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## Representative Men

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# Representative Men

Shaun O'Connell

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The works discussed in this article include:

- Iron John: A Book About Men*, by Robert Bly. 268 pages. Addison-Wesley, 1991. \$18.95.  
*American Psycho*, by Bret Easton Ellis. 399 pages. Vintage Books, 1991. \$11.00  
*Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man*, by David Lehman. 318 pages. Poseidon Press, 1991. \$21.95.  
*Amongst Women*, by John McGahern. 184 pages. Faber and Faber, 1990. \$25.00  
*Lies of Silence*, by Brian Moore. 194 pages. Bloomsbury, 1990. \$25.00  
*Chicago Loop*, by Paul Theroux. 196 pages. Random House, 1990. \$20.00  
*Rabbit at Rest*, by John Updike. Alfred A. Knopf, 1990. 512 pages. \$21.95.
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Midway through 1991, with intentional hyperbole, in a tone combining wonder with irony, *Newsweek* declared that “the men’s movement is dawning, the first postmodern social movement, meaning one that stems from a deep national malaise that hardly anyone knew existed until they saw it on a PBS special.”<sup>1</sup> That is, until the Public Broadcasting System presented Bill Moyers’s *A Gathering of Men*, a 1990 television documentary on Robert Bly, a poet and an apostle of male self-awareness. Bly’s book on this matter, *Iron John*, stayed on the best-seller list for more than fifty weeks in 1991; at the same time, Sam Keen’s provocatively titled *Fire in the Belly* was also a best-seller.<sup>2</sup> Both Bly and Keen were inspired by Joseph Campbell’s pop mythic mysticism, and both Bly and Keen, like Campbell before them, were celebrated on PBS by Bill Moyers. As Richard Stengel wittily noted in *Time*, “What Oprah is to books like *Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them*, Moyers is to intellectual fare like Campbell’s *Hero with a Thousand Faces*.” Yet clearly a nerve was struck, by Bly’s iron and Keen’s fire, in the national psyche in the year of Desert Storm, though both Bly and Keen saw the war against Iraq as evidence of George Bush’s problems with manliness.<sup>3</sup> (When *The Nation* solicited responses from luminaries to the question “What is patriotism?” Bly wrote, in response to celebrations over the Gulf War victory, “The yellow ribbon is the last refuge of a scoundrel.”)<sup>4</sup>

Both Bly and Keen argue that modern men are assigned roles that train them to succeed and grant them power, but these roles also cut them off from their fathers,

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their feelings, and their own families. The “father-hunger” of modern men results in their arrested development and their inability to deal with the world as mature men. Bly urges men to put away childish things — a range of surly behaviors which for Bly even includes the “deconstructing” of English department elders — and regain their mislaid manhood. Like Campbell, Bly searches myths to find salvific models of maturation. “Ancient stories are a good help, because they have endured the scrutiny of generations of women and men, and because they give both the light and dark sides of manhood, the admirable and the dangerous. Their model is not a perfect man, nor an overly spiritual man.”<sup>5</sup> However, valuable as Bly’s approach might be, ancient stories cannot answer the question: What models of man are offered by contemporary stories? What do they tell us, as Tolstoy once put the question, about what a man should do?

Early in the 1990s, six men — one actual, five fictional — emerged from the pages of telling texts: one work of literary criticism, five works of fiction. They were offered up as representative men of the 1980s, an era when the worst were full of passionate intensities, particularly among men. Each antiheroic man in these works was selfish, domineering, dangerous to women, and deceitful, yet each was also committed to a system of values and ideas that made him an interesting case history — values which, in some instances, redeemed his failings. Though these figures are presented with varying degrees of sympathy — depending on the extent to which each author sees his representative man as trapped or the extent to which each of these literary figures rebels against his confining roles — each of these six male authors takes a sharply critical view of traditional male traits: their lust for power, their assumption of authority, their drive for self-fulfillment, and their romantic idealism.

In *Some American Men*, Gloria Emerson says it is still largely assumed to be “a man’s world,” though she also documents the “penalties” men pay for such assumptions. “In a country whose insistence on delusion seems without clear limits, the old definition of masculinity still persists. And it persists because of hidden and unspoken expectations.”<sup>6</sup> The works here under discussion, written by and about American and European men, reexamine “the old definition of masculinity” in striking, occasionally brilliant ways.

Paul de Man was a leading advocate of the school of “deconstruction,” an approach to language and literature that has had significant, if indirect, influence on the American mind. After de Man’s death in 1983, it was revealed that he had written pro-Nazi tracts as a young man in Belgium, early in World War II. This story, man and idea, is brilliantly told in *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* by David Lehman. Paul de Man, who died before his wartime journalism became public, perpetuated a fraudulent image of himself as a former anti-Nazi resistance fighter; at the same time he self-servingly promoted a theory that separated language from action, history from judgment. Harry (“Rabbit”) Angstrom, antihero of four novels spanning the Eisenhower-Reagan eras, came to the end of the road in *Rabbit at Rest* by John Updike. Rabbit was consumed by all of that which nourished him — the consumer culture of middle America, where he lived out his failed dream of success. Patrick Bateman, villain of *American Psycho*, a controversial and lurid novel by Bret Easton Ellis, represents a horrific vision of the young urban professional; he personifies solipsism, consumerism, self-seeking, moral inertia, and violence against women. Parker Jacoda, dubbed by the press

"The Wolfman," is a similarly savage and pathetic victimizer of women in Paul Theroux's far better novel, *Chicago Loop*. Michael Dillon is at once a betrayer and rescuer of women in distress in Brian Moore's political parable of Northern Ireland, *Lies of Silence*. Finally, Michael Moran, an obscure farmer in the west of Ireland, portrayed in John McGahern's supreme work of fiction, *Amongst Women*, is a petty tyrant over a family whose women return his bitterness with love and grow all the stronger for their efforts. These six unattractive but compelling (in several senses) men represent, then, aspects of the age, signs of the times. They hint at what certain representative modern men want and do.

Deconstruction is the trendy literary theory of language and literature whose advocates have taken over many literary journals, whose enthusiasts have come to dominate important or ambitious English departments in American universities, whose academic strike force has even seized control of the Modern Language Association (MLA). These heady revisionists hold that there is no clear link between language and the world or, in their jargon, between sign and meaning. (Paul de Man in *Blindness and Insight*: "Sign and meaning can never coincide." And: "Instead of containing or reflecting experience, language constitutes it.")<sup>7</sup> They discuss, or have "discourse" about, "texts" — not discussions of literary works as we had known them: works written in distinct genres, works composed by various writers, under different circumstances, works reflecting a range of intentions and bearing different degrees of success. Such texts, argue deconstructionists, are *autotelic*, or self-referential, self-contradicting artifacts, removed from the real world. (Of course there *is* no *real* world for deconstructionists; what we might think of as the real world they treat as yet another text, a place where we send each other "messages" — cryptic signals whose minimalist meanings are quite different from what they appear to be, meanings for which deconstructionists have, they claim, the code. Deconstructionists, naturally, arrive at no single meaning; rather, they "problematize" all texts, literal and figurative.)

Deconstructionists (or "decons" of the new anticanon) place linguistic and rhetorical considerations first, seeking contradictions rather than coherence within literary works, thus "liberating" readers from what deconstructionists take to be the common readers' naive expectations of literary representation, morality, and coherence. "It is not difficult to see the attractions" of deconstructive readings, notes Jonathan Culler, a leading proponent, in *Structuralist Poetics*. "Given that there is no ultimate or absolute justification for any system or for the interpretations from it," the critic is free to value "the activity of interpretation itself . . . rather than any results which might be obtained."<sup>8</sup> In other words, literary criticism, in their fast hands, has become an autoerotic act. Such moral relativism and critical license, however, do not add up to compelling intellectual attractions for all critics. "Readers interested in the moral dimension of a novel or poem, or in elevating the degree of artistic success, or in treating the ideas and values it promotes, can forget it. What you get with deconstruction isn't knowledge but a reflexive suspicion of all sources of knowledge — a suspicion extended to art and culture more generally," writes David Lehman in his withering attack on deconstruction, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man*.<sup>9</sup>

Deconstruction — like est, its trendy therapeutic counterpart, which also argues that thinking makes things so — is indeed a sign of the times. It represents a revolution —



all rhetorical, of course — against long-held assumptions and beliefs. J. Hillis Miller, who became president of the MLA in 1986, argued, with characteristic pride and deconstructionist bravura, that “a deconstructionist is not a parasite but a patricide. He is a bad son demolishing beyond hope of repair the machine of Western metaphysics.”<sup>10</sup> And so it has come to pass. The center has not held, said Yeats; deconstructionists applaud the black hole.

Such a theory may at first seem patent nonsense, not worth the effort of refutation. (When told “Your house is on fire!” should you consider such a “speech act” a nonreferential, paradoxical, and problematizing “text,” a verbal artifice, or should you assume that this utterance may be a lucid description of an actual state that requires your action? I would call the Fire Department and worry about metaphysics another time. A popular bumper sticker of the early 1990s takes a clear stand on this issue of philosophical realism when it compellingly states: “Shit Happens!”) However, it must be granted, deconstructionists have performed a service by calling new attention to textual tensions, rhetorical rationalizations, and slipshod, self-serving, moralistic readings of literary works. They have as well, for better or worse, empowered a new generation of literary critics, aided by allies in related schools of partisan social critics — feminists, blacks, ethnics, gays and lesbians, Marxists, and so on — who seek to deconstruct the “hegemony” of the patriarchal literary canon and replace it with a new five-foot shelf of politically correct texts. Marginality is deconstruction’s central faith!

