

South Dakota State University

Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

1987

Music School : A Dance with John Updike's Poetry

Nan Steinley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Steinley, Nan, "Music School : A Dance with John Updike's Poetry" (1987). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 4482.

<https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/etd/4482>

This Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. For more information, please contact michael.biondo@sdstate.edu.

MUSIC SCHOOL: A DANCE WITH JOHN UPDIKE'S POETRY

BY

NAN STEINLEY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts
Major in English
South Dakota State University
1987

HILTON M. BRIGGS LIBRARY
South Dakota State University
Brookings, SD 57007-1098

MUSIC SCHOOL: A DANCE WITH JOHN UPDIKE'S POETRY

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

Thesis Adviser

Date

Head, English Department

Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To undertake this sort of research and writing project involves more than just the researcher/writer. Because of this commitment by those others, I wish to express my gratitude for those most responsible for enabling me to begin, continue, and yes, even finish this study of John Updike.

--To Lou Williams who read and reread this bundle and always offered quiet reassurance that I was doing fine. He now knows probably more than he ever wanted to know about Updike's poetry.

--To those friends and family who would innocently ask how the thesis was going, never doubting that it would indeed be finished.

--And to my husband Gary who had confidence and patience and support always there when I needed it most.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| CHAPTER 1: Reactions..... | 6 |
| CHAPTER 2: The Updike Style..... | 17 |
| CHAPTER 3: The Poems..... | 29 |
| CONCLUSION..... | 87 |
| WORKS CITED..... | 90 |

INTRODUCTION

Few authors can live on the income produced solely by their writing. John Updike is among the even more rare writers who not only has lived but prospered by his pen. As one of America's most prolific and successful living writers, he is virtually guaranteed nation-wide recognition, as well as a position on best seller lists, whenever he publishes anything.

Born in 1932 in Shillington, Pennsylvania, Updike was the only child of parents who nurtured his creative talents. His father was a mathematics teacher at Shillington High School for more than thirty years and his mother was and still is an aspiring writer. Although Updike began writing at the age of eight, his primary interest was to become a cartoonist.

He was an able enough student to win a scholarship to Harvard, the school chosen by his mother because she determined that it had the greatest number of successful writers among its alumni. Updike was editor of the Harvard Lampoon and during his junior year married a Radcliffe student, Mary Pennington. He graduated in 1954, the same year his first short story and his first poem were accepted by The New Yorker.

After graduation the couple set sail for England where Updike was to spend a year studying at the Ruskin

School of Drawing and Art. E.B. White visited him there and offered the young author a job at The New Yorker as a staff writer. This offer was the culmination of several years of work for Updike. A New Yorker subscription had been given to him by an aunt when Updike was only eleven or twelve, and he made an early decision: his "sole ambition in the world was to make The New Yorker myself" (Howard 79).

Returning to New York after his time at Oxford, Updike was to spend the next two years as a writer for the magazine. This short period proved to be his only stint of working within the confines of a regular job. Chancing the financial difficulties that breaking with The New Yorker might bring, Updike moved his family to Ipswich, Mass. By now he and Mary had two children. Two more would soon follow. He had felt that the frantic pace of New York City living was a drain on his creative abilities. The risk in moving for Updike, however, proved to be minimal. Within the first two years of living in Ipswich, he produced, with acceptable reviews, three books. And despite the distance in miles, The New Yorker continued to publish his frequent submissions of fiction and nonfiction.

In the seventeen years that Updike lived in the small coastal town of Ipswich, he published several novels, collections of short stories, poetry and prose,

and a play. By 1974, however, Updike's marriage was disintegrating and he moved to Boston. For the next three years he lived in the Boston area and continued to write. In 1977 he married Martha Bernhard, a woman whom he knew from his earlier Ipswich days. They now live in Beverly Farms, Mass., in a house overlooking the Atlantic, and this most productive of writers has not slowed his publication pace yet.

In the foreword of his latest collection of nonfiction, Hugging the Shore, Updike gives us a hint of his perspective on life and his literary contributions to it. He writes:

Well, who said life, or a life, can be pure? Here, then, without further apology, is the fruit of eight years' purposeful reading, carried out, much of it, to secure me the pleasures and benefits of appearance in The New Yorker. Some of the best-researched and most happily undertaken reviews belong to my twenty months of living alone in Boston. . . . Solitude and small quarters are great inciters of literacy. Also, as it happened, in this land of fragmentation held together by legalities, the payment for a monthly review roughly balanced a monthly alimony payment that was mine to make. At the beginning of those

eight years, I had left a big white house with a view of saltwater. An inland interim of reconsolidation followed, and now I live again in a big white house with a view of saltwater. I keep looking out the window. The clean horizon beckons. All sorts of silver shadows streak the surface of the sea. Sailboats dot it, some far out. It looks like literature. What a beautiful sight! (xix-xx)

Literature yes, but what of the poet John Updike? For those of us who do think of him as a gifted writer of verse, there are just as many who do not. And there are even multitudes more that know him only as the chronicler of suburban life in Couples and a trio of Rabbits. He is, however, one of the most versatile contemporary American writers around.

That many readers are unaware of his poetry is understandable since Updike's drawing power lodges foremost in his vast body of fiction and nonfiction. Many see Updike only as a novelist, and have fourteen works published to date to enjoy. He's given no indication the production will stop. Other readers who champion Updike as a master of the short story need only consult one of his eight collections or wait for the appearance on the newstands of The New Yorker or a variety of other magazines he regularly contributes to.

Fans of Updike in his role as book reviewer are treated to an increasing number of thoughtful, gracious and generous responses to the writings of others.

Besides forays into drama and the world of books for children, Updike has to his credit three volumes of collected pieces of writing. Assorted Prose, Picked-Up Pieces, and Hugging the Shore provide a diversified composite of a man comfortably at home with essays, criticism, parodies, chatty pieces of description, and book reviews.

Updike has also written personal, or autobiographical, essays. That Updike would devote several pages of writing on the topic of his skin disease is curious until one realizes the essay isn't really so much about the psoriasis he has suffered since childhood but rather about himself and his perceptions of the world. Another essay, which begins with the common occurrence of lost luggage, allows Updike to go back in time as he strolls around the streets of his boyhood town of Shillington, Pennsylvania, waiting for the missing suitcases to reappear. At the essay's end, we know much more about Updike's youth. These autobiographical pieces frequently display a warm and comfortable nostalgia which somehow sparks our own memories of earlier friends, playgrounds, teachers, parents, and neighbors.

CHAPTER I

REACTIONS

What about his poetry?

Here we have a man only in his fifties who can claim a solid publishing average of a book a year from 1958 to the present. If the strength of his reputation as one of America's more significant writers carries any weight at all, does it extend to and include his poetry? Obviously poetry in this country isn't accorded the same attention that novels or short stories are, so not recognizing Updike as a serious poet is understandable. But the publication of five poetry collections is some testament to Updike's own faith in another outlet for his creative drive. And as a Time article pointed out, "Updike belongs to the minority that takes his serious poetry seriously" ("View" 72).

His early reputation as any kind of poet at all was established by the appearance of his first book in 1958, The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures. In this book, Updike immediately earned a reputation as a competent writer of light verse, a reputation that still endures. This collection easily displayed what have come to be trademarks of the Updike style whether it be in the novel, essay, short story, or poem: an elegant playfulness, wit, and humor; focus on the "trivia of

life"; a genuine gift with words; a wide-ranging diversity in form and content; a real and personal voice, and a precise and clean yet metaphorical style.

How has Updike's poetry been accepted by reviewers? In comparison to the vast attention given to the novels, short story collections, and his volumes of discursive prose, the poetry receives scant notice. The Carpentered Hen generated mild interest and was recognized in most reviews as containing very presentable light verse. Louise Bogan in her article "Verse" in The New Yorker, says of Updike:

The poetry . . . exhibits all the surface characteristics of verse at its lightest. The gift of wit . . . has its limits and its dangers. It can be ephemeral to a degree when it shows up in verse, since part of its appeal is its timeliness. It needs stout underpinnings of neat thinking and sturdy observation, combined with a wide range of interest, to anchor it to reality. Updike's first collection . . . possesses these fundamental requisites. In addition, it is wildly original and charmingly perceptive. Updike has an unmistakable voice, and it will be delightful to hear more of it as time goes on. (170)

Booklist recommends the book, "notable for its skill, variety, and comic sense" (470). A reviewer for Library Journal remarked, "In his humor he employs no poison pen or arrows of sarcasm" (1938), and Booklist echoes this opinion: Updike has "sharp but never cruel wit" (471). David McCord hints at another Updike trait: "he is a graceful border-crosser (light verse to poem) as Auden has been; as Betjeman and McGinley frequently are" (32). The "border-crossing" is clearly evident as Updike also crosses the borders of poetry into fiction and nonfiction.

The Carpentered Hen was, of course, Updike's first published book and as he began producing the fiction that finally brought him fame and wealth, more and more attention was paid by readers to the poetry.

When Telephone Poles and Other Poems was published five years later, Updike had three novels: The Poorhouse Fair, Rabbit, Run, The Centaur, and two short story collections: The Same Door and Pigeon Feathers, in circulation so naturally the poetry was cast in a more favorable light. Instead of a handful of notices in sources such as Booklist, Bookmark, Library Journal, and the Denver Post, Telephone Poles was reviewed as well in Newsweek, Atlantic, the New York Times, Time, Saturday Review, and the Wall Street Journal.

Opinions, however, were mixed. Richard K. Burns noted that Updike "continues to have fun with the absurdities that occur in daily existence. As with any poet, he is infatuated with words and enjoys exploring the delights and tricks of language" (3628-29). Thomas Lask writes that the "playfulness of ideas is matched by the sportiveness of the lines" (19). "John Updike," comments John Fandel, "is agile in using words and has a lot of fun in being funny" (212). Fandel goes on to say: "His kind of verse is exhilarating. After reading him for a while, one finds the word has taken on new life--its old one renewed, at least" (212). Time writes of the poet:

a man who can dance a light fantastic stanza without tripping over his dactyls is a treasure to be prized. John Updike . . . is perhaps the best player of the game [of light verse] since Ogden Nash and Morris Bishop came into their prime. ("Light Fantastic" 112, 114)

On the down side, we have Louis Simpson carping that the poetry is a "waste of time." Simpson writes: "It is an appalling thought that for many people who do get around to reading poetry now and then, this is the sort of poetry they like. . . . Light verse is for desperate people" (6, 25). Saturday Review's Robert Spector devotes one sentence to Updike. There is in

Telephone Poles, he writes, a "sophomoric sophistication in overly clever rhymes" (38). Peter Stitt writes that Updike's "sense of poetic technique is at best superficial" (268, 271).

The direction Updike set for himself in The Carpentered Hen as a light verse poet saw movement in Telephone Poles toward more serious themes. Not all the critics reserved their remarks for his lighter poems. Edmund Fuller acknowledges this shift and forecasts that Updike's strength as a serious poet would develop (16). And the review in Time observed that Updike was "able to slip unobtrusively out of light verse into something more barbed" ("Light Fantastic" 112).

