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Perched on “Proust’s Dizzying Stilts of Time”: Updike’s *Self-Consciousness* as Return to the Self, Return to Sources

SYLVIE MATHÉ

As much as he was and is known as an autobiographical writer, Updike was one who tread cautiously around the subject of self-disclosure. Wary of exposing himself without filters, he instead opted for his fictive personas to simultaneously reveal himself while still hiding behind various masks. “[W]hat I create on paper must, and for me does, soar free of whatever the facts were,” he insisted in his interview with Charles T. Samuels: “In other words, I disavow any essential connection between my life and whatever I write” (Samuels 27). Whatever his proffered disavowals and caveats, Descartes’ saying *Larvatus prodeo* (“I advance with a mask” or “I go forward masked”) could be said to be Updike’s motto. When first asked for an interview by *The Paris Review* in 1966, he refused in terms that made clear his aversion to speaking about himself: “Perhaps I have written fiction because everything unambiguously expressed seems somehow crass to me, and when the subject is myself, I want to jeer and weep” (qtd. in Samuels 22).¹ How, then, did he eventually overcome his misgivings about writing his memoirs? The solution, in oblique fashion, was to adopt what he called “a mode of impersonal egoism.” Some twenty years after explicitly declaring his rejection of autobiography, Updike, as a way to forestall the endeavor of a would-be biographer, did eventually venture into this allegedly “crass” terrain with *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* (1989), a book that Richard Eder for the *LA Times* called “an exercise in preemptive

autobiography.” An exercise it is indeed, and Updike’s take on autobiography retains an experimental and singular dimension.²

Self-Consciousness, in short, gathers what the author calls “elements of an autobiography” (xi). Composed of six rather heterogeneous chapters in a mosaic of sorts, the volume plays with different modalities, combining essays, memoirs, a letter, and autobiographical sketches. Beyond the generic variations, however, a single thread runs through these different chapters: that of the return to the self alluded to by the title. The ambiguity of the original title, suggesting both conscious knowledge of one’s self and embarrassment of oneself, is reflected in a composite, hybrid work in which one chapter deals with the author’s psoriasis, another with his stuttering—two cubistic self-portraits in the mirror—and a third with his patriotism and political opinions, in particular his “undovish views” (135) in relation to the Vietnam War. “A Letter to My Grandsons,” addressed to the two dedicatees of the book, retraces the history of the different branches of Updike’s family as a form of epistolary legacy. As for the first and last chapters, they frame this return to the self: the first, “A Soft Spring Night in Shillington,” which probes the mystery of access to consciousness, reads as a search for the meaning of existence on the occasion of Updike’s return to his hometown and his nightly walk through the streets; the last, “On Being a Self Forever,” reflects on the evolution of the self in time, the permanence of being just ahead of the constant extinction of previous, ephemeral selves.

Why did Updike decide to collect these autobiographical fragments in the first place? As he explains in the foreword, having heard that a biography of him was in the making, he was so repelled by the idea that he might be cheated of the treasure of his life, his “lode of ore and heap of memories” (xi), that he decided to consign himself to what he deemed important in his own life.³ The autobiographical design, however, may be seen as another form of coverup, masking an ambition of a more scientific nature, that of treating his life as a specimen, of giving the singularity of his narrative a representative and universal dimension:

[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 unique-ness of all the oddly unique lives in this world. A mode of impersonal egoism was my aim . . . (xi)

Here one might recall David Foster Wallace’s notorious quip about the great male narcissists—namely Roth, Mailer, and Updike—in his review of *Toward the End of Time*, and his more specific attack on Updike’s “radical self-absorption . . . and

uncritical celebration of this self-absorption.” For all the damage that this scathing criticism has done to the writer’s reputation, it can hardly be said to apply to Updike’s memoirs.

Self-Consciousness, being a highly atypical variation on the genre of autobiography, hardly lends itself to the charge of narcissism. If the Narcissus of mythology was in love with his image, *Self-Consciousness* by contrast shows the author less enamored of himself than critical of his faults—his skin affliction, his speech impediment, his political prejudices—so that the book reads at least as much as self-criticism as self-praise. More importantly, the mode of “impersonal egoism” that the writer claims as his aim is what allows him to explore the lode of memory with an attitude that he qualifies as one of “scientific dispassion and curiosity” (xi). If personal identity, the *autos* in autobiography, can refer only to the individual’s differences on a backdrop of community similarities, Updike’s exercise in “impersonal egoism” tends to revert the focus, in an autobiography of the self that in a sense defies its purpose and foils the expectations of the genre. Looking at himself as though from the outside—not so much after Rimbaud’s “Je est un autre” (“I is another” / “I is [an] other”) as almost entomologically or anthropologically—he endows the personal and the unique with a communal dimension in a process that combines egoism and community, individual self and collective identity. This recalls the interesting distinction that he draws in his other openly autobiographical sketch, “The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood” (1962), the one between childhood and boyhood: “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” (65). *Self-Consciousness* reprises this distinction by making the self the central access road to the other and to the universe: “A writer’s self-consciousness is really a mode of interestedness, that inevitably turns outward” (24). The writer’s self-consciousness is thus simultaneously a return to the self and an opening on the world.

