STRANGE GRACE
On the Fiction of John Updike, and the Defamiliarization of Faith

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How gorgeously strange the religions of others seem!
—John Updike, from Self-Consciousness

Years ago—I would have been in high school—I read something in a book or a magazine that made me approach my brother Kevin and bemoan to him the prospects of my being a famous fiction writer. I was doomed, I told him, to write uneventful and unimaginative stories because the book or article I read had said the work of all writers, even fiction writers, derived from the author’s life experience, and my life experience was—and here I used these exact words—“completely and utterly normal.” I said, “No one can write if their life is normal!”

I was distraught when I said this, discouraged, and, who knows, I may have even thrown up my hands in despair. My brother was in college at the time, but he was wise enough to laugh at me. He said, “Normal is what you know, Jay.” I don’t recall if he explained himself any more than that, but it’s unlikely I would have understood him if he did. I was too upset at the time, too distracted by my wondering why God—who my parents said was all-loving and just—would endow me with a fervent desire to write stories and then deny me the sort of colorful life experience required to make those stories any good. I was seventeen years old and so convinced that my life was like everybody else’s that I failed to see the truth my brother, just a few crucial years older, had figured out; we were a family beset by strangeness
We were a family of six—my parents, two brothers, and sister—and we lived in constant struggle with the pangs of the despised 1970’s U.S. economy. In one ten-year period, my father spent five years unemployed. His job skills were apparently unmarketable. We moved four times in that ten-year period, always within the state of Washington, as my father followed the trail of work, like a character in a Steinbeck novel. During the first of those moves, in the summer of 1976, he sold our house in Vancouver, Washington, packed a U-haul full of our earthly belongings, and trucked us 360 miles northeast, to Spokane, where there was the promise of a job and the notion we could find a house to rent upon arrival. An ad in the Saturday *Spokesman Review* led us to an unfinished three-bedroom duplex. In a brick-lined planter box in front of the duplex was a hard-pack of dirt with a cluster of small holes dotting the surface of it; in those holes lived a colony of small black ants. As my brothers, sister, and parents unloaded the U-haul, I took a piece of wire I had found on the street and used it to dig up a portion of the dirt in the planter box, and when the ants came out in numbers to defend their ground against me, I used the wire to sever, one at a time, each ant’s head from its body.

That’s what I remember. I was nine years old. I killed hundreds of ants, maybe thousands. Then my mother saw me. She grabbed me by the shoulders, spun me around, shook her finger in my face, said what I was doing was wrong. Her eyes were red and bleary. I thought it was the move that tired her out, but it wasn’t that so much as the strain of financial burden and perhaps the knowledge that it would be a dozen years before she and my father would own a house again.

Our definition of *home*, during this decade, was not a specific place or abode for us; it was the concept of our being together, all six of us, during moments that were, for us,
predictable—during meal times, church, and family vespers before bed. My parents raised us to honor God and the Lutheran theology, and sometimes not in that order. Their mood as they raised us mirrored, at times, the very temper of God in the Old Testament. Fury was their discipline; scolding, their expression of love. In church, however, they were different. They were quiet, serene. They insisted we all be quiet.

We attended church every Sunday. And on that Sunday, the day after we moved to Spokane, we took a one-hour break from carrying items into the duplex, perused the phone book for the nearest Lutheran church, and went to worship. Our family arrived late. We took up an entire pew. When we all sat down, we each opened a copy of the Lutheran hymnal, turned to the page where there was printed the “Call to Worship.” It was the same call to worship as at our old church. And the Kyrie that followed was the same, too; it had the same tune, the same literary text. This excited my brother Kevin. He pointed to the book and told my parents, “It’s the same! It’s the same!” My mother told him, “Shh.”

Within a town and a house that was strange to us, it was the familiar and predictable that piqued our enthusiasm, raised our spirits, quieted our anxieties, perhaps because so few things in Spokane were familiar to us, or perhaps because what we found familiar was dear. Whatever the reason, the sensation of not having a fixed place to call a permanent home for more than one or two years at a time became a routine for me. I knew no other alternative, no other means of existence. I learned to adapt to my family’s social rhythms, our moving, our constant money problems; I coexisted with my parents’ emotional volatility and their distrust of anything secular. It was this adaptation that
defined my understanding of a life I thought was “ordinary.” And it was the cause of my thinking, years later, that I had no stories to tell.

As I grew up, my older three siblings all went to seminary and all were ordained as Lutheran ministers. I did not go to seminary, nor would I ever become a minister, so a common joke I heard was this: “Your siblings are pastors? What the hell happened to you?” To which I responded: “What do you mean what happened to me? What the hell happened to them?” Even still, I understood why others felt the need to ask this question. I was the exception in the family, the one who chose not to follow the beaten path of my siblings’ established norm. Fresh out of college, I took a job as a junior high English teacher, and for the first time in my life believed my life was not normal, not familiar; instead, I thought it was strange. Given my life history, I could better understand why a person might choose to become a Lutheran minister than an English teacher. I’m not sure how I learned to take interest in books or words. I never saw my parents read. We had books stored in our house, but books were not for reading—they were for storing in closets and on bookshelves. Only the words on their spines were ever read. My dad, evidently, thought my career choice was an odd one, too. I was twenty-six, married, and three years out of college before he quit asking me when I was going to seminary. His asking me this question never made me angry, because it was, in my mind, a natural and logical question. I suspected everyone’s parents asked them the same thing.

