Different versions of a story move us, much like, as John Updike writes in the first sentence of his short story, “Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, a Dying Cat, a Traded Car,” “Different things move us” (ES 102). Published in 1961, “Packed Dirt” is a lengthy collage story which consists of seemingly unconnected incidents. Midway through the story, Updike’s first-person narrator, David Kern, describes, through a cinematic vision of his own execution, a sudden panic he experienced stemming from his adulterous behavior:

I remembered a movie I had seen as a child in which a young criminal, moaning insanely, is dragged on rubber legs down the long corridor to the electric chair. I became that criminal. (OS 167–68)

More than forty years later, the author revealed the identity of that nameless film actor in a new version of the story prepared for his collection The Early Stories: 1953–1975 (2003):

I remembered a movie that had frightened me as a child; in it Jimmy Cagney, moaning and struggling, is dragged on rubber legs down the long corridor to the electric chair. I was that condemned man. (ES 110)

In the revised version one can easily identify the movie as Angels with Dirty Faces, a 1938 gangster film starring James Cagney and Pat O’Brien, where we learn in the final scenes that Cagney has been electrocuted. Updike clarified the rather obscure allusion in this later version.
This clarification, however, yields an interesting problem when one considers the film. *Angels with Dirty Faces* centers on a pair of close friends, Rocky and Jerry, who as young hoodlums flee from the police after a petty theft. While Jerry gets away with it, Rocky is caught and sent to a reformatory. Years later, Rocky (James Cagney), now a professional criminal, is reunited with Jerry (Pat O’Brien), who has become a priest working to reform the delinquent boys who admire Rocky. After Rocky is eventually sentenced to death, Jerry, knowing the kids’ admiration for his old friend, visits the prison and asks him to “die yellow,” lest a criminal be idolized. Rocky initially refuses; as he is led to the chair, however, he becomes frantic and begs for his life. To the disillusioned boys, the priest says: “Let’s go and say a prayer for a boy who couldn’t run as fast as I could.” The narrative crux of the film lies in a question: Is Rocky genuinely frightened by his impending death? A prevalent interpretation, as James C. Robertson observes, is that Rocky “feigns cowardice on his way to the electric chair to deter the hero-worshipping kids of his old neighbourhood from following in his footsteps” (48). But if Rocky’s behavior is merely a performance, then perhaps, by implication, David Kern’s pang of horror should not be taken literally since the allusion inevitably lends a touch of theatricality to his account. There arise two questions, then: if David is performing—dramatizing—his fear of death in the story, why? And why did the author find it apt—necessary—to make this revision?

Given the contemporary abundance of visual software in 2003, as well as Updike’s well-known fastidiousness about factual details, it is not likely that the author simply misremembered the scene’s original context. In fact, a more plausible supposition is that he clarified the allusion to the film as a key to the story’s interpretation, just as he frequently used film as “a buttress for his narrative sense, a resource for verisimilitude, thematic imagery, and methods of exploring character and counter-pointing plot” (De Bellis, “It Captivates” 169).

The film in question presents a figure who plays the coward to redeem not only the young admirers but also his younger self. Let us recall the priest’s concluding line, in which he refers to the notorious criminal as “a boy who couldn’t run as fast as I could.” This implies that Rocky is originally analogous to not only Jerry but also his delinquent angels. In fact, as is indicated by the opening scene, where the two hoodlums are on a fire escape looking down on the town, Rocky appears similar to Jerry’s boys: another angel with a dirty face condemned to a life of crime due to evil circumstances. Rocky’s final act is not only one of self-sacrifice but self-redemption through his death. In “Packed Dirt,” too, one of the thematic focuses is death—of the earth, of faith, of a cat, of David’s father’s, and eventually
his own death. Or rather, the whole story is shot through with the recurrent motif of confronting one’s fear of death. A brief answer to why David relates his fear in dramatic fashion, then, would be that his artistic consciousness has demanded the dramatization in order to give coherence to this seemingly disjointed story and thereby outlive his anxiety. This existential strategy is also observed in a contemporaneous David Kern story that figures as a prequel: “Pigeon Feathers.” The first section of this paper will be devoted, therefore, to rereading the dénouement of “Pigeon Feathers” as young David’s self-redemption by art. And in the second section, I will discuss how David develops his idea of art and deals with his further crisis in “Packed Dirt” through verbal art.

