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1   If there has been much more critical work published on John Updike's novels than on his short stories, it is not on account of the perceived superior quality of the novels. The academic critic seems drawn, in much the same way as the general reader, to the bigness of the novel: the importance of the statement seems indissociable from the length of the text. There are also, one suspects, considerations of manageability. It surely appears more straightforward to engage with the thematic and stylistic homogeneity of a novel than with the variety – of characters, themes, styles, narrations[1], contexts – of any given collection of stories. And there exists also, perhaps, a critical view that this very diversity reduces the representativeness of collections: the condensed unity of a novel, written in a concentrated manner over a two-year period, is deemed a truer expression of the artist's voice than the discrete and sundry narratives composed over a seven- or eight-year period, the typical period of composition of an Updike collection of stories. Updike's early collections, it is true, have received a significant degree of attention, but later collections have not been so favored. So it is that little critical work has been published on Updike's 1987 collection, *Trust Me*, despite the quality of the stories discerned by one notable critic of Updike's short fiction.[2] In his 1993 study of the short stories, which covered the greater part of Updike's short-fiction output, Robert M. Luscher considered that *Trust Me* "may be his best and most consistent effort thus far" (Luscher 137).

2   At first sight the twenty-two stories of *Trust Me* display the thematic diversity typical of Updike's collections. The stories range from, for example, the desire of a newly arrived young couple in a New England town in "Getting into the Set" to break into the town's attractive middle-class clique to the late-middle-aged working-class narrator of "Poker Night" who is trying to absorb the news that he has cancer. Elsewhere in the collection, the early-marriage tensions of another young couple are the subject of "Unstuck," while "Pygmalion" offers an example of Updike's regular recourse to familiar myth to accord his narratives a structural and thematic framework.

3   For all that, Updike's short-story collections are not without pattern and continuity, due essentially to the author's drawing upon the trajectory and experience of his own life as a source of inspiration for his stories. As he notes in *More Matter*: "More closely than my novels, more circumstantially than my poems, these efforts of a few thousand words each hold my life's incidents, predicaments, crises, joys" (762). From the boyhood and adolescence of the characters of the first two collections to the elderly characters of the final one, a thematic unity emerges by virtue of the age, stage of life, and concerns and obsessions of the characters, who, very often, are approximately the same age as the author at the time of the stories' composition. Moreover, the title *Trust Me* immediately suggests the possibility, and even the authorial offering, of an overarching thematic unity, reinforced by the opening story bearing the same name as the collection. Luscher avails of this thematic offering, visible in the title of the chapter he devotes in his book to the collection – "The Anatomy of Betrayal: *Trust Me*." Luscher notes at the outset that "the thematic concern with trust resonates throughout the entire book" (137-8), and refers also to the "volume's thematic coherence" (139). And, indeed, the opening story presents the theme of trust in a very direct and almost pedagogical manner. Narrating a series of episodes from various stages in the life of protagonist Harold, "Trust Me" proposes trust as the essential mode of moral exchange between people, the primordial principle in human interaction, emphasized by the characters being bound to each other in the closest of human relationships – parents and children, husbands and wives, lovers. Nowhere else in human affairs, the story implies, are the bonds of trust so visibly elemental, their observance so necessary, and their undoing so calamitous.

4   Yet it would be restrictive of the stories' complexity to view them uniquely through the rigidly causal paradigm of betrayed trust leading to weakened human attachments. Neither cause nor

effect is presented in such an instrumental manner in the volume. Trust, in other words, is not explored uniquely as a matter of moral exchange between people; equally, the loss of trust is shown to have consequences other than the unraveling of human ties. The notion of trust, therefore, although central to understanding much of the human interaction in the stories, is not a complete interpretive tool. As one reads one's way through the stories, a much broader articulation of trust begins to emerge. One becomes aware of a recurring vocabulary and imagery of solitude and, at times, despondency – there prevails in the stories a language of emptiness, abandonment, and even dread. For the characters of *Trust Me*, who are in middle age and beyond, the pressures of ageing, growing intimations of mortality, and the dissolution of ties that had bound them in love to others combine to set them adrift, to undo or loosen connections that promised to secure them to their lives. Luscher, indeed, is alert to the wider ramifications of misplaced trust in the collection, noting that the volume's reflections on trust cover "those social bonds and routines on which we unconsciously rely," but which "are unfortunately subject to time's erosion" (138-9). Where the simple concept of trust does remain pertinent is in the sense of stability it offers: characters begin to feel lost when they are no longer able to rely on some vital support in their lives, be it a person, a faith in the way the world functions, or an idea that has hitherto sustained them – a loss of trust in any of these produces a sense of disconnection. Trust, then, comes to have the following, wider articulations in the collection: first, relations of trust represent a mode of connection for characters to their world and to others; second, these relations function as a fundamental mooring to their existence, a guarantor both of stability and security; and, finally – in perhaps its most profound and surprising articulation – these relations may act as a barrier against existential disquiet.