Midpoint and Other Poems came out in 1969.

Updike's stable of works was growing and now included the novels Of the Farm and Couples, a collection of nonfiction entitled Assorted Prose, and another two story collections, the Olinger Stories and The Music School. Midpoint took a decided shift to the serious with the appearance of only a handful of the funny, cheerful, and high spirited pieces that previously sparkled in Updike's poetry collections.

Again the reception by book reviewers was a mixture of complaint and praise, this time heavy on the complaints. The Times Literary Supplement panned the work: "[I]t's the kind of slapdash speed-writing collage

that Ezra Pound made possible and if you found it piercingly boring to come across a page of music in the Cantos, wait until you take a hinge at Mr. Updike's pix" (104). (Included in this largely autobiographical work are photographs of Updike from infancy to adulthood.)

William Heyen, in Poetry, wrote: "Poem after poem begins in humorous bitterness and reaches toward reconciliation, if only the reconciliation of a well-turned phrase that manages to settle a matter for a moment" (428-29). Said Alan Brownjohn in his two sentence review in New Statesman: "Updike writes the kind of accomplished comic verse that highly ingenious American writers seem able to produce almost at will: sardonic, fashionably frank and self-mocking, and ultimately pointless" (330, 332). Not exactly high praise for the master writer.

Some reviewers were more kind in their treatment of this third collection, a work Updike discusses in his "One Big Interview":

When asked about what my philosophy was I tried to write it down in Midpoint in handy couplets and discovered that of all my books it is the least read, and it was hardly reviewed at all. I concluded that nobody really cared what my philosophy was. That's all right. The novelist is of interest only for what he does through empathy and image-producing, image

arranging; the more consciously a theorist he is the more apt he is to become impotent or cranky or both. (Picked-Up Pieces 509)

Alice and Kenneth Hamilton, who later produced a full-length study of Updike's writing, focus their approval on his stylistic techniques and the themes running throughout the major poem of the book, also entitled, "Midpoint." William Heyen concurred with their evaluation at least on one level, writing that "many sections of Midpoint are technically impressive" (429).

The fourth collection, Tossing and Turning, published in 1977, was greeted much more favorably than Midpoint. By this time Updike's company of works included Bech: A Book; the novels Rabbit Redux, A Month of Sundays, and Marry Me; a story collection Museums and Women; a play Buchanan Dying, and a second collection of his nonfiction prose entitled Picked-Up Pieces.

A typical review of Tossing and Turning came from Choice:

What is increasingly apparent with the reading of this new set of pieces, however, is a fact we have long hidden under the diminishment implied by the use of the term 'verse' to name what it is that Updike writes when he is not producing essays and fiction. It will no longer do: the man is a gifted poet, whether

or not he is writing 'light' matter or not, and could with a greater concentration of effort in the form deserve consideration as one of the foremost living practitioners of the art.

(1057)

William Cole, who has edited a collection of light verse, remarked that "John Updike is the best writer of light verse in this country, and there are many proofs of this in Tossing and Turning" (50). Matthew Hodgart of the Times Literary Supplement agrees with Cole. He said Updike "remains a master, perhaps the master in our time, of light verse" (1158).

Frequently appearing in the judgments of this collection are comments on John Updike's obvious delight with imagery and wordplay, his technical mastery, and the ever-apparent focus on the details of daily life. Even Suzanne Juhasz, who views Updike's poetry as a sort of writer's casual week-end dabbling sandwiched between his "real" work, thinks the book "clever, witty, sometimes seriously silly, once in a while seriously serious" (1281).

"Good novelists who also write good poetry are rare." (Ewart 18) So begins Gavin Ewart's review of Facing Nature, the fifth volume of poetry, which was published in 1985. By now Updike had produced another group of works including the novels The Coup, Rabbit is

Rich, and The Witches of Eastwick; a second Bech book, Bech is Back; two story collections Too Far To Go: The Maples Stories and Problems and Other Stories, and the third and largest gathering of nonfiction in Hugging the Shore.

Ewart compares Updike's writing to the "tradition" of Vladimir Nabokov, Kingsley Amis, and James Dickey: all good novelists who also write good poetry (18). Newsweek's David Lehman states: "Even John Updike's detractors concede that he brings to the least of his literary labors a professional's keen pride in his craft. Facing Nature . . . proves that he's just about the best part-time poet now going" (67).

The type of poetry Updike launched his poetic career upon, light verse, is more evident in Facing Nature than in either of his two previous collections. And although he stated in the foreword of a 1982 reissue of The Carpentered Hen that "I write no light verse now," he obviously has reconsidered and returned to what Joseph Parisi calls a "superior talent for light verse" (1432).

How does Updike label himself? Does he see himself primarily as a poet? A writer of fiction? A critic? When asked in a television interview broadcast in October, 1983, Updike replied:

I'd love to be a poet of the first rank. I still try to write poetry and find a poem, in

the writing, is very exciting. You hear . . . it begins to curl and crackle and your hand begins to tremble, and it really is, I suppose, the most intense contact with the world of language that a writer can enjoy. . . . I seem to be as a poet, sub-minor. I'm not even a minor poet. I hardly exist on the map, but it gives me the most pleasure to write poetry, but my guess is prose is my strong card. If I have a strong card. ("John Updike")

There are those who would disagree with Updike's casual assessment of his place on the poetic map, but he is accurate in saying his prose has taken an unquestionable lead. And now some thirty years into his career, he has become, in the minds of his readers as well as his own, more of a novelist than a poet. Helen Vendler asked Updike in a written interview if he had regrets that he "turned out to be essentially a novelist rather than a poet," and Updike replied:

No. And yet I feel more at sea writing a novel than a poem, and often reread my poetry and almost never look at my old novels. Also, poetry, especially since we have purged it of all that is comfortingly mechanical, is a sporadic activity. Lightning can't strike

every day. It is always at the back of my mind to be a poet. (Hugging the Shore 865)

According to Michiko Kakutani in a more recent interview with the writer, Updike said that more and more he was "being pushed toward the novel as my exclusive metier" (C17). Updike went on to say, "There's a crystallization that goes on in a poem which the young man can bring off, but which the middle-aged man can't" (C17). It is unlikely, however, that Updike will entirely forsake poetry.

CHAPTER II
THE UPDIKE STYLE

Before one takes a closer look at the five volumes which at this time represent Updike's poetic canon, how would one characterize the Updike style, a style that is apparent in all of his writing? Richard Rupp credits him with "a restless, exhaustive exploration of minute physical detail," as well as "catalogues, rhythmic phrasing, proper nouns, and brand names" (693). One poem that particularly illustrates this is one of his more frequently anthologized pieces, "Ex-Basketball Player." Others are "B.W.I." and "The Sensualist." Of course not every poem reflects all of Rupp's mentioned traits, but Anthony Burgess makes a comparison of the styles of Ernest Hemingway and Updike and comments that Updike is the "opposite pole to the exactness of the writing of Hemingway":

Where Hemingway strips language of its literary connotations, Updike makes us aware of the whole history of language--not so much in vocabulary, perhaps, as in rhythm and sentence-organization. (557)

Burgess was recognizing the prose writing specifically rather than the poetry, but the comparison can be extended. Updike's "Sunday" could quite possibly be

whittled down to a quatrain if strained through a Hemingway filter, but much would be lost:

This day that would tell us what we are
 if we would but listen
 this day that is all gray sea
 with no bell buoys to ring the changes
 or turn us toward an appointed shore
 into our boredom breaks
 (a wedding: flecks of rice) flecks
 on windowpanes where
 a branchlet taps (a witch's claw)
 rust red in rain now.
 O lovely failing of the light
 that opens our pupils as sunlight never does
 admitting

pale sun brown lawn blurred hills dull sky
 this the necessary palette
 bare bones of our time here
 where all days are Sundays
 disguised as work days.

This particular poem reflects a characteristic Updike touch, that of rich and colorful imagery. "Sunglasses," "Idyll," "Styles of Bloom," and "Sunshine on Sandstone" are among the many poems that feature his "Shelleyan love of color" (Doyle 360).

His images frequently capture and isolate "precious moments of beauty, joy, and insight and a sense of enchantment in life's commonplace events" (Doyle 360). His poems dealing with aspects of the natural world are resplendent with these moments of beauty. Updike writes in his poem "The Great Scarf of Birds" of pausing to witness the annual migration of a flock of geese flying southward. The event is common enough, and we've all seen it. But Updike "has, like the masters of the Dutch school, the power to see precisely" (Eisinger 650), and he demonstrates this by describing a far less common sight:

As if out of the Bible
 or science fiction,
 a cloud appeared, a cloud of dots
 like iron filings which a magnet
 underneath the paper undulates.
 It dartingly darkened in spots,
 paled, pulsed, compressed, distended, yet
 held an identity firm: a flock
 of starlings, as much one thing as a rock.
 One will moved above the trees
 the liquid and hesitant drift.

Come nearer, it became less marvellous,
 more legible, and merely huge.

"I never saw so many birds!" my friend
exclaimed.

We returned our eyes to the game.

Later, as Lot's wife must have done,
in a pause of walking, not thinking
of calling down a consequence,
I lazily looked around.

The rise of the fairway above us was tinted,
so evenly tinted I might not have noticed
but that at the rim of the delicate shadow
the starlings were thicker and outline the
flock
as an inkstain in drying pronounces its edges.
The gradual rise of green was vastly covered;
I had thought nothing in nature could be so
broad
but grass.

And as

I watched, one bird,
prompted by accident or will to lead,
ceased resting; and, lifting in a casual
billow,
the flock ascended as a lady's scarf,
transparent, of gray, might be twitched
by one corner, drawn upward and then,

decided against, negligently tossed toward a
 chair:

the southward cloud withdrew into the air.

Long had it been since my heart
 had been lifted as it was by the lifting of
 that

great scarf.

The Hamiltons write in their study of Updike:

One of the principal functions of poetry is to
 break down our stock responses to the world
 around us. This Updike does superlatively
 well, with a sure touch and a wit that is dry
 and yet does not exclude tenderness. He
 reminds us that our eyesight is myopic unless
 it can see earth in the light of heaven.

("Theme and Technique" 80-81)

Through the device of asking a question in the poem
 "Sunflower," Updike not only describes the physical
 flower but in a metaphorical sense asks why the paradox?
 As is often the case with many of his poems, the
 deceptively simple surface contains deeper layers of
 meaning:

Sunflower, of flowers
 the most lonely,
 yardstick of hours,

long-term stander
in empty spaces,
shunner of bowers,
indolent bender
seldom, in only
the sharpest of showers:
tell us, why
is it your face is
a snarl of jet swirls
and gold arrows, a burning
old lion face high
in a cornflower sky,
yet by turning
your head, we find
you wear a girl's
bonnet behind?

