

## JOHN UPDIKE (1932-2009) AND THE ARMENIANS

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John Hoyer Updike (1932-2009) was an internationally known American author, who published more than 20 novels, more than a dozen short-story collections, poetry, fine arts and literary criticism and children's books. His prose reflects small-town and middle-class American social life. The work of this American writer, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1982, has attracted significant critical attention and praise. Several aspects of his work have been studied because of its rich and deep content and literary value.

For the Armenians Updike's literary heritage has a certain interest in the context of Armenian-American literary relations. This paper does not focus on the Armenian characters or hints in his large literary output. Rather, it highlights his visit to Armenia, contacts with eminent Armenian figures and his poem dedicated to Armenia's capital city, Yerevan. It briefs the reader on Updike's encounter with Armenian reality, his letter to the painter Martiros Saryan, as well as two of his brief words of dedication to the renowned filmmaker, Sergey Paradjanov (1924-1990) and the current author.

### SERGEY PARADJANOV

It is unknown when exactly Updike learned or heard about the Armenians for the first time. His acquaintance with the country, however, happened in 1964, when he travelled to the Soviet Union on behalf of the State Department, with stops in various cities, including Yerevan.

Updike's visit to the Soviet Union should be considered in the context of the Cold War, when, as of the mid-1960s, Soviet-American relations were marked by a period of "detente". Visits of American intellectuals to the Soviet Union had become frequent. At some point, it might seem that there were positive trends in Soviet-American relations. However, in August 1964, after Updike's visit to the USSR, the United States initiated a military intervention in Vietnam, which immediately led to an increase in international tension.

Prior to Yerevan, Updike visited Kiev, where he met the Armenian filmmaker Sergey Paradjanov. There are no details of the circumstances of the meeting, but both intellectuals behaved warmly towards each other as Updike autographed his self-portrait for Paradjanov. The American author wrote the following:

*Self-portrait / by John Updike / for my most kind friend / Sergei Paradjanov.*

Paradjanov responded by transforming Updike's drawing into a collage<sup>1</sup> as he liked to do so with mementos from his celebrity fans. Later on Updike described Paradjanov in a letter to the author of *The John Updike Encyclopedia* as a "live wire among those very insulated ones in the good old USSR."<sup>2</sup>

The filmmaker Mikhayil Vartanov, a friend of Paradjanov reminisced: "*I was lucky to meet John Updike briefly, not too long before his death. We talked about his visit to Sergey Paradjanov and about Paradjanov: The Last Spring.*<sup>3</sup> *Later on I wrote about that day, and was offered to publish it in a book compiled of memories of various people who knew or had met Updike, but I felt it was not appropriate at the time as I had only met him once and briefly....*"<sup>4</sup>

In the early 1970s Paradjanov was imprisoned and spent four years (1974-77) in prisons and high security camps because of his creative and liberal private life, so alien to Soviet reality. Updike joined the international campaign for Paradjanov's release from prison, along with internationally renowned figures like writers Françoise Sagan and Louis Aragon, filmmakers Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Luis Bunuel, Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrei Tarkovsky, and many others. On the other hand, in Ron Holloway's documentary *Paradjanov: A Requiem* (1994), Paradjanov speaks of Updike as someone who helped attain his release from prison.

#### UPDIKE'S VISIT TO ARMENIA

When the March 13, 1964 issue of *Grakan tert* (Literary newspaper) of Yerevan published Updike's story "Should Wizard Hit Mommy?" (translated from Russian by the well-known translator Armen Hovhannisyan), It would have been hard to believe that that some months later the author and his wife Mary were to be hosted in Armenia. In its November 13<sup>th</sup> issue and under the headline "Armenia is Wonderful" the magazine published the following:

Recently, the famous American writer John Updike was in Yerevan. He visited a number of sights in Armenia, viewed the new buildings in Yerevan, and visited the studio of the People's Artist of the USSR, Martiros Saryan.

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<sup>1</sup> Currently this collage is exhibited at the Sergey Paradjanov Museum in Yerevan.

<sup>2</sup> Jack De Bellis, *The John Updike Encyclopedia*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000, p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> *Paradjanov: The Last Spring* is a 1992 award-winning documentary by Mikhayil Vartanov. It includes both the complete surviving footage of Paradjanov's unfinished last film *The Confession*, as well as Vartanov's behind-the-scenes sequences of Paradjanov at work on the shooting of *The Color of Pomegranates* and other material.

<sup>4</sup> <https://Paradjanov.com/updike/> (accessed on September 26, 2021).

John Updike paid a visit to the first secretary of the Writers' Union of Armenia, Edward Topchyan. A number of Soviet-Armenian writers were also present at the meeting.

