Little Plenitudes: John Updike's Affective Ontology of the Image

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> All I hope for is that once into my carefully spun web of words the thing itself, *das Ding an sich,* will break: make an entry and an account of itself.
>
> —John Updike, "The Sea's Green Sameness"

> . . . our task is to love not what might be but what *is* given.
>
> —John Updike, *A Month of Sundays*

In the early scenes of the 2013 film *Words and Pictures,* a beleaguered English teacher, played by Clive Owen, asks his nonplussed students why they should care about reading. He interrupts their stupefied silence by closing his eyes and reciting from memory: "You should care because Updike wrote, 'The lesson over, he went to the garden patch and joined his mother. He punched her stomach and I watched them pretend to box. Above them, on the single strand of wire strung to bring our house electricity, grackles and starlings neatly punctuated an invisible sentence.'" After a cut to a dreamy crush spreading across at least one student's face, and letting the appropriate downbeat pass, Owen bellicosely addresses them again: "You ever heard that before? Updike has handed you an image that was never described before. What do you think of his gift?" The moment in the film and its quotation from Updike's early novel *Of the Farm* epitomize a common perception of Updike's writing—that he is a consummate purveyor of pictures made with words. Updike's popular legacy, it seems, has less to do with graphic sex these days and more to do

with his visual style, how he paints on the page's canvas images "never described before," images that poetically render the visible world anew.

Critics, too, contend that Updike wrote in such a visually sensitive way that, as Donald Greiner puts it, the "details paint the portrait. The reader *sees*" (2010, 182). Nevertheless, what do we "see" when we read Updike? Not all that much, I wager. Perhaps we imagine a general scene, most likely distinct in spots in the foreground but fringed with haze. I know that grackles and starlings sometimes display an iridescent shimmer, and in different ways, but which is purple and which more jade, and is it near the head or right where the wing begins? Is the sun above, in front of, or behind that electrical wire? Even words as illustrative as Updike's would never lead two readers to imagine the exact same image in their minds. Yet this is no weakness or shortcoming, because Updike's reputed realism does not in fact lie in his evocative images. It is one of the hallmarks of Updike's prose that it decidedly does *not* capitulate to the "reality effect" Roland Barthes famously identified with Flaubert's realism. According to Barthes, the stylistic trick of the reality effect emerges in Flaubert's descriptions of material phenomena that have no intrinsic significance to the narrative other than establishing its validity as a fully imagined world (Barthes 143). To the contrary, Updike's descriptions have less to do with fixing a precise but ultimately reflexive image in the reader's mind and more to do with cultivating the reader's emotional attachment to the world *in general.* His sentences create a virtual experience of wonder and reverence for the plenitude of the visible world, lending his verisimilitude a genuinely affective end. Instead of a reality effect, it would be more appropriate to say his writing cultivates an affect toward reality.

Updike's acclaimed realism does not merely make readers see certain things with words, then, but encourages them to feel certain ways in relation to what can be seen. In so doing, it offers its own vivid sense of what it means to be a fully human being: one whose curiosity about life in this world begins by loving it. Updike's photographic style describes a world of visual experience, no matter how familiar or apparently dull, that is both precious and terrifying, but ultimately lovable. His words' characteristic sensitivity to line, shape, and color expresses what I will call an affective ontology—a philosophical conviction that the world as it is given to experience is worthy of grateful attention and devoted representation. This affective ontology of the image is a pure affirmation of the intrinsic goodness of the experiential world *as such.* This world is not merely valuable to Updike's pen, but quintessentially good.

To affirm that goodness afresh is, for Updike, the end of his verbal artistry. It

is because of this affective ontology that Updike's writing is so visually superb—his lyrical bounty professes a unique philosophy of objects and human vision. It illustrates Augustine's dictum that "love alone is capable of seeing" (qtd. in Balthasar 392). Human vision is not a bare field of perception but a way of feeling, a predisposition to feel at home in the world. Accordingly, the truth content of Updike's lyrical descriptions should be located in their reverence, not their life-like plausibility. When Updike hopes, as his character does in the above epigraph from "The Sea's Green Sameness," that the thing itself will "make an entry" into his writing, he is not referring to visual verisimilitude but the possibility that prose can render the reader open to seeing *das Ding an sich*. This affective ontology—one that affirms the absolute goodness of what Updike calls the visible world's "little plenitudes" (*Just Looking* 11)—permeates Updike's art criticism as well as his novel about American cinema, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996). Rather than attend to Updike's many pronouncements on the visual orientation of his craft, in this essay I seek to catch Updike in the act of looking—first, in how he writes about visual art and, second, how he portrays his characters' responses to realism's apogee, the cinema. For Updike the critic and Updike the novelist, the visual (and visually oriented) arts succeed in teaching us *how* to see the world only insofar as they convince us *why* to love it. Departing from recent thematic characterizations of Updike that exclude his art criticism, such as Robert Batchelor's "über American of the American century" (ix), D. Quentin Miller's Cold War chronicler of "the American ideal of freedom" (37), Marshall Boswell's practitioner of the existentialist "method of mastered irony" (238), and Peter J. Bailey's writer working in the fraught dialectic "between egotism and religious belief" (2006, 23), I will contend that Updike the looker is Updike in love—and jealously begrudging the cultural value of visual images that lack that love.

I

Updike's attention to visual detail is part of why he enjoyed writing about painting as much as he did. Worth reading on its own merits, his art criticism was nonetheless a kind of calisthenics, a tuning exercise to keep his fingertips in sync with his eyes. His essays on art tell us a good deal not only about how and why Updike notices things, but also about what he wants his readers to notice and why. For instance, he shares his enthusiasm for Fairfield Porter's creative use of color, demanding that we join in his wonder, for "where else but in *The Harbor—Great Spruce Head* (1974) have we seen painted those leaden lavender cores at the heart of radiant cumulus?" (*Just* 122). "Leaden lavender" attempts to honor the singular-

ity of this specific color with an equally attentive phrase. Yet the lyrical luster used to name this dull, metallic shade emanating from "radiant cumulus" is in itself a lesson in Updike's way of noticing: naming is a form of response. Writing is not the work of a solipsistic, inward gaze, but the task of forming an adequate response to what has been given to see.