To address my second question—why did Updike need this revision?—the author’s comment on the procedure of the later revision for Early Stories may be useful: “In general, I reread these stories without looking for trouble, but where an opportunity to help my younger self leaped out at me, I took it, deleting an adjective here, adding a clarifying phrase there” (ES xii–xiii). While his admitted intention was only to polish his early works, the 2003 revision reveals how the then elderly author sought to make the details of his early fiction more faithful to the actual events of his youth, as if trying to preserve more faithfully his younger self in the text. The reference to Angels is, I will argue in the final section, another symptom of his artistic “self-preservation” after death.

To better understand David’s art of dramatization in “Packed Dirt,” let us first consider “Pigeon Feathers,” which depicts a younger David’s inchoate but comparable self-redemption through creation. The reading of “Pigeon Feathers” as a kind of Künstlerroman is not unusual. Peter J. Bailey, for example, observes that the story is “a depiction of the psychic process through which an artistic sensibility is born” (45). This thesis is most effectively supported by the story’s final section, where David, at his mother’s request, undertakes to shoot the pigeons that have infested the family barn. After a few shots, David becomes “fully master” of his Remington rifle:

He felt like a beautiful avenger. Out of the shadowy ragged infinity of the vast barn roof these impudent things dared to thrust their heads, presumed to dirty its starred silence with their filthy timorous life, and he cut them off, tucked them back neatly into the silence. He had the sensation of a creator; these little smudges and flickers that he was clever to see and even cleverer to hit in the dim recesses of the rafters—out of each of them he was making a full bird. (OS 47–48)
Illustrated here is the birth of David’s artistic sensibility. At first, the pigeons roosting on the rafters seem no more than “little smudges and flickers” in his eyes, but once shot, each glimmer of a pigeon materializes as “a full bird” before the boy, as if he has created it. But what about the somewhat problematic sentence, “He felt like a beautiful avenger”? The 2003 revision of “Pigeon Feathers” justifies the exclusive attention to the motif of creation by omitting that sentence, leaving in the passage these five words, “He felt like a creator” (ES 31). David has become more creator than avenger in shooting pigeons.

The connection between the motifs of shooting and creation is reinforced through an intriguing echo in the name of David’s rifle, Remington. When Updike recalls his “early intimations of the printing process,” they are often haunted by the memory of his mother’s Remington typewriter (SC 104). As is well known, his mother Linda Grace Hoyer Updike was herself an aspiring writer, and, as Jack De Bellis points out, she “deliberately influenced her son’s emerging creative consciousness” (Early Years 9). Her typewriter’s significance in Updike’s incipient creativity is also testified by the famous Time interview: “With nudging from his mother, John’s writing career began at the age of eight, when he sat down at her typewriter and pecked out his first story” (“View” 53). For Updike, the name Remington was perhaps inseparable from his creative consciousness, and therefore he gave a cameo part to the Remington, not as a typewriter but as the rifle with which David “creates” pigeons at his mother’s request.

The motif of creation, of course, has a theological implication in the story, with its famous concluding line: “he was robed in this certainty: that the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever” (ES 33). Religion itself, however, plays a less substantial part in David’s redemption. When the spiritually disturbed boy consults his grandfather’s Bible for a reassuring word, the Book is described as frail rather than dependable: “a stumpy black book, the boards worn thin where the old man’s fingers had held them; the spine hung by one weak hinge of fabric”; on the other hand, H. G. Wells’s Outline of History, which has evoked David’s spiritual anxiety in the first place, is called “[t]he four adamant volumes of Wells like four thin bricks” (ES 24, 29). The worn-out Bible is contrasted with the well-bound Outline, as if the poor binding implies the feebleness of its argument. To make the contrast more distinct, Updike inserted two adjectives into the description of the two Bibles for the 2003 version: “Grandpa’s old Bible, the limp-covered Bible that [David] himself had received” (ES 29, emphases mine), thus foregrounding the powerlessness of institutionalized religion in the eyes of David. Instead, David’s
spiritual peace is negotiated by himself—“Nowhere in the world of other people would he find the hint, the nod, he needed to begin to build his fortress against death” (ES 27)—by means of his artistic consciousness, for he is going to have a revelation through the bodies he has “created.” Here my view approximates to that of Donald J. Greiner—“The story suggests that formal religion is little more than a refuge against the shock of recognition but that personal faith may sustain the soul” (111)—except that I put emphasis on David’s faith in art. Robert Detweiler, citing the same passage above, remarks that David’s “making a full bird” is analogous to the spiritual consummation through death: “The analogy, of course, is that man likewise is somehow fulfilled through death and that God in allowing death is not permitting a catastrophic absurdity but a good and necessary consummation. The horror of infinity changes to a trust in its intelligent perfection, unarticulated as its form may be” (50). However, no less remarkable than the faith in the divine perfection is David’s trust in his own discerning intelligence—the artistic marks-manship with which “he was clever to see and even cleverer to hit” the pigeons. It is David’s own “creative” ability, rather than God’s, that crucially helps his release from the existential horror.

