
Bech is a slightly comic, slightly tragic, and slightly pathetic character, second only to Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom in the overall significance of Updike’s work. And while Bech’s narratives may not resonate as loudly as those of Angstrom, they provide Updike with the opportunity to explore themes that readers will be hard-pressed to find in his Rabbit books: the relationship between author and creation, the obligations of the contemporary writer, and the responsibilities inherent in representing another’s subjectivity. Put another way, the Bech stories are an exercise in narratively performing the other, where Updike appropriates the voice of a Jewish American subject while critiquing the limitations of that very appropriation. As Updike describes Bech, he is a “semi-obscure” (303) American novelist, author of the 1950s Kerouac-like road novel *Travel Light* and the Tom Wolfe-esque runaway best seller *Think Big*, as well as a string of less significant—at least, according to his critics—books. He has a desperate need for female companionship, an obsession for New York, a weakness for
WASPs, a passion for Melville, an investment in irony, a mistrust of radical politics, a faith in the secular, a penchant for globe-hopping—and, throughout most of the stories, a world-famous writer’s block, or, as Updike keenly describes him, he is “artistically blocked but socially fluent” (8) and America’s “exquisitely unprolific author” (190).

In one of the stories from the second collection, “Bech Wed,” Bech’s former lover Norma Latchett waxes nostalgic over his famous writer’s block: “Your paralysis was so beautiful. It was . . . statuesque” (285). In another episode, Bech wins the “Melville Medal, awarded every five years to that American author who has maintained the most meaningful silence” (167). Perhaps most significant, Henry Bech is a Jewish character created by a non-Jewish writer, and therein lies part of the fascination with Bech as narrative construct. Through the guise of this artistically blocked alter ego, John Updike performs an act of ethnic passing in which he drapes his own Pennsylvania middle-class Christian identity, at times problematically, in the cloth of American Jewishness.

The question remains, however, why? Why would Updike want to represent Jewish subjectivity? Where is the literary profit in such a narrative move? Although known primarily for his Anglo-Saxon male characters, Updike attempts his share of identity “cross-dressing,” such as in his novel *S.* (1988), where he writes—convincingly, more or less—in the voice of a Hester Prynne-like protagonist, a woman who has become disenchanted with patriarchy and the limits of domesticity, and heads out to an ashram in the American Southwest in search of a different life. This narrative move has its own set of potential problems, but in the Bech stories Updike’s representation of subjectivity is even more loaded. By taking on an ethnic identity that has in many ways been seen as “exceptional”—in the negative sense of social marginalization and exclusion, as well as in the more positive light of the postwar Jewish American literary renaissance—Updike leaves himself open to accusations of ethnic insensitivity, caricature, and even appropriation. He creates a character that does not sit well with
many Jewish American critics, for, as one of Bech’s admirers puts it in one of the stories, “Bech Takes Pot Luck,” Updike’s protagonist has “a strangely anti-Semitic Semitic sensibility” (56).

One of the earliest critics to take Updike to task, albeit tangentially, was Ruth Wisse. In her 1976 assessment of Jewish American fiction, Wisse curiously measured the contemporary literary field. Much as Irving Howe would do (memorably and notoriously) a year later, she gave an uncertain prognosis for Jewish writing and, as one case in point, referenced, of all people, John Updike. Dismissively arguing that the Jewish male had become a stock literary character, she noted that “John Updike’s parody of the type in Bech is a gentle hint that even the goy has the formula, so enough already.” Perhaps she should have said that Updike’s use of Henry Bech is a Gentile hint, for Wisse’s passing (in both senses of the word) comment inadvertently raised the question of Jewish representation. Or, put another way, it called attention to Updike’s audacious—or misguided, depending on which direction you read the text—attempts at ethnic narrative crossings.

