

Male Sexuality in John Updike's *Villages*

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A consensus emerged from the reviews of John Updike's *Villages* (2004) that it was one of his weaker novels. The novel did gain the approval of some reviewers ("A graceful panoramic depiction of individuals and their communities," *Kirkus Reviews*; "A very good novel," *Houston Chronicle*) and even from a notable English novelist, Fay Weldon, who praised the novel's "wealth of connections and imagery," as well as the quality of the prose. There was some praise elsewhere, too, but in most cases this was attenuated by the recurring criticism that Updike was reworking too-familiar material, and that the still fine prose could not compensate for an annoying sense of déjà vu. And there were those who found the novel simply to be bad, as was the case with Michiko Kakutani in the *New York Times*, who, having detailed its faults, concluded: "In the end, this all makes for a narrow, claustrophobic novel—a novel that amounts to little more than a weary exercise in the recycling of frayed and shop-worn material." Even Updike scholars have not been enthusiastic. Peter J. Bailey does not "believe it to be among Updike's most successful novels" ("Autobiography" 83), while James Schiff includes *Villages* among the late Updike novels that are "considered, for now, minor," and deems *Villages* itself a novel we are unlikely to remember ("Two Neglected" 45). Probably the clearest sign of the tepid scholarly response is the near absence of academic publications on *Villages*.¹

Readers will, rightly, disregard an unsuccessful novel, but scholars of Updike would do well to return to the lesser works with, if not their initial keenness on encountering a new Updike text, at least a professional interest in dissecting the work as a valid part of the author's literary output and situating it within that

overall oeuvre.² The smaller merits of a work of art do not make it less useful in gaining insights into the meanings and significance of a lifetime's artistic output. Indeed, in the case of *Villages*, it is precisely the flaws identified by reviewers and critics that may well allow refined perspectives of Updike's work to emerge. One failing of *Villages* was deemed to be Updike's returning yet again to the adulterous adventures of the middle-class suburban American male, with the implication that sex is not only the overbearing force but the overriding value in adult male life. Six of the novel's fourteen chapters are entitled "Village Sex," as we follow the protagonist through the three villages that marked the important stages of his life: childhood, early adulthood to middle age, and middle age to old age. Above all, it is the mechanical and compulsive male sexuality in *Villages* that raised the ire of reviewers. However, it is this very sexuality that is worthy of investigation. This essay will consider the representation of male sexuality in *Villages* in order to discover what it might tell us about the evolution in Updike's thinking as he engaged once again with one of "the three great secret things."³

Villages is narrated in the third person from the perspective of seventy-year-old Owen Mackenzie. One can imagine many themes that might be addressed in a novel about an elderly man—his diminishing physical and mental capacities, his adapting to life when his professional career is over, his mortality, his relationship with his wife if he has one or with solitude if he is alone—and the novel does indeed address some of these typical experiences of an aging middle-class Western male. But Updike has only tangentially written a novel about old age. Owen may be very conscious that each passing day is "one more of a diminishing finite supply" (5), but what is most on his mind, and what Updike is most concerned to explore, is sex. The novel, aptly, is bookended by sexual scenes. It begins with Owen being wakened by his (second) wife in the morning, then trying to find "the way back to sleep." He remembers one of his sexual conquests, "Alissa or Vanessa or Karen or Faye, who shared with him the town of Middle Falls, Connecticut, in the 'sixties and 'seventies. His hand gripping his drowsy prick, he relives having one of them beneath him, beside him, above him" (5). In the final scene, Owen is awake in the middle of the night, his wife asleep beside him. Resorting again to memories of his sexual experiences, he seeks comfort in masturbation: "in his mind's eye he runs the images of those moist, knowing engulfments, those grotesque postures of submission" (320).

This framing encloses a novel in which Owen's sexuality generates the self-defining experiences of his life. After the typical sexual fumbblings and initiations of adolescence, Owen, as an MIT sophomore, begins to intuit his feelings about