Lehman, if you will, deconstructs deconstruction by examining the case of Paul de Man, America’s leading deconstructionist and the center of a school of literary and linguistic theorists at Yale University, which dominated critical discourse in and beyond the academy during the 1980s. Deconstructionists argue, as de Man makes clear, that the author is irrelevant to his text: “Considerations of the actual and historical existence of writers are a waste of time from a critical point of view.”<sup>11</sup> Lehman convincingly shows this to be not only a false assumption, but also an expression of wishful thinking.

In the late 1980s, it was revealed that de Man had written ninety-two articles, spanning most of 1941–1942, for the journal *Le Soir*, which had become a Nazi publication in occupied Belgium. In “The Jews in Contemporary Literature,” March 4, 1941, de Man, then twenty-one, argued that Europe would not miss what he claimed were Jews’ minimal contributions to culture if they were deported. Europeans should not crossbreed with “them”; rather, “we” should “liberate ourselves spiritually from their demoralizing influence in the realm of thought, literature, and the arts.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, we learned that de Man had abandoned his common-law wife and children just after World War II when he came to America, where he soon began a new life with a new wife. (In eerie parallel, as Lehman’s book appeared in 1991, so too did the accusations that Werner Erhardt, founder of est, had brutalized his wife, beaten his son, and committed incest with his daughter! Those who urged separations between words and deeds had much to answer for in their own lives, it seemed.)

Reasonably enough, Lehman asks, “Did de Man’s insistence on language’s ‘unreliability’ conceal the wish to lay the blame for his youthful journalism on language?”<sup>13</sup> Lehman’s inescapable conclusion is that de Man’s personal motives were suspect and self-serving, from the time he supported Nazism to the time he advocated deconstruction. In *Allegories of Reading*, de Man wrote, “It is always possible to face up to any

experience (to excuse any guilt), because the experience always exists simultaneously as fictional discourse and as empirical event and it is never possible to decide which one of the two possibilities is the right one. The indecision makes it possible to excuse the bleakest of crimes because, as a fiction, it escapes from the straits of guilt and innocence.”<sup>14</sup> Here de Man, aware his own life is a fictional construct, implicitly claims for himself a freedom from judgment we usually grant to characters in fiction. David Lehman reveals de Man’s claims to irresponsibility to be a problematizing cover-up for his own moral-political-personal culpability. The “bad son” and the “patricide” had been revealed to be just that — not an allegorical figure, as Miller implied, but an actual person who had behaved immorally and was belatedly being held to account for his actions, which, in his case, were words that made a difference in people’s lives — in Nazi Germany and in contemporary America. *Signs of the Times* reaffirms the intimate relations between art and life, a connection that deconstructionists try to deny.

Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* opens with epigraphs from (presumptuously enough) (1) Dostoyevski — on the fictional nature but the social representativeness of the perverse narrator of *Notes from Underground*; (2) Miss Manners (who is a far better writer than Ellis) on society’s need for manners, for “if we followed every impulse, we’d be killing one another”; and (fittingly) (3) Talking Heads, a trashy rock group: “And as things fell apart / Nobody paid much attention.” All of which suggests that the novel’s narrator, Patrick Bateman — a twenty-six-year-old Wall Street hustler (he works at Pierce & Pierce, an allegorically aptly named brokerage firm), a young man on the make for thrills and chills, cutting and thrusting his way through his public life and his pubic obsession — is a representative man who shows how far America has come from a common assumption of civil manners. Bateman’s sickening displays of violence (upon women, the homeless, children, and animals), his inability to feel responsibility or regret, and his numbing materialism are offered as evidence that things indeed have fallen apart. At its best, Ellis’s shocking novel is his way of making Americans pay attention to a derangement at the heart of our culture. At its worst, Ellis’s tedious and lurid novel is yet another example of that derangement.

Narrator Patrick Bateman’s account of his night journeys through sex and violence in New York City are offered by Ellis as evidence of the “End of the 1980s,” as one climactic chapter is titled. However, by the time of its publication, the era of Reagan-Trump acquisitiveness and conspicuous consumption seemed long gone. Our only president, George Bush, was set on reversing the lessons of the Vietnam War by winning one for the Gipper’s former VP in the Gulf and Oliver Stone’s film of wretched excess during the 1960s, *The Doors*, was opening. Indeed, Stone had already done a film version of Reagan-era greed, *Wall Street*, years before, as had two writers in fiction: Jay McInerney in *Bright Lights, Big City* and Tom Wolfe in *The Bonfire of the Vanities*. So Ellis was a redundant latecomer in the genre of cautionary tales about the immoral selfishness and violence of our times — a tale set, of course, in New York City, our Gotham as Gomorrah.

“If I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere,” sing the Vegas showstoppers about New York, “a city that doesn’t sleep.” Patrick Bateman makes it there with a new level of callous violence, stalking his victims through the dark and naked city. As a result, many in the literary community and the other guardians of public taste were figuratively assaulted by the book. For example: “Misogynist garbage,” said Tammy



Bruce, president of the Los Angeles Chapter of the National Organization for Women, a group that pressed a boycott of the novel.<sup>15</sup>

Even Norman Mailer was shocked, which came as a surprise, for the author of *An American Dream* may have provided the literary model of *American Psycho*. In Mailer's novel the self-justifying narrator, Stephen Rojack, takes pleasure in the murder of a woman (his wife), enjoys sex with a maid, then wanders the streets of the city — a pattern followed many times by Bateman. However, after a time Rojack "wanted to be free of magic, the tongue of the Devil, the Dread of the Lord," while Bateman just keeps on slicing-and-dicing his way around Manhattan.<sup>16</sup>

Patrick Bateman is never stricken by conscience and he is never caught, two features of the novel that offended most reviewers. In the novel's final scene, Bateman is having drinks at Harry's Bar, trying to figure out where to try to get reservations for dinner. He notices a sign, THIS IS NOT AN EXIT, and narrator Bateman lets this stand as his final word to the reader, words that close Ellis's novel. Bateman and Ellis at that point seem to merge into one voice. The novel provides no moral center outside the immoral Bateman. That is, there is no exit from his life and character for Bateman and no assurance of safety for the reader.

Perhaps that is why Mailer was shocked. "I cannot recall a piece of fiction by an American writer which depicts so odious a ruling class — worse, a young ruling class of Wall Street princelings ready, presumably, by the next century to manage the mighty if surrealistic levers of our economy. Nowhere in American literature can one point to an inhumanity of the moneyed upon the afflicted equal to" some of the scenes in Ellis's novel.<sup>17</sup> However, Mailer finally came down against *American Psycho*, for all of its author's talent and all of the novel's hyperbolic brilliance, because Ellis has made a banality of his murderer's evil.

Long before its publication, the novel infuriated so many that Simon and Schuster, which had paid the twenty-six-year-old author an advance of \$300,000 for his third novel, canceled the book's publication. The novel was resold, for an undisclosed amount, to Vintage, which issued it in a trade paperback in March 1991. Ellis, who had received death threats, defended his work as a social satire, a novel of "surface" that used "comedy" (undetected by most readers) "to get at the absolute banality of the violence of a perverse decade."<sup>18</sup> So Ellis was proud of the very quality, banality, for which Mailer faulted the novel.

Ellis presents a New York of extremes between rich and poor, sane and insane. The word FEAR is "sprayed in red graffiti on the side of a McDonald's on Fourth and Seventh," where two handsome and affluent young men, leaving their workday on Wall Street, hail a cab on the opening page of the novel. In the cab one of these depressing men-on-the-make scans the newspaper and reports on the daily record of urban horrors:

Strangled models, babies thrown from tenement rooftops, kids killed in the subway, a Communist rally, Mafia boss wiped out, Nazis . . . baseball players with AIDS, more Mafia shit, gridlock, the homeless, various maniacs, faggots dropping like flies in the streets, surrogate mothers, the cancellation of a soap opera, kids who broke into a zoo and tortured and burned various animals alive, more Nazis . . . and the joke is, the punch line is, it's all in this city — nowhere else, just here, it sucks, whoa wait, more Nazis, gridlock, gridlock, baby-sellers, black-market babies, AIDS babies, baby junkies, building collapses on baby, maniac baby, gridlock, bridge collapses.<sup>19</sup>

This catalogue of urban diseases and afflictions, which makes no distinctions between the serious and the silly, recounted by a young man who is *not* the sociopathic antihero of the novel, serves as Ellis's reference point for the reader. It is as though he is saying to the reader, "You ain't seen nothin' yet!" before he launches into the loathsome days and ways of Patrick Bateman, before Ellis explores the permutations and combinations of horror he inflicts upon the innocent and vulnerable citizens of the city.

