

genial spirits have taken their places in the ranks. Another version has it that the Jack Kerouacs, the Zen Buddhists, and the Be-boppers live uneasily in the structures of the short story and abandon them for the jungles. So what can a wise man who has to get together a collection of short stories do but (figuratively) pull back his outposts and look for shelter.

George P. Elliott's "Among the Dangs" is the one clear exception among the chosen stories. Here is a story with a sharp edge on it, one in which the form has not been blunted and in which the material is not groping about for its form, as I am inclined to think is true of the Peter Taylor story and also John Cheever's "The Trouble of Marcie Flint" from the *New Yorker*. In the Taylor story the derivations and limitations are more obvious than the reasons for trying to combine them. Sky-high symbolism, Kafkaesque conventionalization of reality, themes of social significance, incest themes, sentimentalism, Faulkner's cosmos, the Gothic tradition, and snobbism all try to get together to form an Art Club. They do not make it; and the invention, which tries to carry the load with the narrative account of an annual children's party, is dull, if not indeed painfully banal, in contrast to all the glittering obtruding knobs of imputed significance.

Thomas William's "Goose Pond," the story of a man who has need to readjust himself to life and death after the death of his wife, and James Baldwin's "Come out the Wilderness" are strong stories without seeming unduly retrogressive or conservative, and MacDonald Harris' "Second Circle" is a juicy tale as timeless as Boccaccio. The bright dialogue of the maladjusted girl in "Tib's Eve" by Ellen Curie is in the best tradition of the *New Yorker's* mannered manner, and Jean Stafford's "A Reasonable Facsimile" is likewise well-told, although it is a glossy and slick rendition of the waning years of a retired philosophy professor, disturbing on account of its romantic distortions and diffused hyperbole. Conservatism as a literary force has its virtues but it also has serious defects, prominent among which is the easy acceptance of unreality in stories like Miss Stafford's. William Eastlake's "Flight of the Circle Heart," from *Harper's*, is another story built on a base of "slickness."

And the local-colorism and folk-lorism of Tom Filer's "The Last Voyage," Helga Sandburg's "Witch Chicken," and Alma Stone's "The Bible Salesmen" point to another aspect of conservatism revisited. These are also well-told stories, but when they remind me less of my own anxieties and urgencies than of the long lost world of Wilbur Daniel Steele, I am led to remind myself that the world is changing on us very fast in this decade and that we probably cannot afford the luxury of trying to go home again.

—Baxter Hathaway

John Updike, *The Poorhouse Fair*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1959.

John Updike's first long published work belongs in that peculiar and interesting category of fiction called, for want of a definitive term, the novelette, the short novel, or the long short story. Straightforward in theme, plot, and characters, this unusual novel describes in terms of complicated imagery and metaphor an imagined America of fifteen years from now,

dramatized in the events of the fair day at the Diamond Country Home for the Aged.

Updike recognizes Orwell's achievement (who wants to write a *second 1984*?) and does not describe the future in sensational terms. Rather, he chooses to describe an America of the 1970's as seen through the eyes of a generation waiting for death in the poorhouse, that is, a generation which was mature in the familiar forties and fifties. In the tradition of Huxley's *Brave New World*, Updike emphasizes the plausibility of his fantasy by describing the present with a few major distortions. The character of the new society, symbolized by the smoldering paternalism and the paper confusion of the Diamond Country Home for the Aged, emerges from behind the peaceful, recognizable landscape of New Jersey.

In part, the action of the novel arises from the built-in antagonism between the residents and the administrators of the poorhouse, where both sets of characters are defined in terms of their different kinds of lifelessness. But, the novel, to a certain extent, is concerned with direct description, rather than with the sterile conflict between these two static sets of characters. While the absence of power, of decision about the smallest matters, transforms the inmates of the poorhouse into automatons, the machinery of the poorhouse, the trappings of the institution, possesses a superhuman vitality.

