

THE NORTH AMERICAN CITYSCAPE IN JOHN UPDIKE'S «RABBIT» NOVELS, *COUPLES* AND «THE SCARLET LETTER» TRILOGY

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We would not err in choosing John Updike if we had to pick a name among those American writers who have devoted their life and artistic efforts to make a realistic painting of the contemporary North American society. For almost four decades John Updike has been giving both political flavor and social frame to the Everyman of the United States. He has never ceased to exhibit in his literary works an essential concern for the human inner struggle between matter and spirit: sexual and religious controversies, social demands, individual search for meaning—all derive from this endless and unsolvable struggle under which, in one way or another, middle-class American citizens bear their existence. Thus, in Updike's books, there is a permanent attention to the relationship within the married couple, between parents and sons, the individual and the community, and, ultimately, between the individual and the universe.

Updike has managed to preserve the traditional narrative mode writing, since 1958 up to date, both short stories and novels which are representative of the American literary social realism. However, Updike's distinctive use of symbolism and his particular tendency to conceal «the riddle lurking behind phenomena» (*Picked-Up Pieces* 156) under the mask of triviality, allows his prose to acquire a very personal imprint. His characters' names, the setting where apparently trifling events take place, and imagery in general, are highly significant elements in Updike's narrations. The memorable Harry Angstrom, for example, main character of the celebrated «Rabbit» tetralogy, unmistakably echoes the meaning of both his name and nickname: a harried rabbit, full of angst, as small as the unit of wavelength that his last name evokes, which is, at the same time, representative measure of the average middle-class American. The setting

functions in these four novels as a unique emblem of wasteland, the scenery where its characters are condemned to live in perpetual sterility. Regarding imagery, the «Rabbit» novels invite the reader to a symbolic interpretation of some basketball and golf basics, furniture and ornaments of houses, natural elements like the sun, the moon or the sky, and a wide range of commonplace objects. Similarly, the rest of Updike's narratives follow this very pattern, from the early stories and novels to the recently published collection *The Afterlife and Other Stories*.

It is worth studying the way in which the setting *affects* and *infects* both the plot and the message in any of Updike's narrative compositions. The United States is the land that Updike usually prefers for his characters to move and suffer from spiritual trouble—the few exceptions being effective devices for this country to mirror itself in contrast to Old Europe, the distant Eastern countries, or the famished and nearly untouched Africa. Thus, *Bech: A Book* (1970), *Bech Is Back* (1975) and *The Coup* (1978) exemplify the out-of-the-rule literary and ideological purposes in Updike's career. Yet, there is another remarkable exception in Updike's usual choice for setting, this one geographically closer to the United States: the novel *Brazil* (1994). South America—specifically the Brazilian cities and forests—is taken in this novel as a land where the magic and preternatural is entirely credible.

With regards to the particular regions of his home country, Updike most frequently locates his fictional world in places where he has actually lived, such as New England—either the suburb or the big city—and the idiosyncratic Pennsylvania small town.¹ It is this national ground that allows Updike to faithfully create realistic human types and events. As a matter of fact, this Pennsylvania-born writer admits how necessary it is to experience the original soil so that the fictional setting acquires full meaning and realism: «...in a fictional universe there is no borrowed gravity; unless an author is writing for his life, images become mere 'effects' and fly into space» (*Picked-Up Pieces* 245).