5   It is significant that the wider resonances of Updike's notion of trust are presented in the opening story. Even more significant is Updike's presentation of the theme through the motif of a fall. Risk, vulnerability, and a brutal withdrawal of foundation and support are expressed through the story's dominant imagery of height, descent, void, and submergence. The first words of dialogue of "Trust Me" (and thus of the volume) are, "C'mon, Hassy, jump," spoken to little Harold by his father as the former stands at the edge of a swimming pool looking down into the water. Harold wonders what his father, already in the water, "was standing on," yet he trusts his father, and jumps. But the anticipated security of his father's arms does not materialize, and Harold falls deep into the "dense and churning" water; he feels himself sinking for what "seemed […] a very long time," before his father finally pulls him out of the "darkening element" (3). The metaphor of a fall from a height into danger (or the threat of such a fall) is repeated in the narration of other episodes. As an adult, Harold pressurizes his wife into foreign travel, despite her dread of flying. High over Africa, the "inky chasm" below is visible (4). Later, leaving Rome airport, they realize their plane is not climbing. They look down into "the watery world below"; "[i]f he blinked," Harold tells himself in the intensity of his gaze, "they would fall." The plane manages to bring them safely back to Rome, but the damage has been done – "within a year, they separated" (5). Harold will then bring his girlfriend skiing, and press her to ski from the highest slope. An inexperienced skier, she is uncertain, but trusts his reassuring words. The lift transports them "ever higher," and sways "across a chasm" (6). Solid ground at the top of the mountain is treacherous ice; Harold's girlfriend tries to ski but falls, tries again and falls again.

6   The strategic introductory position of "Trust Me," and the motif and meanings of the fall, confer a strong allegorical resonance to the story, reinforced by the observation that "[d]uring the time of separation Harold seemed to be slinging his children from one rooftop to another, silently begging them to trust him" (5). And as if to insist on the link between trust and vulnerability, and to alert us to his deployment of the motif of a fall in his collection, Updike himself designed the book's dust jacket to feature a representation of Icarus's fall. Bernard Picart's *The Fall of Icarus* anticipates several aspects of the opening story: the vertiginous drop; a character (Icarus, a son) unworthy of the trust of another (Daedalus, his father); the terrifying void into which one may fall; the absence of connectedness and fixity; and, of course, the fall into water.[3]

7   Through paratext and opening text, then, Updike has presented an allegory of trust as a contingent, fragile, and mutable attachment in our lives. He once noted that, in life, he "[tended] to see everything poised between heaven and hell" (*Conversations* 20), an unsurprising view of the human condition in a man who had such a strong Christian upbringing. He locates the characters of many of the stories of *Trust Me* in this unstable middle, poised between salvation and damnation. He also noted, in a different interview from the same period, that "[u]nfallen Adam is an ape. […] I feel that to be a person is to be in a situation of tension, is to be in a dialectical situation" (*Conversations* 34). Here again is his notion of opposing forces exerting their pull and power on the individual, and here, too, is another articulation of the fall motif: Updike's characters in *Trust Me* are, like Adam, fallen, exposed now to the vicissitudes of existence. They have been cast out of the paradise of safety and protection, newly cut off, as they enter or are already in the latter part of their adult life, from sources of contentment and security. "The City" and "The Wallet," two of the outstanding stories from *Trust Me,* together articulate the tensions of the Updikean equipoise**:** they share a common theme of the anxieties and desolations of late middle-age and beyond, depict characters cut off from sources of salvation and fearing damnation, and offer contrasting experiences of and outcomes to these characters' existential woes. The analysis to follow will consider the exploration of trust as disconnection in the lives of these protagonists, and will also examine the wider meanings of these narratives, to the extent that they articulate a very personal Updikean vision of postlapsarian existence.

8   One of the more hopeful stories in the collection is "The City," which may be viewed as a narrative of personal renewal, featuring a protagonist to whom rejuvenation comes from an unexpected source. The story features a middle-aged businessman, Carson, who has flown on a sales trip to an unfamiliar interior American city. He is taken ill on arrival there, eventually checks himself into hospital, where he undergoes emergency surgery for a retrocecal appendicitis. He spends several days recovering in hospital, from which he emerges healed, able to leave the city and return home. It is rare for a literal reading of an Updike story not to have its own rewards, be they in their quiet epiphanies, the pellucid language, or the startling metaphors and analogies. "The City" is no exception. However, the full meanings and amplitude of the story are accessible only through an allegorical reading: Carson's more profound illness, a weariness of life, is an existential one, and is the main concern of Updike's story. The allegorical framework is established initially by the metaphorization of the story's spatial settings. Building upon the motif and metaphor of the fall employed in "Trust Me," the story has Carson hover above the city in his plane, both before landing and after departure, while the first signs of his illness manifest themselves as his plane "[descends] into this city," a verb repeated in the next paragraph as we learn of Carson's "nervous apprehension" and the "pain" in his stomach" (25). This descent into an unfamiliar place resembles a descent to a form of underworld. All the sites resonate allegorically: the city remains nameless, a withholding that renders it a mysterious space rather than an identifiable place; the "orange-carpeted corridor" and the dominant maroon of his hotel (26, 27) hint at the incandescence of an underworld, and are "nauseating" to Carson (26); the "planes of wall and floor" of the hotel corridor "looked warped," leaving Carson with the impression that he was being "[transposed] […] to a set of new coördinates" (26); he spends hours suffering in his "room's shadowy spaces" (27), before taking a taxi under the "corrosive yellow glare" of the street-lighting and amid the "[n]eon advertisements and stacked cubes of fluorescent offices and red and green traffic lights" (28), the aggressive, artificial lighting of an unnatural world. He enters the hospital, an enclosed, somewhat labyrinthine world of corridors, halls, wings, annexes, inner and outer staircases, and doors he is forbidden or unable to open. His companions are a "colorful cross section" of patients, a motley group of "prodigies" (35) suffering lavish ailments and wounds, and offering spectacular tableaux of human suffering. When he wakes up after his surgery he finds himself "in an underground room that had many stalactites" (which turn out to be "drooping transparent tubes" hanging from the ceiling), from which he graduates, in his next two awakenings, to "an ordinary hospital room" and then to "a private room" (31), an upward movement (the private room has a window) indicating the stages of his return to

