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THOMAS H. HICKS

Updike's Rabbit Novels: An American Epic

John Updike's quartet of novels about Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom (*Rabbit, Run*, 1960; *Rabbit Redux*, 1971; *Rabbit is Rich*, 1981; *Rabbit at Rest*, 1991) constitutes a major literary achievement. The tetralogy covers a time span of thirty years with each book portraying its hero at a different stage of his troubled, unfulfilled life. Rabbit is a former high-school basketball star in a provincial city, who peaked at age eighteen and spends the rest of his life in a bewildered struggle to recapture past golden moments. As his wife, Janice, notes, he was "already drifting downhill" before their early, hasty marriage,¹ Rabbit does not change in any radical way after high-school. He is a perpetually overaged boy, and, in Updike's view, this kind of arrested development is quintessentially American.

Readers of the Rabbit saga recognize how Harry Angstrom serves as a metaphor of our culture; a paradigm for an American era – an era full of guilt, loss, sickness, betrayal, and – as the first syllable "angst" in Harry's surname implies – dread. Rabbit gorges himself on junk food and dies as a consequence of his own appetites, symbolic of a society sinking in its own vulgar excesses. His moral code is centered largely on himself, like most Americans; he does not live in moral relation to other people. Recorded throughout the novels are the mindless diversions of mass culture and commercials from each respective time period with their awful jollities and accepted vulgarities. There is an AIDS patient, and a cocaine addict (Rabbit's own son, Nelson); we hear the clichés of detoxified Nelson's sermons, and Janice's women's group pieties.

But while Rabbit functions as a symbol of a lost America, Updike's primary purpose is not to make political statements. He is centrally concerned with Harry Angstrom as a person. His primary interest is the mystery of individual destinies, so besides being a representative device, Rabbit is also a distinctive and convincing character. He is an unheroic hero, a figure of common clay. He becomes hugely overweight, caught up in his lust (he even has sex with his daughter-in-law), is sexist, lazy, illiterate (he spends the

whole of *Rabbit at Rest* not finishing a book on American history), a terrible father, an inadequate husband, a tiresome lecher, and a failing businessman. He is a lonely and empty man who has a way of disappointing or hurting those who would love him. He suffers from what Scripture calls "hardness of heart," and it is hardness of the heart (literally the consequence of massive intakes of cholesterol) that does him in. (After a last pathetic attempt at a one-on-one basketball game with a black teenager he has a terminal heart attack.)

Yet for all such indictments, Rabbit emerges as a sympathetic figure. He is at least good enough to like. What redeems Rabbit and makes him interesting is that he is empathetic; a reflective and perceptive human being, with a strange gift for life. Of course, here we are meeting Updike's sensibilities expressed through Rabbit. *Rabbit Run* and particularly *Rabbit Redux* (the book about the sixties) were the works of an angry author who let his main character do his tough talking for him. In the later novels Rabbit's solitude deepens and he turns increasingly inward, and we see the inner life of a chronically depressed man who views the world as a source of so much wonder and dismay. Whereas there was much zest in *Rabbit, Run*, *Rabbit at Rest* is a big, brooding, meditative book that gives the vision of a man who looks out at a world in which he soon will not exist. Updike described *Rabbit at Rest* as "a depressed book about a depressed man, written by a depressed man."²

There are those who are critical of Updike's writing, pointing out how he is often prolix. Some of his detractors claim that he is all medium and no message, a man who writes beautifully about nothing: description makes up for analysis, detail for design. Updike's writing has its lapses. Occasionally, his attempts at verbal cleverness make some of his long descriptive passages difficult to read with their awkward and jumbled metaphors. But Updike doesn't miss too often and I am among those who appreciate the satisfactions of his accurate observations that transform ordinary experiences into something precious. One of the immediately recognizable signposts of Updike's fiction is its fondness for comprehensive detailing of the stuff of daily life: the loving examination of the carpet under a dining-room table, frost on a windowpane, shadows moving on a wall, the back stairs, where the vacuum cleaner and rubber galoshes live, and so on. He is a virtuoso of rapt evocation and getting things down so exactly right.

Updike's writing flickers with the recognition that the world was divinely created and merits the devotion of description. In his 1989 memoirs, *Self-Consciousness*, Updike states that "description expresses love."³ His prolific descriptiveness is grounded in a reverential attitude: love and praise for the world that we are privileged to witness and experience, and a knowledge that daily life will one day cease to be. Thus his novels bulge with the efforts of a man desperate to get as much of the world in before it's too late. Updike's fondness for comprehensive detailing of the stuff of daily life, for exploring corners, is his way of executing the ancient biblical function of praise. He is a rapt witness to the world, an instrument whereby a time and place make their mark. His lyrical and richly descriptive prose in praise of the created world can have the reader teeter with euphoria at the splendor of life.

Updike's greatest gift is for the delicate revelations of metaphor and simile. It is admittedly a gift he overworks at times, but it is a gift in which he is unsurpassed. For example, as Rabbit and his wife struggle together from a commodity dealer to the bank, weighted down with 74 pounds of silver dollars, Rabbit imagines suddenly how they must look to God: like "two ants trying to make it up the sides of a bathroom basin."⁴

Rabbit at Rest is the best of the Rabbit books; it is probably the best of all its authors novels. It is a riveting book, a beautiful book; long after closing it, *Rabbit at Rest* still seems one of the most provocative and painful books I have ever read. It is surely Updike at the height of his powers; here he achieves the perfection of his unique style. It is likely to prove his masterpiece.

