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In Memoriam John Updike (1932-2009): That 'Pennsylvania thing'

Sylvie Mathé

- 1 When all is said and done, Updike's most memorable legacy appears to be his homage to Pennsylvania, the "Pennsylvania thing"¹ that was the formative ground of his artistic career and that, like Proust's Illiers, which became the immortal Combray of fiction, remained throughout his lifetime the alpha and omega of his universe.
- 2 Born, as he wrote, blessed among the blessed at the center of "the best, the least eccentric" state of the union, nurtured by "that misted too-rich Pennsylvania air" ("Dogwood Tree", 151), Updike remained faithful to his roots long after his departure for New England. In fact, ironically, what was to have been his escape to freedom, the liberating flight from his roots, increasingly turned into a backward longing as his home state revealed itself to be a lifetime source of inspiration for the writer. In story after story, and increasingly so in his later years, Updike turned back to Pennsylvania, like so many of his characters, young and old, "always coming back" ("The Persistence of Desire", *Pigeon Feathers*, 14), hastening back from England, New York or New England, "as if the heart of America might give out before he reached it" ("Home", *Pigeon Feathers*, 158). The curve of his outward trajectory thus ended up boomeranging upon itself, the flight out reverting into the flight back.

Pennsylvania as Midpoint

- 3 From the *Olinger Stories* collection to the auto-fictional settings and situations of the family trilogy *The Poorhouse Fair*, *The Centaur* and *Of the Farm*—what he called his "memorial gesture" (*Conversations*, 47)—, as well as the later novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies* and short story collections *The Afterlife* and *My Father's Tears*, Updike has indeed kept exploring the layers of his geographical, personal and family past.

- 4 The names are familiar, of course, and they have become mythical: Shillington, Reading, Plowville, the first circles within the wider circle of Pennsylvania, “keystone state”, home of republican (if also Democratic) virtues. Deep into the first circle, we reach the heart of the heart of the country for Updike, an “enchanted” world, as he put it in the Foreword to *Olinger Stories*, a place both real and mythical, “hang[ing] between its shallow hills enchanted, nowhere, anywhere; there is no place like it” (viii). In *The Centaur*, as a farewell gesture, the artist turned Olinger into Olympus, home of Greek deities—even if he himself, like Chiron, renounced the privilege of living forever among the gods and goddesses by removing himself from this celestial playground. Still, what more affectionate homage could Updike give his native place than to see it through a glass brightly, as the stage of a golden age regained?
- 5 If *The Centaur*—“a patch of Pennsylvania in 1947” (293)—is the novel that formalizes most highly, through its use of the mythical mode, this transfiguration of the daily into the sacred, Updike’s fiction is constellated with moments in which the world of the past becomes tinted with an aura of sacredness, like a stained-glass window vision, “a fabulous rural world” where the grass is “impossibly green” (*Of the Farm*, 18). Thus many early stories, such as “Home”, “In Football Season” or “The Persistence of Desire”, hark back to the seasons of the past and their precious kernel of truth. In “The Persistence of Desire”, the character Clyde Behn, who is back in his hometown and has just run into his high school sweetheart, walks out of the optometrist’s office with his pupils dilated by eye-drops to experience one of those moments of fusion with life’s essence in which past and present are blissfully merged. Mixing memory and desire, the story exudes a kind of melancholy wistfulness, best captured when, to his ex-girlfriend’s question “Aren’t you happy?”, Clyde answers “Happiness isn’t everything” (*Pigeon Feathers*, 23)—a recognition that, deeper than present happiness, there subsist layers of meaning in the past that capture life in its essence and truth.
- 6 What “The Persistence of Desire” enacts in fictional form is the same conviction that animates the later autobiographical essay “A Soft Spring Night in Shillington”, namely that where history and geography meet, the sense of life becomes heightened. This is how Updike describes the cosmic thrill he experienced when walking, some forty years later, along the streets of Shillington:
- I loved Shillington not as one loves Capri or New York, because they are special, but as one loves one’s body and consciousness, because they are synonymous with being. It was exciting for me to be in Shillington, as if my life, like the expanding universe, when projected backwards gained heat and intensity. If there was a meaning to existence, I was closest to it here. (*Self-Consciousness*, 30)
- 7 Back at the center of the first circle, the “midpoint” of Updike’s subjective geography, the mystery of existence—“*Dasein*”—finds its incarnation: “Why me? [...] “Why here?” (*Self-Consciousness*, 6). The writer repeatedly guides us towards the answer to this riddle, which is to be found on Philadelphia Avenue, in a *then and there* that, interestingly, transcends the personal to reach a collective dimension.
- 8 In his two autobiographical pieces—the 1962 memoir “The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood” and the 1989 essay “A Soft Spring Night in Shillington”—, what runs like a red thread is the common streak of community or communality. Though Updike has been accused by David Foster Wallace, in the notorious *New York Observer* article “Twilight of the Phallocrats”, of being “guilty of radical self-absorption and uncritical celebration of this self-absorption” (1), Updike’s “First-Person Singular” in these autobiographical pieces is

