

## Motifs of loss in *The Afterlife*.

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Although little time has passed since John Updike's death, one might risk the opinion that if posterity passes a favorable judgment on his fiction it will be due in large measure to his short stories (and, no doubt, the *Rabbit* tetralogy). Notwithstanding his proficiency in a variety of literary forms, Updike's stories, by virtue of their rootedness in the realities of middle-class, small-town and suburban American life, their imaginative encapsulation of the writer's own trajectory, and Updike's mastery of an enduring form, might well come to be seen – in contrast to the poignant verdict reached by Henry Bech on his own literary output – as the masterpieces of his oeuvre that ensure his reputation.<sup>1</sup>

While writers are usually aware of their literary antecedents and heritage, Updike was exceptional in his reflection on literatures past and present; in this, there was something of the scholar in him. Where his own practice of the short-story form is concerned, one is struck by the section in *Hugging the Shore* that is devoted to what he calls "Tales." Here Updike considers, in addition to collections of Italian folktales and the creation tales of the Makiritare tribe of southern Venezuela, the work of Bruno Bettelheim on fairy tales and Claude Lévi-Strauss on myths. Updike's interest in such theoretical works on folk literature is intriguing, as the short story is the most obvious successor to the folktale, due to its relative brevity and ability to be consumed at a single sitting. A distinguishing and, indeed, essential feature of the folktale is the narrative motif. A motif is any element (a situation, action, object, image, experience, place, character-type, and so forth) that recurs in a literary text and that, through its recurrence, is used to support a theme, or themes. A

motif, then, is a concrete textual element, to be opposed to the abstraction or generality of a theme. It may be understood, in this context, as a formal means to a thematic end. The eminent folklore scholar Stith Thompson remarks on “the great similarity in the content of stories of the most varied peoples. The same tale types and narrative motifs are found scattered over the world” (6). We should not be surprised, then, that John Updike, with his interest in folktales, should turn to the convention of the motif in his own short stories. Although literature has moved away from the rigid formal structure of folk narratives, Updike saw how older narrative modes could be adapted to serve the modern short story. In *The Afterlife and Other Stories* (1994), for example, one finds “Brother Grasshopper,” an elaboration on the fables of Aesop and La Fontaine, as well as variations of the Tristan and Isolde legend and the Bluebeard folktale.

Critics have identified Updike’s use of motifs in his earliest stories. Robert Detweiler sees the bed motif contributing to the theme of adultery in the first Maples story, “Snowing in Greenwich Village” (13-14)<sup>2</sup> and identifies motifs in “The Doctor’s Wife” (58), “The Music School” (94-5), and another Maples story, “Giving Blood” (91-92). It is in fact, in the Maples stories that critics have most often detected Updike’s recourse to motifs. Robert Luscher notes that “most” of the Maples stories “contain recurrent motifs,” highlighting, among others, “Richard’s illnesses” and “images of voids” (108-09). Albert Wilhelm devotes a short article to Updike’s deployment of the “trail-of-breadcrumbs motif” from the Hansel and Gretel tale in two Maples stories, “Giving Blood” and “Here Come the Maples,” analyzing its role in the central metaphor of the Maples’ life together as a journey, where reversing the trajectory of their marriage is no longer possible and they “can solve their problems ... only by walking on into the woods” (73).

Peter Donahue considers the contribution of the Martini motif to the theme of Richard Maple's virility in "Your Lover Just Called," although he does not use the term *motif* in his discussion (364). James Schiff highlights "recurring motifs" in "Separating," particularly those of walls, windows and doors, indicating the obstacles and thresholds to be negotiated by Richard in leaving his family (122-23). And Detweiler and Luscher each identify dominant motifs in the motif-rich Maples story "Gesturing," notably those of physical gestures, mirrors, and the marriage vows etched into the glass of Richard's apartment window.<sup>3</sup>

In the context of a discussion of motifs, "Gesturing" is instructive, as the story exemplifies a recurring formal feature of Updike's fiction, to which the author himself alluded. Speaking about his understanding of the specific competence of narrative, Updike rejects the dominance of "psychological insights" in favor of what he terms "[t]he author's deepest pride, as I have experienced it," namely "his ability to keep an organized mass of images moving forward" (Plath 44). Updike's intention here was to privilege the formal features of narrative over content and themes, and motifs clearly have a place in his "organized mass of images" (some of his motifs, indeed, are also images). In the same interview, he underlines the importance of "pattern" in narrative (45), and he uses the same term in another interview when discussing the influence of myth on his fiction. Myth is part of the patterning that constitutes what Updike called the "music that has its formal side" in his work. These formal features – myth, motifs, images, metaphors, and symbols – are what he terms the "secrets" (52), the hidden "organized mass of images" inserted into his narratives that accord them shape, movement, and direction. As we will see, Updike's images and motifs do indeed create patterns in his narratives; such is the

case in “Gesturing,” where time, emplotment, and the chronology of events are attenuated, yielding to the configuring narrative force of an essentially achronic network of motifs and images.