For all its repulsion, *American Psycho* contains telling catalogues of the consumer culture, for the inhabitants of his New York have no souls, only greedy hearts. Bateman's ability to recognize brand names is at first astonishing, then appalling, finally numbing. According to the *Boston Phoenix*, Ellis mentions some four hundred products in as many pages: Giorgio Armani leads the list (54 citations), followed by Ralph Lauren (49), J & B Scotch (34), and Rolex (26).<sup>20</sup> *American Psycho* seems to seek the combined audience of *GQ* readers and *Silence of the Lambs* viewers, presenting trendy duds with a maniacal genius. At work, for example, Bateman, brooding upon blood, sits at his Palazzetti glass-top desk, wearing Ray-Bans, chewing Nupurin, hung over from a coke binge begun at the night spot Shout! while he listens to rock music on his Walkman. He pops Valium, washes it down with Perrier, then applies Visine to his eyes. "All it comes down to is this: I feel like shit but look great."<sup>21</sup> Ellis composes a fictional world of brittle, pricey "surface."

However, unlike his peers, Bateman lives on the edge as well as on the surface. It first seems his deepest passion is dedicated to obtaining restaurant reservations and attending the *in* clubs: Tunnel, Chernoble, Canal, Nell's, the Yale Club, the Quilted Giraffe, the Newport, Harry's, Fluties, Indochine, the New York Yacht Club, World's End. Bateman is faithful only to one thing — catching *The Patty Winter Show*, live or on tape, each day. During the course of the novel he watches programs on the following: descendants of members of the Donner Party, "UFOs That Kill," the inevitability of nuclear war, "Shark Attack Victims," "Aspirin: Can It Save Your Life?," Nazis, women who have had mastectomies, "Girls Who Trade Sex for Crack," an exclusive interview with Donald Trump followed by a report on women who had been tortured, "Concentration Camp Survivors," "Has Patrick Swayze Become Cynical or Not?," the best restaurants in the Middle East, Spuds McKenzie, "Home Abortion Kits," "Beautiful Teenage Lesbians," the punk rock band Guns N' Roses, girls in the fourth grade who trade sex for crack, and much more. From such lists we begin to discern not, as Trollope once put it, *the way we live now*, but the ways a few affluent, self-destructive Americans lived in the Reagan years. Morning in America, indeed!

Yet Ellis's novel is destroyed less by its indulgence in the horrific — Bateman's pathology, violence, and sexism, after all, should not be ascribed to the author — than by its implausibilities, most notably: (1) Bateman seems not to have to attend to his work to be able to afford a life of extraordinary luxury — restaurants, clothes, jewels, helicopters, and limos — so the economic base of this world is even more fanciful than it is in Wolfe's *Bonfire* or the stylish film *Someone to Watch Over Me*, in which the threatened heroine, rich and beautiful, lives in a Manhattan apartment the size of Grand Central Station. (2) Bateman hacks, dismembers, cooks, and drags bodies around town, to store human remains at a flat in Hell's Kitchen, his clothes soaked in blood, but he is never caught, never even noticed. (3) Ellis's configuration of the yuppie as serial murderer is self-defeating, for by exaggerating the moral corrosions of



the Reagan era, by equating greed with violence, he limits the application of his satire and destroys his case, misses the far more subtle derangements of the era. Wall Street hustlers were bad enough in what they did at the greedy work Bateman implausibly ignores, without trying to make them over into pathological sociopaths! The story of how Bret Easton Ellis ripped off two reputable New York publishing houses — which comically tried simultaneously to make a buck off his book and to protect their reputations — is a more telling social parable. *American Psycho*, as a novel and as a publishing event, embodies and exemplifies American men at their worst.

In Paul Theroux's *Chicago Loop*, Parker Jacoda, an architect, does attend to his work, as a builder-developer, until he quits to become an underground man in Chicago. He leaves murdered girls in their apartments and tries to get caught to stop himself from what he cannot help doing. So, unlike Bateman, Jacoda does have a latent conscience. Jacoda is not forced to stand as a representative of Reagan-era greed, but as an example of a man trapped in the destructive elements of his warped gender expectations. He reduces everything to sexual warfare; misogyny is the dark-side soul. "The presidential campaign was happening, and that was the best reason of all not to buy a paper. What a choice, and you knew they were awful when you saw their wives — four bossy bitches propping up their greedy eager-to-please husbands."<sup>22</sup> When Parker looks at the men in Robert Mapplethorpe's exhibition of often shocking photographs — some of men who are committing sex and violence upon each other — he sees victims of a voyeuristic artist.

Theroux's Chicago serves as the apt setting for Jacoda's descent into the maelstrom. There Parker has no exit.

Parker had managed to cut across, to converge: he did not travel in a straight line. Was it a sign he saw, or the fact that the train was drawing into LaSalle, that made him think of the word *Loop*? Whatever, it was the right word. His whole life was a curve and in the course of his life he would inscribe a loop. He had escaped the tyranny of parallel lines.<sup>23</sup>

However, it is not clear that Paul Theroux has entirely escaped the tyranny of parallel lines in this novel. It is, as Anita Brookner notes on the dust jacket, "remarkable . . . a tour-de-force," a sympathetic treatment of a horrific man who is the victim of his own murderous drives. It is also written with minimalist precision and scenic control, unlike the sloppy *American Psycho*, but *Chicago Loop* attempts no analysis of this evil man. As Coleridge said of Iago, Parker is an example of motiveless malignancy. No insight emerges from his killings, as it does, say, from Pinky's murderous deeds in Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*, for Parker, like Bateman, cannot articulate a moral vision. Parker is first seen assaulting a vulnerable, reckless woman; he is last seen seeking his own punishment. Perhaps Theroux, too, is something of a voyeur, an exploitative artist, showing us lurid deeds for clever literary titillation.

At his boldest moment in *Rabbit at Rest*, John Updike, daring to be obvious, portrays his representative American, Harry ("Rabbit") Angstrom, in the role of Uncle Sam, marching in the 1989 Fourth of July parade in Brewer, Pennsylvania, his home town. Though Harry is fifty-six, overweight, and recuperating from a heart attack, he feels happy to be home again amid the cheers of townsfolk, reminded of those cheers he

heard thirty years before, when he had been a high school basketball hero. “He is a legend, a walking cloud. Inside him a droplet of explosive has opened his veins like flower petals uncurling in the sun.”<sup>24</sup> Young once more, seized by patriotic fervor, reveling in glory, Rabbit once more, he marches to recorded music.

Kate Smith belts out, dead as she is, dragged into the grave by sheer gregarious weight, “God Bless America” — “. . . to the oceans, white with foam.” Harry’s eyes burn and the impression giddily — as if he had been lifted up to survey all human history — grows upon him, making his heart thump worse and worse, that all in all this is the happiest fucking country the world has ever seen.<sup>25</sup>

Harry Angstrom is Updike’s alter ego and hero-of-sorts in four novels — *Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) — which, taken together, constitute an epic of American life: from midcentury glory to fin de siècle decline and fall. In portraying his Pennsylvania double — Rabbit remained in the circumscribed world Updike fled, for “Brewer” is Reading, Pennsylvania, and “Mt. Judge” is Shillington, a nearby town, where Updike came of age before he left for Harvard — in triumphal march, Updike affirms his own patriotism and turns the knife to his critics, literary and political. Clearly Updike likes, though he does not wholly approve of, Rabbit. For all his faults, we shall not look on his likes again, this personification of some American men of the 1950s — callow, conventional, both home-centered and promiscuous, patriotic, and assured that the world owed them a living.

However, not everyone was won over by Rabbit. *Rabbit at Rest* so piqued Garry Wills that he denounced the whole tetralogy as implausible and overwrought in the *New York Review of Books*. “There is a compulsive tidiness about this scheme which tries to make up in comprehensiveness what it has increasingly lost in plausibility.”<sup>26</sup> Wills — the author of many works on politics and religion, including *Nixon Agonistes* — was particularly offended by Harry’s pro-war, pro-Nixon politics during the Vietnam War, the era portrayed in *Rabbit Redux*. “Under the fiction of Rabbit reaching up from the working class is the reality of Updike reaching down to a solidarity with Nixon’s values.”<sup>27</sup> For Wills, Rabbit and his author are of one political mind, so when Rabbit preens patriotically in a parade, so too does Updike. Thus, Wills might say, *Rabbit at Rest* is an act of narcissism, a self-consuming artifact, Updike’s advertisement for himself, his valediction forbidding mourning. “There is an air of forgiveness to the novel, since Harry has lost any sense of what might need forgiving . . . Harry’s creator has lost track of what he originally meant him to mean.”<sup>28</sup>

Garry Wills is an astute political analyst, but he is much too argument directed to serve as an adequate literary critic. He has made a serious case against Updike, but to do so Wills has taken Updike’s own political statements far too literally. That is, Wills has overidentified the author with his novels’ hero — “Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of a critic is to save the tale from the artist,” correctly affirmed D. H. Lawrence.<sup>29</sup> And Wills has, I believe, missed the irony and well-wrought ambiguity of *Rabbit at Rest*, for Updike’s art of fiction makes this a well-realized novel and an exemplary American tale. The novel is Updike’s good-bye-to-all-that for Harry Angstrom, who moves toward death with characteristic recklessness. *Rabbit at Rest* is, as well, Updike’s separate peace with his alter ego and

the America they both had long celebrated. Updike's "air of forgiveness" for his self-destructive character is balanced by a devastating satire of Rabbit's values, values that make him, like his country, bloated, heartweary and near terminal.

