# A Madman

# John Updike

ENGLAND ITSELF seemed slightly insane to us. The meadows skimming past the windows of the Southampton–London train seemed green deliriously; they were so obsessively steeped in the color that my eyes, still attuned to the exhausted verdure and September rust of American fields, doubted the ability of this landscape to perform useful work. England appeared to exist purely as a context of literature. I had studied this literature for four years, and had been sent here to continue this study. Yet my brain, excited and numbed by travel, could produce only one allusion; “a’ babbled of green fields,” that inconsequential Shakespearean snippet rendered memorable by a classic typographical emendation, kept running through my mind, “a’ babbled, a’ babbled,” as the dactylic scansion of the train wheels drew us and our six mute, swaying compartment-mates northward into London.

The city overwhelmed our expectations. The Kiplingesque grandeur of Waterloo Station, the Eliotic despondency of the brick row in Chelsea where we spent the night in the flat of a vague friend, the Dickensian nightmare of fog and sweating pavement and besmirched cornices that surrounded us when we awoke—all this seemed too authentic to be real, too corroborative of literature to be solid. The taxi we took to Paddington Station had a high roof and an open side, which gave it to our eyes the shocked, cockeyed expression of a character actor in an Agatha Christie melodrama. We wheeled past mansions by Galsworthy and parks by A. A. Milne; we glimpsed a cobbled eighteenth-century alley, complete with hanging tavern boards, where Dr. Johnson might have reeled and gasped the night he laughed so hard—the incident in Boswell so beautifully amplified in the essay by Beerbohm. And underneath all, underneath Heaven knew how many medieval plagues, pageants, and conflagrations, old Londinium itself like a buried Titan lay smoldering in an abyss and tangle of time appalling to eyes accustomed to view the land as a surface innocent of history. We were relieved to board the train and feel it tug us westward.

The train brought us into Oxford at dusk. We had no place to go. We had made no reservations. We got into a cab and explained this to the driver. Middle-aged, his huge ears frothing with hair, he seemed unable to believe us, as if in all his years he had never before carried passengers who had not already visited their destination. He seemed further puzzled by the discovery that, though we claimed to be Americans, we had never been in Stillwater, or even in Tulsa. Fifteen years ago he had spent some months in the depths of Oklahoma learning to fly Lend-Lease planes. Now he repaid his debt by piloting us down a narrow street of brick homes whose windows—queerly, for this was suppertime—were all dark. “We’ll give you a try at the Potts’,” he explained briefly, braking. He went with us up to the door and twisted a heavy wrought-iron knob in its center. A remote, rattling ring sounded on the other side of the opaquely stained panes. At length a tall saturnine man answered. Our driver explained to him, “Potty, we’ve two homeless Yanks here. They don’t know the score as yet.”

Early in the evening as it was, Mr. Pott wore a muttering, fuddled air of having been roused. The BED AND BREAKFAST sign in his window seemed to commit him to no hospitality. Only after impressing us with the dark difficulty of it, with the unprecedented strain we were imposing upon the arrangements he had made with a disobliging and obtusely technical world, did he lead us upstairs and into a room. The room was large, chill, and amply stocked with whatever demigods it is that supervise sleep. I remember that the deliciously cool sheets and coarse blankets were topped by a purple puff smelling faintly of lavender, and that in the morning, dressing, my wife and I skipped in and out of the radiant influence of the electric heater like a nymph and satyr competing at a shrine. The heater’s plug was a ponderous and dangerous-looking affair of three prongs; plugging it in was my first real work of acclimatization. We appeared for breakfast a bit late. Of all the other boarders, only Mr. Robinson (I have forgotten his actual name) had yet to come down. Our places were laid at the dining table, and at my place—I couldn’t believe my eyes—was set an insanity, a half of a cooked tomato on a slice of fried bread.

