its myth of happiness and success.” Although acknowledging Harry’s less than admirable character, Gilman regarded the book as a “minor epic of the spirit thirsting for room to discover and *be* itself, ducking, dodging, staying out of reach of everything that will pin it down and impale it on fixed, immutable laws that are not of its own making and do not consider its integrity.”<sup>8</sup>

Another reviewer, Milton Rugoff, was far more critical. Rugoff saw in *Rabbit* a complex of vague ideals and uncontrolled desires, as lacking in distinction as the vulgar and tasteless life he is running from. Though Rugoff placed the novel in the tradition of Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, he regarded *Rabbit*’s rebellion as perverse, limited to a nostalgic longing for former athletic triumphs. Accordingly, Rugoff felt *Rabbit* was as much responsible for his fate as its victim and termed the entire novel compressed even to the point of being hallucinatory.<sup>9</sup>

Writing in the *Partisan Review*, John Thompson not surprisingly objected as much to the world he found in Updike’s novel as to the lack of compassion the author adopted in describing it. He termed Updike’s style ultimately revolting for its indiscriminate application of heightened imagery, both to *Rabbit*’s inchoate feelings and to the more neutral narrative passages. As a result, Thompson concluded, obvious truths about the period were mixed with covert meanings about the squalor of life and authenticity of feeling was identified with the impulse of death.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, George Steiner described Updike as a new and powerful voice of the mid-fifties, cosmopolitan and nonchalant and resonant of both Joyce and Nabokov. Steiner, however, also thought the book “faintly precious, faintly cruel.” Pointing to what he described as a “faintly shopworn air” that hovered over

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the central action of an ex-athlete unable to adjust to the loss of his former glory, Steiner complained of the absence of an ironic distancing, affording an undoubted directness and intensity but not providing a means to assess what the reader experiences. Steiner nonetheless found *Rabbit, Run* to be a fascinating novel, redeemed by passages of striking language and invested with an integrity that makes use of pervasive and explicit sexuality to break out of the deadening conformity of the American middle-class existence.<sup>11</sup>

Style, perhaps predictably, was the focus of a more favorable review by Whitney Balliett in the *New Yorker*. He felt that Updike's poetic but unobtrusive writing created a new prose of "precision, freshness, and grace" that set up a verbal rather than a narrative tension. Though Balliett, too, thought Updike cast a cold eye on humanity, whose failure to meet his high moral standards led him to "write *at* his characters," the tone was seen less as an expression of full-fledged misanthropy than as one of uncompromising indignation.<sup>12</sup>

*Time* magazine saw less of that sustaining value. The author's attempt to show what much of life in the United States was like, the reviewer contended, resulted in a depressing and frequently sordid story whose hero was a "weak, sensual, selfish and confused moral bankrupt" devoid of inner resources. Reflecting the more fastidious morality of the times, *Time* disapprovingly concluded that the novel contained "such relentless despair as is seldom found in U.S. writing" and though the reviewer acknowledged that it was in places commandingly written, its principal importance was said to lie mainly in shock value.<sup>13</sup>

The *Time* review was accompanied by a photo of a youthful Updike posed against a bookshelf, looking up from a book he holds open and during perusal of which he seems to have been interrupted. In this literary pose the *Time* writer saw a resemblance to the sober manner of Picasso's *Boy Leading a Horse*. Updike, however, looks at the photographer with a sly, slightly crooked grin that suggests he is too shrewd to believe what is being said about him but too polite to say so. The ambiguity of his expression seems to echo his stated reluctance to identify Rabbit as a representative American figure and his insistence on a "certain necessary am-

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biguity" in the novel which he did not wish "to be any clearer than life."

Overseas the reviews were even less receptive. An unsigned review in the London *Times Literary Supplement* found Updike's theme of delayed adolescence to accurately reflect contemporary American reality. Updike's acute observation of domestic social scenes, however, seemed to the reviewer balanced by the author's tendency to overwrite, so that the expressive brilliance of individual passages was diminished by the cumulative effect of the prose. For the critic in the *New Statesman*, what promised to be a fierce attack on lower middle-class life inside America was weakened by the book's "introspective brooding and interminable sex." Olivia Manning in *The Spectator* similarly complained of Updike's "philosophical musings, turgid thought-processes, and those inevitable sex passages which, so often repeated, are becoming as stimulating to the normal reader as posting a letter." In short, Manning concluded, *Rabbit, Run* was a "pretty much up-to-the-minute American novel."<sup>14</sup> These judgments were echoed by Anthony Burgess who acknowledged that despite being both young and American Updike had already given evidence of "those qualities which Europeans still think they monopolize – fastidiousness, Flaubertian martyrdom, an innocent belief in the power of exact language." Nonetheless Burgess contended that *Rabbit, Run* lacked both irony or social criticism in dealing with the trivial lives it delineated.<sup>15</sup>

Updike revised the novel four years after it came out, principally, he explained, to restore some of the more explicit sexual passages Knopf's legal department had asked him to delete. These and subsequent revisions Updike made in the text were also intended to sharpen the thematic definition as well as clarify the meaning. Above all, perhaps, they emphasized the graphic quality of his prose, a quality suggested by the subtitle penciled in but later deleted from the original manuscript: "A Motion Picture."<sup>16</sup>