This essay will consider how Updike’s motifs support the theme of loss in three stories from *The Afterlife*: “Short Easter,” “The Journey to the Dead,” and “The Other Side of the Street.” In Updike’s short-story output, *The Afterlife* marks the beginning of what could be termed Late Updike. There is a new alertness to death: the central concern of the collection is alluded to in its title, and many of the stories explore how men moving into their sixties confront their mortality and the attendant anxieties of aging, decline, and loss. These characters have become conscious, as has the protagonist of “Playing with Dynamite,” that they are “[l]iving now in death’s immediate neighborhood” (*Afterlife* 253).

Fogel, the protagonist of “Short Easter,” is typical of several male characters in the collection who find that life after sixty offers less attractive excitations than those of earlier years: “In the daily rub he discovered all sorts of fresh reasons for irritation” (93). The story’s title hints at thematic possibilities: the sensation of the diminishing time of a life, and the complex metaphorical play of death and rebirth at Easter. There is no literal death in the story; Fogel does, however, experience aging as a form of withdrawal from life, and the story ends with a metaphorical death. As for loss, it comes to Fogel as a slow diminishment – in “[h]is body’s accumulating failures” (94), in his “absent-mindedness” (97), and his inability to tolerate the “pure intimidation” that, he concludes, is “the aim of eighty-five percent of all human behavior” (94). This bitter reflection is occasioned by a

display of young-male bravado that obliges Fogel to concede defeat in a macho test of will that he and another driver engage in. That Fogel's adversary here is a young man is an important detail, as it sets up the deployment of a motif that contributes to and develops the themes of loss and death in the story.

The young man embodies the potential and power to flirt with and appeal to women: the motif employed by Updike is the female voice, the thematic associations of which are established in a scene witnessed by Fogel a few months prior to Easter Sunday. On a flight from New York to Boston "a young man and woman, both about thirty, who evidently had not known each other before taking seats side by side" (95) sit across the aisle from Fogel. Their conversation develops into a flirtation, as they employ their seductive wiles to attract each other. These male and female performances are captured in their hand movements, but above all in their voices, particularly that of the young woman. Her voice does "a penetrating dance, tireless and insistent, though her voice was high and light," as if, Fogel imagines, she is "testing her powers." He notes her "soft quick giggle, a captivating titter, a kind of shimmer of shyness in which she wrapped her unrelenting verbal assault upon her seatmate." The ethereal dance of her voice, "throwing her words out in a feathery way, as if to soften their impact," accords it a quality that lodges it firmly in Fogel's consciousness (95). The text goes on to record the young man's self-consciously virile but physically graceless response before returning to focus on Fogel's awareness of "the feathery, questioning, giggling, excited voice" of the young woman (96). And with this first recurrence of the properties of the woman's voice, the motif is set in motion.

The woman's voice triggers a memory for Fogel of how he "had been talked to, in the course of his life, by a woman in a voice exactly like this," a woman, we learn, who had been his mistress: "It had been a bath, her voice, in which he grew weightless, an iridescent bubbly uplifting in which floated always a question, the lilting teasing female question, to which his maleness, clumsy and slow to comprehend though it was, was the only answer" (96). Note how carefully Updike, in describing the voice of Fogel's mistress, elaborates on the properties attributed to the voice of the young woman on the plane, reinforcing these properties as essential traits of a particular female voice: "high," "light," "soft," "shimmer," "feathery," and "questioning" used to describe the first voice, are rendered as "bubbly," "uplifting," "floated," "lilting," and "question" in relation to the second voice; the "tireless and insistent" quality of the first becomes the perpetual interrogation and expectancy of the second.

The female voice is thus established as a motif that supports several connected themes: first, a certain power that women have over men, due to the magnetism of their charms; second, the female need to receive a reassuring response to the anxious question posed by male insufficiency; third, men's inability to provide a satisfactory response beyond the fact of their lumpen, heavy presence; and, finally, the theme of loss – we learn that the affair between Fogel and his mistress had come to "an unhappy end" some twenty years earlier. The ending of the affair, we are invited to understand, marked for Fogel the exclusion from a vital stimulation and pleasure of life, captured in the scene of the passengers leaving the plane: "Fogel forgot to look, as he had been intending, at the young woman, to check out her height, her hips, her face full on, her lovely long lively hands, to see if they were truly ringless." Fogel has the eyes and intentions of a covetous

and competitive male, but this “elderly man” is no longer a player in the game of seduction, a loss expressed through the motif of the female voice: his failure to “check out” the young woman means that she “remained with him only as a voice, the perennial voice of flirtation” (96).

The motif of the female voice is used to develop the theme – through Fogel’s relationship with his wife – of the mismatch between the expectations and needs of men and women. The text notes that “this woman’s powers were long established” (97) as his wife harangues Fogel, as passive here as he had been with his mistress, into helping her do some early spring garden work: “This monologue, he recognized, was a matured version, hardened into jagged edges and points that prodded and hurt, of the young woman’s feathery, immersing discourse across the airplane aisle—a version of that female insistence upon getting male attention.” The young woman’s voice has become transmuted, in Fogel’s perception, into the perennial female “monologue” of power over and dissatisfaction with men. Fogel, we infer, was never able to provide an adequate answer to female questioning, and must now “[m]eekly, draggily” (98) do as he is told (98). Women’s dissatisfaction with men has increased female power, just as men’s offering of their mere passive presence has led to a loss of male influence and authority.<sup>4</sup>