Another characteristic of the Updike style is diversity. The range of creative ability we have witnessed throughout his literary career exists just as definitely within his poetry. He is equally at home with sonnets, odes, lyrics, nonsense rhymes, light or blank verse. The twinkling of the lightest of light verse cozies up comfortably with the darker and more pensive poems. The same poet who wrote the light-hearted "Even Egrets Err" and "Some Frenchmen," also produced the somber and contemptive "Seal in Nature" and "The Grief

of Cafeterias." The range of moods portrayed in his poems is as varied as there are moods to draw upon.

Diversity also resides in his choice of poetic forms. In "Business Acquaintances" for instance, we read a quatrain in iambic hexameter with an uncomplicated rhyme scheme:

They intimately know just how our fortune lies
And share the murmured code of mutual enterprise,
So when we meet at parties, like lovers out of bed,
We blush to know that nothing real is being said.

But in "Midpoint," however, no such simplicity is encountered. This piece covers over forty-three pages and contains a variety of poetic forms as well as photographic and typographic images. Ranging even further, in Facing Nature Updike uses the form of an ode to describe a multitude of natural processes, seven to be exact. Evaporation, rot, growth, fragmentation, entropy, crystallization, and healing are described in a way that reveals careful attention and understanding of the workings of the poetic form as well as the natural processes described.

Another distinguishing mark of Updike's poetry is accessibility. Elizabeth Matson labels him "a readable modern poet" in that he so frequently writes on subjects familiar to us all (157). "There is," Updike insists, "a great deal to be said about almost anything. Everything

can be as interesting as every other thing. An old milk carton is worth a rose; a trolley car has as much right to be there in terms of esthetics, as a tree" (Howard 74C). There aren't poems about milk cartons and trolley cars, but there are poems about watches, waterbeds and the wash hanging out to dry, as well as bird baths, ice boxes, and vacuum cleaners. As Don Greiner says, Updike has "an ability to see magic in the mundane" (6).

Experiences such as marriage, having lovers, parenting, traveling, even the dying of family pets all find their way into Updike's poems. Because these experiences are common to many of us, we feel a sort of validation when we read poems like "Living With a Wife" or "Planting Trees." Patrick Callahan in his review of Telephone Poles writes what could be aptly applied to nearly all of Updike's poetry:

[I]t is a pleasure to experience a poet who feels obliged neither to avant-garde his readers to death nor to choke them in metaphysics. Updike's Telephone Poles suggests by its title the kind of book it is, one that finds adequate fun and value in the unglamorous, and remains content with that.

(364)

But the selection of simple subjects does not prevent the poet from saying more than we read on the surface.

Consider "Omega":

This little lightweight manacle whereby
 My wrist is linked to flux and feels time fly,
 This constant bracelet with so meek a jewel
 Shall prove at last implacable and cruel
 And like a noose jerk taut, and hold me still,
 And add me to the unseen trapper's kill.

He obviously speaks about more than the function of this brandname watch to tell time. He quickly moves into a view of how the clutch of time grasps and holds him. And in his poem "Natural Question," he poses indeed a natural and curious query. Why are ants needed to execute the necessary and final stage to produce the blooming of a peony? Updike employs humor to ask the cosmic question:

What rich joke does
 the comically spherical peony bud--
 like the big button on a gong striker--
 hold, that black ants
 crawl all over its tie-dyed tightness,
 as if to tickle it forth?

This echoes a point made in Time a year prior to the publication of Midpoint, that his poems often "make their point comically rather than gravely, even when, as in three little quatrains called 'Bestiary,' he comments on

something as complex as natural man's unnatural rationality" ("View" 72).

Another facet of the Updike style is his voice. The autobiographical strain that continually surfaces in his fiction is readily apparent in several poems. In those poems that deal with relationships and the gains and losses that come from complications, Updike the Poet steps back and we hear, read, and see Updike the Man. His voice is genuine and truthful and we find little reason to doubt what he's letting us in on. In "No More Access to Her Underpants," we can easily believe that Updike was indeed rebuffed at a party by an ex-lover. "My Children at The Dump" begins "The day before divorce, I take my children / on this excursion" and by the time the piece is finished, we witness some of his pain at the loss of a previous life. A garbage dump perhaps is a location that begs for a bleak review of once happier times that are now, in a sense, discarded, but somehow we again believe Updike really did take his four children on such an outing.

Not all the more personal poems are sad, morose, or full of pain. Many express the humor and delight Updike finds with the world. "In Extremis" is a poem that playfully describes Updike's relationship with his toes:

I saw my toes the other day.

I hadn't looked at them for months.
 Indeed, they might have passed away.
 And yet they were my best friends once.

When I was small, I knew them well.
 I counted on them up to ten
 And put them in my mouth to tell
 The larger from the lesser. Then

I loved them better than my ears,
 My elbows, adenoids, and heart.
 But with the swelling of the years
 We drifted, toes and I, apart.

Now, gnarled and pale, each said, j'accuse!--
 I hid them quickly in my shoes.

And in a series poem written for his young son David, Updike observes "A Cheerful Alphabet of Pleasant Objects." We are given twenty-six short observations on topics ranging from apples to zeppelins. These lessons for his son are written to instruct and to amuse. One of the more engaging poems is "Jack," where there are twenty-two different meanings of this simple word:

A card, a toy, a hoist,
 a flag, a stay, a fruit,
 a sailor, John, a pot,
 a rabbit, knife, and boot;

o'-lantern, in-the-box
or -pulpit, Ketch, a daw,
a-dandy, of-all-trades,
anapes, an ass, a straw.

Obviously John Updike is more than a casual poet trying his hand out on a poem here and there. The body of poetry collected in the five volumes published thus far reflect a serious and steady artistic contribution by a multitalented writer. Despite the fact that Updike's literary reputation originated primarily from his fiction, the poetry deserves recognition in its own right.

CHAPTER III

THE POEMS

The poetry that Updike has assembled in these five volumes spans roughly forty years of his writing life. As with any writer who strives for perfection or at least improvement in the craft of writing, Updike makes some clear gains with each volume. The youthful playing in The Carpentered Hen is increasingly replaced with thoughtful seriousness in the next two volumes, Telephone Poles and Midpoint. Although Tossing and Turning contains perhaps the largest gathering of pensive, bleak poems, a hint of lightness is included. The poet doesn't quite come full circle with his last volume, Facing Nature, but there is a good strong measure of fun and high spirits appearing once again.

A maturity in voice is gained with each succeeding volume, as is a maturity in the forms used. Much of the earlier work is dependent upon regular rhyme and established forms; blank verse becomes the stronger form in the later poetry. What remains consistent throughout the poetry is Updike's diversity in subjects, moods, voice, and theme. This diversity is readily apparent when one takes an overview of the more than three hundred poems.

For a more focused approach in this paper, these poems have been grouped into six categories: Seven New Ways of Looking at the Moon and More; Locations; Glimpses of Nature; Reflections of the Concrete and Abstract; Home and the Heart; and, lastly, The Sure-Footed Blithe Spirit. The first five categories are primarily subject bound; the sixth grouping contains most of Updike's light verse. These special poems defied all attempts of a subject-by-subject placement, insisting instead that a more natural category would simply be one determined by the characteristics of the genre itself.

Seven New Ways of Looking at the Moon and More. The twelve poems that comprise this collection of scientific observations is the smallest of the six categories, but it is by no means the least significant. Updike's fascination with science and its mysterious workings is a relatively new direction in his poetry, as evidenced by the fact that eight of these twelve pieces are published in the most recent book of poems, Facing Nature.

Seven of the poems are lengthy odes written to illuminate and recognize seven natural processes. As he carefully and accurately details each process in its scientific realm, Updike manages at the same time to intertwine personal experience. In "Ode to Healing," for example, he begins with: "A scab / is a beautiful

thing--a coin / the body has minted, with an invisible motto: / In God We Trust." Even while we sleep, the body's healing process is in action and "works at mending the damage that we do." Updike is comfortable using the vocabulary appropriate to his subject:

That headless Ahab the conscious mind
 drives our thin-skinned hull onto the shoals;
 a million brilliant microscopic engineers below
 shore up the wound with platelets,
 lay down the hardening threads of fibrin,
 send in the lymphocytes, and supervise
 those cheery swabs, the macrophages, in their
 clean-up.

Break a bone, and fibroblasts
 knit tight the blastema in days.

Catch a cold, and the fervid armies
 swarm to blanket our discomfort in sleep.

Not only is healing given homage in these odes, but so are the processes of evaporation, fragmentation, rot, growth, entropy, and crystallization.

The other poem from Facing Nature is "The Moons of Jupiter," a lengthy tribute to Callisto, Ganymede, Europa, and Io. Each moon is described: the icy realms of Callisto and Ganymede; the smoothness of Europa, the molten disruptions of Io. Updike's approach to Jupiter's moons is markedly different than the voice he uses in

"Skyey Developments," a poem appearing in Tossing and Turning. This is a cheerful piece, informing readers of the latest findings of astronomers. It begins:

The clouds within the Milky Way
May well be diamonds, proudly say
Astronomers at U. of C.
The atmospheres of two or three
"Cool stars" could concentrate and freeze
More ice than winks at Tiffany's.

"Cosmic Gall," published in Telephone Poles, is similar to "Skyey Developments" in tone and rhythm; in fact both poems could be classified as light verse. Updike uses a device in this poem that frequently marks his light verse, that of citing his source of inspiration to introduce the poem. In this case, M.A. Ruderman and A.H. Rosenfeld from American Scientist:

Every second, hundreds of billions of these
neutrinos pass through each square inch of our
bodies, coming from above during the day and
from below at night, when the sun is shining on
the other side of the earth!

Followed by:

Neutrinos, they are very small.
They have no charge and have no mass
And do not interact at all.
The earth is just a silly ball

To them, through which they simply pass,
 Like dustmaids down a drafty hall
 Or photons through a sheet of glass.
 They snub the most exquisite gas,
 Ignore the most substantial wall,
 Cold-shoulder steel and sounding brass,
 Insult the stallion in his stall,
 And, scorning barriers of class,
 Infiltrate you and me! Like tall
 And painless guillotines, they fall
 Down through our heads into the grass.
 At night, they enter at Nepal
 And pierce the lover and the lass
 From underneath the bed--you
 Call it wonderful; I call it crass.

"Seven New Ways of Looking at the Moon" is
 reminiscent of Wallace Stevens' 1917 poem, "Thirteen Ways
 of Looking at a Blackbird." The poems are similar in
 title and design--short statements about the topic at
 hand, but that is about all they share. Updike's work
 blasts a pop sort of tone throughout:

Man, am I sick
 of the moon.

We've turned it into one big television screen,
 one more littered campsite,
 one more high school yearbook

signed, "Lots of luck,
Richard Nixon."

