Pastoral Elements in Updike's Work

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Abstract: This study tries to present some of the pastoral elements in John Updike's writings, especially in his finest work, *The Centaur*, which would have established him as a major writer. J. Updike's epigraph to *The Centaur* is a quotation from the theologian Karl Barth: "Heaven is the creation unconceivable to man, earth is the creation conceivable to him. He himself is the creature on the boundary between heaven and earth." Two creations exist heavenly and earthly, spiritual and material, ideal and real, unconscious and conscious, imaginative and empirical, divine and temporal, epic and pastoral. In his novel, man is not able to conceive one of the creations and employs earth, that creation that he can conceive to explain the other.

Key words: pastoral-concerned with spiritual guidance of a body of Christians, paean-chant of praise or triumph, torso-trunk of human statue apart from head and limbs, lament-passionate expression of grief.

John Updike has established himself among greatest American novelists. On the first reading Updike seems to stand apart from his contemporary fellow writers because his work shows no need for continually renewed experimentation and he seems immune from the paradoxes of the fiction-maker. For example J. Updike has demonstrated that the middle-class existence is more complex than it has been described in the American literature.

His characters live in the suburbia and they have committed their lives to it. There where many contemporary American novelists tend to see the social environment as a panorama of threatening situations, Updike takes it as the given world for his characters, the only locale in which they will learn what they learn an lose what they lose.

A lot of criticism was devoted to Updike's fiction. Some critics such John W. Aldridge begin their criticism with a negative overview of Updike. David Lodge, analyzing Updike's most notorious book, *Couples*, finds elements in it that remind him of Hawthorne, and defends the book saying that reviewers have been unfair.

The *Centaur*, one of the Updike's major writings, is called by James M. Wellard as an elegiac celebration of the image of the father.

J. Updike, who is perhaps the most important stylist among the writers of fiction in his generation, is representative for a group of contemporary novelists who are aesthetically victimized by their conventional religious yearning. Updike's most famous novel *The Centaur* rests in the mainstream of the pastoral-epic pattern, the author thus contributing to this pattern in the way that James Joyce and John Hilton contributed to it. Milton is adding Christianity and Joyce is adding post Darwinian and post Freudian philosophy.

In a curious inversion of the Hebraic-Christian tradition great king and gods of heaven are shepherd boys (king David in Old Testament) and humble peasants born in mangers (James of the New Testament). The Hellenistic tradition presents kings and gods disguised as shepherds.

In *The Centaur* heaven and earth hold between them the existence of "the man". "Man" is not able conceive one of the creations and employs the creation he can conceive however, earth, to explain the other. He creates metaphors setting his position of being "the boundary between heaven and earth". Thus he wakes god into a version of his earthly father who is capable of extreme mercy but also extreme wrath. He realized that the role of the shepherd is the lowliest earthly social position and causes his god to be born in a stable and to become the god shepherd as well as the son of the God. Ironically he dresses his popes and bishops in shining robes and thrusts a shepherd's crook into their hands. The centaur, half man and half horse, can be seen as the symbol for the paradoxical union of the epic and pastoral elements in Updike's novel. Chiron makes the grand

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sacrificial gesture which tries to conciliate the crime of Prometheus, and sets him free; pastorally Chiron teaches the children of the gods in Arcadian groves. The art of *The Centaur* depends on structure, theme and metaphor. The basic metaphor which compares Olinger citizens to Olympian citizens would be a tour de force and an exercise in analogy and allegory comparable to *Pilgrim's Progress*. Without Updike's arrangement of chapters and his employment of juxtaposed modes and traditions, the surrealism of *The Centaur* would be a Salvador Dali painting. The structure depends on the fact that four short chapters of the book establish the total work as a "pastoral elegy", as imaginatively as Lycidas in a pastoral elegy.

Some chapters in *The Centaur* are variations of basic conventions of the traditional pastoral elegy. The novel as a whole tells the story of the three days Peter-Prometheus and his father George Caldwell-Centaur spend in town, snowed in and unable to return to the mother Ceres and the home farm. There are four pastoral chapters as legitimate elements of the traditional pastoral elegy. Thus, the pastoral hero Chiron involved in his daily tasks of teaching the children of the gods in Arcadian groves. The author includes a catalogue of the flowers and herbs, and celebrates the tranquility of the hero as he was in life. Later on, the newspaper obituary giving an account of Caldwell's life suggests the conventional expression of communal grief. This is the elegiac announcement of death comparable to the shock value of the fact.

Peter grieves for the loss pf the pastoral hero, and he sings his lament to his Negro mistress. In the end, the Centaur accepts death and his son reconciles to it.

The language of these chapters provides the lyricism that keeps the novel from being ironic, satiric and comic. *The Centaur* appeals to the impersonality of pastoral conventions as a vehicle for transforming life into art-the personal into the universal. The language, from the idyllic song and catalogue to the journalistic jargon, from the mixture of love lyric and lament to the statement of apotheosis, provides a point of reference for the almost schizophrenic imagery shifts and linguistic jerks in the rest of the novel.

Formal language is needed to accompany the "formal feeling" which Emily Dickinson says comes "after great pain". This is the purpose of the language of rites and ceremonies. In many passages Updike merges the pastoral with the heroic, the catalogue of flowers and herbs with the epic paean. In the pastoral pages we find the combination of love lyric, pastoral reminiscence lament and interrogation of the universe "like in the pages where Peter speaks to his Negro mistress, and combines his love songs for her with his memory of his father and Olinger.

In the final chapter of the Centaur the author provides the required consolation, and the one sentence epilogue provides the conventional apotheosis. The acceptance of death is associated to the rural home, to Ceres and the earth. It is winter and the landscape contrasts to the warm pastoral scenes of other chapters. On the realistic level we learn that George Caldwell does not have cancer as he had feared; on the metaphoric level, we see Chiron's necessary death and its subsequent rebirth as a constellation.

The pointed consolation is that "all joy belongs to the poor "and that only goodness lives". In the final part of the novel the author presents no longer the beauty of the earth, with scenes from idealized pastoral nature as it is winter, the time of death. Here the imagery is based on the coupling of Uranus (Sky) and Gaia (Earth), heaven and earth. The coldness of winter, the "brutish landscape" is not so important now, because the Centaur is approaching death and his apotheosis into the heavens. And in accepting his fate, he becomes the hero, the senior, the sacrificial figure who mediates between heaven and earth. Having provided the confessional consolation, Updike resorts to a Greek sentence to describe the death of Chiron.

The Centaur achieves its aesthetic unity and thematic wholeness through the adaptation of elements of the traditional pastoral elegy. It is a brilliant adaptation and in its own way, the novel ranks with John Milton's adaptations of pastoral and epic modes. The "final word and farewell" to the memory of his youth and innocence requires the epic metaphors found in *The Centaur*. Employing a technique fundamental to a comic mode, he tempers and turns the story of George Caldwell and Peter into the epic idyllic story of Prometheus and Chiron. Aware that the elevation of rural rustic into heroic sophisticates is a tricky business, he follows Thoreau's technique of smiling

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first of making the analogies and metaphors so striking and absurd that the reader's own imagination is engaged from the beginning, where the wounded Chiron walks down the hall. George Caldwell in his plodding daily commitment to duty and work, and in his capacity for love and sacrifice, becomes Chiron, who gives life and freedom to Prometheus.

In *The Centaur* J. Updike sings an epic paean and a pastoral lament, and the songs mysteriously emerge as one melody with two sets of words.

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