

Introduction

The Writer in Public

While a writer's success stems from work done in private, presumably in a quiet study or office, he may at times feel the need to step outside and meet his readers in public. Readers may feel a similar need on occasion to close their books and drive a few miles to meet the author. This interaction most often comes in the form of a public reading or lecture by the author and takes place on campus or in a bookstore or library. For financial as well as personal reasons, many significant contemporary American writers annually devote days, even weeks, to this ritual, flying across the country to give readings, lectures, and interviews. Although a significant experience for author and reader, this public spectacle and exchange, which in the nineteenth century was covered in detailed newspaper accounts, has received relatively little serious print attention in the contemporary era. Well-known lecture series, such as Harvard's Norton Lectures, are collected and published; however, little to no attention is given to the visit itself, by which I mean the writer's performance and interaction with his audience.

Updike in Cincinnati is unique in comprehensively documenting the two-day visit of a major American author to a Midwestern city where, in the wake of recent race riots and an airline strike, he delivered two public readings; fielded questions from several audiences; sat for an on-stage interview; participated in a panel discussion devoted to his short

fiction; toured a local art museum with its curator and director; and dined with students, faculty, and patrons. The occasion for the visit was the Cincinnati Short Story Festival, a two-week long celebration of the genre, which featured John Updike, Lorrie Moore, ZZ Packer, and other prominent short-story writers, critics, and editors. During its opening two days, April 17 and 18, 2001, Updike was the featured guest, and from video- and audiotapes of his various appearances on stage, written transcripts were generated, which were later revised and polished by Updike and myself. That material, along with photographs taken by Jon Hughes, accounts for the volume you now have in your hands, and stands as a record of what transpired over those two days in April 2001.

Dickens and Twain, of course, were famous for their public performances and readings. Dickens, who had had early aspirations of becoming an actor and had performed in amateur theatricals, loved the stage as well as the adulation he received from the audience. Although his friend and advisor John Forster tried to persuade him that public exhibitions—acting on stage, giving literary readings—were beneath his calling as a gentleman, Dickens began giving public readings in 1853 for charity, and by 1858 for profit. The readings brought him considerable income; however, money was not the sole impetus. As Raymund Fitzsimons notes, “Dickens began reading professionally at a time when his literary powers were declining.” In addition, he was in need of distraction from both his failed marriage and depression. The readings gave him what he required. Following a private reading that the author had given years before to William Macready, the famous actor-manager, Dickens wrote in a letter to his wife, “If you had seen Macready last night—undisguisedly sobbing and crying on the sofa, as I read—you would have felt (as I did) what a thing it is to have power.” Performances also provided transcendence; after one reading, Dickens found himself so animated by his audience that he wrote, “I felt as if we were all bodily going up into the clouds together.” Power, adulation, transcendence,

affection, personal confirmation of his worth and abilities, distraction from worries and depression—all of these things, as well as financial motivation, were fueling that desire. Dickens needed his audience, perhaps even more than they needed him, and over roughly the last decade of his life he toured incessantly, reading while on tour an average of four evenings a week and refusing to cancel performances when ill.

Few writers before him had read, much less *performed*, their works in public, by which I mean that Dickens, working from a prompt copy of his text, which he continually revised, used gesture, vocal expression, and, most significantly, voice modulation to hold his audience's attention. His ability to impersonate and to switch rapidly from character to character was a particular strength, and his performances, according to Kenneth Benson, were astonishing: "Dickens's warmth, histrionic flair and expressiveness evoked tears, applause, shrieks, laughter, hisses, and shouts of 'Hear, hear!' from his audiences." The readings also drew enormous crowds, with lines of several hundred sometimes forming overnight and tickets being scalped or counterfeited. The public reaction Dickens elicited would be more fitting, by contemporary standards, for a pop star or charismatic preacher: the performance hall packed with hundreds, even thousands of spectators; voluble laughing and crying during his reading; fans eager to see his face and touch his hand, even on occasion mobbing him outside the hall and tearing his clothing. The reading was what Dickens lived for during the final decade of his life, yet, ironically, it also contributed to his premature death in 1870 from a stroke.

