

John Updike's Narrative "Secrets": Hidden Ekphrasis in "Made in Heaven"

Some twenty-five years after he wrote his short story "Gesturing," John Updike responded to a question about his decision, as editor of *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*, to include this story in the collection rather than one of several others of his that qualified for selection. Updike explained that he selected the story because it contained "a certain music of imagery" (Schiff 25). In his "Introduction" to the collection Updike notes that "Gesturing" "seemed ... to offer the most graceful weave, mingling the image of a defenestrating skyscraper with those from a somewhat gaily collapsing marriage" (*Best* xxii). The metaphor of weaving is apt, as Updike in this story creates a web of images, linking the black-and-white tile pattern of an apartment floor to a similar pattern in the skyscraper façade – black plywood sheets (replacing fallen glass) juxtaposed with the remaining reflecting panes – an imagery of contrast reinforced by the repeated use of the colours black and white, facilitating the comparison by Richard Maple of wife Joan with lover Ruth. Another layer of the weave consists of motifs of mirrors, ice, and diamonds, and then metaphors of height and depth. The meanings of the story are constructed upon the blend and balance of these formal elements, to the extent that the story's themes are more at the service of its formal devices than the reverse.

As early as the late 1960s Updike was referring in interviews to the importance he attached to the formal properties of narrative. In what is a profound insight into the practice of his art, he stated that "narratives should not be *primarily* packages for psychological insights"; for him, "[the] author's deepest pride ... is not in his incidental wisdom but in his ability to keep an organized mass of images moving forward" (Plath

44). Form, then, is granted equal status with content, as is structure and design with authorial omniscience and instruction. In the same interview he underlined the value of “pattern” in narrative (45), going so far as to assert, in a slightly later interview, “I cannot imagine being a writer without wanting somehow to play, to take these patterns, to insert these secrets into my books, and to spin out this music that has its formal side” (52). Updike was speaking specifically about myth here, but it is clear that these formal resources embraced the patterns created by motifs, images, metaphors, and symbols, the configuring features that accord shape and direction to his fiction. This formal patterning is sometimes openly acknowledged in his stories (as in the myth of the descent to the underworld in “The Journey to the Dead”), and is sometimes discernible with careful reading (the motif of the female voice in “Short Easter”).¹ Elsewhere, however, it is likely that readers often fail to detect the patterns created by Updike’s play with formal features. In such cases he becomes the victim of his own subtlety – in his nondidactic art, his “secrets” are liable to remain so. In a recent contribution to Updike scholarship, the writer Ann Beattie observes: “I am struck by how often ... [Updike] undercuts his own facility. How often he seems to wish that what we see is the story, not its figures of speech, not its clever and astute literary contrivances” (10).

The subject of this essay is what might well be termed formal “secrets” at the heart of one of Updike’s later short stories, “Made in Heaven,” from the collection *Trust Me* (1987).² The story is exemplary in its demonstration of Updike’s use of formal features to initiate and develop themes. Yet the patterning is so subtly embedded in the narrative, and the story so strong in its depiction of the married life of a Christian couple, that it seems likely that even a careful reading might not disclose that the female character of

Jeanette, wife of protagonist Brad Schaeffer, is constructed according to two “hidden” patterning devices, namely an ekphrasis of the Virgin Mary and the Pygmalion myth. Ekphrasis – to quote James A. W. Heffernan, the scholar who has done much to bring about the renewal of interest in this field of inquiry – is “[t]he literary representation of visual art” (“Ekphrasis,” 297), or, in a later refinement of this definition, the “verbal representation of visual representation” (*Museum* 3). The latter “representation” is important here: Heffernan insists, “What ekphrasis represents in words ... must itself be *representational*” (*Museum* 4; italics in original).³ This essay proposes that Updike’s character Jeanette is a verbal (and narrative) representation of centuries-long visual representation of the Virgin Mary in Christian art. It will become clear that the meanings attached to Jeanette through the model of the Virgin extend well beyond those communicated through art alone; what Maria Warner calls the “myth and cult of the Virgin Mary” have been established through, *inter alia*, the Gospels, the celebration of Christian rites, papal pronouncements of dogma, theological debate and contestation, and the reports of visionaries. Yet Updike’s portrait of Jeanette remains an ekphrasis because she is rendered as “the verbal representation of visual representation,” as if, that is, she were an image – a painting, statue, or icon – of the Virgin.

Typically, the subject of ekphrastic analysis is a single artwork, yet Heffernan’s definitions clearly allow more than a single-artwork source, an inference taken up by Tamar Yacobi, who asserts that there is no good theoretical reason to restrict ekphrasis to a unique artwork. She argues for the “neglected” form of the “art model as source.” The art model is a composite, “a generalized visual image” (601). Yacobi notes that “[r]eaders, if anything, are often more familiar with art models than with the details of

specific artworks.” Updike’s *Jeanette*, based on a composite image of Mary rather than on any single piece of art, is consistent with Yacobi’s notion of a “multiple visual source chosen for verbal (re)modeling” (603). Indeed, the very ubiquity of Marian imagery obviates the need for a single-artwork source for Updike’s ekphrasis, and facilitates his exploitation of the variety of associations and roles attached to the Virgin. That said, there is compelling evidence in the story to suggest that Updike was influenced by Byzantine iconography of the Virgin, which source might be explained by the Byzantines’ early and intense devotion to the Virgin.⁴ As Warner notes, “[t]he earliest feasts of the Virgin were instituted in the fifth century in Byzantium” (66), where, she records, the “entire fabric of the Marian cult [had] its official beginnings” (67).