Mr. Robinson came down as Mr. Pott was finishing explaining to us why we must quickly find permanent lodgings. Our room would soon be needed by its regular tenant, an Indian undergraduate. Any day now he would take it into his head to show up. It was a thankless job, keeping students’ rooms; they were in and out and up and talking and making music at all hours, and the landlord was supposed to enforce the midnight curfew. “The short of it is,” Mr. Pott snarled, “the university wants me to be a nanny and a copper’s nark.” His voice changed tone. “Ah, Mr. Robinson! Good morning, Professor. We have with us two lovebirds from across the Atlantic.”

Mr. Robinson ceremoniously shook our hands. Was he a professor? He was of middle size, with a scholar’s delicate hunch and long thinning yellowish-white hair brushed straight back. In speech, he was all courtesy, lucid patter, and flattering attention. We turned to him with relief; after our host’s dark hints and dour discontents, we seemed to be emerging into the England of light. “Welcome to Oxford,” he said, and from a bright little tension in his cheeks we could see he was about to quote. “ ‘That home of lost causes, and forsaken beliefs, and unpopular names, and impossible loyalties.’ That’s Matthew Arnold; if you want to understand Oxford, read Arnold. Student of Balliol, fellow of Oriel, professor of poetry, the highest bird as ever flew with a pedant’s clipped wings. Read Arnold, and read Newman. ‘Whispering from her towers the last enchantments of the Middle Age’—which he did not *mean*, you know, entirely sympathetically; no, not at all. Arnold was not at all church-minded. ‘The Sea of Faith / Was once, too, at the full … But now I only hear / Its melancholy, long, *withdrawing* roar, / Retreating, to the breath / Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear / And naked shingles of the world.’ Hah! Mr. Pott, what is this I see before me? My customary egg. You are a veritable factotum, a Johannes Factotum, of kindness. Mr. Pott of St. John’s Street,” he confided to us in his quick, twinkling way, “an institution no less revered by the student body than the church of St. Michael’s-at-the-North-Gate, which contains, you should know, and will *see*, the oldest standing structure in”—he cleared his throat, as if to signal something special coming—“Oxnaford: the old Saxon tower, dating from the ninth century at the least. At the *least*, I insist, though in doing so I incur the certain wrath of the more piddling of local archaeologists, if we can dignify them with the title upon which Schliemann and Sir Leonard Woolley have heaped so much indelible honor.” He set to his egg eagerly, smashing it open with a spoon.

My wife asked him, “Are you a professor of archaeology?”

“Dear madam,” he said, “in a manner of speaking, in a manner of speaking, I have taken all knowledge for my province. Do you know Ann Arbor, in, I believe, the very wooded state of Michigan? No? Have no shame, no shame; your country is so vast, a poor Englishman’s head reels. My niece, my sister’s daughter, married an instructor in the university there. I learn from her letters that the temperature frequently—*frequently*—drops below zero Fahrenheit. Mr. Pott, will this charming couple be spending the term with us here?” When it was explained to him, more readily than tactfully, that our presence here was an emergency measure, the result of a merciful impulse which Mr. Pott, his implication was, already regretted, Mr. Robinson bent his face low over the table to look up at us. He had perfect upper teeth. “You must know the *way*,” he said, “the ins and outs, the little shortcuts and circumlocutions, circumflexions, the *circumstances*; else you will never find a flat. You have waited long, too long; in a few days the Michaelmas term will be upon us and from Woodstock to Cowley there won’t be a room to be *had*. But I, *I*”—he lifted one finger and closed one eye sagely—“I may be of help. *‘Che tu mi segui,’* as Vergil said to Dante, *‘e io sarò tua guida!’* ”