Not all authors have performed so well and memorably on stage. As magnificent a writer as Melville received mostly lukewarm responses to his lectures, one of which was delivered at the Mercantile Library in Cincinnati in 1858, the same venue Updike visited 143 years later. In those days, of course, lectures were given detailed press coverage, as evident in this description of Melville's talk, "Statuary in Rome," in the

Cincinnati Enquirer, one of at least three newspapers covering the event: “Smith and Nixon’s Hall was about two-thirds filled with a highly intelligent and cultivated auditory, when the lecturer, an unremarkable, quiet, self-possessed-looking man, seemingly about thirty-five or six years of age, with brown hair, whiskers and mustache, bronze complexion, about the medium stature, appearing not unlike the captain of an American merchantman, presented himself.” The reporter goes on to describe Melville’s “delivery” as “monotonous and often indistinct,” a view perhaps shared by the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial*, which, after describing Melville as “an attractive person, though not what anybody would describe [as] good looking,” remarked that his delivery was “earnest, though not sufficiently animated for a Western audience.” Obviously, Melville’s unimpressive lecturing style has not damaged his subsequent literary reputation. In fact, a century and a half later, one could say it matters little whether one is a brilliant and energetic orator like Dickens or a mediocre performer like Melville. Yet it matters in the sense that Dickens’s desire to perform on stage for his readers is a significant, telling bit of information that helps us to understand both his fiction and his psychology.

While Dickens was the early, towering figure of the public reading, such events did not disappear with his death. During my years of graduate school in New York City in the 1980s, for instance, I had the good fortune to sit in packed houses listening to readings and lectures by Saul Bellow, Stephen Spender, Harold Pinter, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Eudora Welty, Margaret Atwood, Raymond Carver, and many others. I should add that none, except for Pinter, *performed* his work; all simply read their writing, prefacing or following it with impromptu remarks. Although few other cities at that time could boast of having so many distinguished literary visitors, that situation changed during the 1990s. Through the corporatization of the author book tour, which sent far more writers across the country to bookshops and libraries, along with

the growth of book clubs and MFA programs, the public American literary scene altered. Ease of travel and increased speaking fees likely played an additional role. Currently, one can easily attend a reading or lecture almost daily in Cincinnati, where I live and teach. Although many of these events, particularly the ones taking place at large chain bookstores, tend to be far from literary, it is possible, as never before in America, to attend public readings by a wide range of writers, both major and minor, and often for free. In addition, the university at which I teach boasts a wonderful visiting writers program; since 2001, the following fiction writers, among others, have read or lectured on campus: Updike, Lorrie Moore, Don DeLillo, Jane Smiley, Julian Barnes, Jeffrey Eugenides, Michael Cunningham, Richard Powers, E. L. Doctorow, Bharati Mukherjee, Robert Coover, and Percival Everett. The Mercantile Library in Cincinnati can boast of a similar roster of authors during this same period.

As for Updike as a public performer, I had seen him read or lecture, before his arrival in 2001, on multiple occasions, perhaps more than I had seen any other writer, largely because of my interest in his work (during the 1990s I published two books on his writings). I first attended a talk he delivered at the Plaza Hotel in New York in 1987, where he shared the stage with Mayor Ed Koch, Louise Erdrich, Peter Benchley, and Father Andrew Greeley. Koch, who had a bestseller at the time, was promoting himself and boasting, while Erdrich, whose husband had advised that she begin by describing something she had done that Updike had not, confessed to having once been a pinette, a high school wrestling cheerleader. Subsequently, I attended a lecture on art that Updike delivered at New York's Metropolitan Museum in 1988; a reading at Cincinnati's Mercantile Library in 1990; a reading at the William Penn Hotel in Pittsburgh in 1991; and an on-stage interview with NPR's Robert Siegel, which focused on golf, at the Kentucky Center for the Arts in Louisville in 1997. Though I confess to having once traveled several

hundred miles to attend a college basketball game, I seldom travel more than a half hour to attend a literary reading; thus, my attendance at Updike readings and lectures usually coincided with either my living in that city or being there for a conference. Further, while my attendance at Updike readings attests to my committed, long-term interest in his work, it also demonstrates how frequently this particular author goes on the road and gives public readings. Had I been willing to drive four or five hours, it is likely that I could have seen him on many more occasions.

