

The Patient Ant and the Foolish Grasshopper: John Updike's Elaboration on La Fontaine.

It is common procedure when considering a case of literary reception, or a case of apparent literary influence, to seek to establish the history of the receiving author's engagement with the original work, and indeed with the entire oeuvre of the earlier writer. This is hardly necessary in the present case, however, as the original text in question is one of La Fontaine's most popular fables, "La cigale et la fourmi,"¹ and its reception is signalled by John Updike in his story, "Brother Grasshopper,"² to which the fable gives rise. It is hardly necessary, in other words, because, first, it is only to have been expected that La Fontaine's fables, and "La cigale et la fourmi" in particular, would have been familiar to John Updike (familiar, that is, to a serious and important writer, and therefore to a serious and voracious *reader* of the literary canon), and, second, because Updike reveals in his text that his story is indeed an appropriation of and elaboration upon La Fontaine's fable. Let it be recorded, nonetheless, that a dutiful check through the essays, introductions, reviews, and other bits and pieces constituting Updike's non-fiction work did not reveal any reference to La Fontaine, ants, or grasshoppers.³

"Brother Grasshopper"⁴ tells the story of Fred Emmet and Carlyle Saughtierfield, two young middle-class men who get to know each other at Harvard through their courtship of two sisters, Betsy and Germaine Terwilliger. The third-person narration tells the story from the point of view of Fred, and traces the relationship between the two men over the years — as they get to know each other, as their respective relationships with the sisters develop into marriage, as the children arrive, as Fred and Carlyle follow their different professional paths, and as they pass into middle age and beyond. Having established the personalities of the two men, and the relationship between them, the narrative moves towards and into the definitive, symbolic encounter between them, before jumping forward to the final scenes of the story, just after Carlyle's death, and particularly to the moment of the scattering of his ashes into the sea.

As suggested above, spotting the parallels between the fable and the short story hardly demands an impressive feat of interpretive skill or great literary awareness on the reader's part,

as John Updike makes clear, not only through a fairly explicit reference but also through a general fidelity to certain narrative elements of the fable, that he has drawn upon La Fontaine's fable as an important moral, thematic, and structural source of inspiration for his own story (which is not to say, however, that the correspondences between the fable and the short story would be obvious had Updike, by way of the reference in the story, not directed the reader towards the fable and had he not given us a clue through the "Grasshopper" of the title). The interest for the literary critic, then, lies in investigating the extent to which La Fontaine's short and condensed narrative exerts its influence upon Updike's story and in understanding how Updike uses his extended narrative form to elaborate upon "La cigale et la fourmi."

The narrative of "La cigale et la fourmi" can be divided broadly into a two-part structure, consisting of, first, the exposition of the reason for and the nature of the *cigale*'s dilemma and, second, the encounter between the *cigale* and the *fourmi*, where the latter refuses the former's request for "Quelque grain." These same narrative structural elements are to be found embedded in Updike's story, and indeed account for most of the text. But Updike uses his extended narrative — La Fontaine's fable consists of just over one hundred words, whereas Updike's story runs to over sixteen pages — to broaden and deepen the expository section that characterizes both narratives: this section alone takes up almost two-thirds of the length of his story. And "Brother Grasshopper" contains a third section, one not present in "La cigale et la fourmi": where La Fontaine leaves his readers to imagine the fate that might await the *cigale* in the wake of the *fourmi*'s pitiless "dansez maintenant," Updike, in a short epilogue, brings us forward in time to have us discover the respective fates of his two protagonists.

In mirroring so closely the narrative structure of La Fontaine's fable, Updike's story suggests and facilitates a fruitful critical reading procedure for the analysis of the two texts: the discussion in this article, therefore, in comparing and contrasting the two stories, will follow the parallel narrative structural unfoldings of both, paying particular attention to the precise manner in which Updike extends and elaborates upon La Fontaine's fable.

The title of Updike's story contains in miniature the twin thematic thrusts of the narrative. If the literary resonances and connotations of "Grasshopper," in others words the La Fontaine

influence, will be developed as the story progresses, most overtly in the second half, it is the term “Brother” which provides the thematic momentum, and the emotional energy, that sets the story on its way, as well, of course, as introducing an element — brotherhood — not present in La Fontaine’s fable.⁵ The theme of sibling relationship and the possibility of a more metaphorical sense of fraternity are suggested from the opening line of the story: “Fred Emmet ... had been an only child” (29). And although Fred had tended to think of what it would have been like to have had a *sister*, he had always experienced a sense of envy whenever his father mentioned his own brother, even though the two had never got along very well: “a brother was something his father had *had*, augmenting his existence, giving it an additional dimension available to him all his life” (29). What Fred’s own family could not provide becomes possible, if in surrogate form, through the family he marries into: the sister of his future wife marries Carlyle Saughterfield, “a tall bony New Englander with a careless, potent manner” (30), the man who will be a kind of brother to Fred all *his* life.

It is particularly during the period of courtship of the Terwilliger sisters that the sibling nature of the relationship between Fred and Carlyle is developed. Carlyle is two years older than Fred, and their relationship acquires the comic contradictions and fierce investments that characterize the exchanges between brothers separated by the temporally insignificant but developmentally immense distance of two years. Fred, as younger brothers do with older brothers, looks up to Carlyle, finding him “exotic and intimidating” (30). This intimidation, initially at least, stems from Carlyle’s greater physical strength and prowess, manifested in the games of catch they played together in the sisters’ college courtyard as they wait for Betsy and Germaine to join them, where Fred’s hands sting with the force with which Carlyle throws the ball to him. But Carlyle, too, adopts *his* role, that of the elder brother, a role he takes seriously, and one, we sense, he invests with a certain tenderness, as he keeps a watchful eye out for Fred’s welfare: when playing touch football with his rugged, confident college friends Carlyle “protectively saw to it that his timorous and undersized brother in courtship usually played on his team” (31). And when the two couples go skiing in these early days of friendship and discovery, Carlyle “was as patient as a professional instructor” (31) in teaching the inexperienced Fred how to cope with

the multiple challenges of the ski slopes.

