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Verbal Vermeer: Updike's Middle-Class Portraiture

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Verbal Vermeer

Updike's Middle-Class Portraiture

Praise *Disney*, for dissolving *Goofy's* stride
Into successive stills our eyes elide;
And *Jan Vermeer*, for salting humble bread
With Dabs of light, as well as bricks and thread.

Updike, *Midpoint* (38)

André Malraux once wrote, "Whenever we have records enabling us to trace the origins of a painter's, a sculptor's, any artist's vocation, we trace it . . . to the vision, the passionate emotion, or the serenity, of another artist" (281). This is certainly true of Updike, who, in addition to praising the art of animation, has said of his own work, "One can give no more than what one has received, and we try to create for others, in our writings, aesthetic sensations we have experienced. In my case . . . the graphic precision of a Durer or a Vermeer" (*Picked-Up Pieces* 36).

Of all the artists Updike mentions in his writing, none is cited more often than seventeenth-century Dutch painter Jan Vermeer, whose near-photographic depictions of household scenes from everyday bourgeois life are recalled in Updike's own fictional portraits of upper-middle-class domesticity—particularly those set in his native Pennsylvania, where the Dutch historically settled. Vermeer, unlike most of his genre-painting contemporaries, deemphasized humorous and narrative elements and instead concentrated on the arrangement of objects and the play of light within an interiorized space, what Malraux called "a simplified color harmony shot through with light" (339). Because he treated objects and humans equally, the former acquired a sense of importance, and the latter a kind of memorialized stasis—each "favored" by the artist's even, modulated light. It was not until the 1860s—when French impressionism was emerging and the public's attention was drawn to surfaces, shadow, and light—that Vermeer's work first began to be appreciated and his artistic vision accepted. Now, of course, his view of the world is considered modern: the fracturing of spaces, the equal treatment of objects and humans as forms, the notion of form as content, and, most importantly,



A Maid Asleep by Johannes Vermeer. Oil on canvas. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Benjamin Altman, 1913 (14.40.611). All Rights Reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

a harmony based on color and tonal juxtapositions, brought about by Vermeer's innovative use of daylight.

Vermeer's was a world of the commonplace, of private moments far less moralistic or anecdotal than are found in the paintings of his contemporaries. Action, when it does occur, is restricted to a single common activity or gesture, while the cool atmosphere of Vermeer's surfaces creates a state of suspended animation: a woman pours milk into a pitcher that never becomes

full; a "procuress" collects for a night of passion, though her customer's hand never leaves her breast; and a lace-maker's fingers effortlessly hold onto taut threads as if they were life itself. In Vermeer's interiors, folds of tapestry, maps, letters, loaves of bread, household vessels, chairs, and musical instruments become as much of interest as the equally static human elements, and modulated broad sunlight seems to select areas randomly to highlight or "glorify."

In this respect, Vermeer was some two hundred years ahead of his time. As Peter Caldwell wryly observes in *The Centaur*, "That Vermeer himself had been obscure and poor I know. But I reasoned that he had lived in backward times" (78). In a later echo, Updike told a Boston television audience that the painter he admires most is Vermeer, adding, "I, myself, in my attempt to be an artist in words, have looked to museums—especially modern museums—as some sort of example of what art might do now. The little *frisson* or big *frisson* I get in the museum is something I hope to translate into my own writing" (Lydon 218–19).

Ironically, Updike's apparent attempts to apply painterly techniques to fiction—"to transcribe middleness with all its grits, bumps, and anonymities" into something more magical (*Assorted Prose* 186), or to appreciate the life-giving effects of light on commonplace subjects and objects—has elicited nearly the same critical lack of understanding that greeted Vermeer during the painter's lifetime. As Donald J. Greiner so succinctly observed, Updike's critics are disturbed by "the lavish care expended to tell the tales not of heroic men but of little people living little lives" (*Updike's Novels* 4). Arthur Mizener noted in his review of *Pigeon Feathers* that Updike has a "highly negotiable talent for adorning his stories with a cosmatesque surface of very great and radically irrelevant decorative charm" (45), while Robert S. Gingher concluded that Updike has an "exquisite, photographic ability to capture and preserve the small details, the quotidian minutiae which fill the spaces of his characters' lives," but questioned the author's suburban subject matter and "message" (98).

If one considers Updike's fiction as deliberate attempts at visual-to-verbal transformations in the manner of Vermeer, such criticisms border on praise. Consider Paul Theroux's review of *Too Far to Go*, for example: "It seems odd . . . that the grace-note of Updike's fiction should be optimism—a radiant box of corn flakes in the kitchen mess, a cascade of Calgonite offering an epiphany in the dishwasher, and so forth—because his people are not so much learning marriage as pondering a way out of it" (7).

With Updike, however, it *is* enough to find radiance in the common-

place, because his characters find in such moments a means of elevating the quality of their otherwise ordinary lives, and in the process they experience a reaffirmation of life itself by noticing, as did Vermeer, how light brings substance to life. Light is definition, light is order, light is life. In Genesis, according to Christian mythos, God's command that "there be light" was the second act of creation, and the first to impose distinction or order on an otherwise dead and formless world. When the day or, in the case of the Rabbit tetralogy, a life ebbs, resulting, as the Wallace Stevens epigraph to *Rabbit Is Rich* explains, in "The difficulty to think at the end of the day, / When the shapeless shadow covers the sun / And nothing is left except light on your fur," for Harry Angstrom and other Updike characters it is important, at least, to notice and appreciate that light.¹ From the very first Rabbit novel, Harry Angstrom has seen the world from eyes that are more painterly than working class. Before he bolts, he

walks back as far as the lit kitchen window . . . and on tiptoe looks in one bright corner. He sees himself sitting in a high chair, and a quick, odd jealousy comes and passes. It is his son. The boy's neck gleams like one more clean object in the kitchen among the cups and plates and chromium knobs and aluminum cake-making receptacles on shelves scalloped with glossy oilcloth. His mother's glasses glitter as she leans in from her place at the table. . . . Nelson's big whorly head dips on its bright neck and his foreshortened hand, dots of pink dabbles toward the spoon, wants to take it from her." (*Run* 20–21)

The surface play of light may seem extraneous or frivolous to critics, but it is extremely important to Updike, for light alone favors one object over another, and it alone has the power to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. And no Updike character is more "photosensitive" than Harry Angstrom—the ex-jock and frustrated MagiPeeler salesman who uses language more suited to a painter. Just as Vermeer sometimes drew attention to tables and fabrics in the foreground by blurring them slightly and foreshortening them to bring about a confrontational angularity, Updike/Rabbit refers to Marty Tothero, Rabbit's former coach, as "foreshortened" (*Run* 41), which brings disturbingly closer an image that, for Rabbit, is different from the one he remembered as a youth.