Stevens' work, however, has a more studied and serious melody:

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird. (Sanders 135)

Updike frequently uses humor as a backdrop for a serious point or to raise a philosophical question, and "Seven New Ways" is no exception. He speaks of the astronauts, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldren:

I loved the way they ran,
like bear-foot ghosts let out of school to say
that Death is probably O.K.
if all it means is being in the sky.
Which answers why.

Locations. If you group the poems Updike has written about places, you have a sort of traveler's guide to locations stretching from Iowa to Leningrad. These don't just give a tourist's view of a locale, but rather, serve as a backdrop for the poet's message, commentary, or musing.

Updike is not an armchair poet. He has traveled throughout the world. Poems such as "B.W.I.," "Azores," "Island Sun," "Antigua," "Poisoned in Nassau," and

"Raining in Magens Bay" are reflective of the time he has spent vacationing at these islands, or as he explains in the essay, "Personal History," these locales were used as sources of sun to help conquer his longstanding battle with psoriasis.

The more northerly climes provided other kinds of inspiration. "Room 28" was a very early piece that Updike produced after his arrival in England fresh from his Harvard graduation. The room described is in the National Portrait Gallery in London, a room full of the likenesses of Lord Byron, Sir James Frazer, Kipling, Conrad, and Henry James. After describing the portraits he's viewed, he makes his point:

Brave room! Where are they now? In college courses,
Perused in inferior light, then laid
On library tables.

Fair knights mismounted on empirical horses,
Flagbearers for a tattered heraldy
of labels

Their universe did not deserve their views. They fade
In pale sun, placed in neither century.

The tone and intent in Updike's other, later, London poem, "Minority Report" is indicative of his development as a poet. This time he is not a poor, newly married young man, but rather a successful writer. He has the trappings of increased wealth: a new Citroen,

English suits, a room overlooking Regent's Park. Updike goes beyond himself in this poem and exclaims vibrant praise for America, "beloved land . . . the only land."

In a series of five poems written in regular meter, rhyme, and form, Updike writes of the cities of Russia. Calling the series "Postcards from Soviet Cities," he includes Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Tbilisi, and Yerevan. In each he captures the essence of what he feels characterizes that particular locale, much like a postcard's quick fix.

Although there are several poems that trace travels to countries other than Russia and Spain, one in particular stands in contrast if in nothing more than the underlying tone of the poet. "Pompeii" is a particularly harsh poem. Updike refers to the people of that lava-encased time as "installments of flesh in slots of stone." Given that many of his poems celebrate the sensual nature of man, or at least his own sensual nature, his judgmental tone is startling. He says "there is little to admire but the fact / of preservation, and the plumbing." This poem is not one of admiration for the sensual delights of man when he so graphically tells how "lunching gluttons found / their sturgeon mouths hot-stuffed with screaming ash."

Nothing quite so brutal is found in his poems of America. From the poet's treatment of this country's

cities and states, we can assume he has a strong sense of national pride. Poems centered in the eastern part of the country number four-fold greater than those focused in either the center or the far West. This may stand to reason simply because Updike has lived nearly his entire life in either Pennsylvania or Massachusetts.

Three poems out of this group of twelve American-based descriptions provide a balanced view of the east, mid and western regions. In "Vermont," for example, Updike speaks of where "green is king," and of "ski tows / And shy cows / [that] Alone pin the ragged slopes to the earth / of profitable worth." He suggests there is a downside to this idyllic beauty, an invasion of sorts:

Hawks, professors,
 And summering ministers
 Roost on the mountainsides of poverty
 And sniff the poetry.

"Iowa" is a fine example of some of Updike's more rich and vivid imagery:

White barns this morning match the trees
 whitewashed by fog that tiptoed in
 among the little hills and froze.
 Was all land once so innocent?
 Did all our country uncles come to rest
 on such long porches fortified

by moats of lawn where fireflies and dew
compounded the smoke of their summer cigars?

Those fireflies! From gloomy aisles of corn,
from lakeside groves the lanterns come.

This winter holds them in it like a jar--
contours of ripeness cast in frost
like old lawn furniture of iron,
our fruited plain as virgin as the moon.

And then we come to "L.A.," a city that has a population
far greater than the combined states of Vermont and Iowa.
This poem offers a startling contrast to Iowa in
emotional response and imagery. Clearly, the poet's
sense of beauty and repose is not defined by his
description of Los Angeles:

Lo, at its center one can find oneself
atop a paved and windy hill, with weeds
taller than men on one side and on the other
a freeway thundering a canyon's depth below.
New buildings in all mirror-styles of blankness
are being assembled by darkish people while
the tan-bricked business blocks that Harold
Lloyd
teetered upon crouch low, in shade, turned
slum.

The lone pedestrian stares, scooped at by
space.

The palms are isolate, like psychopaths.
Conquistadorial fevers reminisce
in the adobe band of smog across the sky,
its bell of blue a promise that lured too many
to this waste of angels, of ever-widening gaps.

Glimpses of Nature. The thirty-five poems in this section are varied and include observations of not only seasonal changes and sunflowers, but also shadows and rats. Several poems have the ocean as their starting point. Three pieces specifically pose direct questions about nature: How can nature be two things at once? How can life come without pain? What's the secret that nature keeps from us?

In "Sunflower," for example, Updike presents a rich physical description of this flower, "the most lonely, / yardstick of hours, / longterm stander / in empty spaces" in the first half of the poem, and then asks his question in the second half. The fierceness of a beast's face "a snarl of jet swirls / and gold arrows, a burning / old lion face" is instantly disarmed by a mere turning that offers an unlikely but yet appropriate view of a sunflower. In this unanswered question, Updike points out a paradox of nature.

The first line in "Query" demands an answer:

"Pear tree, why blossom?" This question could be idle curiosity, or could be asking "why are you bothering to do this?" The initial why is then expanded with a second why, and this one cues us to the tone of the poem: "Why push this hard glitter / of life from your corpse?" This is obviously no simple musing. Push, hard glitter, and corpse lend serious weight to the first stanza. The second stanza adds even more weight to the press:

Headless and hollow,
 each major limb broken
 by old storm or snowfall,
 you startle the spring.

But the poem turns upward on this last line reaching for some hint of life. Unexpected growth from a tree battered by the hardness of weather surprises even the season of spring. Updike goes on:

Doesn't it hurt?
 Your petals say not,
 froth from your shell
 like laughter, like breath.

The poet remains unconvinced in the final stanza of the poem:

But (your branchlets spew up
 in an agony's
 spoutings) it must.

The third of these poems questioning nature is appropriately entitled "Natural Question." What is this secret that nature keeps from us? What's the joke that prompts peonies to beckon ants to tickle out an answer? Updike's ability to use sound to create a sense of movement is evident in the final two lines of this poem. The alliteration in "tie-dyed tightness" and "tickle" works at building a tension that is delightfully released at the end of the poem with a single word, "forth."

The greatest proportion of poems in this section of glimpses of nature are pieces focusing on seasons and seasonal changes. The voice of the poet is generally one of detached observer rather than participant, the one exception being "Hoeing." In this work poem, Updike praises the labor of hoeing weeds. Describing it as a "simple, stupid, and useful wonder," he sallies forth with the remark: "there is no knowing / how many souls have been formed by this simple exercise." Perhaps the poet's concern for "the younger generation" being "deprived / of the pleasures of hoeing" can be better understood as he describes not just the physical act of hoeing but the larger picture, the continued process of growth:

The dry earth like a great scab breaks,
 revealing
 moist--dark loam--

the pea-root's home,
 a fertile wound perpetually healing.

How neatly the green weeds go under!

The blade chops the earth new.

By not witnessing this ongoing process, we miss one of nature's lessons.

Rather than the directions for planting and harvesting a usual spring crop, Updike gives us information on "Planting a Mailbox." The iambic pentameter with an abab rhyme scheme makes this poem one of smooth reading. The adherence to a regular form puts this poem into a comfortable framework and the poet sounds as if he worked for Mother Earth News:

Prepare the ground when maple buds have burst

And when the daytime moon is sliced so thin

His fibers drink blue sky with litmus thirst.

This moment come, begin.

The site should be within an easy walk,

Beside a road, in stony earth. Your strength

Dictates how deep you delve. The seedling's
 stalk

Should show three feet of length.

Don't harrow, weed, or water; just apply

A little gravel. Sun and motor fumes

Perform the miracle: in late July,

A young post office blooms.

Four poems center on praising the splendor of spring. The strength of "Spring Song" is in its brief but rich imagery and in the music of the words:

The fiddlehead ferns down by our pond
stand like the stems of violins
the worms are playing beneath the moss.

Last autumn's leaves are pierced by shoots
that turn from sickly-pale to green.

All growth's a slave, and rot is boss.

"Touch of Spring" is another poem where the sounds of words, especially the alliterative w's, l's, and s's create patterns of movement. The first line is one of motion emphasized by the assonance of thin, wind, winds, off, and water. The second line stops any movement with the harder sounds of lies, locked, dead, snow. The poem turns on the third line where the sun is introduced. The sun unlocks growth and even under the yew hedge some green is found. The poem finishes with an image of yet another sign of life, flesh-pink wood:

Thin wind winds off the water,
earth lies locked in dead snow,
but sun slants in under the yew hedge,
and the ground there is bare,

with some green blades there,
 and my cat knows,
 sharpening her claws on the flesh-pink wood.

"Melting" activates the earth for the eventual "Styles of Bloom." The first poem speaks of the process of snow melting to make room for Proserpine, or Persephone, the herald of spring. And with spring's arrival in "Style of Bloom," forsythia, dogwood, lilac, and bridal wreath display their individual flowering patterns.

There is a sense of movement in both poems. In the first stanza of "Melting," the sun does what is expected, he "burns." The result in the rest of the poem is an unleashing of water in "gutters, sewers, rivulets." The moisture "glistens / drips, purls" and "round-mouthed drains, the square-mouthed grates / take, and they take; down tunnels runs." In "Styles of Bloom," the movement isn't so much one of steady direction but rather an all at once bursting of blossoms and color. "One sudden week," the poem begins, and then the "forsythia / shouts out."

Imagery reliant on color is strong in "Styles of Bloom": lilacs, greens, lavenders, yellows, and shades of white are all spring colors. Other words help create this sense of freshness and light: float, melting flakes, spring sun, dewy, fragile suds, and drenched. These

combine with the rhythm of the poem to produce what appears initially to be an homage to a facet of the natural world. But the tone of the poem takes a curious shift in the last stanza that suggests all is not well despite the profusion of blossoming. Is such production a problem? The poet seems to think so:

White as virtue is white, plain
as truth is plain, the bushes can't wait
to shed their fat bundles of sequins.
Burdensome summer has come.

Two more poems in this section seem to almost be "look at this" poems. Both are simply interesting thoughts and images captured by the design of a few words.

Sunday Rain

The window screen
is trying to do
its crossword puzzle
but appears to know
only vertical words.

Late January

The elms' silhouettes
again relent,
leafless but furred

with the promise of leaves,
 dull red in a sky dull yellow
 with the threat of snow.