We were of course grateful for a guide. The three of us walked down St. John’s Street (all the shades were drawn, though this was daylight), up Beaumont past the sooty, leonine sprawl of the Ashmolean, and down Magdalen Street to Cornmarket, where indeed we did see the Saxon tower. Mr. Robinson indicated points of interest continuously. His lower jaw seemed abnormally slender, as if a normal jaw had been whittled for greater flexibility and lightness. It visibly supported only one lower tooth, and that one hardly bigger than a fleck of tobacco, and set in the gum sideways; whereas his upper teeth were strikingly even and complete. Through these mismatched gates he poured an incessant stream of frequently stressed words, broken only when, preparatory to some heightened effort of erudition, he preeningly cleared his throat. “Now we are standing in the center of town, the very hub and beating heart of Oxfordshire, Carfax, derived—uh-uh-hem—from the Norman *carrefor*, the Latin *quadrifurcus*, meaning ‘four forks,’ or ‘crossroads.’ Do you know Latin? The last international language, the—uh-hem—Esperanto of Christendom.” He carried an old paper bag, and we found ourselves in a vast roofed market, surrounded by blood-flecked butcher’s stalls and bins of raw vegetables smelling of mud. Mr. Robinson methodically filled his bag with potatoes. He examined each potato, and hesitated with it, as if it would be his last; but then his anxious parchmenty hand would dart out and seize yet another. When the bag could hold no more, he shrugged and began to wander away. The proprietress of the stall shouted in protest. She was fat; her face looked scorched; and she wore a man’s boots and numerous unravelling sweaters. Without a word, Mr. Robinson returned and rather grandly dumped all the potatoes back into the bin. Along with the potatoes some papers fluttered out, and these he put back in the bag. He turned to us and smiled. “Now,” he said, “it is surely time for lunch. Oxnaford is no town to storm on an empty stomach.”

“But,” I said, “Mr. Robinson, what about the place we have to find?”

He audibly exhaled, as if he had just tasted a superb wine. “*Aaaaah*. I have not forgotten, I have not forgotten. We must tread cautiously; you do not know, you see, the *way*. The ins and outs, the *circumstances*.” He led us to a cafeteria above a furniture store on the Broad and through the chips and custard tried to distract us with a profuse account of Oxford in its medieval heyday—Roger Bacon, Duns Scotus, the “Mad Parliament” of 1256, the town-gown riots of St. Scholastica’s Day in 1355. Down on the street once more, he took to plucking our arms and making promises. One more little trip, one harmless excursion that would be *very* useful for us, and then down to business. He escorted us all the way down High Street to the Magdalen Bridge, and thus we received our first glimpse of the Cherwell. No punts were out at this time of year, and swans generally stayed downriver. But, looking back toward the center of town, we were treated to the storybook view of Oxford, all spires and silhouette and flaking stone, under a sky by John Constable, R.A.

Weak, distraught, I felt myself succumb; we surrendered the day to Mr. Robinson. Triumphantly sensing this, he led us down Rose Lane, through the botanic gardens orange and golden with fall flowers, along Merton Field, and back through a series of crooked alleys to the business district. Here he took us into a bookstore and snatched a little newspaper, the Oxfordshire weekly, out of a rack and indicated to the man behind the counter that I would pay for it. While I rummaged the fourpence out of my pocket, Mr. Robinson pranced to the other wall and came back holding a book. It was a collection of essays by Matthew Arnold. “Don’t buy this book,” he told me. “*Don’t buy it*. I have it in a superior edition, and will lend it to you. Do you understand? I will *lend* it to you.” I thanked him and, as if all he had wanted from us was a little gratitude, he announced that he would leave us now. He tapped the paper in my hand. He winked. “Your problems—and don’t think, *don’t* think they have not been painfully on my mind—are solved; you will find your rooms in here. Very few, *very* few people know about this paper, but all the locals, *all* the locals with *good* rooms advertise in here; they don’t *trust* the regular channels. You must know the *way*, you see, the ins and outs.” And he left us, as at the edge of Paradise.

