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David R. Jarraway

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# Future Interior: Subjective (A)voidance in John Updike's "Rabbit" Novels

David R. Jarraway

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**Abstract:** In *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), John Updike's use of Wallace Stevens's "Rabbit as King of the Ghosts" crystallizes what American literature in a (post-)Freudian age is particularly prone: ego is no longer master in his own house. Lacan's observation, therefore, that "[w]hat is realized in my history is not the past definite of what it was . . . but the future anterior of what I am in the process of becoming" will serve as a theoretical frame within which to critique the suspect future "interior" of "Rabbit" Angstrom throughout Updike's novel quartet.

**Keywords:** American literature, American modernism, contemporary narrative, American masculinity, Deleuze studies

*"Something quite intricate and fierce occurs in homes, and it seems to me without doubt worthwhile to examine what it is."*

—John Updike, "Can a Nice Novelist Finish First?" (11)

*"You become a self that fills the four corners of night. / The red cat hides away in the fur-light"*

—Wallace Stevens, "A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts," in *Collected Poems* (209)

*"On one side [of our wanting to be inside, within] is the need for home . . . and on the other is the desire for travel and motion . . . We long to connect; [and yet,] we fear that if we do . . . individuality will disappear."*

—Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (3)

Throughout his long and prodigious career, American writer John Updike has been fascinated by human identity in modern culture—a preoccupation that perhaps became crystallized for him upon completion of his third book of poetry entitled *Midpoint* (1969). Ruminating fondly about that volume some ten years later,

Updike observes, "I remain pleased with *Midpoint*. It's about the mystery of being alive—of being *you* as opposed to being somebody else. Perhaps that's the abiding mystery in my metaphysical universe" ("Conversation [Reilly]" 145). Ten years further on, the mystery continues in a book of memoirs entitled *Self-Consciousness* (1989). "In most people," Updike remarks, "there is a settled place they speak from," but in his own case, identity "remains unsettled, unfinished, provisional" (80).<sup>1</sup>

If the mystery of being somebody is the abiding metaphysical thematic throughout much of Updike's work—in an earlier interview he claims that his "religious sensibility operates primarily as a sense of . . . the mystery and irreducibility of one's identity, mixed in with fear of the identity . . . being squelched" ("Interview [Campbell]" 103)—little wonder, then, that the mystery of human identity enters early into the poetic textuality of *Midpoint* as an "O, that white-hot nothing" that later forms part of a worldly "dislocated Real" where "Strange holes, *excitons*, wander loose" (7, 20). I shall return to these mysterious formulations in a more specific way a bit later. For now, I want to draw attention to their overall sense of indeterminacy as a more general means of situating Updike's work within the literary rhetoric of interiority, and, in terms of the organizing rubric for this conventional approach to subjectivity, as we shall see, focus especially upon the way the metaphoricity of interiors may be thought to be both necessary and debatable at once.

To begin: with Updike's own preoccupation with the irreducible mystery of identity, and his concern that it may somehow be squelched, I view his authorship as forwarding the argument elaborated at greater length elsewhere (see Jarraway "*Going the Distance*") that American literature has been historically constituted by and around and through what so often can become effaced in foundational appropriations of human experience, and of human subjectivity in particular: a constitutive space, at once dark, mysterious, unspeakable, that Joyce Carol Oates characterizes as that "black hole in the firmament where God used to be," and that given their "yearnings for infinitude," "Americans are likely to feel . . . [they] *never grow out of*" (*Broke Heart Blues* 92, original emphasis). In a literature as self-referential as America's, I view this lettered space, moreover, as a radical locus of misrecognition—a space inveterately and omnivorously and indefatigably about the cultural work of *distancing* texts as various as poems, stories, novels, memoirs, even people themselves, from essences, origins,

ends, and ultimate truths. In response to the age-old demand to describe what is life and what is death, the ancient female sage in Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize address a decade ago, we notice, is guardedly silent: "[S]he does not [answer]; she keeps her secret; her good opinion of herself; her gnomic pronouncements; her art without commitment. She *keeps her distance*, enforces it and retreats into the singularity of isolation, in sophisticated, privileged space" (n.pag.).<sup>2</sup>