That blur, verging on growth:
 Time's sharp edge is slitting
 another envelope.

"Maples in a Spruce Forest," "Calendar," and "The Short Days" are the last of the seasonal works. All three are four stanza poems with varied but controlled patterns of end rhymes. The first of these is a rather gloomy description of how maples are starved for light and growth in a spruce forest, the "maturity of sullen spruce / will murder these deciduous." An end-of-summer poem, "Calendar," speaks of the subtle shifting that nature goes through in readying herself for winter. Updike writes of the role the sun plays in the seasons:

How the seasons blend
 So seeming still,
 summer is fettered
 to a solar will.

which never rests.
 The slanting ray
 ignites migration
 within the jay

and plans for nests
 are hatching when
 the northern nation
 looks white to men.

Winter has arrived in "The Short Days," where the sun also controls the movement of time. "Like some great father," Updike writes of the sun, "Whose children crack the dawn with play, / The sun retains a heavy head / Behind the hill, and stalls the day."

Rats, mosquitoes, beetles, and earthworms are hardly the stuff of pretty poems, but Updike doesn't turn away from observations of these lower life forms.

Suzanne Uphaus has commented that "Updike's descriptive power is based on a skillful use of particular detail and an unerring sense of rhythm," (1) and in these next four poems we can easily see the rhythm and the eloquence of expression.

The first line of "Mosquito" invades us with an onomatopoeic sense of the pest: "On the fine wire of her whine she walked." The speaker's metaphorical language comes into play in this first stanza as he sets up the pattern of water imagery. He describes himself as a "fragrant lake of blood," "a reservoir, a lavish field of food." And into this pool of life-giving liquid the mosquito "dropped anchor." The water metaphor continues into the next stanza where "This lover pinned in the

feast of my flesh" is "stuck, / Engrossed in the gross rivers of myself." The metaphor is then dropped once the mosquito is dead. In the final stanza the pest is no more than "a fleck of fluff upon the sheet."

This poem has regular form and rhyme, and the rhythm inherent in the iambic pentameter makes it easy to read. The sing-song effect of such regularity however, doesn't occur in "Mosquito," partly due to the counterpoint created by enjambment and caesura.

"Earthworm" is similar to "Mosquito" in that it has regularity in form and rhyme. In working with this poem one has a natural inclination to read it in a monotone. The pattern is too entrenched and there is nothing here that works against it. As for arriving at meaning, the message can be simple: God is as present in the heavens as He is in the earth.

The tone of "Rats" is an uneasy, uncomfortable one if we are to give credence to Updike's message. He places people in close proximity to rats both literally and figuratively. The poem opens with a direct statement: "A house has rotten places." Visual images in this first stanza are strong as the unsavory "rotten places" are catalogued. A second direct statement follows in the next stanza: "Here they live." In this second half of the poem, the paths of rats and the paths of man are paralleled. One distinction is made, however,

that separates rats from people. We "pretend we're clean and all alone."

The last of these lower creature poems, entitled "Tropical Beetles," is a more delightful sort of poem in which Updike shows his fascination with the curiosities of these insects. A nice rhythm moves throughout this piece with a humorously ironic turn in the last two lines:

Composed of horny, jagged blacks
 Yet quite unformidable,
 They flip themselves upon their backs
 And die beneath the table.

The Temperate wasp, with pointed moan,
 Flies straightway to the apple;
 But bugs inside the Tropic Zone
 With idle fancies grapple.

They hurl themselves past window sills
 And labor through a hundred
 Ecstatic, crackling, whirring spills--
 For what, I've often wondered.

They seek the light--it stirs their stark,
 Ill-lit imaginations--
 And win, when stepped on in the dark,
 Disgusted exclamations.

Several poems have the ocean as a common base. This is not surprising as much of Updike's adult life has been spent near the ocean. The lightest of the ocean poems is "Winter Ocean," where in four short rhymed lines, Updike has given us at least eight descriptors of the winter water:

Many-maned scud-thumper, tub
of male whales, maker of worn wood, shrub-
ruster, sky-mocker, rave!
portly pusher of waves, wind-slave.

There is melody and force in this quatrain, and it begs for a reading accompanied by background sounds of waves crashing against a shoreline.

The process of netting blue crabs for a meal is described in "Crab Crack." The design of the poem works well with the observations written in a melodic near-prose style. But this poem isn't simply about catching and eating crabs. The poet also reflects on the responsibilities we incur by our taking from life. Everything rests on the word if:

If when we die, we're dead,
then the world is ours like gaudy grain
to be reaped while we're here, without guilt.
If not, then an ominous duty to feel
with the mite and the dragon is ours,
and a burden in being.

Seals, sand dollars, and seagulls all figure into Updike's poems. In "Seal in Nature," a physical description is overlaid with comparisons to the sculptures of Brancusi, Noguchi, and Arp. The second stanza positions the seal in nature in the present and in milleniums past.

The symbolic value of a coin is stressed throughout the three stanza poem, "Sand Dollar." Despite the massive force of waves and tides, these rather fragile sea creatures manage to endure long enough to give record of life, even if only by means of their shells.

One of Updike's best descriptive poems is "Seagulls." In this piece he details the physical properties of the gull and then likens him to a desk clerk:

Are they intelligent?

We imagine so, because they are ugly.

The sardonic one-eyed profile, slightly cross,

the narrow, ectomorphic head, badly combed,

the wide and nervous and well-muscled rump

all suggest deskwork: shipping rates

by day, Schopenhauer

by night, and endless coffee.

The metaphoric language that marks the poet's style is readily apparent as he draws an arresting comparison of gulls and people:

the gulls stand around in the dimpled sand
 like those melancholy European crowds
 that gather in cobbled public squares in the
 wake
 of assassinations and invasions,
 heads cocked to hear the latest radio reports.

The final poems in this nature category are varied in their tone, subject, design, and intent. Both "Wind" and "Sunshine on Sandstone" carry religious overtones, a trait common in Updike's poetry and fiction. "If God has any voice it is the wind" begins the haunting and restless "Wind." The other poem is by contrast static, a description-oriented writing, almost a Reader's Digest "Picturesque Speech" piece:

Sunshine on Sandstone
 Golden photon white on granulated red
 makes brown,
 wall-broad in this instance,
 house-high:
 splendiferous surface, the stucco
 worn bare
 here and there, stones nicked, cracked,

flecked, marked,
 scored warmly, worn considerably, having
 wept rust,
 borne whitewash, mortar, known weather,
 these spots
 seem meditating irregularities:
 Lord's thoughts.

Patrick Murphy wrote in Horizon that "there is in John Updike's writing the kind of visceral understanding that can whiten a world to being in a flicker of a phrase or in a sudden crackle of speech" (84). The first line in "Penumbrae" illuminates a world not usually thought of: "The shadows have their seasons, too." The tone of this poem is quiet and somber, somewhat like the shadows described. Updike's world of shadows include the "feathery web the budding maples / cast down upon the sullen lawn," the darkness "a globe of gnats" can create, and the Oriental rug-like "thinning shade of autumn." "Shadows on snow look blue" he says, and even the thinnest objects can cast shadows, "each blade of grass projects another / opposite the sun."

A butterfly and an herb--what do they have in common? In "The Fritillary," Updike credits them with the same name and shared physical traits. There is in this poem a quiet delight in observing

When one lights on the other it is very

Nice:

The spotted wings and the spotted petals, both
 spelled from the Latin fritillus [dice],

Nod together

Toward a center

Where a mirror

Might be imagined.

They are tangent,

Self to self, the same

Within a single name.

The miracle has occurred.

Dr. Samuel Johnson in 1775 provided the text for yet another Updike nature poem. "The Menagerie at Versailles in 1775" is, according to Updike, recorded in Boswell's Life. Updike has taken the liberty of slightly modifying Johnson's prose and punctuation to fashion a rather interesting free verse poem:

Cygnets dark; their black feet;

on the ground; tame.

Halcyons, or gulls.

Stag and hind, small.

Aviary, very large: the net, wire.

Black stag of China, small.

Rhinoceros, the horn broken

and pared away, which, I suppose,

If the transmigration of a soul takes place into a rational being, it simply becomes the soul of that body. But if the soul migrates into a brute beast, it follows the body outside as a guardian spirit follows a man.

Updike's poem:

Each bird is chased by another bird,
Each worm by a shadow worm,
Much as each thing has a word
Guarding its spirit and form.

These are the rational souls;
Unable to enter, they float
Behind the brutes, the fishes and fowls,
As a dory is dragged by a boat.

This accounts for the animal world--
Its qualms and skittering fears--
For each squirrel feels a rational squirrel
Pressing on its ears.

Reflections of The Concrete and The Abstract. Within the wide range of subjects that fall under the umbrella of this grouping of poems, Updike's mark encompasses topics from the glasses he must wear, boils, and the Susan B. Anthony dollar, to observing the insane at Massachusetts Mental Health to the functions of cameras. Any subject

can serve. Even the traditional opening of a box of Cheerios to discover the latest advertiser's gimmick deserves Updike's notice. In "On The Inclusion of Miniature Dinosaurs in Breakfast Cereal Boxes" there is tongue-in-cheek humor. The poet refers to himself as a "post-historic herbivore . . . looking for a bite," and he finds not just bites in Sugar Pops, Shredded Wheat and Raisin Bran, but Tyrannosaurus rex, Triceratops, Brontosaurus, and Iguanodon as well. The poem very neatly completes its turn in the last stanza:

Too unawake to dwell upon
A model of Iguanodon,
I hide within the Raisin Bran;
And thus begins the dawn of Man.

Updike's impish humor can incorporate a cosmic sense of the beginning of the universe as well as the dawning of his own work day.

The more than fifty poems that make up this section are among the best Updike has to offer. His sense of the worth of commonplace objects and their often underestimated significance in our lives is evidenced again and again in such pieces as "An Old-Fashioned Lightning Rod," "Telephone Poles," and "A Bicycle Chain."

As the poet begins "Telephone Poles," for example, he eloquently states: "They have been with us a long time / They will outlast the elms." From that point

forward, the everyday telephone pole that lines our city streets and country highways becomes more than a simple conveyance of communication. Updike describes them as mythological creatures, "a Gorgon's head / which, seized right / could stun us to stone." Despite this fearsome picture of the power of telephone poles, Updike pulls up and reminds us gently, "Yet they are ours. We made them." He remarks that we've outdone nature: "What other tree can you climb where the birds' twitter, / Unscrambled, is English?" "True," he says, "their shade is negligible," but we must sacrifice something to gain their benefits. The poem closes with an almost bittersweet realization. We are spared the dropping of leaves every fall with these created trees of ours, but at a cost: "These giants are more constant than evergreens / By never being green."

A companion piece to this poem is "Why The Telephone Wires Dip and The Poles Are Cracked and Crooked." This particular poem was published by Updike during his high school years and later found its way into The Carpentered Hen.

