

THE AUTHOR AND HIS DOUBLE IN JOHN UPDIKE'S *BECH* STORIES

ARISTI TRENDEL

University of Maine, France

Abstract. In the foreword of *Bech: A Book*, John Updike's character Henry Bech gives his creator John Updike his blessing for fiction refuting a curse. In this 'little *jeu* of a book' and in the rest of Bech stories, fear (of alienation, oblivion, castration, the writer's block, and finally of death) is tamed through play. This paper studies the narrative games and play between character and author in their joint attempt to fight fear. Bech, the *Schauspieler* par excellence and *homo ludens*, Updike's most postmodern character, alter ego and mischievous double, although an amalgam of American writers and fitting in the American literary tradition of play, also calls forth the European play culture.

Key words: Updike, Bech, fear, double, play, *homo ludens*.

Henry Bech, John Updike's serial character, is a Manhattan Jewish writer who emerged in "The Bulgarian Poetess," a short story published in *The New Yorker* in 1965, and last appeared in "His Oeuvre," another short story collected in *Licks of Love* in 2000. Bech's life and times were developed in a trilogy, *Bech: A Book*, *Bech is Back*, which prematurely gave *The Complete Henry Bech*, and *Bech at Bay*. Although the latter was presented as a quasi-novel, a more appropriate generic term would be that of a short story cycle which, according to Forrest Ingram, denotes 'a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit' (Ingram, 1971: 15). Thus Henry Bech became one of Updike's memorable, recurrent characters who along with Harry Angstrom in the Rabbit tetralogy define the author, albeit reductively. Bech's official position as the author's double and defiant alter ego was appointed in the foreword of *Bech: A Book*, and was confirmed in a series of interviews that expand the game between the author and his double. This playful treatment of the character is furthered by the comic-satiric mode that characterises these stories which explore the writer's condition in America, satirise the literary establishment and the book industry and dissect a writer's mind. One of its components seems to be fear. Just like Harry Angstrom who carries it in his name, Bech is plagued by angst. American critics have rightly pictured this character as 'the incarnation of the fear of impotence that any artist has' (Detweiler, 1972: 145), but did not establish the multiple link between play, the figure of the double and fear. I would like to examine this triangular relation and argue that play, framing the narrative and at constant work within it, controls and tames fear contributing to its artistic form. Before focusing on the short stories that can illustrate my argument, I will discuss the relationship between

play and art and Updike's intricate use of play which involves the complexities of the double.

Freud in his essay "Creative writers and Day-dreaming" pointed out the relationship between play and fiction contending that fiction is a continuation of children's play mediated by *ars poetica* (Freud, 1955). Moreover, Roger Caillois's concepts of controlled play, *ludus* and spontaneous play, *paidia* (from the Greek word for child) developed in *Les Jeux et les Hommes (Games and Men)* seem quite relevant (*ibid.*). Fiction is clearly an activity of controlled play. Postmodernism excels in games and play. Updike's modernist fiction abounds in games. Golf, his favourite sport, structures some of his short stories and in *Couples* the most important notorious game is the swing, the sexual practice of couple exchange. It is only in the Bech trilogy, though, that the author goes postmodern and adopts a self-reflexive strategy, the *Doppelgänger* device which monitors the narrative. (All citations from the trilogy stories will be referring to *The Complete Henry Bech.*) The play is enacted in a rich paratext, "*paratexte auctorial*," to use Gérard Genette's term, that establishes Henry Bech as a historical person. The foreword of *Bech: A Book* is a letter that Henry Bech sends to his creator where he heavily edits the book, as the editor's intrusive brackets inform the reader, gives him his blessing for fiction, and self-reflexively releases the key word in French, play, 'this little *jeu* of a book' (10). The play is not exhausted within the space of the short story collections, where Bech's historicity is also authenticated by a bibliography of Bech that mixes fictional and real critics such as George Steiner or Alfred Kazin or a French encyclopaedia entry on Henry Bech; it is also extended to four interviews given by Updike to Bech, and published as independent texts. In these dizzying reversals of who is whom, Updike, in a stubborn defiance of the critics who excoriated his verbal pyrotechnics, dazzlingly imitates his own style. Indeed, Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* credited the sophists for a refining of the play through *epideixis*, exhibition, and this playful device gives Updike the licence for a free ride into a self-conscious *epideixis* of verbal skills to respond to his critics in the most sophisticated way through fiction.