"The conversations with Armenian writers and getting acquainted with the magnificent ancient Armenian monuments provided an opportunity to delve into Armenia's ancient culture and the history of the Armenian people. I was happy to learn that Armenian writers are well acquainted with American literature, and at the same time I was ashamed that I knew very little about the rich Armenian literature. The incomparable beauty of Armenia, the image of sensitive, astonishingly hospitable people will forever remain in my memory," John Updike stated at the end.<sup>5</sup>

A treasurable memento, Updike's letter to the painter, from the American's visit to Martiros Saryan's studio, is preserved and exhibited in the Saryan Museum House of Yerevan. One can learn from the letter that although the American author did not meet Saryan, he highly enjoyed his art.<sup>6</sup>

November 5 [1964]

Dear Mr. Saryan –

My wife and I wish to thank you for your kindness in permitting us to visit your lovely home and studio today: we are truly sorry that your health, and your anxiety, for your wife, prevented our meeting. We both greatly enjoyed seeing your joyous and powerful paintings, the memory of which has already become part of our visit to this beautiful land. We wish both you and your wife renewed good health and, again, thank you for your hospitality.

Very sincerely,  
John Updike and Mary Updike

## YEREVAN

What is more important about Updike's trip to Armenia is his poem "Yerevan," which added a small charming Armenian touch to his rich literary heritage. Four other Soviet cities, Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and Tbilisi, were also "privileged" to be immortalized in Updike's poetry. These short poems were published first in the *New Yorker* weekly (May 29, 1965, p. 34) under the title "Postcards from Soviet Cities." Later on these were included in Updike's *Collected Poems 1953-1993* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1995) and reprinted in several other publications.<sup>7</sup>

According to American literature specialist Dr. Quentin Miller, American writer John Cheever, one of Updike's rivals in literature, described

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<sup>5</sup> «Հայաստանը հրաշալի է» (Armenia is Wonderful), *Grakan tert*, November 13, 1964.

<sup>6</sup> Published with the kind permission of the Saryan House Museum.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Ara Baliozian, *Armenia Observed*, Ararat Press, 1979, p. 151.

“Postcards...” as “*some assinine (sic) poems on Russian cities.*”<sup>8</sup> Miller’s opinion, however, is much more professional and noteworthy: “*These poems further serve to illustrate the differences and similarities between the sensibilities of the West and East.... Georgian poets in the poem ‘Tbilisi’ boast/ Their tongue is older than the hills’ ... And in ‘Yerevan,’ ‘The basis of the boulevards That lead from slums of history Into a future stripped of swords’ ... Yet connections and echoes exist throughout these poems which link the realities of the East to the West. Updike connects the two spheres in the last quatrain of ‘Yerevan,’ the last poem of ‘Postcards from Soviet Cities...’*”<sup>9</sup>

Here below is the text of “Yerevan” –

#### YEREVAN

Armenia, Asia’s waif, has here	Carves easily and serves to be
At last constructed shelter proof	The basis of the boulevards
Against all Turkish massacre.	That led from slums of history
A soft volcanic rock called tuff.	Into a future stripped of swords.
The crescent-shaped hotel is rose	Mount Ararat, a conscience, floats
And looks toward Lenin Square and tan	Cloudlike, in sight but unpossessed,
Dry mountains down which power flows	For there, where Noah docked his boat,
From turbines lodged in Lake Sevan.	Begins the brutal, ancient West.

Updike’s “Yerevan” has been twice translated and published in Western Armenian: in the *Baika* (Struggle) magazine of Boston in 1965 and in the *Spurk* (Diaspora) weekly of Beirut in 1971. The poem was translated into Eastern Armenian by this author and published in the Yerevan weekly *Haireniki dzain* (Voice of the Fatherland) in 1994.<sup>10</sup>

#### ARMENIAN REFERENCES

After his return from the USSR, Updike wrote a fictional description of his trip in his novel *Bech, a Book*. Henry Bech is a middle-aged American writer of Jewish origin who embarks on a government-sponsored trip to the Iron Curtain countries. This hints that Henry Bech might be Updike’s alter ego to some extent. Bech notes that “*Armenians all wear sneakers like Saroyan characters.*”<sup>11</sup> In a self-interview ostensibly conducted by Bech in 1971, Updike

<sup>8</sup> Quentin Miller, *John Updike and the Cold War: Drawing the Iron Curtain*, University of Missouri Press, 2001, p. 114.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp. 114-15.

<sup>10</sup> Ջոն Ափդայք, «Երեւան», Հայրենիքի ծայն, 21-27 Ապրիլի 1994. A copy of the clipping of this translation was sent to Updike’s address, and was returned with the following writing by Updike: “*For Artsvi Bakhchinyan//Thank you for your loving translation of my poem.//Best wishes,//John Updike//8/27/95.*”

<sup>11</sup> Anatole Broyard, “All the Way with Updike,” *Life Magazine*, June 19, 1970, p. 12.

commented that in *Bech, a Book* he wanted to write “about a writer, who was a Jew with the same inevitability that a fictional rug-salesman would be an Armenian.”<sup>12</sup>

Along with Saroyan and Robert Penn Warren, Updike also appreciated *Come Sit Beside Me and Listen to Kouchag* (1984), a volume of medieval Armenian *hayrens* (quatrains), translated by Diana Der Hovanessian, calling the translations “graceful and moving.”<sup>13</sup>

Another novel of Updike’s, *S.*, published in 1988, portrays a character, a holy man named Arhat (Arthur Steinmets), who has a wide knowledge of the Hindu religion and Hindi, but is actually a half-Jewish, half-Armenian from Watertown, Massachusetts who lived in India for 15 years.<sup>14</sup> Set in New England, like many of Updike’s novels, Watertown is mentioned by the author as one of the most Armenian populated towns of the state.<sup>15</sup> Concerning the half-Armenian maternal origin of his hero, Updike perhaps echoes the Greek-Armenian mystic philosopher Georgi Gurdjieff, whose writings he knew.

