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HIGH OR POPULAR LITERATURE? – JOHN UPDIKE'S RABBIT SERIES

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Abstract

The article addresses the issue of the ambivalent relationship between high and popular literature. Relying on the criteria proposed by Ken Gelder, the author seeks to prove those artistic qualities of John Updike's Rabbit sequence that ensure his position among America's best writers of high literature.

Key words: high literature, popular literature, John Updike, Rabbit series, formal artistry

In the minds of numerous readers and literary critics the term popular fiction has a negative undertone vis-à-vis its big brother, high or literary fiction. It is often pushed aside as hardly worthy of attention. Ken Gelder uses a picturesque simile to illustrate the overall perception of popular literature by comparing opera to soap opera, the former aiming for educated audiences, the latter intended to entertain the less sophisticated masses (13). The conflict between high and popular literature has been going on for quite some time; Gelder points out Henry James, who in *The Art of Fiction* defended high literature against the intrusion of popular art then represented by Robert Louis Stevenson's novels (16). Ezra Pound's verdict was downright spiteful: "Artists are the antennae of the race, but the bullet-headed many will never learn to trust their great artists" (qtd. in Gelder 23). Nevertheless, critical tolerance toward "the underclass of literary production usually known as pulp" (C. Bloom 5) has been on the rise as well. In the introduction to his book *Cult Fiction: Popular Reading and Pulp Theory*, Clive Bloom warns against "the overemphasis placed upon canonic texts" (3) whereas Michael Korda, while referring to the most successful category of popular writing – the bestseller – seems to be opting for a middle road, saying that "a snobbish or elitist attitude toward the bestseller is as unjustified as a slavish devotion to it" (x). In the meantime, popular literature has found its place in the curricula of well-known universities as an aspect of modern culture no one can overlook anymore, e.g. Trinity College in Dublin.

Another term for popular literature is genre literature, which includes science fiction, western, crime novel, detective novel, romance etc. Whereas Gelder claims the field of popular literature "isn't given any clear sort of definition" (4), the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* provides the following one:

> Popular literature includes those writings intended for the masses and those that find favor with large audiences. It can be distinguished from artistic literature in that it is designed primarily to entertain. Popular literature, unlike high literature, generally does not seek a high degree of formal beauty or subtlety and is not intended to endure. (Popular Literature)

Slovene literary critics agree with the above statement. Kmecl speaks of popular literature as the kind intended for less sophisticated readers or listeners, the ones not so well read and esthetically less demanding than educated readers (Kmecl 1976: 318). Hladnik prefers the term *trivial literature*, defining it as esthetically and functionally lesser mass literature (Hladnik 1983: 6).

Even so, the above definitions are rather vague; after all, Updike said in his 1999 book of essays and reviews *More Matter*, "Well, what about the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, its row of soldiers in leather uniform, that alphabetical universe of *negotiable* truths (my emphasis), of facts I can *use*?" (qtd. in De Bellis, n.p.) – which means that Gelder is basically right. What is it then that distinguishes high literature from popular art? On page 19 of his book, Gelder parallels the two forms of art proposing the following criteria to define high literature: it is cerebral, restrained or discreet, doesn't need a story or a plot, is characterized by formal artistry and is therefore elitist. According to Korda, it doesn't sell well either (xiii). As regards the plot, we may add that literary novels, the plotted ones, have much more complex plots than popular literature. The latter, according to Gelder, is sensuous, exaggerated and excessive; it needs a plot, it is exciting and shows a lack of formal artistry. In short, unlike high fiction, it is democratic (19). Korda adds that it sells extremely well (xiii).

When reading a literary novel, the reader gets more involved than in the case of reading a popular novel, he/she may identify with the characters and ponder their problems and ideas otherwise present in the novel. Reading a popular novel is a much more casual activity. Characters in high literature tend to be psychologically rounded individuals (there are exceptions to the rule), whereas in popular novels, according to R.L. Stevenson, they are "developed only in so far as they service the story" (qtd. in Gelder 23).