Updike has acknowledged the influence of film in eliminating the authorial voice in the novel and so providing an altered sense of space, and in giving him the idea of what a story was and so developing narration as a fictive device. "In movies," he explained,

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something makes it entrance onto the screen and the viewer doesn't know how it came in, nor does he feel he needs to have it explained. The movie has the strangeness of a natural landscape. Nothing seems to have been created; it just happens to be there.<sup>17</sup>

Updike created this landscape in *Rabbit, Run* through the use of the present tense to correspond to the continuous present of movies and by the omission of time-bridging paragraphs. The opening scene of boys playing basketball was, he told one interviewer, intended to serve as a background against which the title and credits of a film could be projected.<sup>18</sup> At the same time Updike expressed some reservations about imitating the instantaneity of film in the novelist's art, a method resulting in an account, he speculated, the authority of which may have been diminished with the loss of the "presiding, talkative, confiding, and pedagogic author."<sup>19</sup>

The visual emphasis of the film approach suggests the animating impulse of the novel is a desire to render the texture of immediate experience at least as much as to record the social background out of which it emerges or even to see the destiny of the characters in terms of the conflict shaped by that background. When, in 1970, the novel was made into a movie, extraordinary care was taken to ensure fidelity to the original. Duplicating the book almost scene by scene the screenwriter called his script a "transcription" rather than a screenplay, and Updike himself commented on the "evident respect for the book" the movie displayed, calling it

a brave picture that does attempt to take us into a real middle America and not a caricature, that does try to cope with how much of our lives happens below the belt, and which has many scenes that will be permanently imprinted on my brain.<sup>20</sup>

Universally condemned by the critics and unsuccessful at the box office (even the actress who played the role of Rabbit's wife criticized it), the film was updated from the fifties to the sixties and thus lacked the context of the deadening Eisenhower years which gave point to Rabbit's need to rebel. The motivation for Rabbit's behavior then becomes personal, almost an expression of petulance rather than a reaction to constricting social pressure. The movie thus misses the novel's ambivalence toward Rabbit and, in

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particular, its sympathy for his desire to escape the trap of middle-class conformity. Subsequently Updike acknowledged that the movie failed in a number of ways, one of which was precisely in its attempt at literal fidelity at the expense of the novel's underlying spirit. As a result, Updike noted, "they produced an enigmatic version of what is very clear in the book."<sup>21</sup>

As well as film, Updike acknowledged the examples of Joyce and Nabokov in dealing with the naturalistic descriptions of sex that were at the same time both justified and convincing.<sup>22</sup> He accepted an overlap between European and American writing, but identified the more personal, spontaneous, perhaps more idiosyncratic concerns he has described as an "autobiographical shapelessness" that forms the distinctive aspect of American fiction in contrast to the knowledge of a fixed social order or a defining theology that provides the English novel with a perspective unavailable to Americans. Although he resists the attempt to find in his work a source of autobiographical truth (more immediate in his short stories, he admits, than in his novels), Updike insists that abandoning that personal element exposes the writer to the risk of mechanically investing his fiction with fact at the expense of an animating intensity.<sup>23</sup>

Updike has perhaps provided the most forceful rebuttal to those critics who objected to his reluctance to condemn Rabbit. In an often quoted comment, he noted the "yes-but" aspect of his work, "Yes in *Rabbit, Run*, to our inner urgent whispers, but – the social fabric collapses murderously."<sup>24</sup> This complex view of the novel was noted by Granville Hicks, who found redeeming qualities in Rabbit and a compassionate response by Updike. For Hicks, one of many who have commented on it, the epigraph from Pascal serves as a summary of the novel in which Rabbit's "motions of Grace" are balanced against the hardness of his heart and the external circumstances which both victimize him and prompt him to delude himself about his prospects.<sup>25</sup> An alternative reading is proposed by Margaret Hallisy, who sees Rabbit's dilemma ironically reflected in Pascal's thought about the duality of man as both limited and omnipotent. Hallisy views Rabbit as a man of faith who feels the presence of God but who receives the diluted wisdom of Pascal from his former coach Marty Tothero. Confronted with

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that spiritual emptiness, Rabbit vacillates, ultimately running from the moral ambiguity in a futile attempt to substitute physical motion for his lost faith.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps responding to the critical tendency to seize on relatively narrow clues as definitive expressions of a novel, Updike has protested that it is possible to overstate the importance of the epigraph which he took from an *Everyman* edition. He changed the translation of the French original, the phrase “the spirit of Grace” becoming “the motions of Grace,” and restored the punctuation, bringing it closer to the original; thus the motions of grace and the hardness of the heart appear on one side of the semicolon and the external circumstances on the other.<sup>27</sup>

