

# John Updike's Rabbit Tetralogy

*Mastered Irony  
in Motion*

Marshall Boswell

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*For my family, both the original text  
—Jim, June, Christian, and Rob—  
and the sequel—  
Rebecca and Graham*

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Finally, a warm bear hug to Tod Marshall, kindred soul.

## A Note on the Texts

All citations to the “Rabbit novels” contain two page references. The first page reference corresponds to the original Knopf cloth edition of that specific novel. The second reference corresponds to the Everyman’s Library single-volume edition of the complete tetralogy, *Rabbit Angstrom* (1995). Recently, Fawcett Ballentine has reissued the four individual Rabbit novels in trade paperback. These new editions consist of the newest galleyproofs from the Everyman’s Library volume, with individuated page references for each novel. To locate citations in the new Fawcett Ballentine trade paperbacks, simply perform the following subtractions from the *Rabbit Angstrom* citations:

<i>Rabbit, Run:</i>	No subtractions necessary
<i>Rabbit Redux:</i>	subtract 267
<i>Rabbit Is Rich:</i>	subtract 623
<i>Rabbit at Rest:</i>	subtract 1051

All other references to Updike’s work correspond to the original Knopf cloth editions.

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# Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
A Note on the Texts	xi
Introduction. Rabbit Rebound Mastered Irony and the Mega-Novel	1
One. <i>Rabbit, Run</i> Kierkegaard, Updike, and the Zigzag of Angst	26
Two. <i>Rabbit Redux</i> The Doorway into Utter Confusion	76
Three. <i>Rabbit Is Rich</i> More Stately Mansions	130
Four. <i>Rabbit at Rest</i> Repetition and Recapitulation	186
Conclusion. Inside America	231
Bibliography	241
Index	247



# Introduction

## Rabbit Rebound

### Mastered Irony and the Mega-Novel

John Updike published *Rabbit, Run*, the first of his four novels about Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, in 1960. *Rabbit Redux*, the second installment in the series, came out in the fall of 1971. The third and fourth installments, *Rabbit Is Rich* and *Rabbit at Rest*, followed in 1981 and 1990, respectively. All totaled, the four-part series—or tetralogy—took John Updike nearly thirty years to complete. This is not to suggest that Updike spent thirty years working *only* on the Rabbit tetralogy. In fact, between each installment he continued to produce a prolific stream of novels, essays, short stories, and poems. What’s more, each Rabbit novel is cast in the present tense and is set in the year or so just prior to its publication date: *Rabbit, Run* takes place in 1959, *Rabbit Redux* in 1969, and so on. Updike could only have written each Rabbit novel in the final year of whatever decade that particular installment explores. Indeed, this tidy, decade-by-decade structure has served as one of the tetralogy’s most popular features: fans of the series can check their own experiences against that of Updike’s gruff, hard-hearted Toyota salesman. In this regard, the Rabbit novels serve as a fictionalized time line of the postwar American experience.

All of which is no less than what Updike always intended. In his Introduction to *Rabbit Angstrom*, the 1995 Everyman’s Library omnibus edition of the completed tetralogy, he describes the novels as “a kind of running commentary on the state of my hero and his nation” whose “ideal reader” is “a fellow-American who had read and remembered the

previous novels about Rabbit Angstrom" (ix). As a "fellow-American," this "ideal reader" is equipped to recognize the actual consumer products Harry purchases and uses, the pop songs he listens to on his car stereo, and the national events he encounters in the newspaper and thinks about on his twilight jogs through his neighborhood. To read a Rabbit novel in the year of its publication is to watch the world get transformed into art. With their up-to-the-minute present-tense narratives, their seamless blend of the "actual" and the imaginary, and their sociologically exact references to pop culture and brand-name products, the Rabbit novels document contemporary American life so precisely that they function as the fictional equivalent of "real television" or cinema vérité.

