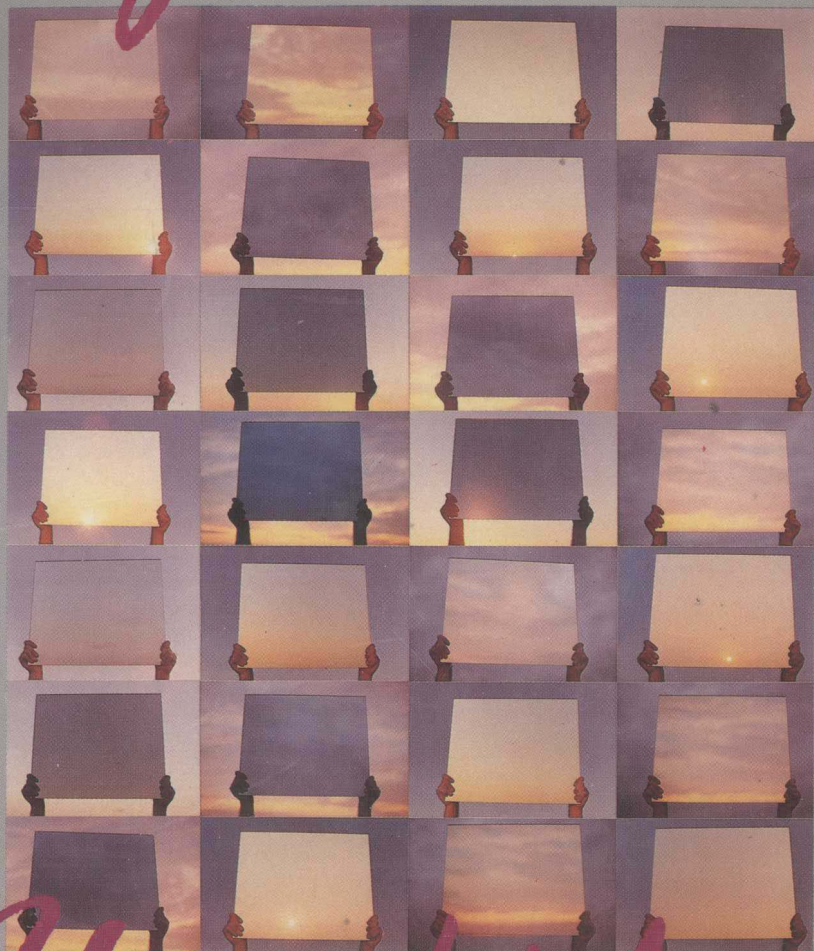

MODERN • NOVELISTS

Jahn



Updike

JUDIE • NEWMAN

MODERN NOVELISTS
JOHN UPDIKE

Judie Newman

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General Editor's Preface

The death of the novel has often been announced, and part of the secret of its obstinate vitality must be its capacity for growth, adaptation, self-renewal and even self-transformation: like some vigorous organism in a speeded-up Darwinian ecosystem, it adapts itself quickly to a changing world. War and revolution, economic crisis and social change, radically new ideologies such as Marxism and Freudianism, have made this century unprecedented in human history in the speed and extent of change, but the novel has shown an extraordinary capacity to find new forms and techniques and to accommodate new ideas and conceptions of human nature and human experience, and even to take up new positions on the nature of fiction itself.

In the generations immediately preceding and following 1914, the novel underwent a radical redefinition of its nature and possibilities. The present series of monographs is devoted to the novelists who created the modern novel and to those who, in their turn, either continued and extended, or reacted against and rejected, the traditions established during that period of intense exploration and experiment. It includes a number of those who lived and wrote in the nineteenth century but whose innovative contribution to the art of fiction makes it impossible to ignore them in any account of the origins of the modern novel; it also includes the so-called 'modernists' and those who in the mid- and late twentieth century have emerged as outstanding practitioners of this genre. The scope is, inevitably, international; not only, in the migratory and exile-haunted world of our century, do writers refuse to heed national frontiers – 'English' literature lays claim to Conrad the Pole, Henry James the American, and Joyce the Irishman – but geniuses such as Flaubert, Dostoevsky and Kafka have had an influence on the fiction of many nations.