normal life. Convalescing, he prepares for his release from the hospital by ascending the six flights of stairs from the basement to the rooftop. Upon his departure, Carson's plane lifts him up into the skies, to the metaphorical heights of revived spiritual and physical health, and he looks down at the city "spread […] underneath him" (38).[4]

9   The function of the allegory is to transfer our attention from Carson's physical illness to his existential malaise, maladies that follow parallel trajectories in the story, from diagnosis to treatment to cure. In his fifties, and after a divorce, Carson identifies himself as one of those "victims of middle-aged restlessness—the children grown, the long descent begun" (25). Left by his wife, disowned by his daughter, and with a "half-forgotten" son (28), Carson is alone in the world, with no-one to tend to him but himself. He has grown tired of the effort that living demands, "tired of numbers, tired of travel, of food, of competing, even of self-care" (26). And he has come to learn a doleful truth, one that insinuates itself into the minds of other characters in the collection, that "there was no disguising our essential solitude" (36). A vital connection to his world, one constituted by family relationships, has been severed,[5] leaving only habit and routine as bulwarks against discouragement. Carson's existential weariness and solitude have reduced his life to instinctive gestures and automated motions, to his filling in the time of "the long descent" to death. In a moment of self-inspection, he is "shocked" at what he sees in the mirror: a man with "a colorless mouth tugged down on one side like a dead man's" (27).

10   This latter reference, along with the motif of descent and wider allegorical resonance of the story, particularly that of space, suggest strongly that Updike has located his character in metaphorical purgatory, a location, indeed, "poised between heaven and hell." Figuratively dead, because weary of life, Carson has been transported to the purgatory of hospital to be purified.[6] "Repeated violent purgations" (27) in his hotel have failed to cure him, so a more systematic, official purification is needed to cleanse him of "the burning, undiscourageable demon" inside him (32). Carson has sinned against life by succumbing to the existential sickness of despair, a religious connotation that the text itself promotes – as does the volume's dominant motif – in giving the following thought to Carson: "For the sick feel as shamed as the sinful, as fallen" (32). Other features and details support the notion of the hospital as purgatory: both are places of temporary, not permanent, incarceration and suffering; the fires of purgatory are echoed in Carson's "burning" illness; the "stalactites" of his underground room nicely suggest a cave-like space of incarceration – this space, indeed, is likened to a "catacomb" (31) – while being well short of the gruesome torments of hell; and his sin is of the venial (that is, forgiveable) variety, so that he may still be admitted back to, and ascend to, the "heaven" of a return to life in joy, which duly occurs. As Marina Warner notes: "the souls in purgatory do not cry out in pain or remonstrate, as they do in hell, but, as Dante described, bask lovingly in the pain that cleanses them and will lead to heaven" (317).

11   In keeping with the story's greater concern with Carson's psychological rather than his pathological condition, his convalescence is indicated essentially through changes in his emotional state: "In the five days that followed, he often wondered why he was so happy" (32). He is able now to liberate himself from self-concerns, and to explore the hospital, and finds that "[h]ospital life itself, the details of it, made him happy" (32). Equally, a "high-arching" home run he sees on television "seemed delicious, and to be happening deep within the tiers of himself" (33). Yet he remains a sinner, and must be fully purged of his sin of despair before being permitted to leave. In what is presented as a nocturnal apparition, a black nurse gently taking his blood pressure is transformed into a heavenly visitation: "a queenly smooth black face smiled down upon him," a face that "was illumined only indirectly, from afar." At the time of night "when despair visits men" (33),[7] the ministrations of this ethereal visitor of dazzling beauty, her "perfectly black and symmetrical face outlined like an eclipsed sun with its corona" (34), has a meaning that is clear to Carson: "*I forgive you*, her presence said" (33).[8] Purged and forgiven, Carson recovers his taste for the richness of life, a renewal that has him expand his horizons beyond the confines of the hospital, back out to the world itself: "His curiosity about the city revived." In a symbolic contrast between the purgatory of his temporary incarceration and the outside world for which he once again yearns and is

destined, Carson observes, from a hospital window, that "the heart of the city […] seemed often to be in sunlight, while clouds shadowed the hospital grounds" (34).