In view of this liberal use of contemporary American history, coupled with the remarkable fact that Updike apparently composed each novel during the year in which it is set, one might conclude that the Rabbit tetralogy gains in historical accuracy what it sacrifices in aesthetic integrity. Updike has kept the novels so close chronologically to the experience they depict that he seems to have given himself no time to revise, let alone organize and structure, the completed manuscripts. Astonishingly, however, this seems not to be the case. On the contrary, each individual Rabbit novel compares in structural elegance with any of Updike's other books, including such intricate, Nabokovian creations as *The Coup* and *A Month of Sundays*. Upon close inspection, moreover, and despite its interrupted, thirty-year composition history, the completed tetralogy proves in the end to be a unified, coherent work of the highest formal achievement. At the same time that the Rabbit novels are "open to accident," they are also fiercely determined in their formalistic design. Each novel follows a carefully laid-out plan even as it fits into the overarching structural logic of the complete four-part work. As each decade spiraled to a close, Updike searched the contemporary landscape for "real life" material to incorporate into the pre-set structure he apparently had laid out in advance, a structure that was presumably malleable enough both to absorb and to withstand ongoing alteration. In short, the Rabbit novels represent rigid formalism in existential action.

This, too, is no less than what Updike has always intended—if not from the beginning, then at least as early as *Rabbit Redux*. Again, the place to turn for illumination is his Introduction to *Rabbit Angstrom*.

“At some point between the second and third of the series,” he declares, “I began to visualize four completed novels that together make a coherent volume, a mega-novel” (x).<sup>1</sup> Herein lies the thesis of this book. Taking Updike at his word, I shall “bind” together the four Rabbit novels and read them as the “mega-novel” that Updike has been working toward since the second installment. As such, I shall argue that this “rebound” Rabbit novel—referred to hereafter by its Everyman’s Library title, *Rabbit Angstrom*—provides a sustained, linear, and ultimately cumulative articulation of Updike’s unique dialectical vision. Primarily existential in nature, this vision—an interdependent matrix of ethical precepts, theological beliefs, and aesthetic principles—is less a creed than a versatile formal device; it is, in effect, the scaffold on which Updike has built the entire tetralogy. In its broadest terms, this vision is dialectical: Updike has organized his “mega-novel” around dialectical relationships that remain unresolved. In each individual installment, all the various thematic threads coalesce neatly into a series of linked dialectical units; likewise, the four novels in the series also relate to one another dialectically, so that *Rabbit Redux* deliberately reverses the tone and thematic emphasis of *Rabbit, Run*, its immediate predecessor, while *Rabbit at Rest* similarly contrasts with its prequel, *Rabbit Is Rich*. In the same vein, the first two novels in the series compose a cohesive unit that in turn relates dialectically to the tetralogy’s last two novels, thereby establishing the formal structure of the finished “mega-novel” as a direct echo of the work’s thematic organization, and vice versa. Ultimately, I shall demonstrate that the full scope of Updike’s formal achievement emerges only after all four novels are read in succession, one after the other.

I shall organize my discussion of this dialectical vision under the

1. Although Updike dates this “mega-novel” vision as occurring “between the second and third of the series,” the idea seems to have been with him sometime earlier. See especially “Bech Meets Me,” a “self-interview” with his own fictional character Harry Bech, which appeared in the November 1971 issue of the *New York Times Book Review* as part of Knopf’s promotion of *Rabbit Redux*, published that same month. There, Updike outlines for Bech his plans for two more Rabbit volumes, the third of which, scheduled for 1981, to be called *Rural Rabbit* and the fourth, “to come out in 1991 if we all live,” to be called *Rabbit Is Rich* (Updike, “Bech Meets Me,” 13). *Rural Rabbit* never happened, of course, while *Rabbit Is Rich* got moved back a decade.

