

# TWO JOHNS ON A/THE RUN: UPDIKE'S *RABBIT*, *RUN* AND MILTON'S *PARADISE LOST*

## *Dois Johns correm juntos: Rabbit, Run de Updike e Paradise Lost de Milton*

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A common criticism of John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* is that it is too graphic in relation to sex. In the last analysis, the characters seem peculiarly motivated by sex only, put through their paces in a clever, but mechanical, way. Such an opinion can only be the result of a cursory reading. It is true that the novel has a kind of stylistic and organizational brilliance. But it is not merely a display; it is invariably at the service of plot and character. Rabbit, like characters in other Updike novels, is experiencing a midlife crisis, and by reassessing his life, find it lacking. Updike focuses on middles: as he told Jane Howard in *Life* magazine,

There is a great deal to be said about almost anything. Everything can be as interesting as every other thing. An old milk carton is worth a rose. [...] The idea of a hero is aristocratic. Now either nobody is a hero or everyone is. I vote for everyone. My subject is the American Protestant small town middle class. I like middles. It is in middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules<sup>1</sup>.

There is hardly a page in the novel that does not have some reference to how light may be ambiguously dark, and vice versa. Bernard Schopen suggests, in

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<sup>1</sup> HOWARD, Jane. *Interview with Updike*, by Jane Howard. p. 7.

*Twentieth Century Literature*, that “Updike has said that the central theme of each of his novels is meant to be a moral dilemma, and that his books are intended as moral debates with the reader”<sup>2</sup>. In keeping with ambiguity, Schopen also noted, Updike “believes there are no solutions” to the moral dilemmas he presents and “specifically rejects the notion that literature should inculcate moral principles or precepts”<sup>3</sup>. Updike puts forward a “morally ambiguous” world, in which the characters thrive in some bad choices and in which they cannot be divided into either good or evil.

In *The Elements of John Updike*, Alice and Kenneth Hamilton wrote,

Updike directs us to those aspects of earth, which can speak to us of heaven and show us how to relate ourselves qualitatively to it. He gives us [...] specific scenes set in one particular place at one particular time [...] concrete situations confronting us from day to day. And he lets us see that, behind the shifting surface of the experiences life brings us, there is one constant question which each of us must answer for himself: Does the universe, blindly ruled by chance, run downward into death; or does it follow the commands of a Living God whose Will for it is life?<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the novel, Rabbit looks for the answer to this question, although he does not pose it to himself in religious terms. He is on a quest for meaning, and his story is in many ways the virtuoso performance of a full-bodied character in the grip of overwhelming moral and emotional entanglements.

Dean Doner suggests, in *John Updike: A Collection of Critical Essays*, that the novel is successful because Rabbit is symbolic of us all, and his running after meaning and purpose reflects our reticent twentieth-century view of this search. Doner summed the things Rabbit flees from as

an economy which traps a man into mean, petty, lying hucksterism; tenement-apartment housing which traps a man and his family into close, airless, nerveshattering “togetherness”; unimaginative, dirty cities which offer no release for the spirit; the ugly voices of advertising and television<sup>5</sup>.

As Rachael C. Burchard wrote in *Yea Sayings*, Rabbit’s story ends up showing that late twentieth-century subjects need “some undefined element which

<sup>2</sup> SCHOPEN, Bernard A. *Faith, morality, and the novels of John Updike*. p. 524.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 526.

<sup>4</sup> HAMILTON, Alice; HAMILTON, Kenneth. *The elements of John Updike*. p. 150.

<sup>5</sup> DONER, Dean. *Rabbit Angstrom's unseen world*. p. 30.

modern American culture – specifically twentieth-century Christianity, small Pennsylvania town version – has not provided”<sup>6</sup>. Rabbit’s “misdirected and uncharted search” is symbolic of the inner search many individuals must undergo when they realize that ([post]modern) culture does not satisfy their need for meaning, purpose, and connection. In *John Updike*, Susan Henning Uphauer proposed that “many critics have identified Rabbit’s running as a religious quest, a search for meaning beyond the natural world”<sup>7</sup>. Of all the characters in the novel, he is the only one who senses that there is meaning hidden somewhere in life; that “somewhere behind all this... there’s something that wants me to find it”<sup>8</sup>. On the same note, Doner claimed in “Rabbit Angstrom’s Unseen World” that “The road map – the way laid out for him by other people – always leads Rabbit further into the net” of confusion, staleness, despair, and sin<sup>9</sup>.