When David studies the pigeons he has just killed or “created,” he recognizes the perfection of their designs—“across the surface of the infinitely adjusted yet somehow effortless mechanics of the feathers played idle designs of color, no two alike, designs executed, it seemed, in a controlled rapture, with a joy that hung level in the air above and behind him” (ES 33)—and therein senses the divine creator’s touch: “the God who had lavished such craft upon these worthless birds would not destroy His whole Creation by refusing to let David live forever” (ES 33). This recognition results from his experience of “creation” with his Remington: after “creating” the pigeons, he now has the eyes of a creator and can appreciate the whole of creation including himself. It is not by reading the Bible but the great book written in the language of Nature, as Emerson would put it, that the boy redeems himself from the anxiety. In this sense, “Pigeon Feathers” shares a central theme with “Packed Dirt”: how existential anxiety is relieved by the art of a writer or a writer-to-be.

II

According to Detweiler, who probably had Thomas Aquinas in mind, “The culminating action and the conclusion of the story [“Pigeon Feathers”] sound suspiciously like a fictional updating of the Scholastic argument from design for God’s existence” (50). Plausible as his supposition is, one might locate another source for
the story’s concluding revelation in G. K. Chesterton’s *Everlasting Man*, a Christian apologetics against Wells’s *Outline of History*.6 “I do desire to help the reader,” Chesterton declares in the introduction, “to see Christendom from the outside in the sense of seeing it as a whole, against the background of other historic things; just as I desire him to see humanity as a whole against the background of natural things” (151). Of humankind, he then infers, “This creature was truly different from all other creatures; because he was a creator as well as a creature” (167). In short: “Art is the signature of man” (166). Human beings therefore perceive “a green architecture that builds itself without visible hands; but which builds itself into a very exact plan or pattern”:

They have concluded, rightly or wrongly, that the world had a plan as the tree seemed to have a plan; and an end and crown like the flower. But so long as the race of thinkers was able to think, it was obvious that the admission of this idea of a plan brought with it another thought more thrilling and even terrible. There was someone else, some strange and unseen being, who had designed these things, if indeed they were designed. (396)

Artistic consciousness enables the human race to reason out the divine existence: Chesterton’s teleological argument is curiously resonant with David’s revelation in “Pigeon Feathers.” In fact, Updike not only noted his familiarity with Chesterton—“The existential terrors . . . had driven me, after college, in Oxford and New York, to Chesterton and Aquinas, Kierkegaard and Barth” (SC 55)—but also had David read Chesterton in “Packed Dirt.” David, now a husband and awaiting the birth of his first child, is told to stay home during his wife’s labor: “I went to bed and set the alarm for three and read a book. I remember the title, it was Chesterton’s *The Everlasting Man*” (ES 108). Despite his mother’s earlier optimism in “Pigeon Feathers”—“David, you’re so young. When you get older, you’ll feel differently” (ES 25)—his existential anxiety remains, if subliminally, alive in “Packed Dirt,” as is implied by the mention of *The Everlasting Man*.

