

JOHN UPDIKE: VISUAL BIAS AND DESPAIR

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CHAPTER I

It is the aim of this thesis to analyze John Updike's sense of visual acuity. As critics who preface the paperback editions of his novels attest, his prose "has the sharpness of a surgeon's scalpel, the precision of a fine watch and focuses on the commonplace like the eye of an X-ray machine." He possesses a "clarity that leaves his reader with a sense of inevitable rightness," a "painter's eye for form, line, and color." "His eye is sharp," he "sees with the eye of a bird," he is "possessor of the keenest eye."

His style, because of this unusual power to see, seems in many respects to have taken precedence over his content, insofar as there is no inherent importance in the events he deals with and the world he describes. The most important fact of his art is that he has chosen to deal with a world familiar to the majority of us, at least more familiar than most literary worlds. He does not depend upon the reality of extraordinary events, as does Hemingway, or upon a pervasive psychological reality, as does Faulkner, to impart the major impact of his perceptions to the reader. In a very real way, he can be said to impart his perceptions alone. It is when he becomes conscious of implications, when he employs metaphor or symbol, or attempts to convey emotion directly, that he is least successful. His successful perceptions in and of themselves

make the common tantalizingly intimate and, without imparting to it supernaturally artistic qualities, make it more real.

While confining himself to a simple and knowable universe, or at least a universe that partakes to a great extent of the clichés of North American life, he also confines himself to an experience that, although not shared by everybody, can also be said to be a vital part of the character of the age. By his contemporaneous participation in a sort of vie moyenne, he also deals to a great extent in his themes and in his philosophy with that symptom of the modern illness that we call alienation. His heroes are absurd, and involved in a world of despair and fear of the void, of a world of facts in which God appears dead. In a world in which perception of reality has taken precedence, it would appear that symbol and metaphor can no longer exist. Still, there are curious traces of an attachment to symbol and metaphor in this author, and this paper will attempt to analyze the tension produced between the author's need to symbolize and the ability to perceive things as they are. He is caught, in a fashion, between the present and the past.

The philosophy of "things-as-they-are" is that anti-systematic non-philosophy that we call Existentialism, and which has had such a large degree of influence upon the art of our age as well as upon philosophy per se. As a non-systematic philosophy, it is best expressed through art, for it arose to

deal with the problem of rationalism that could no longer function in a world that was rapidly becoming "irrational", a world that could no longer be perceived successfully by reason alone. That Updike is familiar with Existentialism should be evident in the prefaces to his novels, his quotations from Sartre and Bergson, and his frequent references to Kierkegaard. It is here that an understanding of the essence of Existentialism will be of value to the reader.

The statement that Existentialism arose as a solution to the problems caused by systematic, linear, rational philosophy is an important one. Western philosophy, from Plato through Kant, can be said to be characterized by the construction of systems or philosophical models in and for themselves. The problem, that of deciding which came first--the reality or the corresponding Idea--can become as perplexing as attempting to decide whether the chicken came before the egg or vice versa. All the same, it must be held in mind that science itself is a Western phenomenon, that the Greeks began the tradition of doing while the Eastern world can be characterized, with due caution, as largely a world of subjective being. It is with Plato that rational consciousness becomes a differentiated psychic function, "lifted fully out of the primeval waters of the unconscious."¹ Thus science, the defining property of this new Homo faber or technological man, is made possible. Man can stand apart from what is and manipulate it for his own ends.²

This cleavage between reason and the irrational, although providing for the changing of the face of the Western world, has been a burden for the West to carry as well. It is not until the arrival of modern culture as we know it, defined by technology and the world of objects, that this dualism has made itself felt in its most violent form. Plato's reason still partakes of a world of religious passion. However, it was to take centuries of technological progress before Plato's doctrine, that the "really real" objects of the universe are universals or ideal Ideas, and particular things are real only insofar as they participate in the eternal universals, was to become painfully manifest. It would be very difficult to function humanly in a world of an ever-increasing quantity of objects as long as one transferred the weight of emphasis from sensory reality to a supersensible reality, paying more attention to the ideal abstraction than to its object.³

The age of metaphysical poetry, that attempted to reconcile a new world of objects with subjective religious feeling, also saw what Mr. Barrett calls the climax of the consequences of this duality in a rather cohesive unit of time that extends from Descartes to Kant. He writes,

The first, the immediately obvious characteristic of this tendency is that through it philosophy has experienced an extraordinary widening and enrichment of data. From Descartes to Kant, man was taken fundamentally as a perceiving-thinking animal, a mechanical body plus a conscious soul. This was the traditional inheritance from the

Greeks, who had defined man as essentially the rational animal, but a tradition now running thin, having lost all its original overtones from Greek religion, poetry and society. 4

Philosophy began to separate itself from Christian religion as well. In the 17th Century the "rational" or conscious aspects of the soul fall within the framework of a universe whose characteristics can best be defined by Newtonian physics, with the human situation defined correspondingly by its relationship to an inert and material universe. Man thus becomes the "epistemological animal." Mr. Barrett continues his explanation of this phenomenon:

But bit by bit the developments of history complicate this simple picture: new sources of information, new regions of experience and feeling, enrich and complicate the philosopher's view of the human situation. Reason itself can no longer be looked upon as the simple faculty of a soul or mind; viewed concretely, it shows itself as a complicated structure evolved by culture and history, as, in the sphere of morals, the complexity of the superego takes the place of the older simple "moral sense." Now, up to a certain point the enrichment of data takes place within the old framework, each detail filling in an empty space on a canvas that is completely sketched out; but a threshold is crossed, the accumulation of detail suddenly effects a transformation of the whole, and a new form either appears or must be sought. The radical extension of data demands a new point of view for generalization. 5

The solution, Mr. Barrett suggests, lay in what he calls "The Search for the Concrete." The realm of abstraction, of empirical data, would have to give way to the "thing in itself."

The idealist philosophers who followed Kant tried to heal the breach caused by this rationalism, and sought to return man's integrity by a fusion of the subjective and objective elements of his nature. The greatest of these healers, Hegel, nonetheless employed "an imperialism of reason so audacious that it eventually brought Existentialism into being as a necessary corrective."⁶ Seeing systematic reason as encompassing all of human experience, Hegel did little to solve the problem. At least in his intentions, however, he seems to have been conscious of a need to return to subjective experience, in spite of his misguided attempts to enclose it with logic.

It was Kierkegaard who finally led philosophy out of the stifling confines of reason. As a believing Christian, he saw faith as more vitally important, and saw as well that the non-systematized individual implies by nature a creature in an open-ended and striving motion. This open-endedness, this concept of the entity, through a re-fusing of the conscious mind with unconscious intuitive faith, gave man back the freedom that he had lost to systematization. This integral individualism took on its fullest implications when Nietzsche pronounced the death of God, and challenged man to create his own values according to that intuition instead of his intellect. The freedom was awesome, and so was the responsibility. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are the direct ancestors of modern Existentialism, best exemplified by Sartre and Camus. This is the non-syste-

matic philosophy which tries to adjust man to his new-found freedom, a freedom that is very much a part of a world of objects that testify to man's ability to do. Existentialism has nonetheless been largely characterized by a confusion somewhat implicit in that world of objects, and concerns itself to a considerable degree with the nausea and anxiety brought on by the inability to act in the face of an infinite variety of choices, produced by "the conflict of intention and reality."⁷ In a very real way, the problem of living in a world beyond systems, in a world of "things in themselves," can be seen to be a problem of perception of those things. It seems that, as a shift in emphasis in man's total sensory apparatus has led to the creation of a world of physical objects, so too will the limitation of the total organism to one sense recreate those problems, and contribute in its own way to divisive alienation and its accompanying anxiety. As Camus himself suggested in his Myth of Sisyphus, "Belief in the absurd is tantamount to substituting the quantity of experiences for the quality."⁸ The absurd, or the feeling of disjunction or "apartness," that is a common feature of Updike's characters, seems to go hand in hand with the world of acute visual perception, or "quantification," that they inhabit. It is a world of detail, of myriads of objects, and, at times, of mathematical precision. It appears that John Updike is conscious of the

problems created by his own perception, particularly insofar as he tries to compensate for the imbalance caused by intellect divorced from intuition. This paper will show how, and with what degree of success, he does so.

CHAPTER II

John Updike's four major novels deal not only with the mind-body dualism that has previously been outlined in the first chapter, but develop the theme of ensuing alienation and disjointedness from a point of mere thematic exposition to a point of considerable complexity. Of the four novels to be dealt with in this thesis -- The Poorhouse Fair, The Centaur, Rabbit, Run and Couples -- it is the first that serves as a basic exposition of the nature and consequences of the conflict between man's mind and his heart. As a first novel it is a bit primitive and lacking in dimension, and it has been said of it that "no doubt what Updike has to say in that book could have been as effectively conveyed in a philosophical essay."¹ The author himself, by revealing his argument without disguise, presents us with the ideal platform from which to see his later works. Its theme, of intuitive beings in conflict with an external rational order, is characteristically existential. The Poorhouse Fair is a dim view of the world that technology has created.

The novel is set in the future, in 1975 or 1980 or 1984 by various accounts, in a world that is increasingly becoming dominated by science and technology, and so in a real sense the novel has an affinity with the anti-Utopian warnings of Orwell and Huxley. The inhabitants of the poorhouse are wards

of the State, and Updike, concerned with their "objectification," continues in the anti-Utopian tradition. His argument is quite simple, and extends throughout the book in plot, symbol and style. While he does not present a working solution per se, his incipient pessimism is modified and buffered by thematic evidences of the polar opposite of that depersonalizing objectification: subjective faith. This is also the manner of the novels that follow, in which no working solution is given, but one is always implied.

To begin the discussion of The Poorhouse Fair it will be appropriate to outline the author's presentation, in dialectic form, of this dehumanizing linear rationalism, of the negative influences of science and technology, and of the resultant alienated man and his hypothetical integrated counterpart. The novel's protagonist, if the term can be used in a book in which no one succeeds in a solution of the conflict and in which characterization itself is at a minimum, is named Stephen Conner. Conner, the administrator of the Poorhouse is, in the Cartesian sense, a linear, rational thinker, with a scientific approach to an irrational world. The novel opens immediately with the inmate Hook's discovery of evidence of Conner's attempts to order that world:

Onto the left arm of the chair that was customarily his in the row that lined the men's porch the authorities had fixed a metal tab, perhaps one inch by two, bearing MR, printed, plus, in ink, his latter name. 2

This Linnaean system of classification, then, is presented directly at odds with the realities of life, in which the chair was chosen by its convenience to the user, in which there was no right or "wrong chair." Confusion of ownership ensues, and sets the tone for the conflict in the book: that between the ideal and the real, between the what-should-be and the what-is, between the artificial order of "soybean plastics" and the natural and organic order of personal craftsmanship-- and between the man who is a part of the wholeness of life and the man who is apart from it. The terms of the argument might have the ring of the cliché, but the sources of the argument are certainly real.

Conner is depicted as the epitome of the scientific idealist, both in what he does, and in his detachment from the human community that is the unlikely source for the workings of his empirical philosophy. He never really acts in the world, though, as our first introduction to his character illustrates:

Conner's office was approached by four flights of narrowing stairs, troublesome for these old people. Accordingly few came to see him. He intended in time to change this; it was among the duties of the prefect, as he conceived the post, to be accessible. 3

He changes nothing, however, and remains isolated in the cupola of the poorhouse, a hardly subtle analog to the ivory tower. Also, significantly, Conner "thought of no one as God."⁴ It was thinking itself, as has been demonstrated, that helped to

pronounce the death of a God beyond reason. He is, rather, a humanist with a vision for the future of man, yet ironically has only disdain for the many and individual "unsympathetic people" of the present to whom his position makes him superior. His "vision," if it is in the tradition of Utopian visions, bears looking into, if only for the restatement of a familiar theme. It is the point of departure for that which the author offers as a challenge, if not a solution, to that anxiety-producing rational vision.

To possess a vision of the glorious human future, Conner is obliged to ignore the miseries of the human beings around him. His utopianism, indeed, tends at times to eugenics, evidenced by such a statement as, "Don't you think we could dispense with Lucas? He learns more than he tells, and physically, you must admit, he's a monstrous error."⁵ The hospital in the west wing is cold and, in the horror story tradition, as anti-human as it can be while still trying to "better" man's lot. Indeed, its horror lies in good part in its intended beneficence. As Conner himself is a man of the best of intentions, his own ideals create a horror out of their very good will, and provide a thematic counterpart to the imperfection that is a part of real human life.

"Everything, potentially, is a science, is it not?"⁶ says Conner, who also proposes, in his positivist fashion, a "scientific state" in which negative features, like poverty,

are abolished. So, he also fittingly hopes for perfect weather on the day of the annual poorhouse crafts fair. He is truly a visionary as he looks up at a lone airplane set in relief against the sky's vacuous "breadth of blue" of "airless cold." He thinks, simultaneously, as the author paraphrases it, "The weather of this one day would be, he felt, a judgment on his work,"⁷ and that any foul weather would be a blotch on his rationalist ego. It is, oddly, this very way of looking that has detached and isolated him from others, made his "command" only "figurative," his power ideal but not real. This simple scene forms the basis for Updike's major theme.

It is Conner's desire for purity and "cleanness" ("He wanted things clean")⁸ that ultimately creates a tension between the ideal and its opposite, and causes impurity and disorder to erupt from beneath. This is seen not only on the inmates' final attack on their isolated leader, but in the motif of underlying imperfection that runs through the book.

The first real instance of this motif, after Conner's comment on Lucas, concerns a cat badly distorted by a car accident. The lame cat is called a "disturbance of accustomed order,"⁹ whose presence flaunts Conner's authority. The cat is finally shot. Next, there is the incident of the wall. While backing up the driveway to deliver soda pop for the fair, the young driver runs into the outer wall. The "crystalline erections"¹⁰ that Conner's rationalism has created in his heart

are shattered by the chaos revealed when the wall is broken:

For the wall, so thick and substantial, was really two shells: what surprised the people standing in silence was that the old masons had filled the center with uncemented rubble, slivers of rock and smooth fieldstones that now tumbled out resistlessly. 11

The theme is restated later when one of the old people recounts the story of a rabbi's beard that, when shaved, revealed a horrid infection beneath. The rabbi's neat, well-kept house is pointedly contrasted with the "horrible mess."¹²

If the foregoing merely shows how not to live life by revealing the consequences of detached rational idealism, a solution, in the form of faith or direct contact with reality, is thematically presented in the novel. It remains thematic, here as in the other novels, and unfortunately is never put into practice.

The inmate John F. Hook is offered as a foil to Conner, whose endless tinkering and idealistic "busy-ness" appears to Hook as a fault. Hook respects reality. He was once a teacher and intimately involved with people. Instead of blank skies, he sees the season-changed tones of the Delaware River that he lived near. He sees the hypocrisy that often underlies altruism. He sees the pattern of things for what they are, sees weather as more complex than can be predicted by forecasters who "can't quite pull a science out of the air,"¹³ and the advent of rain vindicates his world view. Hook is also warmly responsive to the work of human hands, rather than minds, and

the detailed gingerbread of the cupola appeals to him in a sensual, tactile way, while it frustrates Conner's efforts to categorize it intellectually.