Let me suggest even further that the "sophisticated privileged space," in Morrison's own words here, that opens up between the self and the perennial social demands placed upon that self is a space that has been kept and guarded in American literature for a very long time. "Of what use is genius," Emerson, for instance, remarks in his essay entitled "Experience" (1847), "if the organ is too convex or too concave and cannot find a focal distance within the actual horizon of human life?" (3: 474). Hence, Updike's own troubled perception in *Midpoint*, once again, of "Creation [as] a stutter in the Void" wherein may be described a certain "distance losing its value like inflated currency" (32). That the writer's stammering may be intended to work against the voiding of a more capacious or distanced human identity, however, is substantially the argument of an important essay by Gilles Deleuze, who remarks that, in the case of a poet like the Russian Osip Mandelstam, the language of modernism is one of perpetual disequilibrium that begins "to vibrate and stutter" only when speech, whose conventional "homogeneous system of equilibrium" is lost—since it "never assumes more than one variable position"—and a more spasmodic linguistic "zone of continuous variation" is offered in its place (108). Updike champions the stuttering writer to a similar effect, citing the instance of Henry James' father: "The Senior Henry James evidently had some trouble enunciating, for after meeting him in 1843, Carlyle wrote to Emerson, 'He confirms an observation of mine, which indeed I find is hundreds of years old, that a stammering man is never a worthless one. Physiology can tell you why. It is an excess of delicacy, excess of sensibility to the presence of his fellow-creature, that makes him stammer'" (*Self-Consciousness* 81).

Could it not be, therefore, that distance loses its value in the context of literary creation remarked by Updike precisely at that point in which the mystery of being human is stutteringly voided (or avoided, as in my title), or in other terms, is somehow so fore-

shortened or so domesticated or so squelched—interiorized, in a word—that human identity becomes the equivalent of “a satisfied person, a content person, [and so] ceases to be a person” at all (Updike “Art of Fiction” 34)?<sup>3</sup> One tends to feel that Updike himself has come to know something of the deadening effects of a demystified interiority, thanks, ironically, to the burgeoning of his own artistic celebrity:

The person who appears on the cover of *Time* or whose monologue will be printed in *The Paris Review* is neither the me who exists physically and socially or the me who signs the fiction and poetry. That is, everything is infinitely more fine, and any opinion is somehow coarser than the texture of the real thing. (“Art of Fiction” 31)<sup>4</sup>

Thus, homing in on rather than infinitizing out from identity’s sophisticated privileged space interiorizes subjectivity to the point of abject debility,<sup>5</sup> and it thus suggests to Updike a governing topology to which he will return again and again in his work when he remarks, “Something quite intricate and fierce occurs in homes, and it seems to me without doubt worthwhile to examine what it is” (“Nice Novelist” 11; see *Self-Consciousness* 98–99).

As my title further indicates, I shall be arguing that it is the quartet of novels devoted to the life and career of Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom in which Updike finds an appropriate vehicle for putting to work and mapping out the topology of homely or domestic space in all of its debilitating interiority. If, for Updike, subjectivity approximates, much as in the psychoanalysis of Lacan, the irreducible texture of some Real Thing in the passage cited previously, identity is mysterious and strange perhaps for the very reason infamously propounded as well by Lacan in his *Écrits*: “What is realized in my history is not the past *definite* of what it was . . . but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming” (86, emphasis added). To a similar degree, Updike also champions the notion of the becoming-subject, taking his cue from French novelist Michel Tournier, who observes that the self “exists only intermittently and when all is said, comparatively seldom.” Continues Tournier,

Its presence corresponds to a secondary and as it were reflexive mode of knowledge . . . We cannot use the image of the candle shedding its light upon objects. We must substitute another: that

of objects shining unaided, with a light of their own . . . Then suddenly there is a click. The subject breaks away from the object . . . There is a rift in the scheme of things, and a whole range of objects crumbles in becoming *me*. (qtd. in *Self-Consciousness* 142, original emphasis)

But if Updike repeatedly worries the fierce intrication of identity and home just noted, we can surmise that one aim in his fiction is perhaps to reverse the projects of Lacan and Tournier, as it were, and therefore to reveal how subjectivity's process of becoming is rudely voided by the pathological *interiority* that more and more comes to supplant its salubrious futural *anteriority* (and by implication, its more healthful alterity) throughout the length and breadth of "Rabbit" Angstrom's essentially homebound career.<sup>6</sup> We see this starting right with the first novel, *Rabbit, Run* (1969), in which Angstrom is portrayed "safe in his own skin, [and] doesn't want to come out," and how his "hatred" of changeable experience "makes a kind of shelter for him" and thus prevents him completely from coping with—"He turns and runs," in fact—the death of his infant daughter Rebecca, the Angstroms' first born who is accidentally drowned by his wife Janice in a careless moment of stuporous alcoholic inebriation (108, 245, 253).