Rabbit is also the Updike character most likely to objectify women in moments of reflection. As more than a few Updike scholars have noted, Rabbit is a creature who finds comfort in solid objects, who sees magic in moments of everyday life, especially when, as Fitzgerald did with his "dream

girls," Harry thinks about females. Typically, when Harry contemplates the opposite sex, it occurs within a pocket of reflective space where, like Vermeer, Rabbit/Updike is able not only to notice the effects of light upon certain aspects of a subject, but to imagine or contemplate the symbolic associations. When, in *Rabbit Is Rich*, a pregnant Pru is overwhelmed by her wedding reception and Harry notices her feeling isolated in a roomful of people, he also notices a green glossy egg: "Held against her belly the bauble throws from its central teardrop a pale knife of light" (255). Although the palette is different, the technique is unmistakable. In Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, a pregnant woman, her back in shadow and her front bathed by light as she faces the window, holds a single letter suggesting correspondence from her husband. The only other "props" in the painting are two empty dining-room chairs framing the solitary figure and a map of the world hanging on the wall, which suggests a greater world beyond the implied two-person drama suspended in time.

Updike has described himself as a "highly pictorial writer" (*Picked-Up Pieces* 509), believing that "Narratives should not be *primarily* packages for psychological insights, though they can contain them, like raisins in buns. But the substance is the dough. . . . The author's deepest pride . . . [is] in his ability to keep an organized mass of images moving forward" (453). Later, Updike wrote that he "could see that [James] Thurber had a lot of trouble fitting his furniture around his people" (*Hugging the Shore* 840). For Updike, the arrangement of images—people included—is every bit as important as chronological narration.²

Like Vermeer, Updike is acutely aware of the relationship between his characters and the objects that surround them. As in Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*; rather than "fitting his furniture" around people, Updike describes his people and objects with the same loving care, each having the same formal value. In a Vermeer painting, action is implied "offstage" through such doors and windows left deliberately open, affording the human "objects" of the painting quiet spaces in which to contemplate. Such Vermeer-like rooms occur throughout Updike's fiction, especially in the Rabbit tetralogy. Though such compositional moments occur with more frequency in the earlier novels, an older Rabbit is still able to see scenes with a painterly eye. In *Rabbit at Rest*, when Harry explores the room that used to be Nelson's, "now little Roy's," the door is ajar, and as he enters he notices that "light enters it not as sharp slices from the proximate streetlights above Joseph Street but more mistily, from the lights of the town diffused and scattered, a yellow star-swallowing glow arising foglike from the silhouettes of

maples and gables and telephone poles. By this dim light he sees Pru's long body pathetically asleep across Roy's little bed." The soft and revealing light by which he views Pru is contrasted immediately by Janice and Nelson looking for him in the "bright hall" (265).

Likewise, when Harry falls asleep "drinking a Schlitz while channel-surfing with Judy," he wakes with the painter's eye for detail, noticing that "the luminous bar beneath the door is gone but a kind of generalized lavender light . . . picks out the planes and big objects of the bedroom. A square bureau holds the glassy rectangle of Nelson's high-school graduation photo; a fat pale chair holds on one arm Harry's discarded linen trousers, the folds of cloth suggesting a hollow-eyed skull stretched like chewing gum" (116). Though Updike only at times composes scenes this thoroughly in the manner of a Vermeer, the painter's compositional strategies—windows, penetrating and defining single light sources, dark figures against a light ground, attention to shadows and light, and a selective number of objects—occur in Updike's fictional descriptions with regularity.

The tendency toward offstage implied action is evident as early as *Rabbit, Run*, where Updike gives his characters a wide variety of textual space to inhabit. Some subjects exist in the foreground (Rabbit), some in the middle distance (Janice/Ruth/Tothero), and others in the background (Eccles/Kruppenbach/relatives). It is likewise interesting to note that the theological debate that dominated *The Poorhouse Fair* is drawn into the background of Updike's second novel, because of the positioning of the two ministers. As George Hunt observes, one half of the theological argument (Kruppenbach) is presented totally "offstage," while the other half (Eccles) is always projected in shadows (41), or, as Joyce Markle notes, drawn primarily in green (9)—a color that tends to recede into the background. As a result, the religious debate is never projected toward the reader as it is in *The Poorhouse Fair*, when one-third of the novel is devoted to the subject. Likewise, the Vietnam debate that loomed so large in the foreground of *Rabbit Redux*—with Skeeter and Rabbit spouting antiwar and patriotic jargon—is relegated to the background in a later novel, *The Witches of Eastwick*, where the subject is only briefly and unemotionally mentioned. Suggesting a feature that gives Vermeer's work a power lacking in most of the Dutch genre paintings of the same period, Updike's characters are always sensitive to what lies outside the "pictures" they inhabit. But also like Vermeer's subjects, they are so enchanted by the world of solid objects within their reach that they seldom care to look beyond these fictional rooms or beyond the world of their own senses.

What makes Vermeer a genius among his contemporaries, as well as

among modern artists, is his unique ability to select and arrange common objects in configurations that are as formally correct as they are informally apparent. Harmony begins with the selection of images, something of which Updike seems fully aware. As he told one interviewer, "Rather than energy and violence at all costs, I prefer things to be neat and precise: 'domestic' writing. I prefer Vermeer to Delacroix" (Salgas 178). This appreciation for selecting the right objects is evident in *The Centaur*, where the narrator, Peter Caldwell, laments the "dull innocence" of his 4-H Club members in their unfortunate choice of objects to favor with light: "We met in the church basement, and after an hour of slides illuminating cattle diseases and corn pests, I would sweat with claustrophobia, and swim into the cold air and plunge at home into my book of Vermeer reproductions like a close-to-drowned man clinging to the beach" (74).

Vermeer's—and Updike's—appreciation of painting's power to redeem everyday life from mediocrity is best explained by Jill in *Rabbit Redux*. When she tells Harry and Nelson to "think of a painter" whose momentary feelings are permanently recorded on canvas, Nelson responds, "What's the point?" "The point is ecstasy," she says. "Energy. Anything that is good is in ecstasy" (158–59).

Love of detail and compositional harmony are what Updike and his fictional characters strive for and most admire. An appreciation of the sensual becomes near-sexual. In *Marry Me*, for example, when Jerry Conant takes his mistress to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., he seeks out the wall bearing three Vermeers: *A Lady Weighing Gold (Pearls)*, *Girl with a Red Hat* and *Young Girl with a Flute*. "Oh, God," he moaned, "the drawing; people never realize how much *drawing* there is in a Vermeer. The wetness of this woman's lips. These marvelous hats. And this one, the light on her hands and the gold and the pearls. That *touch*, you know; it's a double touch—the exact color, in the exact place" (37).

