

# John Updike's Sense of Wonder

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The word *elegant* is often used to describe John Updike's writing, which articulately, with often incandescent language, presents an imperfect, messy world created not by people's best—or even most ordinary—thoughts, but by the urgency of their desires. His characters are smart—thinking people—but they are nevertheless tortured by the gap between words and what's really *wanted*; those times they are silent, sadness oozes into what's unsaid. His characters are mortal, created by a writer whose parameters stretch very high and very deep: Updike is as familiar with religion and mythology as he is with psychology. The characters may themselves be “elegant” at times, with their talk of lobsters and champagne, but John Updike has one eye on beauty, sensual pleasure, physical passion, and another eye on the predictable, the banal, the loftiest imaginings slamming into the highest brick wall. The natural world is always present: vivid, even radiant, though Updike's characters are set apart from it. It provides the backdrop for his characters' folly; it becomes the scene-stealer for a sentence or two, before we are denied any more views out the window or authorially manipulated transitions or time changes that pivot on an invocation of the world's inherent radiance. The world is just beautiful—yet this is the way we act.

It is well known that Updike began as a visual artist, though language became his medium. His work is highly visual—something that's usually implied, I think, by calling a thing elegant. Nature is the foreground, but he insists that we look

at it instead of tracking words on a page, trying to understand the character and his or her story. We all know that the sight of an oak tree in autumn can make our little accomplishments pale in comparison, and of course Updike sometimes evokes such images to temper or to undercut his characters' getting and spending. Writing that is hermetically sealed runs the risk of seeming contrived: characters get to speak without the annoyance of the phone ringing, without a bird flying into a window; they get to speak—as we do not—to a conversational partner who is not distracted and who is allowed to give his or her undivided attention. That oak tree is a brass band, once you catch sight of it. Everything that happens, simultaneously or thereafter, is tinged by the context it provides: its otherness; its immediacy; its inevitability.

Another quality of elegance is judiciousness. Updike's eye doesn't race through the forest, but locates some detail or single entity to focus on in the natural world and, usually in a sentence or with a brief allusion, sweeps his writerly paintbrush to pair it with his character. An example of such an allusion is from the story "I Will Not Let Thee Go, Except Thou Bless Me," when a series of thoughts occurs to the main character, a man who has broken up with his lover and will soon be moving with his wife and children to Texas, though he does not want to go: the marriage is unraveling, and we know that his wife dreams that she and the children might go without him.

And Tom, hurriedly tying up loose ends in the city, lunching one day with his old employers and the next day with representatives of his new, returning each evening to an emptier house and increasingly apprehensive children, slept badly also. The familiar lulling noises—car horn and dog bark, the late commuter train's slither and the main drag's murmur—had become irritants; the town had unravelled into tugging threads of love. (564)

The noises are indeed familiar, but the suggestion that the train "slithers" makes the reader conjure up a snake, and the snake of course reminds us of trouble in the Garden of Eden; it is the prototype of what is happening here in microcosm. So work and love, domestic life, are being played for higher stakes—not unusual in the world of John Updike. He sees to it that they also become diminished in cosmic importance by their banality: the powerful, mythic snake becomes a commuter train. Either reading, or both readings, add to the story: the writer is conscious of both implications. To reenact the Fall of Man in suburbia is slightly absurd. Also, the move to Texas—not Updike's usual territory—is envisioned as "a desert of strangers; barbecues on parched lawns" (565). The narrator's physical

passion has resulted in his sentence to a kind of hell, with everything that will be taken in as food, and also found externally in the surroundings, burned.

In fairness to the many allusive patterns Updike weaves in the story, there is the more obvious mention of threads, with the husband, Tom, “tying up loose ends in the city” and the town “unravelling into tugging threads of love.” These bits, these threads, materialize in the clothes worn to the couple’s farewell party, so expressive of the times (“Bugs Leonard had gone Mod—turquoise shirt, wide pink tie”), but especially in the dress worn by Tom’s former mistress. She is simultaneously ascendant, as an angel, and absurd in her costume of a dress: “Maggie Aldridge . . . swung down the hall in a white dress with astonishingly wide sleeves” (565). The dress is seen repeatedly as the story progresses: all white, it is of course a wedding dress for the marriage that will not take place, but it is also the way an apparition would be attired (will Tom be haunted by her?). She has come to the party although she has a cold and—literally and metaphorically—a fever. Could she be the phoenix rising from the ashes? “Softly fighting to be free, Maggie felt to him, with her great sleeves, like a sumptuous heavy bird that has evolved into innocence on an island, and can be seized by any passing sailor, and will shortly become extinct” (567). In this scenario, Tom takes his place as just one of many “sailors,” though it is because of him, because of men, that she “will shortly become extinct.”