As for the Pygmalion myth, its most important influence on the story is in Updike’s use of the motif of the male creation of a female ideal, and of the creator’s subsequent adoration of his creation. In the myth, the sculptor Pygmalion creates an ivory statue of his ideal of woman; he falls in love with his creation, touches and caresses it, and covers it in fine clothes and beautiful jewels. He prays to the goddess Venus that she grant him a wife like his ivory-statue ideal, a wish granted when Venus brings the statue to life. The Pygmalion myth informs Updike’s central plot and theme, reinforced by the deployment of precise textual details from the myth.⁵ However, it is the Marian ekphrasis that exercises the greater formal influence on the story, and which operates well beyond the happy ending of the myth, where a child is born to Pygmalion and Galatea. While the discussion to follow will note occasional important textual echoes of the myth, the influence of the motif of a male’s passion for his created female ideal should be self-evident and need no further illustration. For this reason, the essay will be concerned

primarily with the presence and function of the Marian ekphrasis, through which Jeanette is rendered as Brad's creation, and which is the story's formal means to explore the themes of Christian faith, personal belief, male idealization of women, patriarchal possessiveness, and feminist resistance.

"Made in Heaven" follows the chronology of a Christian marriage, beginning with the first meeting of Brad and Jeanette, and following them through courtship, married life, old age, and, finally, Jeanette's illness and death. The opening scene establishes the theme of Brad's instrumental view of Jeanette and lays a foundations for the Marian ekphrasis. The nature of Brad's interest in Jeanette is announced unambiguously in the opening line: "Brad Schaeffer was attracted to Jeanette Henderson by her Christianity"; he is drawn to her on hearing her exclaim, "Why, the salvation of my soul!," as she is hemmed in by "Rodney Gelb, the office Romeo" (*Trust Me* 190). In fending off the latter, figured as devilish tempter – his "overbearing, beetle-browed face," his "giving off heat through his back serge suit" – Jeanette proclaims her essential value in response to Rodney's question about what matters to her. Businessman Brad's first comment to Jeanette is a pragmatic "question of a more serious order": "Are you Catholic?" He feels "relief" to learn that she is a Methodist: "He was free to love her. In Boston, an aspiring man did not love Catholics" (191). No longer threatened by her potential Catholicism, Brad's initial appreciation of Jeanette is to find her Christian faith "lovely" (192). If her religious belief elicits such a condescending response, it is because religion matters little to Brad – the imminent collapse of capitalism in 1930s America would, in his view, "take with it what churches were left" (191). Their subsequent courtship is founded on Brad's

judicious attraction to Jeanette as an acceptable potential wife for an ambitious man in Boston's anti-Catholic business circles.

From the outset, then, Jeanette is divested of personal qualities in favor of her as image and ideal, confirmed by the first description of her, which strongly suggests an image of artificial representation:

The flush the party punch had put in her cheeks helped him to see for the first time the something highly polished about her compact figure, an impression of an object finely made ... She was lightly sweating. The excited blush of her cheeks made the blue of her eyes look icy.... The contrast between her blue eyes and rosy, glazed skin had become almost garish. (190-92)

This lines have a triple function: first, to present Jeanette through Brad's eyes – they are preceded by the words “He looked over” (190) – as his construction; second, to render this vision as an image by portraying her in terms more resonant of artificial representation than of a real person – “an object finely made,” with the shining, “glazed” surface of a statue or painting, and “icy,” slightly nonhuman eyes; and third, to lay the foundation for an association with the Virgin through this language of representation and through the rosiness of the cheeks and the emphasized blue of the eyes. Roses are the symbol of the Virgin: Warner notes that, to indicate the purity of the Virgin and her immunity from the putrefaction of death, “roses spring up in her empty tomb in paintings of the Assumption” (99). Warner records also that “blue is the colour of the Virgin, ‘the sapphire,’ as Dante wrote, who turns all of heaven blue” (xx).⁶

The opening scene and early stages of the courtship also allow the figure of Jeanette to take on the countenance of a very specific ekphrasis, that of a Byzantine icon of the

Virgin. As elsewhere in a story filled, at first sight, with oblique references, Updike offers clues to the formal device he employs: Brad and Jeanette begin to attend together the “Greek Revival clapboard church” with “Ionic columns” that Brad had been attending (193, 194), located in a part of Boston where they feel “the east wind,” which blows through streets resonant in his mind of “old quarters in Europe” (193, 194). We learn that Jeanette had been attending a Copley Methodist church, “with its tall domed bell tower and its Byzantine gold-leaf ceiling” (193). The textual detail of the gold leaf acknowledges the centrality of gold in Byzantine art, a feature already associated with Jeanette in her first appearance in the story: As she speaks to Rodney, the text records the “lighted windows” of the building opposite, which then become the “golden windows” that function as a backdrop to Jeanette’s figure as Brad moves over to speak to her (190, 191). This initial image of Jeanette framed against a golden background conforms to the typical Byzantine representation of the Virgin, as two examples will serve to illustrate.

