

Everyday Retrospectives: Updike and the American Twentieth Century

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Updike's retrospectives

How does Updike see America at the end of the twentieth century? His fiction has, characteristically, been a contextual and historical art; not a purist formalism, but the gathering and collocating of the life of America in its local and historical rootedness. He has made it a matter of record (in *Self-Consciousness*, 1989) that what he has to say as a novelist is "the whole mass of middling, hidden, troubled America" (98); we might, then, expect that as the century draws to its close Updike, in his role as surveyor and recorder of his country, would have some general perspective to offer. And his most recent novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996), with its sweep of American life from 1910 to 1990, appears to aim precisely at that. My intention in this paper is to suggest that Updike's treatment of the American century reaches a specific conclusion, and that it does this through a preoccupation with one central problem: what I shall call the problem of the everyday.

Updike has his own route into the contextual and historical life of modern America: that of the retrospective. This is a distinctive way of opening up the historical and cultural experience of a society. Instead of making the narrative position move with the events described (in the manner of Walter Scott's historical fiction, or of *War and Peace*), Updike locates the source of the narration at some subsequent point, so that it can review the life of a period in full if implicit awareness of the period as a whole. The stance is one of retrospective evaluation in tacit possession of more than could have been known at the time.

This is the method even of the Rabbit tetralogy, where the narration is in the present tense and might appear to be simply contemporaneous with the events described. In fact the narrating voice is positioned at a later moment (in each of these novels, at the end of the decade concerned), and it shapes and evaluates the life of the time from that later perspective. In *Memories of the Ford Administration* (1992), there is a double retrospection: the narrator looks back concurrently

on Presidents Ford and Buchanan from a position at the beginning of the 1990s. *In the Beauty of the Lilies* establishes a narrative position not at the end of a decade but of a century; again, implicitly, it works with the advantage of that full perspective.

But because each of these acts of fictional retrospection works from a defined and datable moment which stands in a precise historical relationship to the period surveyed, the narrative position remains within the history which is the novel's concern; it is never allowed to float free into some transcendent, extra-historical location. In this way the act of narration itself becomes part of the world that is being retrospectively reviewed: these possibilities of interpretation are themselves part of the world being laid before us. In this sense Updike's retrospective fiction achieves its own kind of reflexivity. Updike is aware that one of the features of his time is that someone like him might write about it in this way.

Updike and the problem of the everyday

No reader of Updike can be unaware of his constant and pervasive fascination with the detail and the furniture of everyday life. His fiction is loaded with particularity: with references, lists, even inventories, that go well beyond the support of narrated event to become a presence and a force of their own, a realised agency acting upon every other element of the narrative. This aspect of his writing is so constant that illustration is almost superfluous, but the following passage from *Rabbit, Run* (1960) will establish the point. Harry Angstrom is running, making his first (and unsuccessful) break from his everyday world:

He heads down Jackson to where it runs obliquely into Central, which is 422 to Philadelphia. STOP. He doesn't want to go to Philadelphia but the road broadens on the edge of town beyond the electric-power station and the only other choice is to go back through Mt. Judge through the mountain into the thick of Brewer and the supper-time traffic. He doesn't intend to see Brewer again, that flower-pot city. The highway turns from three-lane to four-lane and there is no danger of hitting another car; they all hum along together like sticks in a stream. Rabbit turns on the radio. After a hum, a beautiful Negress sings, "Without a song, the dahay would nehever end, without a song"... The smell of parched rubber says the heater has come on and he turns the little lever to MOD. (14)

A number of features are apparent in Updike's realisation of the everyday. Most striking is his sense of particularity: of these objects, words, events in this specific place and no other. Updike does not generalise his world. Then there is his consciousness of multiplicity, of plurality, of the infinite number of discrete actualities that make up the everyday. He does not unify his world. And this

world is made up of entities of different kinds which nevertheless impinge on consciousness with a certain fixedness and specificity: material objects (the particular red brick out of which Brewer is built), sensations (the smell of the rubber), cultural artefacts (the song on the car radio). Even the non-material seems to gain the quality of materiality.