sex as he watches, in a burlesque theater, the gyrations of “a glittering woman . . . in fewer and fewer clothes” in a “pantomime of orgasm.” Despite the bawdy atmosphere and the “half-amused” performance of the strippers, their “routines [do] not seem lifeless to Owen”; they are, he feels, “enactments of what was at bottom most real” (79). He will come to see copulation as a “powerful and highly prioritized . . . event” (106), and will go on to pay due homage to its realness and power by drifting away from the responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood and into a series of affairs with married women in Middle Falls, where he lives with his first wife, Phyllis. These are the affairs that earn the title “Village Sex,” in which love, a tenuous factor in Owen’s first affair, gives way to a frenzied pursuit of new sexual experiences. But the affairs are not enough for Owen. Initially chastened by guilt after the first affair, he is launched back into “the sexual seethe” (106) when fellated by his business partner’s wife. Seeing the opportunities offered by the changing sexual mores of the late 1960s, “[h]e resolved in his heart to become a seducer” (186). So it is that, in the early 1970s, the affairs are augmented by one-off sexual encounters with young women he meets at business conferences. Although “the sensation of conquest faded, overnight, to nothing,” Owen cannot stop himself from “explor[ing] the opportunities of a night far from home” (225, 224). Back in Middle Falls, he takes advantage of the secluded room he works in to have regular sex with one of his staff, Karen, who, delivering documents to him there, “saw the room for what it was, a chamber for fucking” (251). And when he isn’t having sex, he’s thinking about it, fantasizing in one instance, as he lies awake at night, about a sexual threesome, and masturbating beside the sleeping Phyllis.

This is but a glimpse into the all-pervasive nature of the male pursuit of sex in *Villages*. It may be surprising that Updike, in his early seventies, was interested enough in the topic to write a novel about it, having already covered it so thoroughly in his fiction. But he was, which is reason enough to scrutinize the representation of male sexuality at the core of his protagonist, a sexuality that is seen to determine his ultimate destiny. *Villages* has the added relevance of being Updike’s last extended examination of the topic, and even has a valedictory ring about it: after Owen’s life of village sex, the final chapter is entitled “Village Wisdom,” and we suspect that the wisdom Owen has gained from a life dramatically shaped by his sexual nature is also Updike’s wisdom.⁴ Three characteristics of the novel’s representation of male sexuality are prominent: its seigneurial tendencies, its destructive nature, and its importance to male identity.

Updike often discusses male sexuality in seigneurial terms, in other words through a metaphorical language that sees male sex with women in terms of own-

ership, possession, land, territory, power, mastery. In an essay entitled "Women," Updike considers that, in the budding sexuality of boys and girls, "motionlessness was [the girl's] essence, and part of the male job was . . . to reduce her to the stillness that permits possession" (*Odd Jobs* 65). Updike's view of the roles of vigorous male and passive female is echoed in his response to a magazine editor's request for his definition of female sexuality: "When the sexual functions ripen, the male assignment becomes penetration and distribution, the female duty acceptance and retention." He continues: "In females, . . . sexuality is more central and more buried than in males. Love, then," he offers, instinctively assuming the male perspective, "becomes an exploration toward a muffled center, a quest whose terrain is the woman and the grail her deep self" (*Picked-Up Pieces* 17). It's a small step from the medieval imagery of quest, with its implied conquest of women as territory, to the Reverend Marshfield's notion, in *A Month of Sundays*, of "the modern American man" as "phallic knight" in his adultery (42).

Elizabeth Tallent, in a chapter entitled "Women and Fields" in her book on Updike, observes how "[c]ertain images prevail throughout a writer's life," and remarks that "[f]or Updike, one such central image is the metaphor . . . equating a woman with terrain" (25). She goes on to offer a number of examples from Updike's fiction, but focuses primarily on *Of the Farm*, citing first this passage: "My wife is wide, wide-hipped and long-waisted, and, surveyed from above, gives an impression of terrain, of a wealth whose ownership imposes upon my own body a sweet strain of extension; entered, she yields a variety of landscapes." One of these landscapes imagined by the protagonist, Joey, "a gray French castle complexly fitted to a steep green hill whose terraces imitate turrets," reveals the seigneurial flavor of Updikean male sexuality (*Of the Farm* 46). If, for Tallent (who quotes more extensively from this passage), the swirl of land and landscape metaphors that follow are the narrator's attempt to seize and fix the identity of his wife, it is also the case that, "[a]s land, she can be conquered as inevitably as the field is mowed" (Tallent 28). As Joey drives a tractor across the field, the terrain imagery feeds his sexual arousal: ". . . and I, rocked back and forth on the iron seat shaped like a woman's hips, alone in nature, . . . discovered in myself a swelling which I idly permitted to stand, thinking of Peggy. My wife is a field" (*Of the Farm* 59). Peggy, as motionless and passively there as land and nature, is to be taken, used, and mastered.