Each volume in the series is intended to provide an introduction

to the fiction of the writer concerned, both for those approaching him or her for the first time and for those who are already familiar with some parts of the achievement in question and now wish to place it in the context of the total *oeuvre*. Although essential information relating to the writer's life and times is given, usually in an opening chapter, the approach is primarily critical and the emphasis is not upon 'background' or generalisations but upon close examination of important texts. Where an author is notably prolific, major texts have been selected for detailed attention but an attempt has also been made to convey, more summarily, a sense of the nature and quality of the author's work as a whole. Those who want to read further will find suggestions in the select bibliography included in each volume. Many novelists are, of course, not only novelists but also poets, essayists, biographers, dramatists, travel writers and so forth; many have practised shorter forms of fiction; and many have written letters or kept diaries that constitute a significant part of their literary output. A brief study cannot hope to deal with all these in detail, but where the shorter fiction and the non-fictional writings, public and private, have an important relationship to the novels, some space has been devoted to them.

NORMAN PAGE

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1

Introduction

As a glance at a bibliography reveals, John Updike is an extremely prolific writer, whose published work includes 12 novels, 9 collections of short stories, 17 volumes of verse, 3 bulky anthologies of non-fictional prose, children's books, journalism and a mass of minor items. None the less, the prime charge levelled against Updike by his critics is that he is 'a writer who has very little to say' (Norman Podhoretz).¹ Though Podhoretz's comment is part of an ongoing feud between Updike and *Commentary* (on which Updike took a satisfyingly ample revenge in *Bech: A Book*) others have also felt that the charge of 'slickness' or triviality had some substance. While Updike is generally recognised as a consummate stylist, even sympathetic readers have argued that the style conceals a hollow centre. For J. A. Ward, 'the subjects he chooses to write about seem undeserving of his scrupulous care'.² Norman Mailer finds his sentences 'precious, overpreened, self-indulgent'. In a swift hatchet-job Joseph Epstein lamented that 'Updike simply cannot pass up an opportunity to tap dance in prose'.³ Even the Russian poet Yevtushenko told Updike that 'You are a man who could play with giant boulders, but you play with rubber balls'.⁴ Some of these accusations should, of course, be discounted as inherently philistine. Style and content are hardly inseparable critical categories and for Updike, language is often a subject in its own right. Particularly in his more self-conscious novels, Updike draws attention to the medium in which he writes, most obviously in the typographic arrangements of *A Month of Sundays* and *Rabbit Redux*, and in the activities of artist-protagonists. Ripostes to the philistines apart, the charge is also answerable on its own terms. Updike has indicated that he undertakes careful research for his novels. *Roger's Version* and *The Coup* provide their own hefty, relevant bibliographies, while the writings of social planners,

historians and psychologists inform *The Poorhouse Fair*, *Couples*, *The Witches of Eastwick* and the *Rabbit* trilogy. While Updike's major claims, as for any novelist, must rest upon his imaginative and formal achievements, the present study will seek to establish just how far Updike opens up for debate such issues as social engineering, sexual politics, economics and technology. It is also rare to find an author with quite so much to say about work, a topic conspicuously absent from the contemporary American novel. In addition, Updike's interest in the functioning of social groups sets his protagonists off from the tortured individual heroes of so much modern fiction. Even when most alone, the Updike 'hero' is defined in relation to his society, whether a society from which he has been banished (*A Month of Sundays*), an imagined society (*The Coup*, *The Poorhouse Fair*) or an antagonistic society which threatens his individuality (*Couples*, the *Rabbit* trilogy). For Updike the group is often the hero, whether it consists of a coven of witches, ten adulterous couples, the residents of an old-people's home, or the quartet of voices in *Of the Farm*. This social dimension of Updike's fiction has been insufficiently discussed by Updike's critics and deserves further attention.

Those readers who have conceded that Updike has 'something to say' have tended to see the message as deriving from a more prestigious source. Updike has been enthusiastically co-opted into the normative canon of American religio-cultural experience, along with Bellow, Faulkner, Percy and O'Connor. *Rabbit, Run*, in particular, has suffered a plethora of Christian readings, and was even prescribed on one occasion as part of a series of Lenten readings (to the outrage of the congregation).⁵ As Updike is a practising Christian, and moreover an intellectually and theologically skilled one, the emphasis is legitimate and has produced some excellent critical studies. However, although religious issues are relevant to any discussion of Updike, it is important to keep them in perspective. John Updike is emphatically not an esoteric writer, nor a rigidly programmed apologist, and it is perfectly possible to understand and appreciate his novels without abstruse theological knowledge. To paraphrase Graham Greene's retort to a similar charge, he is a novelist who happens to be a Christian, rather than a Christian novelist. No one will debate the fact that his fiction refers to Christian beliefs at particular points, nor that some knowledge of Barth, Tillich and Kierkegaard, whose works he has reviewed at length, will deepen

our understanding of his intentions. But the realised appeal of the novels is generated by formal achievements, and by the exploration of quite different topics. The social force of religion (as the Protestant ethic, or as the Utopian project, for example) is arguably more important than any overt Christian message. Sexual politics are a focus of more immediate attention than the allocation of sex roles within Christianity, though the latter is relevant. And it is high time that a critic devoted a book-length study to the role of science and technology in Updike's work.

