The industrious drifter in room 2

John Updike discusses some of his past, present, and future books: Rabbit Run, Rabbit Redux . . . Buchanan Dying . . . A Month of Sundays, *and more about Rabbit.*

by Josh Rubins

In Ipswich, Massachusetts—35 miles and several light-years up the coast from Boston—there's a restaurant called The Choate Bridge. Except that it wasn't always called The Choate Bridge. Once—some years back—it was The Dolphin, and, when John Updike gives directions to his Ipswich office, a timewarp worthy of Vonnegut sets in, The Dolphin resurfaces, and off-season visitors squirm in and out of emptied antique shops, pursuing a phantom bar-and-grill. Absent from both yellow and white pages and from collective memory, The Dolphin soon became a Hitchcock mirage (*The Lady Vanishes!*) and Ipswich, a Hitchcock village. Instant nightmare, followed by nearly-instant daylight, courtesy of a local historian leaning on the Choate Bridge bar. "This *is* The Dolphin" may contradict the pseudo-rustic sign above the bottles, but the words carry the welcome resonance of certainty, and a weary stranger is ready to believe.

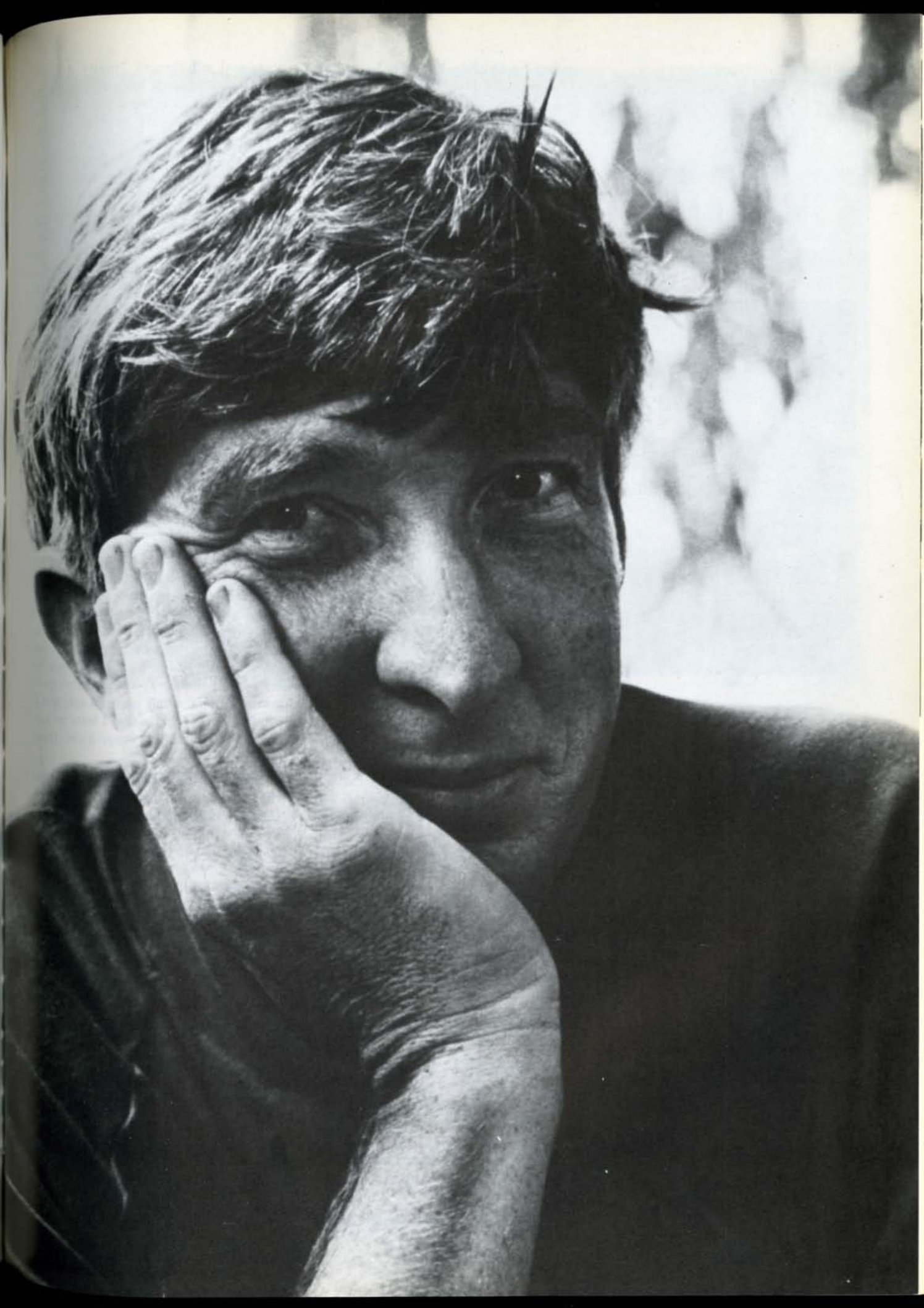
Knowing that The Dolphin and The Choate Bridge are one and the same is the hard part. The rest comes easy. A staircase carved into the restaurant's midsection rises steep and straight from an inconspicuous doorway and unmarked mailboxes. The landing above could make a crowd scene out of a threesome: a lawyer's office to the right, darkness to the left, and—straight ahead—a brown door, anonymous but for a faded metallic "2." When John Updike says, "My life as a writer has been pretty much my own; I've just sat up here more or less and written what books it occurred to me to write," the study behind the brown door is the "up here" he means. A desk, a typewriter, a couch, enough space to wander, and enough space for books to form in neat rows or deceptively chaotic piles. The room is like the best of the Updike novels—compact yet expansive. A writer's dream room. Unintimidating, but all business, comfortable enough to soothe, uncomfortable enough to ward off lethargy. Quiet.

