

CRITICAL ESSAYS ON
John Updike

MACNAUGHTON

*Critical Essays on
John Updike*

William R. Macnaughton

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*Critical Essays on
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CRITICAL ESSAYS ON AMERICAN LITERATURE

This series seeks to publish the most important reprinted criticism on writers and topics in American literature along with, in various volumes, original essays, interviews, bibliographies, letters, manuscript sections, and other materials brought to public attention for the first time. William R. Macnaughton's volume on John Updike is the most substantial collection of scholarship ever assembled on this important contemporary author. It reprints reviews by Granville Hicks, Anthony Burgess, Tony Tanner, Alfred Kazin, and Joyce Carol Oates, among others, and articles by Clinton S. Burhans, Jr., George W. Hunt, S.J., James M. Mellard, and other leading scholars. In addition, this collection contains five original essays by George J. Searles, Gordon E. Slethaug, Kathleen Verduin, Gary Waller, and Joyce Markle. We are confident that this book will make a permanent and significant contribution to American literary study.

JAMES NAGEL, GENERAL EDITOR

Northeastern University

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INTRODUCTION

A Survey of John Updike Scholarship in English

A. BIBLIOGRAPHIES

There are four volumes of Updike bibliographies. These are: C. Clarke Taylor, *John Updike: A Bibliography*; David E. Arnason and B. A. Sokoloff, *John Updike: A Comprehensive Bibliography*; Michael Olivas, *An Annotated Bibliography of John Updike Criticism 1967-1973, and a Checklist of his Works*; and Elizabeth A. Gearhart, *John Updike: A Comprehensive Bibliography with Selected Annotations*.¹ Taylor's work contains a useful history of Updike's own publications from 1949 (in such places as the Shillington *Chatterbox*) to 1967 (including Updike's *Harvard Lampoon* publications) as well as a good listing with brief annotations of early criticism (including reviews) of Updike's work. The annotated reviews are particularly useful. The bibliography of Arnason and Sokoloff to a very large extent duplicates Taylor's information about primary sources (but does not include pre-Harvard publications), although they extend this information to 1969. They also include titles of articles and reviews about Updike (without annotations) up to 1969 (including some information about foreign scholarship). Despite the title, their work is not "comprehensive" although, when first published, in some respects it was a useful supplement to Taylor. It has now been superseded, however, by the thorough bibliography and checklist prepared by Michael Olivas. His annotations of the reviews, scholarly articles, and dissertations about Updike's work are particularly useful (as is the list of and comments on interviews with the writer) even though they are descriptive, not evaluative. Gearhart's new bibliography is not "comprehensive" (although published in 1978, its listing of Updike's publications stops in 1975) and the "selected annotations" are almost non-existent. It does contain some helpful information, however, about foreign scholarship up to 1974 and translations of Updike's work up to 1971.

A thorough listing of critical material about Updike up to 1974 may also be found in the checklist prepared by Arlin Meyer and Michael Olivas for the special Updike number of the Spring, 1974 *Modern Fiction Studies*.² This checklist should be supplemented by the annual bib-

liography of short story criticism published by *Studies in Short Fiction*, by the annual bibliography of scholarship on modern literature published by the *Journal of Modern Literature*, and by the comments on Updike scholarship in the annual edition of *American Literary Scholarship* published by Duke University Press. Useful information about such items as special editions of Updike, recent publications by him, and interviews that he has granted may frequently be found in the *John Updike Newsletter* which has been published several times a year since 1977. In the fourteenth and fifteenth issues of the *Newsletter*, for example, reference is made to a forthcoming Updike bibliography to be published by *The American Book Collector*. The *Newsletter* will also, on occasion, reprint Updike material not easily accessible to most readers, although some of it is trivial, such as his report on the 1980 Boston Red Sox opening game for the *Boston Globe*. Readers who wish to keep abreast of some of his new poetry, short fiction, and book reviews should consult *The New Yorker*, where much of his new work continues to be published.

B. BIOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL

There is, of course, no biography of Updike but information about his life may be obtained in most of the books on his work, as well as in the "First-Person Singular" section of *Assorted Prose* (1965) and in several interviews with him, in particular Jane Howard, "Can A Nice Novelist Finish First?" (*Life*, 4 November, 1966); "View from the Catacombs" (*Time* cover story, 26 April, 1968); and James Atlas, "John Updike Breaks Out of Suburbia" (*New York Times Magazine*, 10 December, 1978).³ Despite his statement in *Picked-Up Pieces* that interviews "are a form to be loathed, a half-form like maggots,"⁴ Updike has allowed himself to be nibbled on many occasions by reporters and T.V. personalities like Dick Cavett; readers wishing to be informed of the most recent interviews—many of which Updike edits himself before allowing publication—should consult the *Newsletter*.