Yet, in the moment, they dance. And while they do, they have a strange conversation in which she tells him, “five years ago you were my life and my death, and now . . .” The ellipsis picks up several lines later, when she continues: “. . . you’re just nothing.” In the next sentence we are told that “the music flowed on, out of some infinitely remote USO where doomed sailors swayed with their clinging girls” (568). As this author sees it, the sexes are often at war. Here, though, the men have been deflated: they are not sailors who can drive a woman into extinction, but lonely guys at a dance, no more powerful than men usually are in such a situation. Later, Tom observes that Bugs (hardly an impressive nickname) and Maggie “danced close, in wide confident circles that lifted her sleeves like true wings” (569). “*True wings*”: like them, but not the real thing. Again, the writer directs us to see it both ways, in terms of potential and in terms of potential unfulfilled. One of the truly interesting and puzzling moments of the story comes when Tom and his wife, Lou, are alone at party’s end:

Safely on the road, Lou asked, “Did Maggie kiss you goodbye?”

“No. She was quite unfriendly.”

“Why shouldn’t she be?” (569)

His wife's question lets us know at almost the last minute that she is aware of the affair. Then, Lou—the nickname is masculine; it was explained early on that it is short for Louise—reveals that for a moment, she became Maggie's pseudo-lover: the woman kissed her on the lips. Sexual, yes, but perhaps also a strange benediction, a serious kiss, rather than Lou and Tom's "peck" of a kiss bestowed on Maggie earlier, continuing the bird imagery and reminding us that birds are symbolic of the spirit. Again, possibility is conjured up in order for it not to happen. Everyone is "very tired." Texas awaits.

In this story, Updike giveth and Updike taketh away; he inflates and deflates, yet the unease lingers in a series of visual images, small moments, and an inability to easily paraphrase what the emotional experience of the story has been. Though the "threads" that underlie the story transform the characters and also have their own interior logic as the story's scaffolding, the end of the story is wrapped up more in language and in interwoven visual patterns than in point of fact. It is as if the surface of a lake has suddenly stopped shimmering, and the mysterious shadows and unrecognizable bits of bark or stone or even sunken tennis shoes are revealed to be only what they are. What we have at story's end may be both the mystery retained, because of Updike's imagistic patterns based on visual images that carry recognizable connotations, and a literal ending that suggests that even the characters are tired of the expenditure of energy inherent in their folly.

In "Separating," Updike's insistence on the quality of the moment, instantly recognizable to readers of contemporary fiction, appears as past-tense, cryptic stage directions: "The day was fair. Brilliant" (788). The scene is set, sketched in indelible Updike shorthand that requires certainty on the part of the narrator, and an open-endedness that asks for a subjective response from the reader. The word *fair*, understood in this context as indicating beauty, also carries ethical connotations; the word *brilliant*, too, has many associative meanings and is rather anachronistic (except in England)—it can be used to describe someone's mental abilities as well as the light that comes off an object.

This is a story, not unusual in America and not unusual in the author's work, about divorce. The separating couple has decided to tell their children, each separately—though the husband can't keep to the script. Early in the story we are given the thoughts of Richard Maple (his last name connects him inextricably to the natural world) as he considers the tennis court on their property, remembering when "canary-yellow bulldozers churned a grassy, daisy-dotted knoll into a muddy plateau" (788). Two things that might have been: nature, undisturbed; his dream of a tennis court that has now more or less gone to ruin. Again, an idea—

a lovely idea—almost materialized, but is quickly demystified and made ugly, somewhat analogous to a bandage: “the barren tennis court—its net and tapes still rolled in the barn—an environment congruous with his mood of purposeful desolation” (789). As happens so often in Updike, the best laid plans go astray, though we have no doubt about what they are, and we see them intensely, as the characters do. For the length of a sentence, or illuminated by the descriptive quality of a perfect adjective, they are indelible; we do not need Thomas Kinkade, “Painter of Light,” to understand that those very common daisies (think also: Fitzgerald) are vivid and could not be more clearly seen if we had a painting in front of us. And yet. The specific, even gilded prose seems to make the sentences lift off the page, while the reality—what happens on the nonverbal level—deflates the ideal. Updike’s images have puncture wounds. I don’t see it merely as a matter of sending something up in order to shoot it down. The interplay between the external world and a character’s internal state is a convention of writing. We are familiar with the pathetic fallacy; the mimetic echo of a character’s psychological state explained by projection onto nature; the clarifying, expansive analogy that devolves, finally, when we break it down into its components, into suddenly suspicious words.