The motif traces Fogel’s decline and accumulating losses. When his affair comes to an end, his mistress declines to invite him and his family to an Easter-egg hunt her family organizes annually. Viewing a home movie of that event some months later at the home of friends, Fogel is haunted by his own absence: “he was not in it; no matter how the camera panned and skidded from group to group, Fogel was invisible.” There is an existential unease in Fogel’s anxious search for a sign of his presence in the home movie,

confirmed by his perception of his mistress's face in the film, "her lips moving to frame a gay feathery voice that was inaudible" (99). Here is the moment of final exclusion from the alluring world of female enchantment, which, for Fogel, a virile man of barely forty years at the time, constitutes an unbearable loss: his former mistress's inaudible voice cuts him off from "the perennial voice of flirtation." His sensitivity to his own invisibility bespeaks a man undergoing exclusion and absence as a form of existential death. Fogel's sense of loss in this scene is echoed structurally – and comically – in his attendance twenty years later at another Easter party: now it is mostly widows who come up to speak to him. The voice motif is employed yet again to underline that the female voice to which the aging Fogel is exposed still contains a demand for male attention, but stripped now of all flirtation: one elderly woman "pressed her wrinkled face upward toward him ..., and launched her voice into an insistent sweet sing-song." And Fogel is still suffering from an existential disquiet about invisibility: "He regretted that no movie camera ... was at work recording the fact that he was here, at this party: that he had been invited" (100). Fogel is still alive, but thinly; documentary evidence and the witness of others are needed to counter a sense of a diminishing presence in his own life.

The motif has an important final function in transforming Fogel's existential insubstantiality into a metaphorical death. Unable to resist his tiredness on this Easter Sunday, he goes up to his son's old bedroom to sleep, accompanied by what has become the soundtrack of his life – a woman's voice: "his wife could be heard chattering on the telephone to one of her myriad of woman friends" (101). Fogel's sleep (itself a metaphorical death, a parallel to the death of Christ) produces an unsettling dream, his emergence from which is rendered as a rebirth, his own Easter "resurrection." But he



awakens into the “dusky” light of evening, feeling ragged and disoriented. He instinctively seeks the sound to which his male existence has become attuned: “He listened for his wife’s voice from their bedroom and heard nothing. He was frightened. He lay half curled up on the narrow bed like a fetus that has lost flexibility. A curve of terror chilled his abdomen.” Fogel’s experience of an Easter rebirth is less a resurrection than a passage into death: what he experiences is “the weight, the atrocious weight, of coming again to life,” rendered explicitly as a fall. The existential anguish of earlier phases of his life returns to him in the absence of the female voice, that Sirens’ song of seduction and flirtation, the voice that had always tried to draw him out of his male torpor and passivity: “Everything seemed still in place, yet something was immensely missing” (102).

The motif of the female voice is but one of several employed by Updike in the story. It is significant that the opening scene presents a memory of childhood happiness for Fogel, occasioned by “a magical peep into a big sugar egg.” The contents of the egg are carefully noted: “a thatch-roofed cottage, a rabbit wearing a vest, a fringe of purple flowers, a receding path and paper mountains—all bathed in an unexpectedly brilliant light .... There must have been a hole in the egg besides the one he peeped into, a kind of skylight, admitting to this miniature world a celestial illumination” (92). All of these elements will return in the story to provide a contrast with the losses and defeats of adult life. The purple flowers will split into two motifs. The color returns in the “glistening purple dress” (99) worn by his former mistress in the home movie from which Fogel is absent, and recurs mockingly in the “purplish dress” (100) worn by the elderly woman at the second Easter party. The flowers recur in forsythia and azaleas, both of which mature

into purple, which ties them to another motif, that of nature's life cycle, and thus of Fogel's own life cycle, thereby reinforcing the themes of life's inevitable movement toward death and of Fogel's growing sense of his mortality.

If the sugar-egg motifs split, they also combine, as color and scenery, in the "lavender mountains" in a televised golf tournament (100-1); another tournament that Fogel watches presents a scene of spring renewal and vigor: there are "trees in tender first leaf and azaleas in lurid bloom" and "[y]oung blond men" playing golf. Here is the life – renewing, virile – to which Fogel no longer belongs: he is slumped in his chair, tired, aching, feeling the weight of "a crushing accumulation" (101). The rabbit returns in the closing rebirth scene, when Fogel, to allay his dread upon waking, seeks comfort in the familiar. But the celestial illumination of the sugar egg has become a tenebrous room, and the "stuffed rabbit wearing a vest" that he sees cannot allay the sense of "something ... immensely missing" (102). Similarly, the "skylight" that facilitates the illumination of the egg recurs in the scene with the elderly woman, in whom is combined the various motifs that indicate the retreat of pleasure from Fogel's life: in her purple dress, speaking in her insistent sing-song voice, she pushes "her wrinkled face upward toward him as if straining to see through a besmirched skylight" (100). Finally, the elements that constitute the illuminated and idealized domestic scene in the sugar egg are recalled in the domestic scene of Fogel's dream by way of the "busy lit stage of his subconscious" (101), the presence of his parents, and Fogel himself clutching his teddy bear. The sugar egg and the dream constitute a structural framing of the story whose meaning is clear: the way Fogel "fell through into wakefulness" (102) is less a resurrection than a reminder of

his symbolic expulsion from an Edenic paradise, his own version of the original Fall into a degraded life, where the final phase of the journey to death has begun.