The fair itself is a display of crafts that people from a technology-conscious America flock to for comfort. Those crafts have the tactile quality of charms, a magic that surpasses cold objects, and they have an immediate appeal to innocent children.¹⁴ The patchwork quilt that Hook so much admires is a magical reflection of an innocent world of the past, with its intricate detail that contrasts with the plain material--like Conner's blank skies--that is currently in demand.¹⁵

In contrast again with the wholeness or "integrity" provided by crafts is the band that comes to play at the fair, and the contrast is hardly a subtle one. In their blue uniforms, they are as neat and clean and unreal as Conner's vision, as different from the past as Conner is from his thoughtful predecessor, Mendelssohn, who had a "natural faith."¹⁶ These musicians are machines who "clicked off glances of disdain with industrial precision." and the bandleader wears a face of "wooden fixity wrought by economic concern." All members are concerned with performing their routine and earning their fee as fast as they can, as members of a "mechanical generation." They play patterns as simple as "the colors of the flag."¹⁷

In contrast again, the novel's final definition of wholeness, its positive statement, lies in the portrait of the inmate Elizabeth Heinemann, and is a description of faith that lies in touch and not in intellect. Elizabeth has been blind since early youth, and so is denied that rational vision that separates man from faith. She "doesn't have a picture" of heaven, and the faith in the present moment that is implied by a sense of touch becomes explicit in her words:

The things you see, are to me composed of how they feel when I touch them, and the sounds they make, for everything has a sound, even silent things; when I draw near an object it says 'yes' before I touch it, and walking down a corridor the walls say 'yes', 'yes' and I know where they are and walk between them. They lead me, truly. At first, when this sense began to grow, I was afraid to have these voices come into my darkness; this was before I had forgotten what darkness was, when I still remembered the light. You see, I could hear the walls talking, but didn't understand that they said, 'Don't be afraid, Elizabeth; I'm here, yes.' like Mr. Conner speaking a moment ago. 18

Heaven, for her, is not a place of vision but a place of touch. It is "a mist of all the joy sensations have given us. Perfumes, and children speaking, and cloth on our skin; hungers satisfied as soon as we have them. Other souls will make themselves known like drops of water touching our arms."19

This would seem to be what the Fall from the Garden of Eden signifies in a real sense: the tree of rational knowledge allowed Adam to "name the animals," and hence the powers of

reason and intellect removed him from all-encompassing touch and the true knowledge of God. As Elizabeth says, "What Heaven can there be for our eyes when vision separates, and judges, and marks differences for envy to seize on? Why are we taught as children to close our eyes to pray?" In Heaven, she adds, everyone will be blind.²⁰

This is the heart of the argument of this book, and of this paper as well. It is the heart of the "intellectual" argument of the age that we title Existentialism. What has to be noted in particular is that it remains an argument, with explicit parts, that does not resolve itself in the course of the novel. Of course, warring elements of the integral human personality are united, the "three different aspects of the anima"--Hook as "the man of thought," Lucas as "the man of flesh" preoccupied with pain, and Gregg, the poet, as "the man of passion." An imbalance of any aspect, the author implies, must be counted an evil.²¹

There is, in fact, a final sort of synthesis, with "The man of flesh, the man of passion, the man of thought" all performing their roles simultaneously as if in a "harmony of forms."²² There is a glimmering of hope as Hook, inspired, arises from sleep, "groping after the fitful shadow of the advice he must impart to Conner, as a bond between them and a testament to endure his dying in the world."²³ The reader knows by now the propositions of the argument, that if anything positive is to be imparted, it must be that life is to be lived with an

irrationally blind faith instead of with a rationally judging vision. The novel's final three words, "What is it?," put nonetheless a final definition on the surface aspects of such a rational solution. Those words, indeed, define more closely the despairing tone of the section just preceding. They imply the presence of an answer, yet the fact of the rhetorical question illuminates the mechanical hollowness of the argument. They imply a consciousness of the problem that a question necessarily contradicts. The question indeed fits well into the overall tone of the book, which a discussion of the preceding action makes clear.

The visitors to the fair, these modern alienated Americans, have been chatting aimlessly in a schizophrenic isolation far more terrifying even than Conner's. Here is a despair more profound than any argument can resolve in a few lines, a despair that surpasses at times the black humor and nihilism to which the age has become accustomed. This is the typical "wasteland" landscape that is so common to Updike's other work. Of his fairgoers he says, "Heart had gone out of these...highly neural, bracycephalic...people."²⁴ and he is talking here of technological man. They only worry about money, and make mechanical love far apart from each other. Amid mechanical relationships, the universe seems inevitably doomed by the second law of thermodynamics, "shifts to the 'vacuum states,' and the well-publicized physical theory of

entropia, the tendency of the universe toward eventual homogeneity, each fleck of energy settled in seventy cubic miles of otherwise vacant space. This end was inevitable, no new cause for heterogeneity being, without supernaturalism conceivable."²⁵

Nonetheless, while the need for faith is recognized, the author makes the overriding fact of despair and emptiness clear. Speaking of a character who has appeared in another story concerning faith and doubt entitled "Pigeon Feathers," he says of a youthful visitor to the fair, "God: to David the word was a vast empty place, yet personified with a mouth and long eyes, always steadily watching him."^{25a} Any solution in the face of such emptiness itself rings of the "highly neural" and "brachycephalic." It becomes a rational device that underscores emptiness, a mechanical device that creates its own sort of despairing perceptual homogeneity through the categorical process of rationalism. The next novel presents again a sort of solution to the problem of despair and alienation: evasion. The sense of despair in the face of Nothingness, where an anthropomorphic God lives no longer, leads to a discussion of the man who acts in a vacuum, in a world in which God and faith are absent. That man is the absurd or existential hero. As with the novel just discussed, however, it is the consciousness with which that solution is presented that defeats its own thematic purpose, and emphasizes an

ever-present despair.

The incompleteness of the human being that was defined in The Poorhouse Fair becomes the motive of an individual's search, through an evasion of the vacuum state, for integrity in Rabbit, Run. In a new world of objects and mechanization that has provided man with the opportunity to see how overwhelming the external world can be, "Rabbit" Angstrom must come to grips with the problem of human intellect faced with the routine that Sisyphus faced as he carried his rock up and down the mountain. He must attempt to resolve the conflict of idealistic intention, or things-as-they-should-be, and reality, or things-as-they-are. Like Camus' Meursault and Eliot's Prufrock, Rabbit has perhaps no real ideals, but is aware of a nagging need to create something to fill the void of boredom that is the lot of a vendor of MagiPeel Vegetable Peelers. as quoted by Galloway, Camus describes Rabbit's situation with accuracy:

It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm--this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the "why" arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. 26

This awareness in the face of nothingness is what characterizes a perception of the absurd, a perception that detaches man ultimately from his environment, for now he can stand apart in reason and look at it and question it. He is no longer a part of it like Elizabeth Heinemann, but instead

becomes victim to an abstraction that Camus calls "the cruel mathematics that command our condition."²⁷ It is oddly just this detachment, this linear reason, this ability to stand apart in judgment of one's condition, that also creates the problem in good part, as the introduction to this thesis has shown. Camus' Sisyphus, condemned to perform a meaningless and fruitless task, becomes whole once again when he becomes re-acquainted in a sort of tactile faith with the reality that is and was his lot, however insignificant.

He too concludes that all is well. The universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone [that he is condemned to roll ceaselessly up a hill only to have it ceaselessly fall down], each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. 28

This struggler in the face of nothing is the absurd hero, and Updike's Harry Angstrom is in a sense involved in this widespread literary tradition, at least insofar as he attempts to "sustain a disproportion on the level of values, [and] persists in his demands for truth in a universe that says truths are impossible."²⁹ Harry is involved in the struggle between intention (the desire for unity) and reality (the meaninglessness of life.) He embodies in himself the entirety of the conflict, already depicted in The Poorhouse Fair, of the idealistic mind and external, blemished reality. "Harry was always the idealist,"³⁰ says the man who once coached this

once-famous basketball star, this craftsman, who is now selling vegetable peelers in the complete image of the debased technological man, reduced to a small cog in an enormous gearbox. He too has his moment of recognition when the stage collapses and he faces the banality of his life. His first reaction, an act of relative affirmation, is to run. He hops into his car and leaves a disappointing wife and child in the vain hopes of finding himself and unifying the conflicting aspects of his experience. He runs from what Sisyphus accepts.

Much attention is paid to that conflict here, for it has become a more developed and complex issue than the mere stoning of an administrator. The conflict is internalized, intense, and more directly personal. The conflict amounts to the schizophrenia that is the major characteristic of technological man with his great schemes and his "taste for small appliances."³¹

The key to this split lies in Rabbit's (Harry Angstrom's) intense subjectivism. His insistence on knowing for himself what is right separates him, like Conner, from objective reality and so, in a real way, is not true subjective understanding. Rabbit runs and refutes, ignoring the positive aspects of existence and making a positive of turning to the negative--particularly through his test of self-knowledge through guilt in his relationship with the prostitute Ruth. He participates in blankness, in the "delicious nothing" of

Ruth's love. His escape to "paradise" is without aim.

That this void comes from the power of reason and intellect that is essential to the "existential crisis" is made clear, if Hell is a separation from God brought about through the individual's separation from himself. "Know Thyself, a wise old Greek once said," says a television Mousketeer,³² and Rabbit's coach echoes this sentiment in his talk of developing the whole man, "the head, the body and the heart," in order to be a winner in "the greater game of life."³³ It is Rabbit's very perfection, however, his failure to fail at least at the game of basketball, that leads to his conflict when he is confronted with the banality of what is.

Much attention is paid in this novel to that Cartesian split between the ideal and the real. The conflict contributes expectedly to nausea: "Nelson's broken toys on the floor derange his head; all the things inside his skull, the gray matter, the bones of his ears, the apparatus of his eyes, seem clutter clogging the tube of his self; his sinuses choke, with a sneeze of tears, he doesn't know."³⁴ Here is a chaos that surpasses the understanding, that characterizes Rabbit's mind, like Conner's before him, that thinks when it sees his house:

Every corner locks against a remembered corner in his mind; every crevice, every irregularity in the paint clicks against a nick already in his brain. This adds another dimension of neatness to his housecleaning. 35

This rigidity is found in Rabbit's father, "a straight man,

who has measured his life with the pica-stick and locked the forms tight, he has returned in the morning and found the type scrambled."³⁶ Jack Eccles, the minister who attempts to save Rabbit, is in fact as confused himself with that "great analytical distance between him and things."³⁷ It is, throughout, "clever and cold" intellect, it is a belief instead of reality, and it is ideals contradicted by imperfections that are the foundation of this book. Rabbit's initial flight centered upon an intellectual argument, a rational questioning: "Everything depends, the whole pure idea, on which way Janice was sloppy. Either she forgot to give him the key when he went out or she never bothered to take it out of the ignition."³⁸

This is the crux of the existential decision. He doesn't know whether to pick up his boy or the car first, and his logistical analysis of possibilities creates a problem that "knits in front of him," whose "intricacy" sickens him.³⁹ The reason that coincides with Rabbit's cold vision of his wife as a "dope" also seems to contribute to that vision. Here is that intellect which brings the author to say of him later in a fashion recalling the incident of Conner and the deformed cat: "For in the vast blank of his freedom Rabbit has remembered a few imperfections..."⁴⁰ That freedom and the detachment of intellect seem to go hand in hand, as did Conner's "authority" and his isolation, and contribute to Rabbit's own total isolation. "Harry is not a team player," says his coach.⁴¹

Alienation and the ensuing despair of unfulfilled ideals are intense, and provide for the development of the book's philosophical theme. As Updike says later, "Usually, the dream was worse than the reality: so God has disposed the world."⁴² Rabbit's alienation is the product of a mental state, not an a priori fact of existence. Much is made of the nauseating anxiety that he experiences, the "great hole" of nothingness that threatens to consume him in a world of vacuum without God.⁴³ He escapes to erotic love as a means of filling that vacuum, but as the author says of the lovers, "they remain separate flesh...everywhere they meet a wall."⁴⁴ Rabbit, in contact with "actual living flowers,"⁴⁵ feels uncomfortable. His freedom has been purchased at the expense of his wholeness and his soul, his subjectivity is in fact his curse: "He's safe inside his own skin, he doesn't want to come out,"⁴⁶ this, in the words of the novel, is what Hell is, "real separation" from God and nature, the "inner darkness" of total subjectivity wherein "everything seems unreal that is outside of his sensations."⁴⁷

That the protagonist here is conscious of a solution is obvious, and this is what makes this book even more despairing than its predecessor, for he himself is aware of what it means to be a "natural man." In his confrontation with Amish peasants on the road, while aware of their integrity, he nonetheless conceives of them as devils and takes appearances for reality.⁴⁸

He is always aware that the wholeness of faith is just around the corner of his perceptions. He is aware of Grace, and succumbs even to the influence of charity, under whose influence, "He feels he will never resist anything again."⁴⁹ True despair though, remains in the fact that even this faith, as the other half of a dialectic, remains a function of logical argument itself, as distant as ever, and as cold. Rabbit reasons in spite of his awareness of the "instinctive" world.⁵⁰ His attempt at an artificial faith that depends on the acceptance of the external world, his attempt to be God or a saint out of desperate isolation,⁵¹ contribute further to his condition. His belief in God is a rehearsed "yes".⁵²

Here is the problem. His faith is dependent upon a cold relationship with the outside world, and not truly upon a subjective knowledge of wholeness. Proud of his return to his wife, after being coaxed back by the minister, Rabbit's new-found faith is described thus: "He had gone to church and brought back this little flame and had nowhere to put it on the dark damp walls of the apartment, so it had flickered and gone out."⁵³ Still convinced that it is the world outside that is gone wrong, he runs again, and his final escape into the brush is an escape into the only faith that can be, that of touch and personal contact, of a new Eden beyond "angular words."⁵⁴ His escape, however, as the tone of the novel suggests, is justified as if it were the world that made him

do it. Rabbit, far from being the existential hero like Camus' Meursault who accepts life as it is offered him, escapes back into rationalism and avoidance of responsibility.

The world through which Rabbit finally escapes, although it might seem an Eden by comparison, is not tactile as much as it is menacing in a rational way. It is a world of terror of the mind, with its vacuums and vacant fields and its intractable claws. The "new life"⁵⁵ he enters is, in fact, the old one. In a new vision of unreality he notes, "Goodness lies inside, there is nothing outside."⁵⁶ The book ends all the same with a light emptiness of spirit that is frightening, with a final and absolute detachment from, not acceptance of, the world outside that is described in all its too realistic and frightening detail.

John Updike's third novel, The Centaur, is a more determined attempt to resolve despair, to reunify the split between mind and body, between subjective and objective reality. Like Hemingway's Nick Adams--and like his favorite exponent of "existentialism" Soren Kierkegaard⁵⁷--Updike's characters, in one form or another, do seek the wholeness that is implicit in faith. The nature of the split that is to be healed is once again stated in the preface to this novel by Karl Barth, a contemporary theologian influenced by Kierkegaard:⁵⁸

Heaven is the creation inconceivable to man, earth the creation conceivable to him. He himself is the creature on the boundary between heaven and earth.