From those five public performances, I gained a sense of what Updike is like on stage, an experience which, perhaps, can be best summarized by Nicholson Baker in his novel about literary vocation and Updike, *U & I*. Recalling “an amazing performance by Updike” on *The Dick Cavett Show* during the late 1970s, Baker writes, “[H]e spoke in swerving, rich, complex paragraphs of unhesitating intelligence that he finally allowed to glide to rest at the curb with a little downward swallowing smile of closure, as if he almost felt that he ought to apologize for his inability even to fake the need to grope for his expression.” Baker goes on to describe a scene from an early 1980s documentary on Updike: “[A]s the camera follows his climb up a ladder at his mother’s house to put up or take down some storm windows, in the midst of this tricky physical act, he tosses down to us some startlingly lucid little felicity, something about ‘These small yearly duties which blah blah blah,’ and I was stunned to recognize that in Updike we were dealing with a man so naturally verbal that he could write his fucking memoirs *on a ladder!*” Updike’s verbal eloquence, his natural grace and intelligence, and his absolute ease as a speaker, despite a very slight, occasional stutter, are probably what his audience, whether live in a hall or watching on television or film, is most aware of. One should perhaps expect this, particularly given the author’s facility with language and deft use of metaphor in his writing, yet one is also slightly astonished to encounter such eloquence *live* in a library or town hall, particularly when the author is

speaking off the cuff. Updike's performances are so effortless and graceful that one assumes that this is the very thing he was meant to do his entire life.

One also notes in Updike's performances humility and sensitivity to his audience's comfort. Often aware of the clock, he is likely to express concern about taking too much of his audience's time; he may even introduce a story he is about to read by stating his hope that it will not go on too long. In addition, he may poke fun at his own prolificacy or speak of his accomplishments in such modest, unpretentious terms that one would have little sense of his distinguished place in contemporary American literature. Genial and generous, he is open to questions and interaction with his audience, whether on the future of the short story or his appearance on *The Simpsons*. Unlike, say, Saul Bellow, he does not express disgruntlement or arrogance at questions, nor does he look for argument or debate like Gore Vidal. He is mostly funny and clever, though in a natural, unrehearsed way. Immediately after being introduced at a book convention in Las Vegas, he fell into a coughing fit and, while trying to bring it under control, managed to say, "I can see the headlines. American author chokes to death on his own words." Updike appears to enjoy being on stage, yet doesn't get worked up or worried about it, and seemingly does little advance preparation. When he visited Cincinnati in 1990, he asked earlier in the afternoon if I wouldn't mind bringing my copy of *Odd Jobs* that evening to his reading—even though he had planned to read from it, he had not brought a copy because, he said, it was too heavy to pack. Further, his elaborate half-hour response to critical papers by Bill Pritchard and Don Greiner at the Short Story Festival was completely off the cuff, without preparation or notes.

One is hard-pressed to find shortcomings in an Updike reading. Though eager to please his audience, he is not too eager. In both Pittsburgh and Cincinnati, he delighted his audiences by reading from

fiction that was set in those two cities, yet, as I've seen on other occasions, he is also prepared to give his audience something that they did not come to hear, such as his poetry, or a few minutes about President James Buchanan. I once heard an audience member express disappointment that Updike did not have a polished, canned speech as Tom Wolfe had had the year before, but rather relied on extemporaneous remarks delivered between reading pieces of his fiction and nonfiction. This man clearly felt that Updike had not made a sufficient effort to write something special for his audience. Given the large fee Updike receives, the man may have had a point. However, and speaking personally, I often find myself more eager, particularly if the writer is verbally deft and clever, to hear improvised remarks rather than a canned talk or speech. Improvisation generates curiosity, even drama—one never quite knows what will be said or happen next. Further, when Updike chooses, in between his improvised remarks, to read from a text, it makes better sense for him to read from his fiction rather than a speech, since the former is clearly the best thing he has available.