Tallent is prescient in her analysis: she notes that the images that recur in a writer's fiction "serve as auguries of future preoccupations as well as reflections of past ones" (25). Twenty years after her book, Updike was writing *Villages*, and his

preoccupations with male sexuality were as intense as ever. Moreover, Owen and Phyllis's wedding night is described in metaphorical terms that echo uncannily the "wide-hipped" passage highlighted by Tallent: "surveying the moonlit field of flesh of which he had taken legal possession that afternoon, . . . he knelt between her legs and combed her luxuriant pussy, now his, as if preparing a fleecy lamb for sacrifice . . . Still kneeling, possessed of the privileges of a husband, . . . he surveyed the glimmering moonlit wealth of her" (*Villages* 108, 109). In the forty-odd years between *Of the Farm* and *Villages*, Updike's imagery of sexuality remained remarkably constant—for some, no doubt, dismayingly so. It is male sexuality as seigneurial in all its wolfishness: Owen, as owner of his property, straddles Phyllis, "with her motionless gaze" (109), who is to be disposed of as he desires. She is "his prize, his captive princess" (107); he is the entitled male exercising his rights and privileges over the prostrate female, the preening landowner intoxicated by the "wealth" of his fertile lands. And all this in the knowledge of his power as master over the sacrificial "lamb" who is powerless to save herself. Phyllis, indeed, has internalized the rules of this patriarchal order and knows she must submit and accept her fate: "His impression grew that he was looking down at someone somehow slain" (109). Victim though she may be, she will not play the part Owen wills on her in his proprietorial *mise-en-scène*: disliking the "[t]heatrical" nature and "showing off" of Owen's foreplay, she tells him, "Let's just do it" (108). The power relations that underpin Updikean seigneurial sexuality are also on view outside of marriage. Dissatisfied with the sexually reserved Phyllis, Owen fulfills his fantasies with the Middle Falls women with whom he has affairs. He regrets that he "failed . . . to use [Alissa's] compliance, her spells of tranced utter slavery, to the hilt" (202), and, seeking to conquer a new neighbor while having an affair with Vanessa, he fantasizes about "bringing this naïve woman to Vanessa like a live doe slung over his shoulders . . . The two women would adore him, vying for him, competing in feats of slavishness" (248–49).

The imperious nature of this Updikean male sexuality takes on a more sinister cast as Owen gives full expression to his sexual compulsions. Indeed, the sinister turn seems to be the necessary and inevitable outcome of the rapacious male sexuality on display in *Villages*. Unchecked by a moral code that would assure his fidelity to Phyllis and commitment to his children, and with a seemingly endless supply of women offering to fulfill his sexual desires, Owen reveals himself ultimately to be destructive: the death that occurs in *Villages* is the direct consequence of his insatiable and aggressive sexual behavior. The victim is Phyllis, and though the "slain" sacrificial "lamb" of their wedding night dies in a road accident while driving

alone, Owen is the perpetrator. The novel's witness to this, and Owen's accuser, is Ed Mervine, Owen's business partner and longtime observer of Owen's marriage, as well as secret admirer of Phyllis. As the two men look down at Phyllis's dead body, Ed leans over Owen's shoulder: "Ed breathed close behind his ear. 'You did this, you fuckhead'" (299).

The reader does not dissent from Ed's judgment, as the novel has carefully laid out the path that leads from Owen as womanizer to Owen as Phyllis's killer, a path signposted by markers of his destructive male sexuality. The first marker is the wedding-night scene itself, which contains within it the portent of Phyllis's death, as if the manner of Owen's possessing her is the beginning of the end of the Phyllis that existed before Owen, and the beginning of her slow spiritual death. It is a scene of quiet farewell as Phyllis lies in her parents' summer cottage, passively awaiting her fate:

What was Phyllis doing, with her motionless gaze? Saying goodbye to the moon? This small bare house, strange to him, to her was full of girlhood summer memories and quaint souvenirs . . . of a bygone family life. . . .

His impression grew that he was looking down at someone somehow slain. The weak moon-shadows of window muntins cast a net over her white form. Her sunken eyes seemed unseeing. (109)

The leave-taking, the white and "slain" body, the motionlessness, the sunken unseeing eyes, the net that suggests a shroud and that anticipates the blanket that covers the dead Phyllis lying beside her overturned car—here is Owen beginning the work that will ultimately kill Phyllis, in a death of a thousand cuts. He is a serial womanizer, humiliating her as he sleeps with the women of their social circle (the novel makes clear that the village knows of his affairs); he is sexually demanding of her, although aware of her reticence ("You seemed to expect alarmingly much," she says as they look back on their failed marriage [289]); and he knowingly allows Phyllis, his intellectual superior, to sink under the drudgery of motherhood and housework ("It's what you've made me," she tells him [165]). Summing up her life with him, she says: "I'm a failure in every respect except that I bore four healthy children" (259). Her physical death is merely the dramatized analogue of her spiritual death, both at the hands of her husband.