In the second novel, *Rabbit Redux* (1971), a similar allergic reaction to change interiorizes his self within "a tight well whose dank sides squeeze and paralyze him" and thus makes him incapable once again of reaching out to another dysfunctional woman in need to whom he has become emotionally attached. Named Jill Pendleton, she later dies accidentally in a fire in the Angstroms' house, the very house where "Rabbit" is portrayed as "floating rigid to keep himself from sinking in terror," and so "completing his motion into darkness, into the rhythmic brown of the sofa" when "terror returns"—the terror interposed for the human subject at the midpoint of either becoming or voiding the Other, hence a terror that, rabbit-like, "squeezes [Harry] shut like an eyelid" (247). And so onto the fourth novel in the series, *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), where the advice of one of Harry's doctors counselling him to "[g]et interested in something outside your self, and your heart will stop talking to you" (476) comes much too late. For by the final page of the novel, it is implied that his heart will in fact terminate the now elderly Angstrom in a far more lethal way, leaving him alone and dead from angina within the cold and empty confines of an antiseptic hospital room in Miami far removed from his home

town, Brewer, and thus leaving readers with the image of “one of the most solipsistic characters in [Updike’s œuvre],” literally “shut up in the solitude of his own heart” according to Marshall Boswell (235).

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that in the third of the “Rabbit” Angstrom novels, *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), Updike should employ Stevens’s “A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts” in an opening epigraph. In a staged encounter between a self-absorbed rabbit and an alien cat in Stevens’s poem, not unexpectedly rabbit becomes “a self that fills the four corners of night,” thus hiding red cat away in its own “fur-light” (*Collected Poems* 209). Stevens’s commentators theorize at considerable length about the human subject’s withdrawal into “enclosed sheltered space” more generally in Stevens’s poetry in an effort to foreground the poet’s continuous brief throughout his work against “the solipsistic retreat into dark and enclosed domestic space” that, in American literature, reaches back to Emerson, once again, and in particular, to Emerson’s important observation (in his essay on Plato), “The experience of creativeness . . . is not found in staying at home, nor yet in traveling, but in transitions from one to the other” (qtd. in Jarraway, *Wallace Stevens and the Question of Belief* 30). In the lines of the poem cited by Updike, rabbit’s “shapeless shadow covers the sun,” so that for cat, “nothing is left except light on your fur.” Because Updike admits in some respects to “the radical centrality” of Freud in his novel writing (“Nice Novelist” 16), I’m inclined to argue that the shapeless shadow of Rabbit covering the sun in both novel and poem is attributable to what American literature in a (post-)Freudian age is particularly prone: that the ego, according to David Macey, is no longer “master in its own house, and can no longer aspire to Cartesian certainties” (74).<sup>7</sup> It seems only appropriate, accordingly, for Updike to install his beleaguered hero in this third novel of the series as the head of a Toyota automobile dealership, and thus transpose his critique of subjective (a)voidance from the interiority of house and home and hospital room to the claustal interiority of the American motor vehicle itself. “As [Angstrom] sits snug in his sealed and well-assembled car,” writes Updike in *Rabbit Is Rich*, “the venerable city of Brewer unrolls like a silent sideways movie past his closed windows” (27). “[T]rapped within his own skin,” but also within “a terror of being himself and not somebody else,” as Updike elsewhere remarks upon his running protagonist (“Interview [Orr]” 160)—the deliberate interiorization of male subjectivity therefore becomes as suspect here

as it is revealed to be throughout the other “Rabbit” novels, as we’ve seen.<sup>8</sup>