To these familiar roles and exchanges that characterize a fraternal relationship — the admiration of the younger “brother” and the protectiveness of the elder — is added the equally familiar combination of natural superiority and resentful submission. On one, early occasion, when Carlyle brings Fred and the sisters out sailing, he pushes Fred into taking control of the boat. When Fred manages to get the hang of it enough to keep the boat afloat, his indignation surfaces: “*This bastard*, Fred thought, as the boat sickeningly heeled, *is trying to make a man of me*” (32). For all that, though, it is Fred whom Carlyle chooses to be his best man, “over all his old skiing and hunting buddies” (32), when he marries Germaine. Fred feels “flattered” (32) at the honour, and, we might reasonably assume, is happy that his future brother-in-law has expressed so publicly the bond that unites them. And it is indeed the theme of fraternity that Updike privileges in the opening to his story: his title identifies the other to oneself as a brother, and these early passages insist on the camaraderie and dependency of a fraternal relationship that develops between strangers, between two men who come to inhabit each other’s lives and to share each other’s tribulations. It is the potential for reciprocity, not rivalry, between those bound by an essential and inescapable condition — the burden of being, coping, and surviving — that flows from the early emphasis on a fundamental brotherhood. Above all, the opening bestows on Carlyle, who is to play the role of the *cigale* in the story, the qualities of empathy and generosity, which represents already a striking and significant elaboration of character by Updike on what are essentially character types in La Fontaine. What now remains to be addressed is the progression of this initial broadening of theme and character as Updike’s story purposefully follows the narrative evolution of “La cigale et la fourmi.”

La cigale, ayant chanté

Tout l’été

“Brother Grasshopper”’s shadowing of “La cigale et la fourmi” is immediately discernible in the opening paragraphs, through the choice of names of Updike’s characters. The first letter of the French terms for La Fontaine’s protagonists, *cigale* and *fourmi*, are reproduced in the names

of Updike's protagonists, Carlyle and Fred. And it is indeed Carlyle who plays the role of the *cigale* and Fred who plays the role of the *fourmi*. Moreover, the implicit character traits of the protagonists in the fable, developed and made explicit in the short story, find expression in the names "Carlyle" and "Fred": the former is rather dashing and extravagant, while the latter is dull and unadventurous (the same, indeed, may be said of their surnames, "Saughterfield" and "Emmet").

The opening, expository section of "Brother Grasshopper" is devoted to a development, a rounding out, of the characters of Fred and Carlyle, a narrative dimension that can only be achieved through inference in "La cigale et la fourmi." The physical features that Updike attributes to his characters are seen to dictate to some extent their personalities and lifestyles. "Fred had been sickly and much-protected as a child, and even his late growth spurt had left him well under six feet tall" (30). The contrasting physiques of the two men explain the sense of intimidation Fred feels in Carlyle's presence. The physical strength of the latter is revealed to Fred in Carlyle's throwing of the ball when they play catch, and is remarked upon explicitly: "The strength stored in the other man's long arms and wide, sloping shoulders was amazing — a whippy, excessive strength almost burdensome, Fred imagined, to carry" (31). The "timorous and undersized" Fred is, as a result of his less robust physique, wary of the dangers of physically challenging sports — to the point of being afraid of the damage one of Carlyle's fast-thrown balls might inflict on him — and is made to "shudder" (30) at Carlyle's recounting of his mountain adventures with his friends while climbing — stories of "sheer ice, blinding fog, tainted venison that left them all vomiting" (p. 30), as well as at what seems to have been the fatal fall of one of Carlyle's friends. Fred, so different from Carlyle, is alert to the common denominator in the "sailing, skiing, climbing, and hunting" (30) that form Carlyle's leisure-time activities: "All these upper-class skills involved danger, Fred noticed" (31).

The characters of Fred and Carlyle are already taking definitive form, and are quite consistent with the inferred character traits of La Fontaine's protagonists: Fred is apprehensive, cautious, and careful, in sharp contrast to the reckless and danger-loving Carlyle, whose dashing, daring, devil-may-care attitude is captured in the small details of his owning his own car (and of the

kind of car it is — a “snappy green convertible”), of his hair being “longer than a businessman’s should be” (32), and of his having “a betranced look” (32) on his face as the boat Fred is attempting to control leans and heels “terrifyingly” with the force of the wind and the sea. While we may not as yet have Fred the *fourmi* and Carlyle the *cigale*, Updike’s story has already sketched out the features that will be developed into full character portraits in complete affinity with the protagonists of La Fontaine’s fable.

The contrasting personalities of the two men are revealed in their attraction to the opposing charms and possibilities presented by the Terwilliger sisters: “Germaine was more animated, more gregarious, and more obviously pretty than Fred’s sensible Betsy” (30). The epithet attributed directly to Betsy, as well as the observation of the qualities she had in less abundance than her sister, make clear Fred’s value system, in so far as, by virtue of the permanent partner he chooses, he translates it into a life-choice: his life will be governed by what is reasonable and judicious, a philosophy that will be sustained and guaranteed by his sensible, sensibly named wife. Not so for Carlyle, who chooses the more physically attractive, more spontaneous, less predictable, and less sensibly named Germaine. The prudence and forethought of Fred and Betsy and the passion and heedlessness of Carlyle and Germaine find expression in the sizes of the families they produce: “There were nine children, in the end: Fred and Betsy’s three, Carlyle and Germaine’s six. Six! Even in those years before ecology-mindedness, that was a lot, for non-Catholics” (34). Although the text does not spell things out, the relative family sizes do allow us to draw conclusions: the sensible couple produced the number of children consistent with their means of support, with their desire for a certain kind of control, and with a philosophy of moderation, while the more extravagant couple indulged in no such calculation, no foregoing of today’s passions and pleasures out of concern for possible repercussions tomorrow. The *fourmi* and the *cigale* are beginning to emerge.