C. CRITICISM AND SCHOLARSHIP IN ENGLISH

"I cannot greatly care what critics say of my work; if it is good, it will come to the surface in a generation or two and float, and if not, it will sink, having in the meantime provided me with a living, the opportunities of leisure, and a craftsman's intimate satisfaction." (John Updike, *Picked-Up Pieces*, p. 503).

Primarily because of their own buoyancy, the products of John Updike's craft continue to float, even those like *The Poorhouse Fair* launched over twenty years ago. Another reason for this buoyancy, however, is because of the support provided over the years by admirers of Updike's craft. In a recent book on Updike, George Hunt asserts that *Of the Farm*

"alone among Updike's fiction . . . has generated very fine academic criticism."⁵ That this statement is patently false will, it is hoped, be shown through the following critical survey. Before beginning, however, two points must be made. The first is that this short discussion excludes foreign scholarship, despite the foreign interest evinced in Updike for many years (readers wishing to explore this criticism might start with the excellent bibliography in Edward Vargo's *Rainstorms and Fire: Ritual in the Novels of John Updike*).⁶ The second point that must be stressed is that Updike's comments about his own work are extremely insightful, particularly in his "One Big Interview" in *Picked-Up Pieces* (1975), of which he writes: "I have excerpted a few self-centered quotations from the six or so interviews I have saved, and closeted them in an appendix, where none but the morbidly curious, or academically compelled, need peek" (p. xix). The "excerpts" come from three previously unpublished interviews, from the *Life* interview referred to above, and from three other very important interviews worth listing here: Charles Samuels, "The Art of Fiction XLIII: John Updike"; Eric Rhode, "BBC Interview with John Updike"; and Frank Gado, "A Conversation with John Updike."⁷ Among the many other interesting interviews with Updike, one more will be mentioned here: Richard Burgen's in issues 9 and 11 of the *New York Arts Journal*, reprinted in the spring and summer 1979 issues of the *John Updike Newsletter*.⁸ The student of Updike will also wish to consult his essays about writing, e.g., "Why Write?" and his introductions, e.g., to the Czech edition of *Of the Farm* (both reprinted in *Picked-Up Pieces*). Updike's book reviews are also often indirectly revealing about his own work: his review of Kierkegaard's 1853-1855 *Journals*, for example ("The Fork," reprinted along with other reviews in *Picked-Up Pieces*); or of Denis de Rougemont's *Love Declared* and Karl Barth's *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* ("More Love in the Western World," and "Faith in Search of Understanding," both reprinted along with other reviews in *Assorted Prose*, 1965). Updike also, of course, continues to review frequently for the *New Yorker*.

1. Criticism and Scholarship, 1958-1966

Almost all of the reviewers of John Updike's first three volumes—*The Carpentered Hen, and Other Tame Creatures: Poems* (1958), *The Poorhouse Fair* (1959), and *The Same Door: Short Stories* (1959)—greeted with enthusiasm the skill and versatility of this young writer in his mid-20's who had published his first *New Yorker* story in 1954. Emphasized was the "great clarity and precision of language," the "almost Chekhovian musicality of pattern," and the commendably non-autobiographical subject matter of his first novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*. Critics spoke highly as well of *The Same Door*, T. E. Cassidy in *The Commonweal*, for example, praising, "the feeling of wonder in these people, wonder at the beauty in

the simple strangeness of things.” William Peden, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, welcomed Updike’s ability (reminiscent of both Chekhov and Joyce) to discern significance in the lives of ordinary people. Amidst this general praise, however, there were complaints of weakness which pre-figured attacks on Updike that would become commonplace. In a favorable review of *The Poorhouse Fair*, for example, Richard Gilman (one of Updike’s most consistently sensitive admirers) wrote: “Occasionally, too, his book suffers from what Pascal described as the wearying effect of continuous eloquence. He would profit from knowing that it is in the spaces between images that their resonance is nurtured and maintained.” And the anonymous *Time* reviewer concluded ominously, “Unfortunately, author Updike plays his talents cool; his passion for understatement seems to rule out all passion.”⁹