However, it is the common reader that is the primary focus. The exchange between the writer and the character makes the reader all the more conscious of the illusory nature and potential of the text. The greater the effort, the more numerous the devices to make the reader believe that Bech is a historical person, the more obvious the game becomes. The Bech stories are clearly involved in a game with the reader, which is the third category of play in Robert Detweiler's typology of modern American fiction (Detweiler, 1976). This increased play, within the already given context of playfulness characteristic of all fiction, may correspond to the need of 'a constant and unpredictable renewal of the (play) situation' in Caillois's terms (Caillois, 1958: 20), but it also seems to be dictated by an even more imperious necessity, the treatment of fear which is omnipresent in the narrative. A ludic and jocular approach offers a greater degree of control, a double distancing which is symmetrical to the theme of the double that frames these stories.

There is no doubt that Henry Bech is Updike's kindred spirit. As the author says, 'I thoroughly enjoyed writing about Henry Bech. I write so often about middle-brow or low-brow people that it was fun to write about someone [...] who permits me to write without holding back, without compensating for the character's mind.' (Plath, 1994:135) Thus Bech is cast as Updike's *Doppelgänger*, the author's psychological double, and if the term evokes German romanticism, it also recalls one of the central characteristics of romantic aesthetics, namely playful irony which runs through the Bech stories. It is no surprise then that Bech reminds his creator in the foreword of *Bech: A Book*: 'Withal, something Waspish, theological, scared and insulantly ironical that derives, my wild surmise is, from you.' (9)

However, building his character Updike creates not only a writer like himself but also his exact opposite; Bech is Jewish instead of WASP, self-educated instead of a Harvard graduate, Manhattan-lover instead of suburban, chronically blocked instead of unstopably prolific. 'Bech was the anti-Updike as far as I could conceive of one,' the author acknowledges and thus introduces his alter ego (De Bellis, 2000: 52). Identification and projection seem to be the analytic keys of the double. Michel Morel in his article "Théories du double: du réactif au réversible," puts forward two concepts for the approach of the phenomenon that seem to originate in identification and projection: reactivity and reversibility. The former involves agonistic relations and a response to aggression, whereas the latter connotes complementarity. As we shall see, within the narrative Bech seems to act both as Updike's reactive *and* reversible double.

As a matter of fact, the dialectics of identity and difference are not foreign to the phenomenology of doubleness. Updike makes this clear while he beholds his double in his text "Updike and I," an imitation of Borges's famous text, "Borges and I" instigated by the magazine *Antaeus*. Some formulas could convey the gist of this text, J.P. Sartre's 'Je suis ce que je ne suis pas,' (I am what I am not) or Rimbaud's 'Je est un autre' (I is somebody else.) The American author patently makes the distinction between the man and the writer and hints at the dominant emotion that binds him to his double, 'He has become a sacred reality to me. I gaze at his worn wooden desk, his boxes of dull pencils, his blank-faced word processor, with a religious fear. Suppose, some day he fails to show up? I would attempt to do his work, but no one would be fooled.' (Updike, 1999: 758) Indeed, the character of Henry Bech seems to be the ideal container to hold the writer's fear of losing his creative gift. And along with it, a host of fears related to his vocation and trade, to *Dasein* and his social being. Bech senses danger on every side, steps on the danger line and immerses himself into fear. An overview of the stories and a closer look at some of them could give us a clearer picture of Updike's metafiction of danger and his fictional venture into fear with a double as his scout.