The themes of dependence and independence that are to be found in La Fontaine’s fable — *la fourmi* relies uniquely upon its own resources to get through the cold winter months⁶ while *la cigale* appeals to the concept, and seeks to draw upon the material support, of a wider community by turning to its neighbour in a time of crisis — are extensively developed in

Updike's story, notably through the communitarian philosophy and less individualistic attitude of Carlyle, an approach already evident in the number of children he has. Carlyle's father had died young and his mother had remarried and now lived in Paris (this, surely, a salute to La Fontaine), and he appeared to have no contact with his only sister, leading Fred and Betsy to speculate that "Carlyle was afraid of running out of family" (34), hence the large number of children he fathered. This need to surround himself with kith and kin extended, whenever possible, to his creating a wider interdependent community of families with Fred and Betsy and their children: "Carlyle saw to it that they all spent at least several weeks of the year as one family" (34). The community spirit is seen to be cultivated solely by Carlyle, and rather against the wishes of the more independent Emmets, who "sometimes found the joint vacations heavy going" (34). It is, indeed, particularly in the descriptions of this communal living that Updike draws upon the *cigale* of La Fontaine's fable for his portrait of Carlyle, and notably in the elaboration of the fable's metaphorical *chanté*.

The *chanté* of the fable allows a wide range of articulations. It is the privileging of irresponsibility over responsibility, indolence over industry, enjoyment over effort, prodigality over parsimony, caprice over constancy, passion over prudence, dispersal over purpose, today over tomorrow. Carlyle's brand of "singing" was inflicted on everyone during the communal holidays, taking a variety of forms and featuring notably an extravagant indifference to waste, beginning with the money he spent on cameras:

[E]veryone was benevolently bullied into expeditions — to the beach, to an amusement park, to some mountain trail — whose ultimate purpose seemed to be to create photo opportunities for Carlyle. He had become a fervent photographer, first with Nikons and then with Leicas, until he discovered that an even more expensive camera could be bought — a Hasselblad. (35)

To say, indeed, that Carlyle was merely indifferent to waste is an understatement: he seems actively to embrace prodigality, as if this were a measure of the extent to which one seized the possibilities life had to offer in order to live it to the full. One of the photos taken during these holidays was of all nine children crammed into the Emmets' "old workhorse of a Fairlane station wagon" (35) — Fred's essential personality is reflected in his choice of car as much as

Carlyle's is in his — with each child holding an ice-cream cone. The text describes the aftermath of the photo, when the cones melt under the summer sun and have to be thrown out the window:

“Over the side!” Carlyle called from behind the wheel, and an answering voice would pipe, “Over the side!,” and another gob of ice-cream would spatter on the receding highway, to gales of childish glee. Conspicuous waste pained Fred, but seemed to exhilarate Carlyle. (35)

Carlyle is in full song in these descriptions of the communal vacations, cheerfully and carelessly consuming and disposing, recklessly spontaneous in the fevered realization of one articulation of the *cigale’s chanté* — Horace’s *carpe diem*. That his prodigality, however, has a philosophical underpinning, although not articulated in such terms, and that this is inseparable from and is the source of other, winning dimensions of his personality, is clear from various gestures that allow his extravagance to be reconceived as generosity. The text evokes Carlyle’s “acts of *largesse*” that made the Emmets feel squeezed — “plastic-foam boxes of frozen steaks that would arrive before a visit, mail-ordered from Omaha, and heavy parcels of post-visit prints, glossily processed by a film laboratory in West Germany that Carlyle used” (35). Updike’s fidelity to La Fontaine’s fable is apparent here in the detail of using food — ice-cream cones and steaks — to highlight Carlyle’s extravagance and the theme of waste in general, but of more significance is his clear desire to explore, through the continuing development of the character of Carlyle, the latent possibilities of the *cigale’s chanté*, and the latent complexity and ambiguity of what might appear, at first sight, to be a rather clear-cut moral in La Fontaine. If the necessarily restricted portrait of the *cigale* in the fable may present the latter as being simply foolishly shortsighted, Updike’s elaboration allows us to conclude that Carlyle’s profligacy should not be singled out and isolated in order to be condemned, but that it is, rather, inseparable from a wider personality trait which bespeaks a quite laudable attitude to life, and whose effects are seen to be positive and rewarding for those around him. On one occasion, Carlyle borrows Fred’s car to take his daughters and nieces out for the day, an expedition that included buying them presents, bringing them for a game of miniature golf, and a trip to the cinema. Fred had

needed his car, so, upon Carlyle's return

Fred let his temper fly. He felt his face flush; he heard his shrill voice flail and crack. Carlyle, who had returned from his long expedition with bags of farmstand vegetables, pounds of unfilleted fish, and a case of imported beer, stared at Fred with his uncanny green eyes for some seconds and then cheerfully laughed. It was a laugh of such genuine, unmalicious, good-tempered amusement that Fred had to join in. Through his brother-in-law's eyes he saw himself clearly, as a shrill and defensive pipsqueak. It was, he imagined, this sort of honest illumination — this sort of brusque restoration to one's true measure — that siblings offer one another. As an only child, Fred had never been made to confront his limits. (36)

Carlyle emerges here as unselfish, tolerant, good-natured, and relaxed, and with a healthy, joyous attitude to life. Thanks to his thoughtfulness, enthusiasm, and generosity, the children have had a fine day out and everyone is about to benefit from another act of generosity: not only did Carlyle go to the trouble of buying vegetables, fish, and beer for the communal meal — again, the short story highlighting the fable's food motif, focusing particularly on the *sharing* of food — but the adjectives that qualify these three items show that Carlyle's largesse contains within it an important measure of concern for the pleasure of *others* as well as for his own. It seems inadequate, then, to reduce Carlyle's extravagance to a form of naive improvidence; in Updike's version of the character of the *cigale*, generosity and even altruism coexist with heedlessness and prodigality.