A painter's knack for pulling colors out of white surfaces again catches Updike's adulation in Winslow Homer's iconic image of innocent boyhood's repose, *Boys in a Pasture* (1874). He goadingly muses that "there is something of Greek drapery in the color-gouged fold of the sunlit white sleeve" on one of the boys (*Just* 43). The fold does slip into shadow but hides a whole spectrum of visibility in its subtle reclusion. Such observations demonstrate a willful desire to appreciate the sly inventiveness of the artist's creative relationship with sense data. In Updike's appreciative eyes, Homer's sometimes too sentimentalized view of rural American boyhood weaves that other Homer's "wine-dark sea" into homespun regalia. Updike confessed that appreciation was indeed the preeminent goal of his art criticism, writing: "The effort of an art critic must be, in an era beset by a barrage of visual stimulants, mainly one of appreciation, of letting the works sink in as a painting hung on the wall of one's home sinks in, never quite done with unfolding all that is in it to see" (*Still Looking* xv). To unfold the image by spreading it out into words. To secure oneself from the "barrage of visual stimulants" not by closing one's eyes, but by opening them to receive the panorama of a single image's myriad rewards.

This approach to writing about what has been seen and what is seeable expresses a basic value. The fact that Updike kept looking, or rather kept writing about looking, demonstrates an ontological conviction about the nature of things and the meaning of human being. His reflections on visual images, his essays on art, perhaps most directly express it. He gives this conviction a name when he recalls his encounters with Paul Cezanne's *Pines and Rocks* (see fig. 1) in the Museum of Modern Art, musing, "What did it mean, this oddly airy severity, this tremor in the face of the mundane? It meant that the world, even in such drab constituents as pines and rocks, was infinitely rewarding of observation, and that simplicity was composed of many little plenitudes, or small, firm arrivals" (*Just* 11). Even a common rock deserves its belabored homage. Distant cumulus clouds disclose new hues to the attentive artist.

Plenitude is not necessarily—like splendor or radiance, reappearing adjectives in Updike's oeuvre—dependent on some notion of beauty bathed in stunningly intense light. The apt synonym for plenitude here is not pulchritude but amplitude.

1. Paul Cézanne. *Pines and Rocks,* c. 1897. Oil on canvas, 32 × 25¾ inches.
Lillie P. Bliss Collection, Museum of Modern Art.

Cezanne's "small, firm arrivals" are dense, bursting with a specific *thisness* that is nonetheless a fathomless *muchness*. Plenitude, a concept born in Platonism but baptized and adopted by medieval Christian philosophers and theologians via Plotinus, originally expressed how the conceptual possibilities of the human mind relate to the nature and structure of the created order. To every conceivable idea, Plato thought, there must be some matching reality. The world of human experi-

ence is equally as expansive as the world of conceivable possibilities. "[W]hat is, is," was Updike's succinct celebration of the ontological mystery at the heart of vibrant materiality (*Still* 35).

Remnants of this ancient notion infuse Updike's preoccupation with naming and extolling the prolixity of "what is." That this medieval metaphysics of plenitude should persist in Updike's late twentieth-century writing is far from unprecedented. Arthur O. Lovejoy's classic study *The Great Chain of Being* (1936) puts plenitude at its center, arguing for its persistence throughout most of western cultural history. According to Lovejoy, this philosophical ideal of ontological multiplicity sneaks its way from classical times right into the modern era. He defines its inexhaustibility as a function of the creativity that brings all things into being—whether trees or telephone poles, fine art or fine weather. Lovejoy explains the concept of plenitude as the world's inexhaustible fullness of forms:

> . . . not only the thesis that the universe is a *plenum formarum* in which the range of conceivable diversity of *kinds* of living things is exhaustively exemplified, but also any other deductions from the assumption that no genuine potentiality of being can remain unfulfilled, that the extent and abundance of the creation must be as great as the possibility of existence and commensurate with the productive capacity of a "perfect" and inexhaustible Source, and that the world is the better, the more things it contains. (Lovejoy 52)

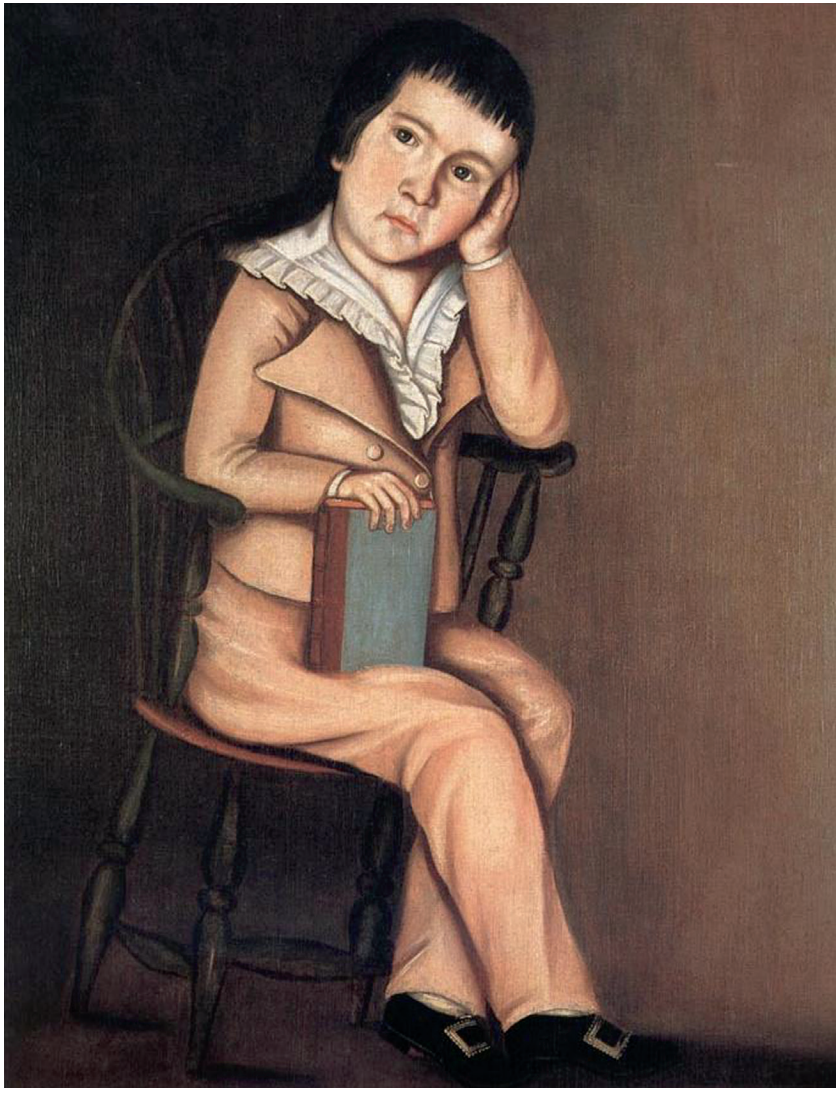
When Updike thrills to discover in Cezanne's *Pines and Rocks* the rewards of observation, he assumes the basic sense of this enduring concept of plenitude—that the world's full range of forms are fundamental to its goodness. His writing, too, participates in this abundance of creation. In order for the artist to pay homage to an "insatiably creative" God, in Lovejoy's words, he must "add something of his own to the creation" (Lovejoy 294). The writer adds to those possibilities with words. Accordingly, for Updike the aesthetic ideal of plenitude is more than a mere occasional insight prompted by Cezanne's "airy severity." It infuses his understanding of the ideal experience of any aesthetic vision.