The large majority of reviews of Updike’s next novel (*Rabbit, Run*, 1960) were also favorable (although, anticipating a problem that continues to perplex many readers, some reviewers were puzzled about the writer’s attitude toward his protagonist). Granville Hicks—who, as much as any early critic of Updike, influenced his reputation’s leap upward—wrote, “From now on Updike has to be regarded as one of our important young novelists, a powerful writer with his own vision of the world” (Hicks’s *Saturday Review* comments are reprinted in this volume).¹⁰

Despite their influence on the shape of Updike’s reputation, almost all of the early reviews of his work are no longer worth reading. One exception, however, is Richard Lyons’ 1961 “A High EQ” in *Minnesota Review*. Lyons’ extremely sympathetic reading of the central character in *Rabbit, Run* suggests similarities between Rabbit and Salinger’s Seymour Glass, but also points to one crucial difference: Seymour’s intelligence allows him to understand himself, whereas Rabbit’s relative inarticulateness causes suffering because he cannot verbalize feelings either to others or himself. Yet, “If nervous systems, like brains, could be measured for their appropriate quotients, Rabbit would have a high e.q. (emotion quotient).” Eccles, the minister, senses this quality, calling Rabbit a mystic (whose experiences, typically, are “all in the present tense”). Such experience is, unfortunately, not transferrable, although Rabbit attempts to share his joy “through the act of love or through a delicately balanced sense of successful physical experience.” Lyons suggests that “What are in Rabbit selfish, physical indulgences become when translated into acceptable traditional vocabulary respectable and transcendent expressions of saints who have touched God in the night.” The critic calls Rabbit’s running “a tremendous positive action. . . . Its essence is not, as this book’s is not, in external circumstances. It is the only thing that Rabbit in his alienation from everyone he knows can do. Love, joy, happiness are intense accumulations of energy, which demand release in some way.”¹¹

Updike’s second volume of short stories, *Pigeon Feathers and Other*

Stories, was published in 1962, again to generally positive reviews. Arthur Mizener, who along with Granville Hicks probably had the most influence on Updike's early reputation, wrote of the short story collection that "it is a demonstration of how the most gifted writer of his generation is coming to maturity; it shows that Mr. Updike's fine verbal talent . . . is beginning to serve his deepest insight" (Mizener's excellent review is reprinted in this volume). A few other reviewers, however, were beginning to accuse him of "slickness" and triviality, with *Time* magazine beginning the beat of a drum which it did not silence until the publication of *Couples* in 1968: "This dedicated 29-year-old man of letters says very little, and says it very well. . . . The impressions left are of risks untaken, words too fondly tasted, and of a security of skill that approaches smugness."¹²

Among the very early more than review-length responses made to Updike, two articles contain discussions still of some relevance to an appreciation of his work. The first by Dean Doner, "Rabbit Angstrom's Unseen World," moves from a consideration of short stories such as "Ace in the Hole" and "Lifeguard," and Updike's novel, *The Poorhouse Fair*, to conclude, "Humanism and humanists have consistently been the villains of Updike's work." Seen in this light, Eccles in *Rabbit, Run* is a selfish meddler in a novel that "says clearly that no man understands enough to take it upon himself to repair the world, no man reads responsibility accurately enough to know where justice lies or how it is to be manipulated." For Doner, therefore, Rabbit becomes the hero victimized by the "net" of humanism, and, in the scene at the graveyard, "It is not because he is lascivious and irresponsible that Rabbit brutally accuses his wife and denies his guilt. It is because he alone, of all the characters gathered about the grave, believes in God."¹³ The second article—John Ward's "John Updike's Fiction"—seems pedestrian from the perspective of 1980, but it was the first critical overview of Updike's work up to and including *Pigeon Feathers* published in a scholarly journal, and thus helped to call attention to scholars of his significance as a writer: "He is just thirty, and two of his works stand with the very few current American novels worth preserving." Moreover, individual comments made by Ward are occasionally provocative, such as his suggestion that many of the protagonists of *The Same Door* are "unconscious artists," trapped by self-deception, and that in Conner of *The Poorhouse Fair* (according to Ward, Updike's best novel), "all the fantasy-possessed young men of the short stories are combined and given a public forum, an official respectability."¹⁴