The old men say
 young men in gray
 hung this thread across our plains
 acres and acres ago.

But we, the enlightened, know
 in point of fact it's what remains
 of the flight of a marvellous crow
 no one saw:
 Each pole, a caw.

Obviously there has been some maturing of the poet's voice and the treatment of the subject, but that Updike trademark of observing the concrete with careful detail holds strong.

Another pair of poems that reflect not only the musing of the poet, but also his shift in attitude toward the subject are the 1963 "Sonic Boom" and the 1969 "Air Show." In the earlier poem, Updike has a nonchalant view of "some pilot we equip, / Giving the speed of sound the slip, / Has cracked the air like a penny whip." Although he refers to sonic boom as the "Thump of Doom," we are casually reassured that "Our world seems much too tame to die. / And if it does, with one more pop, / I shan't look up to see it drop." "Air Show," in contrast, has left behind a more simple form, rhyme, and subject treatment, and instead embraces a stronger structure and more forceful language to describe the excesses spent on Air Force planes. The pilot of these planes is not out there cracking penny whips. Says the poet:

Caressing curves of wind, the metal smiles
 And beds the pilot down in sheets of dials.

Eggheaded, strapped, and sucking gas, he roars
 To frozen heights all other life abhors,
 Where, having left his dirty sound behind,
 In pure blue he becomes pure will and mind.

The mood is obviously different in these two pieces
 commenting on the development of air space technology.

"Relax . . . our world is far from frightening," he
 reassures us in "Sonic Boom." But in "Air Show," he
 writes with a kind of horrified awe:

In shapes that grow organic and bizarre
 Our Air Force ramifies the forms of war,

 We marvel at our own extravagance:
 No mogul's wasteful lust was half so wide
 And deep as this democracy's quick pride.

In this section of observational poems, not all
 focus on the questionable spending of government monies
 in the name of defense or other serious subjects. On a
 closer and more personal note, there are poems like
 "Shaving Mirror," "Dutch Cleanser," "Bendix," and "Movie
 House."

"Shaving Mirror" makes ample use of quotes from
Gulliver's Travels as the poet examines his face in a
 mirror. Despite Gulliver's complaints of "the pores, the
 follicles . . . so varified with spots, pimples, and
 freckles / that nothing could appear more nauseous,"

Updike muses that "hell, here we are, bad clay" and in cheerful resignation describes his own face as if it were a foreign planet:

Draw closer, visitor; these teeth
trumpet their craters, my lips are shores,
my eyes bloody lakes, the lashes alarming,
my whiskers like leafless trees--there is life!

Updike's own view as he gazes in a mirror is clearly a more positive one than that of Gulliver. He blithely dismisses Gulliver's opinion as "hard words." "I say," our modern giant writes, "the more there is / of me, the more there is to love."

"Dutch Cleanser" first describes the scouring powder Updike's grandmother used when he was a small child: ". . . I was frightened of the lady on the can. / Why was she carrying a stick? / Why couldn't we see her face?" Even as an adult, "an aging modern man / estranged, alone, and medium gray," Updike views the cleaning compound with some trepidation: "The lady is still upholding the stick / chasing dirt, and her face / is so angry we dare not see it." The poem doesn't simply end here with this contrast of childhood and adulthood views of a cleaning compound. There is within this poem an insistence that time is responsible for very real changes in Updike, and even in his grandmother, but not in the Dutch cleanser. Perhaps Updike is just musing to

himself that this lady on the can is as relentless as the passing of time: "The dirt she is chasing is ahead of her, / around the can, like a minute hand / the hour hand pushes around."

This poet can tilt his vision ever so slightly and suddenly we have descriptions of the everyday movie theatre, a washing machine, or even new clothes hanging out to dry after a week of rain, taking on mythic proportions.

Some of Updike's poems are simply comfortable observations. In "Food," for example, the poet remarks to us:

It is always there,
 Man's real best friend.
 It never bites back;
 it is already dead.
 It never tells us we are lousy lovers
 or asks us for an interview.

Mush me all up, it says;
Whatever is you, is pure.

Or in "Fever," the poet can hardly wait to tell us "I have brought back a good message from the land of 102 : / God exists." This piece has embedded in it a subtle message for us all. A bout of illness catches Updike unaware and forces him to take stock of his life. If

indeed he did have religious questions (in the poem he claims "I had seriously doubted it [God's existence] before"), the threat on his health brought about some quick reassurance. He concludes "it is a truth long known, / that some secrets are hidden from health."

Updike indulges us with a curious claim in "Exposure." This piece is not without humor as the poet pokes gentle fun at those who believe that "a photograph of a head / Always tells if the person is living or dead." Teasingly, he takes on the persona of one who insists:

Always. I have never known it to fail.

There is something misted in the eyes,
something

pale,

If not in the lips, then in the hair--

It is hard to put your finger on, but there.

A kind of third dimension settles in:

A blur, a kiss of otherness, a milky film.

If, while you hold a snapshot of Aunt Flo,

Her real heart stops, you will know.

Home and the Heart. The fifty pieces in this section plus the extensive "Midpoint" are poems that harken closest to John Updike, the man. In his fiction, Updike

frequently writes about love, lust, families, relationships within and outside of marriage, and without exception his poetry focuses on these same subjects. Many of these poems are plainly autobiographical. Several more have such a clear and strong narrator speaking one easily assumes this voice is Updike's own.

Several of the autobiographical poems focus on his childhood, his parents, grandparents, and growing up in Shillington, Pennsylvania. One of the most nostalgic of these, "The House Growing," makes reference to his father. Updike casts him in the same role as that of George Caldwell, the teacher/centaur, in the 1963 novel The Centaur.

The old house grows, adding rooms of silence.
My grandfather coughing as if to uproot
burdock from his lungs,
my grandmother tapping a ragged path
from duty to duty, and now
my father, prancing and whinnying
to dramatize his battle for the dollar,
pricking himself with pens to start each day--
all silent. The house grows vast.
Its windows take bites of the sky
to feed its flight toward emptiness. The
mantle
restates its curve of molding and undismayed,

the hearthstones fatten on the vanished.

This poem along with "Leaving Church Early" are included in Tossing and Turning, the collection which contains many of Updike's more introspective and serious poems. In "Leaving Church Early," a five-page blank verse poem, Updike uses the family's early exit from Sunday services to serve as a backdrop to pose questions of who they were, what they were hurrying home to, and why. He muses at the end: "We left church early / why? To talk? To love? To eat? To be free / of cant not of our own patenting?" He writes further to his mother, the person he addresses in this poem:

..... You read,
 you write me, Aristotle and Tolstoi
 and claim to be amazed, how much they knew.
 I send you this poem as my piece of the puzzle.
 We know the truth of it, the past, how strange,
 how many corners wouldn't bear describing,
 the "rubbing elbows," how busy we were
 forgiving--
 we had no time, of course, we have no time
 to do all the forgiving that we must do.

In another poem where his mother figures strongly, Updike discusses her gift of a graveyard plot in "Plow Cemetery." He speaks of his history, his relatives, and

his ties to the Pennsylvania community. In the end he concludes:

..... At first,
 I did resent my mother's heavy gift,
 her plot to bring me home; but slowly I
 have come to think, why not? Where else? I
 will
 have been away for fifty years, perhaps,
 but have forever to make my absence up.

My life in time will seal shut like a scar.

Several poems have as their subjects his children and two wives. The most poignant of these is "My Children at the Dump," which begins "The day before divorce, I take my children / on this excursion." The father discourages his children from bringing home goods that have outlived their usefulness. He says,

The seagulls weep; my boys bring back
 bent tractors, hoping what some other child
 once played to death can be revived by them.

Not much can repair broken toys or a doomed marriage. Updike's final lines call to mind the grief, despair, and resignation that people face when a relationship comes to an end:

My daughter brings a naked armless doll,
 Still hopeful in its dirty weathered eyes,
 And I can only tell her, "Love it now."

Love it now, but we can't take it home."

Jacob Korg writes of one of the characteristics of contemporary poetry: it can deal with serious matters in the casual, almost offhand style of conversation. The conversational tone seems to say that the poet assumes no particular prophetic role, does not set himself apart from his reader, but instead adopts an attitude of communicating something ordinary and familiar. When the idea of the poem turns out to be extraordinary, novel or charged with emotion, its effect is subtly increased by contrast with the manner in which it is expressed. (43)

This observation could apply to most of Updike's poetry. Two poems, in particular, come to mind as fine examples of the conversational tone of a man speaking--in this case on the subjects of mortality and infinity. "Long Shadow" is an autumnal poem. Typically autumn is a time of death and dying, but yet in those fleeting days before winter's solid hold on us, Updike believes those days "tell us we shall live forever." In contrast, we have "Upon the Last Day of His Forty-Ninth Year." Here is another seasonal setting, this time in March. This time, however, the poet reflects on the passing of time and the changes that that brings to a person.

Long Shadow

Crossing from a chore as the day
 was packing it in, I saw my long shadow
 walking before me, bearing in the title
 of its thin head autumnal news,
 news broadcast red from the woods to the west,
 the goldleaf woods of shedding branch and days
 drawing in like a purse being cinched,
 the wintry houses sealed and welcoming.

Why do we love them, these last days of
 something
 like summer, of freedom to move in few clothes,
 though frost has flattened the morning grass?
 They tell us we shall live forever. Stretched
 like a rainbow across day's end, my shadow
 makes a path from my feet; I am my path.

Upon The Last Day Of His Forty-Ninth Year
Scratch, scratch, saith the frozen spring
 snow--

not near enough this season or the last,
 but still a skin for skiing on, with care.
 At every shaky turn into the fall line
 one hundred eighty pounds of tired blood
 and innards weakly laced with muscle seek
 to give themselves to gravity and ruin.

My knees, a-tremble with old reflex, resist
and try to find the lazy dancer's step
and pillowed curve my edges flirted with
when I had little children to amaze
and life seemed endlessly flexible. Now,
my heavy body swings to face the valley
and feels the gut pull of steep maturity.

"Marching Through a Novel" is a rare poem in that it focuses on Updike's career as a fiction writer. Most impressive is the poet's attitude toward the subject of his poem, the characters he creates in his novels. The tone is one of affectionate kindness and caring. Updike has a clear and undeniable sense of responsibility toward those he peoples his novels with. With fine metaphoric language, the poet explains what the novelist does on a daily basis.

Each morning my characters
greet me with misty faces
willing, though chilled, to muster
for another day's progress
through the dazzling quicksand,
the marsh of blank paper.
With instant obedience
they change clothes and mannerisms,
drop a speech impediment,

develop a motive backwards
to suit the deed that's done.

They extend skeletal arms
for the handcuffs of contrivance,
slog through docilely
maneuvers of coincidence,

look toward me hopefully,
their general and quartermaster,

for a clearer face, a bigger heart.

I do what I can for them,

but it is not enough.