But Updike takes his characterization even further. Most significantly, in terms of Updike's reception of La Fontaine, and in the context of the moral narrative form that is the fable and upon which Updike is constructing his own story, Carlyle has actually become an exemplary figure. If, in the fable, the *cigale*'s irresponsibility could be subject to disapproval and the *fourmi* could be seen to be a model of prudence and industry, in Updike's story it is, at this point, Carlyle who, unintentionally and without any moral didacticism, provides a lesson in behaviour, and it is Fred who is seen to be badly in need of it.

Updike's explicit evocation of La Fontaine's fable takes place when his story deals with the activity through which, in "La cigale et la fourmi," the moral questions are raised, namely work. It is no coincidence, then, that it is in these passages that the musical association of *chanté*, the

term signifying the fatal flaw in the *cigale*, is weaved into the description of the crucial shortcoming in Carlyle's character:

Carlyle's weakness, perhaps, was his artistic side. His Harvard major had been not economics but fine arts; he took photographs and bought expensive art books so big no shelves could hold them; he could not be in his house, or the Emmets', a minute without filling the air with loud music, usually opera. (36)

The weakness⁷ that is Carlyle's "artistic side" embraces more than a penchant for art books and opera music: what the text goes on to identify is Carlyle's inconstancy and inconsistency. "What Carlyle did professionally became vaguer with the years" (36), notes the text, before taking us through a sequence of his professional activities, finally locating him in California, "on the edge of the movie industry" (37), just as he always seems to be on the edge of something. Where else, indeed, could Carlyle end up in such a story but in the land of giddy self-indulgence and instant gratification? He has arrived in his spiritual home: "Carlyle fell in fatal love with California" (37), and he quickly adopts the extravagant, exhibitionist uniform of the entertainment world: "His clothes became cheerfully bizarre — bell-bottom pants, jackets of fringed buckskin, a beret" (37). Carlyle has now fully assumed his role as *cigale* in the story and has found the stage upon which he can "sing," which he does initially by co-producing "a low-budget film about runaway adolescents" (37).⁸

At this same point in the story the characterization of Fred as *fourmi*, by way of the narration of his professional activities, is being completed:

Fred, unromantically, worked in real estate. After splitting off from the management company that trained him, he bet his life on the future of drab, rundown inner-city neighborhoods that, by the sheer laws of demographics and transportation, had to come up in the world. His bet was working, but slowly, and in the meantime the Emmet Realty Corporation absorbed his days in thankless maintenance and squabbles with tenants and the meticulous game, which Fred rather enjoyed, of maximizing the bank's investment and thereby increasing his own leverage. (37)

This is the *fourmi* setting about the monotonous grind of earning his keep from day to day and

of painstakingly attempting to secure his future through judicious planning and use of resources, and through sheer hard work and consistent effort. Where Carlyle has embraced a world of glamour and excitement, Fred has settled for the dreary and the dull — the adverbs and adjectives in the above passage tell the tale: “unromantically,” “drab,” “run-down,” “slowly,” “thankless,” “meticulous.” If the *fourmi*’s efforts to prepare for winter are not specified in La Fontaine’ fable, we know nonetheless of what they consisted — the unobtrusive, methodical hoarding in a secure place of a private food supply that slowly grew into a reserve that would see out the bad weather, precisely the kind of long-term planning, by analogy, engaged in by Fred:

He was, like many only children, naturally meticulous and secretive, and it warmed him to think that his growing personal wealth was cunningly hidden, annually amplified by perfectly legal depreciation write-offs, in these drab holdings — …buildings so anonymous and plain as to seem ownerless. (38)

The identification with La Fontaine’s characters is complete. As Carlyle has become *la cigale*, so Fred has become *la fourmi*, identities now explicitly conferred by the text in the following conclusion reached by Fred: “He was the patient ant, he felt, and Carlyle more and more the foolish grasshopper” (38).⁹ The die is cast.

Or is it? Or, rather, into what shape is it cast? We ask the question because, as already indicated, Updike’s story is not seen to endorse a facile morality that a partial reading of the fable might produce. Just as Carlyle’s prodigality has a benevolent dimension, so his general insouciance has its winning side, in the form of an innocent indifference to the claims of responsibility, conformity, and convention. Fred’s inveterate prudence, on the other hand, has a vaguely disagreeable shrewdness about it, informed as it is by clinical calculation in order to achieve selfish ends, an impression reinforced by the “secretive” and “cunningly hidden” of the above passage.

It is striking, then, that it is at this very moment in the story, when Fred seems, like *la fourmi* at the end of the fable, to be most in control and relishing his sense of superiority and position of dominance, that his organized life and feeling of stability are thrown into doubt by an entirely

uncharacteristic act — he has an affair:

Yet, when, ten years into his marriage, Fred found himself swept up in a reckless romance, it was his brother-in-law he confessed to. The seethe of his predicament — Betsy's innocence, and the children's, and the other woman's; glittering detached details of her, her eyes and mouth, her voice and tears, her breasts and hair — foamed in him like champagne overflowing a glass. It was delicious, terrible; Fred had never felt so alive. (38)

Yet again we see how Updike has very perceptively drawn out the inherent ambiguity and openness of the fable. The above passage is much more than a description of Fred's emotional turmoil: it represents also a confusion of the moral roles and philosophical outlooks associated with Fred and Carlyle, and acts as a very effective counterweight to any temptation to indulge in easy moralizing. Indeed the passage goes beyond merely blurring the line of demarcation that seemed to separate the characters and their symbolic roles: the narrative roles and the moral and symbolic order of the fable are actually reversed here, for it is Fred who turns to Carlyle for comfort and guidance in his period of crisis. And Carlyle responds in this "brotherly consultation" (39) with "remarks [which] were gracefully light, even casual" (39); and we learn that "his noncommittal calmness did relieve his brother-in-law's agitation and guilt" (39). If Fred were perspicacious enough to notice, he would see that here might be an opportunity to learn another lesson from "the foolish grasshopper," namely that his verdict on Carlyle ought to be tempered by consideration of more than just his perceived financial foolhardiness.