“WHY ME? WHY HERE?”

The return to the self in these memoirs becomes the occasion to reprise the two fundamental questions recurrent in Updike’s work: “Why me? Why here?” In the opening essay, “A Soft Spring Night in Shillington,” these questions are phrased in the philosophical terms of Heidegger’s *Dasein* (“being there”) and of course one of the ironies of this opening essay is that the movie that his mother and daughter go to see on that soft spring night in Shillington while he himself wanders the streets is Hal Ashby’s film *Being There* (1979), based on Jerzy Kosinski’s 1970 novel of the

same name. An additional irony is the loss of his luggage, which is turned into the opportunity of reengaging with his self; finding himself, so to speak.

Just as he considers his psoriasis as the mark of his difference—"the horrible badge of whatever in me was worth honoring: the price, high but not impossibly so, I must pay for being me"—Updike's stuttering appears to be the reflection of his deep self, his obscure and complicated identity: "Who I am seems impossibly complicated and unobvious" (75, 82). The mystery of the self that these physiological affections betray remains for Updike irreversibly attached to the mystery of place: "*Dasein*. The first mystery that confronts us is 'Why me?' The next is 'Why here?'" (6). The former interrogation is one he asks in "Midpoint," a playful self-reflexive freeform poem from 1968: "The crucial question was, *Why am I me?*" (4). This question directly echoes another passage from "The Dogwood Tree":

The mystery that more puzzled me as a child was the incarnation of my ego—that omnivorous and somehow preexistent "I"—in a speck so specifically situated amid the billions of history. Why was I I? The arbitrariness of it astounded me; in comparison, nothing was too marvellous. (80)

The same interrogation is conveyed by Rabbit toward the end of *Rabbit, Run*, though not so much in awe as in angst:

Why does anyone live here? Why was he set down here; why is this particular ordinary town for him the center and index of a universe that contains great prairies, mountains, deserts, forests, cities, seas? This childish mystery—the mystery of "any place," prelude to the ultimate, "Why am I me?"—re-ignites panic in his heart. (243)

And "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington" explores this double mystery not under the sign of Pascal or Kierkegaard's angst, but as a form of miracle:

Yet isn't it a miracle, the oddity of consciousness being placed in one body rather than another, in one place and not somewhere else, in one handful of decades rather than in ancient Egypt, or ninth-century Wessex, or Samoa before the missionaries came, or Bulgaria under the Turkish yoke, or the Ob River Valley in the days of the woolly mammoths?⁴ (40)

Why me (John Updike)? Why here (Shillington)? If there are no answers to these metaphysical questions, it remains that the actual experience of Shillington in the '30s and '40s is central to his identity and an essential part of the mystery of self. The place and the self are in osmosis—"a town that was also somewhat my body" (40)—a town loved as such, because inseparable from body and consciousness:

"I loved Shillington not as one loves Capri or New York, because they are special, but as one loves one's own body and consciousness, because they are synonymous with being" (30). Back in Shillington, Updike thus embarks on an existential and metaphysical quest, "walking the sidewalks of Shillington, Pennsylvania, searching for the meaning of my existence" (3). The essence of the self and the meaning of existence are inseparable from the geographical place where that self was formed, where it acquired its identity. So the mode of "impersonal egoism" that he invokes in the foreword finds its embodiment in a form of geographical egoism: Shillington is the center of the world, the center of the universe, the *midpoint* from which everything radiates. Updike, in "The Dogwood Tree," had drawn a sort of map or geometric design of this geography of the self as perceived by his boyhood self:

My geography went like this: in the center of the world lay our neighborhood of Shillington. Around it there was greater Shillington, and around that, Berks County. Around Berks County there was the state of Pennsylvania, the best, the least eccentric, state in the Union. Around Pennsylvania, there was the United States, with a greater weight of people on the right and a greater weight of land on the left. For clear geometrical reasons, not all children could be born, like me, at the center of the nation. But that some children chose to be born in other countries and even continents seemed sad and fantastic. There was only one possible nation: mine. Above this vast, rectangular, slightly (the schoolteachers insisted) curved field of the blessed, there was the sky, and the flag, and, mixed up with both, Roosevelt. (63)

Blessed among the blessed, miraculously placed in the center of the first circle, the child glories in his central position within this circular geometry. The poem "Midpoint" likewise accounts for the centrality of the I as embodied by "the eye/I pun" (95) dear to Emerson and the transcendentalists: "The eye is the first circle . . . Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn" (Emerson 279). From circle to circle, the exterior world springs to consciousness, radiating from a center that substitutes the sense of arbitrariness with subjective necessity: "feeling that our life is a story, with a pattern and a moral and an inevitability. . . . That our subjectivity, in other words, dominates, through secret channels, outer reality, and the universe has a personal structure" (227).

IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME

Perched on "Proust's dizzying stilts of time" (27) as he revisits the familiar spots of the past, Updike experiences in Shillington something which, with gross oversimplification, might be related to Einstein's discovery that space and time

are linked, and relative to one another: “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” (30). So the philosophical questions that punctuate the quest for self in *Self-Consciousness* open not only on a geography of the self but also on a memorial, almost archeological, dive into times past, from which his self arose. “When does the self dawn?” he asks in the final essay, “On Being a Self Forever,” adding, “My own deepest sense of self has to do with Shillington. . . . I become exhilarated in Shillington, as if my self is being given a bath in its own essence. There . . . objects shine unaided, with a light of their own” (220).

This crucial passage, which lays emphasis on the Proustian dimension of Updike’s work, reads like a summation of his Pennsylvania fiction. For Updike, as for Proust, the only real flowers are the flowers of the past.⁵ To go back in time is to reach the living spring. The return to the self that lies at the core of *Self-Consciousness* takes its full meaning in this revival of the past where the self is no longer separated or alienated but instead adheres fully to its own essence. *Self-Consciousness* thus resurrects for Updike the child that he was, who seems more real to him than the adult he has become: the child from Shillington, Pennsylvania, who dreamed of a miraculous future—compared to which the author’s present pales—remains the ultimate reference, the alpha and omega. Place and time are fused to form the locus where the key to the self lies buried.

And so it is that Updike’s fiction gives pride of place to his deciphering of the past and his search for lost time. Shillington becomes Olinger in *The Centaur* and in the material gathered in his most directly autobiographical collection *Olinger Stories*. In this latter volume, the cycle of stories make up a kind of bildungsroman, ending on the author’s adolescent persona leaving for his adult life.⁶ Updike in the foreword to the collection describes the town as “hang[ing] between its shallow hills enchanted, nowhere, anywhere; there is no place like it” (viii)—a mythical place, therefore, as in *The Centaur*, wherein the Arcadian is superimposed on the quotidian, transfiguring the small Pennsylvania town into Olympus and making of the lost realm of childhood the kingdom of gods (or of God). This mythological counterpoint reveals the extent of the author’s nostalgia for the lost paradise of childhood and the inaccessible mystery it embodies. The transmutation of Olinger into Olympus highlights the sacredness of a place where personal history becomes myth. The golden age of childhood thus remains one of the essential themes of Updike’s fiction, one that has inspired him to write some of his most vibrant pages, saturated with nostalgia.

And just as the true essence of the self is to be found in the past, so is the engine of love. Love and nostalgia are two sides of the same coin, as explored in “More Love in the Western World,” Updike’s essay on the legendary character Iseult. Of this iconic prototype of the “inaccessible woman,” Updike writes:

What is it that shines at us from Iseult’s face but our own past, with its strange innocence and its strange need to be redeemed? What is nostalgia but love for that part of ourselves which is in Heaven, forever removed from change and corruption? (170)

Love itself is but a form of nostalgia, that which prompts us to retrieve the memory of our first landscape—“We fall in love . . . with women who remind us of our first landscape,” he writes in “The Bulgarian Poetess” (748).⁷ As for writing, its matrix lies similarly in the lost paradise of childhood and youth:

I really don’t think I’m alone among writers in caring about what they experienced in the first eighteen years of their life. Hemingway cherished the Michigan stories out of proportion, I would think, to their merit. Look at Twain. Look at Joyce. Nothing that happens to us after twenty is as free from self-consciousness because by then we have the vocation to write. (Samuels 28)

The “vocation to write” finds its realization precisely in this motion of self-consciousness, of reflexivity, where the return to the past is primary.

PERMANENCE OF THE SELF: A “YEA-SAYING” TO THE WORLD

Foregrounded by the epiphanies of memory, those moments when past and present are fused in a timeless beatitude, is the transcendence of a deep self beyond the vicissitudes of the present. In “At War with My Skin,” the chapter of *Self-Consciousness* devoted to his psoriasis, Updike evokes the process of desquamation entailed by this dermatological affliction, the dead skins giving birth to a new skin:

And with my changeable epiderm came a certain transcendent optimism; like a snake, I shed many skins: I had emerged relatively spotless from many a summer and holiday, and the possibility of a “new life,” in this world or the next, has been ever present to my mind. (75)

Here, psoriasis becomes the metaphorical image of the molts of life that are a source of renewal and optimism and give way to the possibility of a “new life.”