Over the span of the three story collections, Updike created what would become one of his most memorable figures. Bech’s authorial misadventures and unexpected critical successes bring to mind several in the Jewish American literary field, especially its most famous triumvirate, Saul Bellow-Bernard Malamud-Philip Roth (although one can also see the influences, if not literary then at least social, of Norman Mailer, J. D. Salinger, Henry Roth, and Daniel Fuchs). Critics such as Wisse see Updike’s Bech as nothing more than Jewish caricature—“parody” and “stock literary fixture” are the pejorative words Wisse uses. Yet what she and others fail to notice—or fail to acknowledge—is the metafictional significance of Updike’s narrative crossings. Henry Bech isn’t just any Jew; he is a writer, someone who attempts to represent other subjectivities through fiction. Through his Bech stories, Updike attempts much the same. Updike the living author “passes” as Bech the fictional Jew, but for purposes other than mere parody. The problems that Bech faces in his writing, blocked or otherwise, can be
read as analogous to Updike’s own challenges in writing the Jewish subject. In approaching the Bech stories, then, perhaps we should judge Updike not on how accurately he represents a “typical” Jewish American writer—a problematic criterion that Wisse seems to assume all too freely—but how much this non-Jew’s representation of the Jewish subject has to tell us about the stakes involved in narrating the ethnic other.

Yet most of the criticism on the Bech stories nonetheless centers on Updike’s choice of ethnic focalizer. Perhaps the most sustained, and notorious, critical analysis of Henry Bech as Jew is Cynthia Ozick’s 1970 assessment of Bech: A Book, which appeared in Commentary (and was later collected in her first book of essays, Art and Ardor). Ozick accuses Updike of inadequately (though not insensitively) representing the contemporary American Jew. Bech, she argues, is nothing more than “Updike in American-Jewish drag” (Pinsker, Jewish-American 112), complete with the kind of stylistic flourish and thematic emphasis on the theological/sexual that defines most of Updike’s writings:

Bech-as-Jew has no existence, is not there, because he has not been imagined. Bech-as-Jew is a switch on a literary computer. What passes for Bech-as-Jew is an Appropriate Reference Machine, cranked on whenever Updike reminds himself that he is obligated to produce a sociological symptom: crack, gnash, and out flies an inverted sentence. (Ozick 115)

The problem with Bech, as Ozick has it, is that he is more of an objectified sociological study—and an inadequate one at that—than a fully realized and believable character. As the product of what Ozick calls this Appropriate Reference Machine, Bech is merely a compendium of contemporary Jewish literature, created from nothing more than “Jewish-sounding” dialogue peppered with such words as zaftig, shiksa, and putz. These novelistic representations, Ozick sardonically notes, put Updike “about even with most indifferent disaffected de-Judaized Jewish novelists of his generation” (116-17). But such com-
pany will not get Updike off the hook. Where the writer goes wrong, for Ozick, is that he refuses to place Bech within the context of his faith, even as tenuous as that faith may be: “It is not that Updike has fallen into any large-scale gaucherie or perilous failures-of-tone. It is not that Updike’s American Jew is false. It is that he is not false enough. By which I mean made up, imagined, mythically brought up into truthfulness” (121). In other words, Updike is more concerned with Bech’s “sociological there-ness” (123), a cultural/literary moment in time, than he is with the current dilemma of the Jewish subject. Ozick goes on to say that what is important is not so much about Jewish “whatness” as it is about Jewish “being”:

Being a Jew (like being a Christian) is something more than what is. Being a Jew is something more than being an alienated marginal sensibility with kinky hair. Simply: to be a Jew is to be covenanted; or, if not committed so far, to be at least aware of the possibility of becoming covenanted; or, at the very minimum, to be aware of the Covenant itself. (123)

In short, Ozick criticizes Updike for his failure to theologize Bech, as he does Rabbit Angstrom or the swingers in Couples, and, as a result, for his inability to understand a Jew’s relationship to God and history. Bech is, according to Ozick, Updike’s only major character to be “wholly untouched by the transcendental” (126) and, as such, is nothing more than an empty vessel.

