CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION
For many readers used to reading popular thrillers, the plots in Updike's short stories may seem bare: in one a man takes his daughter to a music lesson, in another a father tells his child a bedtime story, in many the temptations toward or suspicions of adultery are suffered but seldom confirmed. Moreover, within the brevity of short story, Updike's remarkable style, unfailingly precise, often lyrical, occasionally ironic, becomes even more noticeable than in the novels. Perhaps Updike wanted to combine the characteristics of the novel and the short story when he wrote *Bech: A Book*, and perhaps, in the process, he created a new genre.

*Bech: A Book* has attracted the attention of critics for a very special reason. Some critics consider it a novel, some a collection of short stories, and some others a "story cycle." The reason for this difference of opinion is that this book consists of seven stories with the same protagonist, the middle-aged Jewish novelist Henry Bech. The collection is sufficiently unified that one can read it as a loosely organised novel, with the stories representing a succession of chapters treating various episodes in the hero's life. The suggestion of a casual novel format is strengthened by a consistency of characters and actions, and by a similarity of mood and imagery in
all the stories. The details of the individual stories complement each other, and though there is no progression of narrative as such throughout the book, the seven stories do give a fairly thorough portrait of the main character.

The first story about Henry Bech that Updike wrote was “The Bulgarian Poetess,” which was published in The New Yorker and received the O.Henry Award in 1966. This story, like several of the others in *Bech: A Book*, is partially based on Updike’s experiences during a tour he took in 1964-65 to Russia, Rumania, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia as part of the U.S.S.R. – U.S. Cultural Exchange Program. After the success of this story, Updike, “never wanting to let a good thing go unflogged,” as he puts it, wrote another and then another story about Bech. It was not until he had done four of the final seven stories that Updike “began to think that they might be a book.” Thus *Bech: A Book* “was indeed conceived piecemeal,” and Updike’s refusal to call it a novel reveals his awareness of its episodic nature and tenuous unity.

*Bech* is called “A Book” rather than a novel, not because it lacks imaginative unity, but, no doubt, because it was conceived and architected in a piecemeal fashion. Updike admitted that when he returned in 1964 from Russia and Eastern Europe as a representative in a writers’ exchange, he had collected some
impressions peculiar to a writer. To convey these, he invented the Jewish writer Henry Bech as a vehicle for those impressions and wrote "The Bulgarian Poetess." That story also appears in The Music School collection. Spurred on by its success, he then wrote "Bech in Rumania" and "Rich in Russia," after an abortive try at a long Russian Journal, the remains of which are now included as an appendix to Bech: A Book. Domestic inspirations from America's changing scene in the 1960's led him to compose "Bech Takes Pot Luck" in an American setting; then a London story "Bech Swings?" made a Bech collection feasible. To complete it and unify loose strands, Updike wrote "Bech Panics" as a bridge chapter and "Bech Enters Heaven" to give it a final shape.

The book also utilises a secondary fiction, that Bech is an actual historical person, a contemporary author whom Updike knows and is writing about. We are asked to believe that Henry Bech wrote the preface, after he had read the stories about himself written by John Updike. Thus the preface begins "Dear John," (9) and continues, commending Updike on some of the stories, finding fault with his (Updike's) presentation of Bech in others. He includes "a list of suggested deletions, falsifications, suppressions, and recordings," all of which, Updike tells us, "have been scrupulously incorporated" (11-12).
The sense of fun established here remains throughout the collection, indeed until the final pages, where we find a fake Bibliography, first of books by Bech, and then of “Critical Articles Concerning” Bech. These last are uproarious, for they are phony articles by real critics in real magazines, satirically exposing the parasitic nature of critics, who feed upon the artist as they destroy him. Thus the list includes an article called “Bech’s Mighty Botch” by Marcus Klein, “Bech’s Noble Novel” by Norman Podhorestz, and an E-Z outline on Bech’s best novel by the critic Leslie Fiedler.

Satire of a mild kind can be found in the first story, “Rich in Russia,” where the narrative takes the form of an address to a university class. Here Updike takes the opportunity to make fun of the attitudes current in the groves of academe. This story and the next two stories, “Bech in Rumania” and “The Bulgarian Poetess,” show Bech on a cultural mission to Eastern Europe. The humorous possibilities of the American Abroad, exposed to the dangers of the cultural faux pas and to the vagaries of translation – English, are exploited to some extent in these three stories. Yet the humour is gentle, never reaching beyond quiet irony. More academically-slanted satire returns as a secondary motif in “Bech Takes Pot Luck,” where Bech meets a former pupil of his from a creative-writing class at Columbia. “Bech Panics,” the fifth story, is a chilling one, even when it emphasizes the ludicrous. The final two
stories, "Bech Swings?" and "Bech Enters Heaven," are savagely ironic. They are not in the least humorous.