Elsewhere, in language and imagery, a violent streak in male sexuality is evident. Entering Alissa from behind, Owen is struck by an image that seems one of self-revelation and self-description: "*This is the neck*, Owen thought, *the executioner sees*" (202). Picking up on a remark by Alissa that "[a] woman would rather be

hit on the head than ignored,” Owen finds that “the idea of [hitting her] fed the brutish tenderness with which he contemplated her back as he pumped away at her” (208). One of the women with whom he has a one-night stand tells him that his over-vigorous sex is “hurting her”; he apologizes, “but in fact he was not sorry, he enjoyed the idea of hurting her with just himself” (233). And with Vanessa, “[h]e had, now and then, an unindulged impulse to twist her wrists, to beat her, knowing she could take it” (247). This is the violence of thought, language, and imagery—where male sex is exclusively a matter of “fucking,” “pumping,” and “hump[ing]” (233)—that paves the way to Phyllis’s death, and to the conclusion that it is Owen’s insatiable sexual appetite that kills her.⁵ Ultimately, it is his own guilt that confirms this judgment. Owen dreams of his second wife, Julia, lying dead, apparently a suicide, but “in reality a murder committed by him” (6), and he has further anguishing dreams of losing Julia and of her driving dangerously fast. His second marriage of twenty-five years is “haunted” by the knowledge that “[h]e and Julia wrecked two existing households, and caused a death” (304, 312). Updike did not make a habit of violently killing off the main characters in his domestic middle-class realist novels, telling an interviewer: “I detect in myself a wish not to have *false* violence” (Plath 90). Phyllis’s violent death, then, in Updike’s final novel-length exploration of male sexuality, acquires a powerful symbolic significance.

Donald J. Greiner observes in his invaluable analysis of Updikean adultery that “[f]or Updike adultery is often a social embarrassment but rarely a cause for individual damnation.” The guilt that follows infidelity, says Greiner, “promises not the fires of hell but the pain of anguish” (57). It is instructive, in light of Owen’s acknowledgment of his responsibility for Phyllis’s death, to consider if this conclusion still holds good in a novel written almost twenty years after Greiner’s book. It is certainly the case that the religious sensibilities of Piet Hanema of *Couples* and Reverend Marshfield of *A Month of Sundays* (characters evoked by Greiner) are of less relevance where Owen is concerned. Peter Bailey has explored “the deepening spiritual/theological skepticism in Updike’s fiction” that led through the years to what Bailey terms “the erosion of his characters’ belief in a God-centered universe” (*Rabbit [Un]Redeemed* 21, 43). Owen exemplifies the weakened hold of religion on Updike’s protagonists: religion in Owen’s Middle Falls phase is absent, and, although Owen and Julia, in their old age, attend church “regularly” (269), it seems to be little more for Owen than a social formality and sociological opportunity, an occasion to observe “the rich” (217) exert their privileges and display their success. So if his guilt is to extend beyond “the pain of anguish” and tend toward “the fires of hell,” to a form of “individual damnation,” it will be of a more earthly

variety. Greiner notes that if you “[h]url the charge of sexual transgressor against [Updike’s male protagonists], they will retreat to the next suburb or even to their imaginations” (57). Owen avails himself of such an escape in his move with Julia to the village of Haskells Crossing, and he, too, retreats into his imagination, or rather into his memories and masturbatory fantasies, as he summons up his past sexual experiences. But escape does not bring salvation, as Owen’s sense of guilt has stayed with him in the twenty-five years since Phyllis’s death. His final village is “a good place for lying low”; while Julia lives a full social life, “Owen cowers in the house” (301).

Updike’s working-out of the consequences of adultery in *Villages*, then, takes the form of an anxious struggle in Owen’s mind, a nervous oscillation between the poles of pleasurable sexual memories and guilt-filled dreams, between the reassuring thought that “God killed Phyllis, as a favor to him,” because “she had become inconvenient to him” (305) and blaming Phyllis’s “ghost . . . for his sexual failures with Julia” (306), and between the “comfort and solace” Julia brings him and his clandestine viewings of photos of Phyllis, hidden away by Julia in “a dark cupboard on the third floor” (306). It is clear that Owen has much more to contend with than the anguish and social embarrassment that Greiner identifies in earlier Updikean adulterers; the passing of the years, old age, and his own village wisdom led Updike to portray the price of serial adultery in a less benign light. Piet’s adultery eventually wins for him the woman he loves; Owen’s womanizing kills Phyllis, and leads, in the final pages of the novel, to Owen unable to find the “healing self-forgetfulness” of sleep in the middle of the night; he “sees as if looking down into a suddenly illumined well that his charmed life has been a long torment of fear, desire, ambition, and guilt” (320). Occurring a couple of paragraphs from the end of the novel, this insight seems the ultimate judgment on Owen’s adulterous life. The “torment” may not be that of the fires of hell, but it is a damnation of sorts, a grim and inescapable verdict on the life he has led and the man he has been.