nevertheless akin to a “First-Person Plural”², stamped by its particulars and speaking for its time and place. The writer, it seems, goes in search not only of his personal but his collective identity, making of his childhood “a boyhood”³, giving voice to a self made of other selves, an individual but also a collective self. His reminiscences, written “in a mode of impersonal egoism” (Foreword, xi), become a memorializing, his “I” becomes a “we”. Far from being fiercely narcissistic, his “I” is generously inclusive, a sort of ‘community I’ speaking for his peers, his classmates, his generation, even the whole of mankind:

[T]hese elements of an autobiography [...] record what seems to me important about my own life, and try to treat this life, this massive datum which happens to be mine, as a specimen life, representative in its odd uniqueness of all the oddly unique lives in this world. (Foreword, xi)

Pennsylvania as middleness and goodness

- 9 The second feature of that “Pennsylvania thing” dear to Updike’s heart is what, in many ways, constitutes for him the very essence of Pennsylvania, namely its “middleness”, a word which comes to bear much more than a spatial or geographical meaning. In Updike’s world, Pennsylvania’s middleness partakes of metaphysics, what he calls “the metaphysical essence of Pennsylvania-ness” (*Picked-Up Pieces*, 511), and he makes it his vocation precisely “to transcribe middleness with all its grits, bumps, and anonymities, in its fullness of satisfaction and mystery”. Wondering if it is possible or even worth doing, “in view of the suffering that violently colors the periphery and that at all moments threatens to move into the center”, his answer is: “Possibly not; but the horse-chestnut trees, the telephone poles, the porches, the green hedges recede to a calm point that in my subjective geography is still the center of the world” (“Dogwood Tree”, 186).
- 10 Such a profession of faith touches on the religious, not so much because art is elevated into a religion as because art becomes a means to unveil what is sacred in the universe. From this middleness, the whole can be reached. The writer’s subject, his given, Pennsylvania, becomes the synecdoche of America, his own field to explore: “Shillington and Pennsylvania and the whole mass of middling, hidden, troubled America” (*Self-Consciousness*, 103). Indeed, with a few exceptions—the fictional “outsourcing” of some foreign settings like *Brazil* or *The Coup*, or of remote temporalities in the past or future like *Gertrude and Claudius* or *Toward the End of Time*—, Updike’s privileged subject has consciously and avowedly remained “the American Protestant small-town middle-class” (*Conversations*, 11) which makes up his “elegiac concern” (“View from the Catacombs”, 74). And this “elegiac concern” is never better served than in Pennsylvania, as witness Updike’s Great American Novel, *Rabbit Angstrom*. The Rabbit saga offers a kind of hypothetical, fictional exploration of what he, John Updike, might have become, had he stayed in Pennsylvania and not gone to Harvard. The Rabbit characters, says Updike, “are built on my earliest impressions of life. Their blood is my blood. [...] And their world, Diamond County—it was and is, my world too” (“Going Home Again”). By joining the pantheon of American (non-)heroes, Rabbit, the author’s soul brother and twin of sorts, never judgmentally censored but always gently accompanied in his trials and tribulations, has given middleness its due of immortality—Rabbit as “King of the Ghosts” and the “light on [his] fur” (Wallace Stevens).⁴
- 11 Along with this predilection for middle America goes Updike’s main preoccupation throughout his fiction, namely an ethical interrogation on goodness and the good life:

indeed, his essential concerns have to do with the questions “ ‘What is a good man?’ or ‘What is goodness?’” (*Conversations*,50). The novel *The Centaur*, his testament to his father’s abnegation and self-sacrifice, explores this question in a playful yet moving manner, to conclude that “Only goodness lives, but it does live” (297). In keeping with the Aristotelian conception of literature as the pursuit of the good life, this exploration of goodness has been to Updike the very crux of his literary vocation.⁵ Again, the locus of the “goodness” that he searches for appears to be profoundly related to his Pennsylvania experience. In the short story “The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother’s Thimble, and Fanning Island”, the semi-autobiographical character, David Kern, returning to his home state, is typically struck on Pennsylvania soil with “that old sense, of Pennsylvania knowingness—of knowing, that is, that the truth is good” (266):