rubric of "mastered irony." Søren Kierkegaard, the great Danish existentialist philosopher, coined this term to describe his own method of presenting two sides of an issue and then leaving this paradox unresolved. Kierkegaard modeled his method on that of Socrates, who, in Kierkegaard's interpretation, employed an irony of deferral. Through his questioning style and his tendency to leave contradictory ideas unresolved, Socrates concealed his own views on the issues he raised and thereby shifted the burden of interpretation onto his auditors. The final aim of this strategy was to undermine any abstract truth that could not be privately translated into the auditor's personal life. In a sense, by resolving the contradictions left in place by Socrates, the auditor effectively resolved the issues for himself, in accordance with his own desires and needs. For all its potential power to unsettle and inspire, however, the Socratic method was not without its risks, and that is why Kierkegaard insisted that an ironic author must "master" his irony, which is to say he must deliberately organize all this contradictory material so that the intended meaning emerges as a product of the differential play of that contradictory material. Hence the successfully ironic work both contains and maintains a species of controlled dialectical tension between its contradictory, constitutive ideas. The work's message is not represented by one or the other of these dialectical units, nor is it produced by a facile blending of the two; rather, the ironic author's vision emerges indirectly via the unresolved tension produced by the interplay of that thematic dialectic. And because the tension remains unresolved, the vision that emerges cannot be easily paraphrased. It remains in motion, in action, in play. Or, to employ Kierkegaard's characteristic term, it becomes "infinite." That dynamic energy constitutes the "freedom" Kierkegaard has in mind when he writes, "[I]rony renders both the poem and the poet free. For this to occur, however, the poet must himself be master over irony." The work's governing vision, complex and unstable, does not reside in the text so much as it emerges from the tension produced by the contradictory thematic material. Yet if that tension-filled vision exists "outside" the text, where does it in fact reside? In the readers, who must contend privately and personally with the text's unresolved tensions. By thus forcing itself upon the text's readers, who "exist" outside the text, mastered irony in Kierkegaard's conception re-

turns that text to reality, or to what he calls “actuality”: “Irony as a mastered moment exhibits itself in its truth precisely by the fact that it teaches us to actualize actuality, by the fact that it places due emphasis on actuality.”<sup>2</sup> Mastered irony is truth made active.

Perhaps the most schematic example of Kierkegaard’s ironic method can be found in his massive, two-volume work, *Either/Or*. The completed text consists of two contrasting volumes, each alleged to be written by someone other than Kierkegaard and the whole allegedly “edited” by yet another fictional persona, one Victor Eremita. The first part of *Either/Or* describes what Kierkegaard calls “aesthetic” existence, a life of sophisticated alienation and ennui in which the fear of death is neutralized by the nontemporal consolations of aesthetic appreciation and sensuality; the second section, written in direct response to the former, explores what Kierkegaard terms “ethical” existence, a life characterized by intense inwardness and deep-rooted moral commitment. In Kierkegaard’s scheme, part two of the work does not simply “refute” part one; rather, he sets the two sections against one another in an act of sustained irresolution. As for Kierkegaard himself, he hides invisibly behind his pseudonymous spokesmen, each of whom is allowed freely to articulate his own representative worldview. The two sections taken together, as well as the worldview expressed in each, contradict one another in such a way that the reader is forced to choose between them, and this final movement represents the heart of Kierkegaard’s whole method. Several years after publishing *Either/Or*, he offered this explanation of his technique: “That there is no conclusion and no final decision is an indirect expression for truth as inwardness and in this way perhaps a polemic against truth as knowledge.” That “perhaps” is crucial: Kierkegaard is not refuting knowledge per se but rather the notion that abstract precepts, philosophical or otherwise, ever really apply to an individual *in existence*. The truth he cares about most is inward truth, that species of private subjective awareness that can apply only to the individual reader. Kierkegaard generates this brand of private truth by forcing upon his reader the process of self-questioning. As his pseudo-

2. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Constant Reference to Socrates*, 336; 340.

nymous narrator declares at the close of *Either/Or II*: "only the truth that edifies is truth for you."<sup>3</sup>