In his 1975 novel *Ragtime*, E.L. Doctorow demonstrated the blurred lines between high and popular art. The popular artists in the above novel – Harry Houdini, Evelyn Nesbit, Tateh – Baron Ashkenazy and Coalhouse Walker – embody different aspects of American art with popular roots. They are popular artists who are profoundly affecting the American audiences at the beginning of the 20th century.

Can nowadays high and popular art in America be separated at all? Haven't some very popular 20th century novels such as Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* or John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* become canonized in the course of time? Is John Updike a representative of high literature, or popular art, or both?

When the first Rabbit novel, *Rabbit, Run*, appeared in 1960, Updike did not make everybody happy. Unlike Malcolm Bradbury, whose review in *The Times* praised "that special polish, that brilliance", Angus Wilson was more skeptical: "It is sexy, in bad taste, violent and basically cynical. And good luck to it" (*Observer*).[1] What he probably

[1] Printed on the back cover of the 1995 Penguin edition. See Works Cited..

meant by that was that the Puritanical America was not ready yet for some very explicit sexual scenes in the novel. However, as each new decade brought another Rabbit novel, the popularity of the protagonist increased and with it the readiness of the critics to recognize the Rabbit series as a major literary achievement.

In 1991 Updike published *Odd Jobs: Essays and Criticism.* In the first part of the book titled "Fairly Personal", Updike expresses his views on popular culture, which seem to echo those of Doctorow. "He thinks that popular culture cannot be fully distinguished from high art in literature, but high art detached from popular culture would be sterile" (De Bellis 314). Updike's life had indeed been intertwined with popular art: after a year of study at Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Arts in the U.K. in 1954-55, it became his ambition to find work as a cartoonist. His novels, not just the Rabbit sequence, are interspersed with references to popular art. During his first attempt to run away from his irresponsible wife and infant son in *Rabbit, Run*, the protagonist Harry-Rabbit drives aimlessly through the night listening to the popular music on his radio and when he later becomes involved with the part-time prostitute Ruth, they often to go to the movies together watching the popular films of the period. De Bellis highlights Updike's pedantic precision regarding the titles of the songs that were part of the aforementioned trip south, songs with pertinent titles like "The Man Who Ran Away" and "Secret Love" (344). De Bellis particularly underlines the ones that "punctuate his (i.e. Rabbit's) need for freedom, e.g. "Turn Me Loose"" (Ibid.). In *Rabbit Redux* both the protagonist and his father work as typesetters for the Brewer *Vat*. In the time of Vietnam war and the historic space mission of Apollo 11, the newspapers and television have become indispensable. The TV set is the central object in Rabbit's living room as it provides him with the excitement his life has been sadly missing ever since his glorious basketball days. Following the invitation of a black co-worker, Rabbit goes to Jimbo's Friendly Lounge, gets high on marijuana and listens to Babe playing blues, Broadway songs and The Beatles' music (*Rabbit Redux* 123 -124). Skeeter, the black Vietnam veteran, who later on enters Rabbit's life, "likes Rabbit to read to him from *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*" (Ibid. 277). In *Rabbit Is Rich* Harry, while riding home in his car, ponders his affair with Ruth Leonard of twenty years ago. The car radio plays music of which Harry is consciously aware – disco music, the Bee Gees' hit "Stayin' Alive", and especially "the Queen of Disco" Donna Summer's meaningful song, "Sittin' here eatin' my heart out waitin'/ Waitin' for some lover to call" (36). Jumbo size advertisements along the road make Rabbit think of popular actors John Travolta, Barbra Streisand, Omar Sharif, Ryan O'Neal and Diane Keaton (33, 35-36). In *Rabbit at Rest,* waiting at the airport for Nelson and his family to fly in, Harry lets his mind wander and he aptly remembers "Roy Orbison who always wore black and black sunglasses and sang "Pretty Woman"""" (8) thus hinting at the two major topics in his rapidly aging life – love and death. Harry has become addicted to *Consumers Digest* and soap operas. While incapacitated after heart trouble he and his granddaughter Judy watch the popular shows on the TV together – from *Jeopardy!* and *Simon and Simon* to reruns of *The Cosby Show* and *Cheers* and *The Unsolved Mysteries* (336). Names of popular actors and moderators such as Angela Lansbury and Robert Stack turn up (339). On July Fourth, Harry marches in a Mt. Judge parade. As he makes his way down the well-known route, the sounds of drums, bagpipes and pop