For the balance of this essay, therefore, I would like to flesh out in a bit more detail Updike’s aforementioned critique of interiority with reference to this third novel in the quartet, and to the specific nature of subjective (a)voidance entailed in Updike’s scurrilously masterful critique. “[V]ery few reviews or articles,” Updike contends generally about his novels, “seem to me to take the clues that the epigraphs [are] meant to offer” (“Interview [Campbell]” 84), so that Stevens’s poem can perhaps be our guide, once again, in laying out much of this devastating critique.<sup>9</sup> If as I suggested earlier, interiority in Updike speaks primarily to the self’s failure to negotiate a healthful relationship with otherness, Updike arguably follows Stevens’s text wherein rabbit’s abject failure to a large extent resides in its inability to come to terms with “the monument of cat.” “We feel safe,” Updike elsewhere acknowledges, “when ‘huddled within human institutions—churches, banks, madrigal groups—but these concoctions melt away at the basic moments [so that] ... [t]he self’s responsibility, then, is to achieve rapport if not rapture with the giant, cosmic other’” (*Self-Consciousness* 257): Stevens’s monumental red cat, once again. What is more, if this failure is coterminous with (a)voiding rather than ultimately becoming Other as both Lacan and Tournier suggest, then following Stevens’s text further, the active gesture of exclusion and the more passive operation of repression (Jarraway, *Wallace Stevens* 98) are perhaps the two most signal forms of this failure throughout Updike’s novel. Hence, “[f]rom a certain angle,” as the narrator remarks—either from the angle of exclusion or the angle of repression, let’s say—“the most terrifying thing in the world is your own life, the fact that it’s yours and nobody else’s” (163).

The terror, therefore, that one’s own life might be significantly altered by an encounter with somebody else’s is perhaps what most inspires the gesture of exclusion in the quest for self-interiority—the gesture that actively translates into the paroxysms of racism, sexism, and homophobia for Angstrom throughout the novel. On the matter of race, for instance, few minorities manage to escape Angstrom’s prejudice: “Something about spics,” he ruminates to himself, “they don’t like to see white kids making out, they surround the car and smash the windshield with rocks,” while “Arabs [can] take their fucking oil and grease their camels with it”; and “How did the Japanese ever get to Brewer anyway?” (29, 201,

335). On the matter of the opposite sex, it seems impossible for Angstrom to view women in any but the most sexually reductive of terms: "Rabbit can never look at [Thelma Harrison] without wondering what she must do to keep Harrison happy. He senses intelligence in her, but intelligence in women [had] never much interested him," an assessment that redounds to Angstrom's own wife Janice whom he suspects "does know something. Cunts always know something," and then later to all the female members of his family circle, "Janice or Ma Springer or this Pru, cunts all around him" (49, 109, 171). Cindy Murkett, whom Angstrom lusts after throughout the entire novel but is never quite able to seduce, won't even pass the intelligence test: "He will follow her slit down with his tongue, her legs parting . . . and around the corner next to his nose will be that whole great ass he has a thousand times watched jiggle as she dried herself off from swimming" (369).

Most excluded by interiority's miasms of intolerance are the occasional gay men who cross Angstrom's path, or at least the men he suspects to be gay. The Reverend Archie Campbell, for instance, the Baptist minister who can be seen to destroy the good order of the Angstrom home by entering into it to marry off his son Nelson to his already pregnant girlfriend Pru—Reverend Campbell, Angstrom admits, is a "pro: Rabbit can respect that. But how did he let himself get queer?" (177): "Campbell taps out the bowl of his pipe with a finicky calm that conveys to Harry the advantages of being queer: the world is just a gag to this guy. He walks on water; the mud of women and making babies never dirties his shoes . . . nothing touches him. That's religion" (181). There's certainly enough bias in this assessment to convince Rabbit's son Nelson that the Reverend is gay: "'I mean it's obscene,' Nelson insisted. 'What does he do, fuck the church up the ass?'" (192). But whether or not Reverend Campbell is in fact gay, it only seems enough to be slightly different from some societal norm to provoke the interiorized self into a funk of (a)voidance: "At last some boy [called] Lyle brings in a gray cloth sack like you would carry some leftover mail in . . . something faggy about him, maybe his short haircut" (333).<sup>10</sup>

"Remember," Marshall Boswell cautions the reader, "each issue in an Updike novel has two sides" (157). So that if interiority's exclusions present us with the active and manifest form of subjective (a)voidance, their flip side is the more passive and latent operation of psychic repression bound up with the terrifying realization that