The only issue I've had after hearing Updike perform is really a question: Why does he do so much of it? Given his tremendous literary success and annual prolificacy, he surely does not need the money. As with Dickens, other factors must be driving him. Perhaps being out in public and away from the solitary work and daily grind of writing offers a diversion and relief. In addition, getting out of the house provides experiences, adventure, potentially even new material. Many of the experiences from Updike's literary traveling, particularly behind the Iron Curtain, later poured into his Bech stories. Perhaps most significantly, however, the need to connect to an audience, to hear its praise and applause, cannot be underestimated. As the sexagenarian Rolling Stones recently finish yet another national tour, I cannot help but think that what drives them is not so different from what drives Updike: the sensation and rush of energy that come from being in front of a crowd that

appreciates, values and loves what you do. Finally, an element of bourgeois professionalism may be behind Updike's touring. Just as he has mandated for himself a daily writing quota of three pages, similarly he may deem it necessary, with some degree of regularity, to accept an attractive invitation to speak. Given that he does not view himself as being out there in the world like others, say, in business, this public exchange may provide him with a sense of being productive, financially worthy, and immersed in the world of commerce. In his autobiographical short story "A Sandstone Farmhouse," Updike's narrator says of his protagonist, Joey, "He had always wanted to be where the action was." This seems true as well of Updike, who in a letter to me remarked how writing reviews has kept him tied to the *New Yorker*, New York City, and the world of print: "I like, as they say, the action."

When I began organizing the Short Story Festival and working with colleagues to select writers, Updike was at the top of the list and invited first. Once he agreed to participate, all subsequently invited short-story writers and critics agreed as well. In preparing for the festival, there was a good deal of work, which I shared with Erin McGraw, my colleague at the time and herself an excellent short-story writer, and Janet Bueing, an enormously capable graduate student who then served as our departmental public relations liaison. I was surprised by how much time was spent dealing with airline reservationists, audio technicians, graphic designers, public relations people, and campus scheduling. My notes from the festival are filled with phone numbers, addresses, and performance hall facts and seating capacity numbers—scribbled in the margin are such lines as "mixer wired into receiver and two speakers" and "ICB Audio self-contained."

In spite of all the effort, one cannot anticipate or be ready for the various accidents and circumstances of time. Although the festival took place five months prior to the cataclysmic events in New York City and Washington which would later shake the world, Cincinnati

was experiencing its own problems in an April which had been nothing short of cruel. Comair, the regional airlines for Delta, which maintains a major Cincinnati hub, had been devastated by a pilot strike that began in late March and was generating havoc for travelers as well as threatening the local economy. Then, on April 9, a committee meeting of the Cincinnati City Council in City Hall turned ugly and was aborted when a large group, protesting the deaths of black men at the hands of Cincinnati police, began shouting, threatening city officials, and causing chaos. Their anger was fueled by the recent death of Timothy Thomas, a nineteen-year-old African American man who was shot on the street after being chased by a police officer (the officer claimed that Thomas was reaching for a gun in his waistband, but there was no gun). Thomas was the fifteenth African American to die in confrontations with the Cincinnati police since 1995. Anger from the council chambers spread onto the streets of the city, particularly the neighborhood of Over-the-Rhine, and soon Cincinnati was engulfed by a riot: fires burning, cars being overturned, looters trashing stores. An evening curfew was instituted on April 12, and as the city braced for the funeral of Thomas on April 15, many feared what would happen next. Remarkably, Cincinnati quickly returned to some semblance of peacefulness and order. While the riot claimed no lives, few physical injuries, and only modest material destruction, it was one of contemporary Cincinnati's worst moments—images of the city in flames were broadcast across the nation and throughout the world—as well as a continuing sign of bitter racial tensions and problems both locally and nationally.

Although the riots, I suppose, had little material impact on the festival—once the 6:00 p.m. curfew lifted, evening events were again possible—they were very much on our minds that week. Having viewed the events on television, Updike called from Massachusetts on April 16, the day before his scheduled arrival, to determine how things were and whether it was still appropriate to go on with the festival. We agreed it

was. Although the riots did not cancel or curtail any festival events, they surely cast a shadow and were, for participants and audiences, present in the air, if not always discussed. In addition, the short story, which is always given short shrift beside its towering neighbor, the novel, seemed even more marginal when placed beside the tragic death of a young man and a wave of ensuing urban violence. Yet life goes on, people get out of bed, scheduled events tend to take place, and writers continue to turn to fiction as a way of making sense of the world.