Conant, after seeing the exactness of the three Vermeers, is reminded that both he and his mistress are married to others—a reality that intrudes upon his dream-date/dream-state. He tells Sally, "Now you and me . . . are the exact color, but we seem to be in the wrong place" (37). Of this scene—in a moment of appreciation for Updike's painterly approach that is rare among critics—Elizabeth Tallent writes, "It is as if, for a moment, they have actually entered a Vermeer, a sort of fragile stasis, a beautifully becalmed realm in which the light streams reassuringly from a single direction. . . . The moment is almost inevitably precarious" (43).

Hunt, meanwhile, noticed in *The Centaur* that Peter's "childhood pas-

sion for Vermeer reasserts itself in his narrative . . . through his attempt to render with delicacy and simplicity the ordinary domestic scenes of his boyhood" (56). But it can also be argued that Updike too "reasserts" his childhood passion for Vermeer through narratives that strive for the same magical elevation of the commonplace—not only in these two fictional instances where Vermeer is mentioned so prominently, but in the whole of Updike's suburban corpus. While the Vermeer scene from *Marry Me* is actually not, as Tallent suggests, drawn in the same manner—the singular light, for instance, is not present—she nevertheless touches upon several key points that deserve further study.

That his own domestic scenes are drawn in the manner of Vermeer is suggested by other passages where allusions to the Dutch painter occur in conjunction with a comparable description. In *Couples*, Piet in his bedroom, moving in a Rabbit-like way, "hopped across the hearth-bricks worn like a passage-way in Delft and sharply kicked shut Angela's closet door, nearly striking her. She was naked. . . . Angela had flinched and now froze. . . . A luminous polleny pallor, the shadow of last summer's bathing suit, set off her surprisingly luxuriant pudenda . . . her tipped arms seemed, simple and symmetrical, a maiden's . . . sighing, immersed in a clamor of light and paint, the Hanemas dressed and crept to bed" (9). The briefly open door, the yellow tints, the shadows, the reference to the village of Vermeer's birth (the subject of his only painted exteriors), the notion of a moment suspended in time, and, most especially, the luminosity of light are all components typically found in Vermeer's work. So, too, the narrative element is minimized, and, as in Vermeer's work, there is an implied rather than developed moral dilemma, suggested not so much by content as by competing tonalities and juxtapositions. Plotting and action are never dominant.

There is first and foremost what Updike has called "the window of fiction" (*Hugging the Shore* 196), where light streams in from a single source. Like Vermeer, Updike seems fascinated by the effects of modulated light upon an object. Most of Vermeer's paintings and many of Updike's interiors have windows that, by virtue of their placement, are important compositionally. Even in such later novels as *The Witches of Eastwick*, such settings are common, by night as well as by day: "[Sukie] turned off the bathroom light and went into the bedroom, where the only illumination arose from the street lamp up at the corner" (137). Vermeer paints not impressionistically but symbolically, using areas of sunlight to draw attention to the surfaces he has selected, more creator than reporter. Light and shadow always determine the *values* of objects, using the term in the painterly sense of tonal variations, as

well as in the moral-philosophical sense (mores) and the evaluative (worth) sense.

Updike often finds disfavor with feminists because of his treatment of women. While a painterly reading of Updike's work may not necessarily exonerate the author from such charges, it should at least be pointed out that Updike treats his women more like art objects than sex objects, having deliberately chosen to highlight the female form in his work. It is a curious cultural phenomenon that while the restriction of subject matter to the female form is acceptable in painting, a similar artistic celebration in fiction is thought of as preoccupied or sexist. Yet, it is apparent from Updike's work that he is indeed engaged in the glorification of the female body that visual artists attempt. In describing "One's Neighbor's Wife," Updike writes, "Her hands, oval and firm, bear no trace . . . of awareness that they are sacred instruments—much like those Renaissance paintings wherein the halo of the Christ Child, having dwindled from the Byzantine corolla of beaten gold to a translucent disc delicately painted in the perspective of a 3-dimensional caplike appurtenance, disappears entirely, leaving us with an unexpectedly Italian-looking urchin" (*Hugging the Shore* 5). Following this elaborate art-historical introduction, Updike launches into a long, painterly description of her "pussy" as he imagines it would look in sunlight. Critics react to the latter with some measure of shock, surprise, or amusement, without considering that Updike could, in fact, be serious about the subject matter he has chosen to "paint," fictionally, in rarefied light.

Joyce Carol Oates is among those who take exception to Updike's objectification of the female: "His energies are American in this prolific and reverential housing of a multitude of objects, as 'Nature' is scaled down, compressed, at times hardly more than a series of forms of The Female" (58). It should be remembered, however, that Vermeer treats his characters and objects alike, painting what amounts to still lifes. Characters do not occupy the center stage as they do in genre painting, conventional portraits, or historical narratives. People are as likely or unlikely to be favored by the grace of Vermeer's light as the other objects in the paintings. In Vermeer's work, light and shadow establish order: the relationship of things to each other. And yet, most of Vermeer's canvases portray middle-class women "glorified" by light or made beautiful by the envelope of solitude and quietness that surrounds them and allows the viewer to appreciate "woman" as a formal concern, as an object in relation to other objects in the painting.

Like Vermeer, Updike modulates his light to consider his women in quiet, intimate moments. But modulation is the key, as Rabbit discovers when

he first enters Ruth's apartment vestibule and finds that "abruptly, in the cold light of the streetlamp which comes through the four flawed panes of the window by his side, blue panes so thin-seeming the touch of one finger might crack them, he begins to tremble" (74). "Harsh direct light falls on her face," making "the creases on her neck show black" (79). When Rabbit goes to the window to draw the shade in order to control the flow of light, "Ruth's eyes watch him out of shadows that also seem gaps in a surface," and the "curve of her hip supports a crescent of silver" (79-80). But light both reveals and glorifies. Rabbit "drinks in the pure sight of her," noticing how "she keeps her arm tight against the one breast and brings up her hand to cover the other; a ring glints. . . . Light lies along her right side where it can catch her body as it turns in stillness; this pose, embarrassed and graceful. . . . So that when her voice springs from her form he is amazed to hear a perfect statue, unadorned woman, beauty's home image, speak" (81). That Updike's method is deliberately painterly is clear from a revised paperback version (Fawcett Crest, 1983) of the same scene, where "[Ruth] sits upright with her fat legs jack-knifed sideways and her back symmetrical as a great vase. . . . As one arm tosses her brassiere over the edge of the bed the other, on his side, presses against her breast so he won't see. But he does see; a quick glimmer of tipped weight" (79 paper).