Although Updike's next novel, *The Centaur* (1963) won the National Book Award for fiction, its publication was not greeted with anything close to critical unanimity. The novel had many admirers (such as Renata Adler, whose review is reprinted here), but some reviewers objected to what Vereen Bell in *Shenandoah* called the "elaborate but largely ar-

bitrary and irrelevant mythic parallels";¹⁵ others were puzzled both by the identity of the novel's narrator or narrators and by the problem of the novel's ending: was George Caldwell's "death" literal or metaphorical? One of the most determined haters of Updike's work in general and *The Centaur* in particular was Norman Podhoretz who wrote in his "Dissent on Updike" about the Caldwell/Chiron parallel: "all it does is surround *The Centaur* with a fake aura of profundity while at the same time permitting Updike to plug up holes of motivation and to impose a spurious significance on characters and events which have failed to earn any significance in their own right." Podhoretz concludes his attack by asserting that, in general, Updike has nothing to say, and that his emotional range is very limited, confining itself primarily to "a rather timid nostalgia for the confusions of youth."¹⁶ Even some critics generally sympathetic to Updike were beginning to worry about his supposed shallowness of thought and lack of emotional range. Guerin La Course, for example, in his "The Innocence of John Updike," after praising Updike for his "fresh perception of the appearing world," suggested that "He fears to foray into the night world of feeling for the significances. The polarity of genius has a double edge." Warning that "Updike cannot afford to sit on his hands," he concluded, "He relies, apparently, on language rather than thought, sense rather than sensibility, wit rather than wisdom—all of which afford only temporary harbor."¹⁷

One of the best explanations for the nostalgia in Updike's fiction appeared in a very fine essay by Arthur Mizener, "The American Hero as High School Boy: Peter Caldwell," in his *The Sense of Life in the Modern Novel*. Mizener observes a conflict throughout Updike's work between his desire to express his "cultivated humanistic self in complex forms and ingenious verbal patterns and his commitment to the everyday, homely life that is filled with inexpressible transcendent significance for him." According to Mizener, for a romantic like Updike, there is a glow of intensely felt experience which gathers around his memory of certain particulars from his past—childhood, home, parents—and which he is afraid of losing. Encounters with the past through memory, therefore, become the means of preserving his sense of some sublime quality in life, and of seeing how "the transcendent value of the people he loved as a child inheres in them, an intrinsic blessing."¹⁸ What Mizener's article implies is that Updike's nostalgia is a kind of religious feeling, not a form of timidity or immaturity.

This sense of the religious in Updike is dealt with directly in another fine early essay, Michael Novak's "Updike's Search for Liturgy." For Novak, Updike has "already awakened themes dormant in American letters since Hawthorne and Melville." Most of the essay develops an excellent analysis of a story from *Pigeon Feathers*—"Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car"—and attempts to show how the narrator searches for images of "that deep, serene, perennial way of

looking at life which the secular, active west has lost." Novak concludes that, in his fiction, Updike is attempting to impose meaning on flux, that he is dealing—at least by implication—with serious issues and that he is "beginning to make religion intelligible in America, and to fashion symbols whereby it can be understood." Quoting the final words of Updike's narrator in "Packed Dirt," Novak writes, "'We in America need ceremonies', is, I suppose, the point of a great many of the words he has written."¹⁹ The idea of Updike as a religious writer is also explored in Robert Detweiler's, "John Updike and the Indictment of Culture—Protestantism." Focusing on *Rabbit, Run*, Detweiler sees Updike fighting in the novel the same kinds of problems—false moralism, a belief in progress that ignores man's sinful nature, corrupt institutions—that the neo-orthodox theologian Reinhold Niebuhr had been fighting since the 1930's. Rabbit lacks inner resources, but with proper support he could have overcome his crisis. His tragedy as a man without grace is that his crisis does not lead to redemption; yet, "it is precisely the failure of the community and the institutions that comprise it which cause Rabbit to fail." In essence, therefore, the novel is an indictment of Protestant culture.²⁰

Before moving away from these responses made to Updike's work in the important year of 1963, one should mention Norman Mailer's at times fascinating discussion, which appears in his "Norman Mailer versus Nine Writers." After complimenting the "Literary Establishment" for "improving its taste, Updike was not simply a general edition of James Gould Cozzens," Mailer attacks this "Establishment" for praising Updike's style and chiding his sexual explicitness. On the contrary, Updike must "go deeper into the literature of sex"; moreover, when the action in his novels lapses, he "cultivates his private vice, he *writes*. . . . In the run of Updike's pages are one thousand other imprecise, flatulent, wry-necked, precious, overpreened, self-indulgent, tortured sentences." Mailer praises in *Rabbit, Run* "the dread Updike manages to convey . . . of a young man who is beginning to lose nothing less than his good American soul, and yet it is not quite his fault." Although for Mailer the ending of the novel is a cop-out, there is a "real pain" and "touch of awe" in the book not unworthy of Hardy. Mailer concludes his essentially generous comments about Updike by observing "something too fatally calculated about his inspiration," and warning him to avoid the clutches of the Establishment: "Of course a man spends his life trying to get up his guts for such a caper."²¹