“On Being a Self Forever,” the final chapter of *Self-Consciousness*, explores this theme of the mortality of ephemeral selves that, like the phoenix, keep being reborn: “Not only are selves conditional but they die. Each day, we wake slightly

altered, and the person we were yesterday is dead.” Updike then reviews the various avatars of his self—“my high-school self,” “my Ipswich self,” etc. (221)—distinguishing between those he finds aggravating, even loathsome, and those that by contrast remain dear to him, “the favorite, pet selves” (223). This catalogue of the avatars of the writer’s self is here less a source of nostalgia than of joy, for the message of these little deaths is that of the permanence of the self: “Why, one could say, be afraid of death, when death comes all the time?” (221)—a message that echoes Whitman’s “Song of Myself.”

Updike thus closes his memoirs on a hymn to the perennial nature of the self and the joy of living in the world by quoting an old friend named Ted—“Life is bliss.’ . . . ‘Ah, to be alive, on a June day, in Ipswich, Massachusetts!’” (247)—as well as the urgency of an Emersonian relationship with the cosmos: “The self’s responsibility, then, is to achieve rapport if not rapture with the giant, cosmic other” (257). This transcendentalist message is a message of joy—*Gratia Dei sum quod sum*⁸—that returns us in the end to Updike’s deeply religious aesthetic, that of wonder before the mystery of being in the world. The mediocrity of the quotidian, the *middleness* from which he writes, is invested with a transcendent quality. It’s in this way that Updike’s work, while centered on the mundane, suggests a form of glory.

However mediocre his subjects, Updike celebrates them in liturgical fashion and thereby sanctifies them. The transfiguration of the daily into the sacred is achieved through the detour of art, “[j]ust as a piece of turf torn from a meadow becomes a *gloria* when drawn by Dürer” (“The Blessed Man of Boston” 101). Updike’s return to the self in *Self-Consciousness* fittingly concludes on an affirmative salute, a “yea-saying to the goodness and joy of life” (*Collected Poems* 272) that has been the core of his artistic and existential credo, one that he will sustain to the very end, as witnessed in his last poem “Fine Point 12/22/08” which closes on a reassertion of this crucial belief even as he lies in bed at the hospital, on the threshold of death:

. . . Surely—magnificent, that “surely”—
goodness and mercy shall follow me all
the days of my life, my life, forever. (29)

NOTES

1. He eventually submitted to an interview with Charles Thomas Samuels in the summer of 1967, and the interview was first published in *The Paris Review* 45 (Winter 1968): 84–117.

2. An earlier, shorter version of this essay has appeared (in French) in *Autoscopies. Représentation et identité dans l'art et la littérature* as "Self-Consciousness de John Updike: retour sur soi, retour aux sources." *Annales de l'Université de Savoie* 24 (September 1998): 233–41.

3. In the essay "On Literary Biography," Updike makes the following comment: "[Self-Consciousness] has been criticized as a parading of my wounds; but the wounds were mine to parade, and not some callow inquisitor's" (*Due Considerations* 11).

4. Ben Turnbull's alternate worlds in *Toward the End of Time* offer this "miracle" by way of fictional explorations that reimagine experience in quantum branchings.

5. « Mais c'est surtout comme à des gisements profonds de mon sol mental, comme aux terrains résistants sur lesquels je m'appuie encore, que je dois penser au côté de Méséglise et au côté de Guermantes. C'est parce que je croyais aux choses, aux êtres, tandis que je les parcourais, que les choses, les êtres sont les seuls que je prenne encore au sérieux et qui me donnent encore de la joie. Soit que la foi qui crée soit tarie en moi, soit que la réalité ne se forme que dans la mémoire, les fleurs qu'on me montre aujourd'hui pour la première fois ne me semblent pas de vraies fleurs. » (Proust, *Du Côté de chez Swann*)

"But it is preeminently as the deepest layer of my mental soil, as the firm ground on which I still stand, that I regard the Méséglise and the Guermantes ways. It is because I believed in this and in people while I walked along those paths that the things and the people they made known to me are the only ones that I still take seriously and that still bring me joy. Whether it is because the faith which creates has ceased to exist in me, or because reality takes shape in the memory alone, the flowers that people show me nowadays for the first time never seem to me to be true flowers." (Proust, *Swann's Way*)

6. See Robert M. Luscher, *John Updike: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Twayne, 1993.

7. Thus is Bech, the protagonist of the story and fictional alter ego of the writer, the author of an essay "on the orgasm as perfect memory" (748).

8. The quote—epigraph of Bishop West of Ely, in Ely Cathedral—is one of the epigraphs to *Self-Consciousness* and translates as: "By the grace of God I am what I am."

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