To present David’s anxiety climactically, Updike made a revision when he introduced the motif into the story. Describing David’s excitement as he kisses the palm of a woman not his wife, the sentence originally reads: “the red darkness inside my lids was trembling” (OS 166); in the later version, it becomes, “the red darkness inside my lids was vibrant” (ES 109). In the next paragraph, David shares his excitement with his wife in bed: “like a matched pair of tuning forks, I had set her vibrating” (ES 110). Through this “vibration,” the excitement of a mere flirtation eventually amounts to an existential crisis:
The depths of cosmic space, the maddening distension of time, history’s forgotten slaughters, the child smothered in the dumped icebox, the recent breakdown of the molecular life-spiral, the proven physiological roots of the mind, the presence in our midst of idiots, Eichmanns, animals, and bacteria—all this evidence piled on, and I seemed already eternally forgotten. The dark vibrating air of my bedroom felt like the dust of my grave; the dust went up and up and I prayed upward into it, prayed, prayed for a sign, any glimmer at all, any microscopic loophole or chink in the chain of evidence, and saw none. (ES 110)

This passage exemplifies David’s art of dramatization. “The dark vibrating air,” which evokes the imagery of eternal oblivion, an apogee of David’s anxiety, has been meticulously prepared by David’s wording noted above. The “evidence,” which reinforces David’s anxiety here, is a dramatized echo from the first section of the story, where he praises packed dirt in ruined ground: “Evidence—gaping right-of-ways, acres mercilessly scraped, bleeding mountains of muddy fill—surrounds us of a war that is incapable of ceasing, and it is good to know that now there are enough of us to exert a counter-force” (ES 103). Just as the scene of desolate land impresses him with the brutal but mundane force of decay, the historical or materialistic “evidence” disturbs him on a cosmic scale.

At this nadir of his discomposure appears the reference to *Angels*, which implies that David’s account is dramatized. His renewed anxiety is here amplified to a universal scale and culminates in inducing him to perform a ceremony of dramatization, a “counter-force” against death. Since “Packed Dirt” is a story about a confrontation with death and a consequent need for a ceremony, as has been pointed out since its publication, this scene acts as a pivot in this quadruplych story (let us recall that Rocky in the *ES* version is called “condemned man” instead of “criminal”). The narrator David therefore dramatized his nightmare to present the story as a coherent whole. Updike once said in an interview: “The author’s deepest pride, as I have experienced it, is not in his incidental wisdom but in his ability to keep an organized mass of images moving forward, to feel life engendering itself under his hands” (Samuels 44). Here David’s artistic consciousness, too, demands the dramatization of his experience so as to “keep an organized mass of images moving forward.”

David’s act of dramatization, which is in itself a practice of his authorial pride, assures him of immortality. Faced with the nightmare, he wakes his wife and tells “her of the centuries coming when our names would be forgotten,” but

It seemed to offend her sense of good taste that I was jealous of future aeons and frantic because I couldn’t live through them; she asked me if I had never been so sick I gave up
Why does her response—"she asked me if I had never been so sick I gave up caring whether I lived or died"—acquire "a curious reinforcement," whatever it is? The key again lies in the difference between the two versions of the story. In the 2003 version, Updike describes her "contemptible answer" as "animal stoicism," yet in his earlier version it appears: "the decrepit Stoic response" (OS 168). The altered phrase calls us back to the Chestertonian dichotomy: "[Man] was truly different from all other creatures; because he was a creator as well as a creature" (167). If to give up caring "of the centuries coming when [their] names would be forgotten" is termed "animal stoicism," then caring with creative imagination about future aeons should be called human. The "animal stoicism," her indifference about the afterlife, on one hand reinforces "the chain of evidence" for oblivion because the attitude is tantamount to Wells’s materialism; on the other, it reminds David of a means not to be forgotten: David, now a writer, can survive the coming centuries, potentially, by his work. Thus, he falls asleep just as he "had during the birth of [his] first child," that is, when reading Chesterton’s polemic against Wells’s materialism.