The church of St. Sophia (also called Hagia Sophia) in Constantinople (formerly Byzantium, now Istanbul) was considered, as Robin Cormack describes it, “the Byzantine ‘ideal’ church.” After the periods of iconoclasm (727-787 and 815-843), in which icon veneration was rejected and icons destroyed, it was determined that St. Sophia would become the “showpiece monument” of the new iconophile period (117). To that end, a mosaic image of the Virgin was commissioned, and inaugurated in 867. Located high in the half-dome of the apse of St. Sophia, “[a]gainst the clear gold background symbolizing heavenly light, Mary sits on a backless throne with the Christ child on her lap” (120). Cormack also discusses a recurring Byzantine iconic type, the *Hodigitria* (“she who shows the way”), an image of Mary holding and pointing to the Christ Child. One

representation of this scene, described by Cormack as “the most important icon venerated by the Orthodox community” (109), is rare among Byzantine icons in having an individual title, *The Triumph of Orthodoxy*. Cormack notes: “The icon declares the importance of icons in the Orthodox church by representing their veneration by those who fought for Orthodoxy during the period of iconoclasm” (29). The icon that these defenders of the faith venerate within the icon is a *Hodigitria* scene. The figures, including the Virgin, who occupies the most elevated position in the image, “are surrounded by divine light, symbolized by the gold ground of the background” (31).

Where the character of Jeanette is concerned, the textual association with Byzantine gold leaf, her pictorial framing against a backdrop of “golden windows,” and the Byzantine gold-leaf symbolism of heavenly light – in a story called “Made in Heaven” by a writer with an avowed predilection for formal patterning – are unlikely to be a coincidence. On the contrary: through the ekphrasis of a Byzantine icon of the Virgin, Updike has specific meanings and values at his disposal for the development of the theme of a woman transformed into an ideal and a religious image.⁷

The consequences of this depersonalization of Jeanette create the story’s narrative dynamic: Jeanette becomes, first, Brad’s cherished and venerated possession, and, second, his ideal of Christian faith through which his idiosyncratic belief finds vicarious expression. Brad’s construction of Jeanette is consistent with what Warner identifies as “the powerful undertow of misogyny in Christianity” (225). One expression of this has been “Christian patriarchy’s idea of woman,” to which the cult of the Virgin has contributed: “it is this very cult of the Virgin’s ‘femininity,’ expressed by her sweetness, submissiveness, and passivity that permits her to survive, a goddess in a patriarchal

society” (235, 191). Patriarchy was also a characteristic of Byzantine culture: Cormack speaks of “the gender of power” in describing “the prominence of men in establishing the beliefs and values of this Christian society” (215). Brad displays his patriarchal tendencies initially in a form of physical possessiveness: “Involuntarily his arm encircled her waist at crossings, and he could not let go even when they had safely crossed the street” (192). In church, Jeanette’s “reverence made him ... want to turn and hug her and lift her up with a shout of pride and animal gladness” (193), echoing Pygmalion’s touching and caressing of his statue. It is at moments such as these that Jeanette “seemed most intimately his” (194).

This physical possessiveness, however, is but a manifestation of the greater intrusion Brad commits in taking over Jeanette’s very life and being, in both its public and private spheres. “It was his idea, to accompany her” to church during their courtship (192), a gesture she “resisted, at first,” for fear it would be “distracting” (193). Wherever Jeanette is, in this early phase of their life together, so is Brad, as in her family home where he “greedily inhaled” the world of her childhood (192). Unknown to him, however, his possessiveness “was rending something precious to her, invading a fragile feminine space” (193). But such delicacies of personality and intimacy are lost in Brad’s exhilaration at the possession of his object of desire. As if Jeanette were a transportable icon to be viewed and venerated from different perspectives, and particularly so in church, “he liked seeing her in new settings, in the new light each placed her in.” In this framing of Brad’s contemplation of Jeanette, she is “like a figure etched on a city scene,” where “[h]er smiling face “gleamed” in the light. Brad’s Jeanette slowly crystallizes into

the object and image into which he is unwittingly fixing her: “Brad would sometimes clown or feign clumsiness just to crack her composed expression” (192).

If Jeanette as possession becomes an object, Jeanette as ideal becomes a devotional exemplar to which Brad attaches himself in an unconscious endeavor to assuage an existential solitude and to corroborate his own shallow faith. He “assumed religion was already as dead as Marx and Mencken claimed,” and, although unfailingly attending church on a weekly basis, he is “[p]erhaps ... still an unbeliever” during his courtship of Jeanette (191, 194). It is only in a moment of existential anxiety while on the deck of his wartime aircraft carrier that Brad finds his form of faith. Frightened by “the devastating impression the black firmament of spattered stars” makes on him as he apprehends the vastness of the cosmos, he rationalizes himself into an instrumental faith:

How little, little to the point of nothingness, he was beneath those stars! Even the great ship ... was reduced to the size of a pinpoint in such a perspective. And yet it was he who was witnessing the stars; they knew nothing of themselves, so in this dimension he was greater than they. As far as he could reason, religion begins with this strangeness, this standstill; faith tips the balance in favor of the pinpoint. So, though he had never had Jeanette’s smiling intuitions or sensations of certainty, he became in his mind a believer. (195)

This is a self-serving rationalization: Brad’s discovery of belief is one in which he consciously contrives to reverse the balance of power between himself and the celestial vastness, while remaining existentially anxious enough to need the support of a belief in God. Jeanette’s “intuitions,” on the other hand, are a richer terrain for the flourishing of true faith, and it will only be through her genuine belief that Brad’s contrived belief will

be vicariously sustained. Just as he attended church in the early days to be with her and “basked in her gravity” (193), now he feels “empowered by her fineness, her faith” as he stands beside her (196), and “misse[s] her” when, well into their marriage, she stops accompanying him to the ten o’clock Sunday morning service he prefers: “He felt naked, as when alone on the deck” of his aircraft carrier years earlier (198).