In “Short Easter” Updike invents a number of motifs to support the themes of his story. In “The Journey to the Dead,” however, the provenance of the motifs employed is quite other, reminding us again of Updike’s awareness of literary tradition: the narrative is determined by the ready-made motifs of a long-established myth, at the heart of which is the familiar motif of the journey to the underworld.<sup>5</sup> That much is discernible from a careful reading of the story. Of greater interest is the manner in which Updike goes beyond merely associating his story with a well-known myth from Homer’s *Odyssey* and Virgil’s *Aeneid* for the purposes of thematic resonance: in “The Journey to the Dead,” he does nothing less than construct an entire narrative upon a series of interrelated motifs. The story’s structure is determined by two encounters with what is depicted as an underworld, the first rendered as journey and arrival, the second as descent and visit. Updike, in fact, splits his essential motif in two, into journey and underworld. And, here again, he goes beyond merely attaching his story to a ready-made motif: he augments the individual elements of the dominant motif with an extensive network of motifs of his own. The journey motif is supplemented by motifs of departure, thresholds, and passages, and the underworld motif by motifs of descent and death. This network of interrelated motifs furnishes Updike’s story with a structural framework, a kind of scaffolding, within which the narrative is constructed.

The plot concerns the renewed acquaintance of old college friends Marty Fredericks and Arlene Quint. Arlene is now suffering from cancer, and one day asks Fredericks to

drive her to hospital. He subsequently visits her in her apartment on several occasions and makes a final visit to her in the hospital after she has a stroke. While the story develops a number of themes relating to Fredericks's and Arlene's failed marriages, their former spouses, and their friendship in earlier years, the central theme is the attitude of the living toward the dying and death. Both the journey and underworld motifs support the theme of segregated worlds in which the living keep their distance from the dying, as if the latter, already claimed by death, are no longer of the living but have become unwelcome *memento mori*.

The theme of segregated worlds is facilitated particularly by the motif of the underworld and is set in motion by Fredericks's renewed contact with Arlene at a party in Boston. The underworld is not evoked explicitly in this scene as Fredericks does not yet know that Arlene has "had a cancer scare" (56), but the way is paved for its use as motif by a description of Arlene's relationship to space; height and descent are evoked in terms that have a metaphorical resonance, which increases as these motifs recur. Thus, the party takes place in the elevated space of an artist's loft, in which Arlene "sat up on a table swinging her plump legs," like "a little girl perched up on a high wall" (55, 56). Beside her, "space fell away through a big steel-mullioned industrial window onto the lights of the city," and the text emphasizes that "nothing ... looked higher" than the loft (55). The progress of Arlene's illness is subsequently depicted as a movement of descent toward death, indicated by the continuation of the spatial motif when Fredericks visits her at home: "Her apartment was ... not so high as the artist's loft" (64). The text, indeed, gestures toward its own functioning by using the same metaphorical parameters of the spatial motifs to record the state of Arlene's health in this middle phase: "She had ups

and downs, but the trend seemed down” (68). And when her stroke brings her to hospital for the final descent into death, Fredericks arrives at her room after having “rode down in an elevator” from a parking structure (71). Arlene’s spatial descent is complete: from the heights of apparent good health and “happiness” (56) she has descended, via the way station of temporary release of an apparent remission, to the underworld of the dying.

If the underworld is not represented in an explicit manner in the early scene in the artist’s loft, it is nonetheless suggested: from the loft’s elevated perch can be seen the otherworld of down below. The lights, colors, and implied darkness suggest the atmosphere of a different and harsher world: “the lights of the city, amber and platinum and blurred dabs of neon red, ... the streets and brick rows streaming beneath them like the lights of an airport during takeoff” (55). It is to this world that the characters must inevitably descend, which they do when Fredericks drives Arlene to hospital. The descent of evening and the amber and red, now conflated, recur in the “great blocks of shadow and orange glare as the sun sank over the Fens.” As Fredericks sets out to pick up Arlene at her apartment, it is “dark enough to use his headlights” (57). Their arrival at the hospital develops and strengthens the idea of the underworld, again through the motif of the glare of lights: “As he gently pulled up at the entrance, Fredericks had the impression of bustling all-hours brightness that an airport gives ... [Arlene’s] face was turned toward the light pouring through the glass doors of the hospital lobby” (59).