This haven, and a house on a hill he can reach with a three-minute climb, offer evidence of the only "big decision" Updike admits to having made: "To get out of New York City when I was 25. I'd always wanted to live there; getting a job with The New Yorker, getting some space, more or less realized my ambition. And, suddenly, it occurred to me, after attending a party, that this was a deadly place for me, that I'd be better off going into the sticks, trying to write out of my deepest self, instead of writing in response to deals and requests—all that kind of Manhattan crap. That's sort of fun, but, in the end, you just waste your life."

If publishing dates serve as any measure, Updike's flight from New York has enabled him to avoid that anathema of wasted time that hovers about all American artists, especially those nurtured on a Protestant work ethic. Raised as a Lutheran, he rivals Agatha Christie (a writer he enjoys and admires for her deep sense of human evil) for dependability, and room 2's typewriter has processed a book a year for fifteen seasons or so, with 1973 the only exception. There are apologies for both the productivity ("Most of them are pretty short, after all") and for lapses in it, with promises of a double harvest in 1975 to compensate for last summer's silent presses. The reliable craftsman affectionately battles the footloose Greenwich Villager for the foreground position in an Updike self-portrait. Neither wins out; ultimately, paradoxically, the writer sees himself as an "industrious drifter."

Some drifter. The waitress at The Choate Bridge knows John Updike not just as the famous author-in-town but as the man in the parka who comes down from the room upstairs for lunch every day about 1:30 after a morning devoted to fiction. Novels in longhand. Short stories at the typewriter. Afternoons and evenings accommodate non-fiction, poetry, wife, and children—a daughter to be retrieved at half-past four, yet another book

John Updike is a 1954 graduate of Harvard College. His interviewer, Josh Rubins, was graduated from the College in 1970 and is now a third-year student at the Law School. A contributing editor of this magazine, he is also an actor-director and the author of six produced plays.



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review for The New Yorker to be sent off (I'll review anything," Updike confesses). Annual excursions—this year, Australia; last year, Africa—generate fresh perspectives, but, otherwise, the disruptions in routine seem minor. A phone call from an anxious host anticipating an Updike appearance may bring forth an "Oh, Christ, I've said I'll do so many dumb things" and a groan of despair, but, for the most, this "rather efficient and rather undemanding life" projects a sense of peace and stability unknown to Harry (Rabbit) Angstrom, the hero Updike continues to identify with intensely.

In fact, *Rabbit Run* and *Rabbit Redux* seem to have taken on more and more extra-literary significance for their author as his life becomes—on the surface, at least—less and less like the emotional maelstrom through which Harry Angstrom dog-paddles. "These books have written themselves," Updike murmurs, and, when he defends Rabbit, his voice leaves behind the low, cool, charming monotone of calculated response. "People say the guy is both too dumb and too smart. I think it's possible to have a character who isn't very verbal but who nevertheless is very sensitive. Even an average person is full of perceptions and feelings he'd never be able to put down in words. Rabbit more or less thinks like I do, which is sort of. . . pretty dumb. . . pretty dumb, average, drifting guy."