It was growing dark, in that long, slow, tea-shoppe-lit style of English afternoons, and we had tea to clear our heads. Then there seemed nothing to do but return to Mr. Pott’s house, on St. John’s Street. Now we noticed for the first time students in the streets, whirring along on their bicycles like bats, their black gowns fluttering. Only we lacked a roost. My wife lay down on top of our purple puff and silently cried. Her legs ached from all the walking. She was—our heavy secret—three months pregnant. We were fearful that if this became known not a landlord in Oxford would have us. I went out in the dusk with my newspaper to a phone booth. In fact, there were few flats advertised in the weekly, and all but one lacked a kitchen; this one was listed as on St. Aldate’s Street. I called the number and a woman answered. When she heard my voice, she asked, “Are you an American?”

“I guess, yes.”

“I’m sorry. My husband doesn’t like Americans.”

“He doesn’t? Why not?” It had been impressed upon me, with the award of my fellowship, that I was to act as an ambassador abroad.

There was a pause, then she said, “If you must know, our daughter’s gone and married an airman from your base at Brize Norton.”

“Oh—well, I’m not an airman. I’m a student. And I’m already married. It would just be me and my wife, we have no children.”

“Hooh, Jack!” The exclamation sounded off focus, as if she had turned her mouth from the receiver. Then she returned close to my ear, confidential, murmurous. “My husband’s this minute come in. Would you like to talk to him?”

“No,” I said, and hung up, shaky but pleased to have encountered a conversation I could end.

The next morning, Mr. Robinson had reached the breakfast table before us. Perhaps it had cost him some sleep, for his hair was mussed and its yellow tinge had spread to his face. His eagerness in greeting us was now tipped with a penetrating whine. The falseness of his upper teeth had become painfully clear; spittle sparked from his mouth with the effort of keeping the plate in place. “ ‘Noon strikes on England,’ ” he recited at our appearance, “ ‘noon on Oxford town, / Beauty she was statue cold, there’s blood upon her gown, / Proud and godly kings had built her long ago, / With her towers and tombs and statues all arow, / With her fair and floral air / And the love that lingers there, / And the streets where the great men go.’ ”

“I thought this morning,” I told him, “I’d go to my college and see if they could help.”

“Which college?” he asked. His face became jealously alert.

“Keble.”

“Ah,” he crowed, “they won’t help. *They won’t help*. They know *nothing*. They *wish* to know nothing. *Nihil ex nihilo*.”

“It’s a game they play,” Mr. Pott muttered sourly, “called Hands Off.”

“Really?” my wife said, her voice brimming.

“Nevertheless,” I insisted, “we have to begin somewhere. That weekly you got for us had only one possibility, and the woman’s husband didn’t like Americans.”

“Your ruddy airmen,” Mr. Pott explained, “from out Norton way have given you a name. They come into town with their powder-blue suits and big shoulders, some of ’em black as shoe polish, and give the local tarts what-for.”

My mention of the weekly had set off a sequence in Mr. Robinson’s mind, for now he clapped his hands to his head and said, “That book. I promised to lend you that book. Forgive, for*give* a rattlebrained old man. I will get it for you *instanter*. No protest, no protest. Youth must be served.”

He went upstairs to his room, and we glanced at Mr. Pott inquisitively. He nodded. “I’d beat it now, in your shoes,” he said.

We had made three blocks and felt safely lost in the crowd along Cornmarket when Mr. Robinson caught up with us. He was panting and wearing his bedroom slippers. “Wait,” he whined, “*wait*, you don’t *see*. You can’t run blind and headlong into these situations, you don’t understand the *circumstances*.” He carried his paper shopping bag and produced from it a book, which he pressed upon me. It was a turn-of-the-century edition of Arnold’s essays, with marbled end papers. Right there, on the jostling pavement, I opened it, and nearly slammed it shut in horror, for every page was a spider’s web of annotations and underlinings, in many pencils and inks and a wild variety of handwritings. “Cf.,” “*videlicet*,” “He betrays himself here,” “19th cent. optmsm.”—these leaped at me out of the mad swarm. The annotations were themselves annotated, as his argument with the text doubled and redoubled back on itself. “Is this so?” a firm hand had written in one margin, and below it, in a different slant and fainter pencil, had been added, “Yes it is so,” with the “is” triple-underlined; and below this a wobbly ballpoint pen had added, without capitals, “but is it?” It made me dizzy to look into; I shut the book and thanked him.