Garry Wills's attack on the Rabbit saga is based on the amazing revelations of political values in *Self-Consciousness*, Updike's 1989 autobiographical memoir. There, in a chapter titled "On Not Being a Dove," Updike recounted his fervid support of the Vietnam War. He recalls how he told British editors, early in the war, "I am for our intervention if it does some good." Blood sacrifices are apparently acceptable, for Updike, in a struggle between good and evil. While most notable American writers denounced the war in Southeast Asia and many demonstrated against it — as celebrated in Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* — Updike fumed against the demonstrators! In a letter to the *New York Times*, he declared he believed that those who promoted the war did so to prevent other wars.

Americans should, as he did, *trust* Lyndon Johnson. "If he and his advisers (transferred intact, most of them, from Kennedy's Camelot) had somehow got us into this mess, they would somehow get us out, and it was a citizen's plain duty to hold his breath and hope for the best, not parade around spouting pious unction and crocodile tears." (Updike's heavy sarcasm and reliance upon clichés here show his determination to needle antiwar protesters; blind patriotism results in hyperbole, which overwhelms his usual stylistic delicacy. We are not surprised to learn, from Updike, that his family made him a present of an American flag during the Vietnam War! Curiously, here Updike-as-flag-waver anticipates the scene in which Harry Angstrom parades around, spouting pious and patriotic unction and weeping patriotic "crocodile tears.") John Updike was moved, he reports, when he saw those war proponents, Lyndon Johnson and Dean Rusk, hug at a White House dinner.<sup>30</sup> While Harry Angstrom supported the war from middle America, John Updike toasted it among the power elite.

Updike, shaped by memories of the Depression, his childhood faith in the wisdom of FDR, and the righteousness of the American mission during World War II, identified with authority, even during the Vietnam era, when three presidents lied to us and our military commanders continuously reported false sightings of lights at the end of the long tunnel of war. The country had been good to Updike, so why should he — like those demonstrators who called their native land Amerika — turn against it? "Defending the war (or, rather, disputing the attackers of it) was perhaps my way of serving, of showing loyalty to a country that had kept its hackneyed promises — life, liberty, pursuit of happiness — to me."<sup>31</sup> That America had *not* kept its promises to large sectors of its citizenry, or that the prosecution of a long, bloody war in Southeast Asia might *not* be the best thing for our nation — such thoughts seemed not to occur to Updike, so insistent was he to defend, rhetorically, his country against the verbal attacks from soft liberals. Even the Cold War made sense to Updike, defining the world in Manichean alternatives. "Athens and Sparta, light and shadow. Ours was the distinctly better mousetrap."<sup>32</sup>

Updike's political values, which affirmed John F. Kennedy's Cold War vision of a "long twilight struggle" against forces of darkness, were sustained by a religious vision in which good and evil contend. Though he had married into a New England Unitarian family, which celebrated light, reason, and political liberalism, something in Updike, values and visions derived from his early religious training, rebelled.



Updike's Pennsylvania Lutheranism represents "a theological animus; down-dirty sex and the bloody mess of war and the desperate effort of faith all belonged to a dark necessary underside of reality that I felt should not be merely ignored, or risen above, or disdained." Updike subscribes explicitly to "a dark Augustinian idea." He affirms the notion of Original Sin. "'In Adam's Fall / We sinned all,' began that seminal American text, the *New England Primer*," he notes admiringly.<sup>33</sup> All of this served to solidify John Updike's pro-war patriotism.

So it is not difficult to see why Wills, a sharp critic of Nixon's war policies, saw *Rabbit at Rest* as a fair occasion to attack Updike for mindless, pro-American sentimentality. Wills would not march behind Harry Angstrom as Uncle Sam while a resurrected Kate Smith blessed America in recorded song. "Updike began with the aim of saying hard true things about what is wrong with America," argues Wills. "By succumbing to his own stylistic solipsism, Updike ends up exemplifying what is wrong."<sup>34</sup>

Updike, of course, has a different memory of how the Rabbit series began. When he was in his mid-twenties, he conceived a work of fiction composed of two novellas that articulated alternative visions and life patterns: "One would be the rabbit approach — spontaneous, unreflective, frightened, hence my character's name, Angstrom — and the second was to be a horse method of coping with life, to get into harness and pull your load until you drop."<sup>35</sup> *Rabbit, Run*, then, began as an experiment in point-of-view and present-tense narration, not as a parable of the American character at mid-century; a later novel, *The Centaur*, showed the "horse method." On *Rabbit, Run*, Updike reports: "Although the first novel had had a few overheard news items in it, it wasn't really in a conscious way about the 50's. It was just a product of the 50's."<sup>36</sup> For all that, the novel became a telling period parable.

The Harry Angstrom of *Rabbit, Run* is twenty-six, a MagiPeel salesman, unhappily married to pregnant and alcoholic Janice, and the neglectful father of a son, Nelson; Rabbit is also a reveler in his own lost glories of high school basketball. When he stops to play a pickup game with some neighborhood lads, he feels again the impulse to transcend his own limits — *to fly past the nets*, as James Joyce's autobiographical alter ego put it. For Rabbit, "that old stretched-leather feeling makes his whole body go taut, gives his arms wings. It feels like he's reaching down through years to touch this tautness."<sup>37</sup> His spirits lifted by this transcendent moment, Rabbit attempts escape from the ordinariness of his given life. He gets in his car and heads south, "down, down the map into orange groves and smoking rivers and barefoot women."<sup>38</sup> That is, Rabbit, irresponsible and self-seeking, runs toward a romantic vision, a projection of his own needs, a Florida of his imagination, not an actual place.

Rabbit moves through 1950s America with the same instinctive spontaneity that characterized his former moves on the basketball court. When he stops for gas, a farmer sees he has no route mapped out and warns Rabbit, "The only way to get somewhere, you know, is to figure out where you're going before you go there." Rabbit, however, trusting in improvisation, is not convinced: "I don't think so."<sup>39</sup> Yet Rabbit's instincts are not, as Updike contrives his plot, trustworthy. Rabbit takes a sudden left turn, following his impulses, and fittingly finds himself on a curving dirt road, a lover's lane that leads to a dead end. Thus Updike, in *Rabbit, Run*, plotted a closed world, one which circumscribed Rabbit, stopped him in his tracks. So this tentative rebel against fifties conformity turns around and goes home again. In *Rabbit*

at Rest he thinks about his sister, Mim, who at nineteen broke away from Brewer and ended up in Las Vegas. "Rabbit never could have made it out there. He needed to stay where they remembered him when."<sup>40</sup>

But just as Rabbit, Anteus-like, never can wholly detach himself from his home ground, neither can he sink comfortably into it; that's the tension which makes him interesting. Back from his failed flight to Florida, Rabbit refuses to return to Janice and takes up with a former prostitute, Ruth. She likes him because, as she says, "You haven't given up. In your own stupid way, you're still fighting," though neither she nor Rabbit was sure just what it was he fought to find.<sup>41</sup> The Reverend Jack Eccles, Episcopalian, like the farmer at the gas pumps, tries to discover where Rabbit is going. But Rabbit, a bush-league mystic, cannot say; he will learn by going where he has to go. "Somewhere behind all this . . . there's something that wants me to find it." The Reverend Eccles, who counsels parishioners during rounds of golf, treats Rabbit's quest vision ironically: "It's the strange thing about you mystics, how often your little ecstasies wear a skirt."<sup>42</sup> For Eccles, Rabbit is "monstrously selfish," worshipping his "worst instincts." But Updike sets himself on the side of the seeker. Rabbit knows there is something *there* there, waiting for him, and finds evidence for his vision in a perfect golf shot.

Stricken; sphere, star, speck. It hesitates, and Rabbit thinks it will die, but he's fooled, for the ball makes his hesitation the ground of a final leap: with a kind of visible sob takes a last bite of space before vanishing in falling, "That's *it*!" he cries and, turning to Eccles with a smile of aggrandizement, repeats, "That's it."<sup>43</sup>

Rabbit's visionary moment of overreaching is echoed in Updike's luminous report, in "HUB FANS BID KID ADIEU," of the final home run by the legendary Red Sox left fielder Ted Williams in September 1960 against Jack Fisher, pitcher for the Baltimore Orioles. Here the lonely hero/artist figure performs a triumphant act, driving a sphere beyond boundaries, which illustrates the presence of grace — *it* — in an otherwise compromised world. If Rabbit Angstrom winds up like the legendary Casey, who struck out, Ted Williams did not.

Fisher threw the third time, Williams swung again, and there it was. The ball climbed on a diagonal line into the vast volume of air over center field. From my angle, behind third base, the ball seemed less an object in flight than the tip of a towering, motionless construct, like the Eiffel Tower or the Tappan Zee Bridge.<sup>44</sup>

As in this prose poem on Ted Williams, *Rabbit, Run* registers a vision — patterns that embody aesthetics and values — from Updike's "angle." So, in *Rabbit, Run*, Updike was less concerned with typifying a decade or characterizing the state of the nation than he was with establishing a character, Harry Angstrom, who illustrates an impulse toward transcendence, a faith in transformation, even in the midst of his own failed and tawdry life. Updike's Rabbit has intimations of immortality from recollections of early childhood, from replications of epiphanies of excellence (as in the golf shot), and, as the Reverend Eccles wryly notes, from brief ecstasies that lie beneath skirts.