*The Cambridge Companion to John Updike* in its introductory essay by Stacey Olster, “A sort of helplessly 50’s guy”, puts across what can be called a list of intertextual references for the writings of John Updike, mentioning Updike’s major subject as being writing itself,

evidenced first by his reviews of other writers – past (for example, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Wharton, Mencken) as well as present (Bellou, Vonnegut, Le Guin, Tyler, Roth), foreign (Queneau, Calvino, Sôseki, Borges, Soyinka) as well as American – and apparent more and more in the intertextual allusiveness and metafictional devices that permeate his own novels themselves [...] In so doing, he has joined an awareness of contemporary theoretical developments to the modernist influence of those writers – Joyce, Proust, and Nabokov – he most often claims as his literary antecedents<sup>10</sup>.

Besides the abovementioned literary presences or influences on Updike’s writings, on his religious and philosophical background, John Updike, himself<sup>11</sup>, has also included two books that helped him on his career: *Fear and*

<sup>6</sup> BURCHARD, Rachael C. *John Updike: Yea Sayings*. p. 120.

<sup>7</sup> UPHAUSER, Suzanne Henning. *John Updike*. p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> UPHAUSER, Suzanne Henning. *John Updike*. p. 107.

<sup>9</sup> DONER, Dean. Rabbit Angstrom’s unseen world. p. 65. Other important critical assessments of Updike’s *Rabbit, Run* include: BLOOM, 1987; BORGMAN, 1977; BURHANS, 1973; DE BELLIS, 2000; DETWEILER, 1963, 1984; GREINER, 1984; HORVARTH, 1988; HUNT, 1980; MACNAUGHTON, 1982; NEARY, 1989; NEWMAN, 1988; PLATH, 1994; STUBBS, 1968; WALDMEIR, 1974; WRIGHT, 1991; and YERKES, 1999.

<sup>10</sup> OLSTER, Stacey (Org.). *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike*. p. 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> BOSWELL. *The Cambridge Companion to John Updike*. p. 43.

*Trembling* (1843) by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (1928) by the German theologian Karl Barth.

In reference to Updike's use and reading of all the books and writers listed by the essays of Stacey Osler and Marshall Boswell, not to mention all the other works "sewn" in his writings, it seems that the presence of John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* in Updike's writing, more specifically in the first novel of his Rabbit tetralogy – *Rabbit, Run* (1965) – has not been evidenced yet in the fabric of this text. Thus, the aim of this paper is to highlight the traces of or the threads belonging to Milton's epic in Updike's novel and how such traces or threads manifest themselves as a reflection of Milton's characters and their actions upon Updike's protagonist, Harry Angstrom. Angstrom's search for an outer paradise may be read in conjunction with Milton's paradise within. According to Milton, once we have lost the geographical paradise of Eden, we have to "forge" our "paradise within... happier far"<sup>12</sup>. Angstrom's failed search may derive from his inner blindness or ignorance: there is no possibility of constituting a paradise "out there", our only chance of living full lives is by laboring on an internal locus of moral choices and emotional coherence, which some have called conscience, and Milton called it a paradise within, especially if enlightened by grace and providence.

The search for an outer paradise is already anticipated in the first scenes of *Rabbit, Run*. Harry Angstrom or Rabbit starts the novel watching some kids play basketball, which demonstrates his outlook on movement by suggesting his inner necessity for motion. Still at this scene, Harry also plays, moves and, as the title forewarns, runs. After having stopped playing, the motion verb "running" appears twice, first simply as "running" and later on as "running uphill"<sup>13</sup>. Although a certain need of movement is expressed in this first passage, when Angstrom comes to his house, a static figure is announced. The motionless feeling of his house makes him sick, and the only thing that makes him alert again is a reference to the Greek aphorism "Know Thyself". The Greek saying is uttered on TV when Angstrom's wife, Janice, is watching a kid's program about proverbs. The host of the TV program states the necessity for one to constantly heed the words: "God doesn't want a tree to be a waterfall, or a flower to be a stone. God gives to each one of us a special talent"<sup>14</sup>. The mixture of a pagan dictum with God's lesson comes directly to Harry and Janice, and once both are Christians, they take in the words ascribed to God. Such words make the couple "unnaturally still"<sup>15</sup>, reflecting also the stillness of their presence at home.

<sup>12</sup> MILTON, John. *Paradise lost* (12. 587 [Book number followed by line number]).