Forward is my order,

though their bandages unravel

and some have no backbones

and some turn traitor

like heads with two faces

and some fall forgotten

in the trenchwork of loose threads,

poor puffs of cartoon flak.

Forward. Believe me, I love them

though I march them to finish them off.

The publication of the novel Couples in 1968 earned for Updike not only public attention but also the reputation of a writer who could elaborate on the sexual nature of man. Love and lust . . . the celebration and frustration of both have continued to be major topics in

much of Updike's fiction. Notwithstanding, the poetry also has its share of poems devoted to sex and sexuality. Several poems are rife with rich, sexually graphic images. One of the best of these is "Fellatio." Updike expands this sexual act into a metaphor:

It is beautiful to think
that each of these clean secretaries
at night, to please her lover, takes
a fountain into her mouth
and lets her insides, drenched in seed,
flower into landscapes:
meadows sprinkled with baby's breath,
hoarse twiggy woods, birds dipping, a multitude
of skies containing clouds, plowed earth
stinking
of its upturned humus, and small farms each
with a silver silo.

A poem less graphic but yet still metaphoric is "Flirt":

The flirt is an antelope of flame,
igniting the plain
whenever she hesitates.
She kisses my wrist, waits,
and watches the flush of pride
absurdly kindle my eyes.
She talks in riddles,
exposes her middle,

is hard and strange in my arms:

I love her. Her charms

are those of a fine old book with half-cut
pages,

bound in warm plush at her white neck's nape.

Two of Updike's most shocking poems in their sexual bluntness also contain some of his most vivid and rich description. One, entitled "Cunts," has a foreword note stating that the poem was the result of "receiving the Swingers For Life Club Membership Solicitation."

Interspersed throughout the poem are excerpts (one might assume) of the slick advertising copy of the Swingers Life Club. The other poem "Pussy" begins:

Tendrilous cloudlet in nakedness's sheer sky:

welcome mat gathered where the flowing body

forks

and makes known its crux: wave-crest upon the

shoal

where exaltedness founders and foamingly sinks:

bull's-eye where even the absent-minded arrow

home

The following six stanzas continue in descriptive fashion to, in a sense, pay homage to that particular aspect of a woman's anatomy.

Updike is clearly comfortable with sex and sexuality in his writing, and this comfort has naturally

made him a target of attacks by critics and readers. In reference to "Cunts," Updike responded to an interviewer's question about suspending good taste at the risk of appearing ridiculous when writing such a poem:

Well, why avoid the ridiculous? The poem in this collection you must have in mind is meant to be among other things funny, and indeed is based, like many of my light-verse poems, on something that came in the mail. I think 'taste' is a social concept and not an artistic one. I'm willing to show good taste, if I can, in somebody else's living room, but our reading life is too short for a writer to be in any way polite. Since his words enter into another's brain in silence and intimacy, he should be as honest and explicit as we are with ourselves.

(Hugging the Shore 864)

The Sure-Footed Blithe Spirit.

No matter what we do or think we are doing, if our invention [light verse] should sing and appeal to any number of people at all, it must be because it resonates with certain rhythmic pulses already deep in our spirits, stored there in the beginning and capable of being summoned by the right combination of plot,

person, notion, feeling, word, and song.

(Harmon xxviii)

So writes William Harmon in the introductory pages of The Oxford Book of American Light Verse. In this sixth and final category of Updike poetry, we find the poet at his cleverest and most lively. He freely demonstrates his fine ability to play with language and to have fun with ideas, objects, or incidents. Even names offer him the ingredients needed for a sporting good time. A case in point is "The Clan," a short ditty where he pulls together recognition for those folks with a common last name:

Emlyn reads in Dickens' clothes.

Tennessee writes fleshy prose;

William Carlos, bony poems.

Esther swims in hippodromes.

Ted likes hits but hates his fans;

Gluyas draws Americans.

Vaughan pens music, score on score;

Soapy sits as governor.

I trust everybody is

Thankful for the Williamses.

The subject categories that established the previous five sections studied in this paper do not apply here, although certainly nature, romance, science, observations of objects and abstractions, and even

attention to the personal life of the poet are represented in this light verse section. What sets these poems apart is the approach used by Updike. Richard Armour, one of America's foremost writers of light verse, calls it "a type of poetry instead of a distinct art of its own. It may differ considerably from other poetry, but the difference is chiefly in approach or attitude, and then only in degree" (6).

Alice and Kenneth Hamilton write of Updike:

His poetry at its most lighthearted displays his conviction that it is good to make room in our lives for tame creatures and pleasant objects, lest we lose our true humanity. For man the imaginative creature, the nonessential is decidedly essential. (Elements 42)

Updike does indeed make room for the tame creatures and pleasant objects in our lives. Vacuum cleaners, doilies, easy chairs, and letter slots are among the many objects that come under the scrutiny of this observer of the trivia of life. Among the more tame creatures that Updike writes about are the Amish of Pennsylvania. There is a warm tongue-in-cheek humor when he refers to them as "a surly sect."

The Amish are a surly sect.

They paint their bulging barns with hex
Designs, pronounce a dialect

Of Deutsch, inbreed, and wink at sex.

They have no use for buttons, tea,
 Life insurance, cigarettes,
 Churches, liquor, Sea & Ski,
 Public power, or regrets.

Believing motors undivine,
 They bob behind a buggied horse
 From Paradise to Brandywine,
 From Bird-in-Hand to Intercourse.

They think the Devil drives a car
 And wish Jehovah would revoke
 The licensed fools who travel far
 To gaze upon these simple folk.

What distinguishes light verse from other more serious poems? As Armour has said, it is a poetry that differs in its approach. Light verse also has a different purpose, and that purpose primarily is to amuse, to provide pleasure or enjoyment to the reader.

Armour writes:

[L]ight verse is more likely to elicit a slight smile, or merely a pleased sensation inside, than to provoke a guffaw. This is because light verse at its best has subtlety and overtones of meaning rather than complete

obviousness, although it must always be clear.
Like good serious poetry, it is not exhausted
at first reading. (9)

Updike's light verse often elicits that smile. Poems like "Youth's Progress," "Snapshots," "The Amish," "I Missed His Book, But I Read His Name," and "The Newlyweds," are cheery writings and reflect Updike's faith in the importance of humor. He writes in The Carpentered Hen: "High spirits are what Nature endows us with, that we may survive her crushing flux long enough to propagate" (xvii). Richard Armour talks about the writer of light verse as obviously "having a good time" in his or her creative effort, and in this early Updike poem the fun is evident:

Youth's Progress

(Dick Schneider of Wisconsin . . . was elected
"Greek God" for a interfraternity ball.

--Life)

When I was born, my mother taped my ears
So they lay flat. When I had aged ten years,
My teeth were firmly braced and much improved.
Two years went by; my tonsils were removed.

At fourteen, I began to comb my hair
A fancy way. Though nothing much was there,

I shaved my upper lip--next year, my chin.
At seventeen, the freckles left my skin.

Just turned nineteen, a nicely molded lad,
I said goodbye to Sis and Mother; Dad
Drove me to Wisconsin and set me loose.

At twenty-one, I was elected Zeus.

Characteristic of the genre, this poem turns on its final line. In light verse, the joke, or the point is made in a final line or a final stanza or a final word. The fun comes in large part as a surprise, a kind of punch line at the end of a story. Armour writes "light verse almost invariably reaches its end and rises to its climax simultaneously" (80). Another example of this humor coming into its own in the last stanza occurs in "Snapshots."

How good of Mrs. Metz! The blur
Must be your cousin Christopher.

A scenic shot Jim took near Lyme.
Those rocks seemed lovely at the time.

And here's a product of the days
When Jim went through his gnarled-tree phase.

The man behind the man in shorts--
His name is Shorer, Shaw, or Schwartz.

The kids at play. This must be Keith.

Can that be Wilma underneath?

I'd give my life to know why Josh

Sat next to Mrs. McIntosh.

Jim looked so well in formal clothes.

I was much slimmer than this shows.

Yes, Jim and I were so in love.

That hat: what was I thinking of?

This disappointed Mrs. Striker.

I don't know why, it's very like her.

The dog is Skip. He loved to play.

We had to have him put away.

I guess these people are the Wrens.

An insect landed on the lens.

This place is where I was inspired

To--stop me, if your eyes are tired.

This "cartooning in print" as Updike has referred to light verse, occasionally gives us an opportunity to receive a different perspective on a serious subject. The seriousness, however, is cut and blended with a strong measure of sparkling humor. Of course, not all

light verse has this serious intent promoting it.

Rather, as William Harmon says, it

may remind the reader of certain durable features of the American people. The senses of adventure and fun combine with a practical turn of mind to produce works that deflate the hifalutin, debunk the hypocritical, abridge the sesquipedalian, praise the praiseworthy, and even make fun of the stated or implicit ideals of the Republic itself. (xvii)

"Kenneths," "Tome-Thoughts, From The Times," and "The Moderate" are poems that do indeed "deflate the hifalutin." Updike has made his feelings quite clear when it comes to, in this case, the pretentiousness of those literary critics who take it upon themselves to establish what writers "should" have written.

The Moderate

(Frost's space is deeper than Poliakoff's and not as deep as that of Soulages.)

--Patrick Heron in Arts

"Soulages's space is deep and wide--

Beware!" they said. "Beware," they cried,

"The yawning gap, the black abyss

That closes with a dreadful hiss!

"That shallow space by Poliakoff,"
 They added, "is a wretched trough.
 It wrinkles, splinters, shreds, and fades;
 It wouldn't hold the Jack of Spades."

"But where?" I asked, bewildered, lost.
 "Go seek," they said, "the space of Frost;
 It's not too bonny, not too braw--
 The nicest space you ever saw."

I harked, and heard, and here I live,
 Delighted to be relative.

Quite often we are given the original source of inspiration for Updike's writings. The basis for one poem, "Duet, With Muffled Brake Drums," was an ad in The New Yorker. It read: "50 Years Ago Rolls met Royce--a Meeting that made Engineering History." This was, in 1954, Updike's first acceptance by The New Yorker, and it was an auspicious beginning for them both. The New Yorker has been and continues to be the main outlet for Updike poetry.

Duet, With Muffled Brake Drums
 Where grey walks slope through shadows shaped
 like lace
 Down to dimpleproof ponds, a precious place
 Where birds of porcelain sing as with one voice

Two gold and velvet notes--there Rolls met
Royce.

"Hallo," said Rolls. His umber silhouette
Seemed mounted on a blotter brushed when wet
To indicate a park. Beyond, a brown
Line hinted at the profile of The Town.

And Royce, his teeth and creases straight, his
eye

A perfect match for that well-lacquered sky
(Has zenith since, or iris, been so pure?),
Responded, "Pleased to meet you, I am sure."

A graceful pause, then Rolls, the taller,
spake:

"Ah--is there anything you'd care to make?
A day of it? A fourth at bridge? Some tea?"
Royce murmured, "If your afternoon is free,
I'd rather, much, make engineering history."

