# INTRODUCTION: "A SORT OF HELPLESSLY 50'S GUY"

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At the beginning of *U and I* (1991), news of Donald Barthelme's death prompts Nicholson Baker to contemplate how "disassembled and undirected and simply bereft" he would feel were he to learn of the demise of the writer he considers his "emotional plenipotentiary": "All I wanted, all I counted on, was Updike's immortality . . . 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."[1] Hyperbolic, perhaps, but not inaccurate given the enormously prolific career that John Updike has had since the publication of his first story in 1954: twenty-one novels, fifteen short story collections, seven volumes of poetry, seven essay collections, five children's books, one play, and one memoir. It is no wonder that Baker, who acknowledges having read Updike "very intermittently," still admits to "thinking about him constantly."[2]

Updike's subject, broadly construed, has always been America, where, as the poem "Americana" (2001) states, "beauty is left / to make it on its own, with no directives / from kings or cultural commissars on high" (*Americana*, 5). Indeed, spanning as it does the entire second half of the twentieth century, Updike's writing provides a historical roadmap that traces the changes undergone by the nation since the end of the Second World War: beginning with the regionalism of the autobiographical short stories and the creation of Olinger as a Pennsylvania equivalent of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha and Anderson's Winesburg, extending to the Cold War whose inception and end frames the epic Rabbit Angstrom tetralogy (1960, 1971, 1981, 1990), and projected forward to a post-holocaust 2020 that is the temporal setting of *Toward the End of Time* (1997). Less obviously, but nevertheless consistently, Updike's subject has also been writing, evidenced first by his reviews of other writers – past (for example, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Wharton, Mencken) as well as present (Bellow, Vonnegut, Le Guin, Tyler, Roth), foreign (Queneau, Calvino, Sōseki, Borges, Soyinka) as well as American – and apparent more and more in the

intertextual allusiveness and metafictional devices that permeate his own novels themselves (*A Month of Sundays* [1975], *S.* [1988], *Memories of the Ford Administration* [1992], *Gertrude and Claudius* [2000]). In so doing, he has joined an awareness of contemporary theoretical developments to the modernist influence of those writers – Joyce, Proust, and Nabokov – he most often claims as his literary antecedents.

These concerns are not unique to Updike, of course. Among those contemporaries who emerged during the 1950s and whose works also may be seen as chronicling the past half-century of American history, the names of Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, and Philip Roth come immediately to mind. But unlike Mailer, who approaches his subject by way of the psychopathic outsider in works like *The Executioner's Song* (1979) and *Oswald's Tale* (1995), or Vidal, who adopts the point of view of the privileged Washington, DC, insider in his "American Chronicle" series, or Roth, who employs the lens of Jewish ethnicity in *American Pastoral* (1997) and *The Plot Against America* (2004), Updike has devoted himself to the transcription of "middleness with all its grits, bumps, and anonymities, in its fullness of satisfaction and mystery" (*Assorted*, 186). Significantly, Updike's relationship to that "middle" has altered over time. In 1968, the year that *Couples* was published, his appearance on the 26 April cover of *Time* that accompanied a feature on "The Adulterous Society" presumed that Updike's perspective typified the American perspective. In 1989, by contrast, the writer who still located his authorial "stock in trade" in "an intuition into the mass consciousness and an identification with our national fortunes" was forced to admit that the liberal political position by which he defined himself "had unfairly gone unfashionable on me" during that same late 1960s period (*Self-Consciousness*, 124, 125). Far from simply – and uncritically – articulating the concerns of an American mainstream, then, Updike's canon tells the more interesting story of a writer, often distinctly out of sync with his culture, grappling with a half-century's worth of change.