Prose written with an eye for plenitude assumes that the world in all its multiplicity is a gift worth commending. It is a philosophical conviction that is also a moral value. To keep giving that gift is one reason why Updike writes the way he does. There is always some thing waiting to reveal itself to its patient admirer. This moral relation to being is routinely ignored in the realist turn in contemporary theory, from Bill Brown's "thing theory" to Graham Harman's "speculative realism" to Markus Gabriel's "new realist ontology"; however fresh these theories'

approaches to realist ontologies, they lack Updike's emphasis on the subject's predisposed attitude toward what is good and why. Yet such is largely the lesson Updike imparts in his 2008 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, "The Clarity of Things." When Updike opened that speech with the question "What is American about American art?" (*Always Looking* 3), he sought to define more precisely what he elsewhere called the American "morality of representation," or the way an image conveys its own values (*Still* xiv). While Updike's Jefferson Lecture meanders chronologically through the series of paintings included in the National Endowment for the Humanities program *Picturing America,* it confidently asserts a single aesthetic ideal as the backbone of this morality of representation: the clarity of things.

John Singleton Copley, whose paintings Updike often admired in print and from whom he first derived this critical concept, might have been apprehensive to hear such an ideal affixed to his own work. Copley wished his painting to be more refined, like that of his English contemporaries; he yearned to, in his own words, "acquire that bold free and gracefull stile of Painting that will, if ever, come much slower from the mere dictates of Nature, which has hither too been my only instructor" (qtd. in *Always* 6). Updike turns this lament into Copley's strength and legacy, the impervious heritage he bequeathed to his American successors. The way Updike renders Copley's painterly penchant for the clarity of things over the embellishments of illusion amounts to a late-career occasion for him to state his own aesthetic intentions via the visual art form he most enjoyed. Much of what he claims in the lecture applies to his own work as well.

Though Copley's response to "the mere dictates of Nature" was no shortcoming in Updike's eyes, it did prompt Copley's peers to decry a too fastidious austerity in his painting. Updike quotes Copley's friend reporting back to him that England's eminent Joshua Reynolds, while admitting that Copley's work certainly showed promise, found in his *Boy with a Squirrel* (1765) "a little Hardness in the Drawing, Coldness in the Shades, An over minuteness" (*Always* 6). The Pennsylvania-born painter Benjamin West sent a similar judgment to Copley, claiming some of the English painters found the painting "to[o] liney, which was judged to have arose from there being so much neetness in the lines" (6). What Reynolds saw as a slightly harsh "over minuteness" West called "liney." Updike asks, "What did Benjamin West mean by this word? A line is a child's first instrument of depiction, the boundary where one thing ends and another begins. The primitive artist is more concerned with what things *are* than what they look like to the eye's camera. Lines serve the facts" (8–9). For Updike, the primitive artist is duly focused on "what



2. The Beardsley Limner. *Little Boy in a Windsor Chair,* c. 1800.
Oil on canvas, 32 × 25 inches. Montclair Art Museum.

things *are*" more than the stylistic techniques of illusion, such as shading or spatial composition. Yet note how Updike distinguishes the definition of a thing from its apparent qualities when he separates "what things *are*" from "the eye's camera" of visual perception. Lines, in Copley, serve facts, not ocular illusions.

3. John Singleton Copley. *Boy with a Squirrel (Henry Pelham),* 1765. Oil on canvas, 30⅜ × 25⅛ inches. Boston Museum of Fine Art.

The primitive painter—eighteenth-century American painters in this style are fittingly called limners—starkly distinguishes the substantiality of things with lines instead of light or space. The limner's lack of fleshy depth or suggestive atmosphere may be a mark of his art's immaturity, but it is a mark of conceptual fidelity in Updike's rendering. If one compares the Beardsley Limner's *Little Boy in a Windsor Chair* (fig. 2) with Copley's *Boy with a Squirrel* (fig. 3), Copley's silky

4. Sir Joshua Reynolds. *Portrait of Master Bunbury,* 1780–1781. Oil on canvas, 30⅛ × 25⅛ inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

contours seem almost exaggerated. Yet comparing Copley's painting to Reynolds's *Portrait of Master Bunbury* (fig. 4) evinces Copley's distinct affinity for the limner's harsher, demarcating style. If Reynolds's use of light and shading emphasizes the boy's imaginative interior life, Copley's lines give his portrait the dignity of defined space; "over minuteness" respects the empirical facts if not the realistic illusion of them. Updike thinks this limner style entirely justified, for it exemplifies "a

resolute attempt at likeness and an honest notation" that is justifiably suspicious of the artistic illusion:

> The conventions of illusionistic painting, providing through tint and brushwork the sense of recession in space and of enclosing atmosphere, are not demanded by every culture. In the art-sparse, mercantile world of the American colonies, Copley's lavish literalism must have seemed fair dealing, a heaping measure of value paid in shimmering textures and scrupulously fine detail. "Over minuteness" could scarcely exist, as it did not exist for Holbein or Jan van Eyck. (*Always* 9)

This quotation is a typical specimen of Updike's critical prose. The mixture of precise, apt diction paired with an amiable demotic—"tint" and "brushwork" alongside "fair dealing." "Art-sparse" is itself a bare expression for the cultural wilderness of the colonial United States. Yet Updike's alliterative "lavish literalism" verges on nonsensical embellishment: is not literalism reserved, if not austere? To adhere to the bareness of a thing would certainly seem less than lavish. Literalism can be an expression of inherent worth, however, and a way of lavishing what is with its overlooked value. Moreover, to lavish the literal with such phrases is the linguistic correlate to the limner's lininess. Such details—in words or paint—are a mode, a style, a reverent responsiveness. Copley provides "a heaping measure of value paid in shimmering textures and scrupulously fine detail" not to make up in exhaustive detail what his images lack in the refinement of illusion, but because the world of things is just so disastrously specific.