Several years later, in the fall of 2001, I received in the mail a package from my brother Kevin. I opened it and found a copy of a transcript from Morning Edition, the NPR news show, dated May 22, 2001. The program featured an interview with Tobias Wolff by Susan Stamberg. Near the end of the interview, Stamberg says: “I came across
a wonderful statement from the Nobel Literature laureate, Czeslaw Milosz. He said, ‘When a writer is born into a family, the family is doomed’” (*Morning Edition*, 8). These words were underlined by my brother in a deep blue ink. I called him on the phone and asked him about it. I asked him what he meant. He said, “The quote is not a warning, Jay. It’s an invitation.”

Five more years have passed, and I think I finally understand just what my brother meant. He was telling me to distrust my adaptation to my family’s social norm and observe us in a way we could not observe ourselves—from the perspective of a person who is both strange to us and intimate, who can both empathize with our strict Lutheran affinity and also find it absurd. He was telling me to emphasize that which was particular in our family and deemphasize that which was customary. There is a risk, certainly, in doing this, that I might become what Milosz forewarned: offensive to my family by presenting distorted and magnified images of their likenesses to create a fictional truth. But risking offense in this manner is, paradoxically, an expression of love. In a way, it is like my parents’ scolding.

Sigmund Freud addresses this paradoxical relationship between the familiar and strange in an essay called “The Uncanny.” In it, he compares two apparently antonymic words in German: *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. He presents two senses of the word *heimlich*. In its first sense, the word means familiar, tame, dear, intimate—literally “belonging to the house,” or “homely.” In its second sense, it means concealed, hidden, secret, mysterious. In contrast to *heimlich*, Freud reasons that *unheimlich* naturally means the opposite of *heimlich* in both senses of the word: unfamiliar, not belonging to the house; unconcealed, not kept hidden. The contrast of these words—*heimlich* and
unheimlich; homely and unhomely; familiar and strange—appear to be polar opposites. But, as Freud says, “among the various shades of meaning that are recorded for the word heimlich there is one in which it merges with its formal antonym, unheimlich, so that what is called heimlich becomes unheimlich. As witness the passage from Gutzkow: ‘We call that unheimlich; you call it heimlich” (Freud, The Uncanny, 132). Therefore, what is strange to an outsider is familiar to the character in the home; likewise, what is strange to the homely is familiar to the character standing outside.

There is a mutual duality to both words and their sets of meanings; they are not so much opposites or contradictions of each other as they are definitions for the opposing sides of the same door. The uncanny, Freud says, is created when the heimlich becomes unheimlich; the unheimlich, heimlich. He quotes Schelling: “Uncanny is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret but has come into the open” (Freud, 132). That which is kept in a home—a.k.a. in private, behind closed doors—is also, from the perspective of those outside the home, kept hidden and secret. That which is intimate and familiar to the home dweller is even repulsive and strange to the outsider. There can be no heimlich without the unheimlich, no unheimlich without the heimlich, as a door must have two sides. Therefore, a detail in a story can only be considered strange if it is held privately by someone who views it as familiar and intimate; likewise, a detail can only be called familiar if there is always someone outside the setting to whom it is strange.

Milosz’s quote rings true because it is the job of the writer to makes everything that is “meant to remain a secret…come into the open.” The familiar and intimate, even the homely, under the writer’s treatment of it, becomes strange and public to those who are not of the home in which its set. The writer takes the familiar world and makes it strange.
and defamiliar. This is why even the most well-intended and loving writers risk betraying their families: what is to the family an act of cruelty, making intimate moments public, is for the writer an act of love and close attention, creating an even deeper intimacy.

In his essay “On Defamiliarization,” the writer and literary critic Charles Baxter addresses a claim related to Freud’s conclusion. Baxter says a recurring flaw in short fiction—especially the short fiction of young writers—is that the story begins to “read itself too early…and before very long it [is] always and only about one thing” (Burning Down the House, 35). Such stories, according to Baxter, are too well controlled by writers, the details are too well aligned. He says, “When all the details fit in perfectly, something is probably wrong with the story. It is too meaningful too quickly. Such characters aren’t contradictory or misfitted” (35).

Baxter’s concern in this portion of his essay is that writers fail to view their imagined characters as intimate and strange, familiar and foreign. Such writers are overly determined to deploy their imagined characters in a fiction bent on accomplishing a specific purpose or objective; despite efforts to draw them with consistency and purpose, such characters become, ironically, not believable within their dramatic scenes, because they have been denied the chance to be complex and act in ways contradictory to their purpose, or be flawed and seen as strange within their own settings. It is similar to what my brother told me when he said, “Normal is what you know.” Baxter also makes this claim and warns against it. The truth, when it is known so well and at such a close range, can get dull, he says. “There is an odd, stranger-at-the funeral sensation in the face
of art that is truthful but too familiar, where the author is deeply moved, but no one else is” (37).