Sanford Pinsker, on the other hand, does not read the Bech stories as failures in Jewish representation. Instead, he reads them as Updike’s attempts at representing the twentieth-century American writer and the various frustrations and outrageousness that accompany the occupation. Yet even then, according to Pinsker, Updike has his eye on Bel-low et al., and the astounding achievements of the Jewish American re-naissance, a phenomenon that the WASPy Pennsylvanian observed from an envious distance. The labyrinthine distractions that define Bech’s life, in this assessment, can be read as a wish for the demise of a
literature that should sink under the weight of its own complications. Pinsker states, “The Bech books are . . . Updike’s ‘dream’ that Jewish-American writing will end and that, in another country, as it were, his own ‘Rabbit’ books will continue to roll on” (Jewish American 117). ² While Pinsker is right to observe that Bech is more of a case study in contemporary American authorship than an attempt at Jewish ethnic slumming, it is not at all convincing that the Bech stories function as a narrative desire for comeuppance. And even though Ozick’s arguments on the vapidity or unbelievability of Bech as Jewish American subject are worth considering, such ethnically resonant problems do not permeate the text. Indeed, reading Ozick’s critique, one would think that the first Bech book is filled with nothing but putzes and shiksa. But again, such is not the case. A survey of its pages shows that Bech: A Book does not really rely on an inordinate amount of superficial Jewish American cultural references manufactured by the Appropriate Reference Machine. Several are thrown in here and there—at times conspicuously so, almost as if the author is trying too hard to convince us of Bech’s sociocultural bona fides—but they do not overshadow Updike’s larger writerly focus.

There is more going on in the Bech books than a mere donning of ethnic cloth or a cleverly worded jealous stab at the Jewish literary establishment. Through the character of Henry Bech, Updike is attempting to illustrate, in an almost metafictional manner, the limits of representation. ³ In his Bech narratives, the author is not so much committed to representing Jewishness accurately as he is interested in representing the act of representation, and doing so (perhaps most appropriate for him) within the context of Jewish ethnicity. Updike stated in a number of interviews that he chose the guise of an American Jewish author because of its distance from his own subject position. He told Elinor Stout in a 1975 interview that in the Bech stories “I tried to set up a lot of differences so I could get some distance. I think it’s important to distance your characters, especially the novel-length ones. They must be enough unlike you so that it’s kind of fun to pretend to be them” (80).
This emphasis on “fun” is particularly striking, for the word comes up time and again in almost every interview where he mentions Bech. For instance, in 1978: “I unpacked [the Bech book] via an alter ego who wasn’t myself. Rather, he was my opposite in many ways, and that made it rather fun” (“Conversation” 135). And in 1988: “Although Bech’s life isn’t all fun, it’s been fun for me to try to imagine myself into the skin and mind of Henry Bech” (“Fresh Air” 212). And again in 1996: “I have generally avoided writing about the literary life, and my plunge into it [in the first Bech stories had] a certain exhilaration” (“Introduction” 768).

This emphasis on “fun,” and its significance to our reading of Henry Bech, cannot be overstated. In contrast to Ozick’s emphasis on the more “serious” repercussions of the character, other critics have highlighted the sheer playfulness or jouissance underlying the stories. Bernard F. Rodgers, Jr., for example, calls the Bech trilogy “some of the finest and funniest writing of Updike’s career” (107). Similarly, David Lodge notes that the Bech narratives are “arguably Updike’s most overtly comic works, and this no doubt accounts for their popularity” (235). Indeed, the predominance of humor and even clowning in the stories underscores one of the most significant themes of the Bech pieces: the function of performance, and its limits, in the act of taking on the guise of another (or an other) subject. Updike’s Bech stories provide a rather mischievous or even impish commentary on the expected role of the writer to take on roles, to be a character.