*Rabbit, Run* was composed in the late 1950s, before that decade took on self-conscious associations of smugness and order, which were symbolized by Ike's fondness for golf and hesitancy about foreign entanglements and before John F. Kennedy

got the nation “moving again” — into Cuba, outer space, and Vietnam! The 1960s, by contrast, *was* a desperately self-conscious decade, an era of preening extravagance. It was also a particularly disorienting decade for members of Updike’s generation — those relatively few who were born in the midst of the Great Depression, who remembered World War II with patriotic pride, who came of age in the age of postwar American affluence and assurance, who married young, reared children, and went about their careers, whistling while they worked, as though they were playing their prescribed roles in an American libretto. Then came an unscripted age, scored to rock-and-roll rhythms: the black and women’s movements, the Age of Aquarius, sexual revolution, political assassinations, Vietnam, dancing and demonstrating in the streets. As a result, *Rabbit Redux* was a much more deliberate act of representation of the national “distress,” as Updike calls it. “Suddenly it seemed to me that Rabbit Angstrom of Pennsylvania . . . might be the vehicle in which to package some of the American unease that was raging all around us.”<sup>45</sup>

Rabbit, then, who began as a flawed visionary in *Rabbit, Run*, becomes a mere “vehicle” in *Rabbit Redux*; the solipsistic inwardness, which had constituted both his beauty and his monstrousness, was now overwhelmed by lurid occurrences of national import.

Ten years older, heavy and broken, Harry, as he was by then called, lived in a sterile housing development (Penn Villas) with his sour teenage son, Nelson, and a slimmed-down Janice, who was having an affair with Charlie Stavros, a slick car salesman. When Janice moved in with Charlie, Rabbit implausibly invited into his house two tenants: Jill, a rich, doped-up runaway teenager, and Skeeter, a black revolutionary who was hiding from the police. This combustible combination of characters and values exploded Harry Angstrom’s previously safe life: while he was making love to a neighbor, his house burned; Jill was killed in the fire; Skeeter ran; after witnessing these events, Nelson was marked for life; finally Janice returned, reestablishing a fragile stasis.

In *Rabbit Redux*, the weakest work of the tetralogy, Updike implausibly fused midlife Rabbit with the sexual-racial politics and violence of the sixties. Updike determined to “throw in,” as he tellingly puts it, an inventory of the era’s problems: “all the oppressive, distressing, overstimulating developments of the most dissentious American decade since the Civil War — anti-war protest, black power and rhetoric, teach-ins, middle-class runaways, drugs, and (proceeding eerily to its brilliant technological rendezvous through a turmoil of violence at home and abroad) the moon shot.”<sup>46</sup> In short, Updike overloaded the circuits of the novel with topical allusions; so the novel, like Rabbit, was overwhelmed, overturned like a skiff in a storm. Updike left the focused realism of *Rabbit, Run* for the blurred romanticism of *Rabbit Redux*.

It is as impossible to accept Harry Angstrom — a political reactionary, a timid solipsist — in this milieu as it would be to envision Archie Bunker at Woodstock! Still, Harry’s increasingly rich inner life — he is an American Leopold Bloom — *is* convincingly portrayed. While it strains credibility to see him reading Frederick Douglass and denouncing America’s racism, it is entirely convincing to see Rabbit begin to identify his personal condition and fortunes with his beloved country. “I learned,” Harry told his sister, “the country isn’t perfect.” But, Updike adds, “even as he says this he realizes he doesn’t believe it, any more than he believes at heart that he will



die.”<sup>47</sup> (In *Rabbit at Rest* Harry will accept the related notion of his own death and America’s imperfections.) With *Rabbit Redux*, Updike’s Rabbit books became parables for the state of the nation and Harry Angstrom became an American representative man. His private story counterpoints the public narrative of American successes and distresses during most of the second half of the twentieth century.

Increasingly, Updike identifies the fortunes of the nation with his hero: as Rabbit goes, so goes America. “America and Harry suffered, marvelled, listened, endured. Not without cost, of course.”<sup>48</sup> In *Rabbit Is Rich*, set in 1979, Updike juxtaposes Harry’s fortunes against the nation’s fate and counts the costs. While America is “running out of gas” (the opening words of the novel), figuratively and literally, during the Carter years, Harry (a “vehicle” indeed!) becomes a Toyota salesman on the Brewer lot owned by Janice and her mother, Mrs. Springer; he grows rich, full of himself, and takes his destined place, socially and economically, in American society, becoming a smiling public man.<sup>49</sup>

Harry is at the top of his game. “A ball at the top of its arc, a leaf on the skin of a pond.”<sup>50</sup> In an extravagant symbolic moment, Harry and Janice make love on a bed strewn with Krugerrands earned from stock investments! However, Harry, finally at ease in Zion — carrying out his appointed golf rounds, still seeking God under skirts — knows it can’t last. He, as Jimmy Carter would soon be, is held hostage to fortune. What goes up must come down; what floats must sink. Though Harry celebrates becoming a grandfather, he knows it is the beginning of the end for him. “Through the murk he glimpses the truth that to be rich is to be robbed, to be rich is to be poor.”<sup>51</sup>

In *Rabbit at Rest*, the final work of the tetralogy, a novel set in the last year of the Reagan administration, it is Rabbit who is running out of gas in a nation of diminishing richness. Harry has the sympathy of his author. Reflecting on “Why Rabbit Had to Go,” Updike says, “It’s a depressed book about a depressed man, written by a depressed man.”<sup>52</sup> For all that — the identification between the novelist and his hero, which Wills and others have noted — the novel in no way constitutes Updike’s unqualified defense of Harry Angstrom and his values, as Wills and others charge. Rather, Updike beautifully balances sympathy with satire, suggesting, as he does in the Uncle Sam scene, that Rabbit *is* America, in all its flawed flamboyance. It is, as Henry James said, “a complex fate” to be an American: Rabbit is buoyant with optimism, selfish, potent, improvisatory, dangerous, irrepressible, overreaching, fated. Everything he does, he now believes, is informed by “his faint pronged sense of doom.”<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, Rabbit, no longer the swift runner and artful dodger he was as a young man, looks at himself more honestly and critically than he ever had before. “Fifty-five and fading.” He sees his own swollen reflection in the Toyota showroom glass (“a giant ballroom”) and wonders what has become of him.<sup>54</sup> He is even able to admit to a selfishness that has allowed him to use others and be callous to his family. “His own son can’t stand to be in the same room with him. Ruth once called him Mr. Death.”<sup>55</sup>

The novel opens with Harry Angstrom in the Southwest Florida Regional Airport, awaiting the arrival of Nelson and Pru, his daughter-in-law — a woman who excites lust in the aging Rabbit — and their two children — Judy (age eight) and Roy (age four). But Rabbit senses he may be awaiting “something more ominous and intimately his: his own death, shaped vaguely like an airplane.”<sup>56</sup> Rabbit had always sought, through flight, some undefined sense of wholeness, harmony, and radiance,

which he called *it*. Now *it* — death, a personification of the hollowness at the center of his ever-selfish being — seeks him.

Yet Rabbit is neither bitter about his state nor apologetic about his life. Indeed, he is teeming with wonder at all that is passing and he is rich with realizations. Rabbit explains the credo that guided his action when he tells his granddaughter why he did not park his car where an attendant directed him. “Whenever somebody tells me to do something my instinct’s always to do the opposite. It’s got me into a lot of trouble, but I’ve had a lot of fun. This bossy old guy was pointing one direction so I went the other and found a space,” just as he used to find quick openings on the basketball court.<sup>57</sup> But he now moves warily and tries to protect his granddaughter in ways he failed to protect Becky, his daughter, who had drowned in *Rabbit, Run*, or Jill, his young lover, who was burned to death in *Rabbit Redux*. Updike informs Rabbit’s every step with a sense of fragility, caution, wariness. Taking Judy for candy, he warns her to be careful on the escalator. “Easy does it, pick a step and stay on it. Don’t get on a crack.” At the bottom he says, “O.K., step off, but not too soon. don’t panic, it’ll happen, O.K., good.”<sup>58</sup>

Rabbit’s best times are behind him and his days are nearly done. Weighted by a lifetime of self-indulgence, stuffed with junk foods he cannot deny himself, Rabbit, at 230 pounds, has trouble turning his head, “his neck stiff with fat.”<sup>59</sup> He is seized by chest pains and his vision is foggy. He is, as they say, a heart attack waiting to happen. Much like his beloved, decaying nation. “Everything falling apart, airplanes, bridges, eight years under Reagan of nobody minding the store, making money out of nothing, running up debt, trusting in God.”<sup>60</sup> A 747 is blown out of the sky over Lockerbie, Scotland, and Rabbit identifies with “those bodies fallen smack upon the boggy Scottish earth like garbage bags full of water.”<sup>61</sup>

Harry and Janice, having turned over management of the Toyota dealership in Brewer to Nelson, live in Florida half the year now, in Deleon (*Deelyun*, or “deal you in,” as the locals pronounce it), a town named in cynical allusion to the sixteenth-century Spanish explorer, Ponce de León, a forerunner of Rabbit, who sought eternal youth in the same place. But Rabbit’s Florida is strewn with junky businesses serving the elderly, a landscape laden in death imagery. “On the telephone wires, instead of the sparrows and starlings you see in Pennsylvania, lone hawks and buzzards sit.”<sup>62</sup>

In their two-bedroom condominium in Valhalla Village, on the fourth floor of a housing unit overlooking a golf course, a dwelling for them and other migratory “snow birds,” Harry, now given to Proustian reveries, remembers things past and contemplates the end. He is taking his last look around and Updike is there to show him the way. Finally Rabbit learns the route on his life map. When Harry takes his grandchildren on a tour, “he unfolds a map he carries in the glove compartment. *Figure out where you’re going before you go there*: he was told that a long time ago.”<sup>63</sup>

Part of the charm and the horror of Harry Angstrom and his exemplary life is that he has not, as Ruth long ago noted, given up. He *still* thinks that “there’s something that wants me to find it.” The indescribable *it*, he hopes, is nothing less than a vision of divinity and purpose, a fusion of the lonely *I* with God — at least a clarification of life’s mysteries. Rabbit thinks he still might discover *it* within the arbitrary rules of games or by transgressing social and sexual norms in pursuit of his little ecstasies.