One page later, Baxter says, “What I would argue is that the truth that writers are after may be dramatic only if it has been forgotten first: if the story, in other words, pulls something contradictory out of its hiding place” (38). His language is strikingly reminiscent of Freud’s discussion of the heimlich; he says a story’s most intimate and contradictory details are kept hidden until they are revealed within the story’s dramatic sequence. However, different from Freud’s conclusion, the artistic flaw that Baxter writes about is caused by the writer’s failure to reveal the strangeness of the familiar. Whether it be through a narrator’s changing point of view or by a character acting contradictory to his or her self-interests, writers must craft stories with an intentional duality within the narrative; they must harbor a double perspective that allows them to see both sides of the same door—the heimlich and unheimlich, the familiar and strange—if they hope to create a dramatic and persuasively textured story.

The paradox is that this kind of story can only exist as a result of the writer’s being so familiar with the events that the events become forgotten and not known. The “normal” details that my brother mentioned must be so deeply forgotten that they become “abnormal” when we write about them. A story dominated by details familiar to the writer is written with its contradictions, flaws, grotesque features hidden; a story dominated by strange details reveals the contradictions, flaws, and grotesque features without knowing they are details intended to stay hidden. Baxter offers a definition of defamiliarization as presented by the Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky; he says it “means to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar” (Baxter, 40). To do this—to create
a fictional world full of strange and grotesque details—Baxter later explains that Shklovsky “advises a search for elements that don’t fit—misfit details.” Again, we hear the same language as in Freud’s definition of the unheimlich: that the details residing within a domestic space are, ironically, details not “belonging to the house.”

I am fascinated by the work of writers who craft their stories with this intentional duality and double perspective in their narratives, particularly when those narratives take on issues of religious faith. Dinnertime conversations, when I was young, frequently revolved around the topic of faith, grace, and theology. It seemed there was little else my parents could discuss, other than perhaps their holding the entire corporate world responsible for their fiscal struggles. We talked about the divinity of Christ, the enigma of a triune God, the politics of the church. Once, when my wife and I were dating and I brought her to my parents’ house one Sunday evening for dinner, she later asked me, “Is that all your family does, just talk about God and the church?”

I will admit, I find it strange and odd to bear a religious faith. Despite all the reasoned theories from apologetics and the logical deductions theologians make, all religious faith comes down to one act that is not about reason or logic, but the opposite of reason and logic: faith. That so many people, not just those in my family, even believe in a God of salvation and redemption, and design statements of faith to express this belief is, to be honest, strange to me. But I’m fascinated by this strangeness, especially when it comes to the strangeness of my own faith. I am often perplexed by the way I perpetuate my family’s faith, how I hold it fast and raise my own kids to believe it, not because I find it strange, but because it is to me a thing deeply intimate and “familiar.” Throughout my life, I have several times wanted to rebel against my faith, except for the fact I have found
it so warm and comforting – homely, even. I associate my faith with brief moments of serenity, of moments when I felt belonging to a place, as when, that morning in Spokane, my brother opened the Lutheran hymnal and felt at home among strangers.

I believe this is what my brother invited me to do when he sent me the Milosz quote: to write stories with a dramatized duality, a double perspective, with the strangeness and familiarity I see in my family’s faith and in my own. To serve as examples of how the strangeness and familiarity of faith is dramatized, I turn to two stories by John Updike: “Pigeon Feathers” and “Lifeguard.”

Updike, a practicing Episcopalian, who grew up in a Lutheran home and whose grandfather was a Lutheran minister, writes stories that are told with the eyes of grace. Of course, his stories are far from the work of a Christian proselyte, but the presence of faith in a God of grace is never removed from his work—despite all the violence and sexual content in his fiction. It is, in fact, through the explicitness of violence and sexual content that Updike, as a writer, praises grace.

In his essay “What is Goodness?” in the book John Updike and Religion: The Sense of the Sacred and the Motions of Grace, Religion Professor Darrell Jodock analyzes the impact of Updike’s Lutheran faith as a youth upon the content of his fiction as an adult. Jodock writes: “The world of the Lutheran is fundamentally conflicted” (134), and therefore, he adds, according to Luther, “God can be described only via the use of paradox” (134). He cites the birth of Christ as an example of this paradox. Although an omnipotent creator, God is made incarnate through a poor, weak infant in a manger. “Such a God,” Jodock says, “is ‘both hidden and revealed.’ God is in fact most hidden precisely at those points where God is most clearly revealed” (134). Note the connection,
even the identical word choice to Freud’s and Baxter’s essays—God is both hidden and revealed. Jodock continues:

Contemporary Americans are especially prone to experience God’s absence, but it is not the absence of distance, of an overly transcendent God; it is the absence of involving what Luther would call the ‘hiddenness’ of a God who is both hidden and revealed. What is experienced existentially as the absence of God results from the characters’ self-absorption. God remains available and active, immanent and omnipresent, but not recognized. For Updike, God’s presence can be seen, not as characters withdraw from life, but as they enter into it. (134-5)

Such characters’ entrance into a life is created in fiction through the treatment of a simultaneous duality, or a Janus-faced1 point of view—one that continually processes the ambivalent and paradoxical relationship between the familiar and strange, the known and unknown, the hidden and revealed, or what I earlier called the opposing perspectives of the same door.

