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METAPHORS IN JOHN UPDIKE'S *OF THE FARM*

A man-of-letters who mastered many genres, wrote in a vigorous style and with great intellectual power, John Updike had been commenting on American cultural and political life for nearly six decades. He left us most poignant and precise descriptions of this life in a feast of language focusing on the mystery of the commonplace, on making seemingly insignificant details appear to be resonant and significant.

Of the Farm (1965) is one of his best and most prophetic novels. Its author appeared to be a visionary who presaged great social and cultural cataclysms of the Industrial society, its movement down the slippery slope of godlessness and

consumerism. The time-span of the narrative occupies 3 days. It begins on Friday evening with the arrival of Joey Robinson, his wife Peggy and her son Richard at the farm. It ends next Sunday evening with their retreat to New York, with the protagonist being morally compromised by leaving his mother sick and bed-ridden.

Between these points are incorporated Joey's inner monologues, which are either flashbacks of his first marriage, or self-abusive and self-accusatory reflections; his impressions of mowing the farm and arguments between his mother, on the one hand, himself and Peggy, on the other.

The action in the novel is mediated through the consciousness of an unreliable character, Joey Robinson, and in this respect it celebrates the removal of the author in first person narration. Thus, due to the access to his innermost thoughts, the narrative gains in the effect of 'felt life', in immediacy and authenticity.

On the face of it, the focalizing of the action through an individual limited viewpoint might suppress the authorial control of the literary work and deprive the latter of an important channel of meaning because of the author's distancing from the central character. Far from that, though the events are presented through Joey's lens, the reader is persistently made aware of the creative consciousness behind the text, ruminating on social maladies and man's alienation from his family. The implied author's values are explicitly articulated in the characters' dialogues, the narrative technique that cannot privilege a single viewpoint. The quartet of voices pierces the stillness of rural countryside, quarrelling, seeking alignment, pleading for reconciliation. It must be admitted here that the painterly language of the novel helps to shape and represent the author's vision of the world.

It is the aim of this article to analyze some of John Updike's metaphors¹ in *Of the Farm* [3] and to establish their role in rendering the purport of the author. We proceed from the assumption that the connotative power of metaphors helps to reveal the author's attitude to the issues discussed in the novel and evokes a certain emotional response in the reader.

At the very outset of the novel there are very clear comments on that 'unheroic hero' that should put the reader on the alert against identifying too readily with Joey's attitudes and opinions. His confessions *I am a **blank** to myself, I am a weak man, the **scintillating dregs of my corruption***, his mother's remark *he had a cruelty streak as a boy, not able to stand up to anything* may be taken as signs of his moral deficiency.

With these reservations it is true that the action is narrowed to Joey's perspective, so that the reader is bound, on the one hand, to share his impressions, feelings and mistakes, on the other hand, to make moral judgments on the "unreliable" narrator [4, p. 158].

Formally, the novel begins and ends with the word *farm*. The title is a revealing clue, indicating both the subject matter and its importance for the plot. From the

¹ As is well known, a metaphor is a transfer of some quality from one object to another [1, p. 139], a matter of understanding one concept in terms of another [2, p. 5]. Its expressive power depends on realizing two meanings simultaneously: it equates two objects for the sake of comparison or symbolism.

very outset the image of the farm becomes invested with symbolic significance. Balanced with tenderness, the pivotal narrative question *What's the point of a farm nobody farms?* posed by the 9-year-old Richard three times at the beginning of the novel anticipates the motif of an unfarmed farm (a neglected farm), the use of the indefinite article raising it to the level of a general philosophical problem of the meaning of life, of man's relationship with the world around.

The theme of 'an unfarmed farm', of fall and decline, is insistently articulated through the metaphor of *fall*: we are reminded both of Adam's fall in the Bible as the story portrays the man seduced by another woman, and of American English 'autumn', conventional enough to be perceived as a figurative expression:

Fall, which comes earlier inland, was present not so much as the scent of fallen fruit, as a sense of expiration. The smell was not of youth, but of dust.

The beginning of the paragraph is mirroring its end, pushing the symbolic significance of *fall* to the fore due to the use of the poetic word *expiration*, end or death, and the religious connotations of *dust* (Genesis 3:19; Ecclesiastes 3: 20) [5].

