

Mikko Keskinen, *Response, Resistance, Deconstruction: Reading and Writing in/of Three Novels by John Updike*, Jyväskylä Studies in the Arts, 62 (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 1998) 271 pp, ISBN: 951-39-0119-X, paper.

Mikko Keskinen may not have invented the most felicitous title of the year, but he is nonetheless responsible for one of the most original and intriguing contributions to Updike scholarship of 1998. In his *Response, Resistance, Deconstruction: Reading and Writing in/of Three Novels by John Updike* he has taken the author up on his persistent complaint that the critics have tended to turn a blind eye to his significant contributions to experimental fiction since the 1970s, having forever consigned him to the ranks of 'mannerist' chroniclers of the malaise of the WASP middle class. Even if Keskinen does not quite seem to trust his instincts all the way here, claiming by way of introduction that 'it is not my intention to rehabilitate Updike as a postmodernist,' much of the body of his book demonstrates how fruitful it is to try to read the three Updike novels he has chosen in terms of the concepts and perceptions commonly associated with postmodernist criticism. Certainly he has proved his observation from the 'Abstract' of his study that 'Updike appears to be closer to American postmodernists than is usually acknowledged.' While Keskinen has chosen to concentrate on three novels from the 1970s, *Rabbit Redux*, *A Month of Sundays*, and *The Coup*, novels like *The Witches of Eastwick* and *S.* might have lent themselves equally well to such analyses.

Keskinen's book, originally a doctoral dissertation, falls into two distinct parts. The first part sets the stage for the explication of Updike by introducing a number of contemporary critical concepts and practices; where, in addition to the *Response, Resistance, Deconstruction*, and *Reading/Writing* of the title, *Narratology*, *Transference*, and *Self-Reflexivity* loom large. Here Keskinen shows an impressive grasp and range of reference, critically evaluating the usefulness of concepts and theories for his own purposes. For the less initiated reader than one may expect to find on a dissertation committee, however, the density of argument and the proliferation of abstractions may prove a formidable obstacle. Statements such as the following are by no means atypical: 'Instead of the teleology of narrative, I am interested in the teleo-theology of narratology' and 'This curious combination of monism and solipsism at least partly explains the gendering of the narratees to accord the focalizer.' On many occasions in this book, Keskinen's own

observation that '[t]he general tendency of criticism to be more theoretical or more philosophical than literature may have caused the discipline to become more metaphysical and consequently more thetic than what it studies' is amply borne out!

It would be unfortunate, however, if readers were put off by such professional mental gymnastics, since many of these terms are made to function effectively and empirically in the reading of Updike's texts. Even when the reader, like the present one, employs a fair amount of resistance against a number of the presuppositions of the Derridean deconstructionism that Keskinen largely uses as his frame of reference, the author succeeds in demonstrating that such categories can yield important and original insights into both the thematics of the fiction and Updike's practices as a writer. Such a realization is perhaps most surprising in the case of *Rabbit Redux*, which we have, after all, come to know as one of the four novels Updike has written to chronicle American middle-class life in the second half of the twentieth century. Obviously the realism of the social history is still there in Keskinen's analysis, but the reader is made to see and understand many of these realities in a different way through the new glasses provided by the 'Allegories of Interpretation' of an unfamiliar set of parameters. The narratological analysis of the function of Harry, Skeeter, and Jill is thoroughly illuminating, even if the attempts to (de)construct resisting readers of various stripes may seem both reductive and repetitive after a while.

Keskinen's metafictional discussion of *A Month of Sundays* is also quite enlightening, but it is perhaps in the case of *The Coup* that the fruitfulness of his postmodernist approach to Updike is most striking. In this novel, Updike's most sustained and successful attempt at satire, we get the hilarious questing memoir of Ellelou, the deposed President of the Kingdom/Republic of Kush in Northwestern Africa, and here the author's narratological pyrotechnics are accounted for in exemplary fashion. What is made abundantly clear from these vantage points is the complexity of Updike's treatment of both the (post)colonial African scene and the ethnocentric American society from which Ellelou has received so many formative impressions. And, *mirabile dictu*, this sober and serious analysis also succeeds in augmenting and proliferating the humor of the novel, projecting the satirist's ability to manipulate ironic juxtapositions and assorted other incongruities in a feast of fun for the reader who comes along for the ride.

Mikko Keskinen's book should be required reading for those who think that John Updike is a tedious, sex-obsessed live white male who has written too many novels of social realism for his own good. It has left this reviewer with renewed respect both for Updike's ingenuity and for the capacity of postmodernist criticism, once it ceases to play scholastic ping-pong and engages in the nitty-gritty of textual confrontation, to open up important new horizons of meaning even for resisting readers.