So far we might be talking simply of an expert naturalism. What turns this evocation of the ordinary into a problem is Updike's sense of everydayness as pressure and enclosure; his characters (and Harry archetypally) are shut within this immediacy and particularity, within an everydayness which threatens their humanity. To see how this is so it is necessary to look more closely at the structure of the everyday world as Updike realises it in his fiction.

First, his everyday is the immediate and the close, not the hidden or the distant. This fictional world is made up of realities that impinge directly on the subject. The bill-board advert, the feel of the leather car-seat give themselves fully and immediately to awareness; nothing is reserved or held back. Nor do they refer to any reserves of significance remote from themselves; there is no hinterland of meaning to be opened up. In the cliché phrase of this culture, what you see is what you get. Second, the world that is conveyed is a horizontal world; it has no variations of level, no outcroppings or hollows of greater or lesser value. Everything, the road sign, the voice of the singer, the smell of the rubber, is equally real: nothing belongs to any hierarchy that might give it precedence over anything else. Third, this is a common reality, no one's reality in particular; one participates in it as part of the mass to which it is directed; one's relationship with it cannot be significantly individualised. We all hear the same radio, drive the same cars, obey the same signs.

Updike's fictional realisation of this world stresses these aspects. What makes them an issue for him is his awareness that each conflicts with some founding assumption of traditional humanity. Most human cultures have believed that the important reality was not immediate but hidden, not close but the goal of distant search. Most have believed that entities did, naturally, compose a hierarchy of reality and significance: some things were more real than others, held more meaning than others. Some cultures, certainly Euro-American culture since the Renaissance, have believed in the primacy of the individual experience over that of the mass.

Updike creates a world in which all these human foundations are threatened; and this, for him, is the issue of the American century. But the problem of the everyday is a problem with a history, and this history is itself reflected in Updike's work. The defining modern exploration of everydayness is, of course, Heidegger's, and several of the features indicated above are close to his analysis. For the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, the everyday is the immediate context of the human, the proximate 'world' of value, use and purpose through which human beings necessarily conduct their lives. It is not something that can be escaped or overleapt. To that extent it is a proper part of the structure of human

existence, by no means to be deplored or rejected. In so far as Heidegger finds the everyday problematical, it is because he sees it, for the most part and in most cases, as a world defined by the 'they': by no one and everyone, in terms of values and objectives which are general and diffuse, which belong to nobody and to everybody. This is for him one instance of inauthenticity. The everyday need not be inauthentic; but in so far as it is common and not individually owned, it comes very close to the model of everydayness which Updike realises in his fiction: immediate, level, common.¹

But the problem has, before and after Heidegger, an earlier and a later history, and this also is reflected in Updike's work. There are moments when, as we shall see, he shares Wordsworth's belief that the everyday can be illuminated by some transcendent radiance. At other moments he shares T.S. Eliot's modernist despair at the withdrawal of all transcendence from the dead particularity of life. And in novels such as *Memories of the Ford Administration* and *Brazil* (1994) he shows himself sensitive to post-modernism's post-transcendental contentment with particularity, surface, and multiplicity. Out of this diverse response to the problem, I shall identify two broad approaches: one in which Updike works primarily through the awareness of the individual, and another in which he tries to reflect the developing awareness of a culture. The first approach characterises the Rabbit tetralogy, and the second his latest novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*.

The problem individually defined:
Rabbit Run, Rabbit Redux, Rabbit is Rich

I shall begin with the problem individually defined. In *Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), and *Rabbit is Rich* (1981), Updike follows the problem of the everyday as experienced by an individual, in a way that models the history of this problem since the start of the nineteenth century, when everydayness began to be an issue for Romantic thought. In his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" (1802) Wordsworth offers a poetic strategy for the recovery and sustenance of the human within an everyday that increasingly threatens it. His consciousness of the proliferating multiplicity of modern everyday experience, its inescapable immediacy, lack of hierarchical discrimination and essentially non-individual nature, is apparent in a passage such as the following:

...a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. (735)

A central point of the "Preface" is to suggest how poetry can help to remedy this new situation. One part of this was to go back to an earlier everyday, the everyday of rural people, which allowed the structures of the essentially human to emerge in a way that the modern everyday increasingly did not. This underlay his programme for poetic subjects and poetic language. His other proposal, and the one which had been personally more important to him, was to look for the transcendently epiphanic within day-to-day experience itself: to hold to those moments when the ordinary was illuminated by some fuller and deeper significance, moments which were defining for his sense of a full humanity.