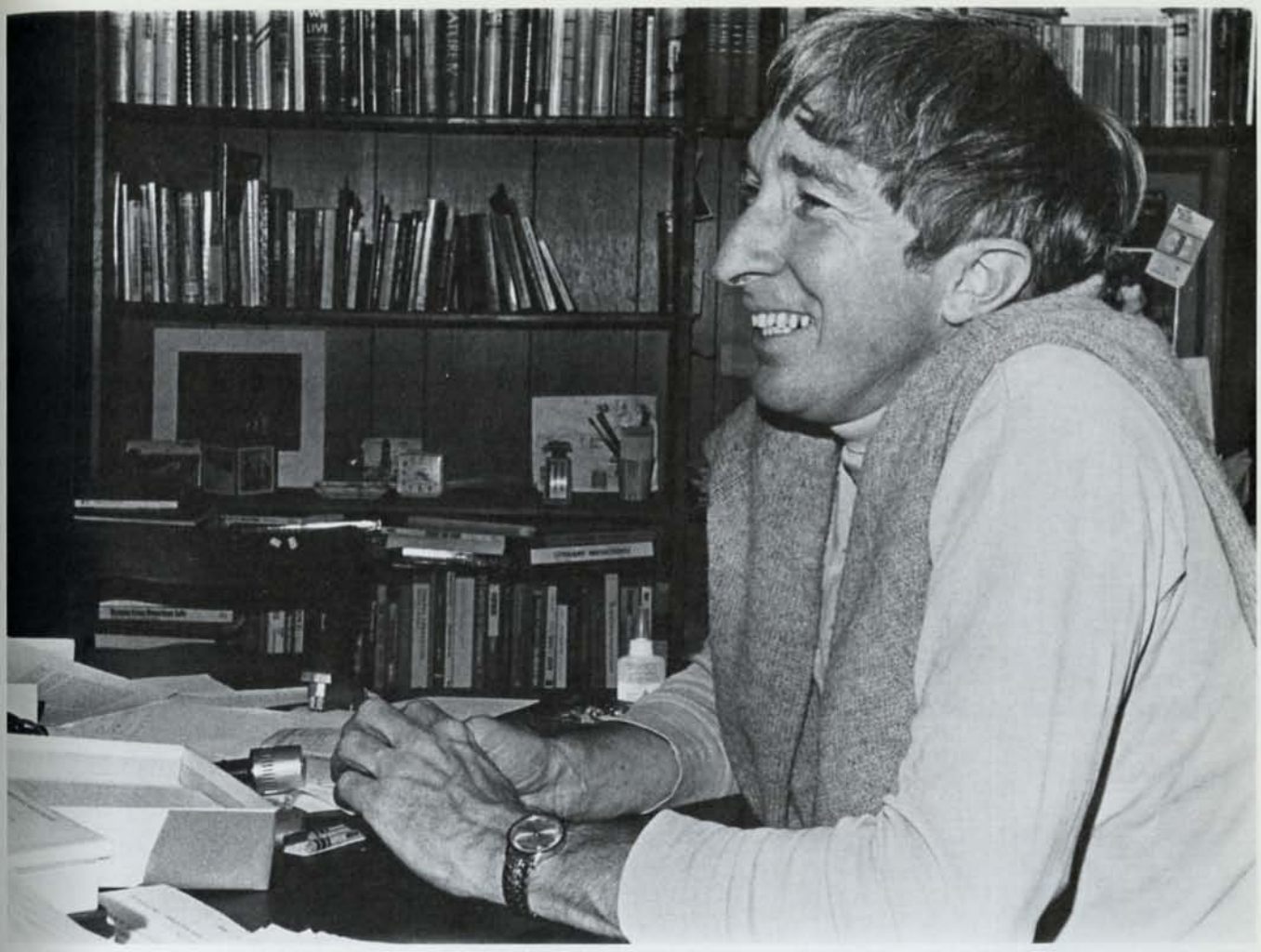
John Updike is neither dumb, average, nor drifting, and he knows it, but the Rabbit books offer him an opportunity for more massive versions of the self-deprecatory asides that pattern his conversation. Glowingly aware of his literary stature, he nevertheless carries his mediocre alter ego with him like a comforter; uncomfortable with distinction, he longs, like so many artists, for the anonymity of averageness. America—especially Protestant, middle-class, non-urban America—regards talent with suspicion, and Updike's uneasiness with being gifted leads him to create a mirror image who is a typesetter, a writer's ultimate metaphor for hackdom. Identification with Harry Angstrom balances the reviews and awards and honors, and so Harry will probably return again as he did in *Rabbit Redux*. "I kind of committed myself with the first revisitation. I have the opportunity—if I live a few more decades—to do a man's life by revisiting him every ten years or so. I would like to be able to write a kind of Victorian tetralogy."