12   Carson's final days are spent in solitary convalescent walks in a quiet staircase that begin to distance him from the rest of the hospital; "invisible and anonymous" (36), ascending from basement to rooftop to recover his strength, he has access to an outside platform. This gradual movement upwards and outwards offers him "a fractional view of the city below" (37). Poised above a kind of void, Carson strains to leap back into this world:

> The drab housing and assembled rubble that he saw through the grid of the cement barrier […] nevertheless seemed to Carson brilliantly real, moist and deep-toned and full. Life, this was life. This was the world. […] Until the morning when he was released, he would come here even in the dark and lean his forehead against the cement and breathe, trying to take again into himself the miracle of the world, reprogramming himself, as it were, to live. (37)

13   The allegory is complete: Carson had lost the means to see his life as anything other than a quotidian grind "of showering and shaving in the morning and putting himself into clothes and then, sixteen hours later, taking himself out of them" (26). His cure consists of his renewed capacity to appreciate the richness of human experience, visible in his alertness to otherwise-banal details offered to his view, be they the "subtle differences" (36) in the flights of stairs he takes, or the "distant agitation of a lawnmower" (37) he hears from his platform. In this awareness of the minute phenomena registered by consciousness, we recognize Updike's own concern to pay due homage to the world by being attentive to the details our consciousness allows us to perceive: often criticized for being fussily descriptive in his fiction, Updike once remarked that what he was "trying to capture" was "the wonder of the real," noting that this wonder was "very easy to ignore […] since we're surrounded by the real day after day and it's easy to stop seeing and stop feeling" (*Conversations* 159). Carson's sickness, his weariness of existence and disconnection from his life, left him dead to the world; his return to life takes the form of a recovery of the lost reciprocity between consciousness and world, memory and meaning, being and pleasure, body and sensation: "[t]he raw outdoor air […] raked through his still-drugged system like a sweeping rough kiss, early-fall air mixing summer and winter, football and baseball, stiff with chill yet damp and not quite purged of growth" (37). It is not, perhaps, within our gift to overcome the "essential solitude" of existence, but Updike, in his parable of the dead being raised and returned to life, has offered his middle-aged character, in compensation, the means to appreciate anew the "miracle of the world."[9]

14   In his exploration of characters confronted with a sense of disconnection in their lives in middle age and beyond, Updike was too much the disinterested seeker of truth to see middle-age anxieties as merely a propitious terrain for transformative epiphanies.[10] If "The City" offers something of a fable of a return to life, "The Wallet" explores the more corrosive effects of ageing and disconnection. The opening sentence sets up the thematic tension in the story, as well as the polar opposites of security and vulnerability between which Updike's protagonist Fulham, a sixty-five-year-old retired stockbroker, oscillates:

> Fulham had assembled a nice life—blue-eyed wife still presentable and trim after thirty-three years of marriage, red-haired daughter off in the world and doing well, handsome white house in one of the older suburbs—yet the darkness was not quite sealed out. (156)

15   Fulham would appear to consider his life and family as a set of assets, investments and strategies that have been carefully cultivated to ensure his sense of well-being, a manifestation, we are to understand, of a stockbroker's instinct to manage his affairs in order to guarantee protection and security. For the story reveals Fulham's life to have been held securely in place, at work and at home, by the buttresses of an ordered and familiar environment, beginning in his childhood through the routine of his regular visits to the cinema. Here, "he even had a favorite seat—back row, extreme left," and discovered, in the minor actors, a secure environment, "a huge family of familiar, avuncular faces." As he got older, continuity was assured through his "moviegoing" in the different places he lived, before he eventually moved on and into his "homebound" life of "marriage and children" (157). Retired, Fulham is now more dependent than ever on the familiarity and regularity of home life. When his daughter calls to collect her

children, Fulham, tired out by grandfatherly duties, is "glad" that "his large white house in Wellesley returned to the order that he and his wife maintained." He keeps his garden shrubs neatly "trimmed," follows a daily routine of "[managing] his own investments and those of a favored few old clients," keeps up with the *Wall Street Journal*, updates his charts, and makes his "daily visit to the post office." These retirement routines are an attempt to re-create the reassuring sense of connection and protection furnished by his professional life. However, "the illusion of integration with the larger circuits of the world was harder to maintain than when he enjoyed a corner office on the nineteenth floor of a Boston skyscraper, with swift-moving secretaries to shield and buttress him" (159).

16   It is significant, in terms of understanding Updike's perspective on the anxieties of the ageing male, that the "darkness" that Fulham's defenses cannot keep fully at bay is of a similar general nature to that which afflicts Carson: both characters are confronted with a disquiet that has its roots in the burdens of existence. But whereas Carson toils under the weight of having to tend in solitude to his continued daily existence, Fulham is tormented by the existential dread of impending nothingness. The first manifestations of his latent anxieties occur in the least expected of places: it is "in movie theatres" that "[d]read would attack him" (156), a fear rendered again by Updike through the motifs of a fall and terrifying space:

> Fulham would be visited by terror: the walls of the theatre would fall away, the sticky floor become a chasm beneath his feet. His true situation in time and space would be revealed to him: a speck of consciousness now into its seventh decade, a mortal body poised to rejoin the minerals. (157-8)

17   For Fulham, "[m]ovies had always been realler than life"; the pleasure of his identification with their fantasies and characters had represented "bright gaps in the daily, dutiful fog," an innocent but comforting diversion. But the "coarsely mythic" movies he now sees when he takes his grandchildren to the cinema present him with images of "other worlds" which, in the fragile existential state in which he views them, he interprets as allegories of death, full as they are of "heights, great spaces, places one might never get back from." He experiences his movie-induced existential dread in a deeply personal manner: "it was *his* existence, his in his totally lonely possession of it, that was so sickeningly serious." Fulham is indeed alone now, but unprotected too, realizing that "all our social arrangements and entertainments" serve merely to "divert us" from the "absolute irreversibility" (158) of the human trajectory towards death and annihilation.