Here, as elsewhere, Kierkegaard sets his ideas in direct opposition to those of his great *bête noire*, Friedrich Hegel, whose famous dialectical method attempted to secure a means by which antithetical ideas could be made consistent with the demands of higher truth. In many ways Kierkegaard's thinking recalls that of Hegel; certainly Kierkegaard was deeply influenced by the great German metaphysician. Yet although both thinkers foreground the dialectic as the path to truth, they differ on several key points, and these points of difference make, to coin a phrase, all the difference in the world. Hegel insisted that every positive concept (thesis) implies implicitly its own negation (antithesis); in his dialectical system, however, these two concepts, the thesis and its antithesis, do not cancel one another out but are rather resolved by a *synthesis* of the two concepts, a synthesis that both preserves and supersedes the antecedent categories while in turn producing new concepts for contemplation, since that synthesis will unavoidably suggest its own negation and so on. Kierkegaard countered that authentic dialectical truth is that which *does not* synthesize, does not resolve. Truth does not consist, as Hegel would argue, in an abstract synthesis of opposites, of a both/and; rather, it lies in the private contemplation of irreducible contradiction, in individual confrontation with an unresolved either/or. In this way, Kierkegaard argued for a living, existential notion of truth founded on fluctuating tension, for since life is unfinished as long as it lasts, so must truth remain unfinished, unresolved, insofar as it is deemed to be a *living* truth.

In *Rabbit Angstom*, Updike employs a similar strategy of "mastered irony" whose inspiration can be traced directly to Kierkegaard. Indeed, so interested is he in Kierkegaardian dialectics that, in his long poem, *Midpoint*, he launches an encomium to his "heroes" with this concise couplet: "Praise *Kierkegaard*, who splintered Hegel's creed / Upon the rock of existential need." More than this: In a private letter to George Hunt, author of *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things*, Updike confirms that his reading of Kierkegaard encompasses the *Philosophical*

3. Kierkegaard, *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the "Philosophical Fragments"*, 252; Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 356.

*Fragments, The Sickness Unto Death, The Concept of Dread*, and parts of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. And in a recent essay entitled "A Book That Changed Me," Updike lists *Fear and Trembling* as the single text that most altered him, both as a person and as a writer. Dating his reading of the book in "1955 or early 1956," he describes himself at the time as "a nervous newcomer to New York City, husbandhood, and paternity." His encounter with Kierkegaard, he continues, came as a watershed: "After *Fear and Trembling*, I had a secret twist inside, a precarious tender core of cosmic defiance; for a time, I thought of all my fiction as illustrations of Kierkegaard." His own work, meanwhile, is ever energized by a sustained play of thematic tension that he calls the "yes-but" quality of his writing "that evades entirely pleasing everybody." This "yes-but" quality describes not so much the critical reception of the work as its thematic core: his novels affirm even as they question. "I meant my *work* says 'yes-but,'" he once clarified. "Yes, in *Rabbit, Run*, to our inner urgent whispers, but—the social fabric collapses murderously." In still another instance, he has made overt the connections between his own conception of the "yes-but" and Kierkegaard's "either/or": "Both the 'yes-but' and the 'either/or' imply there are two sides to things, don't they? So to that extent it is Kierkegaardian, and no sooner do you look at one side than you see the other again." Similarly, he has repeatedly expressed his Kierkegaardian faith in the essentially unresolved and dialectical quality of human existence: "Un-fallen Adam is an ape. . . . I find that to be a person is to be in a situation of tension, to be in a dialectical situation. A truly adjusted person is not a person at all—just an animal with clothes on or a statistic."<sup>4</sup> The unresolved quality of this dialectic constitutes for Updike its human quality, for a human being free of tension ceases somehow to be human.

Taken all together, these elements form the basis of Updike's own conception of "mastered irony," a device whose chief purpose, for Updike and Kierkegaard both, is to inspire in the reader the process of existential self-questioning. As with Kierkegaard, Updike conveys his mes-

4. John Updike, "Midpoint," canto V, lines 11–12; George Hunt, *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things: Sex, Religion, and Art*, 216n; Updike, "Can a Nice Novelist Finish First?" 16; Updike, "The Art of Fiction XLIII: John Updike," 33, 34; Jeff Campbell, *Updike's Novels: Thorns Spell a Word*, 295.

sage(s) in *Rabbit Angstrom* indirectly, ironically, without attributable grounds: the only place for the dialectical tensions to resolve themselves (if at all) is within the reader, and the only way for the reader to accomplish this resolution—however partial—is through self-reflection. Updike has remarked that he conceives all his books as “moral debates with the reader” in which the primary question is “usually ‘What is a good man?’ or ‘What is goodness?’”<sup>5</sup> He is able to spark this debate by affirming, through the “mastered irony” of his dialectical method, paradox and ambiguity. Forced into resolving those paradoxes and ambiguities for themselves, Updike’s readers are indirectly cast into a mode of self-evaluation in the first person.