The seasonal symbolism which is attached to the autumnal mood of expiration, is further echoed in a plethora of epithets and metaphoric expressions, bearing on the idea of decline and fading. Their expressive force is not infrequently enhanced by alliteration and assonances, so that the images evoked become not only visible, but even audible, binding sound and meaning together. Updike's style is polished to the point of perfection in the phrases:

Weedy fields; the gloom of the lawn; the lawn painfully ragged with plantain and crabgrass; the lawn tall with plantain; the air tasted of dung dust; the pump and the privet bush had the air of interlopers frozen by fright at our appearance; a little rivulet hardly a creak, choked by weeds and watercress, trickled and breathed.

Most of these images, especially personifications: *the gloom of the lawn, interlopers frozen with fright, river choked by watercress, breathing rivulet*, are tinged with feelings of loss and sorrow to be further communicated to the reader. Persistent personification, on the other hand, emphasizes the idea of the Farm being alive and living. On the other hand, it is evocative of the Bible verses about farmers and farming on hard work and unity of people (2 Timothy 2:6) as well as the Parable of the Sower (Mark 4:14-26) [5]. The liveliness of animate nature is brought into sharp relief by the artifact metaphors of the standardized, uniform, sterile and inanimate world of an Industrial city (*all houses and glasses and subways*, nouns naming the inanimate manmade objects).

The contrast of Nature and Industrial Civilization is too obvious to be understood as the mainspring of the narrative discourse. Thus, the *acres of land flowing outward* are ousted by *acreage of brightly shoddy goods, this sordid plenty*, combining large supply with units of measurement. The beauty and liveliness of Nature rendered through metaphors and personification *the world becoming a cup running over with light*, evincing synesthesia in an *absolute visual silence*, *the grass and lawn drenched in a glistening stillness*, contrasts with the ugliness and inanimacy of city descriptions.

The open air on the farm, with its pleasant *smell of lavender tinge, the scent of spicy fruit*, is put off by *the air-conditioned city with its uniform and faintly sour coolness of plastic*. In the shopping centre *nothing smelt, even the turnips were bagged in the cellophane*.

The **garish** abundance, the **ubiquitous** music, the **surrealistic** centrality of automobiles ... made me feel like visitor from the dead.

The rejection of the values of the standardized, artificial and inanimate world with its uniformity and trumpery is revealed in the connotative expressions *brightly shoddy goods, ubiquitous music, surrealistic centrality of automobiles, uniform and faintly sour coolness of plastic*, where neutral words (*music, plastic, goods, automobiles*) become tinged with dislike being combined with adjectives of negative evaluation, as well as through the device of oxymoron (*garish abundance, sordid plenty*): *garish* is ‘bright in an unpleasant way’, *sordid* means ‘dirty and unpleasant’ as well as ‘dishonest’ [6]. The notion of *the sordid plenty* was introduced in this novel as a casual remark to be developed, fleshed out and given resonance to in Updike’s later writings.

The opposition of two worlds is implicitly backed up by changes in the rhythmical pattern: parallel constructions with balanced rhythm of country life, on the one hand, jerky rhythm echoing city bustle, on the other.

<i>Here on my farm every week is different, every day is a surprise. New faces in the fields, the birds say different things and nothing repeats. Nature never repeats.</i>	<i>New York, the living memento of my childish dream of escape, called to me, urged me away; into the car, down the road, along the highway, up the Turnpike</i>
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The two worlds are shown as coexisting yet opposed to each other. Their antagonism is kept up by manifestly contrasting views of two characters, Joey and his mother, epitomizing respectively the pragmatic and poetic tempers.

As the story unfolds, there emerges the image of Joey’s mother as a reliable reflector of the author’s views. A true (though aging) custodian of the farm, Missis Robinson sticks to the values of rural lifestyle, the animate world (*It’s important that the farm should be **kept**, otherwise people would forget that there could be anything except **stones and glasses and subways***).

That Joey’s mother becomes inseparable from the farm is brought home through the use of metaphors, connected with land and space (since a farm is ‘a stretch of land’). To begin with, this personage is introduced into a narrative by a phrase: *My mother’s **shape, a solid blur**, emerged from the house*, in which the key descriptive word *shape*, the form of something which is seen, is, as it were, implicitly repeated, dissolved in the oxymoronic combination *solid* ‘not needing shape’, *blur* ‘something shapeless’ [6] at once indicating the resoluteness in *solid* and rendering the idea of merging with one’s surrounding in *blur*.

To emphasize this unity, there are other spatial metaphors. Missis Robinson’s physical appearance and her face are featured as landscapes:

*The **plains of her face**, like those of a cloud, eluded **perspective**; The **space** between her eyebrows was damp; being **surrounded** by her farm we had been*

plunged into **the territory of her thought**; In sleep my mother had slipped from my recognition and flame and had entered **a far territory, the arctic of the old**; Peggy had to accommodate herself to that **enclosing spirit**.

