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Book Review: Self-Consciousness

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SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

John Updike
Alfred Knopf, 1989

By Charles Fanning

Here is a book of six "memoirs" that register the "self-consciousness" of an extraordinary man of letters, John Updike, written, as he declares, to discourage anyone else from taking "my life, my lode of ore and heap of memories, from me." The result is much more than a simple claim of autobiographical ownership. Two meanings of Updike's title *Self-Consciousness* are here, both embarrassment with self and meditation upon self, and they leaven each other. Childhood and adolescent embarrassed apprehension of one's self was, Updike tells us, exacerbated for him by the afflictions of psoriasis and stuttering. To each of these he gives a chapter full of disarming revelations of personal discomfort. But in each case the point is the movement to the second definition of self-consciousness. In ways detailed convincingly and with wit, Updike sees both afflictions as having encouraged his artistic aspiration. "Only psoriasis could have taken a very average little boy, and furthermore a boy who loved the average, the daily, the safely hidden, and made him into a prolific, adaptable, ruthless-enough writer." And again: "though it still crops up, this anxious guilty blockage in the throat, I have managed to maneuver several millions of words around it."

Illuminating here is Updike's clear sense of the scope and ambition of his own attempt in fiction. He answers eloquently the two most persistent negative criticisms of his work. To those who have called his style self-indulgent, he declares: "My own style seemed to me a groping and elemental attempt to approximate the complexity of envisioned phenomena and it surprised me to have it called luxuriant and self-indulgent; self-indulgent, surely, is exactly what it wasn't — *other-indulgent*, rather. My models were the

styles of Proust and Henry Green as I read them (one in translation): styles of tender exploration that tried to wrap themselves around the things, the tints and voices and perfumes, of the apprehended real." To those who have complained that he had little or nothing to say, he answers with a crucial apologia: "I, who seemed to myself full of things to say, who had all of Shillington to say, Shillington and Pennsylvania and the whole mass of middling, hidden, troubled America to say, and who had seen and heard things in my two childhood homes, as my parents' giant faces revolved and spoke, achieving utterance under some terrible pressure of American disappointment, that would take a lifetime to sort out, particularize, and extol with the proper dark beauty." And indeed, one of the best things about these memoirs is the honest, touching portraits of Updike's parents that emerge. Earlier, he says more about his sense of his literary calling: "I saw myself as a literary spy within average, public school, supermarket America. It was there I felt comfortable; it was there that I felt the real news was."

Though both contain gems of self and social scrutiny, two of the six sections rankle. Updike's rationale "On Not Being a Dove" during the Vietnam War seems shallow, specious, out of balance with the still festering wounds of that troubled time. And his "Letter to My Grandsons" lapses into windy genealogy, understandable surely, for this is a real letter and in it he digs out and orders matters of family history worth passing on. But the whole is a bit beyond the interest of a reader from outside the Updike family. Still and all, no Updike page is without at least one sentence that impresses stylistically or shows us something we're better off knowing about. For example, in the genealogy chapter, there is his wonder-

ful eye for defining detail, nailed down in a line of authoritative, accurate adjectives when he observes on his father's ancestral street in Trenton, New Jersey, two men who "plodded into the wind, past the shreds of yesterday's snowstorm, in the same stooped style, a rachitic, nicotinic style familiar to me from my years around Reading — the industrial workingman's style, simultaneously bleary, patient, bitter, stunted, and cocky." And in the "Dove" chapter, he contemplates his own "anti-bohemian gesture" of regular church attendance with winning self-deprecation: "Thus blended among my neighbors, I felt out of harm's way. The basic dread that all religion offers to assuage drove me there, but there was a wider benefit in the distance churchgoing put between me and the stereotypical writer, my disenchanting Manhattan counterpart."

The last section combines a beautifully evoked return to Shillington and the farmhouse of Updike's now ailing mother with meditations "On Being a Self Forever." Naturally enough, Updike's religious sense turns out to be connected to his artist's apprehension of the world. He recalls the basement Sunday School of his youth, and the sense he felt there of God's having extended "a Yes, a blessing, and I accepted that blessing, offering in return only a nickel a week and my art, my poor little art." He continues, and spells out the connection: "Imitation is praise. Description expresses love. I early arrived at these self-justifying inklings. Having accepted that old Shillington blessing, I have felt free to describe life as accurately as I could, with especial attention to human erosions and betrayals. What small faith I have has given me what artistic courage I have. My theory was that God already knows everything and cannot be shocked. And only truth is useful.