Born in 1932, Updike is too young for that "unfashionable" political position to have been the result of what Thomas Hill Schaub has termed the "story of chastened liberalism" that the failure of Soviet Russia to live up to the utopian Marxist dream produced.[3] On the contrary, to the extent that Updike identifies himself as having a political affiliation, it is the result of early exigency: of growing up the son of a Roosevelt Democrat forced to supplement a high school teacher's salary with construction work during the summers and the grandson of a Jacksonian Democrat forced to labor on town highway crews after losing his money in the 1929 Wall Street Crash, of coming from a family, in short, that "had simply *been* poor, and voted Democrat out of crude self-interest" (119). The priorities inscribed in his writing,

nonetheless, are fully in keeping with key elements of that 1950s discourse in which a liberalism defined, according to Lionel Trilling, by "an impassioned longing to believe" and betrayed by Soviet practices eventuated:[4] the replacement of ideology with psychology, adherence to a realism of ordinary facts as distinct from the perceived naïveté of 1930s–1940s naturalism and social realism, affirmation of what William Phillips dubbed "new 'Americanism.'"[5] Yet if such confluence between personal and cultural values enabled Updike to claim, in retrospect, "I was happy in the Fifties" – especially after having survived "the khaki-brown Forties and the grit-gray Thirties" (*More*, 25) – the fiction that emerged from that period did not provide the triumphant "yea-saying to the goodness and joy of life" that a 1955 *Life* editorial titled "Wanted: An American Novel" demanded.[6] Reflecting instead his sense of the period as an intermediate "post-war decade," the 1950s in Updike's early work typically figures, in recollection or direct portrayal, as a "middle bulge" (*Coup*, 132), a "climate of time between, of standoff and day-by-day" (*Couples*, 106). As such, the tensions of Cold War standoffs are translated into the tensions of domestic standoffs – what Updike has called the "politico-marital" (*Self-Consciousness*, 134) – and competitive gamesmanship, and an inability to locate viable systems of belief yields endings in which characters remain in suspension.

Nowhere are these qualities more clearly displayed than in *Rabbit, Run* (1960), the "helplessly 50's kind of book written by a sort of helplessly 50's guy," as Updike recalled, that serves in many ways as a template for much of the fiction that follows.[7] Overflowing ashtrays, dust balls beneath radiators, pork chops congealing in grease, and scatter rugs whose corners keep turning under comprise the facts at the forefront of Harry Angstrom's daily life, while in the background Dwight D. Eisenhower and Harold Macmillan begin a series of talks in Gettysburg and Tibetans battle Chinese Communists in Lhasa. Excellence in sports becomes a gauge of excellence in love, as Harry compares his first-rate basketball career with his second-rate marriage. Athletic rivalry translates into erotic rivalry once Harry discovers that a former teammate has slept with his mistress. Perhaps most important, the "crisscrossing mess" of domesticity that "clings to [Harry's] back like a tightening net" is just a localized version of the "red lines and blue lines and stars" that form the "net he is somewhere caught in" that, in turn, forms the map of the country by which he tries to chart his escape at the novel's outset (*Run*, 14, 36). Receiving no answer to the question posed during that aborted attempt – in an America that "from shore to shore" seems identical, "[i]s it just these people I'm outside, or is it all America?" (33) – and confronted by "a paralyzing sense of reality" in which "his child is really dead, his day is really done" (302), he ends the book once again midflight.

And with the final word "runs" that concludes the book, Updike's character joins the many others in postwar American fiction, of quite varying literary predilections, whose vain searches – whether for freedom from responsibility or responsibility to fill the "vast blank" of freedom (50) – leave them, often literally, in transit: John Laskell boarding a train on the last pages of Trilling's *The Middle of the Journey* (1947), the eponymous narrator preparing to emerge from underground in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Yossarian going AWOL in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), perhaps most ominous, Jake Horner getting into a taxi en route to "Terminal," the final word in John Barth's *The End of the Road* (1958).