Here, Updike's attempt to create the kind of dynamic stasis Vermeer's women inhabit is most clear, as is the attempt to paint, fictionally, a light that both hides and discloses. The passage also illustrates the way Rabbit gravitates toward fleshy women because they remind him of substance, of solidity, of the kind of Rubenesque women memorialized in classical art. Later, when Harry and Ruth are in the public pool, he notices how "standing in the water she looked great, cut off at the thighs like a statue" (133 paper)—another addition that does not appear in the original hardcover version.

Poolside in *Rabbit Is Rich*, Harry is similarly struck by the way light strikes a chunky Cindy Murkett as she stands on flagstones and "dry sun catches in every drop beaded on her brown shoulders, so tan the skin bears a flicker of iridescence" (172). More than male fantasy, the description hinges on contrast—dry sun metaphorically "beaded" like pool water on brown skin—verbally employing the beads of light and iridescence so typical of Vermeer's canvases. Light helps to define Cindy's appeal for him, which becomes clear later when, sleeping alongside a repugnant Janice, he thinks, "How quickly Cindy's [plump] footprints dried on the flagstones behind her today! The strange thing is he can never exactly picture fucking her, it is like looking into the sun" (188-89). His thoughts eventually turn to the com-

forting solidity of memory, of interiors, of Ruth and "the privacy of this room. This island, their four walls, her room. Her fat white body out of her clothes . . . one long underbelly erect in light" (190).

Vermeer's women are always objectlike, frozen in a single, simple action, fleshly solid, and, from their posture and facial expressions, emotionally sound, though thoughtful. Women in Vermeer represent constancy, and while in Updike's fiction the male is typically the activist, it is always the female who is the source of strength, who, as Tallent notes, is often compared to the solid earth: Woman = Terrain (25).

Just as Vermeer painted still lifes with humans, rather than portraits, Updike also seems to have a sense of his characters as objects with formal value, interested in how they fit in the world, rather than the activities in which they indulge. Harry Angstrom is an "order-loving man" (*Run* 13) who, despite age and the way in "his inner life too Rabbit dodges among more blanks than there used to be, patches of burnt-out-gray cells where there used to be lust and keen dreaming" (*Rich* 13), is still able to have his senses awakened by the call of light. *Rabbit Is Rich* begins, in fact, when Ruth's daughter drives into the Toyota dealership, "milky-pale and bare-legged and blinking in the sunshine" (13), and Rabbit, still able to be surprised by the "long day's lingering brightness" (46), finds new life apart from his mechanical routine.

Rabbit sees forms, colors, and tonal masses the way an artist might, and yet for him true "life" is the result of his ability to paint reality more brilliant than it is in actuality, a talent that is largely peculiar to him in the novel, but which other Updike heroes share. When he and Ruth go hiking up a mountain at the park, Ruth complaining as they walk, he suggests that she take off her shoes. Here Rabbit's artistic eye sees beauty again in the strangest of objects and the most ordinary of actions: "Bare of stockings, her white feet lift lightly under his eyes; the yellow skin of her heel flickers. Under the swell of calf her ankles are thin. In a gesture of gratitude he takes off his shoes, to share whatever pain there is." He then tries to kiss her, but Ruth thinks it "a silly time; her one-eyed woman's mind is intent on getting up the hill" (*Run* 111). Again, while Rabbit's remarks appear sexist under a feminist reading, in the context of Vermeer and the painter's eye, sex is not the issue. If one eye is closed, the world becomes flattened and two-dimensional in appearance, something that Rabbit—and apparently Updike—dreads. Twenty years later, at a party, Rabbit perceives "the entire deep space of the room . . . with appointments chosen all to harmonize. Its tawny wallpaper has vertical threads of texture in it like the vertical folds of the slightly darker pull drapes . . . lit

by spots on track lighting overhead . . . and the same lighting reveals little sparkles, like mica on a beach, in the overlapping arcs of the rough-plastered ceiling" (*Rich* 290). In this setting, which in Harry's eyes has depth, texture, and the selective play of light, other couples carry on ordinary conversations and fail to notice details. Among such people, "Rabbit worries that the party is in danger of flattening out" (292). Likewise, with Ruth at the top of Mt. Judge, Rabbit *sees*, while Ruth's vision is restricted to ordinary perspective: "In the lower part of his vision the stone-walled cliff rises to his feet foreshortened to the narrowness of a knife; in the upper part the hillside slopes down, faint paths revealed and random clearings. . . . Ruth's gaze, her lids half-closed as if she were reading a book, rests on the city" (*Run* 112).

In a similar scene with Ruth in her apartment, Rabbit asks if he should pull down the shades before they make love. She responds, "Please, it's a dismal view." Rabbit, however, deliberately looks to see what could possibly be so dreary, as if it were another challenge to his own powers of artistic imagination. What he sees is a sight so lovely that "he feels gratitude to the builders of this ornament, and lowers the shade on it guiltily" (*Run* 79-80). His powers of perception awakened, Rabbit sees Ruth as "great and glistening sugar in her sifty-grained slip" (79). Being able to *see* enables Rabbit to create life and perfection where none, to the rest of the world, exists, and men as well as women comprise the "non-seers."

By contrast, dumbness and dimness seem to be interrelated for Updike. At the funeral of Rabbit and Janice's baby, "Mourners move into the sunshine. . . . at last beyond the dark recession of crowding rocks he has seen a patch of light; he turns, and Janice's face, dumb with grief, blocks the light. . . . He hates her dumb face. She doesn't *see*. She had a chance to join him in . . . the simple factual truth, and turned away in horror" (*Run* 293). In *Rabbit Redux*, likewise, Harry notices when "a shape, a shade, comes forward in the kitchen. He expects it to be his father, but it is his mother shuffling in a bathrobe, yet erect and moving" (92). Updike embraces the traditional-archetypal associations of light equaling truth, salvation, information, and transformation, with darkness and shadow embodying the opposite.

For a time Rabbit's wife does, in fact, experience the creational feeling that accompanies a new way of seeing. In *Rabbit Redux*, having begun an affair with Charlie Stavros, she thinks, "One of the nice things about having a lover, it makes you think about everything anew. The rest of your life becomes a kind of movie, flat and even rather funny" (53). Rabbit, although somewhat driven by sex, is nonetheless driven more by the artistic impulse;

perspective permits him to love life itself, though everyone around him might seem jaded.

Ruth, self-conscious about her size, is hesitant to let Rabbit see her. But Rabbit, before making love to his heavy ex-prostitute, "sits on the corner of the bed and drinks in the pure sight of her. . . . Her belly is a pond of shadow deepening to a black eclipsed by the inner swell of her thighs. Light seizes her right side as her body turns in its stillness; rigidity is her one defense against his eyes. She holds the pose until his eyes smart with echoes of white. When her voice breaks from her frozen form, he is startled" (*Run* 80–81). As long as she is cooperatively motionless, Rabbit is able to paint a still life of her, to notice the way light makes even this large and coarse woman more beautiful—the way Vermeer's plain-looking models acquired a quiet beauty in the stasis he crafted with his modulated rooms full of light. In *Couples*, likewise, Piet is able to see Foxy's face in bed next to him "like a candleflame motionless . . . like the roads of his native state, or the canals of Holland" as long as her face is "perfectly steady" (201).