tunes reverberate through his throbbing head (367); he pushes on all the while taking in "the gaps of 'American Patrol'" and "Yesterday"(370). After the fatal slip-up with his own daughter-in-law, Harry escapes to Florida where he kills time by watching TV, mostly shows like *Roseanne* and *Cosby* (468).

The mere fact that popular culture figures so prominently in the life of our protagonist and other characters of course does not mean that the novels as such should be classified as popular literature. So let us test Gelder's determinants. First of all, high literature is supposed to be cerebral, in other words not simple but difficult. It is elitist in the sense that it aims at a relatively small but well-educated and widely read audience. Updike's five Rabbit pieces certainly don't require any kind of extreme mental effort. For the most part the Rabbit stories begin with one or two precipitating incidents, a minor version or versions of the novel's main conflict. *Rabbit, Run* opens with the 26-year-old protagonist, an ex-basketball star playing basketball in an alley with some kids only to return home shortly afterwards to his pregnant wife who is drunk and totally unhappy. This foreshadows the protagonist's obsessive search for something that could fill the void in his life now that the days of basketball bliss are over, the search that almost destroys his marriage. In *Rabbit Redux* the reader first meets the elder Angstrom and his son going for a drink after work. The father cautiously brings up a delicate issue, the widely rumored infidelity of Rabbit's wife Janice. The rumors are confirmed after Janice's confession to her husband and the couple embarks upon a rocky journey that will take them through months of separation, the burning of their house and the death of a young woman. *Rabbit Is Rich* is somewhat an exception in that its initial scene only partly foreshadows the novel's main conflict. It begins with a friendly conversation between Harry, now the co-owner of Springer Motors, and his one-time rival Charlie Stavros in the company office that is "hung with framed old clippings and team portraits (…) from his (i.e. Rabbit's) days as a basketball hero twenty years ago" (4). Harry is serene, growing overweight and pensive. He dislikes the present and idolizes the past. The two men discuss past events and present-day gasoline crisis. The arrival of a young couple rings a buried bell: the girl looks like Ruth, Harry's mistress of long ago. He wonders if the red-haired girl might be his illegitimate daughter. Running out of gas literally and metaphorically – Harry is beginning to feel the pressure of aging – represents one of the novel's major themes. So does the confrontation with the past, although the embodiment of Harry's love affair with Ruth will have to wait until after Harry's death. *Rabbit at Rest* takes place ten years later. Its introductory pages are interspersed with images of old age, death and decay. Harry, now in his mid fifties, is badly overweight with a pending heart problem. "He has spells of feeling short of breath and mysteriously full in the chest, full of some pressing essence" (7). He smells death everywhere, even the landing airplane about to discharge his son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren looks like slowly descending death to him. This precipitating incident prophesies the novel's central themes of death and infidelity. "Rabbit at Rest" is a long short story, a novella. As such, it begins in medias res, with the unexpected intrusion of Annabelle Byer, Ruth and Harry's illegitimate daughter, on the lives of Janice, now remarried Harrison, and Nelson. The initial scene portraying Janice's stunned denial introduces the theme of Annabelle's painful integration in the family through Nelson's unwavering support.

The Rabbit novels and a novella are neither cerebral nor restrained. On the contrary, Updike rather mischievously takes pleasure in challenging the respectability of his readers. His Rabbit novels and the novella have traditional plots. Following the precipitating incident tension rises as the characters become entangled in further occurrences until the climax is reached followed by the unraveling of the plot and a resolution in the form of an open ending. The latter was a specialty of Updike's series leaving the creator of Rabbit a possibility to proceed with the saga every ten years. Each novel has a protagonist and an antagonist; beginning with *Rabbit, Run*, they are as follows: Rabbit – Janice; Rabbit – Janice; Rabbit – Nelson; Rabbit – Nelson. The role distribution in the last Rabbit text is not so obvious; the protagonist is undoubtedly Nelson, the role of the antagonist, however, appears to be divided between Janice and Nelson's stepfather Ronnie Harrison.