Even more than black death he dreaded the gaudy gate: the mask of sweet red rubber, the violet overhead lights, the rattling ride through washed corridors, the steaming, breathing, percolating apparatus, basins of pink sterilizer, the firm straps binding every limb, the sacred pure garb of the surgeons, their eyes alone showing, the cute knives and angled scissors, the beat of your own heart pounding through burnished machinery, . . . the green color of the surgeon's enormous compassionate eyes, framed, his quick breath sucking and billowing the gauze of his mask as he carved.

The monster of the institution, in full possession of its faculties, becomes the central figure in the novel, its power realized to the extent human figures become mechanized.

The atmosphere of the novel is that of a gruesome fantasy, relieved by occasional bits of wry humor, (as people become so grotesquely conceived as to be amusing).

A small red car—foreign no doubt—drove up in the rain and stopped at the break in the wall, blocking the entrance. Black snouts commenced to poke from the little windows. Ends of bulky cases, they stuck out and sneaked back, like the heads of several turtles caught in one shell.

As one reviewer remarked "one may come away from the book untouched (curiously, one never thinks of *liking* it or *disliking* it)," but, on the other hand, the reader is continually stopping to admire the clarity of its conception and the beautiful, logical progression of the language. Complicated imagery and the development of extended comparisons substitute for complicated action and psychological density in the characters. Simultaneously to further elaborate the already intricate surface of the novel,



Updike makes self-conscious references to other works of literature. Thus, the dramatization of the fair itself, a kind of epilogue to the rest of the novel, is read with the fair scene of *Madame Bovary* in mind.

This is the kind of novel which must be read from the author's point of view, the kind of book which deliberately draws attention to the act of creating, to the dissimilarity between "real life" and life as dramatized in a work of fiction. Because the elaborate imagery and the subtle use of language continually draw attention to themselves, one senses that Updike is not primarily concerned with making a social prophecy, a series of portraits, or even with speculating about the fate of his own generation. While reading *The Poorhouse Fair*, one is always excited by the author's imagination, more concerned with the language and a startling twist of phrase than with the thing itself Updike is describing. Because Updike is a good writer, reading his novel from this point of view is an exciting experience. And, somehow the logic of the language and the symbolism has its own action and progression so that the reader is never conscious of a lack of physical action. We feel Updike's seriousness about his subject as the sinister institution is defined and redefined in increasingly horrifying terms. Still, attitudes about people are only hinted at, and the consequences of his terrible fantasy are not elaborated upon; often the ironies of a situation and the complex comparisons are elaborated upon for their own sakes.

Perhaps in his next novel, Updike will apply his art to the dramatization of a person, and of a life, rather than to the dramatization of an abstraction which cannot elicit our most wholehearted concern.

—Leigh M. Buchanan

W. D. Snodgrass, *Heart's Needle*. Knopf, 1959.

It seems a long time to have been waiting for W. D. Snodgrass' first book of poems, not only because a voice so clear, so honest and so moving deserves its proper recognition, but also because Snodgrass' poems have never seemed like isolated events, each produced by a different moment of the mind or surge of temperament. They are parts of a consistent statement, and, seeing them together, it is possible for us to realize more completely what that statement is.

Snodgrass, as a poet, is like a man who has fallen among thieves, and been robbed of watch fobs, seal rings, mandarin finger-nail guards—of everything, in short, which is not strictly vital to the pursuit of his occupation. He cannot indulge in elegances of attitude, he has no opportunity to collect and exhibit fashionable *bijouterie*. He has been left standing in his shirt, and with no more protection than that, will have to learn what his body and mind can tell him about themselves and their relevance to the road he is standing on. No Snodgrass poem is occasional, save when the occasion strikes at these questions. Nor, though the tone may sometimes be deceptive, is any of his poems other than serious.

The effort these poems make is to determine as clearly as possible what and who the speaker is, to judge and set aside the answers of conventional oracles, to resist with a bitter stubbornness any effort of authority to impose definitions. The poems are engaged in that extraordinary and uneasy