It is not surprising, then, that the phrase "stoicism of animals" reappears in “The Walk with Elizanne,” another David Kern story composed and published around the time Updike was compiling Early Stories, for it shares with “Packed Dirt” such central themes as oblivion, the afterlife, and creative imagination. In “Elizanne,” David Kern, now almost seventy, has returned to his hometown where he visits a sick ex-classmate Mamie Kauffman, who tries to tell him about her suffering in New Age terms: "I’ve been rereading Shirley MacLaine, where she says that life is like a book, and your job is to figure out what chapter you’re in. If this is my last chapter, I have to read it that way, but, you know, I’ve had a lot of time to think lying here and . . . I don’t think it is" (MFT 40). The conversation with Mamie leads David to recognize the “stoicism of animals” again: “In theistic Pennsylvania, David realized, people developed philosophies. Where he lived now, an unresisted atheism left people to suffer with the mute, recessive stoicism of animals. The more intelligent they were, the less they had to say in extremis” (39). After visiting Mamie, David attends his fiftieth high school reunion, where he meets his old classmate, Elizanne, whom he had loved for a season and has not seen for years. She says to him, “there’s something I’ve been wanting for years to say to you. You were very important to me. You were the first boy who ever walked
me home and—and kissed me” (46). Though his memory of the kiss has faded, he tells her that he remembers the walk. In the final section of the story, David creates another version of the walk with Elizanne in his imagination:

If Mamie was right and we live forever, David thought, he could imagine no better way to spend eternity than taking that walk with Elizanne over and over, until what they said, how they touched, whether or not he dared hold her hand in his, and each hair of the fine black down on her forearms all came as clear as letters deep-cut in marble. There would be time to ask her all the questions he had been too slow-witted to ask at their fiftieth. (51)

Matthew Shipe cites this passage and points out: “In an intriguing metafictional twist, the story’s final section presents David’s fictionalized version of the forgotten kiss—the implication being that it is only through the art of fiction that he can mull over the feelings and unasked questions that his reunion with Elizanne occasioned” (78). David retrieves the time with Elizanne not through “stoicism of animals” but in the eternal realm of fiction. Having just met Mamie in extremis, David is conscious of his own mortality and oblivion; thus he, resorting to his art, tries to preserve the forgotten event eternally. Hence the concluding sentence: “We have t-tons of time” (MFT 54). And his fictionalization actually assures his afterlife in the form of fiction—“life is like a book.”

While “Elizanne” concerns David’s fictionalization of his lost memory, “Packed Dirt” features the dramatization of his past that is now dispersing into oblivion. On the day following his cosmic nightmare, David receives a call from his mother and drives all the way to Pennsylvania where his father is hospitalized. The return to his hometown, however, brings home to him a sense of alienation, as is emphasized by the later revision: “Having grown accustomed to the cramped, improvised cities of New England, I was impressed, like a tourist, by Alton’s straight broad streets and handsome institutions” (ES 115). The phrase “impressed, like a tourist,” which replaces “patriotically exalted” (OS 175) in the earlier version, substantiates David’s emotional distance from home. David then recognizes not only the memories of his hometown but also that his father is about to fade away. At the moment he is going to leave the hospital ward, Mr. Kern is for a second puzzled by David’s phrase my home, which, now for the son, means New England, not Pennsylvania: “though at the time I was impatient to have his consent [to leave], it has since occurred to me and grieved me that during that instant when his face was blank he was swallowing the realization that he was no longer the center of even his son’s universe” (OS 182–83). The 2003 revision accentuated the mortality of his father
as David freshly recognizes it, by the altered realization that “he could die and my life would go on” (ES 120). Mr. Kern, who has lost his faith, here seems to be fading away from David’s world, but after a chance visit from a churchwoman, the father reveals to his son: “As a star shines in our Heaven though it has vanished from the universe, so my father continued to shed faith upon others” (ES 119). This observation reminds us of David’s remark at the Alton library: “I never thought to look for the section of the shelves where my own few books would be placed. They were not me. They were my children, touchy and self-willed” (ES 115). This time the father-son motif is translated into that of an artist and his/her work, hinting at a mode of immortality, a posthumous life in text, for David. The reprise of these motifs suggests David’s motive for writing this story: finding his father and his own memories of his hometown to be on the verge of passing, David tries to preserve them, even after his own death, in fiction.