Updike attributes this aesthetic notion of "fair dealing" to what the art historian and critic Barbara Novak calls the "conceptual bias" in Copley's aesthetics (Novak 4). It is a preferential attitude toward the evidential object shared by Copley's contemporary, Jonathan Edwards. According to Updike, "Edwards wrote of 'the clarity of "things,"' of things as the mediators between words and ideas, between empirical and conceptual experience" (*Always* 10). Here Updike is recycling an influential argument of Novak's; note the doubled quotation marks around "things." He gives the impression that the phrase he uses for his lecture's title—"the clarity of things"—was Edwards's phrase. But it is neither Edwards's nor Novak's. While Updike directly quotes Novak's chapter on Copley when he refers to Copley's "conceptual bias," there is no mention of "the clarity of things" to be found in her argument, which opens her influential study *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century.*

In "Copley and Art History: The Study of America's First Old Master," included in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1995 exhibition catalogue *John Singleton Copley in America,* Carrie Rebora writes:

> [Novak] identified "Copley's realism as a unique union of object and idea" comparing him to the theologian Jonathan Edwards, who relied on the clarity of "things" in his preaching as Copley did in his painting. This clarity of things, Novak proposed, was, and still is, at the core of the American experience, and she attributed Copley's greatness to his invention of means of conveying weight, volume, texture — the "thereness" or "being" of people and objects—and his reconciliation of conceptual and empirical experience. (18)

The phrase is in fact Rebora's paraphrase of Novak's characterization of Edwards's preaching. Even though Updike likely got the title of his lecture from Rebora and the exhibition catalog, the quotation he goes on to cite from Edwards to back up his assertion comes from neither Rebora, Novak, nor even Novak's source for her reading of Edwards—Perry Miller's famous study, which Updike had likely read, *Errand into the Wilderness.* Instead, it is from one of Edwards's *Miscellanies* volumes—not exactly everyday reading for a theologian, let alone a novelist.

The source of the Edwards quotation, however, is not some idle scholarly curiosity, or even laudatory evidence of Updike's intellectual heavy lifting. It reveals a good deal of Updike's affinity for Edwards's thinking about "the clarity of things." The quotation Updike uses to explain this object-oriented lucidity, and to support his claim that Copley shared a theologically inspired idea with Edwards, conveys Edwards's own reverence for the triumphant substantiality of things: "The manifestations God makes of Himself in His works . . . are the principal manifestations of His perfections, and the declaration and teachings of His word are to lead to these" (*Always* 10). First of all, it reveals the strength of Updike's affinity for Edwards's theology of things. But second, much like Perry Miller's treatment of Edwards's thought in *Errand in the Wilderness,* it intimates why things exist in affective relationships to human thought. For Updike and Edwards alike, visual experience was inseparable from emotional predispositions. Copley's lush silks and satins and liney portraits, like Edwards's theology, emanate from an original affection.

Miller characterizes Edwards's understanding of the affections through the relationship of words and things in a way that highlights Updike's sympathy with Edwards's linguistic theory. "Edwards' great discovery, his dramatic refashioning of the theory of sensational rhetoric," Miller contends, "was his assertion that an idea in the mind is not only a form of perception but is also a determination of love and hate" (Miller 179). Ideas are not only intimately linked to perception, for Edwards, but to emotional judgments. The rational mind does not operate

in isolation from the affections; judgments and inclinations work in conjunction to become affections. We think, in part, through our emotions. In *The Religious Affections* Edwards clarifies how these inclinations relate to our judgments:

> God has endued the soul with two faculties: one is that by which it is capable of perception and speculation, or by which it discerns, and views, and judges of things; which is called the understanding. The other faculty is that by which the soul does not merely perceive and view things, but is some way inclined with respect to the things it views or considers; either is inclined *to* them, or is disinclined and averse *from* them; or is the faculty by which the soul does not behold things, as an indifferent unaffected spectator, but either as liking or disliking, pleased or displeased, approving or rejecting. This faculty is called by various names; it is sometimes called the *inclination*: and, as it has respect to the actions that are determined and governed by it, is called the *will*: and the mind, with regard to the exercises of this faculty, is often called the *heart.* (24)

Edwards's "theory of sensational rhetoric" (in Miller's phrase) is rooted in this Christian vision of human judgment as necessarily entailing emotional attitudes. Indeed, for Edwards, true religion was first and foremost a tenderness of heart, of orienting the affections toward what is good and true. "It is an evidence that true religion, or holiness of heart, lies very much in the affection of the heart," he expounds later in *The Religious Affections,* "that the Scriptures place the sin of the heart very much in hardness of heart" (45). "Hardness of heart" is a kind of insensitive disaffection, a refusal to love—one of the "external circumstances" Pascal names and Updike uses for the epigraph to *Rabbit, Run.* The purpose of "sensational rhetoric" is to teach correct judgments through "the affection of the heart."

This "sensational rhetoric" is at the heart of Updike's "lavish literalism." To assert the empirical clarity of things—that things mediate between words and ideas, and not words between things and ideas—is to assert the high place of objects in shaping human culture. Updike's sensational rhetoric, like Copley's "liney" quality, seeks to give those objects their ontological just deserts. Yet he also shares with Edwards the awareness that a representation in the mind entails an emotional attitude toward the thing represented—not merely to the representation and its beauty or lack thereof, but to the thing in all its material substantiality. To see things *clearly,* to visually appreciate the full clarity of the given world, demands an emotional predisposition—what Edwards would call an inclination of the heart—to be grateful for what one sees.