If a Rabbit book each decade and an occasional self-directed "pretty dumb" allow John Updike to live and work with his talent, we can be doubly grateful for the novels and easily tolerant of the coyness towards which the "average guy" imagery drifts. Now in his early forties, Updike appears to be experiencing little *Angst* and no loss of vigor. While he toys with the idea of writing less, of taking time to "slow down, soak in the classics, and, in a way, go back to college," his fingers move protectively over the manuscript of a new short novel and, with short stories next on the creative agenda, his eyes repeatedly shift to the right to better contemplate the waiting typewriter. Whatever crises middle age may be bringing. Updike is prepared to meet them with articulate introspection.

"The only way to stay alive as a writer after forty is to become wise. You've used a lot of your youthful juice and a lot of that youthful certainty that you have something, that your life—with some refraction and ornamentation—is in itself interesting. One way to try to become wise is to do some factual writing. I of course wouldn't hope to turn that way with the commercial success that Mailer and Capote have enjoyed, nor would I put forward a theory—like Norman Podhoretz—that makes fact better than fiction. I have more faith than ever in fiction. I really think it's the only way to say a lot of things. To capture the mermaid live, it's the only net we have, and I still have lots of things that I want to say about lived life. In a way, more than ever."

Sitting in his Ipswich office, a blue sweater sleeve-tied around his shoulders, Updike exudes an aura of literary isolation, a solitude that goes beyond the traveling time to New York. No dazzling novices inspire him with encouraging forecasts. Updike the reviewer seems more pained than entertained by his assignments: "Few people younger than me care about the written word as much as I do. I find it hard to make my way through slovenly or heedless prose. Even though my own may be slovenly and heedless at times, I don't expect others' to be." Salinger having fallen silent, only the work of a few active contemporaries—Nabokov, Cheever, Bellow—fosters any small sense of creative community. Updike and the books that come out of room 2 figure into no general literary scene; they are on their own.

Next year we can expect *A Month of Sundays*, the short novel now ready to embark on the publication process that Updike says seems to take longer with



Updike in room 2.

every set of galleys. He is a notoriously imaginative proofreader, rewriting whole sections on the galley sheets, testing the weight and sound and look of every word. *A Month of Sundays* will prove especially taxing in those pre-printing stages, since the book incorporates the typographical idiosyncrasies and errors of its writer-hero, an emotionally exhausted minister—confined to a motel-rest-home for clerical misfits—whose therapy is a daily stint at the typewriter. Combining notions of writing and theology (a stack of religious tracts adorns Updike's desk), *A Month of Sundays*, despite the author's disclaimer that it's "probably a poor idea," sounds promising in summary.

In summary, *Buchanan Dying*, Updike's first play and this year's publication, sounds dull. In reading, it is both better and worse than one's expectations—by turns embarrassing and exquisite.

Here the Updike preoccupation with losers, with mediocre, supremely ordinary men, annihilates interest without achieving poignancy. Our fifteenth President, James Buchanan, was an unattractive human being and an unexceptional statesman—"my kind of man," intones the dramatist, "one of history's obscure forgottens." The play that Updike has fashioned around his fellow Pennsylvanian's deathbed tableau began as 100 pages of a novel that seemed "stiff, unreal, and lacking in electricity." Those handicapping qualities linger on in the revised genre; indeed, they surely come with the Buchanan territory. "Sliding, moving around in a dying man's mind, looking for patterns, veins" might provide a workable, if unoriginal stage premise (probably more appropriate to film than theater), but the mind must be one worth the trip. Buchanan's, especially in Updike's researched-to-a-fault, barely fictionalized treatment, is not; and "let him die in peace" emerges as the dominant emotional reaction to the unchronological yet somehow predictable series of flashbacks that extend through three long acts.