I met John Updike at his gate at the Greater Cincinnati Airport on Tuesday, April 17, around 3:20 in the afternoon (in those pre-9/11 days, one could still greet family and friends at the arrival gate). A tall man, dressed in a tweed blazer and khakis, he emerged carrying a small, heavily worn leather suitcase (he had not checked any luggage). His hair had whitened since I had last seen him—he was nearly seventy, though he looked healthy and in good shape. Relaxed, cheerful, genial, and modest, he spoke fluidly; while not soft-spoken, he is rarely loud. Walking through the airport, we discussed the riots, travel, the Cincinnati airport (the fact that it is in Kentucky), then I gave him a brief driving tour of the city, including a detour through Over-the-Rhine, where the riots had taken place. Once my duties were dispatched, I dropped him at his hotel, the Cincinnati.

We were to rendezvous at his hotel bar less than two hours later for drinks (Updike told us later that he and his wife had given up alcohol and felt better because of it), and we were to be joined by some of my colleagues as well as critics Bill Pritchard and Don Greiner, who had flown in from Massachusetts and South Carolina for the festival. Wearing a gray pinstripe suit, Updike materialized at the hotel bar and informed us, apologetically, that he had forgotten to pack a necktie. “There’s always something I forget to pack.” Through a light drizzle, I led him across the street to Brooks Brothers, which was still open, where we sorted through neckties, eventually found one to his liking, then returned

to the Palace Restaurant at the Cincinnati for dinner. Updike gave a good reading that evening in Zimmer Auditorium to a crowd of about five hundred, a large audience given the fact that a curfew had been in effect forty-eight hours previous; some Cincinnatians, particularly from the suburbs and outlying rural areas, were hesitant, even frightened, to travel into the city. The event was somewhat unique in that Updike read two stories, "Snowing in Greenwich Village" and "Free," which deal with a similar subject and triangle of lover/wife/mistress, but which were composed nearly fifty years apart. His responses to questions were particularly witty. When one audience member asked about his answer to a question on *The Charlie Rose Show*, he explained that on that show "one is apt to say almost any crazy thing that pops into one's head. Charlie Rose has a way of looking more orange in reality than he does on television, and when he leans toward you his face, already long, gets even longer, so that you undergo a kind of panic." Later, he responded to a question about his guest appearance on *The Simpsons*, describing how they had asked him to chuckle, which, he discovered, took some coaching as well as multiple attempts.

After the reading, question-and-answer session, and signing (perhaps a hundred waited in line for a word and signature), Updike said he feared he was coming down with a cold, and, as I drove him and the others back to their hotels, he asked to stop at a drugstore for cold medicine. "Nyquil," he said. "I think I'm becoming addicted." It was nearly eleven, and a policeman was standing guard outside the all-night Walgreen's, perhaps a mile or so from where the riots had taken place. Minutes later, he emerged from the store, smiling, his plastic bag filled with Nyquil, lifesavers for everyone in the car, and a gift for me, his host: a green plaster turtle.

The next morning was cool, crisp, and sunny as I met Updike and the others early at their hotel and drove us to the Cincinnati Art Museum, where we were to be given, an hour before its opening, a tour of

the collection. Stephen Bonadies, a museum curator, led the tour while Jon Hughes, a journalism professor and widely respected Cincinnati photographer, took photographs. A hodgepodge of buildings, wings, and galleries which recently underwent a rather stunning renovation, the museum has an outstanding collection, one of the finest in the United States for a city of its size. In particular, the museum is rich in Nabataean artifacts and has a reputable collection of nineteenth- and twentieth-century paintings by Van Gogh, Picasso, Manet, and many others. Of the various activities I had suggested in advance, Updike expressed interest in a visit to the art museum. (I should add that years earlier, at a small luncheon in Cincinnati, Updike had indicated a desire, after some encouragement from the table, to visit the elevated billboard where a local radio sportscaster, Wildman Walker, had been camped for weeks. Walker was refusing to come down until the lowly Cincinnati Bengals won a game. Updike, unfortunately, never made it there, and when the Bengals won a few weeks later, Walker descended from his exiled perch.) Halfway through our tour of the art museum, Timothy Rub, the museum's then director, joined us, fastening onto Updike and leading him past his favorite paintings, each time remarking, Updike later told us, "Now here's a really wonderful painting."