Mr. Robinson looked at me cleverly sideways. “You thought I had forgotten,” he said. “You thought an old man’s brain didn’t hold water. No shame, no shame; in your circumstances you could hardly think otherwise. But no, what I promise, I fulfill; now I will be your guide. A-hem. Everyman, I will go with thee: hah!” He gestured toward the ancient town hall and told us that during the Great Rebellion Oxford had been the Royalist headquarters.

“ ‘The king, observing with judicious eyes / The state of both his universities, / To Oxford sent a troop of horse, and why?’ ” he recited, ending with a sweep of his arm that drew the eyes of passersby to us.

Just as, by being pronounced definitely insane, a criminal curiously obligates the society he has injured, so now Mr. Robinson’s hold upon us was made perfect. The slither of his shuffling slippers on the pavement, the anxious snagging stress of periodic syllables, the proud little throat-clearings were so many filaments that clasped us to him as, all but smothered by embarrassment and frustration, we let him lead us. Our route overlapped much of the route of the day before; but now he began to develop a new theme—that all this while he had been subjecting us to a most meticulous scrutiny and we had passed favorably, with *flying* colors, and that he was going to introduce us to some of his friends, the really *important* people, the grand panjandrums, the people who knew where there were rooms and rooms. He would write letters, perform introductions, secure our admission to secret societies. After lunch, at about the hour when on the day before he had introduced us to the paper seller, he shepherded us into the library of the Oxford Union Society and introduced us to the fastidious boy behind the desk. Mr. Robinson’s voice, somehow intensified by whispering, carried to every crusty corner and sacrosanct gallery. The young librarian in his agony did not suppress an ironical smile. When his eyes turned to us, they took on a polite glaze that fell a little short of concealing contempt. But with what a deal of delighted ceremony did Mr. Robinson, who evidently really was a member, superintend the signing of our names in a huge old ledger! In return for our signatures we were given, with a sorcerer’s flourishes, an application form for membership. There was this to be said for Mr. Robinson: he never left you quite empty-handed.

Returning, frantic and dazed, to our room at the Potts’, we were able to place the application blank and the annotated Arnold beside our first trophy, the Oxfordshire weekly. I lay down on the bed beside my wife and read through the lead article, a militant lament on the deterioration of the Norman church at Iffley. When I had regained some purpose in my legs, I walked over to Keble and found it was much as I had been warned. The patterns of paternalism did not include those students tasteless enough to have taken a wife. Flats were to be had, though, the underling asserted, absurdly scratching away with a dip pen in his tiny nook with its one Gothic window overlooking a quad; his desk suggested the Tenniel illustration of all the cards flying out of the pack.

I was newly enough married not to expect that my wife, once I was totally drained of hope, would supply some. She had decided in my absence that we must stop being polite to Mr. Robinson. Indeed, this did seem the one way out of the maze. I should have thought of it myself. We dressed up and ate a heartily expensive meal at a pseudo-French restaurant that Mr. Robinson had told us never, *never* to patronize, because they were brigands. Then we went to an American movie to give us brute strength and in the morning came down to breakfast braced. Mr. Robinson was not there.

This was to be, it turned out, our last breakfast at the Potts’. Already we had become somewhat acclimatized. We no longer, for example, glanced around for Mrs. Pott; we had accepted that she existed, if she existed at all, on a plane invisible to us. The other boarders greeted us by name now. There were two new faces among them—young students’ faces, full of bewilderingly pertinent and respectful questions about the United States. The States, their opinion was, had already gone the way that all countries must eventually go. To be American, we were made to feel, was to be lucky. Mr. Pott told us that Karam had written he would be needing his room by the weekend and pushed across the table a piece of paper containing several addresses. “There’s a three-room basement asking four pounds ten off Banbury Road,” he said, “and if you want to go to five guineas, Mrs. Shipley still has her second floor over toward St. Hilda’s.”