<sup>13</sup> UPDIKE, John. *Rabbit, run*. p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

Unnatural stillness is also set up at the first scenes of *Paradise Lost* with the awakening of the fallen angels. Like Harry/Rabbit, Satan is unnaturally still in his new “home” and only later does he attempt for motion. Satan tries to cheer up the other fallen companions for a possible revenge. Right after this initial scene, a comparison between God’s acts and creatures is confused with pagan traditions, and although the Greek dictum is not mentioned directly, the oracle of Apollo “on the Delphian cliff”<sup>16</sup> – the place where the saying “Know thyself” was inscribed – is recalled in Book 1. The presence of pagan myths at the scene after the angels’ fall reveals the first expression of confusion in the fallen angel’s minds. This confusion can be referred to the necessity of one’s recognition of one’s own self in face of a loss. The beginning of Rabbit’s story may also refer to an initial confusion or loss in relation to his involvement with a kid’s basketball game, in relation to his stillness at home and in relation to the understanding of one’s own talent to set about, and later set out, on one’s own path and quest.

Rabbit could not cope with the stillness of his house, with the bitterness of his wife, and with his endangered (moral) life. Thus, he decided to run. By leaving his home, with the excuse to pick up his son in his mother-in-law’s house, he has the chance to run (away, from, into his “self”). But, “Outdoors it is growing dark and cool”<sup>17</sup>. Darkness outside can be compared to the feeling of distress that may be in control of his inner loss. Confusion seems to take place in his mind while walking on the streets and avenues close to his house. Rabbit’s confusion can be illustrated by the narrator’s recalling of Rabbit’s old desire of climbing the poles and hearing the wires sing. For him, hearing the wires sing could be compared to the act of listening to what people were saying: “Terrifying motionless whisper. It always tempted you to fall, to let the hard spikes in your palms go and feel the space on your back, feel it take your feet and ride up your spine as you fell”<sup>18</sup>. The temptation to fall, the image of a tree (of life), and a terrifying motionless whisper are clear traces of a fall and an inner loss, which may, among other things, be reflections from the major points of *Paradise Lost*.

On his way, searching for his outer paradise, Rabbit starts his first escape from the stillness of his life. Driving is a form of running. Running is another version of the fall. At Rabbit’s ongoing “fallen” state, darkness is with him. Darkness is simultaneously from without, because of the description of the external set he is in – “the rich earth seems to cast its darkness upward into the air”<sup>19</sup> – and darkness is from within, because Rabbit does

<sup>16</sup> MILTON, John. *Paradise lost* (1. 517).

<sup>17</sup> UPDIKE, John. *Rabbit, run*. p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

not know where to go, what to do, and neither what he is feeling. While driving, some words appear before his eyes, names of places, television commercials, simulacra of places and products. Among those, the narrator comments on the “Bird in hand, Paradise: his eyes keep going back to this dainty lettering of the map”<sup>20</sup>. Lettering, and not meaningful words, sets the stage of confusion and apparent contradiction. A “bird in hand” implies a condition of imprisonment, whereas a “paradise” apparently brings to mind beauty and completion on a happy site. These opposite states, suggested by the names of the places, are distant from his eyes that insist on looking back on them, and thus making them disappear into a run past.

Still running or being run by, Rabbit “drives through a thickening night. The road unravels with infuriating slowness... He realizes that the heat on his cheeks is anger”<sup>21</sup>. Slowness causes anger for Rabbit, who then “grinds his foot down as if to squash this snake of a road”<sup>22</sup>. Once again, Rabbit’s inner dark condition stimulates his outward behavior. The actions of grinding, squashing, and later on, swelling, apparently appeal to the wildness of Rabbit’s inner feelings, which come to be concluded in the following paragraphs, where “The animal in him swells its protest that he is going west. His mind stubbornly resists. The only way to get somewhere is to decide where you’re going and go”<sup>23</sup>. Rabbit suffers from the pressure of being lost, alone, and he is not able to cope with the view of life outside himself. Rabbit, without knowing an alternative way to go around or about the serpentine road, or better, without even knowing which choice to make, “fears his probe of light” that will probably “stir some beast or ghost”<sup>24</sup> from within himself. These passages call to mind Satan’s passages in Book 4 of *Paradise Lost*. At the beginning of Book 4, Satan gets infuriated by seeing the happy couple, Adam and Eve, in Paradise. A feeling for revenge ensues from the seeing of the happy pair, and in deep anger, Satan goes on “Through wood, through waste, o’er hill, o’er dale, his roam” (4. 38). Satan’s confusion about Adam and Eve in their happy seat erupts as a feeling of doubt, fear, and these inner troublesome feelings affect his outward acts. In the moment of his choice for tempting Eve for the first time, Satan undergoes his first metamorphosis, becoming a toad. As such,

He might taint  
The animal spirits, that from pure blood arise  
Like gentle breaths from rivers pure, thence rise,

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> UPDIKE, John. *Rabbit, run*. p. 32.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

At least distempered, discontented thoughts,  
 Vain hopes, vain aims, inordinate desires,  
 Blown up with high conceits engendering pride<sup>25</sup>.

