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A Falsified Universe of Love and Desire

SUE NORTON

Imagination and Idealism in John Updike's Fiction, by Michial Farmer. Camden House, 2017.

Michial Farmer sets out to make a set of neatly interwoven arguments in his five-part book *Imagination and Idealism in John Updike's Fiction*. Perhaps the most fundamental of these is that Updike shares with his dark romantic New England predecessor, Nathaniel Hawthorne, a view of the human imagination as a primary faculty holding the potential for both good and evil. What guides Updike's career-long aesthetic, Farmer believes, is an intention to explore the balancing act of the imagination, the necessary quest for an equilibrium that allows us to bestow meaning on life (4). In this light, the imagination is both essential in its helpfulness and inherently powerful. But in this power lies danger. Many of Updike's most memorable characters, writes Farmer, "are guilty of living in a falsified universe, of mistaking the order they bestow on the world for an order intrinsic to the world itself" (4).

Not only do these characters risk falsifying their own worlds, but some impose their solipsistic dreams and visions on those closest to them, so that their loved ones become emotional hostages to their dominant longings. To exemplify this hazard, and taking Updike's autobiographical impulse as a guidepost, Farmer analyzes what he calls the 'Parental Imagination' in *The Centaur, Of the Farm*, and a handful of short stories.

In the book's subsequent chapters, this same autobiographical impulse is brought to bear on Updike's explorations of recurring themes that Farmer names

'Collective Hallucination,' 'Imaginative Lust,' 'Female Power,' and 'The Remembering Imagination,' each of which suggests a potent tendency of the human mind to perceive what it needs to perceive in lieu of objective reality.

But before undertaking these arguments, Farmer lays the groundwork by detailing Updike's reckoning with Jean-Paul Sartre and existentialism, a requisite move in a book that rests its claims on Updike's reluctance to adopt a nihilistic understanding of life in the face of scientific reason, as well as his concomitant reliance on the imagination to, among other things, allow for an afterlife. While Sartre, of course, could not conceive of an afterlife, he could and did conceive of an understanding of the human imagination as a creative force that alters the direction of personal circumstance. Farmer's writing is clear and helpful in enabling his reader to appreciate the practical value that Sartre placed on the artistic and, especially, the writerly imagination. For Sartre, "the writer has a duty to communicate appropriately, to create worlds that promote rather than restrict freedom among those who encounter them" (14). Farmer chooses a superbly compelling quotation from Sartre's *What is Literature?* (1948) to demonstrate the profound frisson that occurs between writer and reader: "Raskolnikov's waiting is my waiting which I lend him. Without this impatience of the reader he would remain only a collection of signs" (qtd. in Farmer 14). By this example, we perceive that a writer's talent for signification evokes reactions—such as impatience—in readers. The artistic imagination is therefore transformative. Farmer offers adroit Sartresian logic in concise quotations (for instance: "It is we who set up a relationship between this tree and that bit of sky" (qtd. in Farmer 15)) that enable him to establish Updike as a writer who treated the word on the page—and, indeed, the world on the page—as a way to acknowledge and even invoke the infinite. Though Updike was fully cognizant of the damning lack of scientific evidence to support the premise of a divine creator, he was also intent on believing in one. And this belief, Farmer argues, owes less to Sartre's brand of existentialism and more to Updike's preference for Søren Kierkegaard, who understood the imagination as "a kind of faith, a way of transcending the merely physical and integrating the infinite with the finite" (18).

Farmer makes several references to Updike's 2005 essay for NPR's *This I Believe* series that propel his analysis further—not least because Updike composed it in his seventies, when his thinking was well advanced and his sentiments were firm: "[w]e are part of nature, and natural necessity compels and in the end dissolves us; yet to renounce all and any supernature, any appeal or judgment beyond the claims of matter and private appetite, leaves in the dust too much of our humanity, as through the millennia it has manifested itself in art and altruism, idealism

and *joie de vivre*" (qtd. in Farmer 10). Farmer uses Updike's clear annunciation, along with observations borrowed from Kristiaan Versluys's essay "'Nakedness' or Realism in Updike's Early Short Stories," to give his readers a stable rationale by which to understand Updike's mission as one involving a willful, even gleeful, imposition of the imagination on experience. As Farmer characterizes Updike's take on the imagination, "to live without it is to live in a materialist, mechanistic despair, a world without meaning" (27).