The other radical reversal described in the above passage occurs at the level of characterization, and even of identity, for who else is Fred in this moment of daring irresponsibility but Carlyle? Now it is Fred who is "reckless;" it is Fred who gives in to the heady surges of temptation and danger, of illicit pleasures and uncontrollable passion; it is Fred who has "seized the day," and, in unconsciously embracing Carlyle's philosophy, has "never felt so alive." Although the text does not make such a claim, the reader may again feel that it is Fred who has a lesson to learn, the lesson that spontaneity and passion have their place, and the lesson, too, that nothing remains permanent, nothing is impervious to the subtle readjustments and tempting possibilities of time, be it circumstances, allegiances, the apparent reliability of

emotions, convictions, and habits, or, indeed, the best-laid long-term plans. Fred will end up staying with Betsy, but, even if his calculating pragmatism seems to win the day (“it would be absurd of him to leave the children and Betsy and the share of the Emmet Corporation her lawyers would demand,” 39), the smooth, predictable course of Fred’s life can no longer be taken for granted.

*Se trouva fort dépourvue
Quand la bise fut venue.
Pas un seul petit morceau
De mouche ou de vermisseau.*

The passing of the years (“The marriages, and the families, went on,” 39) brings changes to Carlyle as well, revealed in an incident at the Emmets’ house one Christmastime. The sound of banging brings Fred down to his cellar, where he finds Carlyle using his tools at his workbench, without being able to see exactly what it is the latter is doing. From Betsy, Fred finds out later that “[t]o save money, Carlyle was making some of their Christmas presents this year” (40). While Betsy finds this “sweet,” Fred wonders where all Carlyle’s money went: “He had always resented it that Carlyle had simply *had* money, whereas he had had to make it, a crumb at a time” (40).¹⁰ It turns out that Carlyle’s Californian lifestyle has taken its toll, has had him singing the wrong song too loud and too long:

[S]ix children in private schools and colleges aren’t cheap, and the stock market had been off under Nixon, and Carlyle had trouble trimming his expensive tastes — the M.G. convertible, the English suits ordered tailor-made from London even though he rarely wore suits, the beach house in Malibu in addition to their seven-bedroom Mission-style home in Bel Air. The people he dealt with expected him to have these things. (40)

On top of all of this, he was involved in “a low-budget blue movie” (40) that was, according to Betsy, “just sucking the money out of him” (40). For Betsy, Carlyle has proved an easy target, being too gullible and honourable for the world he moved in. “Furthermore,” she claims, “he likes being around these movie people, especially the little porno starlets” (41). If Carlyle and *la cigale* are open to condemnation, it is on account, perhaps, of their self-importance, their streaks of vain exhibitionism: both feel, somewhere, that they ought to be heard, to be noticed, that they

have something individual to contribute, and, in the heedless search for a suitable stage upon which to perform, fail to see the price they may have to pay. In Carlyle's case, the price being paid was not merely an economic one: "There had been a physical deterioration as well as a financial....[T]he clothes hung loose on his reduced, big-boned frame" (41). Fred feels "a faint pity" (41) for Carlyle; if, however, his capacity for fellow-feeling is limited, it is not only because of his ambivalence towards Carlyle but also because his reserves of pity are being used up on himself: "A decade later, he still missed the woman he had given up — dreamed of her, in amazing, all-but-forgotten detail. He would never love anyone that much again. He had come to see that the heart, like a rubber ball, loses bounce, and eventually goes dead" (41). Once more we find that the understandably over-determined differences of La Fontaine's fable have been attenuated in Updike's story. If the *fourmi* and the *cigale* represent opposing values and philosophies, Fred and Carlyle, as the passing years transform the myriad possibilities and lightly taken choices of the carefree early years into desiccated, intractable fates, are seen to be bound by more than a symbolic brotherhood: it would appear that both men, in following too inflexibly their deeply ingrained intuitions, know what it is to have made something of a mess of their lives. Perhaps, then, there was something else they might have shared — they might have learned from each other: one wonders if a little more spontaneity and passion in Fred and a little more modesty and restraint in Carlyle would not have served both men better.

But they have made their beds, and now must lie in them, and when Fred reluctantly gives in to Betsy's urging — speaking on behalf of her sister who is "too proud to say anything" (41) — that he have a word with Carlyle in the hope that something useful might come of it, the old patterns and personalities rise to the surface: Fred is wary ("He was still afraid of Carlyle, slightly," 41) and irritated (Carlyle had ruined his drill bits in making his presents), and Carlyle is mischievous (he had turned up the thermostat, "knowing that thrifty Fred would resent this," 42) and breezy ("It's money in the bank. When you bring your gang out this summer, we should have a rough print to show you," 42). The inconclusive outcome of this conversation sets the story up for the critical encounter, for a contemporary version of the "Quelque grain" scene of the fable.

*Elle alla crier famine
Chez la fourmi sa voisine,
La priant de lui prêter
Quelque grain pour subsister
Jusqu'à la saison nouvelle.
"Je vous paierai, lui dit-elle,
Avant l'oût, foi d'animal,
Intérêt et principal."*

Carlyle shows Fred and Betsy his film when they visit California the following summer: it “seemed crudely made” (42) and not terribly coherent. But Fred dares not be over-critical, remembering “that time on the Vineyard when Carlyle had laughed at his pipsqueak indignation” (43). The unease and resentment in Fred that has tainted his relationship with Carlyle surfaces, however, in the *Schadenfreude* and sense of superiority he experiences when, in the restaurant after the projection

Carlyle hoped aloud that Fred would consider investing in the film, toward distribution and advertising costs, which were all that was left to get the package off the ground. One more boost and the movie would make everybody a bundle. He could offer eighteen-percent annual interest, just like MasterCard in reverse, or up to a quarter of the net profits, depending on how many hundred thousand Fred could see his way clear to invest. Plus, he promised, he would pay Fred’s principal back right off the top, before he even paid himself. He knew Boston real estate had been going through the roof lately and Fred must be desperate for a little diversification. (43)