Throughout the three Bech books, the protagonist is constantly donning masks, taking on personas, playacting in ways that both satisfy yet confound his audience’s expectations. At the many literary parties and art openings he attends, he is described as arriving “in his Henry Bech mask” (158). In the story “Rich in Russia,” he plays the part of the crass American, filthy with Soviet loot and wanting to spend his way across the communist landscape. With his translator-escort, whom he calls “Kate,” he develops “a clowning super-American manner that disguised all complaints as ‘acts’” (10). “Bech Swings?” opens with a
description of Bech as having “done little but pose as himself” (99). The story literally closes with him reading a British tabloid piece on himself, written by a young female journalist who turned out to be one of his many sexual conquests, and realizing that he has become his own construction, that his career “was not dead; his fate was not so substantial. He had become a character by Henry Bech” (124). In “Australia and Canada,” one of the fragmented and episodic narratives that opens Bech Is Back, he sees in a female television producer a kindred spirit, someone who “had been cast by life into a role it amused her to not quite fill” (191). Later, as he sits through his television interview, he notices a montage of his book-jacket author photographs flashing on the monitor as a voice-over describes his career. Watching the successive images, he realizes the links between performance and his literary calling, that “as his artistic powers had diminished he had come to look more and more like an artist” (192). Here Bech, whose ironic distance from his own profession is analogous to Updike’s relationship with his literary creation, realizes that being an author is something like a screen test, a test for a role for which one does or does not have the right look.

Elsewhere, references to acting and performance likewise abound. Having ended his relationship with Norma Latchett—the consequence of a bad drug experience and of sleeping with Norma’s recently divorced and conventional sister, Bea, as revealed in “Bech Takes Pot Luck”—he takes up with his “plump suburban softy” (203), as he calls Bea, and acts the part of the urban Semite transplanted into the suburban realms of Westchester County, calling himself “Ossining’s one-man ghetto” (78). Indeed, in “Bech Wed” the language of performance, and its links to Jewish identity, becomes the very scaffolding upon which he creates his identity. Among the WASPish friends of Bea, now his wife, “he felt like a spy . . . and, when not a silent spy, a too-vigorous, curly-haired showoff. Exquisite and languid as a literary practitioner, he was made to feel among Bea’s people vulgar and muscular, a Marx brother about to pull a skirt or grind out a cigar in a finger...
bowl” (245). In “Bech Pleads Guilty,” the third story in Bech at Bay, he recalls his younger self visiting college campuses “impersonating himself” (393), and he does so during a painfully protracted lawsuit in which he is being sued for libel. When he finally takes the witness stand—defending himself against a Hollywood agent, Morris Ohrbach, whom he had once called an “arch-gouger” (394) and, what is more, a man he comes to see as the embodiment of his dead Jewish father—an he finds that lying to the court is not as difficult as he had expected. The author, the sculptor of language, realizes that this is because “one becomes an actor, a protagonist in a drama, and words become mere instruments of the joust. Words: how could he have dedicated his life to anything so flimsy, so flexible, so ready to deceive?” (416). Here, the very nature of his profession—and, of course, Updike’s—provides the cloth from which he will weave his various costumes.

In the story “The Holy Land,” in which Bech and his wife take their honeymoon in Jerusalem, he reluctantly plays the role of the “observant” Jew, grudgingly visiting the Western Wall because Bea believes it will help him to appreciate his roots, although he does it so she will leave him alone. The story’s companion piece, “MacBech,” finds Bech donning tweed and a tam to assume the part of a Scotsman while taking Bea to the Highlands, the land of her maternal ancestors, for her fortieth birthday. Unlike his feelings toward Israel, he appreciates Great Britain—“its decline was as notorious as his” (222)—and he particularly enjoys Scotland, partly because he sees such striking similarities between Jews and Scots: “Like the Jews, the Celts had been pushed aside from the European mainstream yet not thrown quite free of it: permitted, rather, to witness closely its ruthless forward roar and to harbor in wry hearts and pinched lives the unblinkered knowing of Spinoza and Hume, Maxwell and Einstein” (228). What is so significant here, and what inextricably binds “The Holy Land” and “Mac-Bech,” is Bech’s sense that both Scots and Jews live in a “kind of magical margin” (228), a liminal space in which, apparently, identity is not
fixed, but malleable and contingent. In the former narrative it is Bea who is enthusiastic about Israel, not her Jewish husband, making her, if not a crypto-Jew, then at least a misguided Jew enabler, and in the latter, the roles have been reversed. Frustrated that Bech has so thoroughly adopted her ancestral homeland, Bea cries, “That’s so typical of you writers—you appropriate. My own poor little Scottishness has been taken from me.” Adopted as well is Bea’s subjectivity, making her an object of his art: “I’ve felt myself in your mind, being digested, becoming a character” (231). The fluidity of identity, here, is part and parcel of Updike’s project in the Bech narratives, his attempt to write through the guise of a New York Jewish American author as a Protestant middle-class writer.