According to Gelder, another important criterion to distinguish between a literary and a popular novel is the degree of formal artistry incorporated in a text. The less there is, the more likely the text will be a popular one. How about the Rabbit saga? On the surface, Updike's texts do not appear artistic. A not-too-observant reader may easily get carried away by the profane language used by the narrator especially in parts dealing with sexual matters. A close study of Updike's language, however, discloses a completely different picture. I have selected examples to illustrate the above thesis from the four novels and the final novella.

> *B*oys are *p*laying *b*asketball around a teleph*o*ne *po*le with a *b*lackboard *bo*lted to it. Legs, shouts. The *s*crape and *s*nap of *K*eds on loose alley *p*ebbles *s*eems to *c*atapult their v*oi*ces h*i*gh into the *moi*st *M*arch air *b*lue above the w*i*res. (*Rabbit, Run* 3)

The opening sentences of *Rabbit, Run* testify to Updike's high artistry. His selection of words is clearly premeditated. Italicized letters indicate his use of alliteration or assonance, underlined ones specify his use of sibilance. The arrangement of sounds is done in such a way as to create an auditory image – to mimic the sounds of shuffling feet on the ground, the spontaneous cries of players and the bouncing of the ball. The above is underscored by the use of an ellipsis – "Legs, shouts" – as well as a synecdoche ("Keds").

> Though her wild heart bathes the universe in red, no *s*park kindles in the *s*pace between her arms; for all of her *p*ouring *p*rayers she doesn't *f*eel the *f*aintest tremor of an answer in the darkness against her. Her sense of the third person with them widens enormously, and she *knows*, *knows,* while *k*nocks sound at the door, that the *w*orst thing that has ever *happened* to any *w*oman in the *w*orld has *happened* to *h*er. (265)

The above scene represents the first novel's major climax: Janice has accidentally drowned the baby Rebecca. The first sentence is a metaphor that stands for Janice's endless fear; it is magnified by the use of a synecdoche ("wild heart") and a personification ("the wild heart bathes the universe"). The second metaphor – "no spark kindles in the space between her arms" – denotes the absence of any vital sign from the baby she is holding in her trembling arms. "The darkness against her" is

a figure of speech showing her panic and absence of hope; “the third person” she instinctively senses represents God. The power of metaphorical language is underscored by the studied display of alliteration, word repetition (italicized in the text) and sibilance (underlined).

> Men emerge *p*ale from the little *p*rinting *p*lant at four sharp, ghosts for an instant, blinking, unt*i*l the out*door light* overcomes the look of *c*onstant in*door light* cl*i*ng*i*ng to them. In winter, Pine Street at this hour is *dark*, *dark*ness presses down early from the mountain that hangs above the *s*tagnant *c*ity of Brewer, but now in *s*ummer the granite curbs *s*tarred with mica and the row houses differentiated by *s*peckled bastard sidings and the hopeful sm*a*ll p*o*rches with their jigsaw brackets and gray milk-*b*ottle boxes and the sooty gingko trees and the baking curbside cars wince beneath a *b*rilliance like a fr*o*zen expl*o*sion. (*Rabbit Redux* 3)

The second Rabbit novel begins with a lyric descriptive passage of an ordinary setting, the immediate surroundings of the printing plant that gives work to Rabbit and his father. Updike evokes the physical sensations the laborers experience upon release from the artificially lit building at four o’clock in the afternoon. In a metaphor he likens them to ghosts unused to daylight. The long second sentence juxtaposes two aspects of the same street, one in winter and another in summer. The opposition of “dark, darkness” and “brilliance” is reinforced by the use of personification in the former and simile in the latter. Darkness is personified as pressing down and the mountain “hangs above” an equally personified “stagnant” city of Brewer. The summer section of the sentence consists of five clauses or complex nouns linked in a polysyndeton by means of the connective “and”; in combination with cacophony (“granite curbs”, “speckled bastard sidings”, “jigsaw brackets”, “milk-bottle boxes”, “sooty gingko trees”, “baking curbside cars”, “frozen explosion”), and fortified by personification (“hopeful small porches”, “cars wince”), alliteration, assonance and sibilance, the passage brings to mind desolation and hopelessness.