nothing is ultimately certain with respect to human identity, and that the ego's exclusions may all be for naught: "'You mean we're not real people?' Rabbit asks" (85). Thus, no matter how high rabbit humps up his ego, to go with Stevens's poem once again—"You are humped higher and higher, black as stone"—its head "like a carving in space" cannot quite shake out the presentiment of otherness: "the little green cat [as] a bug in the grass" (*Collected Poems* 210). "Lost in space" is perhaps what the operation of repression tells us most insightfully about Angstrom in the novel, so angst-ridden (to play up the patronymic symbolism) is he now by the anteriority rather than the interiority of human identity: "A huge hole to fill up" Angstrom despairs (419).<sup>11</sup> These spatial tropings for subjectivity, particularly the "huge hole," can therefore return us once again to that "white-hot nothing" displaced onto those "strange holes" wandering so loosely through the poetry of *Midpoint* mentioned earlier. In psychoanalytic terms, Updike's nomadic *excitons* may put us in mind of a similarly graphic mis-ordering of symbolic identity targeted by Lacan as the literal embodiment of his infamous "corps morcelé" (see *Écrits* 4–5), and in *Rabbit Is Rich* a reminiscence of this formulation for anteriority's indeterminacy takes us to the very heart of the terror motoring Angstrom's need for repression: "In middle age you are carrying the world in a sense and yet it seems *out of control* more than ever, the self you had as a boy [is now] all scattered and distributed like the pieces of bread in the miracle" (169, emphasis added). But this passage also takes us to the heart of Updike's treatment of women throughout the novel, and a final means of rounding out his critique of interiority as subjective (a)voidance.

What intrigues me most about Updike's spatial tropings for the scattered "nothing" of identity that Angstrom quite can't take control of, and that clearly emanates from Updike's own "sense of life as many-layered and ambiguous," given the "different shapes and textures and mysteriousness of anything that exists" ("Art of Fiction" 45)<sup>12</sup>—what especially intrigues me is the extraordinary co-ordination these spacings establish once again with contemporary psychoanalytic theory, and in particular, the notion of woman as an "empty" construction of what Jacques-Alain Miller refers to as "semblances." Explains Miller, "A semblance is something whose function is to mask nothingness ... [only] because we cannot discover Woman, we can only invent her" (14). But rather than "filling the hole in the lack" (as in Freud's analytical investigations), in true Lacanian fashion Miller lights upon another solution alternative to

the futility mirrored by Angstrom in the passages just cited: "This solution consists not in filling the hole, but rather in metabolizing it, dialectizing it ... making oneself a being with nothingness. This opens up a whole new clinic of the feminine, a clinic of the lack of identity ... [that is to say,] of being the hole in the Other by giving it a positive form" (16–17). That Updike is of a mind to positivize identity in just this way for several of his women characters, that is to say, to metabolize their being in terms of the white-hot nothing underwriting the anteriority of human life is perhaps what makes them so threatening to a character like Angstrom. Nelson Angstrom's friend Melanie, for instance, who helps him to return from university, and settle back in with his family in anticipation of his marriage to Pru, bugs "Rabbit" in the sense of Stevens's poem not so much because she tools around Brewer on a twelve-speed Fuji, consorts with all the "wrong elements" in her waitressing job ("hippies and Hispanic families from the south side instead of the white-collar types from West Brewer"), and frequently behaves "kooky as a bluebird" (96, 77, 113). It's simply that her identity cannot be interiorized in all the ways that Angstrom requires his own to be:

54

Melanie was mystical, she ate no meat and felt no fear. She lacked that fury ... smiling out at [Nelson] from within the bubble where the mystery resided that amounted to power ... the mocking implacable Buddha calm ... "You should read [Gurdjieff]," she says [to Nelson]. "He's wonderful ... He believed we all have plural identities." (133)

The important allusion to Melanie's mysticism in this passage is thus in keeping with Updike's positivizing her anteriority as a hole in the Other since the mystic subject, according to Michel de Certeau, "finds its effectiveness at the very moment that it loses itself in that which is revealed within itself to be greater than itself" (qtd. in Jarraway "Sublime Objects" 90)—subjectivity as a many-layered texture of plural identities here, and elsewhere in the novel as "a world of endless possibilities" (87). Little wonder, then, that Nelson (as the above citation goes on to relate) wants "to take up one of the beer bottles and smash it down into the curly hair of Melanie's skull" (133), since "Rabbit" had much earlier fantasized a similar moment concerning his all-too-knowing wife Janice: "to take a large round rock and crush her skull with it" (56). Like father, like son.