18   It is in this vulnerable existential state that two occurrences come to tip Fulham into a crisis of disconnection. The first buttress to Fulham's existence that fails to protect him is, indeed, the "social arrangements" that bind him to his life and the world through a web of interconnections and exchanges. These arrangements, which function as a formal recognition by society of his individual existence and status, are a form of unwritten contract between Fulham and his world, and are based on trust: he has faith in and relies on the continuance of this social order. He sees, for example, the "postal service as an overarching entity" that merits the mail "entrusted to it"; it constitutes a reassuring network of interactions and dependencies in which Fulham has his assigned and recognized place. The extent of his investment in and identification with this system becomes increasingly clear the longer a check he is expecting (the return on an astute investment) fails to arrive. Faced now with the possibility that "the system had holes in it," he sees his mailbox, attached to the fence in front of his house, as "a perilous extension of himself, an indefensible outpost, subject to […] casual battering" (160). Where the arrival of the check would confirm the smooth functioning of the order in which he plays his part, its non-arrival signals a disturbing failure of an infallible principle of logic upon which Fulham's orderly world reposes, that of "cause and effect." But it also suggests to him a shocking indifference to his fate and a withdrawal of the very recognition upon which his secure existence depends. Even worse, the failure of the system reveals it to be "mindless" (161), without, therefore, a benign controlling presence attentive to Fulham's existence, and with which he could "place an appeal" (160). He is exposed now to the silence of the universe and to an "outrageous cosmic *unanswerableness*," leaving him to rage and fret at the edge of the "abyss" (161) to which the check's non-arrival has pushed him.

19   It is the loss of Fulham's wallet that pushes him into the abyss: the fall that he experiences as a consequence represents nothing less than the loss of the person and life he has spent a lifetime constructing. There are important qualitative differences between the non-arrival of the check and the loss of his wallet that render the latter more pernicious, differences explored in the story through the oppositions between outside and inside, public and personal, identification and identity. The postal system represents an order that is essentially external to Fulham, part of a public and social ordering with which he identifies as citizen and as beneficiary of its proper functioning. He is indeed undermined by its failures insofar as he sees himself as the individual victim of its malfunction, and to that extent he takes it as a personal offence, while nonetheless able to recognize it as a failure of a wider social system. The loss of the wallet, however, is deeply personal, to the point that Fulham, in his fixated state and feeling individually targeted, establishes a sinister link between the two developments: "The perpetrator struck again, inside the home." The more insidious nature of the loss of the wallet is conveyed through a language of infiltrated defenses and metaphors of loss of identity. The breast wallet that Fulham had used during his professional life was like "a small leather shield above his heart"; upon retirement he replaced it, in "a slight change of armor" (161), with a hip wallet that he came to consider an "adjunct to his person" (162). It fulfils this role by holding his extensive accumulation of charge and credit cards, as well as cards indicating his membership of a variety of social clubs and cultural institutions, and those for his medical insurance and Social Security. These cards represent and confirm his social membership and social status, augmented by various personal mementos he carried in his wallet that proclaim his successful and well-integrated professional and private lives. More profoundly, they also constitute the reassuring documentary evidence of elements of his identity that attest to his place in the world and upon which rests his very sense of self.

20   Now, however, the carapace protecting his intimate personal world has been infiltrated: "It was irrefutably clear to him that forces out there […] had silently, invisibly conspired to invade his domain" (164). His house, he decides, has been entered by thieves, and his wallet has been stolen. His persecution complex, which imagines an elaborate conspiracy to defraud him, is the agitated voice of an ageing and vulnerable man, existing precariously on the margins of existence and prey to "[premonitions] of extinction" (158). To his wife's concern that he was becoming "wild" in his distress, he exclaims: "It was my *wallet*. Everything is in it. Everything. Without that wallet, I'm nothing." An essential prop to his sense of self, through whose familiar convictions he knows the world and his place in it, has been removed, leaving behind "a phantom, flitting about in a house without walls" (163). Just as the protective walls of the movie theatre fell away during his moments of existential dread, so now the defensive shield of his house, as a form of that dread, laid bare by the loss of the wallet, undoes the efforts of a lifetime to establish a secure place and solid moorings:

> Every door and window, even the little apertures of the mail slot and the telephone, were holes through which his possessions, the accumulations of a lifetime, were being pulled from him. […] The cards in the missing wallet opened into slippery tunnels of credit, veins of his blood. Fulham stood, feeling drained and faint. (164)