In the final section of “Packed Dirt,” David as narrator employs the motif of the car to indicate that his fiction should posthumously preserve his past. On his drive back home, David experiences “a metaphoric death,” as Robert M. Luscher calls it (42), or a kind of highway hypnosis: “In the last hour of the trip I ceased to care or feel or in any real sense see, but the car, though its soul the driver had died, maintained steady forward motion, and completed the journey safely” (ES 121). Note the clear parallelism: feeling as if the car secures a safe journey even after the driver’s death, he senses that his fiction as a vehicle guarantees the author’s potential immortality. David even has the sensation of “obliterating earthly time” (ES 121), with the adjective earthly added in 2003 in order to highlight the transcendent quality of David’s experience. Therefore, when David reveals at the conclusion the thematic focus of his story, he remembers his father’s cars and his own soon to be traded vehicle:

My father traded in many cars. It happens so cleanly, before you expect it. He would drive off in the old car up the dirt road exactly as usual, and when he returned the car would be new to us, and the old was gone, gone, utterly dissolved back into the mineral world from which it was conjured, dismissed without a blessing, a kiss, a testament, or any ceremony of farewell. We in America need ceremonies, is I suppose, sailor, the point of what I have written. (ES 121)

The old cars dispersed into the materialistic universe need ceremonies, as does his own car, which, Luscher writes, “is linked symbolically with an epoch of his life”: “Through his art, he performs this ceremony [of farewell], recapturing the elusive past and successfully preserving a pathway to it that may be travelled perpetually”
David can redeem his past, even his own existence, through the art of fiction, an idea that had been central for him since his teens. As in “Pigeon Feathers,” his discomposure is relieved by his composition; “Packed Dirt” is itself a ceremony of farewell to his old self that puts into practice “a blessing, a kiss, a testament” to his past, with a touch of dramatization.

III

In revising “Packed Dirt” for inclusion in his Early Stories, Updike altered David’s description of his car from “companion and warm home and willing steed” (OS 184) to “companion and haven and willing steed” (ES 121). This revision is understandable from the perspective of “Pigeon Feathers,” where the boy experiences existential anxiety for the first time and feels as if exiled from “a haven”: “The world outside the deep-silled windows . . . seemed a haven from which David was forever sealed off” (ES 15). In “Packed Dirt,” the art of fiction assures him of potential immortality through his work. Hence, his car is called “haven.” The revision, on the other hand, allows us to expand David’s idea of textual immortality into Updike’s, for the author in his foreword to Early Stories writes: “Any story that makes it from the initial hurried scribbles into the haven of print possesses, in this writer’s eyes, a certain valor, and my instinct, even forty years later, is not to ditch it but to polish and mount it anew” (ix). That Updike embedded the word “haven” in both passages suggests that David’s trust in art is shared by the author. In fact, Updike often manifested the “self-preserving” quality of his writings, as he noted in the Foreword to a bibliography of his writings: “My instinct of self-preservation is strong” (Due Considerations 652). After touching upon Karl Barth’s view of the afterlife “as this life, viewed under the aspect of eternity,” he continues: “now that I have, in this huge and fanatically detailed bibliography, something of the sort—my life in print viewed under the aspect of definitive inventory—I acknowledge some comfort” (651). This transcendent function of art sub specie aeternitatis is often observed in his writings. For example, writing about how an author could distribute his works, potentially, all over the globe, he once stated, “This blithe extension of the usual limitations of space is compounded by a possible defiance of the limitations of time as well—a hope of being read, of being heard and enjoyed, after death” (OJ 917–18). Since this passage is actually a response to a French magazine’s question, “Pourquoi écrivez-vous?” one can assume that a yearning for immortality lies deep in his motives: “The papery self-magnification and immortality of printed reproduction . . . was central to my artistic impulse.” To summarize in his own phrase, “To be in print was to be saved” (SC 108).
Updike then must have found himself in great peril during the period in which “Packed Dirt” was composed, “the spring of 1961, . . . a time when my wits seemed sunk in a bog of anxiety and my customary doubts that I could write another word appeared unusually well justified” (HS 796). This depression seems like a typical sign of an artistic slump, but since “to be in print was to be saved,” it was arguably a symptom of not only writer’s block but also a block to his faith in salvation. This hypothesis is confirmed in his memoirs, Self-Consciousness. After having moved from New York City to Ipswich, Massachusetts, in 1957 and being diagnosed with mild emphysema and chronic asthma, Updike experienced depression with “the sullen realization that in a few decades we would all be dead”:

In my memory there is a grayness to that period of my life in Ipswich, a certain desperation out of which I struggled to piece together those last, fragmentary stories in Pigeon Feathers, which I think of, in retrospect, as my best, perhaps because the words were attained through such an oppressive blanket of funk. The sky was gray. Shortly after the insurance report, I was playing basketball . . . and I looked up at the naked, netless hoop: gray sky outside it, gray sky inside it. (SC 97)

“These remembered gray moments,” Updike continues, “in which my spirit could scarcely breathe, are scattered over a period of years” (98). The effect of these depressive years is observable in the two “fragmentary” essay-stories—namely, “The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother’s Thimble, and Fanning Island” and “Packed Dirt.” In the former, a nameless narrator, studying his grandmother’s thimble, confesses: “I feel that the world is ending, that the mounting mass of people will soon make a blackness in which the glint of this silver will be obliterated” (ES 99). The black obliteration looming ahead, which at the same time reminds us of David’s obsession with an impending extinction, is nothing other than a reflection of Updike’s depression.

In this gray period, Updike composed “Packed Dirt” to achieve self-redemption. While the repetition of grayness in the memoir highlights Updike’s depression during that period, David in the 2003 version of “Packed Dirt” calls Lent “those forty gray days during which the earth prepares the resurrection” (ES 104). This marks a change from how the passage appeared in the earlier version: “those forty suspended days during which Spring is gathering the mineral energy to make the resurrection” (OS 157). Replacing “suspended” with “gray” recalls the author’s condition at the time of composition and is used for the period of preparation for the resurrection. As in “Packed Dirt,” where David’s obsession with death is relieved by his writing, Updike himself, we may assume, accomplished a similar resurrec-
tion through writing that story. William H. Pritchard touches upon this point: “It may be more important to assert that these portmanteau, glued-together efforts were therapeutic in pulling him out of a slump than to argue about whether they ‘succeed’ in ways superior to more conventional stories” (76). Though Pritchard emphasizes its farraginous form, the thematic connection is no less crucial in the “therapeutic” quality of this story. Just as David has hammed it up in the story, the author must have dramatized his condition in “Packed Dirt” to relieve his own anxiety. Updike even noted that he used to lie “gasping on the floor” when struck by an attack of his respiratory diseases “since dramatizing my condition seemed the next-best thing to curing it” (SC 99).

If Updike was seeking self-redemption or “self-preservation” in his fiction, “Packed Dirt” and the other Olinger stories must have been more suitable and effective than his other works. As Updike wrote in his foreword to Olinger Stories: “if of my stories I had to pick a few to represent me, they would be, I suppose, for reasons only partially personal, these” (ix). Although Updike in 1963 qualified his Olinger stories as “partially personal,” he again admitted his special preference for them in the foreword to Early Stories: “the idea of assembling my early stories (half of them out of print) presented, to me, no temptation stronger than the one of seeing Olinger Stories back together” (xi). While “all the stories [in the collection] draw from the same autobiographical well,” he explains that “no attempt is made at an overall consistency,” nor is there a need for the stories to be faithful to his biography (ES xi). As he writes in the foreword to Olinger Stories, “let the inconsistencies stand in these stories” (viii). Nevertheless, Updike did not let the inconsistencies stand. For example, in the revised versions of “Pigeon Feathers” and “The Happiest I’ve Been” that appear in Early Stories, Updike alters the age at which his protagonists, David Kern and John Nordholm, move to the country; whereas the move took place in the earlier texts at, respectively, age fourteen and fifteen, in the revised versions each is thirteen (OS 20, 105; ES 13, 69). Interestingly, we can spot a similar revision of David’s history in later Olinger stories, such as “Lunch Hour” (1995) and “The Walk with Elizanne” (2003), which appeared prior to or contemporaneously with Early Stories; in each case the family’s move to the country occurred when David was fourteen (Licks of Love 19, MFT 48). And in another late Olinger story, “The Road Home” (2005), the narrator recalls David seeing the house for the first time at thirteen (MFT 173). Updike evidently persisted in the “age-fourteen” system until the preparation for Early Stories, when he adopted “age-thirteen.” Why the author changed such a seemingly trivial detail can be explained, perhaps, by the fact his own family moved to the country when he
was thirteen. In 2003, Updike must have been more conscious of his approaching end, and in re-establishing David’s history as faithful to his own, we may deduce an urge, in his fiction, for “self-preservation.”