Nevertheless, in much of Updike's work the imagination veers not only toward order and meaning, beneficent idealism, and *joie de vivre*, but also toward dark havoc. Farmer culls textual evidence from two novels and five short stories to support his thesis that the imagination of the parent, specifically of the mother, can, in Updike's fiction, exert influence of mythic proportions on sons in particular. With psychological precision, he makes short work of showing how Allen Dow from "Flight" (1959) and its sequel, "His Mother Inside Him" (1992), along with Ace Anderson of the earlier "Ace in the Hole" (1954), shoulder into adulthood the weighty delusions of their sabotaging mothers. Farmer's prose is swift and efficient, satisfying in its certitude and agility, such as when he sums up Allen's failure of individuation with, "Even breaking away from his mother's imagination, then, involves returning to her. Even arguing against her means arguing as her. . . ." (43). Through the accumulation of Farmer's steady insights, we come to see that, in Updike's world, our parentage offers no way out because even our coping mechanisms are congenital.

Farmer likewise argues that perpetual symbiosis born of maternal ideation threatens to afflict Peter Caldwell in *The Centaur* (1963). Here, by reference to interviews with her son and to Adam Begley's biography, he draws a direct parallel to Linda Hoyer Updike. Cassie Caldwell is "the imagination that has dragged George and Peter into the countryside" (46). As a result, Peter, like John his maker, must develop an "egothism" that "allows him to imagine—or, more accurately, to project—a world for himself" (47). Updike's later counterpart in *Of the Farm* (1965), Joey Robinson, similarly struggles to exist for himself. He is cast in the shadow of a mythologizing mother who "lives almost entirely inside her own mind" (53) to such an extent that his "filial obligation forces him into that same strained space" (53). Farmer makes the case that the idealism Updike delineates in *Of the Farm* is not remotely one of "altruism" or "*joie de vivre*" as suggested by his *This I Believe* essay. Rather, the idealism in *Of the Farm* prompts a kind of "imaginative reconstruction" that forecloses upon Joey's ability to really see his first or second wives for the women they are. Except in such sporadic moments as he is able to

unite “the ideal and the real” (58), argues Farmer, he persists in mythologizing both Joan and Peggy, the sins of the mother becoming his own.

Yet going forward, Farmer finds more fruitful analysis in the sin of omission. Farmer’s section called “Collective Hallucination in the Adulterous Society” demonstrates how weak parental imagination, as opposed to strong parental imagination, is, in Updike’s work, also hazardous. *Couples* (1968) is the obvious point of departure here because, as Farmer points out, it is known to have explored the premise of “an entire generation of parents—in Updike’s fiction if not in real life—who are so lost in the labyrinths of their own sexual exploration that they can barely register the suffering of their offspring” (68). And while he does treat *Couples*, he is also intent on exploring less trodden ground. For this reason, his book eschews the Rabbit tetralogy entirely, and, with this particular section, turns first to *Marry Me* (1976) alongside a handful of short stories including “The Taste of Metal” (1967) and “Avec la Bebe-Sitter” (1966), both of which feature parents who, steeped in extramarital cathexis, jeopardize the wellbeing of their children. Their imaginations are “disordered,” their affections “misplaced and misdirected” (73). In Farmer’s view, they stage in miniature what he calls the “morality play” (75) of *Marry Me*. Through close textual analysis, he demonstrates how, for Jerry and Sally, the adulterous couple at the center of the novel, “accessing the ideal is illusory—but in the meantime the illusory holds” (80). By their intermittent abilities to deceive themselves, their affair continues as though it has staying power, while Jerry’s wife, Ruth, “retreats” (83) into memory to spare herself pain. Reality and “disenchantment” (87) intersperse with willful illusions so routinely in *Marry Me* that Farmer is easily able to bring his reader to see how the imagination, the idealizing mind, can be at least as sustaining as it is debilitating. *Marry Me* presents us with, in Farmer’s view, “a Kierkegaardian dialectical struggle” (86) that precludes a happily ever after ending, but that at least allows the novel to “leave romance behind” (87).