It is Updike's devotion to a form of layered realism wherein what is visible suggests what is invisible, both equally constitutive of what should be considered "real," that distinguishes Harry's quest as more than just another 1950s rebellion against a conformist society, however. "Plain realism has never seemed to me enough," he stated when commenting upon his preference for "crotchety modernist magicians" like Joyce and Calvino. "Novel-readers must have a plot, no doubt, and a faithful rendering of the texture of the mundane; but a page of printed prose should bring to its mimesis something extra, a kind of supernatural as it were, to lend everything roundness – a fine excess that corresponds with the intricacy and opacity of the real world" (*Odd*, 869–870). Typically, that roundness in Updike's work is achieved by way of connections among unlike things. As he explained in a 1964 speech titled "Why Write?," drawing on a sheet of paper "an assortment of objects – flowers, animals, stars, toaster, chairs, comic-strip creatures, ghosts, noses" – and connecting them with lines provided a valuable early exercise, for when completed "they all became the fruit of a single impossible tree" (*Picked-Up*, 34). Thus, in *Rabbit, Run*, a basketball hoop endowed with "high perfect hole," "crotch of the rim," and "pretty skirt of net" gains transcendental import when the orgasm that concludes a later amorous act is described as a "falling through" (37, 4, 85). But since the roadmap that Harry follows in his attempt to escape from Brewer is also described as a "net" in which he feels himself trapped, and the image of descent prefigures all those airplane crashes – at Lockerbie, of John F. Kennedy Jr. – that punctuate the later Rabbit works, the sexuality by which the human condition is transcended is complicated by intimations of human mortality that cannot be denied.

In the 1950s those intimations were more than abstract for Updike, whose "inner alarm" at "all the desolating objective evidence of our insignificance and futility and final nonexistence" was only alleviated by the reading of Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth (*Odd*, 844). Their works affirmed that God was part of that irrefutable reality that Updike sought to portray.

"'Something beyond which it is impossible to conceive anything greater' must exist in reality as well as in the mind," he paraphrased in a review of Barth's *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (1931), "for if it existed only in the mind, it would not be 'something beyond which it is impossible to conceive anything greater'" (*Assorted*, 275–276). Such a deity has little to do with institutionalized religion – Updike very early in his career dismissed the "more or less watered down Puritan God" worshiped in "nice white church[es]" who "is not very real to me" in favor of "God who throws the lightning bolt" who is "God the Creator"[8] – and everything to do with faith. Indeed, it is faith alone and unaccompanied by the false support of good works that, in Updike's view, distinguished his own Lutheran upbringing from that of other Christian denominations (*Self-Consciousness*, 130). Because this God is not the product of human invention but is "Wholly Other" (*totaliter aliter*), as Updike's reading of Barth makes clear, "We cannot reach Him; only He can reach us" (*Assorted*, 273–274).

Correspondingly, one of the ways in which God reaches humans in Updike's work is through those real things that function as "masks for God."[9] As Clarence Wilmot, one of Updike's clergyman characters, preaches, "We do not worship a God immensely above us, out of human reach, but One Who does not disdain to touch us, to lay even rough hands upon us, . . . and to speak to men in metaphors drawn from their daily lives" (*Lilies*, 50–51). The inarticulate Rabbit, who "has no taste for the dark, tangled, visceral aspect of Christianity" but still believes in an "unseen world" with which his actions constitute transactions (*Run*, 237, 234), thus can see in a golf-ball's trajectory that magical "*it*" that, as Updike later explains, holds out "the hope of perfection, of a perfect weightlessness and consummate ease," ultimately, of "grace" (*Run*, 134; *Rest*, 56). In contrast, Teddy, Clarence's lapsed Christian son, senses the need for faith expressed in his rootless grandson's letter, "[b]ut Teddy had no faith to offer; he had only the facts of daily existence. Weather, family news, local change" (*Lilies*, 412).

As J. D. Salinger's forays into Zen Buddhism, Flannery O'Connor's and Walker Percy's strict Catholicism, Bernard Malamud's Jewish mysticism, and, perhaps most idiosyncratic, Norman Mailer's proposed war between God and the Devil attest, Updike was not alone in his religious inclinations during the 1950s. Nor is he alone in them today: one thinks, for example, of all those quotidian things – ATM machines, illegal pharmaceuticals, supermarkets – that join Don DeLillo's characters in shared systems of belief. With the publication of *Couples* and declaration of "sex as the emergent religion, as the only thing left," however, Updike established his own particular niche.[10] In the "*post-pill paradise*" that is Tarbox, Massachusetts (*Couples*, 52, 91), God presides by way of the "pricking steeple and flashing

[weather]cock" that adorn the Congregational Church and wife swapping supports the edifice erected by residents "to keep the night out" (82, 7). As such, what is individualized in *Rabbit, Run* becomes socialized in *Couples*.