It took us a moment to realize what this meant; then our startled thanks gushed. “Mr. Robinson,” I blurted in conclusion, groping for some idiom suitable to Mr. Pott and not quite coming up with it, “has been leading us all around the Maypole.”

“Poor Robbie,” said Mr. Pott. “Daft as a daisy.” He tapped the bony side of his lean dark head.

My wife asked, “Is he always—like that?”

“Only as when he finds an innocent or two to sink his choppers in; they find him out soon enough, poor Robbie.”

“Does he really have a niece in Michigan?”

“Ah yes, he’s not all fancy. He was a learned man before his trouble, but the university never quite took him on.”

“ ‘So poetry, which is in Oxford made an art,’ ” a familiar voice sweetly insisted behind us, “ ‘in London only is a trade.’ Dryden. *Not* a true Oxonian, but an excellent poet and amateur scholar nevertheless. If you enjoy his jingling style. Mr. Pott. Can that egg be mine?” He sat down and smashed it neatly with his spoon and turned to us jubilantly. Perhaps the delay in his appearance had been caused by an effort of grooming, for he looked remarkably spruce, his long hair brushed to a tallowish luster, his tie knotted tightly, his denture snug under his lips, and a plaid scarf draped around his shoulders. “Today,” he said, “I will devote myself to your cause wholeheartedly, without intermissions, interruptions, or intercessions. I have spent the last hour preparing a wonderful surprise, *mirabile dictu*, as faithful Aeneas said to his natural mother, Aphrodite.”

“I think,” I said, in a voice constrained by the presence of others around the table, “we really must do other things today. Mr. Pott says that Karam—”

“Wait, *wait*,” he cried, becoming agitated and rising in his chair. “You do not understand. You are *innocents*—charming, yes, vastly potential, yes, but innocents, you see. You must know the *way*, the ins, the outs—”

“No, honestly—”

“*Wait*. Come with me now. I will show you my surprise *instanter*, if you insist.” And he bustled up from the table, the egg uneaten, and back up the stairs toward his room. My wife and I followed, relieved that what must be done could now be done unwitnessed.

Mr. Robinson was already coming out of his room as we met him on the second-floor landing. In his haste he had left the door open behind him. Over his shoulder I glimpsed a chaos of tumbled books and old magazines and worn clothes. He held in his hands a sheet of paper on which he had made a list. “I have spent the last hour preparing,” he said, “with a care not incomparable to that of—*ih-ih-humm*—St. Jerome transcribing the Vulgate, a list; these are the people that today we will *see*.” I read the list he held up. The offices and titles and names at the top meant nothing to me, but halfway down, where the handwriting began to get big and its slant to become inconstant, there was the word “Chancellor” followed by a huge colon and the name “Lord Halifax.”

Something in my face made the paper begin to tremble. Mr. Robinson took it away and held it at his side. With the other hand he fumbled with his lapel. “You’re terribly kind,” I said. “You’ve given us a *won*derful introduction to Oxford. But today, really, we must go out on our own. Absolutely.”

“No, no, you don’t seem to comprehend; the *circum—*”

“*Please*,” my wife said sharply.

He looked at her, then at me, and an unexpected calm entered his features. The twinkle faded, the jaw relaxed, and his face might have been that of any tired old man as he sighed. “Very well, very well. No shame.”

“Thank you so much,” my wife said, and made to touch, but did not quite touch, the limp hand that had curled defensively against the breast of his coat.

Knees bent, he stood apparently immobilized on the landing before the door of his room. Yet, as we went down the stairs, he did one more gratuitous thing; he came to the banister, lifted his hand, and pronounced, as we quickened our steps to dodge his words, “God bless. God bless.”