Yet, and as demonstrated by Bea’s dilemma, described above, assuming roles and playing parts do not come without a cost. Updike explores the limits of identity performance—where Bech’s “acts” of identity can be read as analogous to Updike’s performance of a Jewish voice—in two different stories in the Bech oeuvre, both of which place the protagonist in existential crises. First, in “Bech Panics,” Bech acts the part of the urban Jew lost among the green and manure-scented and pastures of a rural Virginia women’s college. Although he finds himself lured by the fecundity that surrounds him, the “massed fertility” (84) oozing from the “charming daughters of fertile Virginia” (83)—a tempting scenario that would otherwise set his libido on overdrive—Bech senses that a “profound duplicity seemed to underlie the landscape” (81). While he plays the part of “a genuine male intellectual Jew, with hairy armpits and capped molars, a man from the savage North,” he nonetheless feels that this is a role that “was expected of him, and [he] felt himself performing it, and felt the fakery of the performance, and knew these levels of perception as the shifting sands of absurdity, nullity, death” (83). He realizes, in other words, that for an author/actor who is constantly assuming roles, there is the danger of a missing core, a lost seed of his very being. His experience in Virginia
proved, if proof were needed, how much of a performance [his condition] was. Who was he? A Jew, a modern man, a writer, a bachelor, a loner, a loss. A con artist in the days of academic modernism undergoing a Victorian shudder. A white monkey hung far out on a spindly heaventree of stars. A fleck of dust condemned to know it is a fleck of dust. A mouse in a furnace. A smothered scream. (92-93)

The absence of an anchored self begins to have the reek of death. The story ends with Bech returning to New York and Bea, who picks him up, sensing that something is different, that “there wasn’t enough of him left for her to have any” (98).

The other crisis that Bech undergoes occurs in “Bech in Czech,” the story that opens the third collection. As he does in Bech: A Book, Bech travels as a cultural ambassador to the Soviet bloc, this time just three years before the Velvet Revolution, and after the surprising success of his runaway best seller, Think Big. His marriage to Bea has ended—due in large part to an unexpected tryst with his former lover, and Bea’s sister, Norma—and he once again feels the need to create himself anew. “That was why you traveled to places like [Czechoslovakia],” he thinks, “to encounter fictional selves, the refreshing false ideas of you that strangers hold in their minds” (308). There, in the land of Kafka, he feels himself to be “a creature of the third person, a character” (326). Even those he encounters are described as performing under guise. Vítěslav Syzygy, Bech’s guide around Prague and the Czech translator of his books, often writes under fictitious names, tellingly describing to Bech that “there are layers” to his work as well as to the Czech literary establishment, to what is presented and what is masked: “There is inside and outside” (318).