The hour of countryside I saw from the Pennsylvania Turnpike looked enchanted. [...] I do not know what it is that is so welcome to me in the Pennsylvania landscape, but it is the same quality—perhaps of reposing in the certainty that the truth is good—that is in Pennsylvania faces. It seemed to me for this sunset hour that the world is our bride, given to us to love. [...]. (*Pigeon Feathers*,277)

- 12 More than any other settings, Pennsylvania seems indissolubly linked with Updike’s ethical concerns. His literary renderings of his home state are those in which the ethical reflection on how best to live, the questions of life and death, and mostly the place of love at the center of life irradiate from practically every page.
- 13 Thus the poignantly elegiac ring of the last volume of the Rabbit series comes not only from the ever pressing intimations of death that keep assailing the character but from the moments of pure grace when is achieved a kind of transcendence of time: in the opening pages of Part 2, entitled “PA”, following his angioplasty, Rabbit drives through “a white tunnel” of Bradford pear trees in full bloom on a street in Brewer⁶ (187) and feels as though he has blundered upon a piece of Paradise. Later he tells his daughter Annabelle, “ ‘Tell your mother [...] that maybe we’ll meet some other time,’ thinking ‘Under the pear trees, in paradise’” (293). And when he evokes this heavenly vision with his wife Janice, her indifferent answer nevertheless points to the deep truth, that having been so close to death on the hospital table, he now *sees* differently: “You’ve seen, it’s just you see differently now” (188). As death catches up with him, Rabbit becomes haunted by the “something tragic in matter itself, that keeps watch no matter how great our misery” (332), a passage that reads as a direct echo of “The Dogwood Tree” when the writer evoked the “quiet but tireless goodness that things at rest, like a brick wall or a small stone, seem to affirm” (186). The sense of reassurance has become a tragic sense in *Rabbit at Rest*, which is perhaps an index of the writer’s evolution over this period of thirty years. Nevertheless the goodness of things in repose remains. Thus, from the dogwood tree of his boyhood to the Bradford pear trees of his late middle age, Updike reaffirms the goodness of life that Pennsylvania has ever meant for him.

The curve of a lifetime

- 14 Updike’s late stories and poems hark back to the early stories, stories of boyhood and teenage in Pennsylvania, with their recurring personae. The stories collected in *My Father’s Tears*, in particular, with their high school reunion settings and meetings with old friends—“The Walk with Elizanne” and “The Road Home” both return the persona of David Kern to his Olinger/Alton past—, give out a strange Proustian flavor associated with

the final volume of *Remembrance of Things Past, Time Regained*, and its famous *dîner de têtes* at the Guermentes' when the narrator, Marcel, is suddenly confronted with the aging, aged and ageless characters of his youth, as though perched on the stilts of time, "Proust's dizzying stilts of time" (*Self-Consciousness*, 27). These stories often foreground missed opportunities, long forgotten memories that suddenly re-surface from the depths of oblivion where they lay buried for so long. In the final story, "The Full Glass", the narrator tries to recapture the long-gone moments of "that full-glass feeling" he experienced in his youth (281). In "The Walk with Elizanne", the protagonist ponders the mystery of lost time: "*Elizanne, he wanted to ask her, what does it mean, this enormity of our having been children and now being old, living next door to death?*" (53, italics in text).

- 15 In these late stories, stories which have become his pathway unto death, Updike thus revisits the familiar characters and locales of his early stories, those he once described as his "ticket to immortality", which turned out to be also the tickets to immortality of those he loved and whose life he shared. In a 1968 conversation with Charles T. Samuels, Updike evokes in a memorable phrase "the irremediable grief in just living, in just going on" (*Conversations*, 28). It is this irremediable grief that causes his father's tears in the eponymous story, recalling that the son's departure is indeed a 'small death':

But my father did foresee, the glitter in his eyes told me, that time consumes us—that the boy I had been was dying if not already dead, and we would have less and less to do with each other. My life had come out of his, and now I was stealing away with it. (195)