Milton's metamorphosed Satan is also present in the metamorphosed Rabbit on his run. The animal discomfort that arises in Satan's acts from his inner necessity for power and change is reflected on Rabbit's own discomfort in dealing with his inner necessities. The apparent harmony of the world outside them, for Satan and Rabbit, brings forth their inner weakness presented as wild(er)ness. In addition, the metamorphosis of Harry into Rabbit also contributes to the comparison: a male character that becomes an animal-like figure may express wilderness within.

Rabbit's search reaches its first end when he finds his former coach's place to rest. Tothero, Rabbit's coach, represents for him one of his outside senses of completion, once Tothero has been a father figure for Rabbit since his school years. After running for long hours, Rabbit's body, in extreme exhaustion, had to stop and Tothero's home seemed the ideal place for that. In great need of some sleep, Rabbit gets immersed in his dreams; "His dreams are shallow, furtive things. [...] The skin of his eyelids shudders as his eyeballs turn, surveying the inner wall of vision"<sup>26</sup>. Dreaming, Rabbit is "hidden and safe" and "while he hides men are busy nailing the world down"<sup>27</sup>. Rabbit, trapped in the inner wall of vision and enclosed in his coach's home, dreams about furtive things whereas the world outside him goes on and on. The use of the adjective "furtive" announces Rabbit's cleverness in preparing to restart his outer acts, and so does the expression "the skin of his eyelids" relate to the shedding of a snake's skin. Thus, Milton's Satan, transformed into a snake, comes to mind once more: his temptation in Eve's dream runs by "Assaying [with] his devilish art to reach / The organs of her fancy, and with them forge / Illusions as he list, phantasms and dreams"<sup>28</sup>. The dream itself is an announcement of Satan's clever attempt for the expression of his outer actions. Eve's dream, with her eyes closed, suggesting her temporary blindness, is the first representation of the Fall of Man. In addition to that, the innocence of Eve is disturbed by her dream. Similar to Eve, the uneasiness that assails Rabbit is heightened further by his inner loss and posterior lack in need of fulfillment from the outside.

In his awakening, Rabbit meets Tothero, who invites him to dine. The dining scene is a special one, with bodily and sexual satisfaction,

<sup>25</sup> MILTON, John. *Paradise lost*. (4. 804-809).

<sup>26</sup> UPDIKE, John. *Rabbit, run*. p. 42-43.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>28</sup> MILTON, John. *Paradise lost*. (5. 603-606).

which is not easily understood by Rabbit. Tothero even insists on Rabbit's lack of understanding calling him an innocent person. In Rabbit's apparent innocence, doubts return to his mind by the same way he returns to the mundane world after his sleep/dream. On his return, Rabbit "had missed Janice's crowding presence, the kid and his shrill needs, his own walls. He had wondered what he was doing. But these new reflexes, shallowly scratched, are spent, and deeper instincts flood forward, telling him he is right"<sup>29</sup>. Rabbit's wrong-turns on his snake of a road drives him from the order of his former condition and closer to Satan's distorted memories "of what he was, what is, and what must be"<sup>30</sup> before his fallen state in *Paradise Lost*. The order experienced by Satan in Heaven is all gone and he suffers from the disorder of his state. His disordered mind cannot cope with seeing God's order represented by the new world, and in such state, Satan dismisses the possibility of redemption and gives his farewell to order and light. Like Satan, Rabbit feels the lack of "his own walls," is blinded by surrounding darkness, and turns to self-indulgence.

Whereas self-indulgence runs riot in Satan, Rabbit runs against self-indulgence. With Tothero, Rabbit meets with prostitutes and exercises total deliverance in pleasures of the flesh. Rabbit's former state had run its course. Ruth is Rabbit's choice for indulging in opiate sex, for the satiation of his manly desires. In her apartment, in the preliminary acts of their sexual intercourse, Rabbit "sees in the dark she is frightened" and that the air "tells him he must be motionless; for no reason he wants to laugh. Her fear and his inner knowledge are so incongruous"<sup>31</sup>. The expression of his inner desires (Rabbit wants to selfishly indulge in sex) through his outward behavior (the need to laugh and yet keep a state of motionlessness) goes against the harmony inspired by the act (sexual intercourse). Darkness, lack of reason, the full desire of the corporeal senses, and the wrong exercise of inner knowledge are scenes of Book 5 from *Paradise Lost*. In Book 5, after Eve's first temptation on her dream, Raphael's dialogue with Adam comes to reinforce the dangers of the external expression of the senses. Raphael starts his speech by saying that man does need food to satisfy "every lower faculty / Of sense [...] hear, see, smell, touch, taste"<sup>32</sup>, however, he concludes that man's "proper substance"<sup>33</sup> is reason<sup>34</sup>, and that through it, one may

<sup>29</sup> UPDIKE, John. *Rabbit, run*. p. 45.