For our study of Updike's particular use of setting, we will focus on his «Rabbit» tetralogy and four other novels, *Couples*, *A Month of Sundays*, *Roger's Version*, and *S.*; in each of these, the specific physical setting corresponds to a symbolic sense of place and human condition. The different cities and towns that give taste and color to these novels are representative of Updike's social criticism and artistic urge to accurately depict the «domestic fierceness within the middle class, sex and death as riddles for the

1. Pennsylvania is a recurrent location in Updike's works. The «Rabbit» novels (1960, 1971, 1981, 1990) take place in the fictitious setting of Brewer and Mt. Judge, which closely resemble Updike's native Shillington area. Fictitious as well is the town of Olinger, where most of his short stories are set; *The Centaur* (1963) and *Of the Farm* (1965) remain in this area too. New York and Boston suburbs give shelter to *Couples* (1968) and *Marry Me* (1976). The protagonists of *A Month of Sundays* (1975) and *S.* (1988) live in other comfortable suburban New England sites from which they exile temporarily. *Roger's Version* (1986) takes place in the city of Boston, and *Memories of the Ford Administration* (1992) in urban New Hampshire.

thinking animal, social existence as sacrifice, unexpected pleasures and rewards, corruption as a kind of evolution» (*Picked-Up Pieces* 496-97).

The tetralogy made up by *Rabbit, Run, Rabbit Redux, Rabbit Is Rich* and *Rabbit at Rest* renders an account of the American urban life in Updike's «own muddled, middly sense of the metaphysical essence of Pennsylvania-ness» (*Picked-Up Pieces* 491). Harry Angstrom feels suffocated in his home town, trapped in «that flowerpot city» (27). Brewer is described in *Rabbit, Run* as a neon-lit, wood and brick city whose beautiful natural landscape has been sacrificed to the needs of civilization. Very little remains from the half-wild and naturally pleasant town that Rabbit's memories display here and there throughout the novel; the carefully urbanized Brewer is presently for him «the mother of a hundred thousand, shelter of love, ingenious and luminous artifact» (108). The idea of artificiality and spatial constraint is frequently applied to the city in all four novels, in progress with the different decades —60's, 70's, 80's and 90's— that the tetralogy covers. The disturbing haze and the unnatural red and pink in the cityscape, for instance, color the negative appraisal of the place; still, Rabbit can perceive a certain purity in the clouds over the city:

The city stretches from dollhouse rows at the base of the park through a broad blurred belly of flowerpot red patched with tar roofs and twinkling cars and ends as a rose tint in the mist that hangs above the distant river. Gas tanks glimmer in this smoke. Suburbs lie like scarves in it. (107-08)

From the edge of the parking lot, Brewer is spread out like a carpet, its flowerpot red going dusty. Some lights are already turned on. The great neon sunflower at the center of the city looks small as a daisy. Now the low clouds are pink but up above, high in the dome, tails of cirrus still hang pale and pure. (277)

While in *Rabbit Redux* and *Rabbit Is Rich* Angstrom stays in Brewer, willingly submitting to the American capitalist system, in the first and last novels he flees Brewer in the hope of finding a natural place where he can free himself from the tight familial and social duties. In *Rabbit, Run*, Harry's exhilarating abstract image of the south—an Edenic and healthy land—substitutes the stifling cities like Brewer and Philadelphia:

He is being drawn to Philadelphia. He hates Philadelphia. Dirtiest city in the world, they live in poisoned water, you can taste the chemicals. He wants to go south, down, down the map into orange groves and smoking rivers and barefoot women. . . . Wake up with the stars above perfectly spaced in perfect health. But he is going east, the worst direction, into unhealth, soot, and stink, a smothering hole where you can't move without killing somebody. (28-29)

In *Rabbit at Rest*, this suggestive south takes shape in the Florida coast—the fictitious Deleon, where the wealthy Angstroms own a summer resort apartment. Harry's

new flight from Brewer in search of a free space (435-64) is closely described after the one we witnessed in *Rabbit, Run* (27-40), as if in a symbolic manner he were returning to his uncivilized instincts, giving up both family and society—even though he has lost his compulsive sexual appetite on the way. The impossible adaptation to the hostile environment will finally end for Rabbit in physical death. From the lonely walks that Rabbit takes around Deleon we learn about the melancholy state of his spirit, for old Rabbit is constantly evoking the golden time when America was an inhabitable place—life was simpler then, and one could still be in direct contact with nature:

It reminds Harry of ... the town of his childhood, Mt. Judge in the days of Depression and distant war, when people still sat on their front porches, and there were vacant lots and odd-shaped cornfields, and men back from work in the factories would water their lawns in the evenings, and people not long off the farm kept chickens in back-yard pens, and peddled the eggs for odd pennies... he hasn't heard that sound for forty years, and hasn't until now realized what he's been missing. (477-78)

In the contemplation of the urbanized cityscape, Harry reflects upon the nation's spiritual decay: «We're getting soft. A nation of couch potatoes» (485). The encounter with the kids playing basketball in a street alley (486-89) is also parallel to the one described in the first pages of *Rabbit, Run* (9-12); this time, however, the scene takes place in a black district, where Harry has never been but which he finds familiar. It seems as if only in marginal districts of the artificial American cities it is possible to find authentic life:

But it is the widespread black section that draws him back, he doesn't quite know why, whether because he is exerting his national right to go where he pleases or because this ignored part of Deleon is in some way familiar, he's been there before, before his life got too soft. (486)

Tarbox (Massachusetts), the New England fictitious suburban community in which *Couples* is set, a *tar-box*, perfectly pictures the Cities of the Plain—Sodom and Gomorrah—which, according to the Book of Genesis, were exterminated by divine fire. Even the Congregational Church which the ten WASP middle-class couples attend in their own religious worship to sex, gets burned at the end of the novel. In this «post-pill paradise» (52), the rooster weathercock atop the church works as a sexual symbol, fallen to the ground after the fire and thus, ironically losing its dominance over the city. «Children in the town grew up with the sense that the bird was God. That is, if God were physically present in Tarbox, it was in the form of this unreachable

weathercock, visible from everywhere» (17): here God has been substituted by sex, «sex as the emergent religion, as the only thing left» (*Picked-Up Pieces* 486).²

In *Couples* realism is better achieved indoors; Updike himself admits that it «was originally titled *Couples and Houses and Days* and was all about our entry in other people's homes, as guests and lovers, and ultimately about one couple's escape from the 'low-ceilinged colonial room . . . » (*Odd Jobs* 49). The explicit sexual scenes and the dialogues among the characters give meaning to the allegorical nature of the city. The streets in Tarbox are named after the theological virtues—Hope Street, Charity Street, and Divinity Street, which represents Faith and stands right in the middle of the other two. Each male character is, according to his condition, appropriately placed in those streets:

Now Freddy Thorne, the would-be-priest of the new religion, has his office on Divinity Street. Hanema and Gallagher have set up theirs on Hope Street. When Piet hears on the telephone the news of Foxy's being pregnant by him he looks across to Charity Street. It «seemed a sacred space, where one could build and run and choose, from which he was estranged.» (Hamilton 234)

The protagonist adulterous couple, Piet Hanema and Foxy, like a new Adam and Eve, leave the presumed paradise of Tarbox in search of a different life. Moreover, in the same mythic line, «Piet is not only Hanema/anima/Life, he is Lot, the man with two virgin daughters, who flees Sodom, and leaves his wife behind» (*Picked-Up Pieces* 482). Piet himself eventually understands his abandonment of the city: «They had been let into God's playroom, and been happy together on the floor all afternoon, but the time had come to return the toys to their boxes, and put the chairs back against the wall» (323).

A Month of Sundays, S., and *Roger's Version* have been recognized by the critics as an intertextual literary work which revives Hawthorne's Arthur Dimmesdale, Roger Chillinworth and Hester Prynne. This «*Scarlet Letter* trilogy» focuses on three human cases of spiritual breakdown; Thomas Marshfield, Roger Lambert and Sara Worth are New England residents who, in one way or another, are detached from the city life-style.