The underworld is finally explicitly evoked when Fredericks, “a classics major,” recalls his college reading of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* and their lurid descriptions of an otherworld peopled by the dead. He remembers from these texts how “the dead stare mutely,” are “wordless” and “angry,” and listen “with fixed eyes and a countenance of

stone” to the living (62). Updike’s motif of the underworld is fully realized as Fredericks arrives at the hospital to visit Arlene for the last time:

He rode down in an elevator whose interior was painted red, and followed yellow arrows through murky corridors of cement and tile.... He threaded his way through corridors milling with pale spectres—white-clad nurses in thick-soled shoes, doctors with cotton lab coats flapping, unconscious patients pushed on gurneys like boats with IV poles for masts, stricken visitors clinging to one another in family clumps and looking lost and pasty in the harsh fluorescent light.... Though the hospital was twelve stories tall, it all felt underground, mazelike. (71)

Apart from the obvious signs of the underworld of the dying (“pale spectres,” “unconscious patients,” “underground”), one notes the recurring motifs of darkness, artificial lights and colors (the latter two often merging); beyond these, the “boats,” “masts” and “flapping” coats recall Odysseus sailing to Hades. And when Fredericks finally reaches Arlene in her hospital room, the motifs associated with Homer’s and Virgil’s dead are duly transferred to her: her “eyes burned at him from within a startled, stony fury. She could not speak” (72).

Throughout the story, an invisible barrier has separated Fredericks and Arlene – she belongs to the dying, and he to the living. Early on, he quickly suppressed any idea of becoming romantically involved with her: “The disease figured in his mind as another reason to let Arlene alone. She was taken” (56). Fredericks visits Arlene over the summer, but only to have her recall their shared past and to be warmed by the “sun of youth [that] dappled their reminiscences” (66), a return to an enchanting past that is Fredericks’s way of seeking to suspend his own inevitable journey to death. The theme of the living’s avoidance of the dying is played out in the final scene in Arlene’s hospital

room as Fredericks, “shamed by the shining unblinking fury of Arlene’s eyes,” promises, “insincerely, to come again, and, like heroes before him, fled” (73).

The other element of the dominant motif, that of the journey, exerts its influence on the story in structural terms, as Fredericks makes his two journeys to the underworld of the hospital. The second journey, as discussed above, focuses on a visit to the underworld, while the first is rendered as an epic struggle to reach one’s destination. Yet the journey motif is merely the foundation of a much more complex construction in which Updike elaborates a network of complementary motifs relating to departure, thresholds, and passages. The landscape of the journey to the hospital and the eventual arrival there is twice associated with airports as sites of journeying and departure, and Arlene herself on the first journey to the hospital is presented as an emigrant, “carrying a little suitcase” and associated with her grandparents who “had emigrated from Macedonia” (57). As for the journey to the hospital itself, it is filled with difficulties, if not as arduous as the journey to Hades. Darkness has descended, and Fredericks “inche[s] through the rush-hour traffic” to Arlene’s apartment (57). Together they drive to the hospital: “The rush hour was at its worst, as darkness deepened, and there were many stops and starts.” There is everywhere a sense of obstacle and struggle: “a cross street, a principal artery, was jammed solid” (58). They finally reach the hospital, which resembles “a railroad terminal in the old days—a constant grand liveliness of comings and goings,” the point of departure for the great final journey (59).

Of equal significance as the journey motif are the extensive descriptions of Fredericks’s car. As he drives to the hospital, the car is figured as both antechamber to the underworld and as Odysseus’s raft. As antechamber, it is where Fredericks is acutely

aware of “the immense motions, the revolutions of mortality, taking place inside [Arlene], next to him in the shuddering, cold, slashed cave of the car” (58). Like Odysseus’s raft after the battering of Poseidon’s storm, it is “decrepit,” with “its left fender dented, its canvas top slashed,” and is “rusty and old” (57, 58). And, like the raft, it finally disintegrates: on Fredericks’s arrival for his second visit to the hospital, we learn that the car “had fallen apart, its body so rusted he could see the asphalt skimming by beneath his feet” (71). Through these references and recurrences, the car, as the vehicle that transports Arlene, becomes a motif of decline, disintegration, and death.

The final cluster of journey-related motifs emphasizes the crossing of thresholds and the traversing of passages, reinforcing the notion of a barrier between the worlds of the living and the dying. Arriving at the hospital after her wearisome journey, Arlene turns to face “the light pouring through the glass doors of the hospital lobby” (59); she leaves Fredericks’s world of the living and “passed through the glass doors and did not look back” (60). When Fredericks arrives for his second and final visit to Arlene in hospital, he enters the otherworld of the dying by “push[ing] through the glass doors” (71). Elsewhere, he wonders why his elderly neighbors “do not seem to inhabit a world much different” from his own, although they stand “in death’s very gateway” (62). And Arlene’s view through the window of her apartment of “a strip of old-fashioned park” and “a stone footbridge arched over a marshy creek” (64) is transmuted into the view from her hospital room of “a great ugly iron bridge spotted with red rustproofing paint and crawling with cars” (72). Here, Updike carefully gathers together the resonances of several of his motifs in a final, *über*-motif – the rusted metal of the decaying car, the red of the garish streets, the seedy Boschian atmosphere of down below, and the crossing of



the final passage to the world of the dead. Fredericks and Arlene recognize their separate destinies: he will flee his mortality and return to life, and she will cross the bridge on her final journey to death.<sup>6</sup>

There would be no need to proceed to a discussion of “The Other Side of the Street” were it not for the fact that the function of the story’s dominant motif differs from those of the other two stories. In “Short Easter” Updike creates and deploys a number of interrelated motifs to support the story’s themes, while in “The Journey to the Dead” he exploits and augments a familiar motif from classical mythology in a manner that influences the narrative’s structure as well as its themes. In “The Other Side of the Street” the dominant motif – a garden swing – is again his own, but it functions as more than simple support to the story’s themes: it is also the recurring expression of a binarism at the heart of the story. One might speculate that this binarism was instrumental in determining both the shape and movement of the story, that it was one of the story’s founding ideas; it certainly accords the story its defining imagery and central metaphor.