It is in Jeanette as earthly focus of Brad’s belief that the Virgin Mary ekphrasis receives its full expression. Brad’s veneration of Jeanette intensifies the presentation of her as icon or statued image: he admires “[h]er composure, the finished neatness of her figure” (193), sits in church with Jeanette “at his side, compact and still and exquisite” (194), observes how her body’s physical changes over time add to “that polished, glossy quality that had first enchanted him” (196), and notes how she returns home “shiny-faced” from her church service (198). But it is also through familiar religious metaphors of space that Jeanette is powerfully aligned with Mary. Updike once noted that he “tend[s] to see everything poised between heaven and hell” (Plath 20). “Made in Heaven” employs the same commanding metaphors, using motifs of elevation and height, descent and fall, to trace the shifting fortunes of its characters.⁸ Jeanette is associated throughout with the pole of elevation. Her voice “lift[s] up the words of the hymns” and is “lifted in song” (193, 196), while Brad feels that “[s]he would lift him up,” just as he wants to “lift her up” in church (194, 193).

This elevation represents the orientation of Jeanette toward heaven, and allows us to appreciate the title of Updike’s story.⁹ The Virgin Mary, upon her Assumption, became Queen of Heaven; as living being on earth and as heavenly queen, Warner notes, she “occupies the principal mediating position, as a creature belonging both to earth and

heaven” (xxii). Jeanette, too, is of earth and heaven, and Updike accords her a personal intermediary space, symbolic both of her elevated status and of her belonging to two distinct realms. When Brad and Jeanette marry, they move to what will be their lifetime home, “full of corridors for vanished servants and with even a cupola. Narrow stairs wound up to a small round room that became Jeanette’s ‘retreat’” (195). Her exclusive occupancy of the cupola symbolically elevates her above her earthly abode and locates her in an intermediary realm between heaven and earth.

The cupola as symbol of Jeanette’s omnipresence has two important values exploited by the story. First, it accentuates the Byzantine dimension of the Marian ekphrasis through its association with the original and defining feature of Byzantine religious architecture, the domed church, thus opening up the figure of Jeanette to various meanings of Byzantine iconography.¹⁰ Hugh Honour and John Fleming note the shift in the Byzantine world in the sixth and seventh centuries from the veneration of “an image that was an aid to thought or prayer [to] one that was in itself an object of veneration,” leading to the demand for “[s]mall portable pictures” of venerated figures, or to what came to be known as icons. This move away from the symbolism of images to more lifelike representations led Byzantine painters to adopt “a more naturalistic style,” inviting believers to “a face-to-face meeting with the holy persons depicted” (323). Cormack records an increase in the number of Byzantine texts produced in the centuries after the period of iconoclasm that “coincides with an extension of the expressive devices in icons.” One such text speak of icons as “living painting,” while another considers “icons as appearing to our eyes as living beings which seem to speak graciously with their mouths” (154). Jeanette’s condition is encapsulated in this Byzantine notion of a

double ontology through the representation of her as both flesh-and-blood woman and nonearthly ideal. Her interjacent and omnipresent conditions are reinforced through the frequently recurring motif of her voice, which, along with the connotation of elevation, is represented as being at once earthly and celestial, as if emerging from both worlds at the same time: it is described variously as “frail” (193), “small” (196), “delicate” (203), and “distant” (205).¹¹ In the same vein, the rarity of Jeanette’s utterances is used tellingly to bolster the Marian ekphrasis: the Virgin’s “silence in the Gospels” (Warner 190) is transferred to Jeanette. When Brad ascends one day to her cupola and is troubled by her being “so quiet,” he asks, “Do you feel all right?” to which she replies: “I like being quiet. I always have. You know that” (201).

The second important value of the cupola as intermediary space and symbol of Jeanette’s omnipresence is one that Warner identifies as central to the enduring power of the Virgin. Because “she belongs in both realms,” the “most evident function of the Virgin today is intercession ... Mediation has been the most constant theme of her cult” (285, xxiii). Brad’s shallow-rooted faith cannot grow all the way up to God, but it flourishes in feeding off the nourishing presence of Jeanette’s faith. Practical-minded Brad, with a limited capacity to direct his belief at an ethereal and divine absence, puts his faith instead in the pious being who inhabits his own earthly realm, transforming Jeanette into the repository and object of his faith. As their married life develops, it is less God that Brad worships at church than Jeanette, whose “Christianity, as he imagined it, was, like water sealed into an underground cistern, unchangingly pure” (196), recalling the “absolute purity” of the Virgin (Warner 225). Here is the metaphorical sense of Brad’s constant physical holding of Jeanette: If he clings to her because she is the revered

ideal, it is also because she has become his earthly intercessor, his access to God, and, ultimately, his bridge to heaven and salvation. As Cormack notes of the “functional” aim of the Byzantine icon: “They received the prayers and veneration that passed through them to the ‘other’ world that they symbolized, and they were expected to reflect the powers of God” (2).¹² And although, as Warner records, “God is the only source of salvation,” it is “the intercession of the Virgin with her almighty son [that] brings about this salvation” (286, 323). Jeanette would indeed “lift [Brad] up.”