A full discussion, even a listing, of secondary criticism of Updike's works would run to many pages. (Four book-length bibliographies are available). Readers are directed to William Macnaughton's editorial introduction to his collection of critical essays, which surveys current scholarship very thoroughly and with a pleasantly even hand. Book-length studies of Updike include several worth remarking. Alice and Kenneth Hamilton, and George W. Hunt, S.J., have approached the fiction from a religious perspective. The former study, if at times providing overly allegorical readings, usefully explicates the function of Christian allusion. George W. Hunt's volume is altogether more complex and rewarding, particularly in his discussion of Barth, Kierkegaard and Jung, and is easily the best book in this particular context. Three general works (by Rachael Burchard, Charles T. Samuels and Suzanne Uphaus) provide easily accessible introductions, though the best work of this nature is probably Joyce B. Markle's sharply provocative study. Two writers have explored particular themes: pastoralism (Larry Taylor) and ritual (Edward P. Vargo), the former an extremely suggestive treatment which has worn well, the latter somewhat marred by an exaggerated emphasis on myth, ritual and transcendence. More recently, Elizabeth Tallent's ground-breaking exploration of the erotic dimensions of selected works can be recommended. Other recent works includes studies by Donald J. Greiner, Robert Detweiler and George J. Searles (the last-named a comparative and thematic discussion, locally interesting in relation to the *Rabbit* trilogy). Donald Greiner has devoted no less than three books to Updike: to his novels, other work and treatment of adultery. Though Greiner spends far too much time arguing with other critics and surveying their views, his 1981 volume offers the only extended discussion of Updike's poetry, short stories, drama and non-fiction. Robert Detweiler's

book, first published in 1972 and comprehensively revised in 1984, is consistently excellent, even within the cramped confines of a series format. Detweiler sets many hares running (some of which will be chased across following pages) and his discussion of the 'non-protagonist strategy' deserves to be singled out. It is worth noting here that although all the above are North American there is no shortage of foreign criticism of Updike. Notable examples include Tony Tanner (Britain), Yves le Pellec⁶ (France) and Inna Levidova⁷ (USSR) whose perceptive analysis of *The Centaur* as a product of the 1930s creates an image of Updike as a democratic sympathiser with the disinherited which is highly persuasive. Updike's novels have been widely translated abroad, and at home have resulted in a fair degree of fame and fortune, together with literary awards (The National Book Award for *The Centaur*) and election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1964) and the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1977). Extensively reviewed, they have also created enough interest to prompt a mass of critical articles in popular and scholarly journals. Within the scope of this study I could not aspire to take issue with, or even to cite, all this secondary work, though I have certainly learned from it all.

What of the man himself? Though critical commonplace enjoins the separation of teller from tale, several salient points emerge from John Updike's biography.⁸ Born in 1932, an only child of Dutch, German and Irish descent, Updike was brought up in Shillington, Pennsylvania, where his Lutheran, Democratic family felt the force of the Depression. His grandfather (the model for Hook in *The Poorhouse Fair*) was forced to join a road-repairing crew, his father lost his job as a cable splicer and supported the family thereafter on an annual salary of \$1740 as a teacher. For his family, according to Updike, 'work was sacred'. Updike's own interest in work and economics therefore has firm personal bases, as does his prolific output. Updike's mother, herself an aspiring writer, eventually moved the family, which included Updike's grandparents, back to the farm, a model for that in *The Centaur* and *Of the Farm*. Updike's artistic interest was awakened early, by a gift subscription to the *New Yorker* in his eleventh year, though his first ambition was to be a cartoonist. When he entered Harvard in 1950 to study English Literature on a full scholarship, he contributed to the Harvard *Lampoon*. An example of his cartoon work, reproduced in the *Modern Fiction Studies* Updike Special