Updike has skilfully advanced his narrative in parallel with La Fontaine’s fable, arriving now at *his* version of the exchange between the *cigale* and the *fourmi*. The decisive terms of Carlyle’s pitch to Fred mirror those of the *cigale*’s proposition to the *fourmi*: “hoped aloud that Fred” (“La priant”); “investing” (“prêter”); “how many hundred thousand” (“Quelque grain”); “to get the package off the ground” (“pour subsister”); “he would pay Fred’s principal back” (“Je vous paierai”); “before he even paid himself” (“Avant l)oût”); “he promised” (“foi d’animal”); “eighteen-percent annual interest” (“Intérêt”); “principal” (“principal”). With allowances made for the different plot demands of the respective narratives, we can see that the short story remains remarkably faithful to the fable. The differences, indeed, are of less significance than the correspondences, particularly where the essentials of the two pleas are

concerned: *la cigale* and Carlyle need the carefully husbanded resources of the *fourmi* and Fred in order to overcome a looming crisis, a crisis with the most serious of potential consequences. And it is not only in the major structural and thematic details that Updike follows La Fontaine; he does so, too, in the small, subtle associations he engineers, as now, when he situates the scene of Carlyle's pitch (referred to as his "naked plea," 43)¹¹ in a restaurant, thus establishing a link with the critical issue of food in the fable, and when he has the text invoke Carlyle's "strained-sounding voice, almost inaudible, [which] wheezed on doggedly" (p. 43), reminding us both of Carlyle's "weakness" and, through the *chanté* of the fable, the weakness of the *cigale*.

*La fourmi n'est pas prêteuse;
C'est là son moindre défaut.
"Que faisiez-vous au temps chaud ?
Dit-elle à cette emprunteuse.
— Nuit et jour à tout venant
Je chantais, ne vous déplaise.*

We would be surprised if Fred agreed to lend — "invest" seems a euphemism here — Carlyle the money he has sought. But, as has become his way where Carlyle is concerned, Fred is cautious and non-confrontational, and agrees to think it over, needing, he says, to discuss the decision with Betsy. When she makes clear that the money would not "bail Germaine out" (43), Carlyle's fate is sealed. The wariness and resentment that have informed Fred's relationship with Carlyle over twenty-five years, allied to his innate prudence, now dictates his decision:

Fred felt contaminated by the other man's naked plea, and could hardly wait until he got away, safely back to his own coast. He was too cowardly to turn Carlyle down himself. He left it to the Terwilliger sisters, Betsy to Germaine via long-distance telephone, to pass him the word: No way. Fred Emmet, too, could give a brotherly lesson in limits. (43-44)

Fred may well have participated, those many years before, in the good-humoured laughter at his own "pipsqueak indignation," but the "brotherly lesson" proffered and accepted that day had never quite been digested. It had simmered underneath and now spills over in the refusal to help Carlyle out, and in the rather vengeful and condescending tone of its motivation and formulation. Fred's lesson in limits, if not explicitly articulated in the manner of the *fourmi*'s, is

no less self-righteously moralizing and no less founded on the absolute certainty of one's personal superiority and rectitude: Carlyle must pay the price for his life of foolish pleasures and reckless dissipation — Carlyle and the *cigale* must pay the price for not being like Fred and the *fourmi*. The reader may welcome the caustic “cowardly” handed out here to Fred.

—*Vous chantiez ? j'en suis fort aise.*

Eh bien ! dansez maintenant.”

The *cigale* would have to look out for itself; it would have to suffer the consequences of its short-sightedness; it would have to learn — perhaps the hard way — that one cannot foolishly squander one's opportunities, talents, and resources and expect to be bailed out by others, by those wiser and thriftier than oneself. These are various articulations of the “danser maintenant” of the fable, of the brutal lesson handed out by *la fourmi* to *la cigale*. We fear the worst for *la cigale* — how will it survive the winter without food? Is “danser maintenant” not a death sentence, an ominous imperative that can lead to only one kind of dance, the Dance of Death?

This is the inference of the *fourmi*'s verdict. It must remain an inference because “danser maintenant” are the final words of the fable. Their equivalent in Updike's story — “No way. Fred Emmet, too, could give a brotherly lesson in limits” — are the concluding words of the corresponding section, but not, however, of the entire story. “Brother Grasshopper” has an epilogue, projecting us forward a number of years, and allowing us to discover the effects, if any, of Fred's verdict. And, as if in recognition that Fred's words are an echo of the harsh sentence handed out by the *fourmi*, and that we must now fear the worst for Carlyle, the epilogue begins with the inevitable news:

When Carlyle Saughtierfield, less than a decade after his failed film had emptied his pockets, died, it was in a movie theatre. The girl next to him — not a date; they had just been introduced — noticed him at one point softly thumping his own chest, and when the lights went up the tall man was slumped as if asleep. Impassive. (44)

Carlyle's personal version of the *chanté* of the fable, in the low-budget, low-life world of

young flesh and little porno starlets, brought financial ruin. Not that Fred is to blame — the text merely records Carlyle's ruin and death. It was Carlyle alone who was responsible for his downfall.

Prudent Fred had eschewed the dangerous impetuosity and vain excesses of Carlyle's life, and has survived: he lives on and is financially secure. But, in one important respect, destiny bound him to Carlyle: "Germaine and [Carlyle], some years before, had gotten divorced, and Fred and Betsy, too, as the Terwilliger sisters continued their lives in parallel. Betsy had never really forgiven him for the insult of that old affair" (44). Fred and Carlyle's contrasting values and different paths had nonetheless brought them together again in a shared fate, brothers again in the end, as they had become in the beginning, over thirty years previously, when they played catch together while waiting for the Terwilliger sisters to join them. Both had committed indiscretions, of a different nature and gravity, but judged according to the limits and codes they had embraced in their lives. There is a kind of primitive natural justice on view here: Fred had never quite forgiven Carlyle's laughter at his "pipsqueak indignation" and, years later, had given his lesson in limits. But he found out that Betsy, too, had not forgotten and had not forgiven: she, too, could give lessons in limits.