Mastered irony also finds physical embodiment in the character of Rabbit Angstrom, a literary creation who seems to have an uncanny knack of producing a powerful “yes-but” response in just about anyone.<sup>6</sup> In the dust jacket copy to *Rabbit, Run*, one of the most “Kierkegaardian” of Updike’s novels, we learn Rabbit is “caught in the potentially tragic clash between instinct and law, between biology and society.” The novel is then said to trace Rabbit’s “zig-zag of evasion” only to affirm in the end Rabbit’s “faith that his inner life—an unstable compound of lust and nostalgia, affection and fear—has an intrinsic, final importance.” For “fear” above, read “angst” in its strictest, most Kierkegaardian sense: Rabbit’s last name, after all, is Angstrom, which might be glossed as “stream of angst.” The aforementioned “potentially tragic clash” seems initially to involve a conflict between sensual freedom and societal restriction: Rabbit’s selfish pursuit of pleasure runs up against his duties as a family man. Yet this is only a surface reading at best, for Updike also seems to have in mind here Kierkegaard’s aesthetic and ethical spheres. As will be shown in chapter 1 of this study, the world of objective, earthbound wisdom—represented in *Rabbit, Run* by the minister Eccles, but also present in one form or another in each of the subsequent novels—corresponds not to the ethical but rather to the aesthetic sphere: it is the world of extrinsic control whose inhabitants try to hide from their own anxiety and despair. Conversely, Rabbit’s faith

5. Updike, “Interview with John Updike,” 80.

6. Rabbit’s status as a Kierkegaardian existential hero has been touched upon by several previous readers, David Galloway and George Hunt chief among them.



in his inner life emerges as the novel's, as well as the tetralogy's, Kierkegaardian ethical center.

Still, like Kierkegaard, Updike offers neither synthesis nor resolution to this dialectical situation. Rabbit does not seek a mediating position but rather fluctuates between the two spheres in perpetual unrest. Similarly, Rabbit's belief in his inner life, which is posited as the book's overarching affirmation, does not serve as the solution to this battle of opposites but is itself an irresolvable paradox—that is, the paradox of faith. Again Updike directly invokes Kierkegaard's work here, particularly *Fear and Trembling*, the Dane's most impassioned exhortation on the paradox of “inwardness.” In what does this paradox lie? In the way that Harry's inwardness supersedes both his own sensual urges and the ethical precepts of his culture. In Kierkegaardian terms, Harry, as a single individual, “is higher than the universal” primarily because, like the biblical Abraham to whom most of *Fear and Trembling* is devoted, he acts out of faith. And faith itself is the paradox by which God's will and the will of the individual become one and the same.<sup>7</sup> As we shall see, it is on this paradox, on this unstable third possibility *beyond* the dialectic yes-and-no, that Updike bases the entire four-volume work.

Secure though he is in the faith of his most famous fictional protagonist, however, Updike is quite un-Kierkegaardian in his blithe disregard for the faith of his readers. Kierkegaard knew very well what he hoped to achieve with his ironically constructed two-part book. As Updike himself recently revealed in a *New York Review of Books* essay on “The Seducer's Diary,” the concluding chapter to volume one of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard briefly considered including a startling disclaimer to the book's second edition. In this short passage, Kierkegaard explains, in uncharacteristically direct terms, what he hoped to achieve through the book's pseudonymous authorship and its two unresolved sections: “It was a necessary deception in order, if possible, to deceive men into the religious, which has continually been my task all along.”<sup>8</sup> This is an important distinction to make, for Kierkegaard regarded the competing visions represented in *Either/Or's* twin sections not as equals but as two “stages,” the first being the aesthetic, the second being the ethical. In his

7. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, 55–59.

8. Updike, “Introduction to ‘The Seducer's Diary,’” 140.