Updike's comparison of Copley's "liney" style to Winslow Homer's "painterly" flourishes exemplifies how Updike himself seeks to elicit such inclinations through

5. Winslow Homer. *Undertow,* 1886. Oil on canvas, 29 13/16 × 47 5/8 inches. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

his prose style. He does not only show us things; he wants us to value them, to feel joy at them. Of Homer's *Undertow* (fig. 5), he writes that

> we cannot but be conscious of the paint itself, of thick white dabbled and stabbed, swerved and smeared into place in imitation of the water's tumultuous action; we simultaneously witness both the ocean in action and the painter at work. These arduous passages of tumbling foam and exploding spray are at once representations of natural phenomena and examples of painterly artifice; thing and idea are merged in the synthesis of artistic representation. (*Always* 16)

According to Updike, Homer's use of curvature and thickness are not merely reflexive embellishments but create sensational impressions in service of the facts. In this case, unlike in Copley's portraits, the thing itself is not static but in motion. Stylistically, Homer's painterly strokes are far from Copley's lininess; their shared conceptual priority of the idea of the thing, however, is apparent in Homer's desire to capture the ocean waters not merely in action, but as form of action. As Updike writes, "thing and idea are merged." Here again a sensational rhetoric of the image points toward the concept of the thing. Yet note how Updike's own sentence wants to embellish in such a way as to follow Homer's style and simultaneously gesture toward the thing it describes: "dabbled and stabbed, swerved and smeared" evokes the motion of water as much as a painter's brush, and "tumbling foam and

exploding spray" works to match in verbs what Homer achieved in line and texture, pushing us back to Homer's image and continuing on to the thrill of water's weighted spontaneity.

Observations such as this one in Updike's art criticism show how the concept of plenitude entails an inclination of the heart toward appreciation and gratitude—the ontological conviction occasions the affective state, and vice versa. Not only do thing and idea merge, but the thing, the idea, and a perceptual attitude toward them. This is, in Updike's writing on American painting, a vital part of what he calls the national tradition's "morality of representation." The moral here is that clear vision does not depend on dispassionate judgment but on the attentive devotion of genuine affection. The moral failing of Hollywood films, for this famously prurient novelist, has less to do with sex or violence than with their failure to respect the object-oriented morality of representation Updike discerns in American painting.

II

Updike's attention to visual detail may intimate his love for all forms of visual experience and the insights of visual culture, but critics are divided on how he esteemed the ocular exactitude of motion pictures. Some, such as Jack De Bellis, simply assert Updike's enjoyment of the medium: "From curtain-raising to end-credits, Updike has loved the movies" (De Bellis 169). Donald J. Greiner, while recently noting Updike's "command of cinema lore," also reminds us of Updike's suspicion that good novels rarely made good films, singling out Updike's displeasure at the unsuccessful adaptation of *Rabbit, Run* (Greiner 2012, 176). Peter J. Bailey sees a profound ambivalence in Updike's view of the movies, however, admitting that though Updike "felt real affection for the movies and movie houses of his youth" he increasingly saw them as nothing more than a "bright island of make-believe," to use the phrase from the actress character in *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (Bailey 69, 70). With an eye to the social consequences of film, Liliana Naydan has shown the link between Hollywood-inspired depravity and fundamentalist reactionaries in *In the Beauty of the Lilies*. Judie Newman perhaps best grasps the heart of Updike's thinking about film, though, when she writes that "it is the social impact of visual domination that most concerns him," noting the "general ambivalence" toward visual spectacles in Updike's "opposition of cinema and church" in that same novel (Newman 124). The immediacy of a purely visual culture lacks the affective nuance that could incline the heart toward more substantial loves.

But is not James Schiff right to assume it "likely, given the hundreds of movies [Updike] watched during his youth, that his sense of scene, narrative, and charac-

ter has in some significant way been shaped by film" (Schiff 136)? Is not much of Updike's vivid descriptiveness due to the particular forms of visuality the movies have given us? And are not the movies the very height of Western art's quest for mimetic realism, that kind of photographic realism for which Updike is known? Yet the obvious artificiality of paint seems to have held truer to the medieval doctrine of plenitude than the cinema's realistic illusions for Updike. Moreover, Bailey does not go far enough in claiming Updike's ambivalence about the movies. While Naydan is right to emphasize how *In the Beauty of the Lilies* affirms a faith of "temperance," the movies provide a way "to approach understanding an unknowable, Barthian divinity" only indirectly, through their corrupt privation of plenitude (Naydan 97). If we read *In the Beauty of the Lilies* in light of the affective ontology that emerges in Updike's art criticism, we can see a condemnation of the disregard Hollywood movies too often inspire toward the world's little plenitudes.

Contra the life-denying tendencies of "the bright island of make-believe," let me suggest that the relation between words and images in Updike's writing is delineated against the background assumption that there is always something more to see and appreciate for those who love the given world as such. In the movies of *In the Beauty of the Lilies* something fantastically abstract, however ostensibly realistic the moving image appears, siphons the viewer's attention from the little plenitudes lurking in "what is." Too smitten with the realistic illusions of the camera, the movies in *In the Beauty of the Lilies* end up teaching the eye to notice, and even to desire, an inferior, cheapened version of reality. Its affective ontology is wrong insofar as it celebrates the isolated goodness of desire, rather than a desire for the goodness of what is. Recall that the clarity Updike celebrates in American painting is not the achievement of lifelike illusion, as if the way to celebrate reality was to create a more believable version of it. No, Updike's Jefferson Lecture unmistakably articulates a tradition of American realism that celebrates the distinctly good material reality of things in relation to human sensation, which mediates between words and ideas. Realism demands a concept of the thing that privileges its ontological status as existing independent from its human representation. The movies that dominated so much of the American visual culture of Updike's youth, however entrancing they might have been, lack that "morality of representation" he praises in its painting. They lack the same affective relation that raises human desire into a gratified sense of belonging.

Yet *In the Beauty of the Lilies* undoubtedly tells a story about the secularization of American culture, though not necessarily the standard secularization narrative where movies dominate the culture in proportion to the decline of its religious

identity. The cinematic lucidity with which Clarence Wilmot, a Presbyterian minister, loses his faith in the novel's opening pages—following a short, prologue-like cameo of Mary Pickford on set and filming for D.W. Griffith—could imply such a simplistic one-to-one ratio. The first of the novel's four parts follows Clarence's resignation from the pulpit and his failed attempt to make an adequate living for his family as an encyclopedia salesman during a recession in the early years of cinema, and the printed word he peddles lacks the compelling force of the movies he watches. Yet the succeeding three parts of the novel go on to follow his son, granddaughter, and great-grandson, and their respective relation to God and Hollywood. In toto, all four sections of the novel comprise a cinematic panorama of the American Century as one where the image ascends to its preeminent place in contemporary cultural experience. While the novel begins with the actress Mary Pickford in the news, it ends with the sensationalized TV news coverage of federal authorities raiding a cult compound much as the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives did during the 1993 Waco siege. In Updike's tale, when the century began the movies were news and religious passion was dying out; at its close, the news entertains like a movie and religious passion is on the rise. Movies do not replace God anymore; God replaces movies. Whatever name its characters might give them, in *In the Beauty of the Lilies* twentieth-century American culture worships immaterial, life-demeaning images.