The final scene is played out on the day of the scattering of Carlyle's ashes into the sea. Carlyle had wanted Fred to be present: "Germaine said, "He loved you," which sounded right, since families teach us how love exists in a realm above liking or disliking, coexisting with indifference, rivalry, and even antipathy" (44). It is fitting, indeed almost poetically necessary, in a story which has its origin in La Fontaine's fable, that Carlyle's death and the scattering of his ashes take place in winter. The closing passages recognize the story's debt in other ways, too, to "La cigale et la fourmi." The harsh "dansez maintenant" of the fable, the death sentence, is echoed now as Fred drops a handful of his ashes into the water: "Sinking, doing a slow twirling dance, they caught the light" (45).

Most significantly, though, it is in the central themes of lessons and morals, with which both narratives have grappled, that the story, at its conclusion, turns back to the fable and again acknowledges its origins. As the ashes Fred has dropped in the sea dance in the tide, "[t]wo of

Fred's nieces...beamed at him forgivably, knowingly" (45). In the ambivalent brotherly relationship between Fred and Carlyle, there have been words and deeds to be regretted, but now there is also, crucially, forgiveness to be had, for lessons too quickly and willingly handed out. The old rivalries and antipathies have died with Carlyle. Now is the time, as Fred faces into old age, for consolation:

The sunshine seemed a lesson being administered, a universal moral; it glinted off of everyone's protein strands of hair and wool hats and sweaters and chilly nailed hands and the splintered green boards of the bridge and the clustered, drifting, turning little fragments in the icy sky-blue tide. In this instant of illumination all those old photographs and those old conglomerate times Carlyle had insisted upon were revealed to Fred as priceless — treasure, stored up against the winter that had arrived. (45)

As Carlyle's daughters can forgive Fred, so he, in "this instant of illumination," in his moment of epiphany, can forgive Carlyle. In what is at once a moral epilogue to the fable and a final, gentle lesson transmitted through Carlyle, Fred realizes that Carlyle had all the time been giving him something that his "cunningly hidden" resources, what he thought of as his treasure, would never be able to procure — a cache of memories and sensations and experiences to sustain him through the longest winter of all. Thanks to his foolish grasshopper brother, who had "stored up" something after all, Fred would not be *dépourvu*.

La Fontaine's fable allows much interpretive freedom. Unlike other of his fables ("Le corbeau et le renard," for example), there is no moral explicitly enunciated at the end of "La cigale et la fourmi." The moral that could be inferred is the one cruelly implied by the *fourmi*'s response to the *cigale*'s request — that we are responsible for our own well-being and must therefore pay the price for our follies. We are obliged to recognize this, yet we flinch at the harshness of the lesson and the cruelty of its consequences. We want to speak up for the *cigale*, to protest that there is much to be said for his careless yet jaunty, winning ways. This is, surely, how we should understand John Updike's story — as a broadening and deepening of the moral positions in the fable, as a development and exploration of its moral resonances and implications. And

everywhere his story confronts us with moral and human complexities, inviting us quietly to withhold judgement, and to consider fully the interpretive possibilities of the fable.

This becomes possible in Updike's story by way of narrative, therefore by way of time. The fable, of course, is already a narrative, but it is, necessarily, condensed and constrained, allowing itself the shortest of temporal expansions. Updike's story inserts the stark moral positions and choices of the fable into the temporal unfolding of an extended narrative, thus exposing them to the buffettings of time, to the challenges, changes, and mortifications of the greater part of an adult lifetime. Time in this story reveals the impermanence of things and the foolishness of moral positions too inflexibly held, and exposes cherished pieties and sustaining vanities to messy contamination by human emotions. The epilogue of Updike's story restores equilibrium and equality to the moral order of the relationship between the narratives' protagonists: we find that Carlyle had loved Fred, and that the final, chastening lesson is administered by the grasshopper to the ant.

Ultimately, though, John Updike is not concerned in his story with issuing moral pronouncements; one senses that he has too much affection and empathy for Fred and Carlyle to judge either too harshly. He has simply written a short story that fully realizes the interpretive and narrative potential of "La cigale et la fourmi." He was surely intrigued by the narrative possibilities of La Fontaine's fable, and saw in it the opportunity to explore the forces and choices, the instincts and pretensions, the affections and disaffections, that guided the lives of two men of his own world and his own time.¹²

¹ Referring to "La cigale et la fourmi," René Groos, the editor of the 'Fables' section of the Pléiade edition, observes: "Peut-être parce qu'elle est la première (bien que Jean-Jacques la dise « la seconde »), voilà une des fables qui ont fait le plus couler d'encre." La Fontaine, *Oeuvres complètes I*, (Paris: Gallimard: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1954) 671.

² "Brother Grasshopper" appears in John Updike's collection, *The Afterlife and Other Stories* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1995). Cited extracts from this story will be followed in the article by a page-number reference in parentheses.

³ One needs a substantial amount of shelf space to accommodate John Updike's non-fiction writing. Updike, indeed, has sometimes been accused of writing too much, usually meant as writing too much fiction, a way of saying that he has let the occasional lesser book slip through. More teasingly, one wonders where he finds the time to write as much fiction and poetry as he does, given the vast quantities of essays and criticism that he publishes. To date, he has published seven collections of essays and criticism, the most recent of which, *More Matter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1999), runs to nine hundred pages. A previous collection, *Odd Jobs*, gives a good example of Updike's eclectic reading and insatiable curiosity, and illustrates why he is a comparatist's delight. Under the rubric "Mostly Literary," one finds entire sections devoted to fiction and poetry from America, France, Russia, and Britain. Elsewhere, Updike touches down in Africa, China, and South America. In the chapter entitled "Frenchmen," Updike reviews work by Guillaume Apollinaire, Robert Pinget, Michel Tournier, Raymond Queneau, and Emmanuel Carrère, and, in a different chapter, a book by Michel Rio. All of Updike's reading of these French writers is in their English translations.