Number, shows a small boy telling his teacher, 'Miss Gridley, I may have little to say, but I'm determined to say it well'. As recently as 1985 Updike illustrated an autobiographical essay in the *New Yorker* with his own drawings. This interest in the graphic arts, which is particularly relevant to *The Centaur*, *Of the Farm* and *Marry Me*, was developed in 1954 when, together with his first wife Mary, he graduated and spent a year in Oxford at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art. In the same year he sold his first story to the *New Yorker*, to which he returned to work as a 'Talk of the Town' reporter from 1955-7, during which period he also wrote two (unpublished) novels, *Go Away* and *Home*. Though Updike made a major decision at the age of twenty-five to leave New York and its literary wheeling and dealing, the connection with the *New Yorker* has remained strong. Updike's personal life suggests that he has followed Flaubert's advice, that to be a great writer it is necessary to live like a bourgeois. His working habits are highly ordered. While living in Ipswich, Massachusetts, Updike occupied an office in the centre of town, setting himself a target of three pages per day, the morning occupied with fiction-writing, the afternoon with poetry, reviewing and the 'business' of publishing. (Whole sections of his novels are effectively rewritten at the proof stage.) A practising craftsman who lives by his pen, there is nothing of the campus novelist, media star or ivory-tower writer about Updike. He has cheerfully admitted that he will review almost anything and that, if he had to, he would write the labels for catsup bottles.

A more private motivation for Updike's move to suburban seclusion in Ipswich emerged only recently in a frank autobiographical piece in the *New Yorker* in 1985. Updike suffers from a severe case of psoriasis, a hereditary skin disease (alleviated until recently only by exposure to the sun), in which the skin goes into prolific overproduction and sheds itself. (Updike has used this experience in *The Centaur*). Curiously, Updike owes his draft exemption to it. After Updike's sunless year in England, the examining doctor took one look and classified Updike 4-F. In his own candid admission, Updike, ashamed of his skin, counted himself out of jobs in the public eye, choosing a closeted unseen existence as a writer. Indeed he has even described his early marriage as partly conditioned by the fact that, having found one woman who forgave him his skin, he dared not risk losing her. The move to Ipswich was also motivated by the

opportunity provided by its beach for sunbathing, around which Updike's year was structured from Spring to Autumn, with winter back-up trips to the Caribbean, until the development of a new treatment removed the necessity. Updike, however, is not a hermit on the Salinger model, and has travelled in Russia and Eastern Europe (1964–5) as part of a US/USSR cultural exchange, and to Sub-Saharan Africa in 1973, experiences relevant to the *Bech* stories and *The Coup*. In 1973 Ipswich was left behind, together with Updike's first wife from whom he later gained a no-fault divorce, subsequently marrying Martha Bernhard. Updike has frequently been credited with the ability to evoke a palpable sense of place. Others have spoken for Pennsylvania and Massachusetts. Updike's visit to the North of Scotland with Martha, whose ancestors originated there, produced a short story ('Macbech'), set in Caithness, which, for the present writer, amply attests his abilities in this respect.

And so to the present study. In what follows my main intention has been to provide an introduction to Updike's novels which respects both their specificity and their place in Updike's overall development. This study is not organised chronologically. (The *Rabbit* trilogy, appearing at ten-year intervals, makes nonsense of any such arrangement.) Discussions of individual works aim at the illumination of crucial interpretive issues and are oriented towards those works which demand extended treatment. Without engaging in tiresome plot summary, chapters are structured to make each novel's content clear to readers who are unfamiliar with it, and to explain vital background information where necessary. It goes without saying that particular areas of interest (here afforded discrete chapters) overlap into other novels. Readers will readily perceive connections between the aesthetic themes of *Marry Me* and *The Witches of Eastwick*, the Utopian project in *The Poorhouse Fair*, *Couples*, and *The Coup*, and the technological interests of the *Rabbit* trilogy, *The Coup* and *The Witches of Eastwick*, though I have avoided repeating myself reductively upon these topics. Limitations of space have also proscribed a proper treatment of Updike's work in other genres, which must wait for another book. Though the first object has been to provide suggestive interpretations for the student, I also hope that Updike scholars may find food for thought and a few meaty bones for critical contention here. The necessary evils involved in a short introduction to the work of a prolific,

contemporary writer are obvious. It must simplify and generalise, mapping out a development which may seem arbitrary, and can offer only interim conclusions. Updike will doubtless continue to surprise his readers.

2

The Social Ethic: *The Poorhouse Fair* and *Couples*

Updike's interest in the functioning of social groups begins with his first novel and extends throughout his fiction. 'Serial characters' (Bech, Rabbit Angstrom, the Maples) whose life-histories are picked up at intervals over several decades, invite a representative or social reading, as they change with their social circumstances. In an associated stratagem in the novel proper, the group is the primary focus, constituting a choral or collective protagonist. Avoiding a personal or *Bildungsroman* plot, Updike uses this collective protagonist to suggest the structures of social change within the structures of narrative. By placing the group at the centre, Updike's fiction thus operates as a critique of narrative practices which select and valorise only major individuals, and focuses attention upon the relationship of individual to society. Two novels are of particular interest in this connection: *The Poorhouse Fair*, in which the different discourses of the inhabitants of a home for the aged are interwoven, and *Couples*, where the experiences of ten suburban pairs interact. Both novels are susceptible to Utopian readings, the one set in a not-too-distant future, the other in the 'post-pill paradise' of the Kennedy-Camelot era, but both are more properly to be understood as dystopian, commenting upon the America in which they were written. In each Updike reflects upon the growing social conformity of the period, in *The Poorhouse Fair* by opposing a non-conformist group to the dictates of the social engineer, in *Couples* by creating a community in which the characters are entirely group-oriented, the products of a corporate ideal.