Writers distrust words, and no doubt some distrust them in proportion to how great their talent is for manipulating them. Some writers, such as William Gaddis, visually link their text into one snug woven entity, the longest kite cord ever made, then let us watch it unfurl until the body of the kite is out of view—after which the cord continues to unravel and we have only that to look at, the head having disappeared. Gaddis, though, unlike Updike, depends heavily on dialogue, which he runs together by omitting quotation marks. We must do the work of hearing differently, learning slowly, in Gaddis. With Updike, his amazing gift for using language to make a thing stand apart and shine is also just the talent he, personally, won’t settle for. He does not aspire to be a Romantic poet; he attempts to do two things almost simultaneously—to give and to take away, to mystify and to demystify—and, as background intermingles with plot, or foreground, our seeming advantage of having been presented with the transcendent ideal haunts us with possibility gone awry.

Dialogue in Updike, while often clever, is only so many words. What happens happens beneath the surface, which may be why he wants us to see the surface as being so dazzling: it is the entryway, the beginning of the process required of the reader to delve beneath it. The very affecting ending of “Separating” gives us only one word, but a word we had no reason to suspect would be uttered, as the char-

acter does not. Midway through the story, Richard leads his younger son “to the spot in the field where the view was best, of the metallic blue river, the emerald marsh, the scattered islands velvety with shadow in the low light, the white bits of beach far away. ‘See,’ he said. ‘It goes on being beautiful. It’ll be here tomorrow’” (793–94). The appreciated landscape, the usual but nevertheless vivid adjectives, the whole idea provides some sort of reassurance—of course it does—but this is not the end of the story. That comes when his elder son suddenly blurts out the subtext, verbalizes what Richard has asked himself, and tried not to ask himself: The Question. “*Why?*” is the one word his son utters, and with it the boy punctures the balloon. Or, to use another analogy, he metaphorically opens the lock that his father has literally been trying to repair since the story began. It is written this way, as Richard echoes that stop-time word: “*Why*. It was a whistle of wind in a crack, a knife thrust, a window thrown open on emptiness” (798). So his son has the key, and he does not. Both expanding upon his feelings and, by using any analogies at all, trying to distance himself from them, we have the metaphorical “whistle of wind,” extra nice because it alliterates—it has a pattern, a sound that forms its own little logic. More violently, it is the knife that Richard has already turned inward on himself, now only “a knife thrust,” not even connecting with its target, but still “a knife,” as if it can be objectified. And finally, “a window thrown open on emptiness.”

It would be the rare author who could give a character this line of dialogue without irony, or ominousness: “It’ll be here tomorrow.” If writers believed that, they would also write the story “tomorrow,” but as we know, writers’ delaying tactics and their ability to take avoidance to a high art are fanatically cultivated. My husband, a painter, says that he “likes to paint.” He has observed, and I agree, that writers “like to have written.” I can’t speak for John Updike, but I wonder at his sense of wonder. It seems so integral, yet, in rereading his stories, I am struck by how often—true from the beginning of his writing career—he undercuts his own facility. How often he seems to wish that what we see is the story, not its figures of speech, not its clever and astute literary contrivances. I am in awe of what he can conjure up with a sentence or, at other times, with a word—often, a word repeated so that it takes on more weight, vibrates, registering subtly or subconsciously, alerting the reader, who will rarely stop reading to figure out what’s going on at so microscopic a level, to an imagistic pattern meant to express a level of the story that can be pointed to, but the meaning of which always exceeds its boundaries and therefore cannot be caught, or more clearly expressed.