“Pigeon Feathers” serves a fine example of Updike’s use of narrative duality and double perspective. Originally published in 1960, “Pigeon Feathers” tells the story of David Kern, a thirteen year old boy who has recently moved with his parents from the town of Olinger to his mother’s girlhood home in the country outside the smaller burg, Firetown. David’s conflict is immediate from the story’s first sentence:

When they moved to Firetown, things were upset, displaced, rearranged. A red cane-back sofa that had been the chief piece in the living room at Olinger was

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1 Janus was, in Roman mythology, the god of gates, doors, and doorways—also of beginnings and endings. He is frequently depicted in images and sculpture as having two faces, looking in opposite directions.
here banished, too big for the narrow country parlor, to the barn, and shrouded under a tarpaulin. (The Early Stories, 13)

The narrator tells this story from the perspective of David’s bias. Updike’s diction includes words of judgment; he speaks about things being “upset” and “displaced” and “rearranged.” What David believes should be part of the home—the cane-back sofa—has been banished, thrown out, discarded. In contrast, as the story continues, “the blue wing chair that had stood for years in the ghostly, immaculate guest bedroom…was here established importantly in front of the smutty little fireplace that supplied…their only heat” (13).

David’s turmoil is due not only to the fact he has moved and now resides in a place he does not consider his home, but also to the fact that the items that belong in the home are not in the home, and the items that do not belong in the home are. Even the books, which “at home had gathered dust” (13) are poorly stacked, out of order. He is desperate to regain some sense of what he formerly considered normal, so he removes a book from the new house’s bookshelf, a shelf containing strange and old titles that had belonged to his mother when she was young. These books had an “odor of faded taste [that] made him feel the ominous gap between himself and his parents, the insulting gulf of time that existed before he was born. Suddenly he was tempted to dip into this time” (14).

Here David’s point of view is shown via the mentioning of what he physically senses, and this sensory detail triggers him to become conscious and aware of how his parents’ lives existed before his own life began. This is an important device in the story, because Updike will employ this device again at the story’s dénouement, but only after David is
put through a spiritual crisis that will challenge the very existence of his faith, a crisis that
is set up by David’s home life being upset, displaced, and rearranged. Additionally,
Updike’s specific use of the word “tempted” is important here, not only because it is
through his senses that David is tempted to explore the meaning of his own
existence—which in this case is through the book he grabs from his mother’s old shelf,
H.G. Wells’ Volume II of *The Outline of History*—but also because it is a word that
implies David’s committing a sin by opening the book. The book will challenge David’s
faith by defamiliarizing his understanding of the life of Christ; it will force David into a
position where he will have to choose what to think and believe.

The narrator allows the reader to be aware of two things—one explicit, the other
implicit—about David’s point of view. On the surface of the prose, the narrator
announces what David experiences in reading the book; but the narrator also suggests
how David is aware of what he reads. The narrator is wiser than David and understands
what David cannot put into so many words—but this does not mean David doesn’t think
them. After David has opened the book, the story continues: “Then, before he could halt
his eyes, David slipped into Wells’s account of Jesus” (14). David has entered the action
of sin (in this case, doubt in his savior) but thinks of himself as a victim of what he sees.
It is nearly the same word choice used in the Old Testament story of King David, who
could not halt his eyes when they fell, as if by their own will, on the naked and bathing
image of Bathsheba. There is knowledge of wrongdoing here, but an intentional
forgetfulness of the fact that the wrongful action is being committed through a
character’s—in this case, David’s—will. Wells’s account of Jesus, whom he describes
as “a kind of hobo,” mirrors the disruption of David’s familiar home life, and because the
details in Wells’s book are spiritually disrupting for him, David is catapulted into an even more desperate despair. Updike summarizes the Wells:

[Jesus] had been an obscure political agitator, a kind of hobo, in a minor colony of the Roman Empire. By an accident impossible to reconstruct, he (the small h horrified David) survived his own crucifixion and presumably died a few weeks later. A religion was founded on the freakish incident. The credulous imagination of the times retrospectively assigned miracles and supernatural pretensions to Jesus; a myth grew, and then a church, whose theology at most points was in direct contradiction of the simple, rather communistic teachings of the Galilean. (14)

In this passage, Wells becomes a character in the story through the narrator’s paraphrasing of the passage. Wells’s voice is present in the paraphrasing, and this voice conveys his chastisement of Christianity—he calls Christ a “hobo” and limits Christ’s significance in history through condescending language—while at the same time the narrator captures David’s horrifying awareness of a separate truth that exists outside of his own life experience. Updike’s layering of these points of view allows the reader not only to read the paraphrasing of Wells’s words, but also to read David’s reading of it. What is strange to David is familiar to Wells; what is strange to Wells is familiar to David. It is this conflict in points of view that sends the story’s plot reeling and shakes up David’s life until the final scene.