Due at the university for a 10:30 a.m. panel, we cut short the art museum tour and arrived to find a capacity audience in the intimate setting of the Elliston Room, an endowed space devoted both to quiet study and literary events, its bookshelves filled with an extensive collection of twentieth-century poetry. Jon Hughes again photographed the event. Bill Pritchard began by considering several relatively ignored and somewhat experimental stories from Updike's collection *The Music School* (1966), stories written in the "abstract-personal mode." Bill then provided a close and very perceptive reading of the story "Harv Is Plowing Now," focusing on the "daring shifts of voice" and the necessity of becoming "an ear-reader rather than merely an eye-reader of Updike's sentences."

Don Greiner followed with an equally engaging paper on Updike's much-anthologized essay on Ted Williams' last game at Fenway Park, "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu," which he treated as a narrative that blurs genre lines. Discussing the piece in tandem with Don DeLillo's "Pafko at the Wall," a novella about Bobby Thompson's famous home run, Don demonstrated how both narratives depict mythical moments in American history. What was most memorable, though, were Updike's impromptu remarks, which he delivered without notes or preparation. Again, his wit was in full form. When trying unsuccessfully to recall the longish title to one of his montage stories, which was then provided by members of the panel, he said, "I have all of these Updike experts here. It makes me feel relatively ill informed." Later, when asked about Pete Rose not getting into the Baseball Hall of Fame and himself not being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, he responded, "I suspect the forces preventing Pete Rose from being in the Hall of Fame aren't quite the same that keep me from winning the Nobel Prize. But there may be a similar taint attached to both of us." What was most appealing about his extended response, however, beyond even the humor and wit, was his intelligence and eloquence, which can only be fully appreciated when one reads the transcript. While the panel session, the most scholarly event of the festival, was perhaps unsuccessful in exploring Updike's short fiction in any great depth or breadth, which had been my nearly impossible objective, the papers, along with Updike's response, provided more than ample rewards for those present.

Following the panel session, we crossed the street to the faculty club for lunch, where more than a dozen of us, including graduate students, faculty, and conference participants, sat together. One critic, Rob Luscher, had flown all the way from Nebraska, and another, James Yerkes, who serves as webmaster of the John Updike Web site, had flown in from Maine. One graduate student told me later that Updike had to field so many questions and listen to so much talk that she feared he

would never be able to finish his soup. She also told me that she had asked him about romance and marriage, and that he told her that the two were distinct and that she should read, if she had the opportunity, de Rougemont.

After lunch, Updike, Bill Pritchard, Rob Luscher, and I walked across campus, directly through Nippert Stadium and over the artificial turf where the Bearcats play football, toward the College Conservatory of Music. My interview with Updike took place in Werner Recital Hall. It was the first on-stage interview I had conducted, and though only moderately nervous, I had no clear sense of how things would proceed. By the time Updike began answering my first question, however, I saw how easy it would be. All I had to do was ask a question—I had dozens in my notes—and he would launch into a thoughtful, elaborate, and eloquent response, stringing together beautifully crafted, long, complex sentences for three to five minutes at a stretch. Had I more experience as an interviewer, I might have tried to challenge him or cut off an answer at some point, though that very well could have been the wrong approach.

Following the interview, a sportswriter from the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Paul Daugherty, arrived and, on a bench just outside the hall, proceeded with his own private half-hour interview of Updike. The focus of that interview was golf, and it generated an article that weekend in the local newspaper, the only real journalism besides a piece in the university's daily student newspaper addressing Updike's visit. When I finally dropped him off at his hotel, nearly eight hours after picking him up for the art museum tour, I informed him, somewhat apologetically, that he had about an hour before we needed to be at the Mercantile Library for his evening reading. He was a good sport about it all, though we both sensed that the schedule had become overly taxing.