In the line *her hair*, whose **dominant** grey was mixed with **residual** black, hang loose along her face, the adjective *residual* entails associations with plots of land, opening up vistas of Law and Property, as it means ‘having the right to what is left after a dead person’s debts’ [6].

The description of Joey’s mother also abounds in poetic weather metaphors and similes related to water, sea, wind and air, thus, underlying her harmony with nature: *She panted in faint eddies, like a resting dog*; *Her face was almost featureless, like the head of a goddess recovered from the sea*; ... *her talk seemed the murmur of Nature ...*, *the vocal outpouring in which I had bathed*; *My mother’s face seemed vast, as the slanting reined faces of rocks in tidewater look vast, wet and stricken, between waves*;” “*her voice was breathy ...*”

Similarly, mother’s being in her element, her consonance with nature is brought home through insistent overlapping of the language means used in reference to this personage and the tropes describing the rain. Her conditions and emotional states are presented like the activities of the landscape and atmosphere.

It should be mentioned here that in the Bible the overcast sky as a sign of Heaven augurs ill and betrays lack of ethical skills in Pharisees (Matthew 16:3) [5]. John Updike appeared to be spinning some original images from this biblical metaphor. Thus, the clouds in the sky – at first occurring as a *sullen solid pitch*, *fainting mirages of translucent bluish clouds*, then *boiling clouds of the afternoon*, *coalition of clouds*, and as the signs of the storm gathered developing negative connotations of menace – *translucent clouds developed opaque bellies*; **dramatic clouds**; *dull clouds which had the persistence of an ache* – became **the clouds of grief over the fate of her abandoned fatherless grandchildren**; **the plains of her face, like those of a cloud, eluded perspective**; *she had clouded having felt a personal affront*; *my mother’s display of temper hung heavily on the afternoon*; *She was calm, unclouded*; *her outburst had cleared her*. In these contexts the metaphoric use of the verb *to cloud* as ‘to show sadness’ becomes deliberately literal under the influence of *hung* and *cleared* usually used about the atmospheric conditions. Thus, the literal and the metaphoric, the trivial and the heavenly grow inseparable.

Again, the symbolism of Rain as indicating collision in relations between the characters persists throughout Literature. In Updike’s work the rain seems to be a sympathetic companion, even advocate of Mrs. Robinson in her moral dispute with Peggy. The rain, like everything on the Farm is thought of as a living being, and as such it is personified, watering, tending the land and the house.

The rain, having announced itself, hesitated, held off. A gagged rapidly drifting piece of smoky nimbus travelled across the heavenly territory. The rain, having taken one last breath, signed and subsided into the earth, gently at first, swiftly then with steady relaxed force. The rain breathed on the sides of the house, swept across the barnyard panes with an imperious gesture and lived sparkling amid the green surface. The rain whipped, caressed, embraced the house.

Though the rain *beat sweetly* around us, *urging* us to unite at the fire, there were distances that did *not close*, an atmospheric *soreness* that pressed on my ears with a fine high *ringing*.

Moreover, the rain is endowed with its own voice. The voice of the rain and the voice of Mrs. Robinson merge; they leak and flow into each other, forming a curious blend. Just as the rain possesses a purifying force, so Mrs. Robinson turns out to chastise and purge her children with her breathy voice.

<i>There was an evenness in her voice, like a day of the sky on a day before rain.</i>	<i>The rain lowed its voice. The rain had reconciled itself to steadiness.</i>
<i>Her voice was breathy. Her voice relaxed and swerved.</i>	<i>In the staircase the rain had a different voice.</i>
<i>Parallel to the rain's infiltrating murmur my mother was answering Peggy.</i>	<i>Thunder muttered from beyond. The rain and my mother's voice had merged for Peggy.</i>

The Farm gradually acquires new shades of meaning: it becomes a living space, inhabited by living beings, a space where the art of tending and caring is cultivated (alongside with the rain which caressed, swept, embraced the land).