“A window thrown open on emptiness.” It would be odd to think of the world as empty except that this is Updike, and one’s inner state is being projected. (It is a nice touch that the couple plan to tell their eldest daughter about the separation on “the bridge across the salt creek”; at the end of the story, when their oldest son cries while asking “*Why?*” the literal creek becomes a metaphor internalized, a huge thing absorbed, constricting to the small, quite ordinary child’s tears.) The italicized word *Why*, first asked as a question, is repeated by the father without a question mark. And the answer? The text rushes in like the tide and gives us instant metaphors (“It was a whistle of wind in a crack,” etc.) that, while clever, are also transparently an avoidance. What a thing is *like*, when the thing speaks for itself, is unimportant. Which Updike knows, but he is showing us the fatal tendency of being half in love with easeful words. Does their descriptive quality really make you look more closely at the moment, or look away from it? I think the reaction elicited is the latter. You might be seduced; you might not forget what the words point toward, but in certain contexts—this being one of them—they can bedazzle while being powerless. Writers don’t trust words. There are many possible readings of this story, but one would have to do with the fact that however beautifully descriptive it is, language also is a habit, a thing that can protect us, or allow us, if nothing else, whether we are speaking or listening, to bide time. Writers come up with some of their best sentences because there is always the story they are writing, as well as the buried story—the story they do not want to tell. This is why, when questioned, writers often seem so ignorant about their own material, even after originating and carefully editing it. You know, but you don’t know; the same words that dazzle the reader may, for the writer, be a form of desperation: a distracting tactic; a beautiful smoke screen; a way to say something at one remove from the stunning truth the writer flirts with but does not want to acknowledge. Words are also a way to bide time; the writer risks writing a painful sentence because, when cornered, at least it is not the *most* painful sentence. Yet the freeze-frame of this story, as it concludes, gives us a tableau—really, resides in a visual image that is not directly expressed through analogies—that aims for nothing beyond its simple, almost unbearable, existence. It stands alone, to be highlighted by human pain: “*Why*. It was a whistle of wind in a crack; a knife thrust; a window thrown open on emptiness. The white face was gone, the darkness was featureless. Richard had forgotten why.”

Updike trusts the visuals: the bodies pressed together dancing; the moon shining on the field; a father sitting on his son’s bed—all nonverbal forms of com-

munication. In his essay “Why Write?” he mentions receiving a letter asking him to explain one of his stories and uses this as a point of departure to ask himself, in the same exasperated way he has addressed the person making the request:

[H]ow dare one confess that the absence of a swiftly expressible message is, often, *the* message; that reticence is as important a tool to the writer as expression; that the hasty filling out of a questionnaire is not merely irrelevant but *inimical* to the writer’s proper activity; that this activity is rather curiously private and finicking, a matter of exorcism and manufacture rather than of toplofty proclamation; that what he makes is ideally as ambiguous and opaque as life itself; that, to be blunt, the social usefulness of writing matters to him primarily in that it somehow creates a few job opportunities . . . (31)

At the end of Joyce’s “The Dead,” what exactly—since he is an articulate man who now has much clearer insight about himself and his situation—might Gabriel Conroy *say*, as opposed to going into a sort of fugue state in which his thoughts silently intermingle with the world outside his hotel? His epiphany is beautifully expressed, but when all the thinking is done, his wife, Gretta, sleeps on the bed and Gabriel stands alone at the window. At the end of Richard Ford’s story “Rock Springs,” the narrator, Earl, about to be left by his girlfriend, his daughter again solely in his care, out of money and out of luck, wanders—not in his mind, but in point of fact—into a motel parking lot, where he seems to bifurcate, taking an aerial view of himself. Cleverly—Earl is a con man, after all—Ford implicates the reader:

And I wondered, because it seemed funny, what would you think a man was doing if you saw him in the middle of the night looking in the windows of cars in the parking lot of the Ramada Inn? Would you think he was trying to get his head cleared? Would you think he was trying to get ready for a day when trouble would come down on him? Would you think his girlfriend was leaving him? Would you think he had a daughter? Would you think he was anybody like you? (27)

Ford drops the lure and reels us in, until we are caught too firmly to escape. The question answers itself. The writer implicitly asks, Who could feel otherwise? But in this story, the writer performs a sort of visible/invisible magic act: a clever act of conflation, suggesting that the reader stand first here, then a bit more behind the main character—oh, we’re spying, of course, but it’s just our little game—and then suddenly the torch is lit and we are welded to a character who takes on more dimension, as do we, because, unlikely as it might seem, we have become a new entity, seared into Earl. Gabriel Conroy wanders in his mind, sensing stepping-

stones—the snowflakes outside his window—as guides toward perceiving unity; Earl distances himself from himself and asks an unexpected final question that contains its answer but also requires the reader's mind to wander. While I don't think Updike was inordinately under the spell of Joyce, and while I do not see Richard Ford as rooted in Updike, I do notice—among these defining, now famous moments of fiction—that instead of physical action, there is internal action. In Joyce and Ford, to look outward is to see inward. The way Updike writes, the sensibility presiding over the piece—let's be honest: that is *the writer*—colors the material from the first, much the way a landscape painter looks at life, then builds layers of paint on a canvas. But, interestingly, with Updike it is as if the highlights were put in first, over forms that have not yet emerged; the piece begins with something small and inherently eye-catching illuminated, in a few seconds' time made particular and distinct. It is as if the composition were detailed from its inception, as if the quality of light and the textures and color, alone, inspired—and even constituted—the story.