David’s spiritual self, his entire basis of faith, is disrupted by the Wells passage. He considers for a moment the strangeness and otherness of this statement being made. The narrator continues to empathetically understand and communicate David’s confusion
using words that reflect what David feels or senses or intuits, but cannot express himself. The narrator says that Wells’s words “did not at first frighten [David]; it was the fact that they had been permitted to exist in an actual human brain. This was the initial impact—that a definite spot in time and space a brain black with the denial of Christ’s divinity had been suffered to exist” (15). The absoluteness of Christ’s divinity, much less the absurdity of doubting the absoluteness of Christ’s divinity, is very much part of David’s heimlich world. His beliefs are so deep and so devout that they have gone unquestioned, even unconsidered consciously on David’s part. But David is forced to have his faith made defamiliar. “He read the account again. He tried to supply out of his ignorance objections that would defeat the complacent march of these black words, and found none” (15).

David’s parents have moved into his mother’s childhood home to live with David’s Grandmom. They care for the farm that the house is on. His parents bicker over the treatment of the soil, whether the chemicals applied to it have killed its “soul” (16), but David’s father says a soil cannot have a soul. David’s father says only humans have souls “because the Bible tells us so” (16). His mother insists that the sterility of the soil will kill “every man in the country over forty-five” (16). These debates feed the spiritual and religious ambivalences that disturb David. He overhears their conversation from a different room, so the narrator also narrates this scene as if overhearing it from above or a different room, although not from David’s perspective, but like David, apart from the action. His parents’ debates are contentious, they intimidate David, and he is left more confused later when he hears their sexual grunts in the room next door the night after they engage in debate. “In the next room,” Updike writes, “his parents grunted peaceably;
they seemed to take their quarrels less seriously than he did” (20). By engaging in
sex—and peaceable sex at that—David’s parents bestow to each other a gesture of love
and grace after their quarreling is done. David is foreign to this grace, does not
understand it. Sex, for him, is a carnal and physical gesture, one associated with animal
beings, not Godly grace.

To further show that David’s faith has been put in chaos, Updike then zooms closer to
David’s perspective and once again uses sensory language to create physical images that
show how deeply David is thinking about his own existence. David goes to the outhouse
and brings a flashlight with him. “He set the flashlight, burning, beside him, and an
insect alighted on its lens, a tiny insect, a mosquito or flea, made so fine that the weak
light projected its X-ray onto the wall boards: the faint rim of its wings, the blurred
strokes, magnified, of its long hinged legs, the dark cone at the heart of its anatomy” (17).
This vision gives David “an exact vision of death: a long hole in the ground, no wider
than your body, down which you are drawn while the white faces above recede” (17).
This move, using a physical image to generate a self-conscious point of view, repeats the
one made earlier when David studies the dust on the old books and succumbs to the
temptation to read Wells. But this time Updike has David struggle to build a new
familiarity with his spiritual self—a bleak one, but a familiar one nonetheless. He looks
up the definition of the word soul in the dictionary. When the definition’s concrete terms
do not mesh with his parents’ arguing—neither one defies the definition of soul in their
arguing about the earth, but neither do they exactly support it—David is left alone, in
bed, in the dark, considering again the subject of his own non-existence, his life bereft of
physical senses, his death. “Thinking of it this vividly frightened him. His own dying, in
a specific bed in a specific room, specific walls mottled with a particular wallpaper…but for him no way out but down, into that hole. *Never walk again, never touch a doorknob again*” (20). David’s conscious understanding of his existence is linked indelibly to his ability to perceive a physical world through his senses. He is desperate to understand what life might be like without sensory awareness, so he reaches his hands upward in the darkness of his room and “begged Christ to touch them” (20). Of course nothing happens, so “he returned his hands to beneath the covers, uncertain if they had been touched or not. For would not Christ’s touch be infinitely gentle?” (20).

Sometime later, David attends his catechism class taught by his pastor, Reverend Dobson, and “when the time came for questions, David blushed and asked, ‘About the Resurrection of the Body—are we conscious between the time when we die and the Day of Judgment?’” (22). The narrative moves outside David’s mind for the length of this conversation, but because the reader has already been made privy to David’s questions of faith and spirituality, the reader has an understanding of where his questions and comments are coming from, what they mean beyond the context of the conversation.

Reverend Dobson says he supposes we are not conscious of the time between death and Judgment Day. “Where is our soul, then, in this gap?” (23) David asks. The ambivalence Reverend Dobson expresses in his answer to David’s question—he even says, “I don’t think it matters” (23)—strikes David not as an acceptance of ambivalence, because that is something David cannot do, but as utter ignorance and stupidity. David’s faith is dependent on a physical presence of God, a concrete terminology, a tangible spirit—all constructs of what he thinks is a life spent as a “normal” believer in Christ. David does not want a God of mystery and hiddenness; he wants a God of predictable
and physical nature. His mother says, “It’s so greedy of you to want more” (25). The more David is told it is unreasonable for him to demand the presence of a God without mystery, the more he insists on demanding it.