While the novel associates the loss of God with the rise of an image driven culture, its consistent emphasis is neither the loss of individual belief nor the religious affinities of moviegoing, but rather American culture's fascination with the spiritual power of images and how that fascination mediates the experience of specific characters. Updike's novel explores sensual and emotional experiences—it provides what we might call thick descriptions of, to use Georg Lukács's word, "typical" Americans. These characters are "typical" because, while no individual character is ever wholly representative of the American experience, they do represent *one way* of relating to that whole. Such typical characters help keep the whole—and here that holistic representation is a culture that worships images—in view. The novel explores what it could feel like to be a minister losing his faith, what it could feel like to be a small-town postman, or a movie star, or a member of a cult; and each character bears a typical relation to the seismic cultural changes taking place across the century. Yet both the characters and their society are mediated, in the novel, through images. *In the Beauty of the Lilies* is less about a decline of belief in God, or the creation and demise of the studio system and the rise of television, than how images affect the values that shape everyday experience.

In the beginning of the novel, movies provide ways of escaping and cherishing the given world of everyday life. Clarence Wilmot escapes from the midsummer grind of his hapless door-to-door encyclopedia sales, and his inability to provide for his family, in the cool relief of Paterson's movie houses. There "he felt released from accusation" as "women of a luminous and ideal pallor licked at his fevered brain soothingly" (*In the Beauty* 104). It seems the movies provide the kind of comfort his God used to, back when he believed. Yet this wrongly assumes that God was only a form of escape for Clarence, when in truth what God offered him was an orientation in the world. God bestowed meaning and purpose in the everyday, not its escape. The passage where Updike describes Clarence's release from accusation in the movie houses paints a situation in which the loss of God is irremediable. The movies present an escape from that loss, but cannot restore it.

> Ever since his revelation three years ago of God's nonexistence, he had carried around with him a crusty, stunned feeling—a clinging sense of lostness, as if within a series of ill-furnished, run-down classrooms he found himself in the wrong one, with an urgent appointment elsewhere, for which he was growing every minute a minute more tardy, incurring the growing wrath of some faceless, dimensionless disciplinarian. The sight of his poor family—Stella visibly aged and thinned by their fall, Jared and Esther coming and going with the secretive cockiness of children thrust too early upon their own resources, Teddy at ten growing a shell of deep reserve and plodding stoicism amid the debris of his father's infidelity—was as painful to him as the sight of a sunstruck row of houses on whose doors he was condemned to knock in vain. Within the movie theatre, amid the other scarcely seen slumped bodies, he felt released from accusation. The moving pictures' flutter of agitation and gesticulated emotion from women of a luminous and ideal pallor licked at his fevered brain soothingly. Images of other shadows in peril and torment lifted his soul out of him on curious wings, wings of self-forgetfulness that had not functioned in former days when he and Stella in sober evening finery would attend a Metropolitan production at the Lyceum Theatre, or a Verdi straight from Milan at the Opera House, or a musical play at the Orpheum. (104–05)

The loss of God is wrapped up in Clarence's loss of purpose and identity—the movies he attends complete that sense of loss by immersing him in "self-forgetfulness" whereas a return to belief, or a displacement of the old beliefs into a new form, would require another sense of meaning, a new purposiveness in the world. When Updike describes the movie theatre only a few sentences later as "a church with its mysteries looming brilliantly, undeniably above the expectant rows" (105), it is as much an affirmation of film's transformative power as a critique of the kind of pandering, cultic religion of simple answers portrayed in the novel's last part.

Updike is not insensitive, however, to the ways movies do in fact help us to look at the world more carefully. "Eyes had never before seen in this manner," he writes of Clarence's wonder at what he saw in the movies; "impossibilities of connection and disjunction formed a magic, glittering sequence that left real time and its three rigid dimensions behind" (*In the Beauty* 106). We do see anew through the movies. Yet it is precisely this need to leave "real time and its three rigid dimensions behind," to make the illusion look realistic, that Updike mistrusts. The insistence on the distinction of a thing and its conceptual superiority to either words or images is lost. Whatever new visions the movies provide, there is something invidiously unreal about them. Clarence knows this and while he relishes the escape from accusation that they provide, they seem only to exacerbate his sense of the world's paltry, godless shabbiness. They don't deliver "little plenitudes" as much as terrifying vacancies.

Clarence's son Teddy feels the threat of that vacuity acutely in the presence of the movies' overwhelmingly ideal sensations. He writhes under the very same effects that Clarence found so soothing. "He was not quite the betranced moviegoer his father had been," Updike writes, because Teddy experiences the movies more as a threat than an escape. They were "a bit menacing, an alarming and garish profusion" (*In the Beauty* 146). They do not comfort Teddy and offer no substantial diversion. Instead, the energy of their spectacles speaks too loudly of what they are attempting to cover up: the void felt so keenly in the movie house's enclosing darkness both before and after its bright display. The movies do not illuminate so much as nihilistically wheedle:

> Terror would attack Teddy even in the middle of hilarious and romantic sequences, as he realized that these bright projections were trying to distract him from the leaden reality beneath his seat, underneath the theatre floor. Death and oblivion were down there, waiting for the movie to be over. Not so, these movies tried to say. Life was not serious; it was an illusion, a story, distracting and disturbing but at bottom painless and merciful. These familiar stars, who suffered and died on the screen yet returned a month or two later differently costumed but unchanged . . . led up there a life that was always renewed, movie to movie, without permanent harm, whereas Teddy knew that harm was permanent. The reel of your real life unwound only once. (147–48)

Teddy refuses to fall for it. He rejects the movies' gaudy inveigling, not only because they ignore "the leaden reality beneath his seat," but also because there is something disrespectful uncoiling from within these reels that does not understand the obdurate palpability of the real in the reel. His reaction to the movies is much

as he thinks of his siblings' brassy approach to life: "there was something a bit off, a bit glib, a bit harsh, that misstated the delicate nature of reality as he needed to grasp it for himself" (196).

