BOOKS: AGING

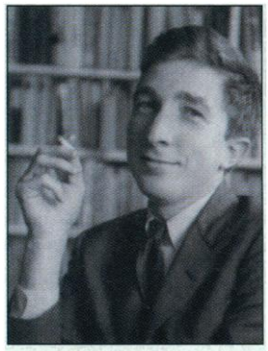
A View from the Other Side

Richard C. Adelman

Toward the End of Time. JOHN UPDIKE. Knopf, New York, 1997. x, 337 pp. $25 or C$35. ISBN 0-375-40006-0.

C. P. Snow's Cambridge lecture *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, Albert Camus's essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and John Updike's first novel *The Poorhouse Fair* emerged around the same time during the mid- to late-1950s. Each of these authors provides a distinct view of how scientists and humanists communicate with one another and with the world around them. Snow catalyzed a continuing debate about the cultural divide that separates the sciences and the humanities. He placed most of the blame for this gulf on the "literary intellectuals." Camus asserted that appreciation of "scents of grass and stars at night" is a more powerful way of knowing than is scientific reductionism. In his view, science's weakness was exemplified by its co-opting the imagery of planetary motion to explain the nature of subatomic particles. With his first novel, Updike launched four decades of creative writing, culminating most recently in his latest effort, *Toward the End of Time*, in which literary images of science accentuate his reflections about growing old.

Snow later revisited the cultural divide with his prophecy that a "third culture" would emerge to close the communications gap between science and artistic expression. Social historians, sociologists of science, science fiction writers, and scientific thinkers subsequently leapt into the fray, as often as not contentiously, with no obvious end yet in sight. Updike, however, occupies a unique integrative niche: In *Toward the End of Time*, he uses literary images of science's sensuousness to enhance knowledge of human experience. Thus, "It makes no sense: all those blazing suns, red and swollen or white and shrunken or yellow like our moderate own, blue and new or black and collapsed, madly spinning neutron stars or else all-swallowing black holes denser yet, not to mention planets and cinderlike planetoids and picturesque clouds of glowing gas and dark matter hypothetical or real and titanic streaming soups of neutrinos, could scarcely be expected to converge exactly upon a singularity smaller, by many orders of magnitude, than a pinhead. The Weyl curvature, in other words, was very very very near zero at the Big Bang, but will be much larger at the Big Crunch. But, I ignorantly wonder, how does time's arrow know this, in our trifling immediate vicinity? What keeps it from spinning about like the arrow of a compass, jumping broken cups back on the table intact and restoring me, if not to a childhood self, to the suburban buck I was when still married. . . . In all cases, my semen arrowed outward, into darkness, like the minutes of my manhood ticking away."



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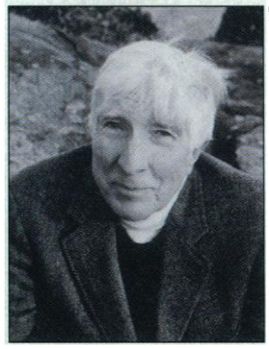

MARTHA UPDIKE

John Updike.

The substantive areas of science whose images Updike intertwines with humanistic sensitivity about aging include cosmology, quantum theory, molecular genetics, and biological evolution. The novel's setting is what remains of society in suburban Boston during the year 2020, shortly after a devastating nuclear exchange between the United States and China. Characteristically exquisite prose and playful incorrigibility, as well as frightfully clever forecasts about the use by the federal government's eventual successor of newly evolved metallobioforms to deliver deadly public services, once again will titillate Updike enthusiasts.

His imagery rivals contemporary science in gerontology as a means of understanding aging—an emotional clarity can be as powerful as laboratory quantitation. Especially poignant is his awareness of the primacy of elderly people's recall of earlier times. For example, the frequently recurring scientific concepts of parallel universes and indeterminacy emerge early in the word "perhaps," with which a 66-year-old retired investment counselor, Ben Turnbull, chronicles a year of his reminiscences and reflections about what his life was, might have been, and still holds in store. Further on, Updike assigns greater value to remembrance than to the gene as a unit of heritability: "Immortal DNA offers as cold a comfort as the transmigration of souls. If we can't take our memories with us, why go?"

Another example portrays agitated molecules of damaged DNA, not only as the internal origin of an illness but as the agents that prompt reminiscence of a more carefree and healthy childhood, as well as a sexual encounter with someone younger: "As a child I used to win freckle contests, and, though the freckles have faded, the susceptible fair skin has remained, its squamous and basal cells seething with DNA damage. During the long wait in my dermatologist's office, I studied my fellow-patients with loathing. They all seemed much older than I, doddering and drooling onto the handles of their canes, when in fact they were probably my age. I still peer out of the windows of my eyes with the unforgiving spirit of a young man on the make. My heart spurned all alliance with these disgusting relics of the last, unmourned century; I sought, instead, collusive flirtation with the noticeably nubile nurse who at last ushered me into an examination cell and, handing me a folded robe of blue paper, indicated that I should strip. Why don't you strip with me, darling?"

All who care about growing old will discover treasure in this novel. The scientific community's share includes at least the following two gems. One is the literary articulation of fundamental beauty in science. The other is the utility of this beauty not only for art's sake, but also for understanding a complex, contemporary frontier of science: human aging. Equally memorable examples of Updike's earlier forays into aging include *The Poorhouse Fair* (1957), which projects science fiction about a day in the life of the residents of a nursing home; the four-novel, three-decade longitudinal study, *Rabbit, Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit is Rich* (1981), and *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), in which both author and the same principal character age from their early thirties to their early sixties; and his memoirs, *Self-Consciousness* (1989).

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