Then the story’s final scene takes place. David is given a Remington .22 for his fourteenth birthday, and his Grandmom assigns him the task of going to the barn to shoot all the pigeons, which have made a mess of the furniture stored there. When David enters the barn, Updike draws a detailed and extensive picture of the scene. These images, at first independent items listed in a sentence, become linked to David’s point of view through their connection to his senses.

The smell of old straw scratched his sinuses. The red sofa, half hidden under its white-splotched tarpaulin, seemed assimilated into the smell, sunk in it, buried. The mouths of empty bins gaped like caves. Rusty oddments of farming—coils of baling wire, some spare times for a harrow, a handleless shovel—hung on nails driven here and there in the thick wood. He stood stock-still a minute; it took a while to separate the cooing of the pigeons from the rustling in his ears. When he had focused on the cooing, it flooded the vast interior with its throaty, bubbling outpour: there seemed no other sound. (30)

These are not David’s words for his sensation, though they do represent what he intuitively understands. Updike has allowed this to happen throughout the story; he provides the narrator the knowledge and power to understand what David thinks more clearly and specifically than what David can explain. Throughout the story, David has refused to admit his own duality with nature and his senses; however, he narrator has expressed consciousness of this duality—evident, for instance, in the Janus-faced
perspective when narrating David’s reading of Wells’s book, and later of David’s close
study of the insect’s X-rayed body—but David has not. This also happens when David
shoots the birds, an act he was at first resigned to do, and gets caught up in the power of
the act’s violence:

   Out of shadowy ragged infinity of the vast barn roof these impudent things dared
to thrust their heads, presumed to dirty its starred silence with their filthy timorous
life, and he cut them off, tucked them back neatly into the silence. He felt like a
creator; these little smudges and flickers that he was clever to see and even
cleverer to hit in the dim recesses of the rafters—out of each of them he was
making a full bird. (31)

David is unaware of his own paradox—that he would, in killing the birds, feel as if he
was making a full one—but what the narrator does understand about this paradox is
important to how the story completes itself in the end.

   David kills six pigeons, and after doing so he walks out of the barn and into a wider
point of view in the story. Updike writes, “He stepped with his rifle into the light” (32).
The narrator drops the close presentation of the ambivalent thoughts to which David
remains unconscious. Then David and his mother share a short exchange of dialogue.
She tells him the birds will have to be buried or else the dog will go wild. She insists this
is David’s job, as the pigeons are his “kill” (32). She goes back in the house and leaves
David to bury the birds. David picks up a bird and for the final time in the story, the
narrator enters David’s consciousness through image and physical detail, only this time
David shares the narrator’s conscious knowledge of what he has understood only
intuitively to this point. Throughout the story, David had demanded a certainty, a
concrete understanding of death and soul and God and Creation. But now he studies the
body of a dead pigeon—a death he knows he has caused:

He had never seen a bird this close before. The feathers were more wonderful
than dog’s hair, for each filament was shaped within the shape of a feather, and
the feathers in turn were trimmed to fit a pattern that flowed without error across
the bird’s body. He lost himself in the geometrical tides as the feathers now
broadened and stiffened to make an edge for flight, now softened and constricted
to cup warmth around the mute flesh. (33)

David sees the bird, even dead, as a thing that was alive and had the ability to mechanize
flight and huddle for warmth. The bird could feel and sense the physical world. This
vision is new for David, and it becomes a moment of realization that allows him to desert
the perspective he’d been so adamant about defending. He abandons his initial theology
and faith that had been for him familiar, and creates a new familiarity, one that is rife
with paradox, contradictions, and ambiguous mysteries, one that is combined with the
perspective he had previously thought strange and threatening. The story’s last sentence
reads:

As he fitted the last two [birds into the grave], still pliant, on the top, and stood
up, crusty coverings were lifted from him, and with a feminine, slipping sensation
along his nerves that seemed to give the air hands, he was robed in this certainty:
that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not
destroy his whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever. (33)

David is liberated when the “crusty coverings” are removed. These coverings are his
bias and need for a concrete certainty, but which David embraces, now consciously; his
awareness of himself matches the awareness the narrator has of him—a new certainty: one that promises his own uncertainty. He comes to this certainty though a dualistic gesture that is physical and non-physical, divine and real, and that gesture is the “sensation along his nerves that seemed to give the air hands.” David’s certainty is that he must have faith in what appears to be ambivalent and strange if he is to preserve any faith in God at all.

In his memoir *Self-Consciousness*, Updike says: “Imitation is praise. Description expresses love” (243). He is known, among other things, as a writer of painstaking detail, of a recorded accuracy of events and images and character. In an interview with James Plath, he said, “Any act of description is, to some extent, an act of praise, so that even when the event is unpleasant or horrifying or spiritually stunning, the very attempt to describe it is, in some way, part of that Old Testament injunction to give praise” (*John Updike and Religion*, 133). Description is an imitation of the created world, and therefore that description, according to Updike, even if it contains images and scenes largely thought to be unholy, is an expression of praise for creation. As he writes, again in *Self-Consciousness*, “What small faith I have has given me what courage I have. My theory was that God already knows everything and cannot be shocked. And only truth is useful. Only truth can be built upon. From a higher, inhuman point of view, only truth, however harsh, is holy” (243). Such harshness for truth allows Updike to record images that seem, to the human world, antithetical to what is holy. The familiar and common definition of a holy image is one without sin, without human flaw; it is pristine, unstained. For Updike, everything human is stained, and to admit this stain and record it truthfully is an act of holiness. It is this perspective of the created world, however
flawed, being holy that allows Updike to create characters of extremely paradoxical qualities.