Jeanette’s intercessionary role in Brad’s instrumental faith has its concomitant in the role played by the church. At Brad’s suggestion they become Episcopalians; the church is “handier” to their house, but, more importantly for Brad, “his associates and clients tended to be Episcopalians, and ... this church held more of the sort of people they should get to know” (195). If the expression of Jeanette’s genuine faith remains “shy” and silent (193), Brad’s becomes active and visible: “He himself taught Sunday school, passed the plate, sat on the vestry, read the lesson. It was like an extension of his business life” (196). Brad loves the trappings and pyrotechnic displays of the “High Church” ceremonies, “the incense, the robed teams of acolytes,” and Communion, about which “he harbor[s] an inner image, a kind of religious fantasy, of the wafer and wine turning, with a muffled explosion, to pure light in the digestive system” (205). Brad confuses faith with the business of faith, spending “hours at the church, politicking, smoothing ruffled feathers” (197-98).¹³ With his faith safely invested in Jeanette, materialist and capitalist Brad can afford to use church services to admire “the look of the congregation,” these well-turned-out and expensively dressed men and women (195). He loves especially, in his patriarchal manner, to look at his own living icon, his Jeanette “in her black silk dress

and the strand of real pearls, each costing as much as a refrigerator, with which he had paid tribute to their twentieth anniversary. Money gently glimmered on her fingers and ears” (196). Just as gold in Byzantine iconography “declares the preciousness of the works and therefore the commitment of the patrons,” and “elevates the human figures from the real into the heavenly world beyond” (Cormack 25), and just as Pygmalion “dresses [his statue] up and puts diamond rings on its fingers, gives it a necklace ... and pearl earrings” (Ovid 351), so Brad “pa[ys] tribute” to his anniversary, but also to his own earthly and heavenly queen, in whom he has deposed his faith and entrusted his salvation.

The depiction of Brad’s greatest triumph – the public display of his pearl-laden icon – is followed immediately by the beginning of his fall; here is Brad – enacting the scene depicted on the Updike-designed dust jacket of *Trust Me*¹⁴ – as a heedless Icarus unaware of the dangers he is courting. Leaving church with Jeanette on Sunday mornings, “his arm involuntarily crept around her waist, and he would let go only to shake the minister’s overworked hand” (196). But “one Sunday” Jeanette rebels, objecting to being “paw[ed]” and “steered” through the crowd. Brad, in his incomprehension, can only plead his enduring love for her. Her retort reveals her awareness of the dualism – as woman and idealized image – at the heart of Brad’s apprehension of her: “Are you sure it’s me you love or just some idea you have of me?” This “finicking distinction” puzzles Brad: “She was positing a ‘real’ her, a person apart from the one he was married to. But who would this be, unless it was the woman who took a cup of tea and went up the winding stairs to her cupola at odd hours?” Brad has indeed substituted the “real” person of Jeanette with his “idea” of her, and it is the “real” Jeanette who disappears up to her “retreat,” where

she can be her true self, safe from Brad's false image of her. She continues her challenge: "Did it ever occur to you ... that you love me because it suits you? That for you it's an exercise in male power?" In his incomprehension at the terms of Jeanette's accusation, and in the manner in which he explains to himself "their mysterious lapse of harmony" – he puts it down to her "change of life" (197) – Brad confirms what the story invites us to see: that by intruding too far into his wife's life, and in fossilizing her as his religious ideal, he has perpetuated the patriarchal ideal of women, one deeply rooted, as we have seen, in the Christian ideal of the Virgin.

The text suggests that this scene takes place on the verge of the Sixties, the decade of cultural upheaval in America, the beginning of the great challenges to the conservative social and cultural order. Brad wonders "if their sons, who had become more or less anti-establishment, and incidentally anti-church, had infected her with their rebellion" (198). Jeanette's challenge to Brad is indeed a feminist-inspired rebellion against his male idealization of her. But her contestation can also be understood, in a story constructed upon a Byzantine Marian ekphrasis, as her own iconoclastic rebellion. Iconoclasts, Cormack explains, "denied the holiness of icons and rejected icon veneration" (87). Jeanette seeks to elude the prison-house of Brad's idea of her, to destroy his stultifying veneration of the image he has created of her, and to recuperate and preserve the private "feminine space" of her personhood and identity.

This scene of contestation should signal the end of the ekphrasis. That it continues is an indication of Brad's continuing dependence on his idealized Jeanette, the only Jeanette he has allowed to exist. The years pass, and Brad, "[i]n his loneliness" in retirement, "would visit Jeanette in her cupola":

[E]verything seemed to halt when he climbed the last, pie-sliced-shape steps, so the room had the burnished silence of a clock that has just stopped ticking. She sat lit from all sides, surrounded by windows, her soft brown hair scarcely touched by gray and the wrinkles of her face none of them deep, so that her head seemed her youthful head softened by a webbed veil.... [S]he did not seem to be doing anything—so deeply engaged in gazing out a window ... that she did not even turn her head at his entrance. Her motionlessness slightly frightened him. (200-01)