During the American Fifties the idea that the United States was becoming a slavishly conformist society gained ground among psychologists, social commentators and writers. In a short sketch,

'Anywhere Is Where You Hang Your Hat' (*Assorted Prose*, 6-13), Updike treated contemporary anonymity in a comic vein, in an exchange of letters between two residents of Anywhere, USA, whose average identities derive from a poster illustrating the correct use of postal zone numbers. *The Poorhouse Fair*, a darker treatment of social accommodationism, is one of many novels of the period which interrogate the results of social engineering. Prominent examples include B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two* (1948), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (1954). McCarthyism had revealed the dangers of outbursts of mass hysteria in response to social repression. In its central incident *The Poorhouse Fair* recalls Shirley Jackson's treatment of this theme in 'The Lottery', which, with its account of the stoning of a scapegoat by a group of average Americans, created a literary sensation on its *New Yorker* publication in 1948. Written in 1957, with its events situated some 20 years later, *The Poorhouse Fair* draws upon a similar vision of a conformist society with a potentially violent underside. In the novel America is in the process of 'Settling':

an increasingly common term that covered the international stalemate, the general economic equality, the population shifts to the 'vacuum states', and the well-publicized physical theory of entropy, the tendency of the universe toward eventual homogeneity. . . . This end was inevitable, no new cause for heterogeneity being, without supernaturalism, conceivable. (65/60)⁹

With its domestic problems resolved by scientific humanism, poverty eradicated and racial prejudice eliminated, America under President Lowenstein represents a secular Utopia, in peaceful coexistence with the 'London Pacts' and the 'Eurasian Soviet'.

As an apostle of this process, Conner, the director of the Diamond County Poorhouse, is intent upon forcing its inmates to cohere into a homogenous group. For the inmates, however, nothing is settled. Political conflicts, philosophical and religious problems are continually debated afresh. To Conner, these are dead issues; he completely misses the relevance of one such debate (on the Civil War and slavery, 92/82) to the residents' own situation. Where Conner's mock-anthropological terminology

dehumanises the inmates, who appear from his distant bureaucratic citadel as 'an ant colony' (50/47), the old people enjoy a variety of carefully differentiated voices and visions. Where Conner looks forward to a secular, homogeneous paradise for all, the inmates, in one of their many discussions, envisage a whole array of vividly imagined and contrasting heavens.

Although supernaturalism contributes heterogeneity to this small social group, Updike speedily undercuts any easy nostalgia for that older Protestant America which they represent. In the initial scene of the novel the old men discover labels screwed to their chairs. Though Conner's demagogic desire to see the inmates duly placed and docketed makes him Updike's prime satiric target, the sense in which the older generation's respect for authority derives from a preceding creed is also underlined. When anarchic Gregg occupies Hook's chair Hook merely adopts his usual position to Gregg's left, displacing Lucas one chair further along the row. In a comically Beckettian scene of musical chairs, the minimal rebellion collapses as the men shuffle back into line, submitting to Hook's authority. Hook's clinching argument for the desirability of knowing one's place associates Conner's regimentation and bureaucratic supervision with an image of moral book-keeping consonant with the Protestant ethic: the men's proximity to 'the Line' (death) means that they have their 'accounts watched very close' (5/10). The ambivalent relation of the inmates to freedom is also focused in the fates of two animals. The one, a feral cat, free but hideously mangled in an accident, is entrapped and put out of its misery at Conner's behest. Though Conner proceeds from the best of motives, the gloating pleasure of his henchman Buddy strongly suggests the truth of Thoreau's remark that, if you see a man approach you with the obvious intention of doing you good, you should run for your life. The other creature, a glossy parakeet, reveals the advantages of snug confinement as opposed to dangerous freedom. Though a being, like the inmates, with no apparent 'reason' or 'function' (Conner's watchwords), the escaped bird provides a glorious vision of splendour amidst the sensual deprivation of the bedridden, much as the inmates' lack of occupation frees them for a potentially rich speculative existence. It is an inmate, anxious for its safety, who restores the bird to its cage.

In the action of the novel three further events interrupt the status quo: the accidental destruction of the poorhouse wall, the