<sup>30</sup> MILTON, John. *Paradise lost* (4.25).

<sup>31</sup> UPDIKE, John. *Rabbit, run*. p. 66.

<sup>32</sup> MILTON, John. *Paradise lost* (5. 410-411).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* (5. 493).

<sup>34</sup> We take reason to mean etymologically: Middle English *resoun*, from Anglo-French *raison*, from Latin *ration-*, *ratio*, computation, from *veri*, to calculate, akin to Gothic *rathjo*, account, explanation. In other words, reason simply as a capacity to relate to the outside world (*OED*).



receive more than the corporeal nourishment. This nourishing reason or “food for thought” should be devised in order to fight Satan and his satanic enterprise. But Rabbit, without the expression of his reason, unable to make sense of the possible choices in front of him, experiences darkness, and cannot evaluate the effects of Ruth’s new presence in his life. In such scenes, Rabbit’s inner light does not shine because of his outer darkness, and his mind seems to crave nourishment because the only part of him that is being fed is his body.

Still with Ruth, Rabbit is not able to see light and becomes invisible to the external world. In the passage where he looks at the people going to Church on Sunday, putting on “their best clothes [...] it seems a visual proof of an unseen world”<sup>35</sup>, a world to which Rabbit and Ruth do not belong. Rabbit also feels himself “hung in the middle of nowhere, and the thought hollows him, makes his heart tremble”<sup>36</sup>. Distant from the “order” of his former life, experiencing a new world, Rabbit is like Satan, and in his despair, “horror and doubt distract / His troubled thoughts, and from the bottom stir / The Hell within him, for within him Hell”<sup>37</sup>. Hell continues to assail Rabbit’s and Satan’s mind wherever they go, and the pit of darkness continually makes them blind.

But the state of Rabbit’s blindness and invisibility is interrupted in the novel by the character named Eccles. The appearance of Eccles<sup>38</sup> in Rabbit’s life resembles the sending of a mediator in one’s life to help one redeem one’s faults. Eccles, as a religious figure, appears in the beginning of his approach to Rabbit as the representative of light set to shine before Rabbit’s eyes. Like the presence of Raphael in *Paradise Lost*, Eccles stands for the visible aspect of the invisibility of God’s acts. The lesson of Eccles is very close to Milton’s lesson in *Paradise Lost*. Eccles, describing an experience from his childhood years, attempts to demonstrate to Rabbit what hell is like. “Hell as Jesus described it. As separation from God”<sup>39</sup>. Rabbit apparently understands Eccles’s message by saying: “Well then we’re all more or less in it”. However, Eccles’s final words, instead of agreeing with Rabbit, show him the serious problem of one’s lack of inner light as a separation from God, as well as from oneself, as it follows:

“I don’t think so. I don’t think so at all. I don’t think even the blackest atheist has an idea of what real separation will be. Outer

<sup>35</sup> UPDIKE, John. *Rabbit, run*. p. 77.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*

<sup>37</sup> MILTON, John. *Paradise lost* (4. 18-20).

<sup>38</sup> Eccles is a character whose name is short for Ecclesiastes, a book of wisdom literature in canonical Jewish and Christian Scripture.

<sup>39</sup> UPDIKE, John. *Rabbit, run*. p. 106.

darkness. What we live in you might call" – he looks at Harry and laughs – "inner darkness"<sup>40</sup>.

Thus, Milton's lesson, expressed on the lines of *Paradise Lost*, is also suggested in the words of Eccles to Harry/Rabbit, which are therefore a calling for the need to respect one's "inward reason" rather than one's "outward compulsion"<sup>41</sup>.