Fear is one of the constitutive parts of the character: 'It's becoming part of me,' Bech in "Bech Panics" confesses to the teacher who witnessed the aftermath of his anxiety attack (101). Hence the Bech stories set up a continuum of fear that spans a writer's archetypal anxieties, namely of the blank page and creative

paralysis, contamination or adulteration of his art with ambient commercialism, adverse criticism, the validity and worth of his work, its chances of survival or oblivion to mention only the capital ones. Yet these fears, specific to the creative activity and the writer's identity, cannot be dissociated from the man's, but act in coordinating conjunction. However, it is primarily the writer who offsets the attacks, the threats and throes of danger. The live exposure of the artificiality of fiction is counterbalanced by a subtle expression of fear through additional narrative strategies that amplify the initial act of play. The play outside the narrative is doubled by the play within. Bech in these stories assumes an actor's role, he is a constant *Schauspieler*, an endless performer. Bech is either a lecturer or the object of a lecture, a cultural ambassador or an interviewee, the President of an Academy and master of ceremonies or a Nobel-awarded speaker. The stage gives him the opportunity to act out and counteract his fears. From performance to performance, a permanent deferral is created, the deferment of the final showdown. Schematically, we could distinguish three sets of fear, political, existential and literary.

"Bech in Russia," "Bech in Rumania" and "The Bulgarian Poetess" feature Bech as a cultural emissary to three former communist countries in the midst of the Cold War. In "Rich in Russia," Bech's trip is presented through a professor's lecture and this performance within the performance evokes Borges's *regressus ad infinitum* universe, an infinite doubling. "The Bulgarian Poetess" starts in *media res* and thus the story relies on what Paul Ricoeur calls "*jeux avec le temps*" (games with time). The comic effect is created by Bech's lack of political savvy and his numerous gaffes. He tells the Russians that his favourite writer is Nabokov. Yet there is no laughter for Bech who only travels in the alien lands of fear. In Rumania he sees the driver's face as the epitome of evil and credits Melville for having faced courageously their native terror (35). Significantly, the story has a second title, "Bech in Rumania or The Rumanian Chauffeur." In Bulgaria he finds himself in the grip of terror while he reads Hawthorne's "Roger Malvin's Burial." These countries belong to 'the other half of the world, the hostile, mysterious half' (44) and thus native and alien never meet. The mirror imagery in "The Bulgarian Poetess" illustrates this dichotomy. Although at some point Bech feels that 'he had passed through a mirror, a dingy flecked mirror that reflected feebly the capitalist world' (46), at the end of the story 'the mirror goes opaque and gives him back only himself' (59). The split is confirmed by the dedication note he writes for the Bulgarian poetess on the copy of his book whose title, *The Chosen*, acquires here a political significance confirming the superiority of American ideology, 'you and I must live on opposites sides of the world' (59). Even love, Bech's favourite sport and potent remedy, does not mend the split. The women he encounters remain potential lovers behind the Iron Curtain. Bech pondering over his fear seeks shelter in his American identity, 'Pardon, je ne comprends pas. Je suis américain,' he answers the 'portly Slav' next to him on the plane that takes him back home. (43). The game of the double is thus multiplied through a series of mirrors. Bech, Updike's double, meets his own reactive double. These stories reflect the fear

of the other in the Cold War politics of the times which bred the threat of mass destruction and a full blown hysteria in the US.

Quite similar is the fear of the developing nations which emerges in "Bech Third-Worlds It." The fragmented structure of the story, built on 12 vignettes featuring Bech on a lecturing tour in the Third World countries, reflects Bech's disoriented and shaken-by-fear frame of mind, 'It was the fear he minded. The Third World was a vacuum that might suck him' (190). Bech's political sensibility is tested through his speeches which are out of step with the societies he is visiting just like his American humour nobody understands. He fails the test and regrets having publicly defended the Vietnam War, 'having meddled with sublime silence' (191). Updike's defensive stance towards the Vietnam War creates a sort of an insider's joke. Bech serves both as a reversible and reactive double for the author who can thus wash his dirty linen. The only shelter to be found is in the American embassies and the authorial ivory tower when he asserts the independence of art from politics. It is precisely the perception of America as a hegemon in continents where political consciousness challenges American supremacy that creates the ambient fear in the story. The final statement that he would never return unless invited increases the comic effect giving the last stroke to the portrayal of Bech as a materialistic ignoramus.