To the extent that success in this death-defying venture depends on a mythologizing of women – with nothing less than God located between the legs of one woman and the genitalia of another described as "heavenly" (343, 194) – Updike's theologizing of the adulterous union harks back in American literature to Hawthorne's "instinctive tenet that matter and spirit are inevitably at war" (*Hugging*, 77). Not coincidentally, the city on a hill in Plymouth County that is Tarbox was first settled as a port by Puritans. To the extent that the adulterous husband whose presence hovers over the novel is John F. Kennedy, its theologizing of sex is a specifically post-Second World War phenomenon, the act of upper-middle-class thirtysomethings who move to Tarbox in the 1950s and, living in "an indulgent economy" (105), lose all sense of the Protestant work ethic they have inherited: "The men had stopped having careers and the women had stopped having babies. Liquor and love were left" (12). If Harry Angstrom resists David Reisman's *Lonely Crowd* (1950), these characters are William H. Whyte's *Organization M[e]n* (1956). Frank, a banker, asks his friend Harold's wife Marcia to "sexualize" him because "[w]ith this sloppy marketing running, it's probably the best investment left" (112); Harold, a stockbroker, looks upon Frank's wife Janet as "a bad investor who would buy high and sell after the drop and take everybody she could down with her" (119). Carol reflects upon "what a lot of *work*" goes into the biological creation of each human being (238), and Janet confirms the sentiment when submitting to "the long work" of Harold's second climax (152).

If this depiction of sex as work qualifies the degree to which Updike saw the election of Kennedy as having brought back "the *fun* in being an American" (305), as characters claim – "fun" being the noun most often invoked by Updike characters who attempt to distinguish the 1950s from other decades (*Coup*, 272; *Seek*, 141) – the assassination of Kennedy that occurs at mid-point shatters that myth of happy consensus entirely. In Updike's portrayal, in fact, it did not so much leave "an emptiness [as] revealed one already there," is less "confirmation of chaos" to come as indication that the period through which the characters have been living is "one of those dark ages that visits mankind between millennia, between the death of and rebirth of gods, when there is nothing to steer by but sex and stoicism and the stars" (294, 372). And the novel shows no signs of that darkness abating. The shift of Tarbox from idyllic retreat to suburban sprawl that signals a modernization justified "as part of the national necessity, the overarching honor of an imperial nation" (387), as evidenced by hints of future war in Vietnam, may also

signal a nation "*fat and full of pimples and always whining for more candy*" that God "*doesn't love . . . any more*" (200), as evidenced by the apocalyptic burning of the Congregational Church "by God's own lightning" (441). Even worse, it may signal a nation that God has never especially favored above all others: the conflagration turns out to be the result of a fundamental unsoundness in the building's construction. Having already quashed the myth of American consensus, the book ends by querying the myth of American exceptionalism. In so doing, it forms part of that ongoing investigation to which Updike has devoted himself since first posing the question in 1957: "What is it that distinguishes the American Man from his counterparts in other climes; what *is* it that makes him so special?" (*Assorted*, 4).

As Richard H. Pells has argued, that myth formed very much a part of 1950s discourse, particularly after the failure of leftist politics abroad left intellectuals scrambling to differentiate between the United States and Europe.[11] Emerging first by way of contrast – "a political lesser evil" (Leslie A. Fiedler), a republic "fundamentally sounder and stronger than its enemies" (Jacques Barzun), "the distinctly better mousetrap" (John Updike)[12] – America eventuated in a plethora of texts that claimed to have uncovered the source of its uniqueness and the uniqueness of its national character: Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), Perry Miller's second volume of *The New England Mind* (1953), R. W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955), John William Ward's *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (1955), and Marvin Meyers's *The Jacksonian Persuasion* (1957), to name but a few.[13]