Eccles's lesson goes on trying to convince Harry/Rabbit to consider his former state and go back to his wife and former married life. Eccles's sensibility and sensitivity are exercised in his invitation to Harry/Rabbit for a game play. By playing golf, Eccles is able to reach the best expression of Harry's/Rabbit's inner self. Harry/Rabbit treats his life like a game and the best examples of this treatment is the comparison he makes between objects and people in his life. Harry/Rabbit, looking for the ball, "walks there, the bush damn somebody, his mother"<sup>42</sup>, and he goes on the opposite way of the bush, "his mother", "just the way it sits there in the center of everything"<sup>43</sup>. This image mirrors Eccles's harsh words to Harry/Rabbit, calling him a selfish person and demonstrating his inner weakness (in this case, fixation on the mother figure), afraid of his people and feeling himself in the center of everything. Still on the game playing, Eccles reinforces his words as an ultimate attempt to convince Harry/Rabbit, evoking the need of one to open one's heart for Grace to reach one's inner light, by saying: "Christianity isn't looking for a rainbow [...] We are trying to *serve* God, not to *be* God"<sup>44</sup>. At this moment, confusion grows again in Harry's/Rabbit's mind and Eccles uses such confusion to conclude his lesson:

"The truth is", Eccles tells him with womanish excitement, in a voice agonized by embarrassment, "you're monstrously selfish. You're a coward. You don't care about right or wrong; you worship nothing except your own worst instincts"<sup>45</sup>.

In these passages, Harry's/Rabbit's character resembles Satan's at their highest connection. Satan's selfishness and self-centered feelings for revenge and destruction of paradise are reflected on Eccles's words about Harry's/

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106-107.

<sup>41</sup> GUSS. *Enlightenment as process: Milton and Habermas*. p. 1158.

<sup>42</sup> UPDIKE, John. *Rabbit, run*. p. 110.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*

Rabbit's need of the power and acceptance of his surroundings (especially the acceptance of a mother figure who, apparently, disapproves of him). In Book 9, Satan's preparation of his temptation against man is an illustration of his confusion in the play with "Light above light, for thee alone,/ [...] the more I see/Pleasures about me, so much more I feel/Torment within me"<sup>46</sup>. The narrator of *Paradise Lost* announces that Satan turned "The eye of Eve to mark his play"<sup>47</sup>. It seems that the narrator's suggestion of Satan's play is a way of revealing the latter's corrupted core. In comparison with Harry's/Rabbit's situation, it turns out to be a rather perverse play with others, in which only their selves, Satan's and Harry's/Rabbit's, matter. Eccles feels Harry's/Rabbit's inner weakness and, using Satan's intent "to be God" instead of "serving Him", a scene of *Paradise Lost*, he admonishes Harry/Rabbit about his evil conduct.

However, Rabbit's way of leading his acts, of involving his external companions and, in a sense, of seducing them, also influences Eccles. The seduced Eccles delivers himself in the hands of Rabbit. According to Ruth, "all the world" loves Rabbit, who instantly agrees and appeals to his mystical side, as a person that gives faith to people. When visiting Janice's family house, Eccles exhibits his admiration to Rabbit, showing his strong seductive behavior towards the other(s). Eccles "tries to imagine Harry four years ago, and gets an attractive picture: tall, fair, famous in his school days, clever enough – a son of the morning"<sup>48</sup>. These two characteristics applied to Rabbit can be perceived in Milton's Satan. First, Rabbit and Satan have the power of allurement through their words and acts. Second, the description Eccles makes of Rabbit is like the depiction of Satan before the fall, who, "thence in heaven called Satan"<sup>49</sup>, originally Lucifer, "bringer of light" in *Paradise Lost*, and "son of the morning"<sup>50</sup> in the Bible. Rabbit and Satan become one in Eccles's description<sup>51</sup>.

Another passage of the novel that brings Rabbit closer to Milton's Satan has Janice, alongside with Ruth, as supporting female characters. In the passage that Janice is ready to deliver their baby, Rabbit suffers again from confusion and doubt. Rabbit's inner confusion and doubt take expression as lust, which springs from his mind. Rabbit annoys Ruth up to the point of her

<sup>46</sup> MILTON, John. *Paradise lost* (4. 804-809).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* (9. 528).

<sup>48</sup> UPDIKE, John. *Rabbit, run*. p. 127.

<sup>49</sup> MILTON, John. *Paradise lost* (1 .82).

<sup>50</sup> King James Bible, Isaiah 14:12.