In his story “Lifeguard,” published originally in 1960, five months after “Pigeon Feathers,” Updike creates a narrator, as in “Pigeon Feathers,” who bears a dualistic perspective. The primary difference is that “Pigeon Feathers” is written with a third person point of view, while “Lifeguard” is written in first person, from the perspective of a summer beach lifeguard who spends the other nine months of the year attending divinity school. The lifeguard admires and studies closely the carnal beauty of the human physique, but insists that to look upon the world this way is not sinful as much as it is an act in praise of creation. In “Pigeon Feathers,” Updike creates a dualistic perspective by allowing the narrator access to David’s interior and exterior, but in “Lifeguard” Updike doesn’t have the luxury of gaining a perspective beyond the lifeguard himself, so he creates a character with a bisected nature, seemingly self-contradictory, as expressed through the two forms of his work: as a lifeguard and as a student of divinity.

From the first sentence, Updike allows the narrator to be conscious (and rather proud) of this division. “Beyond doubt,” the story beings, “I am a splendid fellow. In the autumn, winter, and spring, I execute the duties of a student of divinity; in the summer, I disguise myself in my skin and become a lifeguard” (The Early Stories, 602). He has an immodest carnal appreciation of himself; of his tanned body watching over the beach, he says he has “a delightfully edible appearance” (602). As attentive as he is to the details of his physique, he is just as attentive the other nine months of the year to the “Biblical text barnacled with fudging commentary, through multivolumed apologetics couched in a false friendly Victorian voice and bound in subtly abrasive boards of finely ridged,
prefaded red…” (603). What is thought to be sinful, the lifeguard finds righteous; what is thought to be righteous, the lifeguard finds flawed. But his attention to both—the physical world on the beach, and the spiritual world of his studies—is equally intense. He says, “That there is no discrepancy between my studies, that the texts of the flesh complement those of the mind, is the easy burden of my sermon” (603). What a person might consider disparate worlds—what my parents would consider disparate worlds—Updike’s unnamed lifeguard views as bearing no discrepancy. In narrating his story, the lifeguard defamiliarizes his own faith for the reader’s benefit—not only by expressing a dualistic interest in matters of body and spirit, but also by having the narrator insist that the two parts to his personality operate not so much as a division as a balanced complement to the other, working in tandem. The result is the reader is set up to be made aware of particular and strange nuances that come as a result of the lifeguard’s two passions: the body and spirit.

He admits that he can “hardly bear the thought of stars, or begin to count the moralities of coral. But from the chair the sea…seems a misty old gentleman stretched at his ease in an immense armchair which has for arms the arts of this bay and for an antimacassar the freshly laundered sky” (603). He cannot fathom all of creation, but he can fathom the creation of the world set in front of him, a part of the world he has been given the responsibility to shepherd from his lifeguard chair. He then enters what Updike, as quoted previously, would consider a “description express[ing] love.” His images are exacting in detail, and because they are so exact he has access to an intimacy that the people he describes may intuit, but not have the conscious power to name—much
like David in “Pigeon Feathers,” who was intuitive of spiritually ambivalent ideas that he did not have the conscious power to name.

The lifeguard says the first to arrive on a beach each morning are the old ladies, who wear “wide straw hats and, in their hats’ shadows, smiles as wide, which they bestow upon each other, upon the salty shells they discover in the morning-smooth sand, and even upon me, downy-eyed from my night of dissipation” (604). Because he is so intricately aware of the old ladies’ exterior, and because he has observed and watched them so attentively, he discerns the subtest of facial gestures bestowed on inanimate objects. He makes what should be private to them familiar to himself. Next, he says, come the middle aged, and then.

[the] maidens take all our eyes. The vivacious redhead, freckled and white-footed, pushing against her boy and begging to be ducked; the solemn brunette, transporting the vase of herself with held breath; the dimpled blonde in the bib and diapers of her bikini, the lambent fuzz of her midriff shimmering like a cat’s belly. Lust stuns me like the sun. (604)

Lust, in this sense, does not seem sinful; the vivid originality of the language makes it a celebration of creation. It is lust that enlightens the narrator to the wonderment of creation. And it is lust and enlightenment that the reader feels, too—drawn into creation through the very specific creation of a story and its precise and descriptive language.