From a listing in the BBC Radio Times advertising a
program by "V.B. Wigglesworth, F.R.S., Quick Professor of
Biology in the University of Cambridge," Updike
constructs his conception a day in the life of a "Quick
Professor of Biology:"

V.B. Nimble, V.B. Quick

V.B. Wigglesworth wakes at noon,

Washes, shaves, and very soon
Is at the lab; he reads his mail,
Tweaks a tadpole by the tail,
Undoes his coat, removes his hat,
Dips a spider in a vat
Of alkaline, phones the press,
Tells them he is F.R.S.,
Subdivides six protocells,
Kills a rat by ringing bells,
Writes a treatise, edits two
Symposia on "Will Man Do?,"
Gives a lecture, audits three,
Has the Sperm Club in for tea,
Pensions off an aging spore,
Cracks a test tube, takes some pure
Science and applies it, finds
His hat, adjusts it, pulls the blinds,
Instructs the jellyfish to spawn,
And, by one o'clock, is gone.

A third example of a found source generating what Armour would call "poetry written in the spirit of play" (7) is "Courtesy Call." Updike takes the innocently offered advertising from a London tailor's card: "We again thank you for your esteemed order and now wish to advise you that the clothes are awaiting the pleasure of your visit," and has some gentle good fun with it.

My clothes leaped up when I came in;
 My trousers cried, "Oh is it
 Our own, our prince?" and split their pleats
 At the pleasure of my visit.

My jacket tried to dance with joy
 But lacked the legs; it screamed,
 "Though our confusion is deplored,
 Your order is esteemed!"

"Dear clothes," I cooed, "at ease. Down,
 please.

Adjust your warp and weft."
 Said they, "We love you." I: "I know,
 I was advised," and left.

In his book Writing Light Verse Armour says that
 "much of light verse is not funny at all. It may simply
 be gay and lilting: the poet at play with words and
 music" (10). "Even Egrets Err," "Player Piano," "Reel,"
 and "A Song of Paternal Care" are clearly pieces that
 display Updike's sense of play. "Player Piano" begins:

My stick fingers click with a snicker
 As, chuckling, they knuckle the keys;
 Light-footed, my steel feelers flicker
 And pluck from these keys melodies.

We bounce along with the poet as he plunks and jumps and
 snaps out this poem/tune.

Don Greiner makes an important point about Updike's lighter poems. He writes that the "playful surfaces often lead to consideration about language itself. We read, laugh, and conspire with the poet to deny the seriousness which would judge such humor as insignificant" (5). In a poem illustrating the universal language of animals that we Americans take for granted, we discover a slight hitch.

Philological

The British puss demurely mews;

His transatlantic kin meow.

The kine in Minnesota moo;

Not so the gentle Devon cows:

They low,

As every school child ought to know.

Perhaps the idea of a cow mooing (or lowing depending on the country you happen to be in) isn't of much import, but that simple poem can open one to speculating about other such assumptions.

A final poem to look at in this study of Updike's light verse is "Some Frenchmen." Although the 1969 collection Midpoint contained few light verse writings, this piece is representative of the quintessential Updike: strong form, definite rhyme, word play, an attitude of playfulness, gentle humor, and wit.

Some Frenchmen

Monsieur Etienne de Silhouette*

Was slim and uniformly black;

His profile was superb, and yet

He vanished when he turned his back.

Humane and gaunt, precise and tall

Was Docteur J. I. Guillotine;+

He had one tooth, diagonal

And loose, which, when it fell, spelled fin.

Andre Marie Ampere,# a spark,

Would visit other people's homes

And gobble volts until the dark

Was lit by his resisting ohms.

Another type, Daguerre (Louis),&

In silver salts would soak his head,

Expose himself to light, and be

Developed just in time for bed.

*1709-1767

+1738-1814

#1775-1836

&1789-1851

CONCLUSION

Only a fraction of Updike's poetry has been viewed in this paper, but the poems cited reflect traits evident in all his work: diversity in form and content, wit and humor, precision in language, rich imagery, and the ability to focus on the daily dealings of life. The poetry can be a way into Updike's other work, a door through which we can stroll as we sample his offerings. Some critics complain that he is not able to handle the great themes of life in his writing. Updike responds to this charge:

I distrust books involving spectacular people, or spectacular events. Let People or The National Inquirer pander to our taste for the extraordinary; let literature concern itself, as the Gospels do, with the inner lives of hidden men. The collective consciousness that once found itself in the noble must now rest content with the typical. (Hugging the Shore 873-74)

Although his forte clearly is anchored in nonfiction and fiction, Updike has worked in virtually every form of imaginative writing. He's even tried his hand at script writing. Rabbit, Run was originally to be subtitled "A Movie" and while the novel was a smashing

success, the adaptation produced a disastrous movie. James Caan, the actor who played Harry Angstrom, later remarked that "Rabbit, Run wasn't released; it escaped" (Hugging the Shore 850). Other works converted from print to screen, however, have been more successful. The filmed version of a short story "The Music School" holds closely to Updike's writing, and a televised drama of "Too Far To Go" was well received. Currently Updike's 1984 novel, The Witches of Eastwick, is being filmed as a movie.

Will there be a sixth collection of poetry?

Almost certainly. In a speech given in Adelaide, South Australia, in March 1974, Updike remarked that "the wish to make collections, to assemble sets, is surely a deep urge of the human mind in its playful, artistic, aspect" (Picked-Up Pieces 34). He further develops this idea in an interview with Helen Vendler reprinted in Hugging the Shore:

I have tried more than once to give this 'collecting' impulse some place in aesthetic theory. Rhyming words are in a sense a 'set'--in a form like the ballade, a big set. Some of my light verse strings some similar things--French inventors, semi-extinct animals, new developments in particle physics--in a kind of necklace of stanzas, and steps back pleased.

A kindred human urge, I suppose, is toward the exhaustive. We like a feeling of mopping up, of complete fullness. A jingle through the alphabet does this for us, and less obviously a Greek tragedy does also. We are dismissed by the work of art. I am talking as if art still pandered to our hopes or inklings of order. I'm not sure it does, except in this mysterious sense of fullness. In the days when I wrote poems habitually, I would know I had one, the idea of it, when my scalp crawled. When the skin on my head felt tight. My hand would shake and I couldn't write fast enough.

(863-64)

In an age of "serious" novelists and solemn poets, John Updike has dared to show that writing can be fun, that reading can be joyful and that language is one of man's oldest and most beloved toys.

WORKS CITED

PRIMARY SOURCES:

- Updike, John. The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures.
1958. New York: Knopf, 1982.
- . Facing Nature. New York: Knopf, 1985.
- . Hugging the Shore. New York: Knopf, 1983.
- . Midpoint and Other Poems. New York: Knopf, 1969.
- . Telephone Poles and Other Poems. New York: Knopf,
1963.
- . Tossing and Turning. New York: Knopf, 1977.
- . Picked-Up Pieces. New York: Knopf, 1975.

SECONDARY SOURCES:

- "Answers to questions unasked." Times Literary Supplement.
29 June 1970: 104.
- Armour, Richard. Writing Light Verse. Boston: The Writer,
Inc., 1958.
- Bogan, Louise. "Verse." New Yorker 7 March 1959: 169-70.
Booklist 15 April 1958: 470-71.
- Brownjohn, Alan. "Dualities." New Statesman 6 March 1970:
330-32.
- Burgess, Anthony. "Language, Myth, and Mr. Updike."
Commonweal 11 Feb. 1966: 557-59.

- Burns, Richard K. Library Journal 1 Oct. 1963: 3628, 3629.
- Callahan, Patrick. "The Poetry of Imperfection." Prairie Schooner Winter 1965-1966: 364.
- Choice Oct. 1977: 1057.
- Cole, William. "Too Explicit." Saturday Review 16 April 1977: 50.
- Doyle, Paul. "Updike's Fiction: Motifs and Techniques." Catholic World Sept. 1964: 356-62.
- Eisinger, Chester E. "John Updike." Contemporary Novelists. Ed. James Vinson. 3rd ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982.
- Ewart, Gavin. "Making It Strange." New York Times Book Review 28 April 1985: VII, 18:1.
- Fandel, John. "Seven Poets: The Creation of Images to Delight." Commonweal 8 May 1964: 212.
- Fuller, Edmund. "The Versatile Updike." Wall Street Journal 31 Oct. 1963: 16.
- Greiner, John. The Other John Updike. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981.
- Hamilton, Alice and Kenneth Hamilton. The Elements of John Updike. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970.
- . "Theme and Technique in John Updike's Midpoint." Mosaic Fall 1970: 79-106.
- Harmon, William, ed. The Oxford Book of American Light Verse. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

- Heyen, William. "Sensibilities." Poetry March 1970: 426-29.
- Hodgart, Matthew. "Family Snapshots." Times Literary Supplement 13 Oct. 1978: 1158.
- Howard, Jane. "Can A Nice Novelist Finish First?" Life 4 Nov. 1966: 74-82.
- "John Updike." First Edition. With John Leonard and Nancy Evans. Arts and Entertainment Network. Book-of-the-Month Club, Inc., New York. 28 Oct. 1983.
- Juhasz, Suzanne. Library Journal. 1 June 1977: 1281.
- Kakutani, Michiko. New York Times 24 March 1986: C17.
- Korg, Jacob. An Introduction to Poetry. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1959.
- Lask, Thomas. "End Papers." New York Times 21 Sept. 1963: 19.
- Lehman, David. "Footnotes." Newsweek 26 Aug. 1985: 67.
- "Light Fantastic." Time 1 Nov. 1963: 112, 114.
- McCord, David. Saturday Review 9 Aug. 1958: 32.
- McDonald, G.D. Library Journal 15 June 1958: 1938.
- Matson, Elizabeth. "A Chinese Paradox But Not Much of One: John Updike in His Poetry." Minnesota Review 7 (1967): 157-67.
- Murphy, Patrick. "In Print: John Updike." Horizon March 1962: 84-85.
- Parisi, Joseph. Booklist 15 June 1985: 1432.

- Rupp, Richard H. "John Updike: Style in Search of a Center." Sewanee Review Autumn 1967: 693-709.
- Sanders, Gerald DeWitt, John Herbert Nelson, and M. L. Rosenthal, eds. Chief Modern Poets of Britain and America. Vol. 2: Poets of America. 5th ed. New York: Macmillan, 1970.
- Simpson, Louis. "Don't Take A Poem By The Horns." Book Week 27 Oct. 1963: 6, 25.
- Spector, Robert D. "The Poet's Other Voices, Other Rooms." Saturday Review 1 Feb. 1964: 36-38.
- Stitt, Peter. "Let Bobo Be Bubo." Minnesota Review Winter 1964: 268-71.
- Uphaus, Suzanne Henning. John Updike. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980.
- "View From The Catacombs." Time 26 April 1968: 66-75.
- Vendler, Helen. "John Updike on Poetry." New York Times Book Review 10 April 1977: 28.