<sup>51</sup> It is important to mention that many other passages in *Rabbit, Run* can be worked out on the matter of Harry's selfishness and seduction of others. However, for the sake of this comparative attempt, the passages analyzed are the ones more related to the objective of this paper, which is more focused on the presence of Milton's epic in Rabbit's story.

deliverance<sup>52</sup>; a rather awkward moment when she accepts to perform oral sex on him. At the hospital, the recollection of oral sex bothers Rabbit, who compares it to sin, “his sin, a conglomerate of flight, cruelty, obscenity, and conceit; a black clot embodied in the entrails of birth”<sup>53</sup>. In such confusion, Rabbit fears for the death of his baby to come, “he does not expect the fruit of Janice’s pain to make a very human noise. His idea grows, that it will be a monster, a monster of his making”<sup>54</sup>. Sin and fear are products of Rabbit’s making and are easily associated with Satan’s Sin and Death. In Book 2 of *Paradise Lost*, Sin appears out of Satan’s head, “she” sprung “and for a sign/Portentous”<sup>55</sup> was held. From Satan and Sin’s offspring comes a shape, like a monster, Death. Rabbit’s confusion can be associated with his sin as a “sign/Portentous”, a “sign that excites wonder and amazement before that which is beautiful, but also possibly monstrous, since portentous is an adjective that can be used to describe one’s awe before either magnificence or terrible things”<sup>56</sup>. For Rabbit’s confusion, Sin and Death form a conglomerate of flight, cruelty, obscenity, and conceit, which embody his panic and pain.

Rabbit’s painful moment is extended to after the birth of his daughter. Although he is back to his former life after the girl’s birth, he still experiences doubt and fear. The apparent harmony after the birth is replaced by the motionless aspect of his life. In the passage that Harry puts his son in his crib to sleep, the quietness of his home drives him to fear. Harry walks around the apartment as if he continued on his search, but finds nothing. Instead, he finds himself lost, as below:

He lies in bed, diagonally, so his feet do not hang over, and fights the tipping sensation inside him. Like an unsteered boat, he keeps scraping against the same rocks: his mother’s ugly behavior, his father’s gaze of desertion, Ruth’s silence the last time he saw her, his mother’s oppressive not saying a word, what ails her? He rolls over on his stomach and seems to look down into a bottomless sea, down and down, to where crusty crags gesture amid blind lead<sup>57</sup>.

The return to his former life does not fulfill Harry’s quest for meaning and sense in life. On the contrary, he again experiences loss and the sensation

<sup>52</sup> We here play with the word deliverance. Whereas Janice is delivering her and Rabbit’s baby, Ruth is delivering to Rabbit a kind of rescue.

<sup>53</sup> UPDIKE, John. *Rabbit, run*. p. 164.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>55</sup> MILTON, John. *Paradise lost* (2. 758-761).

<sup>56</sup> RAPAPORT. *Milton and the Postmodern*. p. 26.

<sup>57</sup> UPDIKE, John. *Rabbit, run*. p. 192.

of falling. The passage above can be considered similar to Satan's return to Hell after the Fall of Man. Satan's return is supposed to be a triumph, but turns out to be the same experience of loss and fall and now, in Hell

His visage drawn he felt to sharp and spare,  
His arms clung to his ribs, his legs entwining  
Each other, till, supplanted on his belly prone,  
Reluctant, but in vain; a greater power  
Now ruled him<sup>58</sup>.

Rabbit's return to his former life can be seen as a return to his hell, where he, like Satan, is ruled by the other, "a great power". In both cases, "a great power" is symbolized by "Order", be it from God or from the surroundings. Another point that needs to be highlighted in these two citations is that Rabbit, like Satan, takes a serpent form, rolling over their belly looking down helplessly in vain at their doom.

Rabbit's doom, back in his hell, is to be enclosed in his walls where his fears arouse by "the closed feeling of it, the feeling of being closed in"<sup>59</sup>. Closed in a serpent's form, in hell, Rabbit finds himself in a place or sense in which his inner light is all darkness. Again in bed he feels the force of a type of net pressing on him. "He tries praying to relax him, but it doesn't do it. There's no connection. He opens his eyes to look at the ceiling and the darkness is mottled with an unsteady network of veins like the net of yellow and blue that mottled the skin of his baby"<sup>60</sup>. Rabbit's distance from God, once he has no connection with Him through his prayers, and the sense of being trapped in a net, create the final scenes of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Such scenes display Satan's character ending up again in Hell, distant from the order experienced in Heaven and suffering the eternal punishment in snake form.

But Rabbit, unlike Satan, permits himself to try again. Either from the need to be punished or from the restlessness after suffering, or both, Rabbit's inner necessity for motion is exercised in his new run. From his thoughtless attempt, he insists on having sex with his sore wife, and for not having his aspiration fulfilled, Rabbit runs away. Death is the consequence of another of his reckless acts. Rabbit's baby daughter passes away, drowned by the negligent presence of a drunken mother, and because of the darkness of his absence. Back to Milton, although the devilish machine of

<sup>58</sup> MILTON, John. *Paradise lost* (10. 511-516).