> *R*unning out of g*a*s, *Ra*bbit Angstrom thinks as he *sta*nds behind the *s*ummer-*du*sty *w*indows of the *S*pringer M*o*tors *d*isplay room *w*atching the *traffic* g*o* by on Route 111, *traffic s*omehow thin and *s*cared compared to what it used to be. (*Rabbit Is Rich* 3)

> A *d*oor *d*own below *s*lams, not on the *s*ide of the h*ou*se he can *s*ee. The voice *sou*nds a high note we use in *s*peaking to pets. *R*abbit *r*etreats beh*i*nd an apple sapling too *s*mall to *hi*de *h*im. In his avidity to *s*ee, to draw closer to that mysterious branch of his past that has *fl*ourished without him, and where *lost* energy and *lost* meaning still *fl*ow, he has *b*etr*ay*ed his *b*ig *b*ody, m*a*de it a target. (113)

Rabbit Is Rich opens with a meaningful sentence that hides both literal and symbolic meaning. Carter-era America is running out of gasoline but also of its vital force, stamina. The same goes for Rabbit. By means of repetition, alliteration and sibilance,

Updike created a powerful visual (summer-dusty) and auditory image suggestive of the swishing sound that passing cars make on a highway.

The second excerpt discloses Rabbit on his spying mission in the vicinity of Galilee, Pennsylvania in an attempt to catch a glimpse of Ruth or his illegitimate daughter. In his agitation, Rabbit's sensitivity is heightened, he is fearful that someone might see him. Alliteration is used to underscore the key words, assonance gives the passage a certain degree of musical quality, and sibilance highlights the anxiety of the moment.

> The terminal when it shows up at *l*ast is a *l*ong *l*ow wh*i*te *b*uilding *li*ke a *b*igger version of the sunstruck clinics – dental, *ch*iropractic, arthritic, *c*ardial, *l*egal, *l*egal-medical – that *l*ine the boulevards of this state dedicated to the old. You park at a lot only a few *s*teps away from the door of *s*liding *b*rown glass: the whole *s*tate *b*abies you. Inside, upstairs, where the planes are met, the *spa*ces are *l*ong and *l*ow and *li*ned in t*a*steful felt gray *li*ke that *c*ocky *s*tewardess' *c*ap and filled with the *ki*nd of music you become aware of only when the elevator *stops* or when the dentist *stops* drilling. (*Rabbit at Rest* 4)

The excerpt from the introductory chapter of the fourth Rabbit novel displays Updike's mastery in the use of simile: the terminal is like one of the many clinics for the old, the upstairs hall is lined in the same kind of cloth as the stewardess's cap, the airport music is like elevator music or the kind played in a dentist's office. The alliteration, a repetition of the wailing "l" sound in words "at last", "long", "low" emphasizes the melancholic thoughts and feelings of the aging and ailing protagonist. The clinics are personified as being "sunstruck" – and presented in a cacophonic sequence without any conjunction – an asyndeton. As in previous examples, Updike makes abundant use of alliteration, assonance, word repetition and sibilance all of which highlights the gloomy atmosphere.