Updike is capable of droll humor. Indeed, *Rabbit is Rich* is something of a sustained comedy. But pathos is more characteristic of Updike's writing; it has a poignant, elegiac tone. He has been called the great elegist of the heartbreak that life inevitably brings. The Rabbit quartet particularly discloses the dark truth that the earth keeps turning on the creatures to whom it gives a temporary home, and the world eventually takes away what it gives. Everything breaks up against the rocks of time. As the psalmist put it: "I am your passing guest, O Lord, a sojourner, like all my ancestors" (Psalm 39:12); or as Rabbit puts it: "You fill a slot for a time and then move out; that's the decent thing to do, make room."⁵

Absent in Updike's writings is any complacent optimism that the world can be improved. Instead he offers the vision that our lives go around in a circle and the generations do not progress so much as stay in the same place. At the center of Updike's tragic vision is that we cannot live except by devouring others, whether physically or spiritually. "To be alive is to be a killer," the aging Rabbit concludes.⁶ Against all soft-centered optimism, Updike salutes the doctrine of original sin and offers a deep sense of human imperfection, highlighting the notion that the sinister thing about sin is that it always seems justified. The crooked heart always has excuses. However, we are far more sinning than sinned against, far more fallen than tragic.

Updike has stated that "What has interested me as a writer has been betrayals,"⁷ and everywhere one turns in his novels promises are broken, contracts violated, relationships betrayed. He has been described as the laureate of suburban adultery. This is land where he has long and fruitfully burrowed for material for his writings.

An observation central to Updike's work is that when God dies, only sex remains as divine. In our times the place of God has become vacant and Eros is the engine that drives the human machine. In *Couples*, Updike's notorious novel of 1969, a character named Freddy Thorne declares Updike's position: Thorne says that we dwell in "one of those dark ages that visit human kind between millennia, between the death and rebirth of God, when there is nothing to steer by but sex and stoicism and the stars."⁸ But human physicality is by no means always life-affirming. Whereas in early novels, Updike explores the body as Eros, in *Rabbit at Rest* he explores the body as Thanatos, the blossoming and fruition of the seed of death we all carry inside us. Particularly harrowing is the sequence of Rabbit's angioplasty, where Updike takes us into "this pond of bodily fluids and their slippery conduits."⁹ This is hard to read without wanting to close one's eyes.

One of the pleasures of reading Updike for me has been his religious intelligence and his relentless posing of the ancient God-queries. His novels are tactfully religious: their spiritual implications are mostly proposed on the sly; he does not try to force a message upon readers; he doesn't write tracts, but his novels are "bothered by God." He is a neo-Orthodox Christian who echoes some hard Christian messages and is put off by the hollowness of some modern theological voices that lack a sense of sin. For Updike, God is

not one to forego wrath about an "evil and adulterous generation." The multileveled themes in his novels are capsulized in the idea that there is no getting away; our sins coil back. If "anything goes," there is a price.

The first two Rabbit books are more overtly religious (and political). God is present in the last two books chiefly through his absence, as a felt void. Rabbit experiences his spiritual desires waning as his waistline grows. In *Rabbit is Rich* "God has shrunk in Harry's middle years to the size of a raisin lost under the car seat."¹⁰ In *Rabbit at Rest*, God seems hardly to exist at all. The detoxified Nelson offers a godless grace before meals in the name of "Peace, Health, Sanity, Love." Rabbit notes the absence of nuns at the Catholic hospital where he undergoes angioplasty, during which he tries to pray but cannot.¹¹ *Rabbit at Rest* is about facing death, but doing it without benefit of faith. But throughout all the Rabbit books there is something that bobs and shimmers beyond Rabbit's grasp. Nothing Rabbit experiences is quite enough. He remains incomplete and searching. In an attempt to understand his own life, Rabbit has an inkling that "somewhere behind all this, there's something or someone waiting that wants me to find it."¹² Updike's belief in God, his Sunday churchgoing, his thumping statement in *Self-Consciousness* of his own belief in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, underline how unconventional his fiction is by contemporary standards and why he is an object of distaste to some reviewers.

One of the sadnesses at the end of *Rabbit at Rest* is the sense that Updike was saying goodbye to us, much as Shakespeare says goodbye in *The Tempest*. Fortunately, he has remained productive, and presently resides in Beverly Falls, Massachusetts, where he is a "faithful parishioner" at St. John's Episcopal Church¹³ (he was raised a Lutheran and detoured through the Congregational Church). He is a licensed lector at St. John's and sometimes writes the introductions to the lessons he reads. One can hope that someday those introductions will be published.

Notes

¹⁰John Updike, *Rabbit at Rest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), p. 510.

⁷John Updike, "Why Rabbit Had to Go," *New York Times Book Review*, August 5, 1990, p. 24.

⁸John Updike, *Self-Consciousness* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), p. 231.

⁹John Updike, *Rabbit is Rich* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 371.

¹⁰Updike, *Rabbit is Rich*, p. 258.

¹¹John Updike, *Rabbit at Rest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), p. 138.

¹²Jan Nunley, "Profile," *Episcopal Life*, May 1993, p. 8.

¹³John Updike, *Couples* (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1969), p. 389.

¹⁴Updike, *Rabbit at Rest*, p. 270.

¹⁵Updike, *Rabbit is Rich*, p. 106.

¹⁶Updike, *Rabbit at Rest*, p. 288.

¹⁷Updike, *Rabbit at Rest*, p. 469.

¹⁸Nunley, p. 8.