A dark thread runs through it

by James Yerkes in the November 17, 1999 issue

More Matter: Essays and Criticism, by John Updike

John Updike's massive new book—of which I have read, yes, every single page—is a firm rejection and reversal of Queen Gertrude's famous plea to Polonius in Hamlet, "More matter, with less art." In this, his fifth volume of essays and criticism, Updike pleads that there be more creative fiction writing and less banal cultural fixation, more concern with religion and metaphysics and less preoccupation with a soulless postmodern secularity. The book is a paradox: Updike determinedly assembles more nonfiction matter to convince us that such matter is not what we really need at this time.

A number of themes reinforce this paradox. One is the constant indication that the 67-year-old author is contemplating his own death. "The edge of the grave makes a lively point of vantage," he notes in one of his reviews here, and the consideration of the year 2020 in his most recent novel, *Toward the End of Time*, makes him aware that he probably will not be alive then, "a fact I cannot long stare at."

This kind of sensitivity to "what finally counts" is de rigueur for all of us over 65, and it is hitting Updike hard. His preface begins with the pleasure of putting this massive pastiche together, but it ends with the cold recognition that any authorial hope for some "permanent form" is an illusion. Books and writing are part of a universe which is itself "a transitory scribble on the surface . . . of nothingness." As if he has shocked himself by making that statement, he adds immediately, "Wow! Zap! Nevertheless, the living must live, a writer must write. Enough."

Updike is also troubled by 20th-century culture—especially, of course, American culture. Several essays dwell on the reality and perversity of evil. He is concerned about the superficiality of the intrusive media, with its hyped emphasis on interviewing wannabe and actual celebrities, including writers. Someone in his aging artistic shoes, he says through his alter ego Henry Bech, "makes the desolating discovery that the world would rather have a writer give speeches, judge prizes, receive prizes, attend book signings, go on TV and radio, display him- or herself on

campuses, pose for photographs, than, in the primal sense, write. . . . The appetite for serious writing is almost entirely dead." He is scorching about the current penchant for writing scabby biographical exposés: "The appetite in the print trade is presently for real stuff-the dirt, the poop, the nitty gritty—and not for the obliquities and tenuosities of fiction."

This dark, irritable thread running through the book is certainly not a sign that Updike has become a nihilist, a charge lately made by some of his critics. There is always the "yes, but" in his reading of the human condition. "Yes, this is true, but on the other hand that is also true" goes his dialectic. He specifically criticizes the overly dark worldview of writers like Edith Wharton, Edmund Wilson, Wallace Stevens and John Cheever. Their lack of an adequate religious perspective, Updike intimates, made it difficult for them to handle the dark side of existence. Of Cheever he observes, "Though of a religious disposition, [he] had no theology in which to frame and shelter his frailty." Coherent fiction "is rooted in an act of faith: a presumption of an inherent significance in human activity."

Throughout the exceptionally varied materials that make up the book, Updike movingly articulates the nature and role of fiction as a sign of cultural health. Perhaps the clearest statement of this is his playful and telling dialogue with the Martian emissary Chokchöq, who asks for an explanation of fiction. Farquhar, his NASA belle-letterist conversational partner, explains: "Fiction aims to give the illusion of experience, so we know what it's like to be alive. . . . It's an appeal to the whole soul. It's existential, it's ontological, it's accidental, it's sublime. It's as broad as life, as high and as deep, as shallow and bittersweet and murky, even. It's a mirror out for a walk."

Puzzled, Chokchöq replies: "Humanity appears to be a cosmic breed which never wearies of looking into the mirror. A rather soft mirror, in the case of fiction. It shows little of the digestive process, the laws of physics, and the productive labor of the proletariat, and gives inordinate attention to the erotic and the conversational."

Updike states that "the tonic gift of the best fiction" is "the sense of truth—the sense of a transparency that permits us to see imaginary lives more clearly than we see our own, a sight that cleanses us even as it saddens and frightens." Yes, Aristotle is here. But "now that philosophy has become . . . concerned less with meaning than with the meaninglessness of meaning, the old existential questions find shelter within the novel's traditional direct impression of life." Updike compares art to

religion, in that it "appeals for judgment to standards not measurable in worldly terms, neither in dollar profits nor in immediate critical acclaim."

The sense that Updike scooped out his files for this book is hard to avoid. But much of this material will be new to most of us, and the book is a great feast of literary brilliance. The sexagenarian Updike seems a hardworking literary analogue of Kierkegaard's knight of faith and Dostoevsky's underground man, largely ignored by a majority of cultural leaders both religious and secular, but a treasure nevertheless.