The character Teddy is reminiscent of the portrait in *Self-Consciousness* of the young Updike on his porch or under the dining-room table, hoping to bask away in the innocence of simply seeing and appreciating the world (*Self-Consciousness* 34, 84). The young Teddy does not want to compete; he does not want to jostle or struggle against others. To his mother and sister's complaints that he get up and get going in the game of life, he replies with exasperation, "Isn't it enough, sometimes, if you just don't make things any worse?" (*In the Beauty* 143). In time he becomes a postman, carrying the citizens' mail down the sidewalk with unaffected wonder at his marvelous, small town. The description of the sidewalks he walks reveals Updike's empathy with Teddy's love for his world of experience. Unlike the films' escapist allure, Updike's verbal description of the sidewalks traces a return to the ordinary, yet with the same sense of amazement that those cinematic illusions first bathed Clarence in.

> And so it was that that unseasonably warm September, as the locusts and poplars and willows and lindens along the streets of Basingstoke turned yellow and slowly dropped their variously shaped leaves onto the buckling sidewalks—blue slate slabs in the oldest section of the town, three-foot concrete widths most elsewhere, and in the less developed districts dirt paths trod in a wavery line beside the roadway—he resumed the walks that he had taken through the town in his earliest days there, only now he leaned against the weight of a leather carrier's pouch and wore a gray-blue uniform and shoes black and thick-soled like a policeman's. (204)

Even as he tells the story of Teddy returning to his walks through the town, Updike sets up the passage so as to describe the everyday sidewalks—even the soles of Teddy's shoes—in an attempt to return the reader's attention to the experience of walking small-town streets. The description is no screen shot from Hollywood insofar as these sidewalks buckle unevenly. The cause of that buckling, the trees lining them, are named—locusts and poplars; the materials that made them, too, are named and classified in turn. The passage is imbued with a sense of namable familiarity that evokes not simply the unnoticed, but a sense of the town's small but firm, dense arrivals. Small-town sidewalks have their little plenitudes, too.

Yet it is precisely this smallness that Teddy's daughter, Essie, longs to leave. How else to escape this dreary everydayness but through the movies? This time, however, that escape is not Clarence's momentary respite. Essie becomes a movie star

who abandons her small-town origins for the glamour of, first, New York City, and then Hollywood. If Updike wrote something of his own aesthetic sensibility into Teddy, he gave to Essie (a character based on his favorite movie star, Doris Day) his ambitions and imperturbable confidence. Unlike her father and grandfather, Essie Wilmot neither cowers nor seeks consolation in the flicker of film's images. To Essie, the projected image carries a more clearly defined reality. She does not see it as a form of escape as much as a form of possibility, a means of entering a higher, more substantial world. The young Essie, coming back from her first visit to the movie house without either Teddy or her mother, does not see her home as Teddy sees the sidewalks, but as something *less* than the movies' ideal world. Here Updike narrates her sense of loss, even as his own love of describing undercuts it:

> The set-back gray house, with her father in the yard and her grandmother in the kitchen, and Mr. Bear upstairs waiting on her bed, where the day's light was leaking away above the spines of the radiator with their secret pattern of twisting ivy, struck Essie suddenly as sad, and insubstantial, a ghost house, seen by the light of the silvery movie world whose beautiful smooth people rattled all those words at each other and moved through their enormous ceilingless rooms with such swiftness and electric purpose. (*In the Beauty* 252)

It is not that *what* she sees is any less thrilling than a sidewalk. Yet *how* she sees has been altered by the movies; she's looking for something different. She is not, as Teddy was, enjoying the props of her life for their simple thereness. No, instead she sees that very thereness as their curse—that her father and yard and house and bear are all in Basingstoke and *not* in the movies.

A basic value system emerges in the novel's own peculiar "morality of representation." In the world of Updike's prose (both critical and fictional), our cognitive judgments on the nature and quality of our visual experiences include, in Edwards's word, an "inclination" to love or hate. Vision is not merely a sensual receptivity or even willful attentiveness to a particular visual field; vision has modes that depend on certain attitudes and emotions, and those attitudes and emotions on certain value judgments about what is good. These values are informed by an aesthetic ontology derived from a belief in plenitude. Essie, then, is a character whose way of seeing is too schooled by the movies and the forms of desire Updike construes as inciting. Her aesthetic ontology does not value the clarity of things. Things do not mediate between words and ideas for her, as for Edwards; abstracted, generalized images saturate her imagination.

The screen, for both Alma DeMott (Essie's stage name once she arrives in

Hollywood) and her audience, offers a way of "lifting them up from fumbling reality into a reality keener and more efficient but not less true" (*In the Beauty* 335). As she walks the streets of her hometown, returned now as a famous movie star, she cannot but help feel that "[e]ven naked of her make-up and costumes, she had more definition, more visible edge, than these shapeless shuffling others who had frightened her that day she first went to the movie alone and then, when she came out, looked like a herd of bumbling blind cows" (338). The camera has bestowed on her a new quality of seeing, but one that works only insofar as it can lift her out of the ordinary and its small-town trappings. The "visible edge" that Essie attains is, in these terms, quite like Copley's "liney" quality in its aesthetic function, but not at all in its effects. For the movies' visible edge does not express the ideal concept of the thing, like Copley's. Nor does it express the ideality that images bring to things, as Updike's descriptions so lyrically intimate. Rather, the movies' visible edge, its ontological hierarchy, celebrates cinematic images as an ideal form of the real. Essie feels more real as Alma DeMott, in comparison to her small town, because of the refinements she has achieved in this image of herself. For Updike, however, though the reality of such images is "not less true" than things, they are less ontologically substantial. While images remain the inescapable mode of human imagining, some images are better than others. Essie has less purchase on her world than Teddy in his; her world has purchased its image.

Essie's son, Clark, grows up assuming the hierarchy of this skewed ontology and his own life seems most real, most valuable, when it feels like a movie. He acts out several roles, gaining his deepest sense of self precisely as the one who gets credit for *acting* out these roles. When Clark joins a religious group holed up in a compound in the Colorado mountains, he is renamed Esau by the monomaniacal leader, Jesse, but Clark recoils at first from his new name, for it "did not feel like him yet; he was still Clark to himself, in the credits in his head" (*In the Beauty* 397). Not only the credits are running in Clark's head, though. His memories of family, too, are construed in terms of "the movies his head would sometimes run" (396). While Clark thinks he has escaped living his life as if it were a movie by joining Jesse's cult, and even derides another member's allegiance to pop culture (471), his life ends while he holds a gun and delivers noir-inspired lines. "Slick," he spews in repugnance at this newest name and Jesse's command to shoot the women and children before federal agents overtake their compound, "you fucker, I'll give you Slick" (484). True to Hollywood script, he shoots Jesse and helps the women and children out before reciting one of Bogart's most famous lines to himself, "*Go ahead*

and shoot. You'll be doing me a favor," as one of Jesse's other male followers shoots and kills him (486).