While making love to Ruth, Rabbit creates "a lazy space. He wants the time to stretch long, to great length and thinness," and feels the painted quality of the scene as "at the parched root of his tongue each register their colors" (83). In his re-visioning of Ruth he remakes her so that her most noticeable physical defect is nearly negated. In dim light, Ruth "stands by the edge of the bed, baggy in nakedness" (86), but an intensified, remodulated light recharges Rabbit's ability to see the world through the wonder-filled eyes of a child, and, as in Vermeer, a secular scene becomes almost holy, so baptized by light:

From deep in the pillow he stares at the horizontal strip of stained-glass church window that shows under the window shade. Its childish brightness seems the one kind of comfort left to him. Light from behind the closed bathroom door tints the air in the bedroom. The splashing sounds are like the sounds his parents would make when as a child Rabbit would waken to realize they had come upstairs, that the whole house would soon be dark, and the sight of morning would be his next sensation. He is asleep when like a faun in moonlight Ruth, washed, creeps back to his side, holding a glass of water. (86)

The baptismal effects of light are here accented by water imagery, the traditional medium and symbol of baptism. Ruth, who is "baggy" in her flesh, leaves to get Rabbit a glass of water, while the light triggers Rabbit's

creative impulse. When she returns, Rabbit is asleep, but, if the point of view is consistent, dreaming. In moonlight, washed, Ruth becomes something more delicate and youthful, more dear/deer: a faun.

Given Updike's painterly disposition, if Rabbit does indeed seek to recapture lost youth, it is not youth itself that he seeks. Rather, it is the rediscovery of the wonder-filled way children see the world, as if for the first time. José Ortega y Gasset writes that "the child sees in palpable presence what our imagination is too weak to visualize" (60). A passage from *Rabbit Redux* illustrates how in Updike's mind childlike wonder gradually diminishes with age:

Mom's room has lace curtains aged yellowish and pinned back with tin daisies that to an infant's eyes seemed magical, rose-and-thorns wallpaper curling loose from the wall . . . a kind of plush armchair that soaks up dust. When he was a child this chair was downstairs and he would sock it to release torrents of swirling motes into the shaft of afternoon sun; these whirling motes seemed to him worlds, each an earth, with him on one of them. . . . Some light used to get into the house in late afternoon, between the maples. Now the same maples have thronged that light solid, made the room cellar-dim. (95)

Updike says that his own "sense of childhood doesn't come from being a father, it comes from being a child" (*Picked-Up Pieces* 519). To the infant-Rabbit the room has the greatest magical potency, the most brilliancy. Even to the child-Rabbit the room has the power to become other "worlds," as long as some light is still able to get in through the thickening maples. To the adult-Updike, however, brilliant and magical vision is furthest removed, the room made "cellar-dim" by the growth and age of the narrator and the stand of maples that choke off the creative force of sunlight. Piet, in *Couples*, states the relationship between light and growth more bluntly: "Vague light becomes form becomes thought becomes soul and dies" (213). This progression is evident throughout Updike's fiction, with characters representing each stage. Only brilliant light redeems, prolongs, or creates life—and brilliant light is what Rabbit and other Updike characters gravitate toward, as if it were a fountain of youth.

Vermeer's subjects are never old, and they never age. Whether in moments of listening, talking, reading, or pouring milk, they always seem to have the same sense of rapture and contemplation of the ordinary. Where Vermeer and Updike like to dwell is at the first and most sensual level of creation, that moment closest to the birth of an object through the midwifery

of light: the present. Thought muddles the vision and the ecstasy of seeing/being; likewise, the soul worries too much about future salvation and past sins to be much alive in the present.

Rabbit "hates all the people on the street in dirty everyday clothes, advertising their belief that the world arches over a pit, that death is final" (*Run* 234). Typical of Updike's narrative personas, Rabbit associates life with light, and darkness/drabness with death. When he sees his baby at the hospital, "the smile of the nurse, foreshortened and flickering cutely between his eyes and the baby's nose, reassures him that he is the father" (218).

Rabbit, through his painterly vision and his desire to render ordinary objects more brilliant, is the great creator, the great artist who is called "the old Master" (*Run* 176), with a capital M, as if in allusion to the Dutch Masters. "I made you," he tells Ruth (109)—just as a former basketball teammate reminds Rabbit that their coach—"The man who made us immortal" (176)—created *them*.

Updike has meant for his novels to raise the questions "What is a good man?" and "What is goodness?" (*Picked-Up Pieces* 496), and he seems to be quite aware of the precarious position in which artists and creators find themselves. There is a thin line between creation and illusion, and the artist is always faced with the positive and negative aspects of dreaming. "Hold tight dream girl," Harry says in *Rabbit Is Rich* when he has intercourse with a snoring, sleeping Janice (55). In many respects, Rabbit is an illusionist, a magician who pulls himself out of the dull darkness of a hat from day to day, largely because of his childlike vision. This is evident in a moment of crisis, when Rabbit's artistic vision momentarily fails him again: "The details of the street—the ragged margin where the pavement and grass struggle, the tarry scarred trunks of the telephone poles—no longer speak to him. He is no one" (*Run* 283). Nothingness for Rabbit—and Updike—is not just Barthian nothingness, and dread is never only Kierkegaardian. It is also represented, and in fact *created*, by a loss of the creative imagination, a temporary suspension of the ability to see sparkle and wonder in the commonplace. Banal existence and routines are as much a nothingness as the natural Christian fear of death's finality, for as Updike writes, his characters "go back to work; that's the real way that people die" (*Picked-Up Pieces* 509).

In *Rabbit, Run*, when the hospital atmosphere makes Harry momentarily remorseful over his irresponsible behavior, and he and Eccles sit together in the maternity waiting room, he sees himself briefly as others have; he sees that he embodies not only the positive, childlike side of youth, but the negative, childish side as well. Weighed down by the atmosphere and by the

"blackness" of the minister he is nonetheless drawn to, his life seems to him "a magic dance empty of belief" (198), a charge Ruth takes up later in the novel after the baby dies. "Why don't you look outside your own pretty skin once in a while?" she says (301-2).