Between late 1963 and 1966 Updike's publications continued to illustrate his versatility and talent: one new volume of poetry, *Telephone Poles and Other Poems* (1963); a 1964 adaptation, for children, of Wagner, (*The Ring*), illustrated by him and Warren Chapell (they had collaborated on *The Magic Flute* in 1962; the *Christian Science Monitor* referred to *The Ring* as "a well crafted set of program notes for, say, the precocious children of *New Yorker* subscribers"²²); *Olinger Stories* (1964);

another children's book (*A Child's Calendar*), *Assorted Prose* and *Of the Farm* in 1965; and the stories, *The Music School*, in 1966. In 1964 he also found time to visit several Soviet countries as part of a U.S.-U.S.S.R. cultural exchange program.

The reviews during these years began to harden into almost cliché responses to the work of this by now established writer (he was elected a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1964 and was picked as America's eighth most distinguished novelist in a 1965 *Book Week* poll of approximately 200 novelists, critics, and editors). *Time*, for example, in reviewing *Of the Farm*, wrote, "So far, Updike's performance has been mostly footwork displaying the virtuosity of a writer who can say very little very well."²³ And some of the responses were extremely nasty, most notoriously John Aldridge's "The Private Vice of John Updike" in his *Time to Murder and Create*. In a tone almost slimy with condescension, Aldridge speaks of Updike's "charming but limited gift"; of how, when on the verge of profundity "he does not, after all, know quite what he means to say and is hoping that sheer style will carry him over the difficulty"; of the classical parallels in *The Centaur* as being chosen because of "intellectual chic or status value"; of the "easiness" of Updike's fiction as a reason for its popularity, and so on. The closest that Aldridge comes to praise of Updike is when he says about *Of the Farm* that "There's also a very good description of a tractor mowing a hay field."²⁴ Like many examples of this kind of cruel, obtuse hatchet job, Aldridge's is at times very funny; the value of statements such as this is in their ability to encourage intelligent replies.

Updike, of course, did not lack champions. In his review of *Assorted Prose*, for example, Granville Hicks asserted, "It might be a good thing for critics to contemplate what Updike has accomplished in a decade—two excellent novels and many first-rate stories—and not to spend so much time worrying about the books he hasn't yet even attempted."²⁵ Moreover, although, writing in the 1964 *American Literary Scholarship*, William Stafford had lamented that "John Updike, more talented than Styron (in my opinion) has received far less attention,"²⁶ during the next few years Updike began to receive considerable scholarly analysis.

In his quick overview of Updike's career entitled "John Updike and William Styron: The Burden of Talent," for example, William Van O'Connor predicted that either Styron or Updike "could turn out to be the foremost novelist of his generation": "If the gods continue to favor him [Updike] he should have a magnificent future." And William Peden's first edition of *The American Short Story* contained a brief but appreciative discussion of Updike's short fiction. Paul Doyle's "Updike's Fiction: Motifs and Techniques" praises the writer's subtlety and generosity. Speaking of Eccles in *Poorhouse Fair*, Doyle says, "Again, Updike extends considerable sympathy toward a viewpoint one feels he does not share. . . . They are not straw men, and Updike neither sermonizes nor moralizes."

Doyle also discusses some of Updike's experiments in his short fiction, and suggests that "Much of Updike's fiction might be subtitled 'The Problem of Goodness and the Search for the Good Man.'" Thaddeus Muradian, in "The World of John Updike," points to the writer's major themes as being childhood memories of the past, pain and loneliness, death, and "the Hope," and asserts "In this light, Updike is a Fundamentalist or perhaps a Medievalist in showing us the need to 'escape from life' with death a necessary end but the beginning of something better." Norris Yates also speaks of religious matters in "The Doubt and Faith of John Updike"; Sister Judith Tate in "Of Rabbits and Centaurs" contrasts Rabbit's inability to love himself, others, or God with George Caldwell's success in these areas; for Sister Tate, *Rabbit, Run* shatters the myth "that happiness and freedom are synonymous with concupiscence and irresponsibility"; Hazel Gayol points out comic elements in *The Centaur*, c.f. "The Lord Loves a Cheerful Corpse."²⁷