Speaking of the man Owen has been, the final prominent feature of male sexuality developed in *Villages* is its role in the creation of male identity. Bailey considers that “the affirmation of self is . . . the most consistently pervasive thematic element of Updike’s work,” the essential feature of which is what Bailey calls the “identification of selfhood with the sacred” (*Rabbit [Un]Redeemed* 15, 20). The affirmation of self in Updike’s male protagonists is also, of course, inseparable from their sexuality; as Greiner notes, the Updike adulterer “fears that fidelity threatens the integrity of his sense of self” (19). By the time of *Villages*, what Bailey terms “the reluctantly expanding secularism of Updike’s aesthetic” (*Rabbit [Un]Redeemed*

33) has narrowed the realization and expression of selfhood to the domain of the sexual. This raises the issue of the consequences of jettisoning the sacred in favor of the profane, the supernatural in favor of the natural, and God in favor of secular man indulging himself in his “animal walk in the sun” (*Self-Consciousness* 204). What kind of self, in other words, emerges from these transitions? And what are the effects of the uncoupling of selfhood from the sacred and attaching it uniquely to the sexual?

Such a comparative approach leads one to Updike’s 1968 novel, *Couples*, whose important parallels with *Villages* confer on the latter one of the sources of its interest. Both novels are set in small New England towns and focus on middle-class couples in their thirties whose extensive social interactions throw them into proximity and intimacy with their neighbors, leading to sexual infidelities. There are, of course, important differences between the novels: they have very different temporal ranges—*Villages* follows Owen from childhood through old age, whereas the events of *Couples* take place in one year—and *Couples*, focusing on ten couples in the town of Tarbox, explores a micro-society at a particular cultural moment, whereas *Villages* is more concerned with individual destinies. Crucially, however, both novels are constructed around an adulterous male protagonist, Piet in *Couples* and Owen in *Villages*. By considering the meanings attached to the sexual infidelities of both, we may understand better the evolution in the representation of male selfhood and identity in Updike’s fiction.

A useful point of entry into the comparison of the novels are two observations by Updike. In his 1963 review-essay of Denis de Rougemont’s *Love Declared*, Updike proposes: “Only in being loved do we find external corroboration of the supremely high valuation each ego secretly assigns itself” (*Assorted Prose* 233). In a 1993 interview he says: “In sexual encounter, you get the kind of confirmation of your own existence and tremendous intrinsic worth that you don’t get elsewhere” (Plath 256). Both statements emphasize how union with the intimate other acts as external validation of the value of one’s self. Note, however, that the medium of transmission of this validation is not the same: while it is love in the first statement, it is sex in the second. De Rougemont offers two literary myths to capture these different mediations: that of Tristan and Iseult, with its romantic love and the quest for the unattainable other, and that of the libertine Don Juan, the seducer in search of sexual conquests. Much of the critical commentary on Updike’s fiction up to the mid-1980s drew upon his essay on de Rougemont, notably on the relationship he posits between the quest for love and the formation of male selfhood. Greiner observes that for Piet and other Updike protagonists, “[1]ove is always the key to

the re-creation of the self," and notes that "Piet's adultery is seriously cast in the mold of spiritual quest" (106, 114), highlighting Updike's insistence that *Couples* is "about sex as the emergent religion, as the only thing left" (Plath 52). In his study of Updike, George Hunt identifies the "theme of the male's search for his self and his discovery of it in his simultaneous quest and discovery of the mysterious 'Other'" (8), and, in his chapter on *Couples* and *Marry Me*, notes that Updike sees adultery as "the only modern equivalent for romantic adventure and spiritual aspiration" (118). An added layer to the existential and spiritual connotations of love and sex in *Couples* is Piet's fear of death. As James Schiff puts it: "Piet uses his belief in God and sexuality as a way of defying death" (*John Updike Revisited* 68). In *Couples*, then, sex and adultery are presented, in general terms, as more than simple raw nature and basic instinct; rather, they are seen variously as expressions of love, quests for self-realization through the love of another, and a defense against mortality. Which is not to say that the carnality of Don Juan is not also present in the novel. As Robert Detweiler notes: "Piet is sometimes a Tristan, sometimes a Don Juan, and sometimes both at the same time" (112). And Piet notices in himself, at the end of his adulterous escapades in Tarbox, "a nostalgia for adultery itself—its adventure, the acrobatics its deceptions demand, the tension of its hidden strings, the new landscapes it makes us master" (*Couples* 429). This is the language of the seducer, addicted to the excitement of the conquest. For all that, Detweiler, even while noting that "[o]ther characters reinforce Piet's Don Juan status," sees adultery in *Couples* as more than instinctive animal coupling; behind all the infidelities lies a profound quest, the attempt "to wrench a meaning out of life through indiscriminate sex" (113).