- 16 In the same interview, the writer declares that "[i]n time as well as space we leave people as if by volition and thereby incur guilt and thereby owe them, the dead, the forsaken, at least the homage of rendering them" (*id.*). Which is of course what he does in much of his Pennsylvania fiction, most gloriously perhaps in "My Grandmother's Thimble" when, accidentally coming upon his grandmother's thimble—her wedding gift to him and his bride—, Updike's narrator-persona experiences

the valves of time part[ing], and after an interval of years my grandmother was upon me again, and it seemed incumbent upon me, necessary and holy, to tell how once there had been a woman who now was no more, how she had been born and lived in a world that had ceased to exist, though its mementos were all about us. [...] O Lord, bless these poor paragraphs, that would do in their vile ignorance Your work of resurrection. (*Pigeon Feathers*, 229)

- 17 These "poor paragraphs" in which he is "giving his past a dance" (236) take on the features of a redeeming act, a kind of memorial ceremony to make up *post-mortem* for what in his youth he was not able to provide: "I lived with her and she loved me and I did not understand her, I did not care to. She is gone now because we deserted her" (242). Such is also the case in the mythical rendering of *The Centaur* or the elegiac swan song to his mother, "The Sandstone Farmhouse", a story which takes us back to the *ur*-characters and subjects of his life and writing, ending on Joey Robinson's final guilty recognition that "[h]e had always wanted to be where the action was and what action there was, it turned out, had been back there" (*The Afterlife*, 135). We are here close to what is undoubtedly the touchstone of Updike's fiction, something which resembles what Roland Barthes, in his 1978 Collège de France lecture entitled "Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure", expressed as his wish for the content of his novel to come: "to speak those I love", to "bear witness that they have not lived (and very often suffered) 'for nothing' [...]". Such is the "mission" assigned by Barthes to fiction as, in the late phase of his life, he was shedding off the critic's garments and converting himself to the novel.

- 18 In an essay for the *New Yorker* on the subject of “Late Works”, Updike, who for some time had been warning us that he was “tidying his desk” and “packing his bag”, writes: “Yet, at least for this aging reader, works written late in a writer’s life retain a fascination. They exist, as do last words, where life edges into death, and perhaps have something uncanny to tell us” (*Due Considerations*, 50). Those last words, in all their fascination, are for us, in an uncanny echo to the *Midpoint* of his prime, those of the *Endpoint* sequence of poems posthumously published in the *New Yorker* as an homage to the writer, most notably the last ones, beginning with “Hospital 11/23-27/08”. Like Gabriel in Joyce’s short story “The Dead” becoming aware of the shades all around him, Updike recalls figures from the dead —“I think of those I love and saw to die” (23)—, saluting them and giving them their due as he himself gets closer to the world of shades. Thus in the poem “Peggy Lutz, Fred Muth 12/13/08”, the writer recalls two of his former classmates:

They’ve been in my fiction; both now dead [...]
 Dear friends of childhood, classmates, thank you [...]
 To think of you brings tears less caustic
 than those the thought of death brings. Perhaps
 we meet our heaven at the start and not
 the end of life. Even then were tears
 and fear and struggle, but the town itself
 draped in plain glory the passing days.

- 19 And, like in the story “The Walk with Elizanne”, he puzzles over the mystery and wonder crystallized by these sacred fragments of the past:

I’ve written these before, these modest facts,
 but their meaning has no bottom in my mind.
 The fragments in their jiggled scope collide
 to form more sacred windows. (26)

- 20 At the time of the writing of the poem, Updike was soon to join Peggy Lutz and Fred Muth, forever enshrined in the sacred windows of art.

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NOTES

1. "I was full of a Pennsylvania thing that I wanted to say" (*Conversations with John Updike*, 25).
2. Clearly, though, not the first-person plural of the *New Yorker* "Talk of the Town" pieces.
3. "The difference between a childhood and a boyhood must be this: our childhood is what we alone have had; our boyhood is what any boy in our environment would have had" ("Dogwood Tree", 165).
4. The second epigraph to *Rabbit is Rich* is an excerpt from Wallace Stevens's poem "A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts".
5. Reflecting on the famous *madeleine* episode in *Remembrance of Things Past*, Updike celebrates the rare quality of goodness that Proust's prose exudes:
Everyone knows of the madeleine from whose long-forgotten taste the whole of Combray sprang into renewed being; the paragraph [...] gives us the tea direct, as it was fed by Aunt Léonie to little 'Marcel.' Hemingway would have rendered this action in twenty words; Balzac, in a hundred and made us feel the chemist's shop, and hear the ring of francs on the counter. Proust's tendrilous sentences seek out an essence so fine the search itself is an act of faith. [...] In the interminable rain of his prose, I felt goodness. ("Remembrance of Things Past Remembered", *Picked-Up Pieces*, 163)
6. Brewer is the fictional transposition of Reading, Pa.

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