With regard to *Couples* (1968) and “The Hillies” (1969), though, Farmer is especially keen to delineate the failure of the self-interested human imagination to militate against pain and suffering, in particular Updike’s fiction of the 1960s. He notes, as many critics have, the parental neglect of children in *Couples*; however, but he attributes to “The Hillies,” also set in Tarbox, Massachusetts, a new distinction. Here, he detects a firm authorial indictment of the vainglorious egos and selfish, wishful thinking of the upper-middle-class inhabitants of Tarbox’s now famous “post-pill paradise.” Their young adult children have grown scornful,

vaguely menacing. By day and night, they occupy a higher ground, a hilltop slope above the town where they peer down upon the village, taking drugs and silently, even eerily, relinquishing the American dream.

Farmer's analysis here is both savvy and well placed. It posits an Updike reckoning overtly with moral culpability, offering easy segue to his section on the lustful imagination, where he treats a half-dozen short stories to explore the assortment of ways in which Updike depicts male lust, in Sartresian terms, as "a powerful imaginative force, *l'être-pour-soi* that performs its operations upon the inert *l'être-en-soi* of the female body" (108). His analysis of *The Scarlet Letter* trilogy, *A Month of Sundays* (1975), *Roger's Version* (1986), and *S.* (1988), continues in this vein, examining, for instance, the simultaneously predatory and mythologizing mind of Tom Marshfield in the first of the three. But here Farmer also locates an implicit authorial hope for greater sexual intimacy between men and women, as when Marshfield and his penultimate conquest, Ms. Prynne, achieve what Farmer calls "sexual mutuality": "There is not an active partner and a passive partner. Instead, both partners are simultaneously active and passive, simultaneously seeing and seen, simultaneously re-creating and recreated" (126).

The moment doesn't last, but it offers a glimmer of possibility for genuine connection, devoid of exploitation. Farmer locates another moment of authenticity at the end of *Roger's Version*, where, having traced the myriad instances of objectification and obsession that occur between Dale and Roger, he notes the occurrence of a kind of breakthrough moment between Roger and his wife, Esther, when she denies Roger his power of projection and behaves unpredictably by going to church just, she says, to annoy him. The novel's closing exchange helps Farmer build his argument that in Updike's worldview the tunnel of the imagination is extremely long, but sometimes there is a light at its end offering beneficent illumination. His view of Sarah in *S.* is that, similar to female characters in the previous two novels, she is "a woman forced into the imagination of a powerful man, only ultimately to resist that imagination by the force of her own material existence" (138). In fleeing to the Arizona ashram, Sarah makes a bid for individuation—freedom both from her husband and her therapist. Ironically, of course, she situates herself in the sights of the powerful imagination of the Arhat. Farmer takes account of other critics who have judged Sarah as too much a moneyed hypocrite of the patriarchy to be admired: when she finally does escape the male gaze and male control, she is able to do so because she has been stashing her divorce wealth offshore. But Farmer interprets this outcome as a triumph of female emancipation. Sarah has

not achieved the spiritual illumination she sought but, instead, the illumination Updike sometimes grants when the idealizing imagination is given the slip. Her future, quite possibly, is bright.