In his analysis of Updikean adultery, Greiner proposes that, if it were stripped of its spiritual dimension, "the reader might entirely lose sympathy with the wayward husband. Take away the spiritual yearning and the adulterer seems juvenile" (107–08). Which brings us back to Owen and *Villages*. As the novel approaches its end, Owen "remembers his life in Middle Falls nostalgically, as a magical exploration of his male nature," meaning his male sexual nature (317). Updike, in his final novel-length reflection on adultery, identifies sexuality as the beating heart of male being and identity. The definitive self of Owen comes into being in "the hushed and headlong vault of masturbation" and in his early sexual experiences with his high-school girlfriend, in which is revealed "a core self explored by another consciousness" (64). An illuminating moment occurs with one of his Middle Falls lovers, Alissa: "Once, in a flash of shyness, . . . he put his hands over his flaming erection, and she said, . . . 'Don't hide yourself, Owen.' 'Yourself'—this sore-

looking blue-veined thing was himself. These hair-adorned nether parts . . . were seats of being" (203). Nothing else in Owen's life—not marriage, not fatherhood, not professional achievements—reveals his essential identity so thoroughly as the manifestations of his sexual nature. It is this raw, primal, and self-obsessed identity at the heart of Owen that finds its full expression in a moment of sexual ecstasy achieved with one of his one-night stands: "[H]ad he ever been more crazily happy, more triumphantly himself, than when Mirabella was blowing him while he sped at ninety miles an hour into the flat Nevada desert, straight into the rising morning sun?" (230). The elemental nature of this core male identity is intuited by Owen himself: men, he thinks, are "mechanisms with very few levers—a few earthy appetites, an atavistic warrior pride and stoicism" (212).

Even at seventy, it is in his sexual self that Owen finds an existential consolation not available elsewhere. After lovemaking with Julia, she "stare[s] up at him from the pillow with that cloudy face of satisfied desire which puts a man, briefly, right with the universe, all debts honored, all worries unmasked as negligible" (39). Beset by guilt in his old age, it is in his "core self" that Owen takes refuge. Sex with women, he sees, beginning with Phyllis on their wedding night, "let him enter a realm wherein his own mysterious existence needed no explaining" (321). Here is the seducer's edenic existential perfection, where sex brings world, being, and self into complete harmony, beyond the claims of responsibility, knowledge, thought, reflection, and self-scrutiny.

If Tristan predominates in *Couples*, Don Juan alone reigns in *Villages*. Owen makes a conscious decision "to become a seducer," acting out the obsession described by Updike in his de Rougement essay: "Don Juan loves Woman under the guise of many women, exhaustingly" (*Assorted* 232). If Owen's first affair, with Faye, may be explained in part by his not finding in Phyllis the "external corroboration" of his own worth, "that other being in whose existence [one's] own existence is confirmed and amplified" (*Assorted* 233), his other adulterous affairs and encounters are allowed no other explanation than the pursuit of sexual pleasure for its own sake. The scenes that most distance the carnal selfhood of *Villages* from the spiritual selfhood of *Couples* are Owen's sex sessions with Karen, who sees that, to Owen, she is just "a piece of ass" (252). Owen may suffer "a sweet sickness of love" in the aftermath of his affair with Faye, but his pining for her is explained by nothing other than what their affair gave *him*, most notably "a freedom of the body" (156). For Owen, loving Faye is about loving himself, which reminds us of the essential selfishness at the heart of Updike's definition of love in his de Rougement essay, with its emphasis on what the lover gains in "being loved." Here, surely, is where

one may locate a defect in Owen's moral order; he may exalt the "transcendent value" that even the women of his one-off encounters brought to the "supreme interaction" of sex (321), but this seems merely a self-serving elevation of the sexual self of his "male nature" over a moral self that might have prohibited such adulterous behavior in the first place.