The protagonist, Rentschler, returns to Hayesville in his native Pennsylvania, brought back by the death of his mother to a state where he “hadn’t lived ... for forty years.” Rentschler’s return confronts him with the inevitable consequences of a long absence: so much seems “alien,” and the topography of his childhood is no longer to be found. He notices, too, as he tidies up his mother’s affairs, that he has lost the “regional manner,” most visible in the Hayesville way of “going that extra mile” in word and deed (136, 137).

The shape and dynamics of the story emerge from the configuration of physical space suggested in the title: Rentschler's childhood home on Chestnut Street was one of a group of houses facing those on the other side of the street. The different worlds represented by Rentschler's house and that of his playmate Wilma Anna Emmelfoss across the street set up a fundamental binarism: two sides of the street; two family homes; two worlds of contrasting social status, values and aesthetic sensibilities; two potentials for childhood happiness; and, in Rentschler's childhood experience, two spaces in reciprocal relation – his view of his family home was influenced by the example and experience of Wilma Anna's. The story evolves on two temporal lines, one in the present as Rentschler encounters the notary public who lives in the house beside Wilma Anna's, and one in the past as he recalls the two worlds he inhabited as a child. These lines converge thematically at story's end as Rentschler, forty years on, looks once again on what has been developed as the dominant motif: a treasured garden swing in Wilma Anna's back yard.

The contrasting meanings of the two sides of the street are communicated in their binary spatial relationship, with Updike again exploiting the metaphorical resonances of up and down: "Rentschler had lived on the low side of the street, with his family's yard sloping down to the truck garden and the chicken house" (138). This location develops social and aesthetic resonances as Rentschler recalls the unattractive back garden of his family home, with its stump for beheading chickens and "musty stench of chicken dung" (137). To reach the houses on the other side of the street, one had to ascend "long flights of steps." Here, too, the spatial relationship is not merely physical: "The elevated houses across the street had seemed to be more alive than his, more packed with blessings"

(138). So begins the comparison of these contrasting worlds. Rentschler's house seemed sad and defeated, "lonely" (143); the family eventually had to leave their home and Hayesville when Rentschler's father lost his job to a returning veteran in 1945. Climbing the steps to Wilma Anna's house as a child, Rentschler entered another world: the furniture and ornaments were expensive and elegant, neatly arranged and harmoniously integrated; at Christmas, with its decorations and presents, "the parlor seemed a magical cave" (139). But it is above all the gardens that articulate the contrasting aesthetics and social status of these opposing worlds. If the defining feature of the Rentschler garden was the chicken house, at the Emmelfosses' it was one of the "magical pleasures" to be found in this world: a "double garden swing in a kind of bower of hollyhocks and morning glories" (138).

In its next appearance, the swing becomes a motif that captures and emphasizes the binarism represented by Rentschler's and Wilma Anna's opposing worlds:

From that lonely house he would cross Chestnut Street and come play with Wilma Anna. In her back yard there was an enchanted, luxurious plaything, a white wooden swing, two facing seats suspended in a frame upon which morning glories had been encouraged to grow. She in her starched little dress would swing forward as he swung back, and then backward as he swung toward her, her face in the sun-dapple utterly solemn and dimly expectant ... (143-44)

There is an impressive economy here in the deployment of the motif. The swing becomes a symbol of the happiness and enchantment brought into Rentschler's life; it brings together the children of binary genders who play together; it hints at the budding intimacy of these young solitaries; and the "two facing seats" echo the two facing houses on either

side of the street. The back-and-forth movement of the swing also captures the essential movement of Rentschler's childhood experience, his arrivals in and departures from these two houses, these poles of his existence that constituted a kind of force field, irresistibly drawing him to the magic of one and inevitably pulling him back by duty to the other. Finally, the movement of the swing mirrors the movement of the text as the latter enacts the reciprocity of opposing but interacting worlds, and is suggestive, too, of what may well have been Updike's formative idea and defining metaphor: the oscillating movement of a pendulum.

As the story moves toward its conclusion, the swing is accorded new and important meanings. Its status as something of a sacred object is reinforced when Georgene, the notary public, tells Rentschler, to his amazement, that Wilma Anna still lives in her house and has "just had that garden swing painted again. She cares for it like it's a real antique" (145). Wilma Anna's preservation of this sacred object serves, in Rentschler's mind, to embalm his childhood experiences in her house as an idyllic period of supreme happiness. In the fading light the swing, seen from Georgene's house, glows enough to be visible, "a patch of white in the darkness, and a blurred white framework around it" (146), like the light of a distant star traveling through time into Rentschler's present.