> J*a*nice H*a*rrison goes to the front door when the old bell *s*cr*a*pes the *s*ilence. *D*ec*a*des of rust have all but *d*estr*oy*ed its v*oi*ce, the thing will *die* ent*i*rely some *d*ay, the clapper freezing or the wires shorting out or whatever they do. ("Rabbit Remembered", *Licks of Love* 177)

> Nelson's *d*eep-socketed, *d*istrustful eyes *d*art back and forth as he *listen*s. *Listen*ing is part of what he does for a *l*iving, and he *l*ets them talk while he fishes a Coors from the refrigerator. (219)

> Annabelle looks *a*round, *a*fl*oa*t in this *family* simmer. Her *o*wn *family*, in her recollection, took life from her *br*others as they grew and *br*ought *b*ack pieces of the world – g*a*mes pl*ay*ed, *s*kills mastered, *say*ings and *s*ongs – but her mother was an overweight *r*ecluse and Frank stingy with words, *r*unning his *b*uses to *b*ring in cash, l*i*ke all *f*armers *f*eeling left beh*i*nd and exploited. (290)

The excerpts are from "Rabbit Remembered"; the first one is from the very beginning, where the stunned reader meets Janice remarried to late Rabbit's arch enemy.

Although the narrator does not use the words "old" and "old age", this is precisely what his meticulously selected vocabulary, reinforced with alliteration, assonance and the repetition of "or," wants to put across. Updike also uses personification (the old bell being very old will die in the near future) to bridge the gap between *Rabbit at Rest* where Rabbit dies and the present story where Rabbit's ghost still hovers about. One wonders if maybe the phrase "will die entirely" alludes to the possibility of Rabbit's ghost being expelled one day, of it being put to rest for all times. The second excerpt shows Rabbit's son Nelson as he is being told about his half-sister's existence. There is something unpleasant about him; instead of saying it in so many words, Updike uses a sequence of harsh sounding words ("deep-socketed, distrustful eyes dart") reinforcing the effect with alliteration, word repetition and the repeated use of "r" sound. The last example shows Annabelle's failed attempt at integration in the family at Thanksgiving. The metaphor – "afloat in this family simmer" – points to the fact that she has not been included yet. The narrator goes on using conventional metaphors – brothers "brought back pieces of the world" and step-father was "stingy with words" – stressing the key words by means of alliteration, assonance and relying on the reader's perception of repeated successive "r".

As a poet Updike was sensitive to the relationship between written word and sound. De Bellis names the reasons why Updike's poetry failed to reach wide readership as well as critical attention – namely his extraordinary production of prose, his initial adherence to light verse to be followed by deeper, philosophical poems only later on and his preference for the traditional poetic forms that were considered anachronistic (339). We should bear in mind, however, that the world he observed with the poet's eye was the same observed by Updike the novelist and short story writer. "To Updike, the impulses for poetry and fiction are similar (…) the wellsprings of poetry and fiction are very much the same," confirms De Bellis (337). He quotes Sylvia Plath (*Conversations with Updike*) who claimed the poet's chief impulse was to create "something live that surfaces out of language [that] brings a formal element without which nothing happens, nothing is *made*" (qtd. in De Bellis 337). Updike's poetry has not been given the kind of consideration it deserves. Consequently, the lyrical quality of his prose has not been given appropriate attention either.

In the introduction to *Picked-Up Pieces,* his 1975 collection of prose, Updike said, "Try to understand what the author wished to do (…) Give enough direct quotation (…) of the book's prose so the reviewer's reader can form his own impression (…)". I hope the above quotations from the Rabbit series prove my case, namely that Updike's lyrical prose surpasses the quality of so-called "pleasure books". Updike's Rabbit sequence is not elitist and it does not meet most of the criteria for high literature as proposed by Gelder. Should it therefore be considered popular literature? By no means. I believe we need to adapt the criteria to modern times. The Rabbit series treats important universal themes, this being one of the basic criteria to define high art that should be taken in consideration. A very high degree of formal artistry is what makes literature unnecessarily elitist. High literature or not, most readers still read novels to enjoy them and not to exercise their cerebral skills. Updike's capacity for observation of the tiniest detail of modern life rendered in beautiful artistic language, his well-drawn and credible characters, his well-made and not-too-complex plots, his experimentation with the film

techniques are just some of the qualities that have placed this unsurpassed chronicler of the 20th century America among its greatest writers.

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