The quotation is significant because it describes explicitly the problem that has been the object of discussion so far. The centaur Chiron, who is already half horse and half man, and more significantly half mortal body and half immortal spirit, also seems to form an important extension of the myth of the Fall from Paradise. He was made to suffer atonement for the theft of fire (or knowledge) from the heavens by Prometheus his son, and pays for the crime through the loss of his immortality.

Both the story of Prometheus and of the sin of Adam deal with man's acquisition of forbidden knowledge and the price to be paid for what may be termed reason or "manipulative intellect." Both attempt to make sense of man's dual nature. Caldwell the school teacher, the real world parallel of the mythical Chiron in the novel, is just such an individual. He is familiarly idealistic, yet is trapped in a world of sordid matter. The author's very use of an extended mythic parallel throughout a novel that is, on the surface, realistic is one more attempt to bring the spiritual into the ordinary and give it meaning and dimension, to "soften the edges" of cold reality as presented in Rabbit, Run. "Knowledge is a sickening thing," says Caldwell,⁵⁹ and introduces the familiar theme, an echo and image of Kierkegaard's "sickness unto death" that characterized the two previous novels. This, like the others, has as

its main concern isolation and death in particular.

Like Rabbit, Caldwell does attempt to love, yet his intentions are far from fulfilled in a world apparently devoid of meaning. "It's no Golden Age, that's for sure," he says.⁶⁰ It is rationalism, in the form of his Principal Zimmerman (an authoritarian not unlike Conner) that appears to have provoked his opinion. Significantly, though, Caldwell is not wholly alienated and in a sense is not a full participant in the "absurd." As a teacher (who incidentally gives an enthusiastic lesson on the volvox as the first altruistic social animal),⁶¹ he is very much a part of society. It is his son Peter, (who seems the likelier candidate for protagonist of the book) who sees the absurd, the disparity between his father's intentions and the reality he encounters. "Oh Daddy," Peter snaps. "You're ridiculous. Why do you make such a mountain out of a molehill?"⁶² As his father's critic, he sees him as "silly," but fails to see himself mirrored in his father in his own idealistic approach to life.

The threat and presence of death, as in The Poorhouse Fair and Rabbit, Run, also finds a consistent pattern working in this novel. The presence of Peter's father is, in fact, to him that of a god with a very tenuous earthly existence. The book defines the relationship between man and death or nothingness. The Centaur, if Rabbit, Run dealt with man in the aesthetic sphere, is a parable of the man of action, and in

this sense is a partial answer to the question of how one fills the void.⁶³

Caldwell, in a world of technology characterized by shoddy workmanship that parallels the soybean plastics of The Poorhouse Fair, has his existential crisis in the face of the endless zeros of a science lesson that he is teaching.⁶⁴ The sky, a reflection of the frightening infinity generated by the world of science in which God (in this case Zeus) is dead, is described later in terms of its "tenuous weight" and "menace," for God's mercy is at "an infinite distance."⁶⁵ Caldwell is isolated, for all his attempts at the unity of love, from Nature. "I hate Nature," he says,⁶⁶ and sees his students at times as "dead meat," and humanity as germs,⁶⁷ recalling Conner and the cat once again. Peter, too, is "allergic to life itself."⁶⁸ His despair is even greater than that of his father who sees himself "alone and puzzled...with a painful, confused sense of having displeased, through ways he could not follow, the God who never rested from watching him."⁶⁹ Caldwell, recalling Rabbit's condition himself says to Peter, "You're just so wrapped up in your own skin. You have no idea what other people feel."⁷⁰ The mutual isolation, the ensuing guilt without a source, are familiar in any case. There does, however, appear to be a source.

Mind-body dualism seems, if the centaur motif is consistent, to be a valid source for that alienating schizophrenia of which

Caldwell thinks early in the book. "He felt he was holding his brain like a morsel on a platter high out of a hungry reach."⁷¹ His affliction, although he does seek to solve it, is like that of the rationalist Zimmerman who, though intelligent, has "something missing."⁷² The conflict between the real and the ideal is central, and is exemplified by Peter's startled amazement at "real faces" which (reminding one of Rabbit amid real flowers) suddenly "seemed meagre and phantasmal after the great glowing planetary visions I had been watching."⁷³ Of Caldwell, his personal physician Dr. Appleton says, "Your trouble, George, is you have never come to terms with your own body," to which Caldwell replies, "You're right. I hate the damn ugly thing. I don't know how the hell it got me through fifty years."⁷⁴

The consequences of disunity are, of course, death, pain and despair. The omnipresence of death is manifest in the book not just in Caldwell's psychosomatic fear of cancer (the "poison" inside), but in the many references to human time in the form of ever-present clocks. It is found as well in Peter's ultimate pessimism, his doubt in any order in the presence of chaos, a chaos that just could well be a product of reason. Says Peter to his father, "You make everything mean something it isn't...Relax!"⁷⁵ However, Peter too experiences a Cartesian detachment from his body,⁷⁶ and all attempts to reconcile God and man are futile and, particularly, self-

defeating.

The cure, the solution for anxiety is recognized by Peter himself: "In my terror of words I experienced a panicked hunger for things and I took up, from the center of the lace doily on the small table by my elbow, and squeezed in my hand a painted china figurine of a smiling elf with chunky polka-dot wings."⁷⁷ Tactility, integrity, the wholeness of all senses in balance with touch as a common denominator, is the proposed answer to doubt and schizophrenic chaos. The divisive power of intellectual knowledge that Elizabeth Heinemann testified to is echoed by Caldwell: "Thank God I'm half-blind and three-quarters deaf. Heaven protects the ignorant."⁷⁸ Significantly, though no doubt ironically, all attempts to affirm a traditional God and faith ring flatly and patly of the rational solution in The Poorhouse Fair, just as later attempts to find order and stability will recreate rather than solve the problem.

"The great Jehovah wisely planned/All things of Earth divinely grand,"⁷⁹ sings Caldwell in near-mockery. "Dieu-est-tres-fin,"⁸⁰ gushes the mechanic Hummel's wife to Caldwell. "In God we trust,"⁸¹ says the teacher to his son with the falsity of the sloganeer, recalling the Readers Digest article entitled "Ten Proofs That There Is A God" that Peter picks up.⁸² This is the world of aesthetic experience, of an attempt to perceive the world through ideas. In short, reference to

"faith," as in the other novels, becomes an intellectual game like that which provoked the death of God. True absolutes, for Updike, lie rather in the world of tactile experience-- in the power of the erotic.

Peter takes a Negro mistress near the novel's end, and it is the intuitive and primitive pagan-ness of her that contrasts and even substitutes for his hollow attempts to create, on his blank canvasses, stability and order through the fixed intellectual moment of "art". Peter, with his fondness for the sharp outlines of Vermeer's art, becomes an "authentic, second-rate abstract expressionist," for art is "the hope of seizing something and holding it fast."⁸³ He is acutely aware that the distance between art and intuition, between the priest and the artist, is vast, as well as is the distance between true nature and art.⁸⁴

Still, tactility, exemplified in Peter's Negro mistress who exemplifies the intuitive and subconscious elements of existence, is the only consistent answer offered here. That answer, continuing the theme of despair, will find its full development in Updike's next novel, Couples. It lies in an erotic life which seems, in this author's art, to join the real and the ideal, heaven and earth, and to relate to that realm of action and craft-making in The Centaur. How erotic the erotic is will be the final question leading to a discussion of the author's stylistic method of viewing the world even

while touching it.

The words below are a fitting enough introduction to a novel which has developed the element of death as its most pervasive theme, having extended the premises of The Poorhouse Fair to their logical limits, as well as having made that extension a far more personal matter. Thinks Piet Hanema, the novel's protagonist, at one point of intense anxiety, "God help me, help me, get me out of this. Eek, ik, eeik ik. Dear God put me to sleep. Amen."⁸⁵ Piet is an orphan and an inhabitant of the "vacuous horror" that modern technology has wrought.

Still, as the above words of his suggest, he is a believer in a traditional God. He is a man with a desperate need for order, for tight enclosures, square yards and square houses. Oddly, he is as tight and tense as Conner, Zimmerman and others like them, for he possesses that "European sense of order"⁸⁶ that is his Dutch Calvinist heritage. This is also why the traditional God of logic and order and reason creates for him, as it does for so many of the characters of these novels, the problem of the conflict between true religion and logic that was the bane of the minds of Heidegger and Kierkegaard and so many others. Piet, recalling the religious irony in The Centaur, is aware that there must be a more substantial spirit to Christianity beyond the financial terms that his minister uses to make it appealing. He has a "primitive faith,"⁸⁷ a tentative

belief seen in his perception of the "heavensent glisten of things,"⁸⁸ and in his enjoyment of the warm wash of greenhouse light.⁸⁹ Indeed, even a cold chemist in this novel can see that "life hates being analyzed."⁹⁰ The paradox that is Piet's, however, and not his alone in these novels, is that he approaches the world in spite of his intuitive understanding with a scientifically rational mind. It is this way of seeing which seems to be ultimately responsible for his alienation and his ultimate sense of an all-pervasive death. "That's what we all are. Chemicals,"⁹¹ he says, half joking and half serious, echoing in good part the "wasteland" spirit that has become a literary common-place to say the least, the spirit of a world that reduces man to an abstract entity.

The sense of a Fall, of horror, is everywhere, in the imagery of "solar jism" and "cooking fetuses" that would seem to put an end to all life processes. There is a strong sense of detachment, of guilt ("Won't we embarrass God?")⁹² that coincides once again with a consciously marked dualism that is seen most clearly in the contrast between Piet's glimmering faith and the overly solid, unreal idealism of his distant wife Angela. The curious paradox of John Updike's themes, the subject of the final chapter of this thesis and most evident in the present work, is that his protagonist himself seeks a form of order (a logical solution) that is essentially rational, while frantically attempting to affirm his sense of reality, like Peter in The Centaur, through an erotic contact with an

unconscious, intuitive life.

Piet is of course aware that there is an intuitive or natural order that surpasses any rational order. He is nonetheless a rational man whose faith takes the form of rectangular order, the "rectangular security" of his well-joined carpenter's art and the square houses that he builds. He is a craftsman, a doer whose "shelter" is nonetheless "right angles and stress-beams of sense" that he can inhabit.⁹³ He is an Aristotelian, and also a believer in Plato's eternal ideals.⁹⁴ His Jehovah is a "straight man" like his upright father.⁹⁵ His spirits lift when "order reigns" and the uniformity and regimen of the mailmen signifies, to him, eternity.⁹⁶ Piet, in short, "was loyal to the God Who mercifully excuses us from pleading, Who nails His joists of judgment down firm, and roofs the universe with order."⁹⁷ This is certainly a rational God, reminiscent of the optimistic couplet about the watchmaker God sung in The Centaur. For all Piet's conscious affirmations of faith, in God and in logical order or "rightness," he is again familiarly without a "single destination" as have those clouds in the heavens⁹⁸ (reminiscent of Conner's blank skies). He himself, for all his belief in rational order, gives himself over ultimately to the empty objectified world that rationalism has provided for.

Death is again ever present. Piet is continually walking "thin ice" above its jaws. The meaningless death of a pet

hamster becomes a significant episode for him, and his logical analysis of an illogical fact of life increases his nauseating psychological instability. He consequently seeks refuge in a world of touch and, compared to Angela's rational skepticism, his belief (note his image as the "old yeoman") takes the form of an intimate and transcendent superstition.⁹⁹

Like Rabbit and his prostitute, however, Piet can never achieve the unity with the universe that he seeks. There is always a wall between him and others who he imagines he treats less as the cold objects that they in fact are in this novel. There is no "mingling" between him and his new love.¹⁰⁰ He is a solitary "superman" alone in a non-human world. His contact ultimately takes the form of sexual gymnastics. Like Descartes, he is once again a detached "man in the mirror," standing back and looking at a body that is "out there."¹⁰¹ Piet, like Conner, is an idealist who fails to see that the body must move with the mind, and who, like Rabbit, ends up in solitary self-justification for trying to be like God. "All Piet does is pray," says his business partner Matt Gallagher with unusual acuity,¹⁰² for it is the separation of mind and body exemplified in the idealistic intentions of his particularly rational prayer, that makes him think he "could not specifically locate the cause of his depression, his sense of unconnection among phenomena and of falling."¹⁰³ However, as has been shown and will be further clarified, this depression

does have its source.

"I clearly brought this on myself,"¹⁰⁴ he finally recognizes, after two marriages have been ruined in his search for unity, for there has in a way been a lesson in a world of objects in which there has been no real unity or "coupling" whatsoever. The protagonist has to walk a very fine line between the world of the ordered carpenter with his "builder's eye," the world of the God of righteous justice, and that of the carpenter's hands, of fleshly lust, of the transcendent "misty" and tactile light of the many windows of that world in which "his senses were forced open."¹⁰⁵ "He wanted to touch her, for luck, for safety, as when a child in Farmington after a long hide in the weeds shouts Free! and touches the home maple,"¹⁰⁶ he says, echoing Elizabeth Heinemann's explanation of faith.

This mind-body dualism is made explicit in the world of the other characters, recalling the chaos that underlay order in The Poorhouse Fair. "Their minds and mouths were committed to stability and deception while their bodies were urging eruption, violence, change."¹⁰⁷ "Mouths" recalls the conflict of Piet's minister Horace Pedrick at the book's end in his "struggle with the Word,"¹⁰⁸ or rationalism that is in direct conflict with reality. Piet has to walk that line without any resolution, and the tension in him of two modes of approaching life are what best characterizes the book, and are what

generates its despair.

In deference to the existential spirit of his age Piet says, "We are all exiles who need to bathe in the irrational."¹⁰⁹ The recurrence of the truck with "WASH ME" written on it recalls the need to recover from the curse of the original sin of rational knowledge. After all his contact with the world of tactility, though, Piet has not yet found a true faith, and like Caldwell's references to God, his conclusions are unconvincing in the light of his experience. "The World was more Platonic than he had suspected," says his author.¹¹⁰ Piet, after his divorce and his supposed "new life" of sensory awareness ("nothing was too ordinary for Piet to notice,")¹¹¹ recalling Elizabeth's, is far from consistent with his conclusion, his newly ordered life and his new job. "Piet likes the official order and the regular hours. The Hanemas live in Lexington, where, gradually, among people like themselves, they have been accepted, as another couple."¹¹²

His, in the final analysis, is a spirit that can see nature at war with herself, "as if a conflict in God's heart had been bared for them to witness,"¹¹³ and can't help seeing a difference between God and nature.¹¹⁴ This is the ultimate cause of that metaphysical dilemma that led Rabbit to despair of wholeness and contact and run, and that cuts Piet off from "Charity Street." "You're right, there is something in my life right now, a knot, an awful knot," Piet says.¹¹⁵ His

solution for "cerebral cramps", quite the opposite of that of Sisyphus, is avoidance instead of acceptance. He, too, despairs and runs, creating a larger vacuum than that which he found.