Aware of the imaginative component that infuses all such attempts at national definition, Updike in midcareer conceded: "When a Japanese says 'Japanese,' he is trapped on a little definite racial fact, whereas when we say 'American' it is not a fact, it is an act, of faith, a matter of lines on a map and words on paper, an outline it will take generations and centuries more to fill in" (*Problems*, 45) – the nation not "a face of God," as Harry Angstrom assumes (*Redux*, 47), but another imagined community, to borrow Benedict Anderson's phrasing.[14] At the same time, Updike has always remained aware that the land in which a Shillington boy, by dint of effort, could get a Harvard education, a *New Yorker* staff position, and the chance to practice his craft unencumbered by other obligations was still a "country that had kept its hackneyed promises – life, liberty, pursuit of happiness – to me" (*Self-Consciousness*, 137). Qualification of the actuality in his work is thus offset by celebration of the ideal. A State Department political officer asserts, "I love this crazy, wasteful, self-hating nation in spite of itself" (394) while the Vietnam War still rages in *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996). Updike defends his support of the same conflict by praising America as a "great roughly rectangular country severed from Christ by the breadth of the sea"

(*Self-Consciousness*, 103), majestic in size, unique in being providentially ordained, but still separated from Christ by its practices. What changes over time is the balance between acclamation and reservation.

Significantly, it is not the shift in America's fortunes that causes the greatest shift in that balance. The America of the Rabbit novels is in steady decline as the threat that communist aggression poses in the first two books is replaced by the leverage that oil grants the Middle East in the third and the edge that technology affords Japan in the fourth. Yet Harry Angstrom still proclaims American unilateralism at the end of *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981) – "Who needs Afghanistan? Fuck the Russkies. Fuck the Japs, for that matter. We'll go it alone, from sea to shining sea" (465) – while the country is literally and figuratively running out of gas. Alfred Clayton can chart the resignation of Nixon, the non-election of Ford, and the selection of the "not, absolutely, convincing" Carter in *Memories of the Ford Administration* (1992), and affirm "[t]he torch still shines" (352, 79). Rather, it is the erosion in the 1950s of the bipolar politics from which America gained definition that causes that national symbol to dim as the Cold War comes to an end.[15] For, as Michael Rogin correctly recognizes, it is precisely that kind of binarism – whether conceived as Manicheanism, exceptionalism, or, to use his own term, "American political demonology" – that has been crucial in determining the concept of American citizenship from the start.[16] When, politically, "the only difference between the two old superpowers is they sell their trees to Japan in different directions," as Harry quips (*Rest*, 352), and, economically, the personalized rivalry of "good clean dog eat dog" is replaced by "Japan, and technology, and the profit motive" (*Rich*, 24; *Rest*, 272), why *not* wonder, as Harry does, "what's the point of being an American?" (*Rest*, 442–443). Hardly any, when the "frozen far heart . . . of the grand old republic" is as ready to infarct as the one diagnosed as "tired and stiff and full of crud" and, worst of all, "typical" that is accorded Harry in 1989 (442, 166).

This is not to suggest that Updike's admission of American typicality has made his political position any more fashionable than it was in 1989. On the contrary, his representation of American normativity in terms – exclusively, according to detractors – of middle-class white masculinity and apparent denigration of everyone else in terms of racialized, ethnic, and/or gendered otherness has provoked controversy since the start of his career. To be sure, Updike's work often seems to warrant such allegations. The deification of women as mistresses and dismissal of them as wives do combine in *Of the Farm* (1965) into a view of all women as daughters of Eve, indifferent to that "riddle" of death that men seek to solve and "a subspecies, less than equal to Man, a part of the whole" for having originated as part of his body (152, 151). The juxtaposition of black sexuality and Apollo 11 WASP technology

in *Rabbit Redux* (1971) does introduce black and white as mirror-image binaries; conversely, the portrait of Africa "look[ing] like the country north of Vegas" in *The Coup* (1978) and ruled by a man as "American as apple pandowdy" can confirm the imaginative limitations of an author whose mirror reflects only a North American white man's visage (206, 173). Likewise, Henry Bech, for all that his "irrepressible Jewish God" contrasts with Updike's own "tenuous and diffident Other" (*Back*, 123, 122), may be more ego than alter: in Bulgaria the mirror "gave him back only himself"; in Jerusalem it gives him back southern California (*Bech*, 70; *Back*, 68). When, with his dying breath, a critic hurls the worst insult he can think of at him, it serves as Updike's wry acknowledgement of how outdated and circumscribed the "[m]iddle-middle" treatment of "[*l*]*a bourgeoisie*" to which Bech (and, by implication, Updike himself) has devoted himself has been deemed to be: "You're Fifties!" (*Bech*, 45; *Bay*, 206).