Yet what Bech discovers is a nihilism underlying his authorial performances. At one point he feels exhausted “at the end of a long day impersonating himself” (320). And similar to what happens in “Bech Panics,” this emphasis on role-playing disturbs him, leaving him feeling apprehensive. His signatures, the marks of his identity that he pro-
vides to admirers in Czechoslovakia, seem false and insubstantial, “like so many checks that would bounce” (310). Even more significant are the historic shadows that haunt the land. Bech feels an emptiness in the country, and Updike deftly instills this crisis with ethnic import: “For a Jew, to move through postwar Europe is to move through hordes of ghosts, vast animated crowds that, since 1945, are not there, not there at all—up in smoke” (303). One of the first places he visits is Prague’s Jewish cemetery and the site of Kafka’s grave. He does so because it is expected of him—another role he must perform as a Jewish author—and the experience leaves him with a sense of unease. This becomes apparent by the end of the story when a “creeping terror” (328) comes over him one night in the Ambassador’s Residence, a palace built by a rich Jewish banker who had fled Hitler’s forces. Lying in bed, unable to go to sleep, he is beset by panic that leaves him both impotent—no small thing for the seductive and virile Bech—and with a sense of emptiness. The story ends with his “primordial . . . terror”: “His panic felt pasty and stiff and revealed a certain shape. That shape was the fear that, once he left his end of the gentle arc of the Ambassador’s Residence, he would—up in smoke—cease to be” (329). Here, more than in any other Bech story, Updike directly links his protagonist’s sense of being, or the lack thereof, to his Jewish ancestral past . . . and does so in ways that problematize that relationship. By the end of “Bech in Czech,” we do not know how this experience has changed Bech, if at all, although from most of the stories that follow, a safe bet would be not at all. However, given the complications underlying Bech’s relationship with Jewish history, one could argue that some of the narratives in Bech at Bay (and including “Bech Pleads Guilty”) directly address Ozick’s earlier complaint against the author’s Appropriate Reference Machine in Bech: A Book. In other words, the various Bech stories emphasize the significance of Jewish history and culture as subjective anchor more than some readers have acknowledged. Indeed, Updike admitted as much in an interview with James Marcus: “With Cynthia’s admonitions in mind, I’ve tried in subsequent epi-
sodes [in Bech at Bay] to give him more . . . Jewishness” (“Remembering”).

It is no accident that Bech’s critically noted first novel, Travel Light, revolves around a world that he knows nothing about. From the safe confines of his Manhattan apartment, he learns through his sister—at the time living among the Protestants in the Midwest—about the life of carefree bikers, and he writes solely through secondary and even tertiary sources a novel in the On the Road/Easy Rider mold. This, in many ways, is exactly what Updike does, writing anecdotally and even living vicariously from the perspective of his contemporary Jewish literary brethren. Like his alter ego, Updike is detached and alienated from his subject matter. And perhaps one could go on to speculate that also like Bech, Updike has a nagging suspicion—even slight feelings of guilt and inadequacy—that he is faking it and has not been able to truly capture the “itness” of his subjects. For if Bech is Updike’s fictional stand-in, then perhaps the living author’s own feelings on the limits of ethnic representation are metafictionally embedded in his fictional construct.

In fact, the constructedness of identity, ethnic or otherwise, lies at the very heart of the Bech books. This is especially true of the stories in the first collection. Throughout, the reader notices a series of shifts from one narrative frame to another. In “Rich in Russia,” the events are told from the detached perspective of what appears to be a professor lecturing to his class, complete with admonitions against looking at one’s watch and instructions that his listeners may now close their notebooks. In “Bech Panics,” the narrator—a Hawthornesque voice completely divorced from the events and conspicuously present in its absence—introduces the vignettes as a series of photographic slides presented through a projection unit. In both “Bech Third-Worlds It” and “Australia and Canada,” stories that come toward the beginning of Bech Is Back, the disclosure of events appears as a jumbled interchange between the past and the present, a narrative condition that underscores Bech’s fragmented existence as a globe-trotting cultural am-
bassador. And in “Bech Pleads Guilty,” a story in which the author gets sued for defamation over an unflattering profile on Hollywood agents, the narrative voice introduces the events in an almost tabloid, behind-the-scenes manner.

All of this is just to demonstrate that Updike, traditionally considered a neorealist writer, is much more experimental with narrative voice than most critics give him credit for being. Even the extratextual adventures of Bech take on a metafictional life of their own. The first words of *Bech: A Book* come not in one of the short stories but in a letter from the character to his creator, John Updike, grudgingly sanctioning his representation in the text (anticipating a narrative move that Philip Roth will later make in his “autobiography,” *The Facts*). And on three separate occasions, on assignment for the *New York Times Book Review*, Bech the fictional construct interviews Updike the living author (many times in a condescending manner) on his books *Rabbit Redux* (1971), *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), and *Memories of the Ford Administration* (1992).