The following chapter, through a close look at the style of this and the three other novels, will try to see just how that knot is constructed and perpetuated. It will look at the consequences of rational thought in a world beyond reason, a problem of which, from a brief summary of the themes of these four novels, the author himself is fully aware.

CHAPTER III

The despair that the preceding chapter has shown to be an accompanying feature of the abstraction of rational intellect from an integral balance of all senses has its literary antecedents to be sure.¹ An understanding of the power of isolated vision to abstract and alienate, however, is best found in an analysis of Updike's own predilection for pattern or rational wit that is itself characteristically visual. Wit is a means of abstracting or paralleling one form of perception with another. Rational wit means the pattern of symbolic imitation that is found in an art of fixed perspective, and fixed perspective can never approximate the movement that is experience. The attempt to approximate reality with a rational construct, by fixing a process that can never be static, can only bring about the sense of death that is existential despair. Fixed perspective, as well as rhyming couplets, was what led to the crisis of rational philosophy.

John Updike was a student of art before he became a full-time writer. "His youthful belief that there was no distinction between drawing and writing is significant...in that it directs us to note the importance in his work of the visual artist's delight in pattern!"²

As a freshman at Harvard Updike wrote for the Harvard Lampoon a five-verse poem in praise of ornamental alphabets.

He left it untitled, yet drew for it a decorated initial letter and tailpiece. The third and fourth verses of the poem, in which "non-essential" pattern is evident, run as follows:

Few centuries have dared abuse
the heritage of curlicues.
The Father Adam donned the fig
when Eve got confidential;
and hence, from bra to periwig,
Man's garb is non-essential,
from Dali hats to pointed shoes.

The printed page of days gone by
appealed to an illiterate eye;
but now the slow advance of fear
rolls back the line of boldness;
the print is set with mien austere,
the page, endowed with coldness,
with few attempts to beautify. 3

This stylistic attitude of appreciation of "the wealth of pattern available to an artist,"⁴ remains remarkably consistent throughout this artist's work. It is an attempt in itself to prevent "the slow advance of fear" that contemporary "dehumanizing" austerity has created. In Updike's short story "Dear Alexandros" an American who has "adopted" a Greek boy by mail writes to him: "Your nation should be very proud of producing masterpieces which the whole world can enjoy. In the United States the great writers produce works which people do not enjoy, because they are so depressing."⁵ In a world in which the abstract entity "American Parent No. 10.638" writes "Needy Child No. 26,511," this view is certainly understandable. What the writer fails to note, however, is that the oral world of Greek poetry, in spite of its patterned formulas, is a far

cry from visual embellishment for its own sake, for the sake of pattern per se. Homer, after all, was blind, and the wine-dark sea is better heard than seen.

Updike does, quite importantly, do much to animate, humanize, and familiarize the inanimate, as his poem "A Cheerful Alphabet of Pleasant Objects" in The Carpentered Hen makes clear.⁶ The carpentered hen, to begin with, is an early example of the author's fascination with "the skilled matching of natural and man-made objects which carpentry demands: A carpentered hen with hinged wings is required (so Updike suggests) to account for the laying of a wooden egg; and the poem matches the pattern common to live fowls and tooled wood."⁷ In the smoothly rounded darning egg,

The grain of the wood
embraces the shape
as brown feathers do
the rooster's round nape. 8

The other tame creatures, vegetable and mineral as well as animal, are "tame" because they form an integral part of the pattern of the human world.⁹

The "Cheerful Alphabet" offers poems of the metaphysical variety, adding visual pattern to meaning, creating typographical images of "Mirror," "Nutcracker", and "Pendulum". For, as Updike observes in an essay on Max Beerbohm entitled "Rhyming Max," "By rhyming, language calls attention to its mechanical nature and relieves the represented reality of seriousness."

Despite all the power of puns and rational wit to "break down our stock responses to words...to jolt our minds onto a new track,"¹⁰ the chances that wit will get in the way of an attempt to convey that "reality" and convey mere wit itself increase.

Wit, to be sure, has no inherent fault. If, however, there is nothing underlying wit to give it its impetus, if it resonates hollowly like the Augustan song about the wise plans of the "great Jehovah" in The Centaur, then wit becomes rational process for the sake of rational process itself. Carried out to its logical conclusions, it can lead to existential anxiety. An example of the alienating power of the technique of rational wit can be seen in a description of Flick Webb at work at his gas station in a poem entitled "Ex-Basketball Player," also found in The Carpentered Hen:

Flick stands tall among the idiot pumps--
Five on a side, the old bubble-head style,
Their rubber elbows hanging loose and low.
One's nostrils are two S's, and his eyes
An E and O. And one is squat, without
A head at all--more of a football type. 11.

The alphabeticization of a human situation does more to draw the reader's attention to the incongruity of the symbol itself, rather than describe or even extrapolate, for the symbol itself has no quality to extend. The accommodation of man to objects is commendable as a means of ensuring "our true humanity," in the words of the author. In his dissertation for the

bachelor's degree at Harvard he fittingly wrote, of Herrick interestingly enough, that

his humility is the Christian awareness of the smallness of earthly things. His poems are short, his subjects are trivial, his effects are delicate. Yet at the same time he is willing to describe tiny phenomena with the full attention and sympathy due to a 'major' theme. 12

Updike, however, is still primarily concerned here with the dominance of the process of seeing over that of feeling, for any attention paid to "tiny phenomena" must, because of a necessary focus, be visual. An accumulation of "tiny phenomena" seen with clarity can only form part of a larger pattern, itself a rational and visual construct that is non-qualitative. Items are not linked with the continuity that is implied with touch, but are further isolated as entities unto themselves. "Tiny phenomena" described with the full attention and sympathy due to a "major" theme is the very cause of existential anxiety. Such a process is itself a definition of imbalance, the conflict that arises from focusing upon the details, the detached objects or symbols, that are only a part of a larger whole.¹³

Visual bias in Updike's art finds its most pervasive aspect in detail and precision in general, which must by nature be visual. Visual bias will later be seen to extend, however, to the use of mathematical and geometrical metaphor, a form of symbolic analogy that is at odds with the author's theme that vision in itself creates anxiety, alienation, and despair.

Precise detail in Updike's prose is not the detail of feeling, of the turn of emotion, or of the irony of life. It is rather a detail that recreates a visual world of objects, the technological world. This detail finds its ultimate expression in the catalogs in these novels of those objects of the world. The fact that items are catalogued is itself an attempt to classify experience, much as Conner himself attempted to do. These objects are not seen for what they are in themselves, but together form a part of a larger intellectual pattern. Objects are quantified instead of qualified, as if all were in some sense equal in their homogeneity, all part of one side or another of a rational argument. Precision itself becomes rational and symbolic.

The poorhouse fair is a good example of rational cataloguing. Here the objects are named and classified. The early Singers, Phoebe lamps and pofferje pots stand for a past world of handicraft and touch with life, as do the candies that are also sold at the fair.

Coconut strips, peanut butter eggs, vanilla fudge squares, wax jugs of green syrup you drank then chewed the wax, gingery horehound sticks, penuche in chunks, thick coins of white and pink mint, licorice belts you punched the silhouettes of animals and birds out of, little vegetables of sugar, gum drops in the shape of trademarks, tacky cups of amber, licorice that burned your throat and gave you bad breath, Turkish delight you couldn't touch without spilling powdered sugar, licorice pipes with red dots sprinkled to imitate burning, all loose and unwrapped, jumbled in jars and cardboard boxes. 14

The sensuous aspects of the above description might seem undeniable, but only if the reader had neglected to notice that David, who perceives this detail that is significantly visual in nature, were not himself "alienated" in this fair that also represents the modern world of cold man-made objects, and were not himself rationally "in process of subduing the town to memory." The paragraph that mentions this abstracted memorization of detail also includes a reference to the youths who "make love" abstractly and only visually in the headlights of automobiles. The paragraph in the novel that follows the cataloging of the candies is a description of their quantitative aspect. The mention of their economics of distribution, even assuming this is to show how the past has been debased by modern man, is necessarily at odds with any attempt to show them as a part of non-rational, non-technological past which cannot avoid being part of a rational argument. The fact that they have been so precisely seen contradicts any non-rational and faith-inspiring nature that they might have.

Further examples of precision of detail that appear to be at least neutral if not qualitative on the surface are nonetheless abstracted from and secondary to the nature that they represent. All art must of course do this, as the word is never the object it represents. The following passage, though, while appearing to have a high degree of neutrality, to be a description of nature as-it-is, cannot avoid the dualistic argument

that underlies the novel, that chaos is to be found beneath the surface appearance of rational order: "At the edges of two boards laid on the wall steam curled as if several hidden cigarettes were smoking beneath them. The trees, tousled by the storm showed the undersides of some leaves."¹⁵ This recalls the corruption within the poorhouse wall and beneath the rabbi's beard, and is that much less a description of nature. The complete transcription of a newspaper article on "The Canadian Dilemma"¹⁶ that recalls the transcription of a multitude of signs and a variety of life's details in these novels, can be construed as well as part of the overall dualistic argument of this novel, for the dilemma has "two horns." This attempt to capture reality yet employ it as a factor in a rational argument is an ever present feature of the author's prose style, and is seen perhaps most clearly in his description of Minor's Luncheonette in The Centaur:

...in the luncheonette there was a small table offering for sale plastic cigarette cases, miniature gilt picture frames containing washed-out photographs of June Allyson and Yvonne de Carlo, playing cards with kittens and Scotties and cottages and lagoons on the back, and depraved 29¢ items like transparently loaded dice, celluloid pop eyes and buck teeth, dribble glasses, and painted plaster dog turds...¹⁷

This is not just an attempt to describe the world in all its ambiguous complexity of flux, but is rather an attempt to describe a banal and stifling world, the world of Minos' labyrinth. As such, such a description must of necessity be

quantitatively symbolic, insofar as it is a case of life-as-it-is used for a purpose beyond itself. None of these details has a value outside of the catalog. While a fact of detail may in any art have a meaning beyond itself, these have been precluded from any meaning beyond the context of the category or the argument.

Such apparently realistic detail as appears in the maps and catalogs of radio commercials and pop songs in Rabbit, Run,¹⁸ in the image of "the detailed chart of spare part code numbers"¹⁹ in The Centaur,²⁰ has a unifying characteristic. Far from being atypical, this detail and sense of accuracy is a mark of a deeper theme in Updike's prose fiction. The implications of such detail, apparently neutral, as the word "PARADICHLOROBENZENE" on a drugstore window, "BOUNCING BETSY" on a pinball machine, or even the precise focusing on the sharpness of a shoelace or an individual grain of sand, on microscopic flakes, flecks and chips, is that all that is seen with clarity implies a sense of alienation or despair, if only because of the overall context in which detail occurs, the despair with which it is, in a most basic sense, merely associated. Updike's conscious theme is that a precise and detailed vision such as Conner had will alienate. The apparent unconscious paradox in the author's art is that his attempts to approximate the detailed reality of life-as-it-is is itself a rational attempt.

The more accurate the vision becomes, the more symbolic and less descriptive of reality it also becomes. Visual bias thus means that the thing seen accurately is the thing seen negatively, the thing seen in despair. The thing seen clearly is the thing seen out of context.

The first instance of vivid detail in these four novels occurs in the fourth line in the first of them. The Poorhouse Fair begins,

In the cool wash of early sun the individual strands of osier compounding the chairs stood out sharply; arched like separate serpents springing up and turn-again into the knit of the wickerwork. An unusual glint of metal pierced the lenient wall of Hook's eyes and struck into his brain, which urged his body closer, to inspect. 21

What he sees, of course, are the tags that are emblematic of the rational order that Conner himself represents. The process of vision itself is evident in this passage. While the realistic elements cannot be denied--for Hook is apparently looking at an actual and not an ideal chair by the very fact of its idiosyncrasies, the vision, the author's vision, is itself scientific and analytically fragmentary, seeing in a fashion not unlike Conner's, the sun-relieved "individual strands of osier" that "compound" the chair to stand out sharply. What is to be noted primarily is a curious mixture, seen most clearly in those realistic yet emblematic tags, of the realistic and the symbolic. Chair and tag are both tangible, yet curiously

idealized at the same time, as if the real were too real, by virtue of its very elaboration.

The fusion of realistic and idealistic elements can be seen more clearly in a description of nature as the anti-idealistic Hook sees it:

Despite the low orange sun, still wet from its dawning, crescents of mist like the webs of taut caterpillars adhered in the crotches of the hills. Preternaturally sensitive within its limits, his vision made out the patterned spheres of an orchard on the nearest blue rise, seven miles off. 22.

The purpose of this description within the context of the novel is to contrast physical nature, and the past that was Hook's home in that distance, with the coldness of the poorhouse regimen and the cold ideals of the man in charge of it. Hook, however, though looking at an orchard near a life-giving river instead of an airplane against a blank sky, is looking nonetheless as Conner looks. He is seeing "patterned spheres" in a scientific, geometrically abstract way.

Detail, the thing seen with accuracy, implies coldness throughout Updike's prose. Whenever things are seen accurately, they are seen coldly, and the best of examples to illustrate how manner relates to theme is to be found in his description of the poorhouse hospital--vivid, indeed, in every detail.

The figures beneath some of the sheets made faint movements; a skeletal arm lifted to gain attention, a pink scrubbed head turned listlessly to take in the new entrant. The sheets did not seem to have beneath them

persons but a few cones, from the points of which the folds sloped apparently to the mattress, and Lucas thought of parts of bodies--feet, the pelvis, shoulders without arms--joined by tubes of pliable glass, transparent so the bubbling flow of blood and yellow body juices could be studied. The impression was upon him before he could avert his eyes. Incapable of any retreat he looked on the floor, fearful above all of accidentally finding among the composed faces of these ailing and doomed the face of an acquaintance, someone with whom he had shared a talk on the sunporch, or walked into Andrews with. On the floor his helpless eyes noticed the marks made by the soft wheels of the stretcher-wagon. Even more than black death he dreaded the gaudy gate: the mask of sweet red rubber, the violet overhead lights, the rattling ride through washed corridors, the steaming, breathing, percolating apparatus, basins of pink sterilizer, the firm straps binding every limb, the sacred pure garb of the surgeons, their eyes alone showing, the cute knives and angled scissors, the beat of your own heart pounding through the burnished machinery...23

This description of an unmistakable scene of death, seen by detached and "helpless eyes," is remarkable not so much for the visual acuity of description that itself implies horror and disjointedness, but for the obvious contrast between that acuity and the anonymity and more human generality of that "someone" with whom Lucas "had shared a talk on the sunporch."

In a scene reminiscent of Lucas' perceptions, Rabbit Angstrom, in his own "helpless" detachment and estrangement, also sees his mother with specificity and consequently with horror:

'Mrs. Angstrom has four-cornered nostrils.