In "Rich in Russia" we find Bech celebrated as an author of stature and given more than fifteen hundred dollars' worth of rubles for Russian translations of his works. Since he can't take the money out of the country, though he tries hard to spend the rubles, he finds little to buy until, on the last day of his tour, he goes with Kate, his translator, to a Moscow shop and spends almost the entire sum for furs. As he hurries to catch his plane a short time later, his suitcase opens, and fur toys and books drop on the runway. He and Kate gather them again, and he departs.

"Rich in Russia," as mentioned earlier, has mild irony. Bech is indeed "rich in Russia," but he can't take the riches with him except in the form of exotic gifts. More than that, his richness is really personified in Kate, his loyal and emotional translator. When he kisses her at the airport, "he realized, horrified, that he should have slept with her" (33). He has taken her and her dedication for granted; therefore, he has missed, more than a sexual encounter, the chance to know a valuable person well.

The second story in the book is "Bech in Rumania," and it continues the novelist's cultural exchange tour of Eastern Europe. Like Kate in "Rich in Russia," we have in this story Petrescu, the
translator who accompanies Bech on a trip to meet the head of the Rumanian Writers' Union. While on a sightseeing tour, Bech goes to a Bucharest performance of Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* and to a night club with another author and his wife. Bech's conversations with Petrescu, combined with the running descriptions of life in modern Rumania as Bech sees it, comprise the essential story. The primary impression that results is the difficulty of communicating between two cultures. Bech and Petrescu like and respect each other, but a genuine friendship is thwarted by the lack of time and by the official busyness of the visit. The American Embassy people in Bucharest are enthusiastic bumblers, and the Rumanian leaders are rigid bureaucrats. The absence of rapport is epitomized by Bech's chauffeur, a taciturn Rumanian whose violent driving and constant horn blowing upset his passenger. The chauffeur seems to comprehend no English, yet he indicates at the end that he has indeed understood but has not tried to communicate. While on the plane leaving the country, Bech answers the unfamiliar words of the seatmate with "pardon, je ne comprends pas. Je suis Americain" (62). The statement fits his whole experience in the country, where "he realized that for four days he had been afraid" (62). Bech thinks of himself "as a sort of low-flying U-2" (61), as he tells an American from the Embassy, but his reconnaissance is not very effective on any level.
“The Bulgarian Poetess” tells how Bech has agreed to join a cultural mission to “the other half of the world,” chiefly with the faint hope of escaping from himself. At a Writer’s Union meeting in Sofia he is nauseated by the artificiality and futility of the proceedings. Then a blonde woman in a blonde coat enters the room. Vera Glavanakova is a poetess, unmarried and dedicated to her art. Bech feels that she is his “golden woman,” the love that he has been waiting for all his life. Official functions – visitors to the Rila Monastery and the Sofia ballet, and a cocktail party at the American legation – allow for only a few brief, and public, conversations. Before Bech’s plane leaves they exchange books. Bech writes in his gift to her: “It is a matter of earnest regret for me that you and I must live on opposite sides of the world” (85).

Valery’s doctrine of biological metamorphosis is a content theme in “The Bulgarian Poetess,” and one which continues through the other Bech stories. This doctrine asserts that the whole of the natural world is to be seen as a tangible concretion of spiritual energy. The artist alone knows the soul of things, their true being. So the things of space and time that appear to be falling into the dissolution of death and oblivion are raised to eternal being by the artist’s transforming power. Biological life becomes a new creation by passing through the spirit of the artist who imposes upon its natural chaos aesthetic form.
Before Vera Glevanakova first enters the room at the Writers' Union, Bech has been looking at a bowl of fruit on the table before him. In the bowl is a pear, carrying on the side facing him a brown spot marring its golden skin. He identifies this spot with the entire falsity and futility of his present role. While talking to Vera, he finds to his surprise that he has taken the pear from the bowl and divided it precisely into two. He and she might have been a perfect "pair." But there is a corrupting flaw on his side. Deliberately, though unconsciously, he cuts himself off from this "golden" woman.