We see more female characters secure the rights to their own imaginations in Farmer's section on Female Power. In "Marching Through Boston" (1966), Joan Maple has recast herself as a civil rights activist as her husband Richard loses primacy in the new marital narrative. Farmer identifies this story and several others through the 1980s to suggest Updike's evolving intention to grant female subjectivity, however challenging, given his acknowledgement that "on this planet, the female body is the prime aesthetic object" (157). Nevertheless, Updike attempts varieties of psychosexual role reversal in the male/female power relations that we find in his female-centered short stories, and Farmer outlines these. But his analysis of *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) inevitably—and consciously—problematizes Updike's relation to female power and imagination. With close attention to the dynamics of all three witches and the invidious Darryl, he shows how power in this novel is in continual volley. Sometimes the women, the witches, hold it, but just as often, they throw it away. Farmer finds the formulation complicated: "Women are powerful, and it is their imagination that makes them powerful. Yet they need men for their imagination to function, even though these same men are often destroyed by the imaginative work they enable" (166).

Farmer's reader is left with what many of Updike's readers have often been left with: a disturbing uncertainty as to whether Updike's fiction stages female objectification for critique or merely replicates it. Farmer's final section, "The Remembering Imagination," edges toward resolving this uncertainty. It considers, among other things, the figuration of the female in the recollection of the male. Though Farmer doesn't use the term itself, his analysis identifies a kind of 'bewitching' aspect to some of Updike's female short-story characters when they are beheld from a temporal distance, an aspect ironically (if arguably) less pronounced in his novels about witchery. In both "In Football Season" (1962) and "First Wives and Trolley Cars" (1982), Farmer notes the manner in which the past becomes "enchanted" (176) when, for instance, the adult male protagonist recalls the scent of teenage girls in autumn, or when, in thinking back on his "discarded first wife" (179), a remarried husband finds she suddenly becomes a figure of "lightness" (178). As Farmer accurately observes, many a male Updike character "projects a past happiness to make sense of his present unhappiness" (178). And when he is "cut off from the magic of his adolescence" (176), his longing for a female of yesteryear produces feelings of loss, not lust.

This is a revealing distinction because it allows Farmer's analysis, so well sustained throughout the book, to remind us again of the foreboding female presence—or its equal and opposite absence. Femaleness is often larger than life in Updike's work owing, mainly, to the formidable prowess of the human imagination. And though well-rendered female subjectivity may, arguably, have eluded John Updike all of his writing life, notions of female perfection did not. Farmer's reference to Alf's doomed relationship with his mistress of infatuation, Genevieve, in *Memories of the Ford Administration* (1992), helps him make the simple yet cumulative point that "the ideal will eventually shatter on the hard ground of reality" (189). Perhaps a reasonable conclusion, then, is that Updike critiques female objectification because he critiques all objectification—sometimes on purpose, and sometimes despite himself.

Throughout *Imagination and Idealism in John Updike's Fiction*, Farmer's prose is clear and steady. Its tone is one of respect for Updike's work—but monographs rarely, if ever, disparage their subjects. Perhaps what is more noteworthy, at the level of style, is Farmer's respect for his reader. Some critics are writer's writers, some are reader's writers, and some are both. Farmer is both, but he also seems to be a kind of teacher's writer. His explanations throughout the book, in particular in its concluding section, presume a mixed readership comprised of multiple audiences, some highly knowledgeable about Updike's biography, his critics, and his works, and others who are initiates. He doesn't over-define terms at any point, but he doesn't smugly presume prior knowledge either. His final pages address Updike's relationship to realism and postmodernism. The discussion here is brief and immensely satisfying to those of us who have asked ourselves similar questions about Updike's narrative priorities, but also, presumably, to those readers now learning about literary movements and the positions of diverse American writers within those movements.

One more satisfying aspect of this book? Its well-chosen cover photo. Appropriately rose tinted, it features a middle-aged Updike whose expression is thoughtful and fraught, his index finger resting on his lower lip as he ponders a private concern, looking, for all the world, like any one of us, on a pensive afternoon, waiting on the imagination's next feat.