Lozenge-shape, they are set in a nose that is not so much large as extra-anatomical; the little pieces of muscle and cartilage and bone are individually emphatic and divide the skin into many facets in the sharp light. Their interview takes place in her kitchen amid several burning light bulbs. 24

The parallels between this and the immediately preceding passage are obvious: detail, disjointedness, geometrical qualification, (cone and lozenge), and most of all, emphasis on the process of vision itself, emphasized by both eyes and contrasting light. Rabbit in this scene is as estranged and uncomfortable as Lucas.

This process of describing experience in visual terms is a process best defined as symbolic, a process wherein an ideal form is used to describe, by representation, a living and changing situation. This is where Updike's embellishments and patterns, as defined in his poem in the earlier part of this chapter, can be called symbolic, in the same way as describing people as "cones," or nostrils as "lozenges," or hills as "perfect spheres," is symbolic. In each case, reality is defined in terms of an abstraction. In each case, quality, in the form of living nature, human or otherwise, is quantified and rendered static. Allegory, also a form of representational symbolism, as seen in the overall structure of The Poorhouse Fair, for example, is certainly operating. It remains secondary, though, to a much more pervasive process of which it is only a part, and which must first be seen in all its aspects.

Symbolism, the broad process of representation, is very much a factor, if not the factor, of Platonic rational thought. All quantification, all objectification, is symbolic. This is the sense in which symbolism must be understood before the manner of its conflict with what Updike describes as subjective, non-rational faith, can also be understood.

Numbers are themselves a form of representational, rational symbolism, a form of abstraction perhaps even more extrapolated than a geometrical form. Numbers, from the earliest of these four novels under discussion, are associated with pain. Their thematic purpose is to show how far the world of science is from the world of human realities. Like the clear vision of the hospital, like Conner's clear vision of the sky, numbers are ultimately associated with death. All abstraction, for Updike, thematically implies death. Abstraction, for him, is the modern world. Lucas, in The Poorhouse Fair, who pokes at his ear with a matchstick in order to give himself a sense of reality through non-abstract touch (note also his need for liquor to "smooth" the edges of life seen through, or imposed upon by, a rational structure) is here being given a hearing test. The coldness of the world of number, and the world of science that was Orwell's and Huxley's theme, is unmistakably clear:

Lucas figured that if he passed this test he would be let off the lancing. At first it was easy. The voice was a woman's, very slow and

ticky, like a phone operator's. He repeated after her, "13, , , 74...5..." Her voice grew higher as she sank into a lake of viscid substance. "12," she called, "99". In the strain of listening the rustle of blood in his head created static. "Uh, 99." His tongue had become queerly cumbersome; his heart fluttered high in his chest. He missed the woman's next two cries, so deep and tiny had she grown. The head across the aisle turned left, then right on the pillow, like a wing-beat. Lucas ventured, "80?" 25

The argument itself, however, cannot avoid its own sort of symbolic dualism. The nurse who comes to relieve Lucas of his ordeal is named, rather significantly, Grace. Lucas himself, after telling the doctor that the pain was "between seven and eight o'clock," notes, recalling the dualistic conflict between Conner and Elizabeth, that it was "A queer trick, his making the ear a timepiece; there was something insane in so much explanation."

Numbers, in The Centaur, elaborate the author's attitude to the world of science and the fact, isolated out of its context, that is the technological fact. The novel opens with Caldwell the teacher being struck, as Adam was struck for his theft of knowledge, by an arrow that is the isolated fact par excellence. He has just finished chalking the number 5,000,000,000, "the probable age in years of the universe," on the blackboard. The class laughs, destroying the "privacy" that is a thematic constant of Updike's rational thinkers. It is the knowledge itself, the consciousness of an infinity that cannot be rationally comprehended, that has isolated him as well in despair.

The "figures...remind him of death." "His stomach began to sway with nausea." Caldwell himself appears to know why, for he has called "knowledge" a "sickening thing."²⁶ Rabbit, and Piet Hanema also, stand in awe of the world of science, and both feel despair.

The author makes the same point about time as he does about numbers. In The Centaur in particular, specific times are often mentioned (4:17; 4:18; 7:28; 7:35), and the author does not fail to point out that objective time, time as an abstract entity, does not exist and is severely limiting when invoked. Caldwell explains the quality of time involved in the universe's creation as "not a second of our imaginary time, but a real second, of real time."²⁷ There are two clocks in the Caldwell household, a right one and a wrong one. It is here, however, that the nature of the author's dialectical argument becomes apparent.

There is a fast clock, which is "red and electric and plastic." There is also an accurate clock which is "dark and wooden and ornamented and key wound and had been inherited from my grandfather's father."²⁸ The contrast between the two is reminiscent of the rational dialectics of the argument, first presented in The Poorhouse Fair, of the differences between plastics and home-made goods, a dialectic that obscures the true nature of either, much as a consciousness of two qualities of time is itself a denial of "real time." A

distinction between Nature here and God there, between inside here and outside there, subject here and object there, is a distinction that demands the fixed point of view that is the source of the rational vision, that is more shakeable as it is more secure.

That a rational vision is all-pervasive is a point to be noted carefully. The inability of rationalism to escape from the confines of its own arguments can be clearly seen in the nature of Caldwell's observation of his relationship with another woman in the superimposed mythic mode in which he becomes Chiron the centaur. More prevalent than the use of number or time in these novels is the use of perspective (the fixed point of view) in the geometrical vision. Chiron-Caldwell can see "even in his distraction...that...the problem (of love-making) might be expressed geometrically."²⁹ This is the quantified and rationalized Eros that will be treated later in this paper.

Caldwell, though, is frightened by a world of numbers, and his mythic world of past experience has been destroyed by a world of modern science. "The Milky Way," he complains, "which used to be thought of as the path by which the souls of the dead travelled to Heaven, is an optical illusion."³⁰ He is, like Conner, nonetheless responsible for his view of the world, and even death fails to free him from the bonds of rationalism, however much the insertion of Caldwell-Chiron into

a mythic and anti-rational dissolution is designed to show his escape. Even up to the end he catalogs "the daughters of Nereus," in spite of the implication that the magic of their names is meant to recall a world before reason. Though perhaps conceivable as a victim of time and pedagogy ("A clock in his head was ticking on."³¹), Caldwell remains a detached and rational observer, from love to death which both, in this novel, intrude upon the rational world so abruptly. The fact of the argument precludes its own solution in artistic terms.

Peter, who is presented particularly in his own eroticism as a solution to the problem of dualism that is his half-flesh-half-spirit father, and who sees "mathematical fact" as meaningless in the face of reality, who sees theory as "too neat and too grim,"³² is nonetheless trapped himself by rationalism. He has also felt the despair of visual fixation, not only in his relationship to his father, but in a vision of nature whose rationalism recalls Hook looking at the land near the Delaware river. The passage is worth quoting in its entirety:

Peter pauses under the high light that guards the near corner of the parking lot. What he sees at his feet puzzles him. On the whiteness that has already fallen small dark spots are swarming like gnats. They dart this way and that and then vanish. There seems to be a center where they vanish. As his eyes travel outward he sees dots speeding toward this center; the further away they are, the faster they speed inward. He traces a few:

all vanish. The phenomenon seems totally ghostly. Then the constriction of his heart eases as the rational explanation comes to him. These are the shadows of snowflakes cast by the light above him. Directly under the light, the wavering fall of the particles is projected as an erratic oscillation, but away from the center, where the light rays strike obliquely, the projection parabolically magnifies the speed of the shadow as it hastens forward to meet its flake. The shadows stream out of infinity, slow, and, each darkly sharp in its last instant, vanish as their originals kiss the white plane. It fascinates him; he feels the universe in all its plastic and endlessly variable beauty pinned, stretched, crucified like a butterfly upon a frame of unvarying geometrical truth. As the hypotenuse approaches the vertical the lateral leg diminishes less and less rapidly: always. The busy snowflake shadows seem ants scurrying on the floor of a high castle made all of stone. He turns scientist and dispassionately tries to locate in the cosmography his father taught him an analogy between the phenomenon he has observed and the "red shift" whereby the stars appear to be retreating at a speed proportional to their distance from us. Perhaps this is a kindred illusion, perhaps--he struggles to picture it--the stars are in fact falling gently through a cone of observation of which our earthly telescopes are the apex. In truth everything hangs like dust in a foresaken attic. Passing on a few yards, to where the lamplight merges with the general agitated dimness, Peter does seem to arrive at a kind of edge where the speed of the shadows is infinite and a small universe both ends and does not end. His feet begin to hurt with being cold and wet and cosmic thoughts turn sickly in his mind. As if leaving a cramped room he restores his focus to the breadth of the town, where large travelling eddies sway and stride from the sky with a sort of ultimate health. 33

The above passage offers a good example of the non-selectivity of Updike's prose. That rational style might at first appear to indicate an indictment of rational vision, such as

was made of Conner's vision of the jet pinpointed against the background of a clear sky, particularly from the fact of Peter's ultimate nausea. Curiously, though, it is "the rational explanation" of this natural phenomenon that "eases... the constriction of his heart." That rational explanation is a visual focusing of the highest order which is paradoxically meant to make the phenomenon less "ghostly" and consequently more real.

It can also be argued that Peter's anxiety is the author's judgment upon him for his rational vision of nature. If this were so, however, there would be a distinct contradiction between comparing Peter to Conner, even at moments, and the author's obvious sympathy for him. The corollary of this argument is that Peter lapses momentarily into rational vision, in a lapse already precluded by its salutary effects, as part of a course of spiritual development. As the preceding chapter of this thesis has shown, however, there is no more development or progression in this novel than in any of the others. There is a consistently homogeneous neutrality throughout, and all protagonists end up where they began in any spiritual and moral sense.

The most obvious explanation for the scientific vision that is characteristic of this passage is the fact of style itself, of the neutral vision for its own sake. Peter's fascination with that vision is the reader's, but the fascination

remains more with a static analysis than with consciousness of a process that is secondary to that analysis. The static and the moving are themselves at odds in this passage, in spite of any possible thematic purpose. Unlike the author's use of that cold man-made jet set against a blank sky, an image that has already been contrasted with nature's "endlessly variable beauty" in The Poorhouse Fair, this paragraph provides an example of metaphors that are mixed and incapable of making a logical point that the theme of the novel requires. Such metaphors seem to describe nature as-it-is to the limits of perception, and analytical reason obscures the sense of the thing perceived.

Peter, later on in the novel, will stretch nature, like a butterfly, upon a frame, in a passage that reflects his attempts to be a part of the whole universe, a passage clearly intended to be a reaction against any tendencies towards rational dualism that he might have. The all-pervasive dualism that remains, however, is best seen first in the contrast made between the fact of Peter's constricted rational vision and the "breadth of the town, where large travelling eddies sway and stride from the sky with a sort of ultimate health." It is seen in the contrast implied between antlike snowflakes that scurry on a far colder "floor of a high castle made all of stone." Here is a contrast that could parallel the cruel logic or "unvarying geometrical truth" that crucified Nature's butterfly.

Nonetheless, the sudden appearance of busy ants in the midst of a geometrical analysis is a contrast that seems to have gotten out of hand.

Peter is already to have realised the fact of this crucifixion of Nature. He supposedly knows it is death. He continues his perceptions in abstraction all the same, fascinated like the reader by the very process of analogy for its own sake. That analogy conflicts with a non-scientific, irrational Nature wherever it is employed in contrast to the intensities of a cold and crucifying vision. He watches animate snowflakes "kiss" a white plane of logic. Stars that fall "gently through a cone of observation" are compared indirectly to a universe in which all "In truth...hangs like dust in a forsaken attic." Finally, even a softly health-giving "breadth" is incongruously focused upon like those gently falling stars that beg comparison with a world perceived through touch.

Peter's very perception of that snow, like his perception of his girlfriend, "every pore on her nose vivid,"³⁴ is meant, like Hook's vision of the variable riverside, and even beyond thematic purpose, to be a perception of the marvels of nature as-it-is, as if embellishment here went inward to nature's processes, rather than outward to man's abstraction of them:

Peter had forgotten what snow is. It is an immense whispering whose throat seems to be now here, now there. He looks at the sky and it answers his eyes with a mauve, a lilac,

a muffled yellow-pearl. Only after some moments of focusing does the downflow visually materialize for him, as an edge of a wing, and then an entire broadening wing of infinitesimal feathers, broadening into the realization that this wing is all about them and crowds the air to four hidden horizons and beyond. Wherever he looks, now that his eyes are attuned to its frequency, there is this vibration. The town and all its houses are besieged by a murmuring multitude. 35

This passage, immediately preceding Peter's logical vision, is already an association of visual focusing with the tactile softness of a bird's feather, of a mechanical frequency with a softer vibration and murmuring. The implication is that the visual perception that develops into rational explanation were the only way to ease the viewer's heart, as if it were equal to the softness of touch. As the process of describing nature becomes itself more visual, visual and non-visual modes of translating experience become all the more confused.

The analytical passage quoted above is preceded by a description of the feeling of snow on Peter's face, and is ended by a description of cold and wet on his feet. It is a description of a world perceived by touch. Peter is meant to have returned to a world thus perceived, a fact particularly evidenced by his reaction against his father's own analytical rationalism. "You make everything mean something it isn't," he charges. "Why? Why can't you relax?"³⁶ It would appear that Peter's perceptions themselves, visual or not, are what distinguish him from his father who is caught in the knot of naive

dualism. Perception of any sort, however, literary or not, need not be solely visual. Conner may be characterized as insensitive by staring at a blank sky. That Hook stared at more interesting subject matter ultimately makes little difference.

The paradox is this. Although Peter is himself finally reconciled to a world of erotic perceptions in the chapters preceding the last that begins, "My love, listen," his comfort remains in the detachment that logic has produced. The author implies one thing thematically, yet says it in such a way as to contradict that thematic purpose. Not only are the senses of touch and vision confused, but vision, rational vision, even subsumes touch, is used to describe it. In the passage that follows, a world of touch is not denied. Rather, it is perceived in a curious way. Here again is a comfort in detachment, a comfort that remains questionable in view of the consequences of the Cartesian experience. This is not the comfort that Elizabeth Heinemann experienced, yet is meant thematically to be analogous. This is more evident in view of the fact that this experience below is the turning point that evolves Peter completely into a world of tactile experience. Peter walks through a blizzard:

Somewhere deep in the opaque smoke Abe Cohn lies snug in his pillared mausoleum, Peter draws comfort from this knowledge. He glimpses an analogy with the way his own ego is sheltered under the

mineral dome of his skull. ...He becomes transparent: a skeleton of thoughts. Detached, amused, he watches his feet like blinded cattle slog dutifully through the drifted snow; the disparity between the length of their strides and the immense distance to Olinger is so great that a kind of infinity seems posited in which he enjoys enormous leisure. He employs this leisure to meditate upon the phenomenon of extreme physical discomfort. There is an excising simplicity in it. First, all thoughts of past and future are eliminated, and then any extension via the senses of yourself into the created world...the extremities of the body are disposed of...sensations seem to arrive from a great distance outside himself. 37

Detachment is indeed justified by the ever-present pain of cold. It nonetheless continues into pleasure. In the chapter that follows this passage, a world of comforting physical reality is presented as a solution to the detachment of mind from body that Peter's father exemplifies. Despite the presence of the warmth and simplicity of Vera Hummel's kitchen, of the sound of the storm, or the touch of a figurine, Peter still perceives reality with a marked degree of visual detachment. In a closer relationship with his father, and nature as well, his father and Hummel still appear "Framed in the windshield like the blurred comics of an old silent movie."³⁸ The image of a warm human past, like the image of the correct clock, is still far more rational and detached than the theme allows here. Wooded hills, even after a sensuous ordeal with the objective world, still "look like an etching,"³⁹ and a lake looks "like the back of a mirror."⁴⁰ Such language is not as

rational as it could be, but it is still the language of detached visual art that defies its theme.