⁴ In translation into English, La Fontaine's "cigale" has been rendered as either "cicada" or "grasshopper," although the latter is incorrect — a "grasshopper" in French is "une sauterelle." One is more indulgent about the laxness in the English translation when one reads René Groos's notes accompanying the fable in the Pléiade edition, in which he notes that one critic, Fabre, reprimanded La Fontaine for "les erreurs d'histoire naturelle." The same critic asserts, notes Groos, that "la célèbre chanteuse est certainement une sauterelle." 672.

⁵ One could probably argue that La Fontaine's fable does allow the possibility that *la cigale* and *la fourmi* are "brothers," in that both belong to the wider insect *family*. But the term "family" here is a metaphor, and the possibility of such a relationship is not exploited in the fable. At the more literal, precise level of entomological classification, *la cigale* is a homopteran insect belonging to the family Cicadidae, whereas *la fourmi* is a hymenopterous insect belonging to the family Formicidae.

⁶ The traits most readily associated with ants are their industriousness and the organisation of the colonies they inhabit. In focusing exclusively on the first of these, in ignoring, therefore, the *fourmi*'s membership of a complex social colony of participation and shared responsibility, La Fontaine has his character appear not only industrious but selfish as well.

⁷ This is not the first reference to a weakness in Carlyle. Early on in the story we read: "His voice, husky and hard to hear, ... was the one weak thing about him" (31). We see here how Updike, even in the smallest details, draws upon La Fontaine's fable, in this case through focusing on Carlyle's voice, thus aligning it with the *chanté* of the fable and associating Carlyle with the fatal weakness of *la cigale*. On two further occasions the text will refer to Carlyle speaking "in his reedy voice" (32, 39), reinforcing the connotation of weakness.

⁸ *La cigale* sings "Tout l'été", "au temps chaud." Carlyle, in his corresponding period, does his "singing" in the "endless sunshine" (37) of California.

⁹ Updike's alignment of his characters with those of the fable, particularly in the case of Carlyle, is carried through into the smallest details. So it is that Carlyle is associated throughout the story with the colour green, the colour most readily associated with the grasshopper. Carlyle's eyes are "an uncanny pale green" (34); he stares at Fred "with his uncanny green eyes" (36); he owns "a green Studebaker" (30), also referred to as "his snappy green convertible" (30); at one point he sits down on a "briny green fold-out sofa" (38); he is described as wearing "an embroidered green dashiki" (42), and when he died he was "[w]earing a green dashiki" (44); when Fred drops Carlyle's ashes into the sea, he leans over "the rough, green-painted rail" (45) to do so, and further on in the passage "the splintered green boards of the bridge" (45) are evoked. The second colour associated with Carlyle, although to a much lesser extent, is beige, a very light brown colour. After green, various browns are the prominent colours in grasshoppers. When Carlyle got married, "[h]e bought Fred a beige suit to match his own" (32), and there is a further reference to Carlyle's "identical beige suit" (33). Carlyle's choosing Fred to be his best man, a public statement of a life-long bond between them as brothers-in-law, is symbolized by their wearing the same colour, a fact that is underlined in the text on the two occasions the beige suits are mentioned. Later in the story Carlyle is described as wearing "a kind of southern-California safari suit" (38); he is again dressed, in other words, in a sandy brown or beige colour.

Without making any explicit comparisons, one notes how Updike draws upon the grasshopper for his description of some of Carlyle's physical features. Carlyle, like a grasshopper, has "somewhat protuberant eyes" (31), referred to

later as being “prominent” (34). His “bulging closed eyelids” (32) are also described. The description of Carlyle’s face is clearly based on the long, flat smoothness of the grasshopper’s face: ‘Carlyle’s eyes were an uncanny pale green, with thin pink lids, and prominent, so that his long face gave the impression of being a single smooth tender surface, his nose so small as to be negligible’ (34). The borrowing of the physical features of the grasshopper seems to extend to the description of Carlyle’s limbs and frame. The long, ridged body and the long thin rear legs of the grasshopper probably inspired the “tall bony” (30) description of Carlyle, and Updike may well have transferred the power and length of the grasshopper’s rear legs to Carlyle’s arms: “The strength stored in the other man’s long arms and wide, sloping shoulders was amazing — a whippy, excessive strength almost burdensome, Fred imagined, to carry” (31). And just as the grasshopper’s rear legs, when it kicks them out in self-defence, can be dangerous for a predator (due to the stinging spines on the legs and feet), so Carlyle’s throws of the ball “made Fred’s hands sting” (31) and caused him to be wary of the danger “of being hit in the face and having an eye or a tooth knocked out” (31). We should note, too, that, just as an ant is much smaller than a grasshopper, so Fred is much smaller than Carlyle, a fact heavily emphasized in the text. Finally, it is possible to recognize the ant in the opening description of Fred as “swarthy and thick-set” (29): the dark hue of “swarthy” is to be found in the colouring of the ant, and “thick-set” would not be an unreasonable description of an ant, particularly when focusing on its abdomen.

¹⁰ Like the *fourmi* gathering his food.

¹¹ “Plea” renders well another sense of the French verb *prier* that is present in its use in the fable, defined in *Le Petit Robert* as: “Demander par grâce, avec humilité ou déférence.”

¹² I had completed this piece before I got around to reading John Updike’s latest collection of essays and criticism, *More Matter* (see note 3). This collection reprints a foreword that Updike contributed to a limited edition of “Brother Grasshopper” published by Metacom Press in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1990. In his foreword Updike notes that he had neither Aesop’s nor La Fontaine’s version before him as he composed, “out of the usual writerly resources of fragmentary memory and wanton distortion, this short story of acquired fraternity,” *More Matter*, 774. I have clearly attributed to Updike more design and contrivance than was indeed the case — his memory proved to be remarkably reliable, and, well, as he notes himself in his foreword, “fabulation works in mysterious ways,” 774.