In *Rabbit, Run* Updike shows himself to be an inheritor of this second possibility. Harry Angstrom is constantly on the look-out for moments when his world is illuminated, when some detail of the everyday is filled with a radiance that sets it outside the horizontal level of common experience and affirms what he feels to be his truest humanity. Sex has the power to do this, but also moments such as his glimpse of a lit church window from Ruth's flat (47), or the soaring golfball as he drives down the fairway (77-8), or this Sunday moment when a fuller reality seems to show through the texture of the ordinary:

He 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, that the wandering thread of his feelings leads nowhere. Correspondingly he loves the ones dressed for church: the pressed business suits of portly men give substance and respectability to his furtive sensations of the invisible, the flowers in the hats of their wives seem to begin to make it visible; and their daughters are themselves whole flowers, their bodies each a single flower, petaled in gauze and frills, a bloom of faith, so that even the plainest walk in Rabbit's eyes glowing with beauty, the beauty of belief. (135)

The romantic provenance of Harry's transcendental hunger is apparent here in the echoes of Blake, and of Coleridge's churchgoing family at the end of the *Ancient Mariner* (601-9). But in the second and third novels of the tetralogy, this response to the problem of the everyday proves unsustainable. In *Rabbit Redux* Updike can be seen to follow the history of the everyday into a later, modernist, phase; the relevant poetic comparison is now T.S. Eliot. As in "Prufrock" or *The Waste Land*, the possibility of the epiphanic transformation of the everyday has vanished; what is left is a hard, flat multiplicity that negates the human by making of it another thing among the infinity of things:

The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.
(177-9)

The bleakness of Eliot's catalogue is echoed in a passage such as this, when Rabbit, looking for a present for his mother, goes into a drugstore with his son Nelson:

Up near Ninth and Weiser they find a drugstore open. Thermos bottles, sunglasses, shaving lotion, Kodak film, plastic baby pants: nothing for his mother. He wants something big, something bright, something to get through to her. Realgirl Liquid Make-Up, Super Plenamins, Non-Smear polish remover, Nudit for the Legs. A rack of shampoo-in hair-color, a different smiling cunt on every envelope: Snow Queen Blond, Danish Wheat, Killarney Russet, Parisian Spice, Spanish Black Wine.... The world outside is bright and barren. The two of them, father and son, feel sharply alone, Rabbit gripping his bulky package. Where is everybody? Is there life on earth? (231-2)

Nothing any more "gets through" to Rabbit or his mother: the world is a flatness, unilluminated, a stereotypical travesty of the human. Even the defining human act of 1969, the first moon landing, achieves no elevation above the everyday, and becomes another event among many.

What Updike registers in this novel and in *Rabbit is Rich* is the terror of an undifferentiated particularity; an everyday world in which everything has equal weight and equal disconnection from the deeper instincts of humanity. Whereas in *Rabbit, Run* the natural world could, in a Wordsworthian way, offer a transcending radiance to which Rabbit could turn, by the time of the third novel nature is seen through the dead mechanism of the man-made world. Sitting beside a swimming pool in the Caribbean, Harry looks up at the stars:

Once, on some far lost summer field of childhood, someone, his mother it must have been though he cannot hear her voice, told him that if you stare up at the night sky while you count to one hundred you are bound to see a shooting star, they are in fact so common. But though he now leans back from the Stinger and the glass table and the consolatory murmur of his friends until his neck begins to ache, all the stars above him hang unbudging in their sockets. (665)

The problem culturally defined: In the Beauty of the Lilies

These first three novels of the tetralogy show Harry Angstrom encountering, on the individual level, the full weight of the problem of the everyday. The final novel of the sequence, *Rabbit at Rest*, takes him on from that point; and in doing so it helps to indicate Updike's positive response to the problem. But first I shall look at his rather different approach to the problem in *In the Beauty of the Lilies*.