<sup>59</sup> UPDIKE, John. *Rabbit, run*. p. 225.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

Satan is brought to its apparent end in punishment in *Paradise Lost*, Satan's deceptions go on causing suffering to God's creation. In the epic poem, "the hellish pair"<sup>61</sup>, Sin and Death, leaves the view open and enmeshes their presence in the evil aspects of life. Back to the novel, Rabbit runs against his life, which highlights the evil presences of sin and death once again around him. In other words, Rabbit runs against life and sin brings about the death of his baby. After the baby's burial, another escape takes place in Rabbit's story. Rabbit searches for his inner necessities in Ruth and finds instead Ruth calling him "Mr. Death"<sup>62</sup>. Ruth is also Rabbit's victim, because she was about to abort for the fear of not having Rabbit close to her. She reinforces her words saying to him: "You just wander around with the kiss of death"<sup>63</sup>. The idea of wandering runs parallel to Rabbit's eternal running short of life: he seems to incorporate both Satan and Death.

Having no (sexual or moral) fulfillment in Ruth, after all his fears and their losses, Rabbit leaves her house and runs once more. Outside, he looks for some strength in the light of the church, which is unlit, and darkness takes control of him. "Afraid, really afraid, he remembers" life and realizes that

Goodness lies inside, there is nothing outside, those things he was trying to balance have no weight. He feels his inside as very real suddenly, a pure blank space in the middle of a dense net. I don't know, he kept telling Ruth; he doesn't know, what to do, where to go, what will happen, the thought that he doesn't know seems to make him infinitely small and impossible to capture. Its smallness fills him like a vastness<sup>64</sup>.

With the words above, Rabbit finally seems to have come to terms with the vastness of his inner self, for he kept trying to accomplish his paradise from the outside. In Milton's lesson, paradise lies inside, and although Rabbit "doesn't know, what to do, where to go, what will happen", he apparently achieves his greatness by understanding his smallness, and as such he may run, in a "solitary way"<sup>65</sup>, not to find his outward fulfillment, but instead to see "Light out of darkness"<sup>66</sup>. The end of *Rabbit, Run* and the whole of *Paradise Lost* seem to delve into intractable problems. The first one may cause disgust in some readers in the overt and displaced references to sex, and the

<sup>61</sup> MILTON, John. *Paradise lost* (10. 585).

<sup>62</sup> UPDIKE, John. *Rabbit, run*. p. 251.

<sup>63</sup> *Id.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>65</sup> MILTON, John. *Paradise lost* (12. 649).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* (12. 473).

latter may have disgusted some readers out of misplaced conceptions about the author's puritanical and harsh theodicy. By and large, Updike and Milton seem to have run some dis-gusting<sup>67</sup> ideas by their readership.

If the universe, blindly ruled by chance, runs downward into death, or if the universe follows the command of a Living God whose Will for it is life, is for each and every reader to decide. Again, if the two Johns were assessed in flight (as in Updike's critics' forgetting to include Milton on the list of intertextual allusions or metafictional devices), they nevertheless met somewhere, somehow. But we have not run our luck as informed readers. After all, there are books and there is literature. If we decide to read *Rabbit, Run* as literature, the path proposed and discussed in this article has been a reading experience that makes available to readers traces of an author (Milton) and threads of a text (*Paradise Lost*) that surely belong to the novel's moral/religious dimensions. The book of literature that *Rabbit, Run* is, a complex net of citation, influence, and intertextual allusiveness, could not do without a hind look by the readers who see Updike reading Milton, or Milton being written by Updike, or both simultaneously.

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to highlight the traces of Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, in Updike's novel, *Rabbit, Run*, and how such traces manifest themselves as a reflection of Milton's characters and their actions upon Updike's protagonist, Harry Angstrom. Under this perspective, Angstrom's search may be read in conjunction with Milton's paradise within.

Keywords: *John Milton; John Updike; paradise.*

### RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é trazer à luz os traços do poema épico de John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, no romance de John Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, e demonstrar como tais traços se manifestam como uma reflexão dos personagens miltonianos, bem como de suas ações, sobre o protagonista de Updike, Harry Angstrom. Nessa reflexão, a procura de Angstrom pode ser lida em conjunção com o paraíso interior de Milton.

Palavras-chave: *John Milton; John Updike; paraíso.*

<sup>67</sup> Akin to Latin *gustare* to taste, and therefore, etymologically linked to the verb to choose. In short, both authors present in their texts very hard choices (*OED*).

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