These external circumstances were, for Updike, everywhere Rabbit turns, from pregnancy and family responsibilities to the financial problems that press in upon him. The motions of Grace, he explained, represented our nonmaterial side that seeks out what is good, and the hardness of the heart, with which Grace is intertwined, a contrasting expression of Rabbit’s character.<sup>28</sup> While hidden in what he thinks of as the safety of his former coach’s apartment, Rabbit is directed to where “men are busy nailing the world down, and toward the disembodied sounds his heart makes in darkness a motion of love.”<sup>29</sup>

In fact, however, Rabbit’s concluding meditation on motion and his subsequent ecstatic attempt to fulfill its potential lead him in another direction. Rabbit dismisses as insubstantial the crowded field of social experience and its consequent confusions. “Funny,” he thinks, “how what makes you move is so simple and the field you must move in is so crowded. Goodness lies inside, there is nothing outside, those things he was trying to balance have no weight” (308). The balance, which in the epigraph appears to be maintained by a semicolon separating the motions of Grace and the hardness of the heart from external circumstances, here seems shifted exclusively to an internal arena in which competing claims may be examined. “The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment,” declares Emerson, in whose transcendental philosophy critics have found justification for Rabbit’s actions. For Emerson, however, abandonment proceeds from the “flames and generosities of the heart,” which, though it refuses to be imprisoned,



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prompts the circular movement that allows us to transcend the transience of things.<sup>30</sup> Like William Young of Updike's story "Museums & Women," Rabbit searches for a radiance that continues to fade behind him at each encounter with what come to be seen as the increasingly familiar joys of domesticity. The resistance to such contentment in Denis de Rougemont's suggestive elaboration of his mythic treatment of love in the Western world, prompts some of Updike's more strenuous reservations. Nonetheless, although he sees as finally unconvincing de Rougemont's obstructed and narcissistic view of love, he acknowledges that it accurately describes a means of self-assertion in which "The heart prefers to move against the grain of circumstance."<sup>31</sup>

The conflict between self-assertion and the insistent claims of the substantial world often centers in Updike's fictions around the mediating force of religion, to which, Updike has remarked, we optimistically look for a "guarantee that our self enjoys an intended relation to the outer world."<sup>32</sup> Acknowledging the "culture of common experience" depicted in *Rabbit, Run*, Thomas Edwards contended the novel was so distinctly an expression of the 1950s because it "takes so little account of the public terms of life in its time."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, noting what he termed Updike's accurate representation of the "minutiae of the Eisenhower age" – indications of class and status that ranged from the glamor of high school heroes to the authority invested in athletic coaches and included the way generational tensions both pulled at family life and looked to it as a sustaining value – Richard Locke felt that finally Rabbit operated within his inner spaces.<sup>34</sup>

Still, as Edward Vargo points out in calling attention to the sacralized dimensions of *Rabbit, Run*, Rabbit's failure to integrate his religious feeling with any paradigmatic myth or ritual act other than sports, sexuality, or running or, briefly, in the rite of Christian burial prevents his meaningful or sustained communion with the unseen world.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, Dean Doner finds the traps from which Rabbit runs – a joyless marriage, a stifling economy, and a general lack of excellence that afflicts middle-class American life – all signs of an oppressive humanism that runs throughout Updike's fiction. Doner identifies an opposition between the guilt that attends earthly considerations of happiness for which the humanist Rev-

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erend Jack Eccles is perhaps the principal spokesman, and the higher promptings Rabbit glimpses of his soul. Rabbit becomes lost, Doner points out, when he attempts to follow a road map rather than his intuitive sense of an unseen world. Accordingly, Rabbit rejects the sociological view of religious consolation offered by the comically portrayed Reverend Eccles; he inarticulately and intuitively clings to the belief in an unseen world that redeems the otherwise empty landscape.<sup>36</sup>

In thus reducing humanism to a middle-class materialism indifferent to the needs of the spirit and responsible for the deterioration of values that describes contemporary urban life, Doner misses the ambivalence with which Updike views it and the sustaining, even transcendent, human qualities of the ordinary urgings of sex and the institutional ceremony of church and the sacramental nature of marriage. It is, finally, Rabbit's ecstatic escape from these that leaves him directionless. His resistance to the unseen world must be validated as much as his belief in it must be celebrated.

Updike has defended Rabbit's attempt to escape the constraints on self-realization and individual freedom that marriage imposes, claiming there is a case to be made for running away from one's wife and that what he intended to show in the novel was "the shadow of moral ambiguity."<sup>37</sup> At the same time, he has described Rabbit as a victim of the "dreadful freedom" that comes with absorption in one's personal life, in large measure resulting from the lack of purposive vocation and the consequent boredom that has left the American middle class struggling with problems that once troubled only the aristocracy.<sup>38</sup>

Updike has acknowledged that though the novel "had a few overheard news items in it, it wasn't really in a conscious way about the 50's. It just was a product of the 50's."<sup>39</sup> The central image of running announced in the title, a movement which seems to contrast with the static self-satisfaction of the Eisenhower fifties, has over the years continued to prompt critical attention to the question of whether Rabbit is running away from or toward something, whether he represents an alternative to the mediocrity and deadness of middle-class American life in the excellence he had