Mention of a moral self invites us to consider for a moment the moral dimension of Owen's behavior, an approach encouraged by Updike himself, who saw his books as "moral investigations of how we live" and "moral debates with the reader" (Plath 258, 50). In these investigations, he says, "[t]he question is usually, 'What is a good man?' or 'What is goodness?'" (Plath 50). Such questions have always seemed less important when it comes to *Couples*, a novel that, through its dramatization of societal transformation, spiritual questing, cultish socializing, and ritualized group play, boldly established its own codes and terms of reference. But it is less easy to resist engagement with Updike's moral standard in *Villages*, in which one person dies as a result of the conscious behavior of another. Phyllis's death and Owen's increasingly frenzied sexual behavior leave such an enormous moral vacuum in their wake that the reader seeks a perspective from which to understand and articulate the defects of a male selfhood realized purely in sexual terms. In this regard, the philosopher Charles Taylor offers some relevant pointers. In his *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989), he considers the relation between selfhood and morality, or, as he puts it, "between senses of the self and moral visions, between identity and the good" (x). Taylor grounds his argument in his concept of "strong evaluation" (4), or the discrimination we make between right and wrong, between what is morally higher and lower, better and worse. Taylor calls this evaluation a "framework," which "incorporates a crucial set of qualitative distinctions" that provide "the sense that some action, or mode of life, or mode of feeling is incomparably higher than the others which are more readily available to us" (19). Following from this, the answer to the question "Who am I?" is grounded, for Taylor, in "an understanding of what is of crucial importance to us. To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand" in relation to the good: "My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand" (27). We know who we are by knowing where we stand morally, and our determination of what is good or bad, right or wrong, is the means through which we articulate our identity.

Where Owen is concerned, Taylor's moral self never seriously comes into existence. Rather than displaying an orientation toward the good, Owen's self is oriented purely toward what is good for him. It is the self as self-absorbed; "helplessly self-centered," Owen seeks throughout his life to "preserve his charmed, only-child sense of life" (168, 311). Where Taylor's framework is "independent of our own desires, inclinations, or choices" (20), Owen places his instinctive trust in his inclinations, in whatever will advance his cause, to the extent, at one point, of conducting a retrospective benefit analysis of what he got from his two wives: "Looking back, he is touched by how completely his two wives delivered what he asked. Phyllis had hoisted him up into Cambridge and the snob life of the mind, and Julia into Haskells Crossing and the life of bourgeois repose" (317). But the primary articulation of self in the novel is, of course, Owen's sexual self, the devil that whispers in his ear and banishes any hope of grounding his behavior in concepts of the good. The ostensible site of the moral self in Owen, or what is left in the vacuum created by its absence, is his sexual self, a congeries of instincts, impulses, desires, calculations, evasions, and performances, the latter indicative of the absence of a framework that would create and inform a stable moral identity.⁶ The one constant in Owen's erratic adult sexual life is the steady and irresistible throb of lust, the true site of his identity, where he affirms who he is, and which guides his behavior and tells us where he "stands." In fact, Taylor's definition of moral identity is not that far removed from one offered implicitly, if uncomfortably, by Updike himself. In his essay "On Being a Self Forever," he describes a "piece of local kitsch" that hung on the wall in his childhood home: "It showed an Amishman standing erect with a hammer and a carpenter's square, above the slogan WHAT A MAN DOES, THAT HE IS. I believe it but didn't like reading it" (*Self-Consciousness* 225).

What, then, might we usefully conclude from the different representations of male sexuality offered by Updike in two novels written thirty-five years apart? And what might these differences tell us about the evolution of his views? We can say immediately that male sexuality in *Villages* is obsessive, narcissistic, damaging, and only tenuously connected to love, and that while there is just as much adultery in *Couples*—probably more—male sexuality is presented in that novel as a redemptive quest for identity, spirituality, and immortality, with affection not absent and love often present.⁷ Where *Villages* is concerned, and particularly Owen's sexual life, we can justly invoke Updike's comment in a 1976 interview about "the sense of sex as something brutal, crushing, barbaric even" (Plath 87). Given that *Villages* was Updike's last major reflection on adultery from the male perspective (as he surely knew it was likely to be), given that the novel is clearly

offered as the final thoughts in a stock-taking review of a life of sexual promiscuity, and, given, finally, the emphasis on an ultimate wisdom gained, we might well conclude that the indulgent and positive attitude toward adultery in *Couples* gave way to a revised view in *Villages* of its harmful, even destructive, effects. We know from his interviews and nonfiction that Updike was deeply aware of the meanings of his fiction. He had to have been aware, then, that *Villages* portrays both the spiritual poverty of the seducer and the detrimental effects of his sexuality. In this light, *Villages* is a revisiting of the topic of adultery by a writer better placed in his old age to judge its long-term effects. *Villages*, then, is an addendum to *Couples*, a necessary rebalancing: Tristan gets Iseult in *Couples*, and Tarbox heals its wounds; in *Haskells Crossing*, though, Don Juan causes the death of his victim, a wound that can never heal.