Rabbit’s vision clears on the golf course near his Deleon condo, where he plays

with three wise men, as he believes them to be — three Jewish retirees, men who accept their lives as Rabbit, that funky searcher, never can.

Always, golf holds out the hope of perfection, of a perfect weightlessness and consummate ease, for now and again it does happen, happen in three dimensions, shot after shot . . . All you have to do is take a simple pure swing and puncture the picture in the middle with a ball that shrinks in a second to the size of a needle-prick, a tiny tunnel into the absolute. That would be *it*.<sup>64</sup>

But Rabbit searches for meaning in ways other than replaying the games of his youth. Throughout *Rabbit at Rest*, Harry reads, a few pages each night, Barbara Tuchman's *The First Salute*, a book about the Dutch role in the American Revolution. Tuchman's comments obviously also apply to America under Reagan; they allow Updike to filter a larger vision of national decline through Rabbit's semiconscious haze: "Fantasies about America produced two strongly contradictory conclusions that in the end came to the same point of injecting some caution into the golden dreams."<sup>65</sup> Could America become one nation? Were its people too self-indulgent? Such speculations help Harry get to sleep, but they also point us to Updike's larger thematic purposes.

Then Harry has his inevitable heart attack. While he is sailing with Judy, their boat overturns and Harry, in a truly heroic moment, drawing upon all his instinctive and improvisatory gifts, rescues his granddaughter from drowning and gets her back to shore before he collapses. (In *Rabbit, Run*, Rabbit abandoned Janice, who accidentally drowned their baby, Becky, an event that haunts Harry and Janice for the rest of their lives.) "Whatever it is, *it* has found *him*, and is working him over," Rabbit decides, after his heart attack.<sup>66</sup> Life is a game of elimination, he concludes, wondering who next is *it*.<sup>67</sup>

Recuperating in Penn Park, in Brewer, Pennsylvania, Rabbit revisits scenes of his youth, taking his long goodbye and confronting new troubles. Nelson has, in their absence, ruined the family business, run up a massive debt to drug dealers, and nearly destroyed himself with a cocaine addiction. Cocaine is Nelson's *it*, his quick trip out of a miserable world, as he suggests when he admits his addiction to his mother. "I love coke, Mom. And it loves me. I can't explain it. It's right for me. It makes me feel *right*, in a way nothing else does."<sup>68</sup>

Nelson, his father's son, is another representative man, a personification of the thirty-something, self-indulgent, financially and personally overextended hustling men of the Reagan era. Nelson had plunged his family into the crimes of the 1980s — fraud and debt from overextended credit, his company books cooked by a book-keeper who is dying of AIDS. Yet Nelson has his own faith in America as a rescuing God. "It's *easy* to be rich," he tells his father, "that's what this country is all about."<sup>69</sup> Nelson, who lacks Rabbit's redeeming charm, reveals a future in which self-destructive American men meet their dour fate and foreshadow greater national miseries.

Nelson takes on unmanageable burdens, but for Harry this is a time of letting go. He visits Thelma Harrison, with whom he has been having an affair for a decade, since they first made love in a Caribbean wife swap in *Rabbit Is Rich*; now she is dying of lupus. She gives him a Diet Coke and Harry reflects on a larger design of diminishment. "First they take the cocaine out, then the caffeine, and now the sugar."<sup>70</sup> Harry, who has turned fifty-six by this time, is more cautious, feeling more



mortal. Though Thelma wants to, he does not want to make love with her. He worries about AIDS. (Ronnie, her husband, Rabbit's former high school teammate, has slept around.) "Love and death, they can't be pried apart any more."<sup>71</sup>

Rabbit undergoes angioplasty, making his temporary stay against death. In the hospital he continues to settle his affairs. His nurse, Annabelle Byer, may be his daughter by Ruth. She is kind to him, asks him if he wants to see her mother, but Rabbit passes up the chance to see his former lover, the woman he has sought for years. A time to love and a time to die. When Thelma and Ron Harrison visit him in the hospital, she says there is a time for everything and this is the time for her to give up. Despite the presence of her husband, she kisses Harry goodbye.

Lost opportunity is not only a personal but also a national condition, as Updike makes clear when Rabbit reflects on George Bush, president-elect. "Harry misses Reagan a bit, at least he was dignified, and had that dream distance; the powerful thing about him as President was that you never knew how much he knew, nothing or everything, he was like God that way, you had to do a lot of it yourself. With this new one you know he knows something, but it is a small thing."<sup>72</sup> *Rabbit at Rest* is a parable about the diminishing promise of American life, perhaps about the betrayed promise of all life. (Did Updike find renewed national purpose in Bush's quick devastation of Iraq in 1991?)

Yet in the midst of death, Updike implies, there *is* life. Out of mutual need — each feels abandoned by a spouse — Pru and Harry, staying in the Springer house, come together in sex. While Nelson is in a drug rehabilitation center and Janice is taking real estate classes, Harry and his daughter-in-law form a brief union, transgress acceptable norms and decencies to give each other solace and passing pleasure. "Her tall pale wide-hipped nakedness in the dimmed room is lovely much as those pear trees in blossom along that block in Brewer last month were lovely, all his it had seemed, a piece of paradise blundered upon, incredible."<sup>73</sup>

Blessed by the incredible once again, for a while Rabbit seems his old self, reborn. He takes over management of the car lot again. As the Toyota ad put it, "Who could ask for anything more?"<sup>74</sup> Harry plays the role of Uncle Sam in Brewer's Fourth of July parade. But he cannot long escape death images. Thelma dies. Then Mr. Natsume Shimada of Toyota arrives, like a grim reaper. Shimada speaks in a comic accent, but he bears a serious message, not only for Harry, but for America. "We produce better product for rittle man's money, yes? You ask for it, we got it, yes?" But "America make nothing, just do mergers, do acquisitions, rower taxes, raise national debt. Nothing comes out, all goes in — foreign goods, foreign capital. America take everything, give nothing. Rike big black hole." Shimada sees Americans as jolly, undisciplined people, living in a country full of dog shit, the nation Rabbit had adored and exploited. Shimada blames Janice and Harry for being in Florida instead of watching over Nelson's management of the firm.<sup>75</sup> When Shimada takes the Toyota dealership away from the Angstroms, he removes the economic bubble that has lifted them to giddy heights. They are on their own, in free-fall.

Nelson returns, filled with the higher power rhetoric of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. With Nelson back, Janice wants Harry to stay away from the lot. "We'll be fine," she says, but, Updike adds, "she lies."<sup>76</sup> Things continue to come apart. Nelson, who at first wanted to start a treatment center at the lot, wants to sell motorcycles. Harry warns there is another economic depression coming.

Janice wants to sell the Penn Park house to pay their debts and for them all to live together in the Springer house.

Harry's troubles come to a head when Janice phones him from the Springer house, where Nelson and his family live, saying that Pru has told them that she and Harry slept together. Janice will never forgive him for what he did; she calls it "monstrous."<sup>77</sup> She insists that he drive over to "process" all this, but Harry packs and heads South, replicating his failed journey of escape in *Rabbit, Run*. Now as then he listens to the radio — oldies songs like "Vaya con Dios" and "It's Magic." He looks for the garage where the farmer had told him he should know where he was going. "Well, now he did. He had learned the road and figured out the destination."<sup>78</sup> This time Rabbit knows where he is going, and Updike allows Rabbit finally to transcend the limits of his commonplace life, though it is the only life he will ever have. Only death is waiting for him to find *it*.