21   The blood metaphor is commensurate with Fulham's sense of the loss of his wallet as a form of death, an outcome that, in his mind, represents the ominous culmination to a series of events: in the movie theatre he saw himself moving towards death; in the lobby afterwards, in the video game he played with his grandson, his fighter ship "twirled like a trapped animal" before being "annihilated" (159);[11] the non-arrival of the check signaled a new disconnection and isolation from the world; and now everything that expressed his existence and identity, past and present, was being sucked out of him. His house, now defined uniquely by "[t]he wallet's non-existence" (164), feels to Fulham the way it might "the day after he died" (165). In a collection concerned with the losses experienced in middle age and beyond, among which those of an existential nature, the final recourse to a language of disconnection and vertiginous space to describe Fulham's distress is apt: the loss of the wallet "merged with landscapes and faces that had once belonged to his life and would never be seen again, melted into the irreversible void" (165).[12]

22   Throughout his career Updike repeatedly returned to the vital connection between his life and his short stories. Looking back, in 1987, at a writing life already almost thirty-five years old, he noted:

> The short stories are probably the most me, the most autobiographical […] . They're almost like scrapbooks to me now. […] The short stories were a kind of running letter to mankind about my inner adventures, my domestic adventures; whereas the novels almost always are in some large part fantastic. (*Conversations* 195)

23   While the parallels between important phases of his life and the dramatic situations of his short stories are visible and recurring – an only child in his beloved small-town home; living with parents and maternal grandparents; the unwanted move to the country house when Updike was thirteen; early marriage; children; separation; divorce; remarriage – of much greater relevance than external biographical facts is the manner in which his beliefs and emotional responses to experience found their way into the short fiction. Such an influence is profoundly at work in "The City" and "The Wallet." And while these stories are, of course, perfectly comprehensible and rewarding without the interpretive filter of the author's life, it is nonetheless legitimate and instructive, in the attempt to understand the impetus and urgency of the creative act of an important writer, to consider the influence of those aspects of Updike's life that had such a pervasive and recurring influence on his short fiction. This is particularly true for fiction that is so avowedly autobiographical, and in a writer for whom writing was "a way of expressing lightly the unbearable. That we age and leave behind this litter of dead, unrecoverable selves" (*Self-Consciousness* 215).

24   One way of understanding Updike's statement that he "[tended] to see everything poised between heaven and hell" is to relate it to his conception of human experience as one in which we are caught "in a situation of tension, […] in a dialectical situation." For Updike, a definitive tension in his life 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, one that would persist, indeed, as Updike grew older, although in attenuated form. He underwent a crisis in his early and mid-twenties, when, he recalled later, "I felt fearful and desolate, foreseeing, young as I was, that I would die, and that the substance of the earth was, therefore, death." Different facets of death may provoke different kinds of terror; for Updike it was "the desolating objective evidence of our insignificance and futility and final nonexistence" (*Odd Jobs* 844), creating an "existential desperation which all men being mortal feel" (*Conversations* 160). Updike's reflections on existence are full of terms indicating the depth of his anguish: he speaks of existence as "total despair" (*Conversations* 14), and of – in an echo of Carson's tribulations – "the irremediable grief in just living, in just going on" (*Conversations* 28). In the year he published *Trust Me*, he was still speaking of existence as "painful," tainted by the fact that "we are a death-foreseeing animal" (*Conversations* 192).[13]

25   It was only through his reading of Kierkegaard that he was "[given] […] back" his "right to live" (*Odd Jobs* 844). Kierkegaard is routinely accorded the title of "the father of existentialism" on account of his privileging of the individual, particularly his insistence on the freedom and responsibility of the individual to determine the self through free choices. Kierkegaard emphasized passion, or human subjectivity, over intellectual reflection and abstract thought, and it is this that appealed to Updike: "Eagerly I took from Kierkegaard the idea that subjectivity too has its rightful claims" (*Odd Jobs* 844). Faced with the "objections of material science" (*Self-Consciousness* 218) that would deny us the consolations of God and an afterlife, and that condemn us to insignificance and ultimate "nothingness" (*Self-Consciousness* 217), only religion – understood by Updike in the widest sense as any "private system" of belief (*Self-Consciousness* 215-6), and born in human subjectivity – could dominate the terror of mortal existence. Updike saw that God could be found in Kierkegaardian subjectivity, "on the far side of a leap of faith unaided by reason and propelled by human dread and despair" (*Due Considerations* 514). Updike was lucid enough to recognize the ontological status of this God created by a leap over reason into pure, willed belief: he acknowledges that Kierkegaard "almost says that God is there because I so much want him

to be there" (*Conversations* 98). But faith, Updike concluded, "is not a deduction but an act of will" (*Odd Jobs* 844). Emboldened by Kierkegaard, he decided that he would believe in God, and "[u]nder the shelter" that Kierkegaard, certain other writers, and his own need for consolation provided, Updike "lived [his] life" (*Self-Consciousness* 219).