BOOK REVIEW (continued)

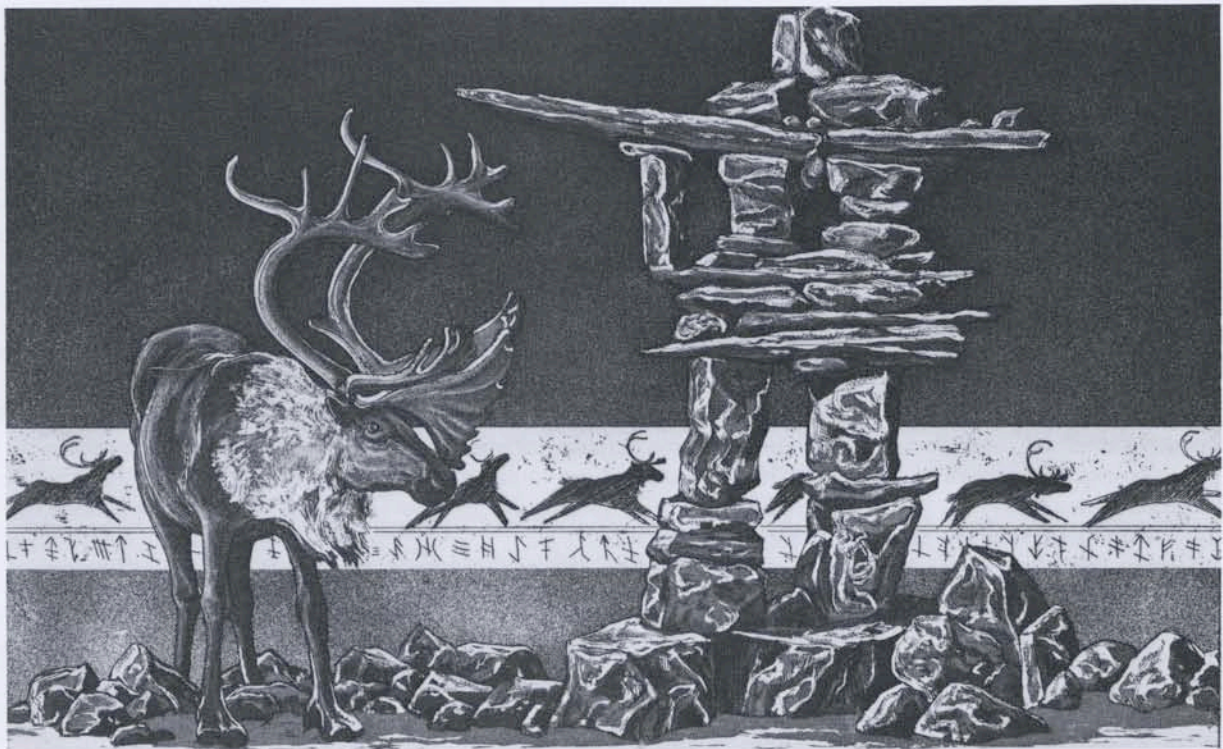
Only truth can be built upon.”

Happiness, concludes Updike, “is best seen out of the corner of the eye,” and he provides two positive images from his lifetime of “selves” to end on: as a cocky Harvard junior sitting down in a lecture hall at the start of a course, and “the other morning” walking back from his mailbox, when “I experienced happiness so sharply I tried to factor it into its components.” Here are two components from this last section: “Existence itself does not feel horrible; it feels like an ecstasy, rather, which we only have to be still to experience. Habit and accustomness have painted over pure gold with a dull paint that can, however, be scratched away, to reveal the shining underbase.” And again: “the self who looked up into the empyrean of print from that dusty farm in Pennsylvania with its outhouse and coal-oil stove is not so remote from me that I can still think it anything less than wonderful to have become a writer.”

This is a man blessed (literally, as he sees it) with talent, opportunity, and an enviably even temperament. He has used his gifts wisely, that’s clear. But what saves this book from complacency is Updike’s consciousness throughout of having stayed “out of harm’s way.” That phrase, a favorite of his grandfather’s, runs through the book as the leitmotif of Updike’s self-portrait of the artist as a cautious observer from outside the fray. He sees himself as having remained like the little boy he was, enjoying “the sensation of shelter, of being out of the rain, but *just* out,” as when he would crouch behind the porch wicker furniture during rainstorms, “irresponsible, safe, and witnessing.” As he puts it on the book’s last page, he feels “a touch of disdain” at having been “my own life’s careful manager and promoter. . . . I have steered my unique little craft carefully, at the same time doubting that carefulness is the most sublime virtue. He that gains his life shall lose it.” Well, maybe

so. And yet, had Updike’s life and art exhibited the headlong turbulence, callousness, and risk of a Tolstoy or even a Faulkner, he could not have brought us the “news” of the heart of the country, of the American middle, as he has done so consistently and well for so many years. But it seems clear from the witty and sane consciousness of self herein displayed that he knows this too.

For John Updike truly is what that overworked phrase conveys — a national treasure. He is a thoroughly American writer whose art affirms by bearing witness to ordinary life. Not surprisingly, his memoir of *Self-Consciousness* has a lot in common with Updike’s own best fiction. This is a decent man’s book of quotidian hours — transformed by the artist’s dazzling gift of tongues. The result is homely earnestness raised to another power by sheer talent and loving attention to craft. ■



The wise caribou said to the stoneman, “You can fool some of the caribou all of the time, and all of the caribou some of the time . . . but you can’t fool all of the caribou all of the time!”

Larry Vienneau