On the way to his father’s hospital in Pennsylvania, David in “Packed Dirt” gives a lift to a young sailor, and they take turns at the wheel, talking about the sailor’s girlfriend. After David confesses that he is a writer who writes “whatever comes into [his] head,” the youngster asks him, “What’s the point?” (ES 112, 113). David answers: “I don’t know. . . . I wish I did. Maybe there are several points.” The last sentence was added by the author forty years later, as if answering the routine criticism against his stories that he addressed in 1964: “I have been told that the story [“The Friends from Philadelphia”] seems to have no point. The point, to me, is plain, and is the point, more or less, of all these Olinger stories. We are rewarded unexpectedly. The muddled and inconsequent surface of things now and then parts to yield us a gift” (OS vii). Indeed, not only the protagonist but Updike himself seems to have been rewarded with textual immortality. Whether this kind of afterlife was an unexpected reward for the young Updike or not, the elderly author’s emendations demonstrate his faith in art as a countermeasure for extinction. In this sense, it was a ceremony for him to assure his “self-preservation”—by both restoring his long out-of-print selection and revising the allusion to the film that implies posthumous redemption. He needed yet another ceremony, is we might suppose, one of the several points of what he has rewritten.

NOTES

1. In this paper, the earlier versions of the Olinger stories are cited from Olinger Stories. For it and other Updike titles, the following abbreviations are used: ES for The Early Stories: 1953–1975, HS for Hugging the Shore, MFT for My Father’s Tears, OF for Odd Jobs, OS for Olinger Stories, and SC for Self-Consciousness.

2. In revising “The Happiest I’ve Been” for ES, Updike even changed the final scene with “[r]ed dawn light” (OS 120) into that with “pre-dawn light” (ES 79) because it is too early for dawn on New Year’s Day in Pennsylvania.

3. Updike himself observes, “The themes here interwoven—and there is a good deal of conscious art in this farraginous narrative, and more fiction than may meet the eye—had long been present to me: paternity and death, earth and faith and cars” (HS 797).

4. For more instances, see Endpoint 11, Higher Gossip 4, OF 915.

5. David’s creation parallels with Updike’s, for as Lorrie Moore appropriately puts it, “it is Updike, lavishing such craft upon his descriptions of the birds, that has allowed David to live forever; art here outperforms faith” (17).

6. “The Everlasting Man,” according to Joseph Pearce, “grew out of the controversy that had raged between Belloc and H. G. Wells ever since the latter had published his Outline of History”
While admitting Chesterton's volume was “wholly different in tone from Belloc’s bellicosity” (305), he concludes: “It was an answer to Well’s Outline of History and an attack on the shallowness of modern thought” (309). In the Prefatory Note, Chesterton himself says, with his characteristic understatement, “I have more than once differed from Mr. H. G. Wells in his view of history” (141).

7. Updike later incorporated the latter two philosophers in The Centaur, “the subsequent novel” (HS 797) of “Packed Dirt.” For more about his use of Kierkegaard and Karl Barth in the novel, see, for example, Newman and Hunt.

8. The “evidence” cited here alludes to actual events around the time of the composition of “Packed Dirt,” as we can easily locate obvious ones such as the Eichmann trial or the discovery of the DNA structure. In addition, the mention of the smothered child recalls a tragedy—a missing eight-year-old boy was found in an abandoned icebox—which was reported on the first page of The Boston Globe, August 4, 1958 (“Boy’s Death”).

9. See Novak, one of the earliest criticisms on “Packed Dirt” (first published in 1963).

10. The composition of “The Walk with Elizanne” slightly precedes the revision for ES. “The Walk with Elizanne” was submitted to The New Yorker on April 16, 2001, and was published on the issue of July 7, 2003 (Collected Later Stories 956).

11. Updike castigated David’s opinion about marriage—“I told him [the sailor] I had married at the age of twenty-one and had never for a minute been sorry” (OS 171)—and dropped the phrase for a minute in ES, whether or not it was another case of “self-preservation” by the author who had got a divorce long before the revision.

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