26   Released from his sense of the futility of life, an innate Updikean optimism found its voice, acting as a counter-force to the one pulling him towards despair. His attempt to capture in his fiction the "wonder of the real" was propelled by his desire "to convey the fact that the creation of the world is in some way terribly good. We love being alive" (*Conversations* 159). This Updikean dialectic, the oscillation between the poles of beauty and terror, wonder and dread, heaven and hell, find full expression in "The City" and "The Wallet." The latter terms of these binaries, appropriately nuanced, provide the dominant themes and crises in both stories, and certainly dictate the overwhelming mood of ruin in "The Wallet." But the counterpoise is present in the healing tale of "The City," a story in which, in keeping with the Updikean existential dialectic, existence is both ailment and cure. There is in "The City," one senses, a conscious attempt on Updike's part to write an uplifting story, one that offers an antidote to the existential weariness it diagnoses. One discerns the nature of the balm that Updike wishes to administer in comments he made on his fiction in the late 1960s, after he emerged from his own existential crisis:

> I do notice [in my work] a recurrence of the concept of a blessing, of approval, or forgiveness, or somehow even encouragement in order to go on. I wonder if twentieth-century man's problem isn't one of encouragement, because of the failure of nerve, the lassitude and despair, the sense that we've gone to the end of the corridor and found it blank. (*Conversations* 50)

27   In Updike's analysis here of the response in his fiction to modern existential despair, we find much that resonates in "The City." Carson's "lassitude" is that he has gone "to the end of the corridor" and has found nothing to keep him going but habit and deadening routine. But in so setting up the dilemma of his story, Updike generates for himself an existential and creative problem: how is a man to be rescued from the "despair" of living, and how can such salvation be realized within the compressions of a short story? In an interview, Updike quotes the theologian Karl Barth, to whom he attributes the insight that "a drowning man cannot pull himself out by his own hair." Updike's interviewer continues: "Updike interprets this to mean 'there is no help from within—without the supernatural the natural is a pit of horror'" (*Conversations* 14). So it is that Updike's allegorical fable is imbued with the supernatural transformations and motifs of a return to life from death, and none more so than in the nocturnal appearance of the otherworldly nurse who grants Carson forgiveness, and who, in the manner of a heavenly visitor, "never came again" (34).[14] Her apparition has the spiritual weight and power of a divine intervention, the source of the "blessing" that provides the existential and creative solutions in Updike's story. Carson, like the miraculously cured, is returned to life,[15] and invited to make his own leap of faith, to believe in and embrace the "miracle of the world."

28   We are back to little Harold at the edge of the pool: he must jump, trust his father to catch him, but suffer the consequences if trust should fail him. So, too, for several of the characters in *Trust Me*: in a leap of faith they will offer their trust to the world, and will either fly or fall, or, like Icarus, fly and then fall.

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Notes

1 Speaking in 1986 about the length of time it took him to write a novel Updike said: "I take about a year. It's really two years between conception and publication of a novel" (*Conversations* 184).

2 A search through *John Updike: A Bibliography of Primary and Secondary Materials, 1948-2007* revealed not a single piece of critical work featuring either *Trust Me* or a story from the collection in the titles of the critical articles listed; this listing features, for the most part, newspaper book reviews. At the end of the *Trust Me* listing in *The John Updike Encyclopedia*, readers are directed to Robert M. Luscher's book on Updike's short fiction, to Donald J. Greiner's 1981 book on Updike's non-novel work (no doubt as its lengthy coverage of pre-*Trust Me* collections serves to contextualize the stories of *Trust Me*), and to two newspaper reviews. A search of the online literature database, "Literature Online," disclosed two critical articles on stories from *Trust Me,* one on "More Stately Mansions," and one, in Spanish, on "The Wallet" (database accessed on July 21, 2011).

3 Picart's *The Fall of Icarus* was used on the dust jacket of the American hardback edition. Penguin, Updike's UK paperback publisher, designed its own first-edition cover to feature a shadowy, slightly blurred black-and-white photograph of an adult hand holding the hand of a child.

4 Apart altogether from the convincing textual evidence of the allegorization of space and of the movement down to and up out of the city and hospital, one is encouraged in this interpretation by Updike's use of the motif and allegory of the descent to the underground in his story, "The Journey to the Dead," from *The Afterlife and Other Stories*, the collection that followed *Trust Me*. Updike's use of the motif in this latter story is more explicit and extensive: the story specifically evokes the underworld of *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*, and the entire narrative is constructed upon a series of motifs determined by the overarching motif of the descent to the underworld. In this story, harsh artificial lights, corridors, underground spaces, a hospital, and metaphors of descent are prominent. See "Voyage au pays des morts : l'irréversible et la nostalgie dans 'The Journey to the Dead' de John Updike" and "Motifs of loss in *The Afterlife*."

5 Carson imagines a party that one of his doctors is probably attending, and thinks about the "festive domestic world from which he [Carson] had long fallen" (29).

6 The word "purgatory" comes from the Latin *purgare*, to make clean, to purify.

7 Updike reinforces the allegorical resonance of his story through his use of a vocabulary that, if the story were read in a purely literal sense, might not bear notice. For example, the nurse visits him in the "depths of […] night," in "those abysmal hours" (33) when despair is hard to keep at bay. "Depths" and "abysmal" both contribute to the extended metaphors of descent and underground.

