

December 1, 1986 (vol. 2, no. 9)

Dear Colleague:

On an elevated train, you look at the tenement houses and through an illuminated window you catch a glimpse of a woman laying the table for dinner. The glimpse is fascinating. But why should it be so? Wittgenstein writes: "Nothing could be more remarkable than seeing a man who thinks he is unobserved performing some quite simple everyday activity. We see a man alone in a room, walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, sitting down, etc...[Watching this] is like watching a chapter of biography with our own eyes. We should be observing something more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange to be acted or spoken on the stage: life itself. But then we do see this every day without its making the slightest impression on us! True enough, but we do not see it from that point of view" (Culture and Value, p. 4).

John Updike makes the same observation in his latest novel Roger's Version. Through a window, Roger catches a glimpse of his wife, "moving with a preoccupied slouch, holding a tilting glass of what looks like blood or burgundy, from the living room across the hall to the dining room." He says: "Secret glimpses, even as innocuous as this, of life proceeding unaware of my watching have always excited me. Of the days of my ministry I remember keenly the lit windows of my unsuspecting parishioners as I stealthily approached up their front walks for an unannounced call, pouncing upon them in their evening disarray with the demands of the Absolute."

Roger and his wife are no longer in love. In fact, they have grown quite indifferent to each other. They chat listlessly. The wife looks out of the living room window and says, "Why don't I what? I was spying on the Kriegmans, envying them their happiness." Roger replies: "That's the way we look to them, too. Don't worry about it. All families look great through windows."

The most ordinary activities look great, provided we see them "from that point of view." Is it because from that point of view we realize that God Himself is the playwright and that human happiness consists mostly of moving across the room with a drink in hand, or washing the dishes with warm soap suds creeping up our arms?

Best wishes,

*John*