JOHN UPDIKE

BECH IS BACK

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BECQUE (Henry) . . . Après des débuts poétiques assez obscurs . . . à travers des inexpériences et des brutalités voulues, un talent original et vigoureux. Toutefois, l'auteur ne reparut que beaucoup plus tard avec [*œuvres nombreuses*], *où la critique signals les mêmes défauts et la même puissance. . . . M. Becque a été décoré de la Légion d'honneur en 1887.*

—LA GRANDE ENCYCLOPÉDIE

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BECH IS BACK

Three Illuminations in the Life of an American Author

THOUGH HENRY BECH, the author, in his middle years had all but ceased to write, his books continued, as if ironically, to live, to cast shuddering shadows toward the center of his life, where that thing called his reputation cowered. To have once imagined and composed fiction, it seemed, laid him under an indelible curse of unreality. The phone rang in the middle of the night and it was a kid on a beer trip wanting to argue about the ambivalent attitude toward Jewishness expressed (his professor felt) in *Brother Pig*. "Embrace your ethnicity, man," Bech was advised. He hung up, tried to estimate the hour from the yellowness of the Manhattan night sky, and as the yellow turned to dawn's pearl gray succumbed to the petulant embrace of interrupted sleep. Next morning, he looked to himself, in the bathroom mirror, markedly reduced. His once leonine head, and the frizzing hair expressive of cerebral energy, and the jowls testimonial to companionable bourbon taken in midnight discourse with Philip

Rahv were all being whittled by time, its relentless wizening. The phone rang and it was a distant dean, suddenly a buddy, inviting him to become a commencement speaker in Kansas. "Let me be brutally frank," the dean said in his square-shouldered voice. "The seniors' committee voted you in unanimously, once Ken Kesey turned us down. Well, there was one girl who had to be talked around. But it turned out she had never read your stuff, just Kate Millett's condemnation of the rape bits in *Travel Light*. We gave her an old copy of *When the Saints*, and now she's your staunchest fan. Not to put any unfair pressure on, but you don't want to break that girl's heart. Or do you?"

"I do," Bech solemnly affirmed. But since the dean denied him the passing grade of a laugh, the author had to babble on, digging himself deeper into the bottomless apology his unproductive life had become. He heard himself, unreally, consenting. The date was months away, and World War III might intervene. He hung up, reflecting upon the wonderful time warps of the literary life. You stay young and merely promising forever. Five years of silence, even ten, pass as a pause unnoticed by the sluggish, reptilian race of critics. An eighteen-year-old reads a book nearly as old as he is and in his innocent mind you are born afresh, your pen just lifted from the page. Bech could rattle around forever amid the persisting echoes, being "himself," going to parties and openings in his Henry Bech mask. He had his friends, his fans, even his collectors. Indeed, his phone over the lengthening years acknowledged no more faithful agitator than that foremost collector of Bechiana,

Marvin Federbusch, of Cedar Meadow, Pennsylvania.

The calls had begun to come through shortly after the publication of his first novel in 1955. Would Mr. Bech be so kind as to consider signing a first edition if it were mailed with a stamped, self-addressed padded envelope? Of course, the young author agreed, flattered by the suggestion that there had been a second edition and somewhat amused by the other man's voice, which was peculiarly rich and slow, avuncular and patient, with a consonant-careful accent Bech associated with his own German-Jewish forebears. Germanic thoroughness characterized, too, the bibliographical rigor as, through the years, the invisible Federbusch kept up with Bech's once burgeoning production and even acquired such ephemera as Bech's high-school yearbook and those wartime copies of *Collier's* and *Liberty* in which his first short stories had appeared. As Bech's creativity—checked by the rude critical reception given his massive chef-d'oeuvre, *The Chosen*,* and then utterly stymied within the mazy ambitions of his work in progress, tentatively titled *Think*

* Not to be confused with *The Chosen*, by Chaim Potok (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967). Nor with *The Chosen*, by Edward J. Edwards (London: P. Davies, 1950); *The Chosen*, by Harold Uriel Ribalow (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1959); *Chosen Country*, by John Dos Passos (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951); *A Chosen Few*, by Frank R. Stockton (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895); *The Chosen Four*, by John Theodore Tussaud (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928); *The Chosen Highway*, by Lady Blomfield (London: The Bahá'i Publishing Trust, 1940); *Chôsen-koseki-kenkyû-kwai* (Seoul: Keijo, 1934); *The Chosen One*, by Rhys Davies (London: Heinemann, 1967); *The Chosen One*, by Harry Simonhoff (New York: T. Yoseloff, 1964); *The Chosen People*, by Sidney Lauer Nyburg (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1917); *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, by Paule Marshall (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969); *The Chosen Valley*, by Margaret Irene Snyder (New York: W. W.

Big—ceased to supply objects for collection, a little flurry of reprinting occurred, and unexpected foreign languages (Korean, Turkish) shyly nudged forward and engorged some one of those early works which Bech's celebrated impotence had slowly elevated to the status of minor classics. Federbusch kept a retinue of dealers busy tracking down these oddments, and the books all came in time to the author's drafty, underpopulated apartment at Ninety-ninth and Riverside for him to sign and send back. Bech learned a lot about himself this way. He learned that in Serbo-Croatian he was bound with Washington Irving as a Hudson Valley regionalist, and that in Paraguay *The Chosen* was the choice of a book club whose honorary chairman was General Alfredo Stroessner. He learned that the Japanese had managed to issue more books by him than he had written, and that the Hungarians had published on beige paper a bulky symposium upon Kerouac, Bech, and Isaac Asimov. On his Brazilian jackets Bech looked swarthy, on his Finnish pale and icy-eyed, and on his Australian a bit like a kangaroo. All these varied volumes arrived from Federbusch and returned to Federbusch; the collector's voice gradually deepened over the years to a granular, all-forgiving grandfatherliness. Though Bech as man and artist had turned skimpy and scattered, Federbusch was out there in the blue beyond the Hudson gathering up what pieces there were. What Federbusch didn't collect deserved oblivion—deserved to fall, the dross of Bech's

Norton, 1948); *Chosen Vessels*, by Parthene B. Chamberlain (New York: T. Y. Crowell & Co., 1882); *Chosen Words*, by Ivor Brown (London: Jonathan Cape, 1955); or *Choses d'autrefois*, by Ernest Gagnon (Quebec: Dussault & Proulx, 1905).

days, into the West Side gutters and be whipped into somebody's eye by the spring winds.

The author in these thin times supported himself by appearing at colleges. There, he was hauled from the creative-writing class to the faculty cocktail party to the John D. Benefactor Memorial Auditorium and thence, baffled applause still ringing in his ears, back to the Holiday Inn. Once, in central Pennsylvania, where the gloomy little hilltop schools are stocked with starch-fed students blinking like pupfish after their recent emergence from fundamentalism, Bech found himself with an idle afternoon, a rented car, and a map that said he was not far from Cedar Meadow. The fancy took him to visit Federbusch. He became, in his mind's eye, a god descending—whimsical as Zeus, radiant as Apollo. The region needed radiance. The heavy ghost of coal hung everywhere. Cedar Meadow must have been named in a fit of rural nostalgia, for the town was a close-built brick huddle centered on a black river and a few gaunt factories slapped up to supply Grant's murderous armies. The unexpected reality of this place, so elaborate and layered in its way, so El Grecoesque and sad between its timbered hills, beneath its grimy clouds, so remote in its raw totality from the flattering bookishness that had been up to now its sole purchase on Bech's mind, nearly led him to drive through it, up its mean steep streets and down, and on to tomorrow's Holiday Inn, near a Mennonite normal school.

But he passed a street whose name, Belleview, had been rendered resonant by over fifteen years of return book envelopes: Marvin Federbusch, 117 Belleview. The hag-

gard street climbed toward its nominal view past retaining walls topped with stone spikes; on the slanted street corners there were grocery stores of a type Bech remembered from the Thirties, in the upper Bronx, the entrances cut on the diagonal, the windows full of faded cardboard inducements. He found number 117: corroded aluminum numerals marked a flight of cement steps divided down the middle by an iron railing. Bech parked, and climbed. He came to a narrow house of bricks painted red, a half-house actually, the building being divided down the middle like the steps, and the tones of red paint not quite matching. The view from the gingerbread porch was of similar houses, as close-packed as dominoes arrayed to topple, and of industrial smokestacks rising from the river valley, and of bluish hills gouged by abandoned quarrying. The doorbell distantly stridulated. A small shapeless woman in her sixties answered Bech's ring. "My brother's having his rest," she said.

Her black dress had buttons all down the front; her features seemed to be slightly rolling around in her face, like the little brass beads one maddeningly tries as a child to settle in their cardboard holes, in those dexterity-teasing toys that used to come with Cracker Jack.

"Could you tell him Henry Bech is here?"

Without another word, and without admitting him to the house, she turned away. Federbusch was so slow to arrive, Bech supposed that his name had not been conveyed correctly, or that the collector could not believe that the object of fifteen years of devotion had miraculously appeared in person.

But Federbusch, when he came at last, knew quite

well who Bech was. "You look older than on your chackets," he said, offering a wan smile and a cold, hard handshake.

This was the voice, but the man looked nothing like it—sallow and sour, yet younger than he should have been, with not an ounce of friendly fat on him, in dark trousers, white shirt, and suspenders. He was red-eyed from his nap, and his hair, barely flecked by gray, stood straight up. The lower half of his face had been tugged into deep creases by the drawstrings of some old concluded sorrow. "It's nice of you to come around," he said, as if Bech had just stepped around the corner—as if Cedar Meadow were not the bleak far rim of the world but approximately its center. "Come on in, why don'tcha now?"

Within, the house held an airless slice of the past. The furniture looked nailed-down and smelled pickled. Nothing had been thrown away; invisible hands, presumably those of the sister, kept everything in order—the glossy knickknacks and the doilies and the wedding photos of their dead parents and the landscapes a dead aunt had painted by number and the little crystal dishes of presumably petrified mints. Oppressive ranks of magazines—*Christian Age*, *Publishers Weekly*, the journal of the Snyder County Historical Society—lay immaculate on a lace-covered table, beneath an overdressed window whose sill was thick with plastic daffodils. In the corners of the room, exposed plumbing pipes had been papered in the same paper as the walls. The ceilings, though high, had been papered, too. Kafka was right, Bech saw: life is a matter of burrows. Federbusch beside him was giving off

a strange withered scent—the delicate stink of affront. Bech guessed he had been too frankly looking around, and said, to cover himself, "I don't see my books."

Even this missed the right note. His host intoned, in the sonorous voice Bech was coming to hear as funereal, "They're kept in a closet, so the sun won't fade the chackets."

A room beyond this stagnant front parlor had a wall of closet doors. Federbusch opened one, hastily closed it, and opened another. Here indeed was a trove of Bechiana —old Bech in *démodé* Fifties jackets, reprinted Bech in jazzy Seventies paperbacks with the silver lettering of witchcraft novels, Bech in French and German, Danish and Portuguese, Bech anthologized, analyzed, and deluxized, Bech laid to rest. The books were not erect in rows but stacked on their sides like lumber, like dubious ingots, in this lightless closet along with—oh, treachery! —similarly exhaustive, tightly packed, and beautifully unread collections of Roth, Mailer, Barth, Capote. . . . The closet door was shut before Bech could catalogue every one of the bedfellows the promiscuous Federbusch had captivated.

"I don't have any children myself," the man was saying mournfully, "but for my brother's boys it'll make a wonderful inheritance some day."

"I can hardly wait," Bech said. But his thoughts were sad. His thoughts dwelt upon our insufficient tragedies, our dreadfully musty private lives. How wrong he had been to poke into this burrow, how right Federbusch was to smell hurt! The greedy author, not content with adoration in two dimensions, had offered himself in a

fatal third, and maimed his recording angel. "My dealer just sent some new Penguins," Federbusch said, mumbling in shame, "and it would save postage if . . ." Bech signed the paperbacks and wound his way through ravaged hills to the Mennonite normal school, where he mocked the students' naïve faith and humiliated himself with drunkenness at the reception afterward at the Holiday Inn. But no atonement could erase his affront to Federbusch, who never troubled his telephone again.

In the days when Bech was still attempting to complete *Think Big*, there came to him a female character who might redeem the project, restore its lost momentum and focus. She was at first the meagerest wisp of a vision, a "moon face" shining with a certain lightly perspiring brightness over the lost horizon of his plot. The pallor of this face was a Gentile pallor, bearing the kiss of Nordic fogs and frosts, which ill consorted with the urban, and perforce Jewish, hurly-burly he was trying to organize. Great novels begin with tiny hints—the sliver of madeleine melting in Proust's mouth, the shade of louse-gray that Flaubert had in mind for Mme. Bovary—and Bech had begun his messy accumulation of pages with little more than a hum, a hum that kept dying away, a hum perhaps spiritual twin to the rumble of the IRT under Broadway as it was felt two blocks to the west, on the sixth floor, by a bored bachelor. The hum, the background radiation to the universe he was trying to create, was, if not the meaning of life, the tenor of meaninglessness in our late-twentieth-century, post-numinous, indus-

trial-consumeristic civilization, North American branch, Middle Atlantic subdivision. Now this hum was pierced by an eerie piping from this vague "moon face."

Well, the woman would have to be attractive; women in fiction always are. From the roundness of her face, its innocent pressing frontality, would flow a certain "bossiness," a slightly impervious crispness that would set her at odds with the more subtle, ironical, conflicted, slippery intelligentsia who had already established power positions in the corporate structure of his virtually bankrupt fantasy. Since this moony young (for the crispness, this lettucy taste of hers, bespoke either youth or intense refrigeration) woman stood outside the strong family and business ties already established, she would have to be a mistress. But whose? Bech thought of assigning her to Tad Greenbaum, the six-foot-four, copiously freckled, deceptively boyish dynamo who had parlayed a gag-writer's servitude into a daytime-television empire. But Tad already had a mistress—stormy, raven-haired, profoundly neurotic Thelma Stern. Also, by some delicate gleam of aversion, the moon face refused to adhere to Greenbaum. Bech offered her instead to Thelma's brother Dolf, the crooked lawyer, with his silken mustaches, his betraying stammer, and his great clean glass desk. Bech even put the two of them into bed together; he loved describing mussed sheets, and the sea-fern look of trees seen from the window of a sixth-floor apartment, and the way the chimney pots of the adjacent roofs resemble tin men in black pajamas engaged in slow-motion burglary. But though the metaphors prospered, the relationship didn't take. No man was good enough for this