Yet evidence also exists – particularly in Updike's later works – that the ways in which gender, race, and ethnicity are defined may involve more than simple binaries. *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) and *S.* (1988) open with husbands divorced, deserted, or turned to dust and women whose incantations and attempts at Eastern religion are driven by the same fear of death and desire for transcendence that habitually haunt Updike's men. *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000) presents a queen through whose bloodline the throne passes. *Seek My Face* (2002) defines the human species as "less differentiated by gender than many" and men and women as "both made to run, and to hang on to branches, and to eat nuts and berries" (252, 253). *Brazil* (1994) shows nature confounding all racial difference, as occurs when its hero and heroine exchange colors in the Mato Grosso. *Self-Consciousness* (1989) posits a genealogical inheritance of "mixed blood" and predicts an "ideal colorblind society" flickering at the "edge of the sluggishly evolving one" (164, 195). If nostalgia is indeed, as Updike long ago posited, "love for that part of ourselves which is . . . forever removed from change and corruption" (*Assorted*, 287), the evolution that occurs over his career shows him resisting that unnatural impulse.

By approaching Updike's writing more with respect to recurrent themes than individual texts, and by deliberately incorporating into its discussion those neglected works of the past decade, this volume of essays foregrounds the element of evolution into its very structure. In so doing, it seeks to do justice to Updike's *oeuvre* in a number of ways. First, it facilitates comparisons between Updike and other writers who have dealt with similar subjects over the course of their careers. Second, it juxtaposes earlier and later Updike works against each other – in effect, situates Updike in dialogue with himself – so as to illustrate the ways in which both inform each other. Third,

it permits readers to consider the degree to which the evolution of Updike's career has allowed for the possibility of change. The trajectory of the volume, then, proceeds from a consideration of those subjects that form the basis of Updike's work to those subjects that time has forced him to reappraise, with the focus throughout on Updike's fiction, the genre with which readers are most familiar, and any other work (essays, reviews, poems) incorporated as ancillary.

"Part I: Early influences and recurrent concerns" introduces readers to the thematic appropriation of "middleness," the techniques of American neo-realism, and the orthodox brand of theology that underlie Updike's writing as constants. D. Quentin Miller opens this study of Updike's aesthetics by examining those early writings that take place in Olinger, the middle ground on which battles between insulation and stagnation, change and claustrophobia, are habitually waged by Updike's young and artistic alter egos. Kristiaan Versluys distinguishes the realism of Updike's early stories as a contemporary variation of a nineteenth-century original: its devotion to the quotidian indebted to William Dean Howells and Walt Whitman on the one hand, its search for an all-encompassing metaphor or moment of stasis adhering to the poststructuralist interrogation of fixed meaning on the other. Marshall Boswell concludes by discussing the influence that Kierkegaard's and Barth's dialectics have had on Updike's art and aesthetics, in particular on the novel of "moral debate" in which the clash between ethics and inner call to faith eventuates.

"Part II: Controversy and difference" examines the sexual mythologizing of women that derives from Updike's own religious impulse and the eroticizing/exoticizing of blacks and Jews that reflects a canonical American literary tradition. Within this section Kathleen Verduin juxtaposes Updike's reliance on feminine archetypes – earth mother, sexual temptress, and witch – that constrict women against the mundane realities of American life that he depicts as frustrating women. Jay Prosser extends Updike's interest in American slavery, which is to say imperialism at home, to the phenomenon of imperialism abroad and, with Updike's delineation of the chronic psoriasis from which he suffers, to skin as it is related to his most intimate self. Lastly, Sanford Pinsker explores the way in which Updike's cross-dressing as the Jewish Henry Bech, his most famous authorial alter ego, provides Updike with a mouthpiece that is simultaneously him and not him.

"Part III: American chronicles" traces the changes in the second half of the twentieth century that have mandated not just Updike's reassessment of America's heritage, but his reassessment of the literary devices by which that legacy is best portrayed. To that end, Edward Vargo turns his attention to Updike's portrayal of American history and charts the shift from a