Here is the apogee of the Marian ekphrasis. The “silence” is at once that of a sacred space – “He thought of [the cupola] as her meditation room” (202) – and a mute image. Jeanette is as motionless an icon, “lit” by the light of the “windows” like a mosaic in the dome of a Byzantine church. Her “youthful” appearance indicates the fixed, eternally young image that has remained unchanged in Brad’s mind since he first met her, one consistent with the obligatory representation of the Virgin as youthful: Warner notes that “the Virgin’s youth became the visible sign of her purity” (302) and that the “ideal” she represents is that of “a fixed immutable absolute” (334). The likening of Jeanette’s hair to a “webbed veil” is a final corroboration of the ekphrasis: here is the Holy Veil of the Virgin, the *maphorion*, what became, as Warner points out, the “abiding signature” of the representation of the Virgin (291).¹⁵

In the narrative of Brad and Jeanette’s life together, this cupola scene signals their separation from each other. It is a separation in a physical sense, through Jeanette’s self-isolation, but also spiritually, although Brad will not be aware of this until a late stage of Jeanette’s terminal illness, in the final scene of the couple together. Dying in hospital, Jeanette shocks Brad in no longer wishing to receive visits from their minister and in

refusing to take Communion, telling him that it seems “an awful lot of bother” to continue to believe. He asks when she lost her belief, and she replies: “Since you took it from me. You moved right in. It didn’t seem necessary, for the *two* of us to keep it up.” Brad finally pays the price for his several sins: for his insincere and misdirected belief, for his possessive intrusion into Jeanette’s life, for his appropriation of her faith, and for imprisoning her in a false identity and ideal. Jeanette’s feminist rebellion is complete: “He lifted his eyes and saw her as enviably serene, having wrought this vengeance” (206).

This final scene, too, is rendered as a Marian ekphrasis, through the recurrence of what have become the motifs associated with Jeanette as icon: “the compact, highly finished impression” that her features continue to make on Brad, and “[t]he blue of her challenging eyes and the fevered flush of her cheeks” (205). Recalling the cupola, the text emphasizes the “wall of steel-rimmed windows” that can be seen from Jeanette’s hospital room; in a continuing echo of the Byzantine Virgin, they become “rectangles of gold” when the lights are turned on in the evening (204, 206).

But the Marian ekphrasis in this final scene is most evident in its resemblance to a Byzantine *Koimisis* (the Falling Asleep of the Virgin Mary), or Dormition scene. The end of Mary’s life posed a problem for the Christian churches, for, as Warner records, “nowhere in the Bible is the death of the Virgin mentioned” – a silence that “invited story-telling” to explain the meaning of the Virgin’s death (81). The dogma of the Assumption (proclaimed in 1950) was the response to the conundrum. As Warner notes, the doctrine “skirt[s] the question of Mary’s death” (253): needing to preserve the perfection of the Virgin, it proclaims that “the all-pure Virgin was spared the dissolution

of the grave” and that she avoided the separation of body and soul by “ascend[ing] body and soul into heaven” (xxiii, 89). Byzantine belief, on the other hand – continued into current Orthodox Church teaching – asserts that Mary died the natural death of a normal mortal being, and that she lay in her tomb for three days before being resurrected, after which her body and soul were reunited in heaven. On August 15 the Catholic Church celebrates the Assumption, and the Orthodox Church celebrates the Dormition. The *Koimisis* icon, which became one of the most popular in the Byzantine world, features the Virgin in a supine position. Updike’s final scene is true to this composition, not only in having Jeanette lie on her back in her hospital bed, but also in the crucial meaning attached to the scene: Jeanette’s death is that of a mortal human being, one who suffers, in her cancer, the “bodily decay” spared the Virgin (Warner xxiii). Through this final Byzantine Marian ekphrasis, the story preserves Jeanette’s double ontology: she will die as herself and on her own terms, as a flesh-and-blood woman, but will die for Brad still preserved in the idealized image in which he has immobilized her. For Brad, despite Jeanette’s deathbed renunciation of faith, has invested too much in this image to relinquish it:

Though she had asked that there be absolutely no religious service, Brad and the young minister arranged one, following the oldest-fashioned, wholly impersonal rite.... He continued to go to the ten o’clock service ... But it was sheer inert motion; there were no falcon flights of his mind anymore, no small, true voice at his side. There was nothing. He wished he could think otherwise, but he had believed in her all those years and could not stop now. (206-07)

Jeanette's death signals the end of Brad's ascent to and contact with heaven and the divine. Jeanette is associated throughout with elevation; with her death, Brad will be forever denied his "falcon flights." Brad's reaction to Jeanette's renunciation of faith is true to a story and collection informed by motifs and metaphors of height and descent: "'You mean you don't believe?' In his inner ear he felt all the height of space concealed beneath the floor, down and down" (206). We may understand Brad's impending fall as a punishment for the sin of insincere, instrumental belief: he rationalized his belief into existence, conceived of it as a barrier to the terrors of existential nothingness, and sustained it through paying tribute to his human ideal, rather than to God.¹⁶