Bech's search for a safe haven orients his peregrinations towards industrialized nations and his choice of residence towards the suburbs. Authorial irony pervades the character's attempts to escape danger. The 'suburban softy' he vows to marry to find shelter from a threatening world and in a nation full of 'riots and scandals, sins and gnashing metal' (207) does not deliver her promises. Bech's suburban marriage is a brief interlude in his urban existence. It is in "The Holy Land" that the illusory nature of this haven appears but it is in "Bech Wed" that its full unholiness is revealed (12). In the former story, Bech's fear is reactivated by the history-laden tormented land which reflects Bech's own. However, this self-image is rejected and reactivity is at play: 'His marriage was like this Zionist state they were in: a mistake long deferred, a miscarriage of passé fervour and antiquated tribal righteousness, an attempt to be safe on an earth where there was no safety' (212).

"Bech Wed" develops the full implications of the mistake. Marital requirements make Bech write a low quality novel sacrificing his art on the altar of domesticity. Bech's artistic demise only matches the declining standards of the book industry which is hilariously described. The book is an artistic failure but a commercial success. Yet breaking free from his 'captivity in Sing-Sing' (278), as his suburban passage is qualified, only throws him back into an alien world. The only harbour for a writer is fiction, yet Bech is a blocked writer. The Bech stories capitalize on a writer's obsessive fear, the one of the blank page.

Bech's chronic block is like a tall tale spun into the narrative, a sort of gag for the reader to feast on. Bech is blocked at the beginning of his adventures and remains so unto the end, his mind being 'cluttered with books he had not written, cut into substantial dreams of drunkenness and love' (107). The latter takes the

form of an endless wooing and waiting, as this ladies' man unsuccessfully runs after his long-lost Lenore: 'there always lurked the hope that around the corner of some impromptu acquiescence, he would encounter in a flurry of apologies and excitedly mis-aimed kisses, his long-lost mistress, Inspiration' (138). His 'exquisitely unprolific' career (194) is crowned with the Melville Medal given every five years to the American author who has maintained the most meaningful silence" (172). Irony is multi-layered as Bech's self-irony – 'Am I blocked? I'd just thought myself as a slow typist' (82) – is doubled by constant narratorial irony and topped by authorial irony. Updike's some sixty volumes are flashed about against Bech's seven slim ones. Parodically, it is the block itself that is elevated to monument status: 'Your paralysis was so beautiful. It was [...] statuesque' (260), Norma, his former mistress tells him considering the slovenliness of his new novel. In the "Three Illuminations in the Life of an American Writer," the literalisation of the writer's block doubles the comic effect. After having signed 28,500 books on a tropical island, Bech's fingers are paralysed, so he cannot sign his own name any more.

The story features another danger that recurrently comes up in the Bech stories: the writer's objectification through excessive lionisation. Bech's idle time makes him all the more vulnerable to such a danger. Having stopped being a writer, he only plays the role of one. Acerbic irony underlines this discrepancy: 'Bech realised that as his artistic powers had diminished he had come to look more and more like an artist' (196). Mimicry (simulation) is precisely one of the four basic categories of play according to Roger Caillois's typology (Caillois, 1958). Bech's block makes his performance as a writer a mere simulation. Increased play corresponds to exacerbated fears. No reassurance is granted to lessen them. In "Three Illuminations in the Life of an American Writer," whose fragmentary structure relies on a reconstructing technique Updike called 'the fugal weave,' Bech is confronted with his own maimed image when he discovers that the faithful collector of his books was a mere investor who never read them, and the mysterious, would-be woman who worshipped Bech, the writer finds the man disappointing. Conversely, Bech's drunken eyes in "White on White," a playful wink at Truman Capote's black and white party, pierce the deceptive façade of success and achievement of the New York world of art and scan the mud that lies beneath. The story, whose metaphorical network is based on colours and motifs of purity and impurity, ends with the Yiddish word for unclean, *Treyf*.