The skeptic and freethinking Lambert, in *Roger's Version*, is a professor at Harvard and lives in a wealthy Boston district; through his eyes we are introduced to the immense wasteland that human technology has produced in Boston. The urban panorama which Lambert dominates from the skyview restaurant is reminiscent of the one pictured by Harry Angstrom from the top of Mount Judge in *Rabbit, Run*. In both, nature-devouring civilization is denounced:

2. «...no other novel presents mid-twentieth-century American suburban sexuality, its practice and its consequences, so effectively» (Uphaus 55).

...neighborhoods too far out from the central city to be yet thus gentrified diminished in smoky tones of rose and gray and green toward a white smear of gas tanks, beside the rust of a high-arching iron railroad bridge. Like outsize tree stumps, the cluster of a large housing complex stuck up from the denuded hills that marked, on maps, the limits of the city; but in fact the city went on and on, following the expressway and the shoreline south, sucking village and farmland into its orbit until you could say it ended only where the far suburban edge of the next coastal city began. (341)

Like Angstrom too, Lambert is attracted by the shabby and poor areas—where he meets his niece Verna for sexual encounters (60-62) and mentally complains about the dehumanized world in which he lives, a world that he psychologically projects into the city. Therefore, Lambert's descriptions of Boston are usually tinged with the idea of death, dirt and sickness: «Our city, ...is two cities, or more—an urban mass or congeries divided by the river whose dirty waters disembody into the harbor . . .» (52-53); «The city has many hospitals, all of them expanding, commandeering block after block of their surrounding neighborhoods, as if the healing art itself become a cancer» (284); «Our old city from above is predominantly red, and the view is shocking, a vast surgery or flaying» (337); «Above all, higher than we usually see it, the serene kiss-off of the horizon, flat as the oscillograph of brain dead» (340). The characteristic sound of the city does not turn out to be that of children kicking up a row or birds singing; instead, one persistent *voice* is heard: «There arose to us at this altitude, through the thick glass, the anesthetized city's only voice, the urgent hiccup of a police siren» (344).

Likewise, he seems to have lost the vocational passion for his job at the university, so through the campus visual image he exhibits both his prestige and success in an extremely pessimistic—yet ironical—manner: «The university, which loomed so large in my mind and life, almost vanished in the overview of this part of the metropolis; . . . There, in that dim patch of scum on the hazy pond, I had my life; up here I had fought for that life, successfully» (347-48). «The city spread so wide and multiform around and beneath us: it was more than the mind could encompass, it overbrimmed the eye; but was it all? Was it enough? It did not appear to be» (348).

In the diary-shaped novel *A Month of Sundays* the story is presented from the viewpoint of the adulterous Christian minister Reverend Marshfield. Due to his immoral and scandalous behavior, he has been exiled for a month in an Arizona desert motel under his bishop's recommendation, temporally abdicating the ministerial labor in the Massachusetts area. The novel's action runs through the Reverend's written discourse, so the allusion to New England is found only in his memories, and the Arizona desert works as a symbolic setting—a place which is far enough from Marshfield's social environment as to allow him to meditate about his blatantly sinful actions. Marshfield is detached from the typical American life, which even for a God's minister turns out to be as comfortable and seductive as to lead him to the capital sin of lust.

The desert, an austere and sexually aseptic place according to the biblical tradition, is in *A Month of Sundays* the only place in Updike's spiritless America where one can be partially free of the luxury and tempting society in which we are thrown to live. In contrast to the city, the desert is the place where one can ponder and understand human drives. The thirty-one-day experience in the Arizona desert does not successfully withdraw Marshfield from real life temptations, since the very possibility to succumb to sin is inherent to human nature; rather, the desert is the place where one can ponder and understand human drives. Therefore, through the minister's mental rebuilding of his past sexual intercourses, as well as through his onanist practices, we are led to conclude that humanity lies precisely in the acceptance of the individual's constant inner clash between flesh and spirit. That Marshfield feels sexually attracted by the motel keeper, Ms. Prynne, is for him just a proof of the unavoidable human fate of loving and giving ourselves to others. Having rebelled at first against any change in his conceptions («Though the yielding is mine, the temptation belongs to others» 7), Marshfield eventually learns that it is in authentic, spiritual love—rather than in mere bodily satisfaction—that a person finds meaning and sense in life. Still loyal to the biblical tradition, Updike is giving here the desert a quality of purifying, redeeming and illuminating space. The desert, in the beginning a godforsaken spot, becomes the Palm of God's Hand. There Marshfield finds solace and self-understanding:

We all know the name Death Valley. How many of us have heard of *La Palma de la Mano de Dios*? So the Spaniards called the harshest basin of the American desert as they knew it. The Palm of God's Hand. Are we not all here, in the Palm of God's Hand? (194)

Very much like Thomas Marshfield, the protagonist of the novel *S.*, Sarah Worth, lives a temporary exile from her New England hometown. The difference, however, is that Sarah wills to start a new life joining the community founded in the Arizona desert by Arhat, a Hindu religious leader. Pinning her faith on the idea of spiritual rebirth, Sarah abandons her comfortable, male-dependent, and unsatisfactory existence. The novel is a transcription of recorded tapes and letters that Sarah sends to her friends and family. Her personal view of the deserts and desolate place, which she finds beautiful, reveals her elation and happiness:

This *had* to be the place I was meant to bring my life to. My poor bedraggled silly life, to be recycled. . . . all that gentle gray-green desert and then this unexpected valley with slanting walls of tumbled orange rock in their weird, soft-looking shapes the wind has carved, and this mild blue washed-out Western sky over everything like the face of Brahma. Inside I just felt this glorious *relief*. (38)

Sarah's former *silly* life as a matron, wife and mother in the «terrible conditions of incarceration» (176) of suburban Massachusetts, is substituted by an idle and peaceful contemplation. Although the new community, the Ashram, is set on a desert and its lodgings are «a rather higgledy-piggledy arrangement of trailers with doors and walls cut through and welded back together» (76), there is a disco and a mall. Moreover, in one of the letters, we realize that the community does ironically resemble any average American city:

...let us declare it a city. We propose the lovely name of Varunaville, in honor of Varuna, the heavenly encompasse... We will govern ourselves nicely, posting speed limits and rout signs and all that. Already we have been constrained to create quite a large police force, due not to any derelictions within, but to harassment from without.» (155)

Consequently, in the final section of the novel Sarah feels that the *authentic* self she believed to have discovered through the Ashram teachings does not quite differ from the one she always had. Thus, the «arid, abandoned environment» which they had made «not only habitable but paradisiacal» (155), turns out to be a fraud. According to Schiff, who relates this novel to the America depicted by Hawthorne,

Updike is satirizing the pleasure orientation and lightheartedness of the ashram, in direct contrast to the grim and darkened world of the Puritans. Contemporary America, in Updike's opinion, has become 'soft' and excessively comfortable; this utopian experiment lacks the conviction, commitment, and intensity of the Puritan movement. (108)

The originally utopian community becomes a city not different from those we have considered earlier—typical of Updike's cityscape, so overcrowded as to deny identity to its inhabitants, so artificial as to distort their natural instincts, and so well off as to turn them into lazy, lonely, and comfort-loving creatures. The Arizona desert here becomes a contemporary image of the biblical desert, where the allure of capitalism threatens human awareness of the meaning of life.

In Updike's narratives, as we have seen, the North American cityscape has become a spiritually desertic land, dehumanized and spoiled by the excessive comfort and urbanization. There does not seem to exist a real communication between human beings and nature, between human beings and their neighbors, not even within the human being's own self. It is easy to sense in these novels that the simplest and most elementary joy of living has vanished and there only survives a very human desire of spiritual regeneration. Updike appears to insist that the North American cityscape is a ruthless wasteland for its peoples. As the protagonist of *Couples* puts it: «God doesn't love us anymore. He loves Russia. He loves Uganda. We're fat and full of pimples and always whining more candy. We've fallen from grace» (200).

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