It is probably not a coincidence that "Made in Heaven" and Updike's autobiographical meditation "On Being a Self Forever" from his memoir *Self-Consciousness* date from the same period (mid to late 1980s). Both texts reflect explicitly on the nature of religious belief, suggesting a late-middle-age stock-taking by Updike on the importance of faith in his life. For Updike, a definitive tension was engendered by the simultaneous and competing emotions of joy in the fact of existence and terror in the knowledge that it must end. It was the latter emotion that prevailed in his early adult life and would persist as he grew older, if in attenuated form. Enduring the terrors of inevitable nothingness led Updike to conclude that "[b]eing human cannot be borne alone" (*Self-Consciousness* 233), so he "decided" he would believe "the Christian religion I had been born into" (230). Religion, he saw, "enables us to ignore nothingness" (228) and helps "put us at ease in this world." But the "pragmatic undercurrent" of this journey to belief "troubles" Updike, and, in identifying the flaws of such rationalizations, he employs the term that

describes Brad's coming to faith, for which he is punished at the end of the story: "Pragmatic belief becomes cynical belief" (232-33). Cancer causes Jeanette's physical death, but Brad, in his self-serving, instrumental belief, is responsible for the death of what the story shows to have been most precious to Jeanette: her private spiritual self, her faith.

The story's use of the Pygmalion myth and the Marian ekphrasis prompts one to consider the patterns that they create. The myth gives density to the theme of creating and falling in love with an idealized image, yet the myth and story move in opposing directions: The myth's conceit is that an idealized image is brought to life as a flesh-and-blood woman, while Updike reverses this movement, replacing a flesh-and-blood woman with an idealized image. This latter movement is also the transformation at the heart of the cult of the Virgin, hence the greater influence in "Made in Heaven" of the ekphrasis as a formal means of patterning. Mary and Jeanette have parallel trajectories, based on their status as "an image of the ideal" (Warner 338). Both are innocent young women whose fate it is to be transformed by men into an idealized image.¹⁷

Ann Beattie reminds us that "Updike is as familiar with religion and mythology as he is with psychology," and that "[h]is work is highly visual" (5). The balancing of these influences is apparent in "Made in Heaven": religion, mythology, and art give formal shape to the story, while psychology defers to their structural and thematic patterns. These formal patterns, sometimes secret, go a long way toward explaining the exceptional density and richness of Updike's short stories.¹⁸

¹ See Mathé, “Voyage au pays des morts,” and Duffy, “Motifs of Loss in *The Afterlife*.”

² The story has been discussed by two critics: Donald J. Greiner briefly notes its concerns “with the paradoxes of faith and with the relationship between personal hope and cultural health” (257), while Robert M. Luscher offers an incisive short analysis.

³ The unfamiliarity of the term *ekphrasis* does not mean, as Heffernan points out, that “scarcely anyone is writing about the literary representation of visual art; it simply means that scarcely anyone is using the word *ekphrasis* to do so” (“Ekphrasis,” 297). Heffernan’s justification for employing the term is that “*ekphrasis* designates a literary mode, and it is difficult if not impossible to talk about a literary mode unless we can agree on what to name it” (298). There is an added justification for using the word in the discussion of Updike’s work: Updike wrote extensively about art, and the influence and presence of art in his fiction has often been noted. In a 1976 interview Updike himself said: “I am a sort of frustrated painter, or rather I have painted a bit and was told I have a very good sense of composition. So maybe I see the book as a canvas with things disposed in it” (Plath 91-92). Ekphrasis could prove to be a useful concept in Updikean criticism.

⁴ Carole Sherr, a Pennsylvania friend of Updike’s mother, recalled to me a trip with Updike and others to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., to visit the “Treasures of Tutankhamun” exhibition in late 1976 or early 1977. While there, Sherr said, Updike went out of his way to have her view a Fra Angelico painting of the Madonna, on view in the gallery at the time.

⁵ A hint, or perhaps a confirmation, that Updike draws on the Pygmalion myth in “Made in Heaven” is to be found in another story in *Trust Me*, “Pygmalion,” in which a husband molds his second wife in the image of his first.

⁶ Botticelli, Lochner and Schongauer all painted scenes of the Madonna in a rose garden or bower. Botticelli’s *The Virgin Adoring the Sleeping Christ Child* (1490) features the Virgin clothed in a rose-colored dress (repeated in the color of the roses) under a blue cloak.

⁷ The argument that “Made in Heaven” draws on the Virgin Mary as a model for Brad’s idealization of his wife might run up against the objection that Brad and Jeanette are Protestants. From the Reformation to the present, many Protestants have been wary of what they have seen as excessive Catholic devotion to the Virgin. To which objection one might point out, first, that the Marian model is that of the artist Updike and not of the character Brad; nowhere in the story is Jeanette seen by Brad as Mary. In any case, not all Protestant churches were hostile to the Virgin, and Updike himself noted in an interview that the Lutheran church in which he was raised is “a little closer to Catholicism than Calvinism.” By “Calvinism,” Updike meant “the New England Puritan ethos” with which, he said, “I don’t feel much affinity” (Plath 94). Second, even within the fictional world of the story, the Marian ekphrasis is not incongruous, as Brad and Jeanette become Episcopalians. The Episcopal Church in the United States is part of the Anglican Communion, which has long revered Mary. In 2005 the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission wrote: “Our Agreed Statement concerning the Blessed Virgin Mary as pattern of grace and hope is a powerful reflection of our efforts to seek out what we hold in common and celebrates important aspects of our common heritage” (*Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* 2).

⁸ These motifs and metaphors are everywhere to be found in the stories of *Trust Me*. See Duffy, “Loss of Trust as Disconnection in John Updike’s *Trust Me*.”