Of the discussions mentioned in the previous paragraph, only Paul Doyle's is of more than historical interest. Four other commentaries published around this time, however, still may be consulted with profit by readers interested in Updike's work. David Galloway's existential interpretation of *Rabbit, Run*, for example, still possesses a certain plausibility, particularly if one cannot tolerate the plethora of Christian interpretations of the novel. In *The Poorhouse Fair*, Galloway sees Updike attacking the "life-denying impulses of the age" but creating a hero (Hook) who "remains too much a part of the system to be a true rebel." Rabbit Angstrom, on the other hand, is a "picaresque saint" (R. W. B. Lewis' phrase) with a vision of the absurd and the need "to find that world in which he can again experience the sacredness of achievement." Rabbit wants to "comfort and heal" and is selfish only in the manner of the searcher after truth. Updike's own faith is capricious, and he continues to explore "rituals which sustain men in a godless universe." In *The Centaur* (in which the "objective chapters [are] told by Caldwell himself and the retrospective chapters narrated by Peter"), Updike describes a "world apparently devoid of meaning." George is not a true existentialistic hero because he lacks a vision of absurdity; Peter, however, provides this awareness.²⁸ (A second existential interpretation of Updike published around this time is in Sidney Finkelstein's *Existentialism and American Literature*. Finkelstein's discussion is very simplistic, however; at times, in fact, it seems as if he does not know Updike's plots very well.)²⁹ A second worthwhile discussion of Updike may be found in Charles Walcutt's *Man's Changing Mask*. Opposing Galloway, Walcutt argues that "The perspective that sees them [Rabbit and Caldwell] as saintly must ignore the action in which they are enmeshed and treat them as essences who really live somewhere else." Rabbit, for example, "is not strong; he is rich and complex and full of potential but *weak*"—the "centripetally diminished man." Speaking about the action in *The Centaur*,

the critic observes that—unlike naturalistic fiction—it is not linear, but in reality a series of confrontations—action as “a field of force”—that reveals George’s personality and the quality of his will; such confrontations also establish tensions that create energy, which “vibrates with its contained force and so gives a powerful sense of life.”³⁰

A third fine article that remains interesting is by a Russian critic—Inna Levidova—writing in English in her “John Updike’s *The Centaur* in Russia.” She suggests that, at first, the classical material in *The Centaur* may seem “superfluous” because of the “overwhelming authenticity” of the rest of the novel; yet, the myth is organic: “If George Caldwell were just a school-teacher, we would be faced with a novel of an extremely different spirit, different inner rhythm and, naturally, different philosophical overtones.” Levidova goes on to comment on the “Chekhovian suggestiveness” of Updike’s setting and its “details selected in Chekhov’s manner.” She observes as well a dimension of social criticism in the novel—the high school, for example, “depicted by Updike with truly savage and Hogarthian strokes”; and George, “a true son of the 1930’s with his instinctive democratic spirit and bitter contempt for the local Jupiters, and with his unbounded sympathy for all the disinherited and hopeless.”³¹

A fourth article by Gerry Brenner is isolated in this paragraph (although it will not be discussed here, since it is reprinted in this volume) because it remains the most sensitive interpretation of *Rabbit, Run*. The article is called, “*Rabbit, Run*: John Updike’s Criticism of the ‘Return to Nature’ ” and was first published in *Twentieth Century Literature* 12 (1966), 3–14.

Perhaps the most useful publication about Updike to appear during this period is the article in *Life* magazine by Jane Howard, “Can a Nice Novelist Finish First?” The interview contains not only valuable biographical information—about his childhood, for example, where he learned to laugh a lot and “examine everything for God’s footprints”—but also revealing comments made by Updike about his own attitudes: “I believe that all problems are basically insoluble and that faith is a leap out of total despair”; “It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules. Something quite intricate and fierce occurs in homes, and it seems to me without doubt worthwhile to examine what it is”; “My novels are all about the search for useful work.” One final example will suffice—a statement implicitly directed at many of his own critics: “It seems to me that critics get increasingly querulous and impatient for madder music and stronger wine, when what we need is greater respect for reality, its secrecy, its music. Too many people are studying maps and not enough are visiting places.”³² It could be argued that this review—edited by Updike himself—points to 1966 as the plausible end of this first stage of Updike’s career. In the review he seems to be consciously attempting to explain elements in his fiction that had been increasingly under attack,