In a way, Rabbit and other Updike heroes hide in surfaces as much as they revel in them, so engaged in re-creating reality and re-painting what they perceive as dull routines or unsavory circumstances that the world they ultimately inhabit becomes a private one, one is in constant danger of becoming all-exclusive of the outside world, and of so-called reality as it exists for others. They create and are reluctant to leave their magical Vermeer-like rooms, the surfaces that contain them becoming like membranes, or neo-wombs. Thus, Updike's heroes are caught in a curious paradox, similar to one that Emerson describes: "We are not very much to blame for our bad marriages. We live amid hallucinations, and this especial trap is laid to trip up our feet with, and all are tripped up first or last" ("Illusions" 275).

Rabbit must become a child in order to see the world anew each time he looks at the repetitions that accompany familiarity and the simple process of aging. As Eccles tells Rabbit, "Children are very sacred in psychology" (*Run* 126). Yet, with the positive aspect of becoming a child—childlike wonder and vision—comes the negative aspect: self-centered childishness. Children largely occupy the present, appreciating moments with a fullness adults can never achieve because their own minds are always preoccupied, always occupying more than one plane of time. Rabbit lives totally in the present, with no thoughts for his future, and really no great preoccupation with the past. Though numerous critics have suggested that Rabbit seeks a return to glory, he spends little time thinking about the past. No descriptions exist, for example, of his high school team in action, or locker room memories. His is a world of moments, of the fullest possible appreciation for the present—which is why Thelma, the grade-school teacher who "chooses" the childlike Rabbit during a triangular night of mate-swapping in *Rabbit Is Rich*, likes him. "You're so glad to be alive," she says (418).

Rabbit, like other Updike heroes, notices Vermeer-like rooms in real life, or creates them if none seem to exist. He notices people as they sit alongside windows, and charm in such places as the Eccleses' spare bedroom, where the human element is present only in a photograph: "Sunshine, the old clown, rims the room. Two pink chairs flank a gauze-filled window buttered with light that smears a writing desk furry with envelope-ends. Above the desk is a picture of a lady in pink stepping toward you" (*Run* 206).

Just as Vermeer reused rooms for his paintings of domesticity, so, appar-

ently, has Updike. In *Rabbit Redux*, the bedroom where Harry awakens next to the runaway Jill is similarly described: "Sunshine, the old clown, rims the room. The maple has so many leaves fallen morning light slants in baldly" (301). Rabbit knows what Malraux has said, that "for a certain moment of history a picture or a statue speaks a language it will never speak again: the language of its birth" (317), and artistic creation—living fully in the present—becomes a way of "freezing" time, of preserving moments, and consequently, of preserving or providing for the salvation of self. Space is threatening for Rabbit, who finds comfort in interiorized, self-contained moments of idealization and creation. Having left Janice again at the end of *Rabbit, Run*, Harry is balanced on a "small fulcrum" weighing opposites. One alternative is "the right way and the good way, the way to the delicatessen—gaudy with stacked fruit lit by a naked bulb—and the other way . . . to where the city ends. He tries to picture how it will end . . . and he doesn't know. He pictures a huge vacant field of cinders and his heart goes hollow" (306). "There is light, though, in the streetlights," and it lights the way for Rabbit's curtain call (306). As soon as he perceives the luminosity, the scene is once again transformed: "to his left, directly under one [streetlight], the rough asphalt looks like dimpled snow. He decides to walk" (306), and eventually run, toward the light.

Once again, the ability to perceive motion in stillness—buildings in darkness under the spell of light—literally lights the other-world of dark, empty space that Rabbit finds so threatening, yet which seems his only escape. Feeling trapped by a marriage to a woman he no longer loves, having impregnated both of the women in his life, and having indirectly caused the death of his daughter, the irresponsible, childish side of Rabbit prompts him to run. What gives him the impetus, what "trips" or triggers his final flight, is the childlike ability to perceive newness in old forms, the play of light that bleaches the dark asphalt white and gives motion to thresholds—steps and windowsills—making the darkness seem somehow less threatening.

Updike, in his essay on "Emersonianism," cites an essay on "illusions" that contains a passage most applicable to the ending of *Rabbit, Run* and to the critical writings of those who have not fully appreciated the way Updike continues to experiment with visual-to-verbal art transformations: "Even the prose of the streets is full of refractions. In the life of the dreariest alderman, fancy enters into all details and colors them with rosy hue. . . . Great is paint; nay, God is the painter; and we rightly accuse the critic who destroys too many illusions" (Emerson, "Illusions" 273). In running—in seeking to avoid the trap of dull reality—Rabbit chooses the world of illusion. A non-artist,

he nonetheless glories in his ability to paint his world more beautiful than it is. His flight is symbolic of imaginative flight, that leap from the "real" world needed in order to create an ideal world. Although Rabbit is, as critics have noticed, childish in his response to the world, he is also childlike in his desire to see in it something better.

A Vermeer-like reading of Updike's work certainly helps to explain why, curiously, Harry Angstrom is more intellectually contemplative than most men of his class, education, occupation, and regional roots—or why Rabbit seems to notice light the way only a painter or art student can. To notice such light is to notice detail; to imagine or create such light, as Harry often does, is to rival a painter or the Creator himself. Light, for Rabbit, is the mantle of a creator. When, for example, Harry engages Charlie Stavros in small talk and sympathizes with his problems in *Rabbit Is Rich*, he is absolved by Charlie's simple pronouncement, "What can *you* do?"; even metaphorical light is rejuvenating: "This is what he wants to hear; relief bathes him like a kind of light. When you feel better, you see better; he sees all the papers, wrappers and take-out cup lids that have blown across the highway from the Chuck Wagon, lying in the bushes just outside the window, getting soaked" (270).

Updike, by his own admission and by critical consensus, is a poet of middleness and commonness, the very realm from which Vermeer chose his raw materials. In Updike's words, "It is a function of art to show us the paradise that, disguised as the ordinary, surrounds us as we live" (*Hugging the Shore* 630). Answering charges that his characters are too ordinary, Updike responds, "Either everyone is a hero, or no one is. I vote for no one" (*Picked-Up Pieces* 518). Typically his characters are upper middle class—never lower and seldom higher in station. His "heroes" are Linotypers, carpenters, bricklayers, salesmen, teachers, writers, artists, ministers, or middle-management executives. To make such ordinary lives seem extraordinary through careful abstraction has been one of Updike's main aesthetic principles, something that is evident in all that he has written. "There is a way of working with rotten wood," Harry observes, "and making it as solid as marble, and like marble swirled and many-shaded" (*Rich* 282). Throughout the Rabbit tetralogy, Harry depends upon such observations—the effects of light upon objects—to get him through tough moments. When, for example, in *Rabbit Is Rich* he has erection difficulties responding to Janice, he turns to light for help: "He resolves to suck Janice's tits, to give himself a chance to pull himself together, this is embarrassing. A pause at the top, you need a pause at the

top to generate momentum. His spit glimmers within her dark shape above him; the headboard of their bed is placed between two windows shaded from the light of sun and moon alike by a great copper beech whose leaves yet allow a little streetlight through" (52-53). As in Vermeer's interiors, light beads and glistens, not on a woman's pearls, but on Harry's spittle, and the stream of streetlight angling in between two windows is all it takes for him to notice the composition of the room and feel better. Harry's painterly imagination and thoughts of shadow and light provide a similar comfort when a conversation with Nelson turns tense and he thinks of the rain outside and the garden, where "the smallest scabs of earth, beneath the lettuce and lopsided bean leaves perforated by Japanese beetles, are darkening, soaking, the leaves above them glistening." Such thoughts divert Harry from "studying Nelson's stubborn clouded face" (*Rich* 118).