However subservient he is to Hollywood's scripted scenes, Clark recognizes how deeply the film industry has twisted his experiences. When Clark comes home after an afternoon of busted hopes and an evening of partying to find his mother courting a much older man, he goes into his bedroom, pulls out a half-smoked joint and puts on a half-watched porn flick. The scene is worth dwelling on for the vividness with which it shows Updike's habit of adorning disturbing situations with an easy lyric vitality. It is a key passage for grasping how the novel distinguishes its loving, lyrical descriptions from the falseness of the movies' all too generic clichés. Updike describes Clark watching a brunette maid who looks like "[h]is mother when young, before he was born," and who reveals in her sexual acts "a down-home girl from somewhere's simple wish to please" (*In the Beauty* 433). Oedipal overtones aside, it is clear from other passages in the novel that Clark is frustrated with his mother and at the same time wishes they were closer. As the film continues, Clark finds something erotic in his hatred and self-loathing:

> He had slipped his pants and underpants down on the bed and with his left hand matched the brunette's mouth stroke for stroke, as she kept glancing hopefully upward to the male face, which was off the screen—his mother's look of bright expectancy at its purest, a look he seldom saw any more, as she expected less and less of him. He'd show her, the bitch. His own eyes rolled back into his skull and his airplane lifted off with a shiver of propulsion and a set of diminishing throbs. When he looked again the butler was jerking off on the maid's face, white gobs like Elmer's glue which she was licking off her fingertips, still girlishly, shrewdly eager to please, and Clark had come all over himself, his hand and pubic hair and the band of his underpants. God, people are disgusting. (434)

As crude and explicit as the scene is, it is more comic than pornographic. It arouses bemused disgust more than any semblance of erotic desire. Yet why must Updike indulge his zeal for vivid diction with "a shiver of propulsion" and "diminishing throbs," or that juvenile reference to "his airplane lifted off"? Why does Updike maintain his characteristically graceful prose while describing such a demeaning disgrace of basic dignity and its sloppy mess of semen?

Reading scenes like this one in Updike's fiction can be a morally disorienting experience. Undoubtedly, there is a moral ambiguity here entirely absent from the porn flick. Updike sounds as though he's enjoying himself in describing all this,

but then ends with "people are disgusting" (which doubles in free indirect style as Clark and Updike's conclusion). Would it not be more tasteful to express the interior conflict within Clark more thoroughly, instead of patiently picturing for us where his semen lands? There is more at work here, however, than mere descriptive fidelity—"shiver of propulsion" is not an affectless, contentless, reportage of the realistic facts. If Updike is too eagerly cossetting crudeness, the perverse pleasure of his prose is utterly intentional. For the scene is everywhere a perversion of something good: the joy a son can feel in pleasing his mother and her joy in his pride is here turned into the masturbatory fantasy of an incestuous blow job. The mystery of human sexuality becomes humiliation and lonely dissipation. That "shiver of propulsion" enacts precisely this perverted beauty, bearing witness to a latent, but comically crestfallen, goodness.

Two of the most astute critics of Updike's Christian influences, George Hunt and Stephen H. Webb, have argued that an Augustinian theory of evil, where evil is nothing but a privation of the created good, is intentionally evident in the moments of moral disorientation in Updike's writing (Hunt 32–38; Webb 591). Recalling this metaphysical assumption is indispensable when considering the context of Updike's sense of seeing, because it feels strange to bestow "lavish literalism" on a gob of masturbated semen and fix its dripping ooze with an appreciative gaze. This, too, radiates with the clarity of things? For Updike, yes, it does. Hunt's elegant analysis of how Updike employs his own unique version of Karl Barth's distinction between "creaturely imperfections" and the "Nothingness" that is evil's privation from goodness is helpful to recall here. "Nature might *seem* evil to us but it *is* not in itself," Hunt writes, "for nature always embodies God's gift of creative grace. Nothingness is the negation of grace, the antithesis to the Creator and creation" (Hunt 36, 37). The imperfections of creation—those limitations that provide the fodder for so many of literature's memorable scenes of comic relief—are not intrinsically bad. The possibility of transcendent experience that human sexuality offers is not "bad" in its creaturely comedy of bodily fluids. Yet it is bad, becomes destructive, in its negation of that creaturely goodness.

The scene where Clark masturbates offers us a stark look at the clarity of things while simultaneously showing us their rejection in the fantasy world that the pornography evokes. The prose delights in rendering service to the clarity of things through its affective ontology of the verbal image it creates. While Clark's fantasy and its incestuous violence betray the bleak reality that is the negation of something good, Updike portrays this empty fantasy alongside his own fantastic description of beloved things. The Elmer's glue is no whimsical addendum. The name and its

associations with grade-school art projects and American consumerism create a darkly comic disjunction within the scene. Yet Updike's "lavish literalism" heaps loving attention on the white, pure substantiality and quotidian innocence of both semen *and* glue. Updike's "conceptual bias" (Novak's phrase) is apparent here once again in its attempt to keep pace with the profusion of the visible world's intractable luminescence.

The Christian theology of creation's goodness that Hunt identifies in Updike's fiction is most likely the source of Updike's unique vision of plenitude. Yet, even as the Christian religion in American history has helped people return to the goodness of the world, it has also helped them escape from its pressing responsibilities. *In the Beauty of the Lilies* opens with Clarence losing his passionate faith, and, desperate in its awful void, he becomes a devotee of the movies. The novel closes with Clark being converted from a meaningless and empty devotion to the movies only to escape into a narrowly defined religious zeal. The religion of images, Updike warns us, has replaced the Puritans' old religion of the word as the galvanizing authority of American culture. The late twentieth century's liberated celebration of the image, though, seems just as life denying as the Puritans' print-preferring asceticism. What both the Puritans and Hollywood misunderstand is that the task of human being in this world, as one of Updike's Hawthorne-inspired protagonists once put it, "is to love not what might be but what *is* given" (*A Month of Sundays* 135).

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