Although the electric clocks have been "thrown out of right time" by the power failure that parallels a shift in perception, although Peter now enters a world of dreams, and although the point of view of the eighth chapter is a relaxing from a knot of psychic conflict, there is a strange mixture of the rational with the awareness of the need to escape that knot. Peter is lying in bed, looking out of the window at Nature in all her winter glory:

The two telephone wires diagonally cut the blank blue of the sky. The stone bare wall was a scumble of umber; my father's footsteps thumbs of white in white. I knew what this scene was-- a patch of Pennsylvania in 1947--and yet I did not know, was in my softly fevered state mindlessly soaked in a rectangle of colored light. I burned to paint it, just like that, in its puzzle of glory; it came upon me that I must go to Nature disarmed of perspective and stretch myself like a large transparent canvas upon her in the hope that, my submission being perfect, the imprint of a beautiful and useful truth would be taken. 41

The contrast between diagonals, rectangles, and a submissive relaxing of a hard-focused perspective is not apparent as long as an irrational Nature is seen in rational terms, crucified itself like a butterfly by geometrical abstractions. In a sequence of pure description, markedly detached from any attempts to ascribe it thematically to any character, the author himself describes lockers that "dwindle to an insane perspective

of zero,"⁴² as if this were just another description of things-as-they-are, neutrally transcribed. There is much more description which, while neutral in content, is not neutral in the specifics of its description. Like Peter, the author's technical view of a non-technical world is inescapable, non-selective, and only comprehensible in the light of the all-pervasive theme of alienation, detachment and despair that has been described in the preceding chapter of this thesis. The remainder of the present chapter will define the extent of rational vision, of the thing seen clearly, that is itself an integral factor of the author's theme, while alien to his expression of it.

"Foreshorten" is a peculiar verb that occurs with a quite amazing degree of frequency in Updike's prose. Conner sees "people foreshortened on grass,"⁴³ in addition to seeing them simultaneously in abstract distance in his cupola as "bugs."⁴⁴ While Rabbit appreciates, rather incongruously, "the fine machinery of this beautiful life," he additionally sees the nurse who delivers his redeeming blessed event as wearing a "foreshortened" smile.⁴⁵ A stonewalled cliff is "foreshortened to the narrowness of a knife."⁴⁶ Girls seen through an "icy glass" are "foreshortened into patches of plaid, fur, books, and wool."⁴⁷ The atomization that goes with vision recalls the way in which Rabbit, capable of focusing upon a distant moon,⁴⁸ can also see Ruth's legs as "separate

things" not part of a whole.⁴⁹ Looking through a window, he too saw his son's "foreshortened hand"⁵⁰ that is really only a minor addition compared to the atomized view of him that just precedes this detail. "Foreshortening" is most frequently closely associated with a breakdown of wholeness, an inability to capture a naturally integrated life. In a scene in which a living parakeet contrasts--as Lucas tries in vain to capture him--with "four staring corners as sharp as knives," the out-buildings as well are described as having "foreshortened fronts,"⁵¹ Tothero, ex-coach to Rabbit who fears approaching him, also appears "foreshortened."⁵²

This is the language of the artist, a mechanical creation of a rational perspective that attempts to reproduce reality. In all the above cases, there is undoubtably a sense of distance, alienation, and despair. Peter himself, preferring ideal or visual reality to "real" or tangible reality is, himself, detached to say the least. He prefers the idyllic setting of the museum, yet after observing a snake swallow a whole field mouse in a rather aesthetic "nature appreciation" class, he does not return for a second lesson.⁵³

Peter's aestheticism, or idealized detachment, is seen in his worship of Vermeer, a painter of "heavenly and cool" pictures with no rough edges, whom he wants to emulate.⁵⁴ Here is an aestheticism, a concern with pattern, common to the author himself. With the artistic technique of foreshortening, a

geometrical method of creating an illusion of depth, however, comes a vast array of technical, and technological, imagery. The thematic purpose of number as an abstraction of experience has become the stylistic technique of the geometrical (of which alphabetical imagery is a subcategory) and mechanical metaphor.

One of the most basic principles of geometry is that of symmetry, and it recurs in Updike's prose in the form of these "symmetrical pictures" hung on Mrs. Springer's wall.⁵⁵ Mr. Angstrom, putting his arm around his daughter's waist, makes a "fine picture" in "incongruous symmetry."⁵⁶ Still, the language of geometry is much more complicated than this, as it can already be seen that it does not confine itself to inanimate objects alone.

The scene in Hummel's garage where Caldwell is about to get his mechanically incongruous arrow removed offers a fine example of a technical world seen in technical terms. Caldwell's vision is unerringly Cartesian. Like Peter in the cold, he too is trying to avoid pain, but oddly contributes to it, as the consequences of his mind-body dualism have shown:

As the string of the helium balloon slips from a child's absentminded fingers, so fear set Caldwell's mind floating free. In his dizzy abstraction he tried to analyze the cutters as a diagram: mechanical advantage equals load over force less friction. Length of lever AF (fulcrum=nut) over length FB, B being biting point of gleaming crescent jaw, multiplied by secondary mechanical advantage of accessory fulcrum-lever complex, in turn multiplied by mechanical advantage of Hummel's calm and grimy

workman's hand, clenching action of contracting flexors and rigid phalanges five-old, MAXMAX5Ma=titanic. 57

Interestingly, as in Peter's case, this rational vision is no different from that of the author's style itself when left to its own devices. This is a significant point indeed. A tale becomes later a "prism,"⁵⁸ much as the character Chiron-Caldwell, even in the ecstasies of sensual rapture, makes "exact researches into the lime-flower's quiet honey,"⁵⁹ even as Hook, in a moment of childish and dreamy reverie, wanders "among the rectilinear path of a pattern of a quilt."⁶⁰

A "slash of sun...slowly knifes down, cuts across [Rabbit's] chest," creating "unfamiliar planes."⁶¹ A goblet is a "knobbed hemisphere,"⁶² as toilet water is seen in terms of its "oval" shape.⁶³ A street lamp "burns shadows into the inner planes" of an armchair.⁶⁴ Smoke rings "interpenetrate"⁶⁵ with a clarity reminiscent of the "perfect green circle" of the steering wheel of Rabbit's car.⁶⁶ Houses, in addition to being "fortresses of cement" in a world of numbers ("There are a dozen three-storey homes, and each has two doors. The seventh door is his"),⁶⁷ in a landscape in which mountains are seen as a "ring of cutouts,"⁶⁸ become later mere "stuccoed cubes" surrounded by "round and rectangular and octagonal advertisements."⁶⁹

This is a justifiable means of describing an inanimate technological world. The use of the abstract metaphor, however,

is not merely limited to the inanimate. Indeed, it finds a more frequent use in descriptions of animate beings and relations between them. Like Rabbit, who has always had a touch with objects, ("He's a natural.")⁷⁰ the author carries over a marked ability to deal with the inanimate world to his treatment of the animate world of variable process. Like Rabbit, he too must be "fretted" by the knot of rational thought, by "his conscious attention with an almost optical overlay of presences"⁷¹ that must consequently create itself the nightmare world of alienation and detachment that is his theme.

Not merely cigar ashes are "cones," but dying people as well are seen as "cones";⁷² human voices are "metallic,"⁷³ and their words are "angular."⁷⁴ Eyes are seen as "metal studs"⁷⁵ or "arcs,"⁷⁶ faces are like "balloons,"⁷⁷ and mouths are like "letter slots."⁷⁸ Life itself is called an "arc,"⁷⁹ and love between man and woman is described as "the mechanism of their union."⁸⁰ Individuals are "images...mirrored in symmetry,"⁸¹ and meet "at incompatible angles."⁸²

These mechanical metaphors are certainly pertinent in an artistic vision of a mechanical world, particularly when Conner views people as

...triangles and rhomboids flashingly formed
by the intersection of legs and torsos
scissoring in sport, and the modulated angles
of nude thoracic regions...⁸³

Like the technician Kenneth in Couples who sees human relations

as mere "chemical bonds,"⁸⁴ Rabbit is indeed justified in seeing his "object" Ruth in geometrical and metallic terms, for the description is apparently merely a device to emphasize his alienation:

Her face, seen so close, is built of great flats of skin pressed clean of color by the sun, except for a burnish of yellow that adds to their size mineral weight, the weight of some pure ungrained stone carted straight from quarries to temples. Words come from this monumental Ruth in the same scale, as massive wheels rolling to the porches of his ears, as mute coins spinning in the light. 85

There is, all the same, considerable evidence that this style is non-selective, and not necessarily focused at revealing her coldness. Ruth and Rabbit are particularly close in this scene, and the air itself is "crystalline," and "the checker pattern of the pool floor is refracted to its surface."⁸⁶ The scene is reminiscent, in its mixture of sympathy and mechanical metaphor, of organic and non-organic, of the scene in The Centaur in which Peter observed the fall of snowflakes. Even a minimum of color involves a qualitative judgment, and the purity of stone, as well as the non-quantitative spiritual implications of "temple", preclude a solely dehumanizing thematic position. In a synesthetic confusion of touch and intellect, human and object are nonetheless seen with the same eye that sees all things--not just negative things, but all things neutral and even positive in their thematic content--with a rational vision.

For example, Hook, though certainly not meant to be a

rationalist as he looks at the quilt that reminds him of a distant, innocent, and pre-rational childhood, nonetheless "studies" the cloth with the "thin arcs of his eyes."⁸⁷ Even Caldwell-Chiron, the man-god who perceives the need for touch as well as the agony of numbers, sees with a "litmus eye" and analyses with "the chemistry of his thought"⁸⁸ a natural scene that is thematically presented as a counterbalance to a rational technological world. Nature itself, then, continues to be quantified even when used to oppose unnatural reason. Stylistically, the land that Hook sees near the Delaware River has little to distinguish it from that jet plane seen against the blank sky. Like Peter, Hook paradoxically finds "satisfaction" and comfort in a precise vision of the "patterned spheres" of an orchard. A style that itself parallels Conner's own rational vision is incapable of distinguishing the nature of its object, and sees animate and inanimate alike in coldly rational terms.

The very fact of such a visually biased rational style goes hand in hand, then, with the theme, that runs through these novels, of despair and detachment. Within the confines of such rationalism, only a dualistic argument that places the irrational against the rational, itself a rational argument that depends upon abstraction, can exist. The style itself is not appropriate to the author's theme, a fact that becomes clear in a description of the west wing of the poorhouse, while

the activities of the poorhouse fair are "flattened in the plane of shadow."

All the energy used for moans and talk was consumed in the reception, by tiny discs of sensitive plate embedded in faces in turn embedded in pillows, of the horizontal rays of the daily omen. Orange bars streamed parallel to the beds; from the peaks on the sheets conic shadows fell upward, towards heads and shoulders, slashing linen which was, in the contrast, faint green-blue. Sunset in the summer was framed between two horsethestnut trees; in winter one tree obscured it, fretting its unpredictable colors with a system of twigs that never changed. Tonight, a bank of gray, like washed slate upon which the schoolchild's sun had been pasted, sloped upward into purple, and changed to soft cloth, undulating in long even folds as if crimped for display. At the horizon stood the thunderheads of the storm that had passed. Diminished by distance and pierced by light, they seemed transparent. The air was unmarked except by blue outlines, dividing a gray that was cool from one within that was (heightened in the sky's superior scale of luminescence) the same dull lilac Hook had observed shining through the ears of the rabbit on the grass beyond the wall. 89

This is a description of considerable interest. Even if this passage is assumed to be more than a mere description of nature as-it-is, its quantifying dualism remains its most important feature. Any combination, in any case, of a description of nature with its use as a part of a rational, dualistic argument is self-contradictory, and leaves the reader with the problem of deciding which to take seriously, the description of natural effects or the argument that must be alien to them.

Here there are two kinds of nature. "Unpredictable

colors" contrasts curiously with an unchanging "system of twigs," as if both could not exist together. Similarly, the sky is divided into part artificial cut-out (visual), and part "soft cloth" (tactile). The air outside is coldly outlined, and contrasts with an apparently organic and touchable lilac that recalls the living rabbit. The contrasts running through this passage reveal that this scene in its entirety, a scene of internal subjective warmth, is meant to oppose the artificiality of the crowds in the world outside. The west wing is quiet. The room is entered softly by a nurse named Grace, who is described as "an angel" wearing a "love dress." Those "cones," though, despite describing a phenomenon as natural as color, have indeed little to distinguish them from the horror of hospital equipment already demonstrated. Even nature here appears unnatural and harsh. Once a mathematical or symbolic construct is placed over it, once it is seen with the clarity that rational analysis at first appears to provide, it must inevitably succumb to the consequences of that rational vision. A cone remains a cone, in spite of what it describes. While meant to show horror in something thematically meant to be seen negatively, it will do the same for the thing meant to be seen neutrally, and the thing meant to be seen positively as well. A highly rational, symbolic way of seeing must inevitably reduce all it sees to the level of the process itself, to the cold mechanics of that process that sees and sees alone.

Further proof of the homogeneity and inescapable all-pervasiveness of a linear, rational style is best found in those descriptions where more obviously positive aspects of largely pessimistic novels are implied. Rabbit, before he runs out on his family, sees the head of his son as no different from the kitchen objects that surround it:

The boy's little neck gleams like one more clean object in the kitchen among the cups and plates and chromium knobs and aluminum cake-making receptacles on shelves scalloped with glossy oilcloth. 90

It is possible, considering Rabbit's despair at the time, to justify such a cold description as a means of paralleling his world-view. Nonetheless, in scenes obviously meant to be affectionate, mathematical or geometrically symbolic quantification persists.

The neck of his son, in a scene of tender affection for his still absent father, "seems a stem too thin to support the ball of his skull with its broad whorl of pillow-mussed hair."⁹¹ There is something paradoxical, certainly, in view of the overall theme of escape from rigid order into freedom, in writing of the new baby that arrives after Rabbit's love for his wife has been renewed if only temporarily ("...he considers himself happy, lucky, blessed, forgiven, and wants to give thanks.")⁹², in describing a suckling child and mother in a rather tender scene as follows: "The union of breast and baby's face makes a globular symmetry to which he [Rabbit] and Nelson [his son]

want to attach themselves."⁹³ In short, here is the same language that has in so many instances been invoked to describe horror and alienation. Rabbit's sympathy for the new baby is described later on in the book, even as he is about to run. That sympathy, as well as his self-sympathy for the failure of others to understand him, is clear.