The garden swing motif has now been set up to achieve its final effect as the temporal lines of past and present converge. The chicken house and the swing are the totemic objects of the two family gardens, now seen by Rentschler as the spaces that encapsulated the contrasting worlds of his childhood. He gazes upon the swing, recalling once again its "swinging back and forth, back and forth," and then enters Georgene's garden, where he is engulfed by an overwhelming sense of loss:

These secret yards, straight and narrow, had been the essence of the happiness on this side of the street ... Rentschler inhaled Hayesville happiness; he saw his entire life, past and to come, as an errant encircling of this forgotten center. His childhood back yard ... had been comparatively sad and disorderly. His family had not quite had the Hayesville secret. It was right that they had been forced to move. (146)

The motif of the swing gathers its final significance as it triggers, along with the garden, Rentschler's mournful epiphany; and it is indeed an epiphany, and not simply a momentary jag of nostalgia. The returning "pioneer," back from the west in his native Pennsylvania where up until now he has felt himself "an alien" (145), has finally returned home, but it is his recognition that this has always been home that has him conceive of his "entire life" as an exclusion and displacement. Here is another story in *The Afterlife* that ends with something "immensely missing." But Rentschler's loss is greater than Fogel's in "Short Easter": Fogel is moving slowly, but not tragically, into decline and death; Rentschler's epiphany is that his whole life has been spent in exile, a punishment and banishment initiated by his original expulsion from home. The term *errant* is powerful here: Rentschler has led a life of wandering, straying from the glowing, pure white center of harmony and happiness. In his loss, he can feel "nothing but wonder" for Wilma Anna's "majestically rooted life" at the center of the world, at home (147).

The story concludes, as if to motion toward its own binary operation, with a final oscillation. As Rentschler leaves Georgene's house, he feels "dismissed," echoing his childhood expulsion from this world when his family had to leave Hayesville. In a reaction of self-consolation, he wills an antidote to this life-long exclusion: "Stepping into the glittery November chill, he was dazzled to see the house on the other side of the

street ablaze; the porch light and front-room lamps were lit up as if to welcome a visitor, a visitor, it seemed clear to him, long expected and much beloved”(147). In a conflation of the two temporal lines of the story, the motif of the garden swing exercise its final influence on the text: the pendulum swings one last time from one side of the street to the other as the child who had always to return to his “lonely” house and the adult who is condemned to a life of displacement converge to fantasize a magical, belated admission to paradise, a return to the family home across the street that would resemble the world on the other side of the street.

These three stories invite one to reflect on the theme of loss in Updike, and lead one to conclude that the most profound articulation of loss in his short fiction is that occasioned by the anguish of mortality.<sup>7</sup> One of the “intrinsic stresses in the human condition” that Updike highlighted in a 1971 interviews was that “you foresee your own death” (Plath 61). Awareness of mortality, indeed, is a theme that links Early and Late Updike. In “Pigeon Feathers” (1960), 14-year-old David Kern is visited and subsequently terrified by the premonition of his death, and manages to overcome his distress only through a consoling little narrative he constructs in which God, “who had lavished such craft” upon the pigeons David has just killed, “would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever” (*The Early Stories* 33). Thus released into immortality, David is free to project himself into his future. The protagonists of the three stories from *The Afterlife* can have no such illusions: if they project themselves into the future, they see only death. Fogel and Fredericks, in particular, are explicitly troubled by the anticipation of death. The only way to escape this vision is to look the other way, to the past, where

life was untainted by intimations of mortality. Only life can counter death, even if offered in the evanescent textures of memory.

It is not surprising that death should be the ultimate expression of loss in an author who, in his early years, was sufficiently troubled by his mortality to write “Pigeon Feathers.” Yet one senses in Updike an even greater anguish, one that goes beyond the understanding of death as the end of a life. Again, it is instructive to consider the affinities between “Pigeon Feathers” and *The Afterlife*. One finds in both a contextualization of death that gestures toward a greater existential dread. David Kern is bothered by “the insulting gulf of time that existed before he was born” (14), and is terrified by a “vision of death” in which he sees himself in a kind of grave, where “you will be forever, ... and in time no one will remember you, and you will never be called by any angel” (17). Here, time expands beyond the limitations of a life to embrace nonexistence before and after the time of a life, a horrifying temporal expansion expressed in the culmination of David’s vision of death: he imagines what seems like the fossilization of his body “[a]s strata of rock shift,” absorbing him into the vaster, annihilating movements of geological time. Death is perceived as an “extinction,” an ultimate negation that threatens not only the meanings of a life but of death as well: the meanings of both are nullified in the vision of massive cosmic motions in which “the sun expires, and unaltering darkness reigns” (17). The existential anguish the young Updike expressed in “Pigeon Feathers” is a fear about the value of human existence itself. Is life but a pinprick of light in cosmic time, an experience after which we are condemned to “everlasting darkness” (21), where no one, not even the angels, will come to rescue us from an absolute “oblivion” (18)?