The spatial association that thus comes to sum up best the (w)hole of Melanie's mystic sense of plural possibility in Updike's novel is, as we might expect, distance: "Her eyes lift, so the whites beneath the irises show, as she looks toward her distant origins" (84). And it's a trope that significantly comes to attach itself to the other women in the novel. Nelson's wife Pru, for instance, who "irritates him . . . with her defiant dancing and her pregnancy and all these blacks and queers she's not afraid of"—Nelson himself, in a moment of abandonment, actually "enjoys watching her from a distance" (297, 293). His father, by contrast, when he "feels himself towering and giddy," with "ashamed words strikes across a great distance" attaching itself to his wife Janice while she "listens motionless to her doom" (347). So that when Updike talks about distance losing its value in the stuttering void of human relationships, we are perhaps instructed to think that it's only because having (a)voided so much of the possibility for becoming other than oneself, the Angstrom ego humped so high actually forms, as Updike states, "a barrier to some secret beyond," thus leaving "a whole world half-seen in the corner of one's eye snuffed out" (415, 418).<sup>13</sup> Hence, Ruth Leonard, an old flame of Angstrom's in years gone by, renders her excoriating assessment of his character as the novel concludes: "Stuck on yourself from cradle to grave . . . You're nothing but me, me, me and gimme, gimme" (400, 401). What's left, then, is only interiority's lethal evacuation of anterior distance in the novel's final line: "His. Another nail in his coffin. His" (423). As Updike himself admits in the "Introduction" to his four-novel compilation, *Rabbit Angstrom*, "Rabbit is, like the Underground Man, *incorrigible* . . . from first to last" (xxii, original emphasis).<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, Updike provokes us to imagine what in American literature might be the alternative to subjective (a)voidance in his "Rabbit" novels, and in an essay on "Whitman's Egotheism" in *Hugging the Shore*, leads us back to Emerson once again when he observes, "The world in which Emerson, and the American artist, finds himself is not one subdued to human uses by previous generations but a 'dumb abyss,' a wilderness radically strange, in which has been planted the other radical strangeness of one's self" (107). The noticeable switch in spatial metaphors in this passage whereby the abyss linked to a more estranged and open subject comes to take the place presumably of the void connected to one more subdued and closed puts us in mind of just where that abyssal space of open possibility is likely to occur: neither at home, nor in some place away from home, Emerson reminds us, but in the transitions

in the spaces in-between. In what appears to be a specific meditation on this reflection of Emerson, American poet Mark Doty (in my final epigraph) alerts us to the fear that attends our need for homely interiors that seems always to be simultaneous with our desire to transit away from them: the fear that “individuality will disappear” (3). Hence, in an act of sodomitical sexual congress that must represent a maximum of egoism humped high when “Rabbit” finally beds Ronnie Harrison’s wife in a wife-swapping scenario near the end of the novel, the “void” that he experiences is the furthest thing from Emerson’s “abyss” since it’s a “nothingness seen by his single eye,” the narrator astutely remarks, and in an adjoining passage, “a void, a pure black box, a casket of perfect nothingness” (379, 378). But as I have been at pains to show throughout this essay, there is another kind of nothingness in Updike, indeed in American literature, one interposed, as Doty again remarks, “between holding on and letting go,” and it is the singular achievement of Updike’s “Rabbit” novels that, in line with Emerson, their future *anteriority* can point to the “wisdom [that] lies in our ability to negotiate between these two poles” (6).<sup>15</sup>

Stevens puts this crucial moment of rumination succinctly half-way through his majestic poem: a “nothing to think of [that] comes of it-/self.” The word *self* is important here, appearing as it does on a line entirely alone. What will it choose: the void of rabbit, or the abyss of cat? Interiority or anteriority? In *Self-Consciousness*, Updike would appear to provide the perfect gloss for this momentous choice when he writes,

Perhaps there are two kinds of people: those for whom nothingness is no problem, and those for whom its is an insuperable problem, an outrageous cancellation rendering every other concern, from mismatching socks to nuclear holocaust, negligible. Tenacious of this terror, this adamant essence as crucial to us as our sexuality, we resist those kindly stoic consolers who assure us that we will outwear the fright, that we will grow numb and accepting and, as it were, religiously impotent . . . [But] As Unamuno says . . . “I want this ‘I’ to live—this poor ‘I’ that I am that I feel myself to be here and now.” (228–29)

Hopefully, then, in order to live, our ability to see through the tenacious terrors cast up everywhere by the “adamant essence” of selfhood will spare us the (a)voidance of nothingness as a “problem” rehearsed above. Or, in terms of Updike’s equally majestic fictional

quartet, to negotiate our way past “Rabbit” on his sofa or “in his bed, his molars in their crowns” (76), and on to that moment once more in *Midpoint* where “I am another world, no doubt; no doubt / We come into this World from well without” (43).