The same fearful, 'X-ray vision' (302) persists in "Bech Presides," where the competitive aspect of play, *agon*, another one of Caillois's four characteristics of play, but the sole one according to Huizinga (1955), is in full swing. The literati and their mutual envy and inner circle quarrels are the main focus. Moreover, the danger of corruption does not spare the talented and high-minded, the Academy-like group of "Forty;" they refuse to accept new members pretending that nobody is good enough and prefer to disband their organisation and sell its building, bequeathed to them by an art patron, to reap the financial benefit. Although Bech, informed of the high stakes, does not vote in favour of the dissolution, he

is pictured comically thrilled and eager to accept a bribe-like gift for his presiding services at the end of the story. Through the *Doppelgänger* who is here a reactive double, the author re-appropriates his own image satirising the New York elite. In the narrator's review of the American literary scene, Updike comes up as a 'suburbanite' along with the 'Johns,' 'Hara, Hersey, Cheever, all living safe while art's inner city disintegrated' (42). Although a writer appropriates everything as Bech's wife annoyingly tells Bech in "Macbeth," he fears the appropriation of his own image. This is shown in "Bech Swings?" where Bech finds his image perversely distorted in an interview by an interviewee who wily flattered him and stuttered the promise of a space for 'a-d-definitive t-t-testament' (111).

This death by distortion and the subsequent fear of alienation from the truth of the work and the authenticity of the man through adverse or envious criticism is brought up in "Bech Noir." Bech, is transformed into serial killer, a grim avenger of the critics who castigated his work and castrated him, 'Mishner dead put another inch on his prick' (155). "Bech Noir" plays with the conventions of a detective story and popular culture as Bech turns into a sleuth tracking down his detractors and a Zorro who black-clad re-establishes justice. Bech caught into the whirl of revenge, the vertiginous fulfilment of murderous impulses, the intoxicating sense of liberation, brings up another characteristic of the play in Caillois's typology, *illinx*, vertigo, patent in this story. Bech as Updike's Mr Hyde does the dirty job. The text is interspersed with the discourse of Updike's adverse critics including Harold Bloom's notorious phrase that the author would never attain the American sublime. As for Updike, he did not hide his exasperation over them: 'He "has nothing to say" [...] it's become a kind of epitaph on my career no doubt above my deathbed some well-wisher will quote Harold Bloom' (Schiff, 2000: 27).

The fear a writer has as far as his/her place in the canon is concerned is also treated more implicitly through word-play in "Bech Takes Pot Luck." Although in the former story Bech actively takes his revenge against the critics who tried 'to eliminate him' (181) and 'refused to grant (him) a place, even a minor one in the canon,' in "Bech Takes Pot Luck," he is helpless before the terror he experiences when he pits himself against a literary giant, James Joyce: 'The stars overhead were close and ripe. What was that sentence from *Ulysses*? [...] – *The heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit*. Bech felt a sadness, a terror, that he had not written it, not ever' (77). Bech, on a fashionable vacation on Martha's Vineyard which is frequented by celebrities, looks all the more fragile and provisional next to the modern classic.

The idiomatic expression in the title, "to take pot luck," first refers to Bech's invitation of his former student, who is also vacationing in the same place, for an informal lunch, then, when Bech smokes pot offered by his student and unluckily gets sick, it becomes literal, and finally it is again turned into a pun referring to the two sisters, as Detweiler observed (Detweiler, 1984:147). When Bech's girlfriend goes away with the student, Bech turns to her sister. However, it is in the literary pantheon that Bech will take pot luck. Caillois's category, *alea*, chance seems quite

relevant. Updike picks up the gauntlet. Unlike Bech who declares in the foreword of the book that he does not like puns (10), Updike does. From *alea* we move to *agon*. The American author does compete in the story with Joyce, the greatest pun-maker in English-speaking literature.

A writer's dream of consecrated immortality is both indulged in and mocked at in "Bech in the Bounty of Sweden" and "Bech Enters Heaven." In the former story, Bech hilariously depreciates the Nobel Prize he is about to receive, while haunted by the fear of oblivion: 'Bech's seven books glimmered in his backward glance like fading trail marks in a dark wood' (217). In the latter, Bech having fulfilled his mother's dream finally enters the pantheon of immortals which turns out to be disappointing: 'When he stood, he had expected to rear into a man's height, and instead rose no taller than a child' (142). The literary idols of his youth are a group of doters sending back to him a future of senility. At the induction ceremony, Bech is lost in the apparition of his dead mother's ghost. The literary heaven looks very much like death by canonization as the story's last sentence indicates: 'He had made it, he was here, in Heaven. Now what?' (142). The ironic open-endedness of the story points to the closure of death.