We have seen how Updike returned to the theme of mortality in the stories of *The Afterlife*. But he also returned to the theme of death as oblivion in the collection's pivotal story about death, "A Sandstone Farmhouse." The commanding metaphors of the story are accumulation and removal. The sandstone farmhouse accumulated the evidence of human occupancy as the generations passed through it, and particularly so in the time of the protagonist's mother, who "had trouble throwing anything away" (104). This hoarding, however, is not due to indolence or negligence: "Joey recognized in this accumulation a superstition he had to fight within himself – the belief that everything has ... a worth which might, at any moment, be called into account. It was a way of advertising that one's own life was infinitely precious" (115). As he cleans out his mother's house after her death, Joey sifts through the carefully preserved testaments to the family's "precious" lives: college notebooks, Christmas cards, photo albums, valentines. But the story resonates with the threat of ultimate oblivion – if there is accumulation, there is also removal. Joey realizes that "[h]e was the last of his line" to have used his father's tools, "sacred" objects that seem now like "runes no one else could decipher." Stones and things endure in this story, like these "antique implements worn like prehistoric artifacts," but people perish and disappear (126). Joey cannot identify the "stiffly posed ancestors" he looks at in his mother's photo albums because he had never bothered to take up her repeated offers "to teach him their names and exact relation to him." Joey should be the repository of the history of the previous generations of his family, the one to ensure their continued existence in memory and time. But time has brought only oblivion, and now "his ancestors floated free and nameless," as if they had never existed (130). The lives in this story are also caught up in an engulfing temporal



extension: the time of the story expands outward beyond the life of Joey's mother to previous generations, then to the early-nineteenth-century builders of "these Pennsylvania farmhouses" (106), and extending far beyond human memory, back through the geological periods to the "huge moraines" deposited by "the last ice age's most southerly advance" (107). The temporality of this story may not terrify in the manner of David Kern's death vision, no doubt because Joey has lived long enough to have learned that time is loss lived, yet this is a story whose images and metaphors – such as the young mother "running toward ... her death" (129) – inscribe death within life, contrast human mortality with imperishable matter, and threaten ephemeral human lives with an ultimate forgetting.

In young David Kern's vision of death, one is pinned into one's grave, "blind and silent" (17), consigned to an "unaltering darkness." Another writer, to whose work Updike was often unsympathetic, shared this Updikean vision of the "human condition": the stricken Pozzo, he too blind, saw, in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, how cosmic time engulfs human time and portends the obliteration of human meaning: "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (83).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> At the end of "His Oeuvre," Bech surveys with disgust his seven titles "stashed in boxes" after a public reading at which yet another ex-lover has turned up. He concludes that these women come "to mock his books" and to impress upon him that "We, *we* are your masterpieces" (509).

<sup>2</sup> Detweiler uses the terms interchangeably, however, when he observes that "the adultery motif accompanies [the protagonists' dialogue] through the repeated references to beds" (13). He then goes on to

record these bed references, but it becomes clear that the bed is the motif that supports the theme of adultery.

<sup>3</sup> To the motifs mentioned by Detweiler and Luscher should be added the motif generated by the pattern of the floor of Richard's apartment, the "black and white tile, like the floor in a Vermeer." The sentence in which this phrase occurs, as if to alert us to the formal modalities of the story, has Richard's glance move from the apartment floor to the skyscraper opposite his building, where he sees the pattern echoed by way of the "black plywood" in the façade (replacing fallen panes) and the windows that mirror cloud and sky (*Early Stories* 801). This motif of contrasts paves the way for a series of oppositions between his wife and lover in the story's extensive network of motifs, metaphors and images.

<sup>4</sup> In scenes where men and women are together in this story, the men are static spectators of dynamic women – from the lively young woman on the plane and Fogel's energetic wife to the women at an Easter-egg hunt who are "swooping about after their children" (99).

<sup>5</sup> As scholars have long noted, Updike drew extensively on myth in his fiction. See, for example, "Classical Literature" and "Myth" in De Bellis, *The John Updike Encyclopedia*.

<sup>6</sup> After writing this article, I became aware of Sylvie Mathé's excellent article on "The Journey to the Dead." Whereas my own piece seeks to examine the origins and deployments of various Updike motifs in several stories from *The Afterlife*, Mathé's article focuses uniquely on "The Journey to the Dead." She thus explores in greater detail how the story "se constitue à partir d'une élaboration métaphorique de l'image centrale du voyage au pays des morts" ("is constructed by way of a metaphorical elaboration of the central image of the journey to the abode of the dead"; 30). Mathé's discussion extends to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the myth of the Gorgon, whose gaze turns the beholder to stone. She links the Gorgon myth to Arlene's stroke: when Arlene breaks the taboo of evoking the dead by recalling in her conversations with Fredericks the "whole vast kingdom of the dead" that constitutes their past (70), she is struck dumb (the effect of her stroke). Fredericks, seeing the mute fury in Arlene's eyes and realizing how "[t]he dead hate us, and we hate the dead" (73), flees, because "croiser le regard d'Arlene, c'est aussi rencontrer la Gorgone et risquer d'être pétrifié à son tour" ("to meet Arlene's gaze would also be to meet the Gorgon and to risk that he, too, be turned to stone"; 43 [translations are mine]).

<sup>7</sup> The theme of loss in Updike's short fiction has often been highlighted by scholars. Donald Greiner noted that "Updike's stories are more often than not about loss" (xviii), while Robert Luscher proposes that "[t]he majority of Updike's stories focus on loss and the ongoing struggle against time's diminishment" (x).

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