### Notes

1. Two physical afflictions throughout Updike’s personal life, *Self-Consciousness* makes clear, have bodily contributed to Updike’s own unsettled and provisional sense of self: First, a bad case of stuttering in his youth, that creates a kind of “cleavage” between thought and word and thus for the novelist “demonstrates the duality of our existence,” or in other terms, “a kind of recoil at the thrust of your own voice, an expression of alarm and shame at sounding like yourself, at *being* yourself, at taking up space and air . . . [in which case] the captive tongue is released into *Maskenheit*, the freedom conferred by masks” (87). Second, a chronic case of psoriasis onset in maturity, that, like stuttering, imparts to Updike a sense of “duplicity” with respect to his ego—a “dualism, indeed, such as existed between my skin and myself [that] appeared to me the very engine of the human,” but like the *Maskenheit* of stuttering, affords him “a certain optimism” as well: “like a snake, I shed many skins . . . [so that] the possibility of a ‘new life,’ in this world or the next, has been ever present in my mind” (75).
2. So Updike near the end of *Self-Consciousness* is reminded of a similar wordless distance that, like Morrison’s, may be put to the uses of reflecting upon life’s mystery and the soul’s secret manifestation within that strange presentiment. Writes Updike, “There are distances in New England, hard to see on the map, that come from the variousness of regions set within a few miles of one another, and from a tact in the people which wordlessly acknowledges another’s right to an inner life and private strangeness” (254).
3. “A truly adjusted person,” Updike further observes, “is not a person at all—just an animal with clothes on or a statistic. So that it’s a happy ending, with this ‘but’ at the end” (34). Hence, his emphasis in a much later interview on “dramatizing aspects of your own self [while] turning it into a person,” with the additional remark that “That manipulation of the alternatives that we all have within us is the most creative and honest thing we do” (“An Interview” 206).
4. Hence, in *Self-Consciousness* once again: “Who I am seems impossibly complicated and unobvious. Some falsity of impersonation, some burden of disguise or deceit forms part of my self, an untrustworthy part that can collapse at awkward or anxious moments into a stutter . . . [None-theless,] my stuttering feels like an acknowledgment, in conversation, of the framework of unacknowledged complexity that surrounds the simplest exchange of words [hence,] a tongue-tripping sense of complexity” (82, 83).

5. "Our lives depend upon *an interior maze* of pumping, oozing tubular flow," observes Updike elsewhere, "whose contemplation itself can induce claustrophobia." Hence, "[o]ur lives begin with a slither through a tight place, and end, according to Tolstoy's vision in 'The Death of Ivan Ilyich,' with being pushed deeper and deeper into a black sack" (*Self-Consciousness* 90, emphasis added). I shall return to this idea of claustrophobia in Updike's own "Rabbit" novels in a moment.
6. As an imaginative writer, Updike would no doubt heartily concur with Rosi Braidotti's observation that "[t]he tense that best expresses the power of the imagination is the future perfect [by means of which subjectivity] shifts away from reassuming platitudes of the past to the openings hinted at by the future perfect." Continues Braidotti, "Memories need the imagination to empower the actualization of virtual possibilities in the subject. They allow the subject to differ from itself as much as possible while remaining faithful to oneself, i.e., while enduring" (400). I shall also return to this issue of subjective possibility in Updike's fiction a bit later in my argument.
7. The removal of Cartesian certainties thus requires us to think about "deconstructing reified gender dichotomies," as Jessica Benjamin points out, and contemplate instead subjectivity in "transitional terms," that is, "leaving a world of fixed boundaries with uncrossable borders for a transitional territory in which the conventional opposites create movable walls and pleasurable tensions" (115). For Updike, such leave-taking would appear to imply thinking about male subjectivity outside the conventional context of the American nuclear family: "When young I had wanted a wife who would be attractive, and motherly, and artistic, and quiet, and she materialized. We wanted children, and they obediently came, healthy and lovable and two of each sex. Now, through no fault of their own, they composed a household whose walls seemed to be shrinking around me, squeezing my chest . . . The anxiety surrounding me made breathing yet harder; it reduced my space" (*Self-Consciousness* 99). On the influence of Freud in his work, Updike further states, "I, myself, read Freud rather late in life, but I can say that he helped me. He also definitely helped America, because he—on top of the Calvinistic commandment to prove ourselves on earth through the accumulation of wealth—gave us the possibility to prove ourselves . . . Since Freud, sexuality is also something positive, not something negative as it was suggested by the Puritans" ("Conversation [Winkler]" 175).
8. Nelson Angstrom refers to the motor car as his father's "best friend" in *Rabbit Is Rich* (233), but it was in fact Harry's "only haven" as early as *Rabbit, Run* (36).
9. The several deliberate invocations throughout the novel to Stevens's poem—the description of Angstrom as "a kind of ghost in the way