Gurdjieff is mentioned in Updike’s famous novel; *Rabbit is Rich* (1981). Gurdjieff’s works have been studied by one of the novel’s protagonists, Melanie, whose friend Nelson ridicules her interest (“*I thought it was stupid,*” *Melanie says in her voice of muffled singing. “Oh shit, you think everything is stupid except what’s his name, Kerchief.” “G. I. Gurdjieff”*), but Melanie recommends that he also read Gurdjieff (“*You could read Gurdjieff,*” *she says, and giggles*”). Interestingly Mary O’Connell, a literary critic, draws several parallels between Melanie and Gurdjieff.<sup>16</sup>

There are other sporadic references to Armenians in other writings of Updike as well. In 1996 in *The New Yorker* (October 10) Updike published a review on early reports after the Titanic sank in 1912, mentioning “*the cowardly men.... sometimes clad in women’s clothes, were variously reported as Italian, Japanese, Armenian and Filipino.*”<sup>17</sup> In his novel *Toward the End of Time* (1997) Updike’s hero, Ben, “*rummaged in the encyclopedia and the seldom-consulted family Bible, nagged ever since Easter by thoughts of St. Paul.*” Delving into

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<sup>12</sup> Jack De Bellis, *John Updike: The Critical Responses to the “Rabbit”*, Praeger, 2005, p. 68.

<sup>13</sup> *Translation Review*, vol. 17-22, University of Texas at Dallas, 1985, p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> De Bellis, p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> Watertown’s Armenian connection is mentioned in David Foster Wallace’s novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) as well as in Elizabeth Alexander’s poem *Boston Year*.

<sup>16</sup> See Mary O’Connell, *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma: Masculinity in the Rabbit Novels*, SIU Press, 1996, pp. 199-200.

<sup>17</sup> *Filipinas Magazine*, vol. 45-48, vol. 52, vol. 56, p. 4.

history, Ben bumps into information about the city of Iconium (Konya), “*rivalling the second Antioch as a center of Christianity in inner Asia Minor,*” which in later days “*became the residence of the Seljuk sultans of Rum and the headquarters for the Mevlevi dancing dervishes of Turkey; the Armenians of the region remained loyal to Christianity but were savagely slaughtered during World War I.*” In the *Terrorist* (2006), Updike’s 22<sup>nd</sup> novel, whose main hero is an American-born Muslim teenager named Ahmad Ashmawy Mulloy, there is one mention of Armenia: “*And rugs,*” says Habib Chehab. “*They want Oriental rugs, as if Lebanese are from Armenia, from Iran...*”<sup>18</sup>

Obviously, the mentions of Armenians, though occasional, appear after Updike’s visit to Armenia. This, however, is not necessarily related to the trip the author made to the USSR, as he mentioned Armenians in American and historical contexts.

To conclude, despite these connections, Updike remains an unknown writer for most Armenian readers. Indeed, Updike’s main works still await their Armenian translations.

## ՃՈՆ ԱՓՏԱՅՔԸ (1932–2009) ԵՒ ՀԱՅԵՐԸ

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1964ին ամերիկացի հռչակաւոր գրող Ճոն Հոյլըր Ափտայքը ԱՄՆ պետքարտուղարութեան կողմից ուղեւորուել է Խորհրդային Միութիւն: Քիւտում նա այցելել է Սերգէյ Փարաճանովին, որին նուիրել է իր ընծայագրուած գծանկար ինքնադիմանկարը: Յետագայում Փարաճանովն այդ նամակը դարձրել է *քուլաժ*: Նոյն ուղեւորութեամբ Ափտայքն այցելել է Հայաստան, եղել Մարտիրոս Սարեանի արուեստանոցում, նամակով իր հիացմունքն է յայտնել նկարչի արուեստի հանդէպ: Հաղորդման մէջ առաջին անգամ հրապարակուում է այդ նամակը: Ափտայքը գրել է «Երեւան» բանաստեղծութիւնը, որը թարգմանաբար հրատարակուել է արեւմտահայերէն եւ արեւելահայերէն: Բանաստեղծութեան կտրօնի պատճէնն ուղարկել ենք Ափտայքին եւ այն ետ ստացել՝ իր շնորհակալական ընծայագրով, որն առաջին անգամ հրապարակուում է սոյն հաղորդման մէջ: Վերջին մասում իմի են բերուած Ափտայքի գրական գործերում առկայ հայերին եւ հայութեանն առնչուող այլեւայլ թռուցիկ յիշատակումներ: Հաղորդումն համատեղում է Ափտայքի առնչութիւնները հայութեան հետ:

<sup>18</sup> This and previous quotations without references are taken from e-books.