The narrator, furthermore, knows how contradictory it seems to declare lust as a praise of God’s work. He asks, “You are offended that a divinity student lusts?” (605). The narrator is aware of the reader’s need to insist divinity students and ministers of the cloth be free of carnal sins, or at least not so free to declare their lust so boldly. But the
narrator’s mocking the reader’s offense suggests the narrator believes that the divinity student, in order to know and understand the blessings of a created world, must lust, and must be allowed to openly lust. It seems a spiritual paradox. But Updike’s narrator seems to revel in this condition, capturing its intrinsic contradictions through an evocative simile: “My lust makes me glow,” he says, as the day wanes. “I grow cold in my chair, like a torch of ice” (605).

From here, his narration embarks upon a kind of theological apology, though sharply different from the “multivolumed apologetics couched in a false friendly Victorian voice” he has mentioned earlier. His is an authentic voice, a human voice, with openly carnal interests and impenitent lust. He says, “A real woman’s beauty lies…in the arabesque of the spine. The curve by which the back modulates into the buttocks. It is here that Grace sits and rides a woman’s body” (605). The sensuousness of detail is credited to God, and more interestingly, to God’s Grace. God has blessed us, the narrator says, with this beauty for which we can feel lust.

The narrator has moved, in the story, from narration to description to argumentation. In the process, his theology of lust becomes more convincingly complete. Initially, he creates a separation of his views from that of the person who believes lust is sinful and therefore must be shunned; he asks, “You are offended that a divinity student has lust?” But then he takes the very topic of human lust and uses it to argue a point that proves he and those who restrain themselves from lust are more familiar to each other than strange, more alike in their human condition than different. Using the first person point of view, Updike doesn’t have his narrator shift or change so much as express a connected understanding with others who lust and are more ashamed to admit it. Lust is the same,
whether celebrated or denied. “To desire a woman,” he says, “is to desire to save her. Anyone who has endured intercourse that was neither predatory nor hurried knows how through it we descend, with a partner, into the grotesque and delicate shadows that until then have remained locked in the most guarded recess of our soul” (605).

Our lust and sexual congress are the means through which we explore and understand the defamiliarized, the hidden, the strange; so too is the narrator’s description of physical beauty and celebration of where “Grace sits and rides a woman’s body” (605). He further makes this connection to the human condition by saying, “We are all Solomons lusting for Sheba’s salvation. The God-filled man is filled with a wilderness that cries to be populated” (605). And, “Every seduction is a conversion” (605). He makes use of the plural “we” to force all who read his testament to admit to such shared passions, but these passions, the narrator says, are holy because they are gifts from God.

“So,” the narrator says, “be joyful. Be joyful is my commandment. It is the message I read in your jiggle” (607). By this point in the story, the narrator’s perspective has merged with the reader’s point of view, in the same way a pastor’s sermon concludes with a remark that upholds the congregation’s newfound enlightenment with what the pastor has known for a time. The narrator had been enlightened to the wisdom and grace of lust, and the purpose of his story was to preach this point of view. What the unenlightened might have found strange has been revealed as familiar and shared and true.

It has become true for me too, although I have some fear that I will be less likely now to build this duality and ambivalent treatment into my stories than when I began this thesis. Until I wrote this essay, I was not as conscious of the option to create such a
duality in a story in such a variety of ways. The notion was strange to me, but now I have begun to make it familiar. This familiarity makes me nervous. If it is true that “normal is what you know,” the approach to defamiliarizing issues of faith in fiction has become part of what I know. Just when I figure out how to defamiliarize, the process of defamiliarization has been made more familiar. But the trick, as Baxter says in his essay, is to be alert to the contradictions and misfit details, both in what I write about and how I go about writing it. This concept requires that any approach to defamiliarizing be different for every story written, so that the very habit of making a story strange always remains strange. The technique to finding a story’s evolving strangeness—whether through dualistic point of view or contrasts in paradoxical content—is a matter of listening to the story and understanding its particular mysteries, or what it wants to hide. The same is true with faith; for faith without a desire to understand spiritual mysteries is no longer faith, but misguided certainty. On the other hand, faith in mystery yields endless possibilities. This is true in story as it is in spirit.
Works Cited


In early 1958, John Updike, flush from the publication of his first poetry collection and the completion of his first novel, The Poorhouse Fair, moved his growing family out of New York City and into a seventeenth-century clapboard house in Ipswich, Massachusetts, where, by his own account, he suffered a full-blown existential crisis, one that had actually been brewing for several years. "Amid my new responsibilities," he has explained, "I felt fearful and desolate, foreseeing, young as I was, that I would die, and that the substance of the earth was, therefore, death" (Odd, 844). As such, Kierkegaard and Barth did more than help Updike recover his faith; they also provided him with a model for his own theological and aesthetic vision. Related content. Chapter. John Updike American Literature Analysis. John Updike Short Fiction Analysis. John Updike Long Fiction Analysis. John Updike Poetry: American Poets Analysis. Updike, John (Hoyer). For Updike, as for many other writers, the conditions and possibilities of love are an index of the conditions and possibilities of faith and belief. As Updike writes in an essay: "Not to be in love, the capital N novel whispers to capital W western man, is to be dying." Updike’s versatility and range can be seen in terms of both style and subject. His first novel, The Poorhouse Fair, written when he was in his twenties, is cast twenty years into the future and explores the social and spiritual implications of an essentially antihumanistic socialism.