- [people] talk of him as if he wasn't standing right there" (39); or of his "being tumbled by a cat" (61); or of his taking full possession of a golf green as "[a] cloud covers the sun" (159), etc.—such parallel referencing invites readers of *Rabbit Is Rich* to pay rather close heed to Stevens's text.
10. Thus, in the ongoing incendiary conflict between father and son throughout the novel, the homosexual serves as a kind of recriminative tool when, for instance, Nelson jokingly alludes to himself as a "queer" (read = failure), in Harry's eyes, while Harry parodically refers to his inept offspring as "Nellie" (read = effeminate) (110).
  11. Angstrom, of course, is also reminded of the popular 1960s TV series entitled *Lost in Space* (415)—a spatial presentiment that elsewhere in the novel has terrifying associations for him in connection with the vastness of a "[f]resh blue sky" (101; further on 23 and 403). Significantly, in the concluding chapter of *Self-Consciousness* entitled "On Being a Self Forever," Updike brings this particular image back, once again, to the protean and fluid randomness of his mysterious selfhood: "When I look up at a blank blue sky . . . I become aware of a pattern of optical imperfections—specks in my vitreous humor like frozen microbes—that float always, usually unnoticed, in the field of my seeing. These are part of my self . . . [Hence,] I think of my self [as] a flaw that reveals my true, deep self, like a rift in Antarctic ice showing a scary, skyey blue at the far bottom" (212, 213).
  12. "There is the larger attempt, in the shape of your novels," Updike further explains, "to give something of the texture and the ambiguity of life itself, which makes, perhaps, for novels that don't end as conclusively and as satisfyingly as 19th-century novels did. But I think it's our fate as 20th-century people to live with ambiguity, and so I've tried to make my books in some sense reflect the ambiguity that exists" ("Fresh Air" 210). In the "Conclusion" to his very thorough study of the "Rabbit" tetralogy, Marshall Boswell surmises, "The final truth imprinted by [the four books] is the truth of ambiguity, whereby dialectical disunities are left unreconciled" (238), and views the rhetoric of irony unpacked in Milan Kundera's *Art of the Novel* as most applicable to Updike's own fictional technique, "'[n]ot because [irony] mocks or attacks but because it denies our certainties by unmasking the world as an ambiguity'" (qtd. on 238). The issue is further explored in Boswell on 10, 26, 93, 101, 119, 125–26, 233, and 236.
  13. In "The Photographs" section of *Midpoint*, Updike remarks, "Distance improves vision" (12), and since the punning interchange between "I" and "eye" is a consistent one throughout much of his literary criticism, distance ought to be a source for self-improvement as well. Reflecting on his novel writing by 1975, Updike therefore observes, "I tried to set up a lot of differences [among my characters] so I could get some distance. I think it's important to distance your characters, especially the

novel-length ones" ("Interview [Stout]" 80). Thus, while the humped masculine egos of father and son are continuously at loggerheads throughout much of *Rabbit Is Rich* noted previously, there is nonetheless the prospect of "staring into the distance as if toward a land where [Harry] and Nelson can perfectly agree" (107). Significantly, in his essay on Stevens in *Hugging the Shore*, Updike remarks, "Joined to [Stevens's] reflective, deliberate cold side there was something combative and uproarious, which expressed itself in contention with distance" ("Heaven of an Old Home" 613). For a further critical expansion of this important artistic crux in the poet, see Jarraway, "Doty, Deleuze, and 'Distance.'"

14. I am, therefore, rather dubious about Boswell's extravagant claim that an earlier "version" of "Rabbit" in *Rabbit, Run* is "open to everyone," and that "[e]veryone is wild about Harry, and Harry is wild about everyone" (52).
15. "The dreamed-of balance" is how Doty describes this strenuous negotiation later in *Still Life*: "to be rooted in the house, in comfortable domestic alliance, in relation—and to have one's freedom of association, too, weightless, with the quick mobility of air or fire. Both solid and spirited, both fixed and unbound" (63).

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