8 This passage concludes with the sentence: "Carson thought of his daughter" (34). In the literal reading of the story the forgiveness transmitted by the nurse's presence is that of the daughter for the perceived failings of the father. This is indeed the interpretation of the passage offered by Luscher (143).

9 Novelist Marilynne Robinson reviewed *Trust Me* upon its publication, and considered "The City" to be a "wonderful" story. Although she did not focus on Carson's existential malaise, her review nonetheless employs a language that liberates the story somewhat from its literal meanings. She records that Carson is "rescued and healed by strangers, among strangers," how his "perceptions" are "heightened," and how he regards the ministrations of the medical staff "with an admiring compassion, which is otherworldly."

10 All writers surely see themselves as seekers after truth, but the potential of fiction to express truth, and Updike's commitment to truth in fiction, seemed to have a particular claim on him. He associated description in his prose and his realist mode of writing with truth, as he noted in a 1987 interview: "One thing that's given me courage in writing has been this belief that the truth, what is actual, must be faced and is somehow holy. […] So I have felt empowered in some way to be as much of a realist as I could be, to really describe life as I see it" (*Conversations* 203).

11 Fulham's grandson is called Tod. In German, the noun *Tod* means death.

12 The end of the story is open to different interpretations. The story concludes with the wallet being found and with Fulham "squeezing the beloved bent book of leather between his two palms and feeling very grandpaternal, fragile and wise and ready to die" (166). Luscher interprets this final phrase, plausibly, as Fulham having become "conscious that at his age losses are not so easily redeemed" (151). It could also be understood more optimistically: now that his wallet has been found, Fulham is restored to himself and can face death with greater serenity. Yet, taken with the opening lines of the story, in which Fulham is suspended between the security of his "nice life" and the "darkness" of existential dread, one is led to read the ending less optimistically: the story has moved Fulham from the opening phrase of the story celebrating his life to the closing one placing him closer to death.

13 We have seen how Updike's death-fears found their way into the fiction. But this was so even before the stories of *Trust Me*. Robert Detweiler observes, in his book covering Updike's prose up to the early 1980s (therefore before *Trust Me*), that the "lurking sense of death has figured strongly in Updike's fiction" (3).

14 The hospital as an allegory for purgatory, along with the supernatural resonance of the nurse's apparition, allows the interpretation of the latter figure as the Virgin Mary. As already noted, the nurse is described in the story as "queenly," which accords with the Virgin's privileged title of Queen of Heaven. Warner notes that the "most evident function of the Virgin today is intercession" (xxiii). According to Warner, "[t]he Virgin's intercession with her son can bring […] consolation to the living" (315), and she notes that "purgatory […] is her special sphere of influence" (318). That the nurse is black is hardly an obstacle to this interpretation, given the theological acceptance and ubiquity of Black Madonnas.

15 The very first words in the text after the visit of the nurse are those spoken to Carson by his surgeon: "Walk […]. Get up and walk as soon as you can" (34). Like the miraculously cured, Carson duly does so. One thinks of Jesus's miraculous curing of the cripple, narrated in John 5:8: "Jesus saith unto him, 'Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.'"

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

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Droits d'auteur

Résumé / Abstract

Tandis que le titre du recueil de nouvelles de John Updike, *Trust Me* (1987), et le thème de la confiance trahie dans la première nouvelle, éponyme, donnent au recueil sa cohérence thématique, une lecture des textes qui se limiterait au seul sujet de la confiance trahie menant à l'affaiblissement des liens humains serait restrictive. Le recueil donne une expression plus large au thème de la confiance, celle d'un mode de rapport des êtres humains au monde, à leur vie et aux autres. Les protagonistes des nouvelles "The City" and "The Wallet" subissent la perte de confiance comme la perte d'un tel rapport, ce qui engendre, dans les deux cas, un malaise existentiel. Cet article étudie la nature de ces crises existentielles dans le cadre de l'utilisation par Updike du motif de la chute. L'article examine ensuite la manière dont le malaise existentiel récurrent chez John Updike lui-même influence le thème de la crise existentielle dans ces deux nouvelles, une démarche qui se justifie par la dimension autobiographique avouée des nouvelles d'Updike.
Mots clés : nouvelles, motif de la chute, mort, John Updike, influence autobiographique, crises existentielles, confiance et rapports humains, allégorie

While the title of John Updike's short-story collection, *Trust Me* (1987), and the theme of betrayed trust of the first story ("Trust Me") offer a thematic coherence to the collection, it would be restrictive to read the stories through the simple thematic filter of betrayed trust leading to weakened human attachments. Trust is given a wider articulation in the collection, that of a mode of connection for human beings to their world, their lives, and to others. The loss of trust for the protagonists in the stories, "The City" and "The Wallet," is undergone as just such a loss of connection, engendering in both cases an existential disquiet. The article explores the nature of these existential crises, situating them within Updike's wider deployment of the motif of the fall in his collection. The article goes on to consider the manner in which the existential theme of these two stories is informed by Updike's own recurring existential unease, a reflection justified by the avowedly autobiographical dimension of his short fiction.
Keywords : trust and connection, short stories, John Updike, fall motif, existential crises, death, autobiographical influence, allegory