Unrepentant Rabbit runs, completing a journey to Florida he began thirty years before, but this time there is no turning back. On the long drive, then alone in his Deleon condo, Rabbit has time to think and comes to some conclusions that seem to have Updike's endorsement. Updike's stay-at-home hero has finally surpassed his limitations, come to understand *it*, which he finds to be "incredible" or, as Shimada put it, "Rike big black hole." That is, Updike holds Harry Angstrom up to criticism for his selfishness as a husband and father, as a poor caretaker of his talents and a violator of his body, but Updike allows him the dignity of a tragic realization. Rabbit had been "reared in a world where war was not strange, but change was: the world stood still so you could grow up in it. He knows when the bottom fell out." When Kroll's, a huge, hometown department store, closed, while Rabbit was a boy, "Rabbit realized the world was not solid and benign, it was a shabby set of temporary arrangements rigged up for the time being, all for the sake of money. You just passed through, and they milked you for what you were worth, mostly when you were young and gullible. If Kroll's could go, the courthouse could go, the banks could go. When the money stopped, they could close down God Himself." Now Springer Motors will go. And soon, so will he. All things pass. "Nothing is sacred."<sup>79</sup>

Not only does Thelma die, but Barbara Tuchman, chronicler of the American mission, dies as well. Then Baseball Commissioner Bartlett Giamatti dies of a heart attack. Mike Schmidt of the Phillies decides to retire. "I like the way he went out," Rabbit says, "quick, and on his own nickel."<sup>80</sup> Even the demise of the Cold War makes Rabbit plaintive: "It's like nobody's in charge on the other side any more. I miss it, the cold war. It gave you a reason to get up in the morning."<sup>81</sup>

In *Rabbit at Rest*, John Updike posits a parable of national decline and fall. Rabbit, a petty Gatsby, has not fulfilled his early promise, and the nation he loves has turned sour. At least Rabbit decides to go out on his own nickel — he has his final heart attack while playing basketball with a black young man on the outskirts of Deleon. Thirty years before, early in *Rabbit, Run*, he had played in another pickup game, mourning the loss of great days gone. Now he reaches out for *it* one last time. "Up he goes, way up toward the torn clouds. His torso is ripped by a terrific pain, elbow to elbow. He bursts from within; he feels something immense persistently fumble at him, and falls unconscious to the dirt."<sup>82</sup> He is not dead at novel's end, but he is close enough to count out of the game.

Harry Angstrom embodies Updike's portrait of a failed and fallen America. Rabbit fulfilled the promise of American life — athletic prowess, marriage and a

family, sex, and money — and it now promises to kill him. “Enough” is the final word of the novel. Harry (“Rabbit”) Angstrom, representative American man, is done in by his own fulfilled dream of success, his wretched excess.

Brian Moore’s *Lies of Silence*, a novel in the genre of the political thriller, portrays Michael Dillon, a thirty-one-year-old resident of contemporary Belfast, in a “moment of crisis,” arrested, between worlds, unable to mature or regress, a dangling man. Dillon’s crisis seems, at first, private and predictable. In a fictional version of Belfast, Dillon is a husband and a hotel manager of the Clarence, on the Malone Road (in actual Belfast, the Wellington Park is located on the Malone Road), but this is not the life he wanted. “He was a failed poet in a business suit.”<sup>83</sup> Unsurprisingly, though he is married to Moira, age thirty-three, Dillon is in love with Andrea, age nineteen. Moira, who grew up on the Falls Road, hates living away from Belfast, but Andrea, who is from Canada and a former Queen’s University Belfast student, is ready to flee Belfast whenever Dillon can break himself of the city’s hold.

Dillon’s middle-class and midlife crisis turns suddenly and dramatically public. With melodramatic bravura, Moore has Dillon decide to tell Moira he is leaving her, only to be prevented by the appearance in his life of political terrorists, the IRA.

The Dillons live in North Belfast, far from “the image of the city [familiar] to the outside world: graffiti-fouled barricaded slums where the city’s Protestant and Catholic poor confronted each other, year in and year out, in a stasis of hatred, fear and mistrust.”<sup>84</sup> In his neighborhood, Catholics and Protestants live at peace, side by side. But Dillon cannot so easily escape murderous Belfast. IRA men, figures masked in woolen balaclava helmets, materialize like a bad dream and take the Dillons hostage. They explain that Michael, in his car, is to deliver a bomb to the hotel, a bomb designed to kill the Reverend Alun Pottinger, Orange Order propagandist, Moore’s fictionalized portrayal of the Northern Ireland Protestant majority’s propagandist, the Reverend Ian Paisley. Pottinger will be speaking before the Canadian Orange Order at the Clarence. Moira will be held hostage while Michael delivers the bomb. “She needn’t think that bein’ a Catholic from the Falls is goin’ to save her neck,” says an IRA man of Moira. “So, mind what you say, the pair of you.”<sup>85</sup> That is, as the saying goes in tense Northern Ireland, *Whatever you say, say nothing!*

*Lies of Silence* is a novel in which an Irish representative man cannot break out of the debilitating heritage of his divided nation.<sup>86</sup> Dillon is a servant to his betters — hotel clients and the hotel’s American owners — and a feckless dreamer. He maintains his “lies of silence” by betraying his wife, but then conforms to the national lust for martyrdom by threatening to identify a kidnapper and, by so doing, exposes himself to IRA assassins. Finally he *is* a martyr, killed by the IRA, though he had by then decided *not* to inform.

Dillon’s conditions of arrested adolescence — his desire to escape the responsibilities of married love through romance with a younger woman, his hankering for poetry rather than practicality, his wish to run away from his given life to an imagined felicity elsewhere — are all traits enforced by the special conditions of Belfast, as Moore imagines it.

As Michael Dillon drove the bomb from North Belfast, through center city, to the hotel near Queen’s, he was intensely aware of “this ugly, troubled place which held for him implacable memories of his past life.” He drove past the Catholic boarding



school where he had been caned, past the university where he had his failed dream of escape through poetry, past “those Protestant and Catholic ghettos which were the true and lasting legacy of this British Province founded on inequity and sectarian hate.” But he was still trapped, just as he had been as a boy, when he stared out the window “and imagined himself in some aeroplane being lifted over that grey pig’s back of a mountain to places far from here.”<sup>87</sup>

At the Clarence Hotel, Michael parked the car beneath the window of the room in which Pottinger was scheduled to speak, but then rebelled against his captivity and ran across the street to a shop and phoned the police, who cleared the hotel before the bomb exploded. Though Michael had no way of knowing it at the time, Moira was safe, for the IRA lads had left her shortly after Michael drove off with the bomb. But it seems that Michael had, by *not* carrying through with the proxy bombing, broken his ties with Belfast at last, particularly when the suspicious, enraged Moira refuses to go to London with him, where he will bring Andrea and take on a new job at another hotel.

At a farewell party at the Clarence, Dillon’s sense of the pull of place might reflect Moore’s own ambivalence toward Belfast.

This city, with its ugly streets, its endless rain, its monotonous violence, its Protestant prejudice and Catholic cant and, above all, its copycat English ways, incongruous as a top hat on a Tonga king — all of these things he had wanted to flee now lost their power to anger him. Instead in this crowded room filled with Ulster men and women he felt, as people must have felt in wartime, the fellowship of the besieged.<sup>88</sup>

Michael need not have worried, for Belfast would not so easily be abandoned. Briefly, as Michael and Andrea, seemingly safe in England, share idyllic days in a Hampstead flat, he is lulled into the illusion that he might be able to start a new life. “Was it over? Was it possible, here in London, to slip back into the safe anonymous river of ordinary life?”<sup>89</sup> The Belfast police want him to return, to identify one of the kidnappers. Michael vacillates, first telling Andrea that he must “do the right thing,” then telling a newly concerned Moira that he will not testify. Dillon dangles between worlds and convictions. Then the IRA relieves him of the need to choose by gunning him down. Michael Dillon, a man who would have been another Stephen Dedalus, full of silence, exile, and cunning, becomes another Gypo Nolan, the pathetic betrayer in Liam O’Flaherty’s *The Informer*. In *Lies of Silence*, Brian Moore’s myth of Belfast is featured as a destructive place, particularly for its murderous and murdered young men.

*Amongst Women*, John McGahern’s beautiful novel, centers upon the final years of Michael Moran, a cantankerous, occasionally charming, old Irish Republican — a man who fought against British rule before the 1921 treaty divided Ireland, then fought again in the post-treaty Irish Civil War, a man who, in turn, has never ceased fighting the world around him, particularly the members of his own family, those who love him despite himself. “No matter how favourably the tides turned for him he would always contrive to be in permanent opposition.”<sup>90</sup> Like Paddy McGuire, the bitter farmer in Patrick Kavanagh’s poem *The Great Hunger*, McGahern’s Moran was one with his miseries, except for those rare moments of rapture when he was alone with his fields. But

at the end of the day, he was more the victim than the lord of all he surveyed. "Instead of using the fields, he sometimes felt as if the fields had used him."<sup>91</sup>

In the late 1950s, Moran is an aged man, living on a farm in the west of Ireland with his second wife, three daughters, and one son — another son having fled the sting of his father's hard hand and sharp tongue. After his failed struggle for a united Ireland, Moran was disillusioned by the "crowd of small-minded gangsters" who ran the Republic.<sup>92</sup> All he came to care for was his family, but he fouled his own nest with his bitterness. Moran distrusted, as much as he relied upon, the hope embedded in the bones of the women he dominated. In time, each of his children fought his and her way out of their father's dour world, finding new lives in Dublin and London, though all but one of them returns home for renewal of their defining ties to family and place — Moran's farm, Great Meadow, outside Carrick, in the west of Ireland. McGahern shows how Moran's strengths were gradually passed on to his long-suffering wife and daughters and became their heritage, while Moran's sons turned away from their imposing father as a model. *Amongst Women* is a tribute to the women of Ireland who come into their own in our time, replacing the driven men who founded a nation.