At 5:30 p.m. I met him in the hotel lobby—he was dressed again in his gray suit—and we walked three blocks to the Mercantile Library, which was established in 1835 and is the oldest lending library west of

the Alleghenies. Slightly annoyed by the full schedule, Updike said he had tried to nap but that there hadn't been enough time; both of us were semi-exhausted and less than eager to be heading toward yet another event. Further, upon arriving at the library, where the crowd had not yet materialized, we realized that there had been a miscommunication and that we could have had an extra half hour or more of down time. During the lull, Updike was given a tour by the library's executive director, Albert Pyle, a published mystery writer. One of the more beautiful and tranquil spots in downtown Cincinnati, the Mercantile Library, with its tall ceiling, wood plank floors, and cast-iron magazine racks, has hosted, in its various manifestations, lectures and readings by Melville, Thackeray, Emerson, Stowe, and more recently Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates. Numerous writers, including Don DeLillo and William Gibson, have told me that the Library is one of the finest and most appealing venues in which they've read.

Following hors d'oeuvres, wine, and small talk with his audience (the event had sold out in just days), Updike read the first Bech story he ever wrote, "The Bulgarian Poetess," then answered questions and signed books. During the signing, I met Updike's stepson, John Bernhard, an engaging man who coincidentally was in town on business and had stopped by to listen to the reading. Bernhard, whom Updike greeted with a smile and kiss, seemed intrigued by his stepfather's performance as well as the audience's response to it; he had not seen his stepfather do much of this and was interested in how we perceived Updike and whether or not he was like other visiting writers. It was another good reading, perhaps more elegant as well as intimate in the library's setting, and afterwards a group of us took Updike to the Maisonette, Cincinnati's famed five-star restaurant (now defunct). What I recall most about that dinner is laughter, perhaps relief that the events were now over. Updike seemed alarmed, albeit comically, by the Maisonette's prices and was unwilling to order the exorbitantly priced sole meunière,

though he encouraged my wife to do so and later asked if he could try a bite of hers. Mostly he was funny. When his own more moderately priced fish arrived, he held up its elegant accompanying half lemon, wrapped in a gauze dressing held in place by white strings, and remarked, “It looks like a see-through nightie,” then added, to the entertainment of the table, “Or perhaps an Amish woman’s cap.” Afterwards, as we waited outside for the car, everyone was cheerful, there were hugs and goodbyes, and Updike, in between thanking his dinner partners, told me that he felt good and how earlier that evening, when the crowd had begun forming at the library, he had found his second wind. “It always seems to happen that way,” he said.

The next morning I met Updike at his hotel, and on the drive to the airport he presented me with an inscribed copy of his new volume of poetry, *Americana*, then handed me a British edition of Baker’s *U & I*, which had been given to him the day before by a fan—he asked if I would send it to Don Greiner, who for years had been amassing one of the largest and finest collections of Updike’s published writings. He also told me about his dream from the night before, which, unfortunately, I’ve forgotten. At the airport, I thanked him for coming, apologized for overworking him, and said that I hoped our paths would cross again soon. Friendly and cheerful as ever, he set off for his return trip to Boston, his bag packed with what he called “my Cincinnati tie.”

A few days later, during the second week of the Cincinnati Short Story Festival, my colleagues and I were listening to and entertaining Lorrie Moore, ZZ Packer, and others, and in the weeks following, I began generating, with assistance from others, transcripts of the many festival events. In the meantime, I sent to Updike a packet of photographs, taken by Jon Hughes as well as the photographer from the student newspaper. He seemed grateful for the photos, though he wrote, “I seem to have an expression I maintain through most of these authorial appearances—mouth half open, as if mulling a salient point or recovering from

a sharp blow to the back of the head.” Later, when I sent him, apologetically, a thick packet of transcripts to revise, he replied, “Don’t you think it’s cruelty to dumb authors to get one to a conference, have him spout thousands of impromptu and haphazard words, and then submit for his pained scrutiny these words in their disgraceful incoherence, repetitiveness, and virtual idiocy?” I did. Yet I also believed that publishing the material was the thing to do. In spite of his justified complaints, he must have agreed, since he spent a good deal of time revising his remarks and returned them promptly.