Oblomov-like, Buchanan spends the first act refusing to budge from bed, avoiding the demands of the memory-figures who materialize to badger him. Strangely enough, until "Buck" finds his footing (the Empress of Russia, in French, applies her charms and sets him dancing as Act I fades away), the drama does develop a dynamic thrust—the ironic duality of the dying man's real physical situation played against a retrospective of his lifelong passivity. But, with an ambulatory Buchanan, the metaphor dissolves, and Act II surrenders to an historical survey, a pageant-like procession of famous names, and scenes awkwardly crammed with an aggressive demonstration of accumulated information (had you forgotten that South Carolina is known as the "Palmetto State"?). For every Buchanan conversation of which there's a record, Updike has found a home in his second act; the overcrowding breeds claustrophobia. A quasi-comic portrayal of

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Southern femininity does not contribute the longed-for fresh air; nor does Act III, although a vast improvement, remedy or explain the excesses of its predecessor.

Updike admits that "it would be a very fine audience that would sit still for Act II and get out of it what I put into it," but perhaps he overestimates the difference in fortitude between a spectator and a reader. What no audience would sit still for, few readers will keep turning pages to pursue.

Too long, too chained to history, *Buchanan Dying* drowns its dramatic seedling—the paradox of the passive personality—in a flood of unstructured detail. The few moving moments that Updike has created owe nothing to the White House or the Civil War or the slavery issue. They reveal Buchanan at his least specific. Plays, far more than novels, demand a touch of Everyman in their starring roles, and only rarely—in his disastrous romance, in his flashes of failed faith, in his family confrontations—does Updike's James Buchanan embrace more than a single set of history-book dates.

"I'm not a theatergoer and find most plays pretty silly," John Updike muses, "which may make me a limited kind of playwright." For whatever reason, Updike is really not a playwright at all, because he fails to acknowledge the overwhelming complications of a genre transplant, mistaking dialogue with stage dressing for dramatic action. *Buchanan Dying* does offer several stageworthy moments, a few playable scenes, and a handful of theatrical effects (multiple roles for single actors, an applause machine, a crafty prop or two, onstage use of a bedpan), but—for both the reader and Mr. Firstnighter—the absence of a governing theater sense downshifts the work from a play to a collection of speeches and conversations. As such, its triumphs are unquestionable.

Aphoristic, rhythmic, and as richly colored as the deepest tapestries woven by Tennessee Williams, Updike's stage speech dares to risk the perils of prose poetry and almost always wins its gambles. "The carrying costs of my body have grown exorbitant," Buchanan moans, "My toes, for all the messages they send me, might be in session in Sacramento." Single lines reverberate long after the second act descends into the bogs of history: "A clerical error in Heaven is chaos here below." Extended speeches of recollection, prayers, and letters are assembled out of words that belong together, sound together, and achieve significance beyond mere content. President Polk's lament for his vanished youth is worth all the theology in Act III; the reassuring cadences of Buchanan's mother's stagey Scottish burr carry more truth than the transcriptions from dusty documents.

Almost inevitably, the excesses that disfigured *Couples* — the gambles doomed to come up double zero—accompany the risks well taken: uninvited words that send readers rushing to dictionaries, self-indulgences that shatter fragile balances of sound and meaning. Contortions of language ("But Lincoln did not forthcome") tax the ear and mind, and the obsessions that seemed appropriate beside the rampant eroticism of *Couples* turn laughable and grotesque in the stately, staid 1868 of *Buchanan Dying*. (Buchanan's betrothed "rips her bodice so her breasts show." Buchanan burbles, "You are a goddess; you are a cow." No wonder he died a bachelor).

"In a way, an unplayed man is a nonthing," sighs Updike, knowing that his play "obviously got beyond playable bounds." Roger L. Stevens at the Kennedy Center has estimated that the text to be published this June (on the anniversary of Buchanan's death) would run some seven hours in performance. Without major revisions, *Buchanan Dying* is unlikely to be slated for upcoming productions. Yet, one day, actors should speak those lines, and Updike should come to grips with the trauma of the passive dramatic hero—unconstrained by the borrowed straitjackets of historical scholarship.

But, having worked off an innate sense of obligation to his native state by immortalizing its only Presidential timber, Updike has placed his collected works of James Buchanan on the shelf in room 2 and has long since moved on to the lives of other drifters. In them, in the mornings, he continues to face the "deep fear that action is bloody, that decision is bloody, that the world as it exists is a world of terror and death." And, after the morning, lunch at The Choate Bridge-Dolphin and a walk up the hill. □