⁹ There is another resonance to the title. “Made” is a homophone of “maid.” One of the *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of “maid” is “A virgin; spec. the Virgin Mary.” This identification of the Virgin as maid has its origin in the scene of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel appears to a virgin named Mary to tell her that she is to conceive “and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS” (Luke 1:31). Warner describes what follows: “Mary, hearing this, acquiesces in her destiny with the famous words, her fiat: ‘Behold the handmaid of the lord, be it unto me according to thy word’ (Luke 1:38)” (9).

¹⁰ Recall, too, the “tall domed bell tower” of Jeanette’s Methodist church (193). The dome was “used extensively in Byzantine architecture as a manifold symbol of the cosmos, the heavens, death and resurrection” (Honour and Fleming 315).

¹¹ The heavenly connotations of Jeanette’s voice are also suggested by its repeated association with crystal: “crystal-clear” (190), “crystalline” (193, 205). In *Self-Consciousness* Updike notes: “The Bible in fact says very little about Heaven, aside from the extensive measurements in Ezekiel and the glimpses of the crystalline city with streets of gold in Revelation 21” (214).

¹² One of the most prevalent Byzantine iconic types of composition is a *Deisis*. The Greek word *deisis* means “prayer” or “intercession.” In a *Deisis* composition, the Virgin and St. John the Baptist are placed on either side of Christ in poses of intercession.

¹³ Jeanette and Brad represent, to an extent, the opposing elements that constitute the doctrinal differences between Protestantism and Catholicism over the Protestant theology of *sola fide*, according to which faith alone, and not good works, can lead to God’s pardon. Jeanette possesses true faith, while Brad busies himself with church- and religion-influenced “good works” and activities.

¹⁴ Designed by Updike, the dust jacket of the Knopf hardback edition of *Trust Me* features a reproduction of Bernard Picart’s *The Fall of Icarus* (1731).

¹⁵ A photograph of the Virgin’s head in the mosaic icon in St. Sophia is striking with regard to this description of Jeanette. The spaces between the tesserae create intersecting lines that give an impression of a spider’s web. Moreover, the dominant color of the Virgin’s veil in this icon is brown, like Jeanette’s hair in this scene (Cormack 104). In the color reproductions of icons in Cormack’s book, brown is by far the dominant color of the Virgin’s veil (e.g. 178, 182, 189, 209, 212, 213), an interesting feature given the dominance of blue in representations of the Virgin.

¹⁶ A peer-review reader of this essay brought to my attention a short commentary by Updike on “Made in Heaven” of which I was unaware. In her 1987 *New American Short Stories* anthology, Gloria Norris asked writers to select a story of theirs “published in the last three years, that they felt deeply attached to or that represented their best work” (1). In his commentary on “Made in Heaven” (which was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1985), Updike records his attempt to do “several things rather new for me” (25), most notably “to show a marriage over the years, developing, as long marriages do, its secret and final revenge, its redressing of a long-sustained imbalance.” He also emphasizes (again) his interest in the technical challenges of narrative, remarking that it “is not easy, for a short story, to contain time and to display its abyss.” His remarks neither confirm nor refute the reading of the story proposed in this essay. Although Updike refers to the cupola and to “one of my favorite subjects, the mystery of churchgoing” (26), there is not, as one might expect, a word about the Virgin. Yet we may recall Updike’s fondness for inserting “secret” patterns into his stories, as well as Ann Beattie’s observation that Updike “undercuts his own facility” by not advertising his fiction’s “clever and astute literary contrivances” (10).

¹⁷ Updike sprinkles his ekphrastic topping throughout his story. Some of it falls as snow, with which Jeanette is associated: In the opening scene, which signals the beginning of Brad’s attraction to Jeanette, it is twice noted that it is snowing outside (190, 191); sitting with Jeanette on a love seat they once bought “during a blizzard,” Brad is reminded that “[h]is love for her always returned full force when it snowed” (202); and when Brad visits Jeanette in hospital, it begins “to spit snow” outside (206). This motif could refer to one of the Virgin’s titles, “Our Lady of the Snow,” or it could be a reference to the nativity scene, of which snow is one element – though Warner notes that the snow, like other “circumstantial detail” of the scene, is not in the biblical account but is part of the “collective inheritance of western fantasy” (14). Then there are Brad and Jeanette’s two sons: one dies aged “well over thirty,” approximately the same age as Jesus at his death, while the other is a carpenter (199), the implied trade of Jesus in the Bible (Mark 6:3).

¹⁸ But have we discovered all of Updike’s formal secrets? Jeanette’s death recalls the death at the end of Poe’s allegorical tale “The Oval Portrait”: A young woman marries an artist, whose greatest desire, seeing a potential image rather than a person, is to paint her. Weeks pass as the artist strives to capture his wife on canvas, while she begins to weaken in the “dark high turret-chamber” where she sits for him. Consumed and blinded by his vision, the artist sees nothing but the image he is creating. Day and night he toils,

and turned his eyes from the canvas rarely, even to regard the countenance of his wife. And he *would* not see that the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sate beside him.... and then the [final] tint was placed; and, for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he gazed, he grew tremulous ..., and crying with a loud voice ‘This is indeed *Life* itself!’ turned suddenly to regard his beloved:—*She was dead!*’ (225).

Here is another tale of a woman sacrificed to her idealized image.

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