It is too bad that critics such as Ruth Wisse and Cynthia Ozick have focused solely on the ethnic content of Henry Bech’s character and have ignored the narrative means by which Updike represents this character. A closer look at the constructed nature of Updike’s famously blocked artist figure reveals that the author is not necessarily guilty of detached caricature. He may not get the “Jewishness” of Henry Bech right all the time, but Updike’s game is certainly not limited to mere ethnic slumming. He is aware of the stakes involved in representing the ethnic other—any Other—and demonstrates this awareness by contextualizing the very act of representation. It is important here to recall Bea’s cry in “MacBech,” when she admonishes her husband for appropriating her ethnic heritage: “My own poor little Scottishness has been taken from me; you’re more of a Scot now than I am. I’ll have nothing left, eventually, and you’ll move on to appropriate somebody else’s something” (231). She’s right. Bech is a consumer of subjectivities. But behind her telling words, as behind Bech’s insensitive appropria-
tions, is the pen of the self-conscious and highly ironic author. In his Henry Bech stories, Updike is not so much the detached sociologist, clinically delineating the boundaries of identity, as he is the self-critical writer of fiction, debating with himself in a variety of narrative voices over the privileges, as well as the responsibilities, of the contemporary American writer.

Notes

1. All three Bech collections, as well as the 1999 story, are collected in The Complete Henry Bech from the Everyman’s Library. All references to the Bech stories in this essay are to the Everyman edition.

2. Pinsker later tempered his assessment of Updike’s relationship with Bech—that is, the “envy” factor—in his reading of Bech at Bay. Instead of merely using Bech as a ventriloquist’s dummy held at an ironic distance, Pinsker notes, “Updike warms to his protagonist, not only identifying with his subject but also downright liking him” (“Updike” 94). The clearest example of this for Pinsker is the outrageous “Bech Noir,” which serves as a comic wish fulfillment.

3. Updike himself used similar wording to describe his engagement with Henry Bech, calling it at one point—in words suggested by his interviewer, James Marcus—a “metafictional frolic” (“Remembering”).

4. Updike references Morris Ohrbach’s resemblance to Bech’s father, a merchant in New York’s diamond district, no less than seven times in this short story. These passages, along with Bech’s identification with Ohrbach as “victim,” are notable for their ethnic significance. Throughout the story, Bech is seen struggling with his Jewish past, unsure (and prompted by his uncertain feelings toward Ohrbach) of how to read himself within this context. This is just one example of how Updike more solidly anchors his creation within Jewish history in the third collection of Bech stories. He does this to a much fuller degree in “Bech in Czech,” which I discuss later.

5. This is partially borne out by the stories that come later in the collection, especially “Bech Noir” and “Bech and the Bounty of Sweden,” pieces with premises so outlandish and comedic, even over the top, that Updike’s previously mentioned emphasis on “fun” completely overshadows any sense of Bech as a Jewish construct.

6. If we read the Bech books not as traditional short-story collections but as examples of short-story cycles or composite novels, then these stories, each made up of strands from multiple narratives, function synecdochically, serving as smaller mirror images to the larger text.

7. It is worth noting that in this playful foreword, where the fictional author supposedly gives his blessing, Bech is nonetheless censored and held “at bay.” Toward the end of his letter to his creator, the editor (that is, Updike) cuts a number of his suggestions for improvement, inserting instead the innocuous comment, “[here followed a
list of suggested deletions, falsifications, suppressions, and rewordings, all of which have been scrupulously incorporated—ED.]” (6). If indeed all of these changes have been incorporated, then why hide their enumeration? It is clear who holds the cards here, and that Updike is fully aware of the power, and responsibilities, held by an author.

Works Cited