And yet.

The reader who sees in Owen's alleged responsibility for Phyllis's death the moral stance of *Villages* will look to the end of the novel for confirmation of Owen's "damnation." And it seems to occur a few paragraphs from the end in Owen's dismaying vision that "his charmed life has been a long torment of fear, desire, ambition, and guilt." This, surely, is the clincher, the final and irrevocable self-imposed verdict on Owen's wrongdoing, with which he must now live out his days. But, consistent to the end, the Updikean male protagonist is allowed to flee unbearable reality. True as always to his sexual self, Owen takes refuge in "[w]hat remains to him" (320)—namely, his sexual memories, in this case his appraisal of the differences and nuances in his mistresses' orgasms. The sacred is no longer needed to provide transcendence; it is to be found in sex: Owen's mistresses, he sees, "brought transcendent value to the [sexual] act, the supreme interaction." The way is now open for Owen's concluding insight on his life: "Things come, for the instant, clear. Owen's past is like a sheet of inky-blue tissue paper held up to a light, so the holes pricked in it shine: these stars are the women who let him fuck them" (321). This coarse and loveless credo of the serial adulterer, morally barren and emotionally puerile, is the final wisdom offered in *Villages* on male sexuality. Is it also, then, the *novel's* credo? Two interpretive possibilities suggest themselves: Is *Villages* being true to its own artistic order in giving an unsavory character enough rope with which to hang himself, in the manner of Nabokov with Humbert Humbert? Or is allowing a man who has lived a full and prosperous life to conclude that the highlight of that life was "fucking" as many women as he could an indication that this is what the novel ultimately endorses? Sex in *Couples* has a

convincing sociological and cultural resonance; sex in *Villages* is little more than the randy adventures of a male adulterer. And that is exactly what Updike gave us when he returned to the themes of adultery and male sexuality. Through its final provocative wisdom on men and sex—where guilt is evaded and “fucking” women is everything—and in its repetitive, loving, and voluptuous evocation of Owen’s sexual doings, *Villages* leaves us wondering exactly where *it* stands.

NOTES

1. A search of several databases (accessed 5 Nov. 2014) for the period 2004–2014 produced only a small number of passing references to *Villages*. Bailey’s essay seems to be the only one to have considered the novel in any depth. Updike himself suggested two reasons why his later fiction is not up to the standard of his best work. The first is diminishing mental agility due to aging. In an essay titled “The Writer in Winter,” he wrote: “An aging writer wonders if he has lost the ability to visualize a completed work, in its complex spatial relations. . . . [H]e may arrive at his ending nonplussed, the arc of his intended tale lying behind him in fragments. The threads have failed to knit” (*Higher Gossip* 5). The second reason, given in an interview, inspires less sympathy than the first: “This present novel that will be out—*Villages*—I several times thought it might be a bad idea and kind of abandoned it. So, it was really the habit—the habit of writing that kept me at it in the end. It was like a bad marriage. . . . This is the wife I’m married to here, and I’m going to finish this book. Finishing it becomes the only way to get rid of it” (“Showing Ordinary Life”).

2. Schiff argues that it is necessary and valuable to study the late work, as such a study offers “the opportunity to gain a better understanding of how this work fits within Updike’s oeuvre” (“Two Neglected” 46).

3. In Updike’s autobiographical text “The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood,” the “Three Great Secret Things” are sex, religion, and art (*Assorted Prose* 142–46).

4. The parallels between Owen’s and Updike’s sexual lives are confirmed by Adam Begley’s biography. Referring to the period in which Updike lived with his first wife and family in Ipswich (the model for Middle Falls, just as it was for Tarbox in *Couples*), Begley states: “Updike slept around in Ipswich, ‘a stag of sorts,’ as he wrote in his memoirs, ‘in our herd of housewife-does.’ And when his success as an author meant that he began to travel around the country and abroad, he permitted himself sexual adventures away from home” (211).

5. Owen is associated with killing elsewhere in the novel as well. When Alissa becomes pregnant, probably by Owen, he thinks of the fetus as a “tiny complicating creature, whom he would have gladly killed if he could” (211). And he sees himself as “his own child’s executioner” (276) as he contemplates the effect on his son of his divorce.

6. Owen’s first mistress tells him: “Don’t do your naïve act,” and his second asks him: “[W]hy do you always play innocent? You’re not innocent” (150, 239).

7. It should be noted that not every reader sees evidence of love in *Couples*. Tony Tanner writes: “Updike surely intends [Piet’s] relationship with Foxy to be a serious love story, but in this world—or the world seen from this point of view—how is sex as love to be differentiated from sex as lust?” (54).

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