The fear of death is prevalent in Updike's fiction. In the Bech stories, fiction appears as a poor guarantor of immortality, an insolvent practice. Bech constantly senses the danger of never transcending his mortal condition, aggravated by the slimness of his work and his chronic creative block. In one of Bech's interviews of Updike, published in *The New York Times*, this patronising alter ego exposes the folly of the creative enterprise: 'poor fellow hopes to keep his own skin dry in the soaking downpour of mortality' (Bech, 1971). According to Otto Rank (1989), in his essay on the double (originally appeared in 1914), the ambivalence of the double precisely stems from the ineluctability of death. The subject cannot help finding in his double the death he tried to avoid. The most dramatic showdown with death occurs in "Bech Panics," a biographical reconstruction of Bech's life through five slides, featuring the Jewish writer haunted by Locke's unease and Kierkegaard's dread. Bech's trip to the South is an initiatory one into the mysteries of death. An easy prey to an anxiety attack Bech gets close to a mental collapse and has a narrow escape. Out on a limb, he is the dangling man unable to take the leap into faith. The story dealing with the conjoined fears of sexual, spiritual and artistic impotence brings together what Updike called in his essay "The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood," 'the three great things, sex religion and art'. Although "Bech Panics" is the most serious story in this cycle, it catches up with comedy in the ending. Bech, just out of the belly of the whale and somewhat transformed by his experience, touches his pocket to make sure the check he received from his visit to the Southern College is in it.

If fiction, then, is a letdown as a rampart against death, the reassessment of life seems legitimate. In "His Oeuvre," the last story in the Bech cycle, the fear of a wrong assessment crops up. In a series of readings attended by former lovers, Bech remembers his past exploits, compares life and fiction and questions his hierarchy of values, "These women who showed up at his readings did it, it seemed clear, to

mock his books, empty of almost all that mattered, these women he had slept with were saying. We, we are your masterpieces' (Updike, 2000: 140). This competitive displacement of fiction, although mocked at, could be taken seriously.

Henry Bech, who unlike Harry Angstrom survived John Updike, certainly represents an expansion of the frontier between the author and his character and seems to be the verbal embodiment of all fears, even the one that may appear at the very end: ranking fiction higher than life may be a writer's fatal flaw and thus an impossible catharsis.

REFERENCES

- Bech, H. (1971) Henry Bech Redux. *The New York Times on the Web*, November 14. Available from <http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/04/06/lifetimes/updike-v-bechredux.html> [Accessed on November 21, 2011].
- Caillois, R. (1958) *Les Jeux et les Hommes*. Paris: Gallimard.
- De Bellis, J. (2000) *The John Updike Encyclopedia*. Westport: Greenwood.
- Detweiler, R. (Winter 1976) Games and play in modern American fiction. In *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 17, No. 1 (pp.44-62).
- Detweiler, R. (1984) *John Updike*. 1972 Rev. ed. New York: Twayne.
- Freud, S. (1955) Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 9, transl. by James Strachey (pp.143-153). London: The Hogarth Press.
- Huizinga, J. (1955) *Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Boston : The Beacon Press.
- Ingram, F. (1971) *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Jourde, P. and Tortonese, P. (1996) *Visages du double: un thème littéraire*. Paris: Nathan.
- Morel, M. (2001) Théorie et figures du double: du réactif au réversible. In *Figures du double dans les littératures européennes*, Conio G. (ed.) (pp.17-25). Paris: Age d'Homme.
- Plath, J. (ed.), (1994) *Conversations with John Updike*. Jackson: U of Mississippi Press.
- Rank, O. (1989) *The Double: A Psychoanalytical Study*, transl. by Harry Tacker, Jr. London:Karnac.
- Schiff, J. (Spring 2002) John Updike with James Schiff: The Short Fiction of John Updike. *Boulevard*, 17.3 (pp. 23-40).
- Updike, J. (1992) *The Complete Henry Bech*. London: Penguin.
- Updike, J. (1998) *Bech at Bay*. London: Penguin.
- Updike, J. (1999) *More Matter*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Updike, J. (2000) *Licks of Love*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

Aristi Trendel (Dr., Assoc. Prof.) is currently working at the University of Maine, in Le Mans, France. Her field of research is modern American literature. Email: aristi.trendel@sfr.fr