Form, not narrative action or thematic content, is at the core of the "magic moments" that are essential to Updike's fiction and to his characters, for in order to respond to the challenge of making ordinary lives seem extraordinary, his characters must never travel great distances or have a great deal of exceptional things happen to them in their lives. What happens to them is what happens to all men and women: they inhabit Middle America, they eat, they work at middle-class jobs, they have sex, and, in facing death, they wrestle with their middle-of-the-road religious beliefs.

In Vermeer, "The visible definition of female shape had been his continual purpose: progressively he had discovered in it the character of a monument" (Koningsberger 59). By contrast, the absence of light can produce a similarly striking effect. In *Rabbit, Run*, when Harry, a former teammate, and two women double-date at a restaurant, light has a direct influence on the way things are perceived. When one of the "girls," Margaret, speaks, "a serious shadow crosses her face that seems to remove her and Harry, who sees it, from the others, and takes them into that strange area of a million years ago from which they have wandered; a strange guilt pierces Harry at being here instead of there, where he never was. Ruth and Harrison across from them, touched by staccato red light, seem to smile from the heart of damnation" (178). Here quite clearly the light—and absence of light—is symbolic as well as selective, and those who, like Harry, are able to perceive the effects of light will have their vision appreciably altered. Light, as in Vermeer's paintings, has the ability to re-create or appreciably change reality. Light is associated with disclosure and demystification; shadow, with mystery. In Vermeer, areas of highly concentrated information (light) are alternately juxtaposed

against areas of noninformation (shadow). Articulated areas of a painting always need to be supported by nonarticulated areas, and vice versa. Updike, of course, is also aware of this principle, for such nonarticulated areas support his Sunday skaters who, in "the pattern of their pirouettes," are "silently upheld" (*Assorted Prose* 186).

When Updike uses light to describe his scenes, a contrast is somehow involved, whether pictorial, symbolic, or thematic. Often pictorial light will be paralleled by suggestions of the symbolic or thematic. In the same double date mentioned above, Harry is feeling the first traces of remorse over his affair with Ruth when he notices "a colored girl in an orange uniform that he guesses from the frills is supposed to look South American . . . and he sees her back is open halfway down her spine, so a bit of black bra shows through. Compared with this her skin isn't black at all. Soft purple shadows swing on the flats of her back where the light hits. . . . She doesn't care about him; he likes that, that she doesn't care. The thing about Ruth is lately she's been trying to make him feel guilty about something" (174). Rabbit notices how the light hits "the flats of her back," but what is also illuminated for him in seeing her turned away from him—as figures are often positioned in Vermeer's canvases—is an intimate moment colored by indifference, rather than vulnerability. Seeing the light and making the association immediately prompts Rabbit to think of an obvious contrast in Ruth's behavior.

If the notion of form-as-content is kept in mind, this layering of black-and-white/shadow-and-light can account for certain puzzling aspects of Updike's fictions that at first seem thematic in nature. Critics have, for example, been somewhat perplexed by the fact that Peter Caldwell, in *The Centaur*, narrates the story of his father while lying next to his black mistress. But Updike, with his painterly eye, knows that light without shadow is dull and weak, incomplete. Formally, they depend upon each other. This is no more apparent than in *Rabbit, Run*, when Harry sees his infant daughter in her bassinets "somehow dimly, as if the baby has not gathered to herself the force that makes a silhouette" (232). Although the scene foreshadows the baby's death by drowning, it is important to note how interdependent light and darkness are for Updike. Without a shadow, there is no life: yin and yang separated. Just as Harry in *Rabbit, Run* feels a force pulling him toward the minister, Eccles, a "tug drawing him toward this man in black" (105), often the things that appear most dynamic in Updike's world are those objects and scenes that display the tense balance that results from the clean juxtaposition of colors. Fuzzy areas of tonal overlapping are rare in Updike's suburban fictions, and when blending does occur, it is decidedly negative.

In the pool scene from *Rabbit, Run*, for example, Harry sees "a clear image" of Ruth in the water, her bottom "a round black island glistening" and bubbles breaking as she swims (142). "The air sparkles with the scent of chlorine," and Harry rejoices at how clean she feels to him: "Clean, clean. What is it? Nothing touching you that is not yourself. Her in water, him in grass and air" (143). In the lengthy, glorious description of Ruth-as-monument that follows, Harry once more revels in the light that surrounds them. But then after she emerges from the water and joins him on the lawn, he notices "chalk highlights" on her tanned skin, his idealized image of her starting to blur, to fade. In defining "clean," Harry thinks like an artist. Chalkiness in art indicates an inability to control the intonation of those areas that pretend to be illuminated. After seeing such an area on Ruth—perhaps an indication of a lapse in his own ability to paint life more brilliantly—Harry looks over Ruth's slightly tanned "dead body" with its "chalk highlights" to a pair of girls who embody light and darkness in more striking contrast: "the lighter figures of two sixteen-year-olds standing sipping orange crush from cardboard cones. The one in a white strapless peeks up at him from sucking her straw with a brown glance, her skinny legs dark as a Negro's" (144).

Critics have been puzzled by the fact that Updike's men are fascinated by black women or often take black mistresses, but to a painterly eye such striking contrasts create a formal tension and harmony of balance. At the all-black bar where Harry first sees the white teenage runaway Jill, "the blacks fit around her like shadows" (*Redux* 128). Leaving the bar, Harry panics when, in the "rolling balls of light before them" cast by headlights that illuminate the "white shards" of boat shapes against the "black floor" of the river, he perceives that "two brown figures are chasing them. Their shadows shorten and multiply" (137). Throughout the novel shadows chase Harry, who has become the embodiment of middle-class white, passive America—part of that all-accepting, television-watching, flag-waving silent majority. Later when Harry, having taken the black militant Skeeter and Jill into his home, "contemplates the set of shadows" sitting across from him (206), one suspects that these active and youthful character types are projections of what Harry was, and what he could yet become. Before his "shadows" arrived, Harry felt dead to the world. "I don't feel anything," he tells his mother (100). Only with the wholeness provided by the infusion of new ideas—by the shadows he takes in—does he come slowly to life again, himself re-created, his own light made stronger by the contrast. Rabbit and his shadows are tonal contrasts (yin/yang), but also moral contrasts. According to Jung, "The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality. . . . To become

conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real" (91). However, given the Jungian notion of shadows as projections, it is possible that Updike's artist-heroes may at times project their "shadows" onto objects in order to achieve formal wholeness and artistic balance, as well as ego-personality wholeness and stability.

It would be foolish to contend that racial elements are not present, since the novel is Updike's most sociologically and historically topical, but Updike is also highly fascinated by the sheer beauty of sharp contrasts. But there are certain passages that are unexplainably bizarre if content alone is considered. In the scene from *Rabbit Redux* where Rabbit watches a black man sexually exploit a white girl in his living room, for example, he sees in the dark room something so "beautiful" and fascinating in its contrast that it prompts him to turn on the light: "The black shadows of [Skeeter's] hands glide into the white blur Jill is . . . as a potter guides a lump of clay upward on the humming wheel, into a vase. She keeps rising, smoke from the vase. Her dress is being lifted over her head. 'Turn around, honey, show us your rump.' A soft slap gilds the darkness, the whiteness revolves. . . . Where her breasts should be, black spiders are fighting" (296–97). The contrast of black and white planes juxtaposed creates, for Updike and his narrative persona, a thing of beauty and artistic tension in spite of the coarse drama that gives it shape. In this instance, though such episodes will typically prompt thematic studies, it is just as likely that Updike is again treating his humans as if they were objects: formally. Form becomes content. That the scene is so conceived is upheld by Updike's otherwise curious and inappropriate use of the potter metaphor. Though his son sees the incident as a rape, Harry, sitting in his easy chair, sees nothing sexual, but rather a creative process that reminds him of his own printing occupation. Like Updike, he is fascinated by the way black ink looks upon a pure white page (*Picked-Up Pieces* 517). When Harry cannot bear to watch what he perceives as "beautiful" anymore in darkness and finally turns on the light, his initial response is shocking and unexplainable—even sadistic or misogynistic—if the potter metaphor is not seriously considered. He thinks, simply: "Nice," because "what he sees reminds him in the first flash of the printing process, an inked plate contiguous at some few points to white paper" (*Redux* 297).

In his application of Barth's Yes and No—the moral dialectic—to Updike's fiction, Hunt notes that the No exists "only by reason of the exclusion that the power of God's Yes entails, the way a shadow exists only by reason of light" (34). In this he echoes Kant, who also felt that light must precede shadow. Yet, in the Orient, "the dualism of light and darkness is summed up

by the *yin-yang* symbol: each area contains the seed of its own opposite and each grows out of the other in unity and interdependence" (Piper 116). As a writer who studied art formally, Updike most certainly accepts the latter principle, realizing that shadow and light must coexist on equal planes if balance is to be achieved. In Updike's fiction, light and darkness are symbolically present in the polarities that critics have fully explored: Barth's Yes and No, Eliade's sacred and profane spaces, Kierkegaard's dialectic method, and the eros and agape forms of love. These paired opposites help create the stasis that approximates the fragile moments in a Vermeer where the ordinary becomes briefly glorious. Under a painterly reading of Updike's work, such stasis is a positive element, the result of a preference for "pictorial" fiction over the traditional narrative, and an expression of Updike's deep-seated concern for creating lasting monuments.

Because of his erratic behavior in *Rabbit, Run* and in three sequels, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom has fairly perplexed critics. Tremendously irresponsible, he moves from job to job, leaves his wife several times, takes up with a prostitute, takes in a teenage runaway and a black militant, sleeps with his daughter-in-law, and generally behaves as if he had never grown up. But Updike would have us believe that Rabbit is also one of the few people who are fully sensitive to life. Mrs. Smith, near the first novel's end, remarks, "That's what you have, Harry: life. It's a strange gift and I don't know how we're supposed to use it but I know it's the only gift we get and it's a good one" (223).

Updike writes that "a man in love ceases to fear death" (*Assorted Prose* 286), and so while the sexual is always a predominant quest for Rabbit and other Updike heroes/antiheroes, the love of life is equally important. A man in love sees wonder in the world, and a man who *wishes* to see wonder in the world will want more than anything to be in love, to keep trying to see things with the nonjaded eyes of a young person. Ruth senses this quality in Rabbit. When Harry asks her why she likes him, she says, "'Cause you haven't given up. In your stupid way you're still fighting" (92). While others around him have become either wearied by life or accepting of its drab reality of commonness, Harry, in *Rabbit, Run* and in three sequels, is able to see the world like someone watching a lover undress for the very first time, to see things more artistically or monumentally than they are in reality.

While numerous critics see Harry Angstrom as little more than a has-been star trying desperately to recapture lost glory, Rabbit, by virtue of his eye for light, his painterly sensibility, is infinitely more complex than the irresponsible ex-athlete who hops from bed to bed in plotlines that at times

seem thin. Considered in the context of Vermeer's work, Harry's ability to appreciate the essence of life that *is* light accentuates his redemptive possibilities as well. As Oates has observed, Updike's world is "incarnational." She adds, "Updike usually affirms it in words, but the act of writing itself, the lovely spontaneous play of imagination, is salvation of a kind" (57–58). More precisely, a painterly style using color and tonal gradations to shape the fictional canvas, balancing polarities to achieve tension and stasis, and describing things with an exaggerated expressiveness—this is salvation for Updike and his characters. If, as Malraux has suggested, art is "that whereby forms are transmuted into style" (272), then Updike—especially in his attempts to render the commonplace in the scintillating style of a Vermeer—is certainly an artist of the highest order. And Rabbit? What first set him in motion is what has driven him in each of the four novels: a fascination with "*Jan Vermeer*, for salting humble bread / With Dabs of light, as well as bricks and thread" (*Midpoint* 38). Sensing darkness at the novel's end, "a dark circle in a stone façade," Rabbit sees "light, though, in the streetlights. . . . Although this block of brick three-stories is just like the one he left, something in it makes him happy; the steps and window sills seem to twitch and shift in the corner of his eye, alive" (*Run* 306). With light.

Notes

1. I have used the following editions: *Rabbit, Run* (New York: Knopf, 1960); *Rabbit Redux* (New York: Knopf, 1971); *Rabbit Is Rich* (New York: Knopf, 1981); *Rabbit at Rest* (New York: Knopf, 1990); *Assorted Prose* (New York: Knopf, 1965); *Hugging the Shore* (New York: Knopf, 1983).
2. For an account of Updike's childhood fascination with Vermeer and an early example of an interior composed in the manner of the Dutch painter, see "The Lucid Eye in Silvertown" in *Assorted Prose* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 188.