My decision to publish this collection of materials en masse, however, was delayed. While the panel discussion and interview appeared in literary quarterlies in 2002, I was uncertain about publishing the entire festival proceedings that pertained to Updike’s visit. As a critic and reviewer, I have always tried to maintain some degree of credibility and objectivity, and I feared that by publishing these materials, which some would view as homage, even hagiography, I would undermine that personal objective. In addition, while I had enjoyed my role as host during the festival, I wasn’t entirely comfortable with seeing that performance reproduced in print; the critic in me wanted to be less visible and not become a Boswell to Dr. Johnson. Finally, I feared that the project would be perceived by some as too light and thin to warrant serious publication. Although these doubts were never entirely quelled, I eventually came to the conclusion that the material should be published. Given that many notable contemporary writers annually spend days, even weeks, giving literary readings and talks around the country, this long-neglected subject seems viable and deserving of attention, particularly now that newspaper accounts of these events are no longer available. At the very least, it feels worthwhile to write it all down, get it into print, and save it for posterity. Further, through video- and audiotapes, as well as photographs, we have been able to create an unusually precise and full record of Updike’s visit—perhaps unprecedented in nature,

and far more extensive than was possible in the nineteenth century. In addition, the manuscript provides approximately eighty pages of impromptu remarks from one of the most distinguished American writers of the latter half of the twentieth century. Some of this material may prove useful to future scholars and readers, and in its entirety the volume may engage anyone wishing to better understand Updike, his fiction, or the occasion of the public literary performance. As Updike confessed, he has wanted to be where the action is, and perhaps I, as a teacher, critic, and festival organizer, have wanted something similar. This, then, in a very modest sense, stands as a record of “the action” as it transpired over two days in April of 2001.

Letter to Be Included as an Afterword to the Introduction

Dear Jim:

I am happy to repose in your too-generous account of my public readings and appearances; would that it were exactly so. Since you ask in the course of your description, “Why does he do so much of it?” permit me a response, though you answer the question well enough on your own. For one thing, I don’t think I do a lot of it—almost none in recent years, and, overall, less, surely, than Vonnegut, Mailer, Oates, Wolfe, and a dozen poets. My reasons, as best as I can understand them myself, are

1. I may not need the money, but I *feel* I need it. For two days or, in the Cincinnati case, three of travel and amiable socializing I receive twice or more the payment than for a short story that took many days of intense and chancy mental effort to compose. “Chancy”—a story can always be rejected, and come to nothing. As long as posing as a writer pays better than *being* a writer, a child of the Depression, as was I, will be tempted.

2. I get to see, in the margins of my appearance, a bit of the country, this wonderful federal republic that it is my job to know and love. And I meet a lot of bright professorial people and hopeful young students that I would not otherwise; just the deportment and dress of a student audience tells you something about where you are. And how would I otherwise get to hang out with great guys like Jim Schiff, Bill Pritchard, and Don Greiner?

3. I began late—until 1965 or so I read in public only in a few New England venues—and was pleasantly surprised to discover that I could do it, without much stuttering. The microphone and the attentive audience allay a stutterer’s basic fear, the root of his vocal impediment—*the fear of not being heard*. The speaker tries, at a cocktail party or in a telephone conversation, too hard to be heard, to be understood, and anxiety jams his throat and blocks speech. Instead, a soothing honey of attention and responsive laughter eases the platform performer’s voice box, and he luxuriates in a degree of attention not experienced since his parents stopped hearkening to his first babbling.

4. Reading something aloud is a good way to test it, to see if the words do flow as when heard in one’s head. My effort while reading is to pronounce the words slowly and distinctly, letting them speak for themselves. You have to have faith, in the surrounding silence as you drone on, that the listener—*any* listener—is with you.

5. I have been known to write out speeches and give them, à la Tom Wolfe, but really that seems too much effort for fifty minutes or an hour in the limelight, between the dinner with the English faculty beforehand and the book-signing afterwards. Also, it bends my mind in a crippling way; there is something fishy and forced about opinions manufactured on mighty topics (e.g., “Are public libraries good things?” and “Is the planet going to the dogs?”). My fiction and poetry are my fullest and most honest attempt to describe my realities and contribute to society’s net wisdom. If reading a selected sample, with what comments occur to me, is not enough for the audience, let it go down to the Cineplex instead.

I had a great time in Cincinnati; but why is there no shrine to Doris Day?

All best,
John Updike