Bech comes nearest to realizing biological metamorphosis at the ballet, where he sees a performance of Silver Shippers (78). When, in the ballet, the princes leaps through the mirror to her lover, Bech's heart leaps back to the "enchanted hour" (79), he has spent with Vera before the performance. But Bech's tryst with his princess has not been a sexual one. The enchanted hour had been spent talking about art. If sexuality unites man to woman biologically, there is also a union of souls in art. The dancer's art awakens Bech subconsciously to the nature of his love for Vera, a love not dependent upon her physical presence.

The metamorphosis wrought by art brings Bech's heart for once on the same side of the world with his soul-mate. But the
world of art is shattered by imperfect performance. The wizard in *Silver Shippers* (78) was a poor dancer, and at one moment almost dropped the princess. Bech, a wizard who has lost his power, drops Vera altogether. She, on her side, shows herself to be always the flawless artist. Her parting gift to him is a book of her poems, in which is written a message ending with the words with much “leave” (84). Bech is sure she meant to write with much “love” (84). But it is not she who is the slipper. Her English may be weak. Her poetic instinct is sure. She knows that he has chosen to leave her. Thus, we can notice that though Bech’s self-consciousness is dissolved in the encounter with Vera, his new sense of being remains intact only through the necessary separation from her.

In the fourth story, “Beck Takes Pot Luck,” we find Bech back in the United States. He spends August on Massachusetts Island with his mistress, her sisters, and the sister’s children. His vacation is interrupted by the appearance of one of his former students, Wendell. Bech and his mistress are not getting on well together and the sister is suffering through a divorce. The young student enters the chaotic household and, through his ability to amuse the children and his general adeptness at beachfront living, provides some order and relief. When Norma, Bech’s mistress, learns that the young man has L.S.D. at his apartment, she wants to try it, but he suggests that they smoke marijuana first “as a dry run” (98). That
evening, Bech, Norma, Beatrice the sister, and Wendell smoke the “grass” (106). Nothing happens to Norma, but Bech becomes ill and vomits. Norma and Wendell drive away; and, in the interim, Bech and Beatrice establish a beginning intimacy. That night he sneaks away from Norma’s bed to sleep with her sister, and “by fall the world went out on the literary circuit that Bech had shifted mistress again” (113).

“Bech Panics” picks up Bech’s career at a later date when a crisis overtakes him. He is forty-six, and the month is March. Since his refusal to enter Vera Glavanakova’s poetic world he has lived wholly in the biological one; and suddenly disgust with the universe of matter overwhelms him. His unease begins in New York, where he is living with his third mistress since his return from Eastern Europe. She is a divorcee with three young children. He is upset that she can so easily combine love-making and mother-care. To avoid the embarrassing situation, he consents to a speaking engagement at a girls’ college in Virginia. The budding landscape, the discussions about literature that become diverted into Anthropology, the disturbing presence of his own maleness – all these convince him that life simply “vexes the void,” is “a blot on nothingness,” and that human consciousness is a casual by-product of the biological process. His desperation drives him to religion and he begs “Someone, Something for mercy” (114). Help comes to him
in the form of Ruth Eisenbraun, an intelligent professor of English from New York. She first asks him to adjudicate poems written by her students, members of the college Lanier Club, and afterwards invites him to sleep with her. Bech is reduced to tears by her second proposal, which he joins to her first one. "Poetry and love, twin attempts to make the best of a bad job" (145).

Bech's sense of panic continues and he feels that he and his work are being drawn relentlessly into a void. Only on one occasion does he realise that there is nothing in biological existence, however sordid or cruel, that cannot be transmuted through the magic of art so that chaos is overcome and the human spirit reaffirmed. Yet Bech lacks the courage to hold firmly to what he inwardly senses. When he returns from Virginia to New York, his mistress is aware that he is so spiritually shrunk "that there wasn't enough of him left for her to have any" (148).

The last two stories in Bech: A Book show Bech the writer dwindling away into nothingness. In "Bech Swings?" a visit to London comes when a British anthology of his work, entitled "The Best of Bech" is published. The visit proves a personal and professional disaster. His publisher, his short-term English mistress, and a fawning American interviewer exploit his weaknesses to advance their own ends. The germ of an idea for a
new novel to be called "Thing Big" is conceived one day, and dies the next. Nothing big can born from the brain of this writer who has "spilled his seed upon the ground." The question mark of the title is important. Bech "swings" dubiously, not sure if he is enjoying or despairing. He is too self-aware for uninhibited participation, and the title carries the tone of proper incredulity even as it declares Bech's own intent.