Updike has given this novel the title that, in his memoir *Self-Consciousness*, he suggested might be given to his work as a whole (98); and

certainly this latest novel is in many ways more inclusive than anything in his previous work, more even than the 2,000 pages of the tetralogy. *In the Beauty of the Lilies* attempts a cultural-historical retrospect of America in the twentieth century: from the last years of nineteenth century industrialism, through the labour radicalism of the pre-war years, the first world war itself, the Crash and Depression, the second world war, the cold war, the 1960s and alternative culture, to 1980s media culture and the Waco siege. Specifically and significantly, the novel follows, from its first page, the history of the American cinema; and Updike traces the relationship between film and his central problem, that of the everyday.

Updike establishes this as a cultural and not simply an individual problem by tracing its impact across a sequence of lives through four generations. Each has to deal with a world resolved into a surface flatness, a depersonalised commonality. How they respond to this problem embodies Updike's understanding of a general, cultural response. For the first generation, the problem is how to cope with the loss of an older world, a world of depth, hierarchies, and a securer individuality. The first section of the novel covers the years 1910 to 1914, and it deals with the Rev. Clarence Wilmot's loss of faith. He has been a Presbyterian minister in Patterson, New Jersey, but his faith deserts him quite suddenly one spring afternoon, and he finds that the earlier structure of his life, with its God-centred hierarchy of reality and of meaning, has been replaced by the horizontal equivalences of everydayness:

Life's sounds all rang with a curious lightness and flatness, as if a resonating base beneath them had been removed. They told Clarence Wilmot what he had long suspected, that the universe was utterly indifferent to his states of mind and as empty of divine content as a corroded kettle. All its metaphysical content had leaked away, but for cruelty and death, which without the hypothesis of God became unmetaphysical; they became simply facts, which oblivion in time would obliviously erase. (7)

In the months and years that follow, what oppresses Clarence most is the depthless immediacy of the world of object and event; its absolute lack of relation to him as an individual. Updike makes this tangible in his catalogues of the contents of the minister's house: "...the mahogany dining table, with its pedestal legs and much-waxed top of faintly mismatching leaves; the Tiffany-glass chandelier, shaped like an inverted punchbowl with scalloped edges: ...none of these mute surfaces reflected the sudden absence of God from the universe." (10) From this point Clarence's short remaining life will be lived among such mute surfaces, in the flatness of a world where everything is on one level.

Updike uses Clarence Wilmot to present a moment of cultural transition: from the hierarchical reality of the nineteenth century, when even the design of furniture and wallpaper seemed to resonate further and deeper significance, to the flat undiscriminated everydayness of the twentieth. But Clarence is given one resource in his diminished life, and that is the cinema. As an unsuccessful seller

of encyclopaedias, he slips alone into afternoon shows, and there he finds something of the former dimensionality of experience restored, though in different and evanescent terms. What has become all mute surface is tweaked aside in cinematic invention to reveal depths and intensities which reality can no longer give him: "...the films lifted the skirts of the supposedly safe, chaste and eventless world to reveal an anatomy of passion and cruel inequity. Men in top hats were invariably villains or clowns; a girl attracted to a man from a superior class was usually ruined." (107) Updike hints at what, throughout the novel, he will show to have been the role of the cinema in this century: simultaneously to register everydayness, with a particularity that no other art can match, whilst at the same time infusing it with an often factitious depth, scale and mystery that everyday life cannot offer.

Living in the everyday

It is this restoration of dimensions other than the horizontal which draws Clarence, mourning as he is for his lost faith, to the cinema. For his son, Teddy, the impact of film is different, because his attitude to the everyday is different. He sees his father as betrayed and abandoned by God, by a sham and cruel transcendence whose withdrawal destroys him. Teddy is left with a bitter sense of the danger of all that, and he lives his life determined to have nothing to do with it. For him the flat everyday is the best option: a world of ordinary predictabilities, claiming no heights and depths, no meanings beyond commonplace ones. His widowed mother's move to Basingstoke, Delaware, takes him into a realm which has no aspirations beyond the everyday, the perfect place for the ordinary life which he will live there for seventy years. Updike shows us Teddy, as he walks around his new home town, dissolving his father's theological perspectives into an everyday reality which, in its local particularity, fascinates him:

...Teddy walked the town, that first lonely summer, hoping to become part of it, taking the measure of its shady blocks, its ragged curving downtown, its little Greek temple of a town hall, the sprucely painted churches where the Presbyterians, the Methodists, the Baptists, and the Episcopalians entertained their bearded God in His several shades of Protestant doctrine, the close-set deep-porching homes of the not uncomfortable, and the surprisingly stark rowhouses, with piebald asphalt shingles and sagging porches one step up from the pavement, tucked between the empty, hollow-eyed rose-colored tannery and the busy bottle-cap factory... The downtown turned its back on the river; but for slots between the buildings through which the shuffling glint of sunlight on water-dimples flashed through to his eye... (136)

Teddy chooses a life which, in its aesthetic, brings him closer to Updike than any of the other characters in this novel; as a postman who marries an ordinary Basingstoke girl, he enters, knows and loves the detail and the particular of

this town's everyday life. What we see through his eyes is endlessly fascinating in its entire lack of aspiration to any dimension other than that of the everyday, and on that level each detail has its place and its non-transcendental radiance.

It is a part of Teddy's inhabiting of the everyday that, just as he has no time for religion, so he (alone of the major characters) has no time for the cinema. Films unnerve him, precisely because they do what they did for his father: reintroduce a sense of further and hidden dimensions, break the frame of the everyday: "...the motion pictures, all made now in California or Europe, three thousand miles away in one direction or another, embraced the chaos that sensible men and women in their ordinary lives plotted to avoid." (146)

But though Updike presents him as a relatively comfortable inhabitant of the everyday, Teddy is also shown to be in a human sense incomplete; he remains, to an extent, the child who retreats into the safety of the ordinary and the known, once into his collections of stamps and cigarette cards, and now into the homely detail of Basingstoke life. The predictable daily routine of the mailcarrier protects him against larger issues, at least until the end of the novel, when life forces them upon him. The efforts of his daughter and grandson to move beyond this limitation of the ordinary are a comment on its completeness as a human model.

Resisting the everyday

Teddy's daughter, Essie, is the occasion for Updike's most complex analysis of the tension between everydayness and humanity, and its cultural consequences. As a small-town girl who becomes a cinema superstar, she knows both the world of common ordinariness and the compensating world of fantasy and glamour. Her childhood world is both reassuring and frightening:

Light had felt its way in under the dry green window shade above the spines of the radiator and was standing beside her bed when the unhappy tangle of her dream fell away and she dared open her eyes. Like a leak in a great tank of darkness the light had seeped into all the familiar things of her room –varnished pine bureau, painted straight chair, staring doll sitting on the chair with the oval soles of her cardboard shoes showing, radiator (which under its flaking silver paint had ivylike designs in a low raised pattern like a kind of secret... (228)

Her world is immediate and powerfully material, but at the same time it suggests to her hidden agencies that are benign against the terror of her dream: the personified light standing by her bed, the enticing secret of the radiator pattern. This is a part of Essie's childhood sense of the immediacy of God: "God was in the clouds and had sent Jesus to earth to make Christmas and Easter, and His love pressed down from Heaven and fit her whole body like bathwater in the tub." (233)

Essie has a sense of the immediacy of the transcendent which is greater than that of either her father or her grandfather, and in an earlier age this would have found its expression through religious faith. But despite the proliferation of churches in Basingstoke, Delaware, the everyday world into which she is born will not, finally, permit that; what happens in Essie's case is the displacement of her instinctual sense that the world contains different levels of reality into the invented reality of cinema. Even as a child, her visits to the cinema give her a sense of hidden depths: "Being alone [in the cinema] was like being alone on the deck of a great dark ship slowly moving through an unseen sea." (245) As she begins to put together a performing career, she has a simultaneous sense of the increasing unreality of the everyday world that has produced her: "In the midst of her tame family she felt her power, her irresistible fire; these pale faces around the blue tablecloth were falling away from her like rocket supports in the newsreels." (286) With her entry into film, she becomes part of a world which both reflects and denies the everyday; which takes up everyday themes (such as teenage crime and drug addiction) but at the same time, because they are being projected through someone now known as Alma DeMott, substitutes for them a reality whose justification is precisely its distance from and above everydayness.

Alma's power with her audiences is grounded in their intuition that she knows the everyday: "She had been there, the audiences felt—in the musty back seats of Plymouths, at the lunch-hour sock-hops, in the alleyway behind the drug store... at the edge of town with its stupefying view of rural emptiness." (333) But as her career advances she is less and less able to keep any productive contact with that world; her marriages fail, her son grows up not knowing her. She becomes a creature of the fantasy world that she has chosen in order to give some height and scale to existence; reaching for a fuller humanity, her humanity is the price that in the end she pays. Updike makes this point conclusively through her detachment from her son's final weeks and violent death.

If Essie/Alma represents the fate of someone who, in the classic American way of the Hollywood star, tries to overleap everyday reality, her son Clark embodies a later and in some ways more tragic stage of the problem of everydayness. Essie went into the invented realities of popular cinema from a base in the ordinary world; Clark has lived his entire life within the unrealities of the Hollywood social circuit. He hardly knows his father; his closest relationship as a child seems to have been with Rex, another of his mother's lovers. He knows his mother only as a hasty visitor between the studio and social engagements: "...she did the best she could... I didn't see her much except on weekends." (361) He has a half-career as an unsuccessful free-lance producer, has early developed a cocaine habit, and works as a ski-instructor through the generosity of his great-uncle. He has no real beliefs or commitments; his world is flimsy, and he does not take it or himself seriously.

This makes him an easy victim when a recruiter for a tiny millenarian sect takes him to its headquarters and introduces their charismatic leader, Jesse Smith. Because he is used to living within factitious realities, he accepts this one with

surprising readiness, and becomes one of Smith's most useful disciples. The millenarian narrative, of the imminent end of the world and the return of Christ to his elect, provides Clark with another virtual reality, this time not in celluloid or computer memory but in a place: a mountain, buildings, people. He discovers that he is ready to die in its defence; and when one of the madder members of the group precipitates the desired final conflict by opening fire on a school bus, Clark, who in this new reality has been given the name of Esau, picks up his rifle with a kind of joy and a sense that it connects him more fully with the world than anything that he has known before: "The Ruger's rear sight was an intricate leaf shape, the front sight a beaded ramp that seemed to Esau, waving the barrel through the window, to swing into its target like a ball of mercury popping into the bottom of a cup." (444) What is shown to him through the sights of the gun is something he has hardly noticed before, the tangible beauty of things and of the world:

He propped open the loose worn window with a stick of kindling and nestled his face into the cool smooth concavity of the stock's cheek piece and let his gunsight follow the drifting flight of a hawk cruising the valley below. The November wind was sharp on his face and his eyes watered as he took in the beauty of the morning: the mountainside falling away in blowing grassy terraces interrupted by clumps of cottonwood and pine, the sun hidden behind an approaching slant sheet of cloud whose edges were white eddies of fishscales sculptured like curved ribs of sand left by a receded tide... (444)

In the following siege and gunfight, and the final self-immolation of the sectarians within their farm, Clark stays loyal to Jesse Smith; he has no reason to prefer the police or the National Guard. But the shell of virtual reality, acquired first from his mother and reinforced by Smith, begins to crack. As the farm burns, he becomes aware of the links between the cinema and the home-made apocalypse happening around him. Thinking himself only moments away from heaven, he imagines it as "gold and blue and jasper, with marble stairs and still lakes and women drifting about in tiaras and silken gowns falling in parallel folds like Elizabeth Taylor in a movie whose name he had forgotten." (482)

Clarity finally comes as Smith begins to shoot the women and children who are his own followers, "launching" them to heaven. Clark "...knew what to do. He felt his physical body existing within that electric hyperclarity that for years had come and gone in his head." (484) To save the others, he shoots Smith, and announces the end of the communal fantasy: "For God's sake, you idiotic bitches, get out! It's over! Git! Git! He cried with his inspired certainty, "Can't you see, there's nothing *here* any more!" (485)

Clark is declaring the end of Smith's millenarian dream, but he is also echoing his grandfather's sudden loss of faith, with which the novel began. It has taken the whole novel, and eighty years, fully to digest that moment in the spring

of 1910; and that process has been a cultural history of problematical engagement with the everyday. For Clark, it is too late; his immersion in invented realities is too complete for him to return to the world, and he turns away from the chance to escape: "there was nothing for him on the outside now, just hassle and embarrassment for Mother." (486)

The aesthetic of everyday humanity

What does Updike conclude from this? He has presented a panorama of a culture broken, at the start of the century, from substantial transcendental roots; inhabiting with various degrees of comfort the flat equivalences of the everyday, and rebelling against them in the fantasies of film and false prophecy. Neither Harry Angstrom nor Clark Wilmot receive any hint, in their deaths, that the everyday account of reality was not absolute and final. Their fate, and that of others such as Teddy and Essie, suggests that along with a levelling of the world, a levelling of the human has also taken place. Aspirations to a grander or fuller humanity can only end in falsity and disappointment.

This might appear to be Updike's whole conclusion; but there is one aspect of his fiction which suggest that it may not entirely be so. If it was Heidegger who classically posed the problem of the everyday for the twentieth century, Updike is Heideggerian in one positive respect: he regards the everyday as necessary and inevitable, a natural and proper part of human existence. Like Heidegger, he understands that human beings live in terms of what surrounds them, of the world that is to hand. Though he can share the bleakness of Eliot's common world, he is unlike the classic modernists of the earlier part of the century in his ability to love the immediate and the particular in all its shapeless, one-dimensional proliferation. Updike's catalogues, unlike Eliot's, often have a tenderness towards what they describe, as though he were lovingly registering the detail of his world.

This tenderness towards the particular is apparent in almost all of Updike's recent work. In the final novel of the tetralogy, *Rabbit at Rest*, Harry Angstrom's last weeks are spent on his own in an unfashionable part of Florida, in the small town of Deleon, where, one afternoon, he wanders away from the mushroom retirement condominiums to the old part of the town:

He discovers, some blocks back from the beachfront and the green glass hotels, old neighbourhoods where shadowy big spicy gentle trees, live oaks and gums and an occasional banyan widening out on its crutches, overhang wooden houses once painted white but flaking down to gray bareness, with louvered windows and roofs of corrugated tin. Music rises from within these houses, scratchy radio music, and voices in argument or jabbery jubilation, bright fragments of overheard life... It reminds Harry... of the town of his childhood, Mt. Judge in the days of Depression and distant war, when people still sat on their front porches. (477-8)

There is nostalgia here, but also (and this, perhaps, is what nostalgia has at its heart) a love of particularity, a powerful recognition of the beauty of specific places and actions in a commonplace world. What is being registered here, whether now in Deleon or in memory in Mt. Judge, is the beauty of the everyday, a beauty which derives from particularity and from the placing of all the details in a Heideggerian world of human purpose and concern.