The tiny soft marbled body, weightless as paper, goes stiff against his chest and then floppy, its hot head rolling as if it will unjoint from its neck. "Becky, Becky, Becky," he says, "go to sleep. Sleep. Sleep, Sleep." ⁹⁴

This might at first appear a reflection of Rabbit's distance, occasioned by guilt (of which he has already apparently been relieved), or a means of further describing his coldness, or the ineffectualness of his love.

The same baby, dead, is described later however, when the protagonist has apparently repented for good, renounced his "gap of guilt" between himself and humanity.⁹⁵ "He feels he will never resist anything again,"⁹⁶ he says. He is ready to give up the world of logic and order for a world of touch and faith.

The angular words walk in Harry's head like clumsy blackbirds; he feels their possibility. Eccles doesn't; his face is humorless and taut. His voice is false. All these people are false: except his dead daughter, the white box with gold trim...Harry's eyes fill with tears. It is as if at first the tears are everywhere about him, a sea, and that at last the saltwater gets into his eyes. His daughter is dead; June has gone from him; his heart swims in grief, that had skimmed over it before, dives deeper and deeper

into the limitless volume of loss. Never hear her cry again, never see her marbled skin again and watch for the blue knives of her eyes to widen at his words. Never, the word stops, there is never a gap in its thickness. 97

In spite of an obvious contradiction between "angular words" and an irrationally baptismal purge of logic from his heart that is the key to this scene that precedes Rabbit's ultimate running, this beloved baby has "marbled skin" and eyes like "blue knives." While not purely symbolic, these metaphors, in their objectification of the animate, perform the same function. Piet Hanema, in a scene in Couples, tenderly and almost baptismally holds a baby:

A pearly quiet blessed its vicinity and the windows giving on the frost-charred marsh--- seemed to frame images thrown from within, by a magic lantern centered on the infant's untinted soul. 98

Lest the rather abrupt contrast between the supernatural and the mechanical be mistaken, the baby has "eyes the color of basalt" and the muscles in his forehead "bulged like elastic levers."

Quantification continues with even more positive incidents and aspects. Vera Hummel, analog to the erotic and hardly rational Venus in The Centaur, is described in terms of "the gold and copper bits of her that glitter through the intervening jostle of bodies" of an oscillating and atomized crowd, and "arrive chinking" at a spectator's eyes.⁹⁹ The erotic--and it is this that brings this part of the discussion full circle--

which Updike offers as a solution to the rationalist dilemma, is itself rational and quantified.

The mechanization of Eros is more complex, in Rabbit, Run, than the voyeuristic love-making through a car window first introduced in The Poorhouse Fair. For all its future complexity, it remains mechanization. Rabbit, Run first introduces the erotic in the role of solution to the unravelling of the knot of logic. "You're such good news," says Rabbit to Ruth, who at least delivers him from one form of despair. The geometrical and mechanical nature of the descriptive passage that follows, however, is paradoxically at odds with the irrational love that is at issue: "Across from him her broad pelvis, snug in a nubbly brown skirt, is solid and symmetrical as the base of a powerful column. His heart rises through that strong column."¹⁰⁰ This passage does not even concern itself with sexual mechanics, but, even more abstractedly, describes qualitative human emotion. A desire to make love is later described as "like a small angel to which all afternoon tiny lead weights are attached."¹⁰¹ Such a metaphor inspires alienating horror indeed.

Couples, though, is the novel that defines most accurately the consequences of developing the dialectical theme of rationality in contrast with sensuality that was first outlined in Elizabeth Heinemann's encounter with Stephen Conner. Here, the quantification of the positive and the sensual, a quantification

recalling Peter's "calculating" approach to love,¹⁰² becomes most evident and most incongruous.

Eros, like Elizabeth's mist and Peter's snow, presents an escape from a world of cold objects, symmetry, and mechanical and codified relationships that forms the setting of Couples. Eros is the logical extension of Elizabeth's non-visual perception. It is to be understood, of course, that a literary sense of the erotic can only be conveyed by imagery. The more mechanical, rational, and visual (in the most refined aspects of the process of vision to which the symbol is confined) a conveyance of a sense of the erotic becomes, the more that conveyance defeats its own purpose and distracts the reader from its subject. The more a description of the erotic depends upon rational terminology, the less erotic it becomes. The problem of describing subjective emotion in physically and mathematically quantified terms becomes apparent in a passage such as the following that describes Rabbit in motion, a motion reflecting his subjective state: "As he climbs the stairs, the steps seem to calibrate, to restrain by notches, a helpless tendency in his tear-puffed body to rise."¹⁰³

Here is an objectification of the individual to a mechanical world, a definition in mechanical terms of human emotion that is to a large degree justifiable by the immediate context. In Couples, though, something as subjective as the erotic finds itself quantified with no immediate relationship

to the external environment at all, wherein a rational vision exists apparently for its own sake alone, and ultimately de-emphasizes any expression of the erotic because of its direct contrast to it. In a curious mixture of touch and rational vision, a woman is described as follows: "Suddenly she felt to be all circles, circles that could be parted to yield more circles."¹⁰⁴ The application of an abstract geometrical form to the human is a rational conceit that implies a contradictory coldness. Coldness, however, is by no means meant to be implied by such a passage, no more than it is in an innocent physical description of music (Debussy's) seen in visual terms as "translucent sheets," during a scene in which a lover tenderly leaves a woman's bed "like a spy unsticking an envelope," and in which "the fabric of the night itself was showing fragility, crumbling into brown particles of distinct visual detail."¹⁰⁵

Sex, in a moment of party fantasy, is described as "someone doing mathematical calculations with chalk on the broad part of one thigh" of a headless idol "overgrown with vines" in one visionary, almost humorous moment.¹⁰⁶ It is no less mathematically described, no less detached and atomized, in the author's more serious moments. In the passage below, Piet and Angela make love:

Unspeaking also, lest the spell break, he would dare mirror her caress, discovering her night-gown, usually an opaque and entangling obstacle, transparent, rotten, sliding and falling from

her flesh like deteriorated burial cloth
from a body resurrected in its strength. 107

Love is nearby described as "an insistent symmetry,"
adding to the general confusion of quantity and quality.

Piet's new love, Foxy, is described in one instance in
sensual and mystical terms:

Foxy was in the dream, though not visibly; her
presence, like the onflow of grace, like a
buried stream singing from well to well, ran
beneath the skin of dreaming as beneath
reality, a living fragility continually
threatened. 108

One can see her in contrast to the rigid, idealistic Angela
who, like Conner, stares at fixed stars, who is often described
as an "ideal" and overly solid "mechanism".¹⁰⁹ However, as
has been already demonstrated, Updike's technological style is
highly nonselective, as can be seen clearly in a description
of Piet and Foxy making love, more metaphysical than physical.
Her belly is a "bright drum taut as the curve of the ocean above
the massed watch springs of blond hair. Her navel inverted.
Their lovemaking lunar, revolving frictionless around the planet
of her womb."¹¹⁰

Even Piet is himself objectified in the most tender of
moments, and the paradoxical conflict of the sense of touch
and of vision is most explicitly defined in a sentence in which
Foxy's "finger had trespassed from his hair to the sensitive
terrain of his face, taut planes she explored as if blind."¹¹¹
In addition to inviting comparison to those other cold planar

faces of so many of the novel's characters who do cold things with their lives, here is a conflict of the blindly sensual and the visually rational. The precision of "taut planes" precludes the vagueness of touch. There are no planes for the blind man. The objective legal terminology of "trespass" and the scientific objectivity of "terrain" conflict with the fact of a finger as well as with mention of sensitivity. The paradoxical confusion in an argument that depends upon a presentation of sensual life as a solution to the anxiety of rational dualism becomes even humorous when a woman's buttocks are described as "narrow and nipped in like the responsive little wheels at the front of a tractor."¹¹² The author himself suggests later that "The bodies of women are puzzle pieces,"¹¹³ evidence of a despairing detachment once found in the poorhouse hospital.

Piet, a rational "Aristotelian" as the author calls him, is certainly in a "knot"¹¹⁵ like Rabbit found himself in, torn between sense and idealistic intellect. He finds "joy in being rectangularly enclosed,"¹¹⁶ indeed, but it is the use the author makes of the carpenter image that best describes an attempt at the fusion of tactility with a need for rational order that creates that knot. With a sort of spiritual and moral cubism, Piet's

...mind moved through images of wood, patient
pale widths waiting for the sander, intricate
joints finished with steel wool and oil,
rounded pieces fitted with dowels, solid yet

soft with that placid, suspended semblance
of life wood retains. 117

Here is the source of his knot and fear, and of the conflict that extends through four of John Updike's novels, closely aligned with death and despair. Piet, though trying to enter a world of touch, "calculated he must do something acrobatic" in an attempt to retain his wife's love.¹¹⁸ It is still the very calculation itself that is the source of his estrangement. He too, like Conner, is an idealist, whose mind moves not so much through wood as in a straight line through space. "Imagine straight lines," he thinks, about to make love.¹¹⁹

In addition to Flick Webb's gas pumps, there is an abundant use of alphabetical symbolism, seen in the "V" necklines, "S" shaped cufflinks, "L" shaped rooms, "X" shaped intersections, and "N", "T", "M" and "H" shaped houses that reflect the ABC's of linear argument.¹²⁰ The equations, lists, and other abstract and categorical metaphors that occur so often in Updike's prose are, while evidence of an attention to things-as-they-are, nonetheless symptomatic of a larger overall tendency to symbolize that defeats a sense of the thing perceived. Though the author is conscious of the need for a solution to the conflicts provoked by the contact of human beings with a world of objects and an overall process of objectification that has been called the curse of our age, though he can see man-made telephone poles as "A better fit than the Nature it replaces,"¹²¹

though he can anthropomorphize inanimate objects (note his "walking storms,"¹²² "unconscious mail sacks,"¹²³ the cable that is "so alive,"¹²⁴ gym lockers that experience "terror"¹²⁵ bannisters like "cats,"¹²⁶ an automobile that acts as if it "had tried to speak,"¹²⁷ and that amazing swimming pool, very much like a living thing, that "was the hero here."¹²⁸), though he can reconcile man to the non-human, his largely rational wit often continues on its own momentum. The gasoline pumps too were anthropomorphized, yet the abstract and the symbolic, the essence of rational wit, tends to take precedence when invoked, by virtue of the absoluteness of its form. Curiously enough, if a machine is to have nostrils that are S's, and eyes that are E's and O's, it is the symbolic image that is going to linger in the reader's mind, not the fact that a machine has been given nostrils and eyes. The final impression is that it is not like us (unless we are made of alphabetical symbols), but that we are like it. That same fearfully abstracting power of numbers that the author is aware of does more in its way to dehumanize Flick Webb (sic) than to humanize gasoline pumps. Updike's poem, "Seagulls", offers a further example of this process. His description of a bird is disjointed, metaphorical, and rational.

A gull, up close,
looks surprisingly stuffed.
His fluffy chest seems filled
with an inexpensive taxidermist's material

rather lumpishly inserted. The legs,
unbent, are childish crayon strokes--
to simple to be workable. 129

There is, of course, nothing inherently wrong with such a description, except that here is not a bird but an argument, a factor of the existential argument outlined in the preceding chapter. The intelligent bird's "ectomorphic head" suggests "deskwork" and Cartesian man as the poem later shows. A distinct contrast, then, is made between these birds and the wholeness of non-intellectual love in the form of "young couples" who, standing in the "rhythmic glass" that oddly is the sea, are "tugging as if at a secret between them" that is curiously reminiscent of planetary love. The power of a full love to dispell the schizophrenia of raw intellect is then made clear, for these lovers

walk capricious paths through the scattering gulls,
as in some mythologies
beautiful gods stroll unconcerned
among our mortal apprehension. 129a

Mortal apprehension, then, is rational "deskwork" that is found in a world of words. Whole love, like faith, is capricious and mythical, but that integral love is sacrificed at the expense of birds who are also asked to be seen as qualitatively different from young lovers, much as Piet saw God as different and apart from Nature.¹³⁰ Both birds and lovers, however, are quantitatively equal, both tug in a knot near a sea of "rhythmic glass."

This is the apprehensive dilemma. The author, though conscious of the difference between rational thought and faith, of the split seen clearly again in the above poem, between mind and body in those birds that recall the brachycephalic fairgoers, seems to be caught in his own rational vision. Of Rabbit, in his search for a disentanglement from the knot of logic, he says, recalling Sisyphus reconciled to his rock, "this--these trees, this pavement--was life, the real and only thing."¹³¹ Tree and pavement are just that, unquantified or unqualified in their general nonspecific simplicity. The same solution, an intuitively "pagan" mistress, is offered Peter. In the same fashion Caldwell was touched by Hummel the mechanic and the hobo-cook who both worked with their hands, as does Piet Hanema, the carpenter running from a world of rational mechanism. All these are rational arguments themselves, of course, relating to the dualistic thesis nature of that initial contrast between visionary Conner and blind believing Elizabeth.

Updike's "solution" is itself disjointed, and this is perhaps best seen in the structure of The Centaur, starting with the definition of the position of man caught between heaven and earth and the dualistic nature of Chiron-Caldwell. In the role of solution that gives the book its very meaning, mythic and non-rational modes of perception are presented as a factor in a dualistic argument. Venus as Goddess of Love,

and the supposed tactility of the intuitive underworld that is Hummel's garage, are both offered in opposition to the intellectual world of the teacher. The sensuality of the mythic scenes is quite obviously an escape from a world of detached objects seen with a despair-provoking rational vision. That intuitive sensuality has its most obvious introduction as one side of an argument in Caldwell's abrupt encounter with Venus. The reader, just prior to this encounter, has learned about "his eyes worn by correcting papers in the boiler room." Here are the oral, tactile, and non-intellectual aspects of a world that is mythic and pre-rational Greece, a world destroyed by science. Here is an allegory of the Fall into reason, of a longing for the past.

Hitherto everything in Nature had been kind to Man.
Every species of berry had been gently aphrodisiac,
and coming from Pelion at a canter he had spied the young
Chariclo gathering watercress. 132

The movement of the entire book, even to the very end when Chiron is released from knowledge and set in the mythical world of the stars, is to recover a non-rational paradise. The meaning of this "other-world" as a means of escape is made even clearer in the cataloguing of the flowers, herbs and spices that Chiron canters through: "a vigorous underworld of arbutus, wild pear, carnel, box, and andrachne filled with scents of flower and sap and new twig the middle air of the forest,"¹³³ recalling the nature that Rabbit escapes to, that

Hook remembers. The very mythical symmetry, or juxtaposition of elements in The Centaur, however, becomes itself symbolic, abrupt and harsh, as the glossary of mythical parallels in the back of the novel attests. The introduction of myth into a world supposedly non-mythic is itself non-mythic and rational, more concretely symbolic than allegorical even, and is itself part of a rational and dualistic argument. Peter-Prometheus starts a chapter, "As I lay on my rock," and it is not the rock of Sisyphus.¹³⁴ The chapter itself is qualified by realism, by detail of life as-it-is, but reality, or even an illusion of it, has been sacrificed like the seagull. As long as Vera is to be seen as Venus, Hummel as Hephaestus, Doc Appleton as Apollo, or even Isidore Osgood as Io, then alphabetical symbolism remains in direct conflict with an attempt at reconciliation, confusing the process of "seeing" with what is.