Ah, but think of Updike's respect for opacity. The bright sentences seem to determine things, but ultimately do not—the emotional weight they carry and the characters' precarious movement toward something unknown is not always in sync, and is often at odds. Think of Rabbit's run toward the end of *Rabbit, Run*. We sense the loneliness in the gap between the character and the external world—a negative space, a place of estrangement, for which there are vivid examples, yet no words. I mentioned Joyce and Ford because the gracefulness of their sentences, the way the sentences build to suggest a depth that is ultimately psychological, seems rooted in their strong visual sense. Flannery O'Connor, in one of her essays, says that literature has to come at us through our senses, and in these writers it certainly does. Perhaps Updike was the shy boy, the class poet, the writer with so much power to wow that he became (his word) finicking in his restraint: sketch; highlight; make it indelible; wow 'em with your power of language, then show that that—or any power—contains its opposite, powerlessness. To continue my painting metaphor, the frame in Updike should not go unremarked upon. It is mortality. Each image he dazzles us with dazzles in its own space, for its own moment or moments, but the constant awareness, the borders on the expansive language, are what contains us for that moment—meaning, the moment of the story—but which are not there just for our edification and admiration. They are inventive, beautifully expressed, the world as we rarely see it, but as we recognize it immediately, yet they fail to sustain us—our efforts in the world build no better world. These intense visual realities desert us—and properly so, as

I think Updike would feel—by moving on, by running as Rabbit does from what he thinks of as impossible complacency with the real, until we, too, eventually—in the restricted and in the ultimate sense—move on.

These are the two concluding paragraphs from John Updike's very short story "Archangel," which I had never read until recently, and which comes as close as a story can to becoming a beam of light. I won't emphasize my own points and interests about what the writer observes, and why. What we hear, reading this story, are words directed to oneself, in a private moment overheard: more shorthand, words that point to visual images that cannot themselves be decoded by finding the exact words to describe them. Updike's interest is in what underlies the fabric and texture of daily living, and the ebb tide that is the inevitability of death. Along the way, he makes a little joke by alluding to the title of his first novel, then reverts to his customary humility when writing about the "microscopic glitter in the ink of the letters of words that are your own." He loves his words; he loves their appearance as well as what they denote or connote; he loves the process, as does any happy fanatic. There is also the ability of his eye—a cold eye, sometimes; other times, a poet's evaluative eye, directed toward minutiae that need not be stretched very far to embody the power of metaphor. He is a sensualist who attempts to compare what he sees with what he intuitively—pretty grimly—about the largest, least understood, cosmic questions. He isolates narcissism, yet sees its potential not only for self-deception but as a rallying call for transcendence. This makes him a writer who, at his quite often best, is impossible to paraphrase, one who escapes us on the currents of his words as they lift lightly off the page and become airborne. It's a great disappearing act, because when something is powerfully articulated, you experience the presence of the person speaking so strongly, he remains present: we're all in this together.

Where, then, has your life been touched? My pleasures are as specific as they are everlasting. The sliced edges of a fresh ream of laid paper, cream, stiff, rag-rich. The freckles on the closed eyelids of a woman attentive in the first white blush of morning. The ball rapidly diminishing down the broad green throat of the first at Cape Ann. The good catch, a candy sun slatting the bleachers. The fair at the vanished poorhouse. The white arms of girls dancing, taffeta, white arms violet in the hollows music its contours praise the white wrists of praise the white arms and the white paper trimmed the Euclidean proof of Pythagoras's theorem its tightening beauty and the thin viridian skin of an old copper found in the salt sand. The microscopic glitter in the ink of the letters of words that are your own. Certain moments, remembered or imagined, of childhood. The cave in the box hedge. The

Hershey bar chilled to brittleness. Three-handed pinochle by the brown glow of the stained-glass lampshade, your parents out of their godliness silently wishing you to win. In New York, the Brancusi room, silent. *Pines and Rocks*, by Cézanne; and *The Lace-Maker* in the Louvre, hardly bigger than your spread hand.

Such glimmers I shall widen to rivers; nothing will be lost, not the least grain of remembered dust, and the multiplication shall be a thousand thousand fold; love me. Embrace me; come, touch my side, where honey flows. Do not be afraid. Why should my promises be vain? Jade and cinnamon: do you deny that such things exist? Why do you turn away? Is not my song a stream of balm? My arms are heaped with apples and ancient books; there is no harm in me; no. Stay. Praise me. Your praise of me is praise of yourself; wait. Listen. I will begin again. (649–50)

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