The same is apparent in “A Sandstone Farmhouse”, an intensely personal story of Updike’s 1994 collection, *The Afterlife*. This story has special weight because it is plainly a fictional treatment of Updike’s own sense of loss following the death of his widowed mother. After the funeral, the son goes to the farmhouse which was her home and clears it of the accumulation of his parents’ two lives:

In the toolhouse, where his father had left a pathetic legacy of rusty screws and nails neatly arranged in jars, and oily tools, half of them broken, mounted on rotting pegboard, there were also antique implements worn like prehistoric artefacts: an ancient oblong pink whetstone pointed at either end and soapily warped by all its use, and an old-fashioned square hoe worn into a lopsided metal oval... They seemed sacred –runes that no one else could decipher. (125-6)

The power and beauty of these everyday and worthless objects is rooted in the way that their particularity links to lives: not just those of his parents, but unknown lives lived in these terms across unimaginable generations. *In the Beauty of the Lilies* reflects the same sensibility. The humanity of the Wilmots is shown at its strongest at those moments when they register the beauty of evanescent particularity: the newly-wakened Essie looking round her bedroom, Teddy recalling particular house-fronts and mailboxes and people that he served over many years, Clark suddenly seeing the beauty of the mountainside through the sights of his rifle.

If this recognition of the beauty of everyday particularity is, for Updike, the definingly human act, then it is not hard to understand why the cinema is given such a central place in this latest novel. More than any other art form, more even than realist fiction, film can achieve this registration of particularity; for a century in which the everyday is problematical, cinema is a central resource. But because, as Essie’s experience shows, film can also fake and fantasize realities, it can also betray the particular and the everyday in favour of something that, as technology advances, draws ever closer to a virtual reality. Updike, it is clear, has his reasons for both loving and distrusting the cinema.

The grounds of the human

Updike’s retrospectives are a search for a refounded humanity within the cultural and historical contexts of twentieth century everydayness. In his own terms it seems that the search is successful; he sustains his confidence in human-

ity against all the pressure of the twentieth century everyday world, and he sees America as the place in which the terms of this humanity are most clearly visible. He sustains it not in terms of transcendental faith (though he himself continues a Christian), nor in terms of the ethical nature of human beings (like his near contemporary Saul Bellow). Instead he founds his humanity on an aesthetic of the particular. In response to the question, what sets human beings apart from all the multiplicity of the everyday world, Updike suggests that it is their ability to register the particularity of that world and to love it in the beauty of that particularity. Human beings are those creatures that can do that: we know of no others. And this is a humanity which is entirely attuned to everydayness; because it is only in terms of the everyday that the objects of its aesthetic vision can present themselves.

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Note

1. Heidegger's discussion of the everyday is mostly to be found in Division 1, chapter 4. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962) 149-168.

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Everyday Retrospectives: Updike and the American Twentieth Century

Το άρθρο εξετάζει την αναδρομική θεώρηση της Αμερικής του εικοστού αιώνα από τον John Updike, κυρίως μέσω μιας συζήτησης του τελευταίου του μυθιστορήματος, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (*Στην Ομορφιά των Κρίνων*, 1996). Πιστεύω ότι η εξερεύνηση της Αμερικής αυτού του αιώνα από τον συγγραφέα εστιάζεται σε ένα κεντρικό πρόβλημα, αυτό της αντιπαράθεσης μεταξύ του 'καθημερινού' και μιας ασφαλούς ανθρωπότητας· η προσέγγιση αυτού του προβλήματος από τον Updike έχει τη θέση της σε μια συζήτηση που ξεκινά με το κίνημα του Ρομαντισμού και συνεχίζεται μέχρι τον κλασικό μοντερνισμό του Heidegger στη δεκαετία του 1920. Ο Updike φαίνεται να εξερευνά το πρόβλημα από δύο διαφορετικές οπτικές: αυτή της εμπειρίας του ατόμου, στην τετραλογία του 'Rabbit', και αυτή της εμπειρίας ενός πολιτισμού στο τελευταίο του μυθιστόρημα. Προτείνω ότι η λύση του συγγραφέα για το πρόβλημα της καθημερινότητας βρίσκεται σε μία αισθητική της ιδιαιτερότητας, την οποία ορίζει ως καθοριστική ανθρώπινη ιδιότητα.