Thus, in the context: *I realized that my mother must **water** and **tend** and "**keep**" these plants ... I felt around me, throughout **the farm**, a thousand of such details of **nurture** about to sink into the earth with her, 'to farm' is synonymous with 'to water', 'to tender', 'to keep', 'to nurture', taking on the overtone of 'taking care', 'looking after', 'cultivating.' The author seems to be baring the root of the word *culture*, which denotes 'manifestations of human intellectual achievements' [6], to remind the reader of its derivation from Latin *cultural colere*, which means 'to tend to the earth and to grow'. The farming of the mind is the capacity denied to the dehumanized pragmatic vision. For Peggy and Joey who are by-products of the industrial civilization the land is the desirable object of selling (*She is thinking of money sitting in these acres*).*

The episode of mowing the lawn is the key moment in the novel. By some literary critics [7] it was reduced to refreshment and distraction, the satisfaction, which the main character feels and which his office work never gives him. I would argue, in my analysis, that on close inspection it was **destruction** rather than **distraction** on the part of the main character, who came not to feel at one with his environment, but to ruin it, not **to explore**, but **to exploit** it. Indeed, there are grounds for such an interpretation, the linguistic cues and clues which allow the interpreter to draw such an inference from the text. Much favoured by the author device of antithesis in *my mother's method when she mowed was **to embrace** the field... **mine** was **to slice**, in one ecstatic straight thrust. I imitated **war**, she **love***, hints at Joey's the Conqueror coming to the land, to be further reverberated in metaphoric expressions which trail in connotations of war and battle: *the engine **shuddered with a violence**, plummeted into an infinite well of **power**; the individual teeth of the tread were like **the blank heads of an advancing army**; **two dwindled armies** of uncut grass **stood against me**, **flowers crudded** past the wheels; crickets **sprang crackling** away; butterflies **loped** through their **tumbling***

universe; the **triumph of floating** between the steady wheels, that reduced all **unruly** flowers to the contour of a cropped field; I **destroyed** two quails, **hit** many rocks, **ruined** nests, **butchered** birds; I **felt excited by destruction**.

However, the triumph of destruction is a Pyrrhic victory over Nature, a step into self-destruction, because it is achieved at the cost of killing the human in the man, it warps human nature. The gift of ‘farming’, i.e. ‘taking care’, ‘being responsible for’ is alien to him. Hence the analogy which works by implication throughout the novel: ‘unfarmed farm’ – *abandoned children – the eternal damnation of my three children*.

The pending question – What’s the point of a farm nobody farms? – posed by another fatherless child Richard at the beginning and laid over, in the development of the story, recurs implicitly at the end, when Mrs. Robinson is suffering from heart attack and Joey has to undertake *the burden of mothering my mother*. The hypostatical root repetition in the phrases of similar syntactic structure (*farm nobody farms/ the burden of mothering my mother*) together with the Shakespeare metaphor of the *husbandry of language*, interacting with the terms of kinship and care of the land, enhances the idea of responsibility, protection and cultivation which are in danger of atrophy as concerns the main character.

Central to the story, the theme of betrayal is evoked through the recurrent use of words and word-combinations: *my dismissal of Joan; my betrayal of Peggy; I subjected her to a series of disappointment and humiliations, a desertion of mother* which he means to be a rescue. Thus, there appear in the novel three strong-willed women (Joan, Peggy and Mrs. Robinson) struggling for the obedience of one weak irresponsible waning man whose life is reduced, in his own words, “to sex and money” [3].

The image of the farm, thus, takes on a new metaphoric dimension: it becomes a touchstone, where the character’s worth (or unworthiness) is tested, measured and valued. On the final pages of the novel, it grows into a powerful symbol, conjuring up the forces not benign, but sinister and malevolent: **weeds** thrust everywhere, the **malevolent** idleness of Sunday lay on everything. The farm seemed no longer a lush and fatten haven, but a wild **place, an unspoiled emptiness** attracting **slum-dwellers, a vacuum** pulling into itself **madmen and rapists**. This is what life becomes when it is dehumanized and uncultured – a wild place, a vacuum, an emptiness, a spiritual void, Updike seemed to be saying.

In reading “Of the Farm” one has an overwhelming sense of a creative mind behind the text, its ‘implied author’ who forged its labyrinth of thought with great mastery. This feeling is so intense, because, to use a quotation from the minister’s sermon in the novel, in it “language aerates the barren density of brute matter with the penetration of the mind, of the spirit.”

To sum up, the connotative power of metaphors in “Of the Farm” helps to impart the underlying themes and values of the story, contributes to the creation of plausible characters and determines the reader's response to the narrative issues. The novel revolves around the dualistic struggle of the pragmatic and the poetic tempers, epitomized respectively by the protagonist and his mother. The powerful religious strand is intertwined with the spatial and water metaphors in the portrayal

of Mrs. Robinson, highlighting her inseparability from nature and adherence to the traditional lifestyle. Departing from it is the sequence of the artifact city metaphors, interwoven with the metaphors of destruction and ruin, associated with the narrator. Updike's gift of metaphors becomes a fragile instrument of raising the commonplace and the ordinary to the realm of Art.

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