Just below the surface of this realistic novel, we can detect the faint outline of a symbolic pattern. Moran represents the hard life and harder heart of an Ireland that was quickly fading, Yeats's "great hatred, little room." His women both embody the mythic Irish role of sacrifice, particularly for Rose, his noble wife, and represent, for his daughter, the new sense of identity for women in Ireland, the emergence into a new world of self-reliance and authority. Though McGahern does not flinch at portraying the self-consuming passions of Moran, the novel shows proper respect for a man who, however misguided, fought for his nation and believed in his church and his family. Indeed, the novel is a literary act of mercy in its compassion for characters caught in the nets and nettles of the hard life that Ireland offers its citizens. When Moran rails at his firstborn, Luke, who left his home and never returned, Rose urges Moran to "do the generous thing," but that is beyond him.<sup>93</sup> Some critics said much the same, and not without just cause, after reading McGahern's early fiction, which was unrelenting in its flaying of Ireland, but *Amongst Women* is an eloquent statement of reconciliation.

McGahern, Ireland's finest living writer of fiction, has long imagined Ireland as a prison in which his characters are confined with lifetime sentences, though in *The Pornographer* he redefined Ireland as a haven in a lawless world.<sup>94</sup> In *Amongst Women* McGahern goes to the heart of the country to look at the destructive elements and hidden strengths in traditional Irish life.

The novel shows the redemptive element in traditional Irish family life, rooted in a dear, perpetual *place*, surrounded by fields; the Morans are sustained by unquestioning faith, illustrated by their nightly recitation of the Rosary, each member saying a decade. In Irish country life, cohesion is beautifully embodied in field work, as when all members of the family join in gathering the hay into sheaves. Or when they all go together, squeezed into a car, to midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. "Once they crossed the bridge the church appeared like an enormous lighted ship in the night. There was something wonderful and moving about leaving the car by the roadside and walking together in the cold and darkness towards the great lighted church"<sup>95</sup> However confining it might have been, a sense of coherence resided in the community. In the town, Moran's visiting daughters were greeted warmly on Saint

Stephen's Day. "'You're home! You're home for Christmas!' and hands were gripped and held instead of shaken to show the strength of feeling."<sup>96</sup>

Though McGahern welcomes the new age of wider individual opportunities, a sense of regret for lost clarity in the hard pastoral life of western Ireland suffuses the novel. Just before his death, reluctant to let go, Moran rises, walks the fields, takes his last look around. "The meadow . . . was no longer empty but filling with a fresh growth, a faint blue tinge in the rich green of the young grass. To die was never to look on all this again. It would live in others' eyes but not in his."<sup>97</sup> McGahern shows that these fields — and Himself, man of the house, in them — will live in the eyes of the women who, quite literally, survived him. And in the eyes of the readers of *Amongst Women*, a novel of a troubled and troubling man of Ireland.

Robert Bly's *Iron John: A Book About Men* is a book about male initiation, although, according to Bly, it in no way denigrates women or resists the insights of the women's movement. The "Wild Man" Bly admires is no macho rapist. Rather, he is one "who has examined his wound, resembles a Zen priest, a shaman, or a woodsman more than a savage."<sup>98</sup>

To make his point, Bly retells, interprets, and amplifies, with examples drawn from mythology and other folk tales, "Iron John," a tale first set down by the Grimm brothers around 1820, but the story could be thousands of years old. In the tale a boy loses a golden ball, which rolls into Wild Man's cage. Wild Man promises to return the ball only if the boy steals the key to the cage from beneath his mother's pillow and frees Wild Man. This the boy does, setting in motion a series of adventures (an initiation rite), which eventually brings him to manhood. "The Wild Man here amounts to an invisible presence, the companionship of the ancestors and the great artists among the dead."<sup>99</sup>

For all that, Bly's Wild Man is no wimp. Indeed, Bly sets himself against the "soft male," that is, the modern male who has been both chastened and enlightened into tenderness and passivity by women. So for all its antimacho consciousness, Bly's thesis retains trace elements of anger against what he presumes women (Mom again!) have done to men. Bly would preserve the male "instinct for fierceness," but not "the instinct for aggression." For Bly, "in recent decades, the separatist wing of the feminist movement, in a justified fear of brutality, has labored to breed fierceness out of men."<sup>100</sup>

However, Bly does not always make clear the line between positive fierceness and negative aggression. He urges men to heed the call of the Wild Man and leave "the busy life" (that is, the life of dutiful work and home commitment) behind. Bly praises but does not adequately illustrate "the positive side of male sexuality." Though the Iron John story ends in a marriage ceremony between the boy-become-man and a princess, Bly says little about the way manhood is affirmed through *fulfilling* the roles of worthy husband and father by living in the midst of the life we all know. For Bly, "every modern male has, lying at the bottom of his psyche, a large, primitive being covered with hair down to his feet. Making contact with the Wild Man is the step the eighties male or the nineties male has yet to make . . . Contact with Iron John requires a willingness to descend into the male psyche and accept what's dark down there, including the *nourishing* dark."<sup>101</sup> Sadly, such assertions make more sense around a campfire, or between the pages of a book, than they do in the midst of a busy life lived within a complex society. Bly provides a map of psy-



chic and spiritual escape, but he says little about how a man should get through the day in his given life. *Iron John*, then, is still another American wish-fulfillment book in which the adolescent hero lights out for the territories.

The works discussed in this article portray men who journey away from their ordinary lives, guided by various versions of the Wild Man, into initiation rites, searching for some undefinable *it*. Some of them find plausible new lives based upon old deceptions. Paul de Man was a fraud all his life and, consequently, promoted a theory of interpretation that justifies deceit. Harry Angstrom, a failure as a husband, lover, and father, became a bloated, foolish, self-consuming solipsist in *Rabbit at Rest*. But, through Updike's marvelous, inside, present-tense narrative, Rabbit retains the redeeming courage of his own convictions, the candor to see who he was, and the rashness to pursue what he wanted, even when that was meretricious.

Patrick Bateman, Bret Easton Ellis's monstrous creation, is a perfect illustration of Bly's thesis that modern capitalism encourages its young to perpetuate the occasion of ersatz initiation through various means of thrill seeking. In *American Psycho*, sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll are insufficient distractions for the jaded psyche of young Bateman, who turns to sadistic thrill killings. Though he inhabits a more subtly executed house of fiction, the same can be said of Parker Jacoda in Paul Theroux's *Chicago Loop*.

Sooner or later — only at the very end for Rabbit — these American men, arrested adolescents all, abandon their responsibilities as husbands, as fathers, as responsible citizens, in failed quests to create new lives, new selves. Taken together, they certainly do not live up to their responsibilities as protectors of the earth, which is what Bly says the Wild Man should be. Rather, these men, real and imaginary, embody the wilfulness, insensitivity, angry and powerful sides of men. What is admirable, to varying degrees, is the candor and artfulness of these male authors who successfully expose the dark half of the male psyche. What is wondrous, too, is the redemptive grace occasionally found in these figures who refuse to settle for things-as-they-are.

Perhaps McGahern and Moore, Irish writers, present their compromised fiction heroes with more sympathy because these novelists more persuasively illustrate the shaping hand of cultural-historical influence on their fictional characters and therefore blame them less than American novelists, who present fictional heroes who like to think that each man is the author of his own destiny. Moore's Michael Dillon tries to fly past the nets of responsibility, planning to leave his wife, family, and country for a new love from the New World, but IRA men intrude to remind him of his local commitments. Even then Dillon leaves Belfast, seeking a renewed self in England, but the ties that bind him to home — Belfast as the quotidian! — are far-reaching. Moore presents a world in which men are trapped between a stone and a hard place; interestingly, the women around Dillon survive and grow, while he is killed.

John McGahern's Irish world is even more enclosing, for his representative man, Michael Moran, an embittered former rebel, a petty tyrant who rules his farm and family with an iron hand, will not let go of destructive old ways, though it drives his sons away. His women, wife and daughters, suffer even more; however, at the end of their father's days, they grow strong through their resistance. As in Moore's *Lies of Silence*, McGahern's *Amongst Women* does not conclude with the death of the male protagonist; rather, both novels turn their attentions to the surviving women. The fictional heroes of these novels by Moore and McGahern are men who are defined by their reactions to social contexts and redeemed by the devotion of their women.

They have a far narrower range of choice to impose shape and meaning than do their American counterparts. Thus their manhood, more circumscribed, is more plausibly portrayed.

More than thirty years ago, Leslie Fiedler, in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, suggested that American fiction, like American life, is “charmingly and infuriatingly ‘boyish.’” As a result, our literature insufficiently deals with mature social arrangements; instead, child- and adolescent-centered, “the American novel is pre-eminently a novel of terror.” As we see from the American novels here examined — the two Irish novels tell a different story — little has changed since Fiedler wrote:

Our great novelists, though experts on indignity and assault, on loneliness and terror, tend to avoid treating the passionate encounter of a man and woman, which we expect at the center of a novel. Indeed, they rather shy away from permitting in their fictions the presence of any full-fledged, mature women, giving us instead monsters of virtue or bitchery, symbols of the rejection or fear of sexuality.<sup>102</sup>

The representative men portrayed in these books have much to answer for, but most of the writers who portrayed these men deserve praise for their candor about the male animal. 🐻

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## Notes

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