Couples offers a more explicit example and a good definition of a baroque and largely ornamental pattern of symbolism that overlays what appears to be an acute perception of reality. Here is symbolism as it is best understood, wherein not only does something stand for something other than itself, but stands for a larger process as well. It would not be difficult to mistake, in Rabbit, Run, the meaning of the juxtaposition of Ruth and Rabbit's profane love with the church opposite their bedroom. Nor is it difficult, in Couples,

to mistake references to parallels of Piet's spiritual situation with fallen Adam. The burning of the church here, "struck by God's own lightning,"¹³⁵ is an unmistakable though paradoxical allegory of the Death of God as well as the chastisement of sin. A phallic gilded weathercock, in more of a paradox, survives the flames that destroy the hollow walls of the church. This destruction is itself an existential affirmation, in a curious and self-contradictory way, of an end of a rational God (by the hand of a rational God Who works in symbolic patterns) and of a need for an intuitive life that will offer release from these rational symbols. There is a multitude of incidents in this novel that demand reading in a larger symbolic context, contradictions notwithstanding.

There is the pick-up truck that says "WASH ME" while Piet, awaiting an apocalypse of storm and fire, thinks of his alienating guilt.¹³⁶ There is the use of "Divinity," "Hope," "Faith" and "Charity" Streets, from the latter of which Piet is "estranged,"¹³⁷ There is the use of rationally patterned party games to show how cold and mechanized modern man has become. There is the use of the name "Tarbox" to imply a trap, the name "Angela" to imply idealism, as well as "Piet Hanema," the carpenter, as a pious Christlike soul (anima) in search of himself. There is the caged hamster as a symbol of death and the futile despair that is the lot of modern man. There is the greenhouse as a transcendental church of organic nature.

There is indeed the strong suggestion, recalling the cities that sit like a two-headed dog as Rabbit once turned from the town of Paradise to dissolution in the South, that much of Updike's prose is to be read as allegory, as part of a larger structure, rather than for its mere attention to things and experience. The first chapter of this thesis has shown, however, that direct perception of experience, and the perception of experience through rational process, must be at odds with each other.

It might be argued that these details do exist only in themselves, represent themselves alone, and are only a part of a detailed and acute description of reality as it is, were it not for the fact that the pervasive quality of Updike's art is that nothing exists in itself, that all is quantified, that all is, in its way, a rational argument against rationalism, and that to read the broadly rational beyond the minutely rational is an unnecessary digression when all meaning is inherent in the smallest aspects of style. Symbolism can consequently only be in conflict with a thematic attempt to show the dangers of symbolic or rational thinking. The conflict arises when both demand understanding simultaneously. In the event of a conflict, as in a description of that alienating "corrugated glass divider (ASG mfg., 1" thickness overall),"¹³⁸ the symbolic will always take precedence. Even the apparently realistic detail of a number is a quantifiable

aspect of rationalism in its highest form, as has been previously demonstrated. The detail is itself thematically expressive of alienation, and an attempt to imply alienation further by the description of a glass divider between Piet and his business associate is redundant.

Rationalism is the characteristic of John Updike's art, his "elegant, sharp-eyed wit" and sense of pattern. The purpose of this thesis has been to show that the fixed vision and perspective of rationalism goes hand in hand with the content of his novels, but in an unexpected way. Rationalism seems to be contributing, as the first chapter of this thesis has shown, to that overall thematic sense of despair. It certainly does for Caldwell:

His conversation with Hummel was making Caldwell anxious. A clock in his head was ticking on; the school called to him urgently. Disjointed music seemed to be tugging at Hummel's exhausted face. Images of loose joints, worn thread, carbon deposits, fatigued metal webbed across Caldwell's apprehension of his old friend: Are we falling apart? in his own mind a gear kept slipping... 139

This is the image of technological man in technological time. However, to perceive with reason the world created by reason, "as if truth were a secret in such low solution that only immensity can give us a sensible taste,"¹⁴⁰ to quantify the qualifiable without readjustment is, it would seem, to expect the knot of reason, and ensuing alienation, detachment and despair.

Like the conflict between sexual experience and such a

description as "like a lens he opened, and like a blinded skier lost himself on the slopes of her presence"¹⁴¹ which bears the seeds of conflict in the very description itself, the conflict between quality and quantity, between reality and symbol is, like the image of the right-angled tactile carpenter, the paradox and Knot of John Updike's art. Rabbit has a vivid dream that describes the consequences of rationalism:

He is alone on a large sporting field, or vacant lot, littered with small pebbles. In the sky two perfect disks, identical in size but the one a dense white and the other slightly transparent, move toward each other slowly; the pale one is directly above the dense one. At the moment they touch he feels frightened and a voice like over a loudspeaker at a track announces, "The cowslip swallows up the elder." The downward gliding of the top one continues steadily until the other, though the stronger, is totally eclipsed, and just one circle is before his eyes, pale and pure. He understands: "the cowslip" is the moon, and "the elder" the sun, and that what he had witnessed is the explanation of death: lovely life eclipsed by lovely death. With great excitement he must go forth from this field and found a new religion. 142

Rational order is, for Updike, the solution to the problem created by rational order, as is best seen in a poem of his entitled "Mobile of Birds," recalling Piet Hanema's ultimate faith in a rational order in things.

There is something
in their planetary weave that is comforting.

The polycentric orbits, elliptical
with mutual motion,

random as nature, and yet, above all,
 calculable, recall
 those old Ptolemaic heavens small
 enough for the Byzantine Trinity,
 Plato's Ideals,
 formal devotion,
 seven levels of bliss, and numberless wheels
 of omen, balanced occultly. 143

If the response of the Existentialists was correct and appropriate, then death itself lies in the "loveliness" or aestheticism of pattern and the abstract vision itself, and the new religion is one of touch and true faith, as Updike himself is aware. Though the answer has been revealed, however, it has never been resolved, for even Rabbit's end, like Peter's and Piet's, brings him back to a "vacant field," a stage of empty aesthetic detachment from the natural world. Rabbit is still, at the very end, "tripped" and sparked by an illusion. His very running, "an effortless gathering out of a kind of sweet panic growing lighter and quicker and quieter",¹⁴⁴ is the panic of detached aesthetic vision.

Appendix A

Both Coleridge and Arnold offer interesting illustrations, as well as historical literary evidence, of the consequences of visual bias and the fixed perspective. Coleridge writes in his "Dejection: An Ode." (1802).

And still I gaze--and with how blank an eye!
And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
That give away their motion to the stars;
Those stars, that glide behind them or between,
Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen:
Yon crescent Moon, as fixed as if it grew
In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue;
I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!

("Dejection: An Ode," lines 30-38)

He cannot pin down the source of the anxiety that possesses yet severs him, cannot attach it to any definite object. It is

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief,
In word, or sigh, or tear-- (21-24).

Nonetheless, Coleridge's malady, like that consistent malady of Updike's protagonists, is closely aligned with his means of perceiving the world. The mind that sees the moon "fixed as if it grew/In its own cloudless, starless, lake of blue," has been abstracted from the heart.

Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" reveals a similar means of perception:

The sea is calm tonight.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits--on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
(1-5)

Arnold's perception here of moon, light, and vast cliffs, is extremely similar to Coleridge's perception of the moon as an isolated object floating in a sea of background stillness, detached from an all-encompassing realm of touch of which

vision is merely a part. Arnold, as might be expected, is simultaneously alienated. Thus the world which for Arnold "seems/To lie before us like a land of dreams/ So various, so beautiful, so new," and which not merely incidentally "Hath really neither certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain," is precisely what the author says it is: unreal, distant, and abstract, in which the "Sea of Faith," or the world of integral tactility, has justifiably withdrawn. The speaker, in the vernacular, is "out of touch."

Both poets, as also might be expected, are aware like Updike of the solution. Coleridge's release from anxiety comes with his realisation that "I may not hope from outward forms to win/The passion and the life, whose fountains are within," and that "we receive but what we give." With recognition of the need for man to be in balance with himself and nature through a sense of touch that is reciprocal with the external world of sense, he finally discovers a sensual joy in "life's effluence, cloud at once and shower," that recalls the misty sense of all-encompassing touch to which Updike's character Elizabeth Heinemann once testified.

Arnold's Scholar Gypsy, who flees "this strange disease of modern life" for a tactile world of primitive oral people and "cool-haired creepers" is indeed a forerunner of Rabbit, Peter and Piet, who all seek a baptismal reconciliation in touch, and an escape from the knot of visually biased logic that created a nightmare world of horror from a mass of technological objects which, taken individually in a less complicated world, might merely have inspired the aesthetic elation of the "sublime."

Appendix B

A quite credible reason for the breakdown or disintegration of the entity known as "Modern-Western-Technological-Man" has been proposed in Marshall McLuhan's The Gutenberg Galaxy. In a fashion similar to Kaufmann's explanation of the bottleneck of rational thinking, he defines at its heart just what "irrational man" is. McLuhan's thesis is that the linear alphabet has, through the isolation of one sense from the total human sensorium, caused a breakdown in the "ratio" or wholistic balance of all the senses, providing for that "man without ratio" who has, of necessity, a sense of the "absurd" that is characteristic of so much of modern art. The isolated sense, in this case, is the visual. Linear movable type has allowed man to see ideas out of the context in which they were generated--a context best exemplified by the oral cultures of Greece and Africa, where the word was much more cousin to the deed. Updike has not neglected to use Greece in this way.

Visual abstraction, notes McLuhan, finds its ultimate culmination in "Descartes and Newton, who had wholly abstracted the visual sense from the interaction of the other senses." ¹ Here, as Kaufmann has pointed out, was where Existentialism was obliged to enter the picture in the role of a psychic cure.

Homeric, or oral, man, has been given an individual ego because of that phonetic writing whose sounds he could recreate in his own privacy. The ear ties man magically (read "physically") to the source of sound and the facts of physical life as they happen. Vision, however, is neutral, quantitative (the source of mathematics, geometry and logic) in its substance rather than qualitative. McLuhan continues in his own words:

...until phonetic writing split apart thought and action, there was no alternative but to hold all men responsible for their thoughts as well as their actions. ... It follows, of course, that literate man, as we meet him in the Greek world, is a split (or detribalized) man, a schizophrenic. Mere writing, however, has not the peculiar power of the phonetic technology to detribalize man. Given the phonetic alphabet with its abstraction of meaning from sound and the translation of sound into a visual code, and men were at grips with an experience than transformed them. 2

Vision is neutral in substance, but not in its ultimate effects. Updike's alphabeticization should be seen in terms of the above.

Appendix C

Pilar, a character in Ernest Hemingway's For Whom The Bell Tolls, is aware of the intensity with which a short life must be lived. She recollects what John Killinger has called "an almost Keatsian catalogue of sensuousness." 1

"We ate in pavilions on the sand. Pastries made of cooked and shredded fish and red and green peppers and small nuts like grains of rice. Pastries delicate and flaky and the fish of a richness that was incredible. Prawns fresh from the sea sprinkled with lime juice. They were pink and sweet and there were four bites to a prawn. Of those we ate many. Then we ate paella with fresh sea food, clams in their shells, mussels, crayfish, and small eels. Then we ate even smaller eels alone cooked in oil and as tiny as bean sprouts and curled in all directions and so tender they disappeared in the mouth without chewing. All the time drinking a white wine, cold, light and good at thirty centimos the bottle. And for an end, melon. That is the home of the melon."

"The melon of Castile is better," Fernando said.

"Que va," said the woman of Pablo. "The melon of Castile is for self abuse. The melon of Valencia for eating. When I think of those melons long as one's arm, green like the sea and crisp and juicy to cut and sweeter than the early morning in summer. Aye, when I think of those smallest eels, tiny, delicate and in mounds on the plate. Also the beer in pitchers all through the afternoon, the beer sweating in its coldness in pitchers the size of water jugs."

"And what did thee when not eating nor drinking?"

"We made love in the room with the strip wood blinds hanging over the balcony and a breeze through the opening of the top of the door which turned on hinges. We made love there, the room dark in the day time from the hanging blinds, and from the streets there was the scent of the flower market and the smell of burned powder from the firecrackers of the traca that ran through the streets exploding each noon during the Feria...." 2

That life need not be perceived in visual terms alone is apparent here. This is the rock that Camus suggests we embrace if we are to become whole again.

Footnotes

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2. See Appendix A.
3. Barrett, Irrational Man, pp. 73-74.
4. William Barrett, "What Is Existentialism?", The Saturday Evening Post, (November 21, 1959), p. 28.
5. Ibid., p. 29.
6. Ibid., p. 129.
7. David Galloway, The Absurd Hero in American Fiction, revised edition (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas Press, 1970), p. 9.
8. Ibid. p. 15.

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2. John Updike, The Poorhouse Fair, (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1958), p. 5.
3. Ibid., p. 12.
4. Loc. cit.
5. Ibid., p. 18.
6. Ibid., p. 36.
7. Ibid., p. 30.
8. Ibid., p. 46.
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12. Ibid., p. 51.
13. Ibid., p. 35.
14. Ibid., p. 103.
15. Alice and Kenneth Hamilton, The Elements of John Updike (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1970), p. 129.
16. Updike, The Poorhouse Fair, p. 22.
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22. Updike, The Poorhouse Fair, p. 127.
23. Loc. cit.
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26. Galloway, The Absurd Hero, p. 9.
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33. Ibid., pp. 54-55.
34. Ibid., p. 83.
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44. Ibid., p. 72.
45. Ibid., p. 42.
46. Ibid., p. 105.
47. Ibid., p. 164.
48. Ibid., p. 28.
49. Ibid., p. 226.

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51. Ibid., p. 112, p. 121.
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53. Ibid., p. 225.
54. Ibid., p. 242.
55. Ibid., p. 247.
56. Ibid., p. 254.
57. Hamilton, Elements, p. 78.
58. Loc. cit.
59. John Updike, The Centaur (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963),
p. 108.
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66. Ibid., p. 291.
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76. Ibid., pp. 264-265.
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79. Ibid., p. 195.
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81. Ibid., p. 168.
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110. Ibid., p. 449.
111. Ibid., p. 448.
112. Ibid., p. 480.
113. Ibid., p. 464.
114. Ibid., p. 20, p. 215.
115. Ibid., p. 369.
116. Ibid., p. 199.

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16. Ibid., p. 60.
17. Updike, The Centaur, p. 115.
18. Updike, Rabbit, Run, pp. 29-30.
19. Updike, The Centaur, p. 152.
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21. Updike, The Poorhouse Fair, p. 5.
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24. Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 133.
25. Updike, The Poorhouse Fair, p. 26.
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84. Updike, Couples, p. 418.
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87. Updike, The Poorhouse Fair, p. 22.
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- 144. Updike, Rabbit, Run, p. 255.

APPENDIX B.

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2. Ibid., p. 5.

APPENDIX C.

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2. Ernest Hemingway, For Whom The Bell Tolls (London: Jonathan Cape, 1941), pp. 83-84.

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