"Bech Enters Heaven" opens with a memory of a day in May 1936, when Bech at thirteen was taken by his mother into a huge auditorium. There he saw wonderingly, "the flower of the arts in America, its rabbis and chieftains, souls who while still breathing enjoyed their immortality" (194). Heaven, presumably is the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He knew that his mother had taken him into this heaven to show him her dream that he would earn the right to sit among the immortals. The scene then shifts to the present. In the same auditorium Bech now sits upon the dais, hedged in by poseurs and dotards. One of these is the decayed remnant of the famous playwright of the thirties who had provided the entrance tickets for Bech and his mother three decades ago. He confides to Bech, "Jesus Christ... the bastards always said, 'Let's wait until he writes another book, that last one was such a flop.' Finally, I say to them, 'Look. The son of a bitch, he's never
going to write another book,’ so they say, ‘O.K., Let’s let him the hell in.’ Welcome aboard, Bech” (202).

Updike has told us that Bech “wants to be lifted out of the flux the way literary immortals are,”3 but in this story he is again bitterly disappointed, realizing that “literary immortals” are merely mortals, that what he had imagined as heaven is “a cardboard tableau lent substance only by the credulous” (205). But, in spite of this recognition, Bech goes through the ceremonial welcoming of new members, stands for the insincere introduction in which his name is mispronounced, submits to the handshake and the applause.

It is this willingness of Bech to succumb to the demands of the society in which he lives that distinguishes him from Updike’s more serious protagonists. All the Bech stories create a comic view of the victimization of its main character and a coinciding reduction in his importance reflected by authorial distance from him. While Updike’s serious protagonists may also be viewed as victims, they are victims of an inner drive, a sense of mission that leads them to defy the dictates of society. Bech never defies society.

In his comic subservience to the demands of society, “Bech becomes a showman against his will. A display piece. A toy.”4 He submits to being used by women, by colleagues and students, and
by the State Department, which wants him for propaganda purposes. All the while he regrets what he has missed and hopes more than he gets.

When *The Same Door* was published, reviews expressed admiration for Updike's brilliant handling of delicate moments as if his short stories were poems. Many reviewers of *The Same Door* celebrate his genius for showing the magic of the ordinary in a form which seemed so different from the usual short story as to be excitingly new. Praising both insight and style, for example, A.C. Spectorsky suggests that the tales in *The Same Door* should be called stories only by lack of a term to describe them: "A more accurate and clumsy designation might be 'fictional essays.' They are vignettes, slices of life, anecdotes ... a viable new form has been created." Spectorsky correctly describes Updike's relationship with his characters and scenes as "a caring non-participant." Emotion is always implied because the controlling factor is not the heart but the eye. Delicate observation joins elegant style to make *The Same Door* a new experience.

As mentioned earlier, Updike is known for his ability to communicate the wonder of the common place. According to Thomas Cassidy, "there is a point in each story, when the ordinary becomes literary make – believe of a quietly exciting kind ... his people do
make their disappointments and their deariness shine just a little bit, no matter how."  

The short stories in Pigeon Feathers mainly deal with alienation. It is alienation in many forms: isolation from the community, estrangement from those who used to be closest to one, and loneliness in the midst of the universe itself. But Updike's people seldom remain drifting in a spiritual vagrancy; for such drifting is a luxury that the residual work ethic, embodied in Updike's own artistic persistence, will not allow. His characters continue to go through the motions, and the repetition of the daily actions settles into new rituals that can generate, perhaps, new meaning. It is not that the unexpected gift no longer occasionally arrives; rather, it will not do for people to languish in hope for it. Grace still responds to the stimulus of works, and one must fashion his own design to recover the outlines of a master pattern.

The short stories in The Music School represent a continuation of his characteristic artistry but also a radical departure in theme and mood from his previous fiction. The Music School projects a brittleness and neurotic insight into adult problems.
In conclusion, as Charles Thomas Samuels observes,

Updike's range of experience is both common and confined; he avoids those upheavals in which many of us like to think we find our true reflection. Some readers will persist in finding him trivial; they will miss separable and obtrusive "ideas"; even fervent admirers must admit that his situations are often too slight. But within the ordinary moments he selects, his precisely expressive language always embeds an insight authenticated by gesture, a truth extensively portrayed. No one has ever denied his skill. But we ought to remember that in art skill is not a dispensable adjunct to seriousness: it is seriousness: proof that the artist esteems his craft, his subject, his readers. Updike's reverence for life won't disdain small moments and won't compromise itself with inflated or pretentious language. His seriousness is chastened by modesty, his nostalgia is both joyful and unillusioned his precision is both linguistic and dramatic.
REFERENCES:


