LITERARY CARTOGRAPHIES AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTIONS IN UPDIKE'S *TERRORIST*

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Abstract: 'Literary Cartographies and Identity Constructions in Updike's Terrorist' examines the patterns of abstract configurations of space and more specific illustrations of urban place of fictional New Prospect, New Jersey and the ways in which they are turned into the fictional shape that the novel Terrorist assumes. These are shaped to make sense of the post – 9/11 interaction between what might be seen as Updike's 21st century American versions of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, but having relevance to perceptions of a world of clashing ideologies.

Keywords: literary cartography, identity construction, post- 9/11 literature, focalizer, the PATRIOT Act

In their 2011 volume, *The Spirit of Cities*, Daniel A. Bell and Avner de Shalit evoke a political character still in the public eye today, who, in the pre 9/11 age was asking for God's blessing: In 1998, the then mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, ended his second inaugural address on a high note: "I ask God to bless us and our great city—the capital of the world now and forever." (249). What followed three years later opened a new chapter in America's and world's history, while in fiction the label of post-9/11 literature became established, with John Updike as one of those who tried to deal with the new consciousness in challenging ways.

Updike's *Terrorist* brought the chronicler of post-war mainstream WASP suburban and urban America onto the new, post – 9/11 ground. For the author who had gained prominence since the early 1960s with what would become the 'Rabbit Tetralogy,' the 2006 'non-Rabbit' novel was a formidable challenge, a literary undertaking that elicited mixed critical responses. Harry Angstrom, a younger version of Miller's traveling salesman, had started running away from his postwar 'suburban bliss'('masculine mystique?') and wandered through the labyrinthine paths of an identity crisis that would span the following decades. Ahmad, the protagonist of Updike's novel, is not an alien, but a young American experiencing ... alienation in New Prospect, USA. The challenge Updike faced was formidable, though. As Richard Gray noted, 'if there was one thing writers agreed about in response to 9/11, it was the failure of language'(1).

This text explores the 'new prospects' facing one particular American who disregards the American Dream in search of the Right Path. It considers the ways in which abstract configurations of space and more specific illustrations of urban place (in fictional New Prospect, New Jersey) are turned into the fictional shape that *Terrorist* assumes. These are patterned to give meaning to the post – 9/11 interaction between what might be seen as Updike's 21st century American versions of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, but having relevance to perceptions of a world of clashing ideologies. How do the landmarks and overall patterns of urban space contribute to this interaction and in what ways are they linked to the drama and thematic framework of a novel which, in spite of its title, is much more about 'the State of the Union' than about dangerous aliens? What do these patterns in the fictional framework of the novel contribute to the delineations of a character apparently torn between

faith and what Ahmad considers to be the inner and outer 'devils' that prevent him from finding and following the Straight Path?

In *Terrorist* both the configurations of urban space and the new, post 9/11 prospects work to introduce a fictional engagement with American identity in the 21st century. In it, Ahmad, the live terrorist, is the central character and focalizer. As Lenore Bell notes in her volume on 9/11 in fiction, 'The novelist who approaches the September 11 attacks has the chance to cover very rich ground through the figure of the terrorist. Aswith Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the villain has the potential to become the most engrossing, complex character in the piece' (47). The central character and focalizer will bring together the apparently loose threads of literary cartography.

The main coordinates of the literary cartography of the novel are New Prospect, New Jersey and New York, New York. New Prospect is obviously Newark, New Jersey which, like the town of Mt. Vernon, separated from the city of Brewer by the mountain, is both linked to and separated from metropolitan Manhattan by the Lincoln Tunnel.

Literary cartographies as narratives accommodate both the mapping of spaces and places and the perspectives from which they are perceived, fashioned, created. Perceiving and fashioning spaces and places is part of the business of identity construction, as territorializing one's environment is asserting and developing one's identity. It is interesting to note that one particular space and one particular perspective were the ones from which Updike witnessed 9/11. Updike had seen the 9/11 attacks on Manhattan's Twin Towers from Brooklyn Heights, one of New York's most affluent and beautiful neighborhoods. However, he chooses a distinctly lower perspective on Manhattan on the other side of the island: New Prospect, USA, which had definitely seen better days in the relatively recent past, but which saw the tragedy of the Twin Towers just as clearly as observers on the other side of Manhattan, like Updike watching from Brooklyn Heights.

To ask oneself why Updike chose to change the geographical perspective from which to weave his 9/11 literary cartography rolled into his fictional is probably worth considering. One reason is that he wanted to use an 'alien' perspective, provided by a new type of character. So, instead of a WASP-ish character, such as Rabbit, already rich, or already at rest, why not imagine a character that would be shockingly appealing to many 'non-terrorists'? In addition, like in many of his other novels, by using a distinctly different perspective from his own and from other people's, he may created various contrasts that also produce humorous situations, human comedy with at least two different meanings being one of Updike's literary ambitions. This means, on the one hand achieving a panoramic and faithful artistic landscape in such an eminent tradition as Dante's more divine and Balzac's less divine, but more cartographic comedy, while, on the other hand, continuing the deployment of his own comic genius in his own Human Comedy *oeuvre*, well into the post – 9/11 age, well past the American Century. Last and not least, changing the perspective from which the author territorializes space and place through his narrative, mediated by an apparently 'alien' character, is highly revelatory about a creator's identity: like such outstanding artistic forerunners as Walt Whitman in his 'Song of Myself,', John Updike might be imagined to claim about himself as an American artist, 'I am large, I contain multitudes.' Why wouldn't Ahmad be part of the novelist's all-American perspective, with its intimations of overwhelming diversity?

Readers in 2006, when Updike's novel was published, had to accommodate the trauma of 9/11, the controversial PATRIOT Act, as well as the disclosure, in 2004, of the horrible torture and prisoner abuse, perpetrated in the Abu Ghraib prison in Irak, against suspects of terrorism. Dealing with 9/11 and with issues linked to terrorism had become a sensitive and controversial topic, so literary representations of them had to cope with a very complex, and politically charged, situation.

Updike's cartographic undertaking in *Terrorist* begins at Ahmad's school, Central High School, where the narration focuses on how the protagonist views his 'enemies,' the devils that seek to deprive him of his God. *Terrorist* makes use of the narrative technique Updike had used in previous fiction to combine third person point of view with a character's subjective perspective The 3rd person narrator shows the school through the protagonist's eyes as a place of damnation, where boys, girls, and teachers are equally devilish. The teachers ('weak Christians and nonobservant Jews') are obviously more to blame than the rest. In addition to being perceived by the young potential terrorist as leading immoral lives, 'They are paid to instill virtue and democratic values by the state government down in Trenton, and that Satanic government farther down, in Washington, but the values they believe in are Godless: biology and chemistry and physics'[1]. Immediately afterwards the reader sees that the devils are not only outside Ahmad. They have started taking control of his consciousness as well, as the doubts of a very intelligent, rational self, competing with blind faith for the soul of the protagonist:

[…] materialist forces, working their will upon him. He will not grow any taller, he thinks, in this life or the next. *If there is a next,* an inner devil murmurs. What evidence beyond the Prophet's blazing and divinely inspired words proves that there is a next? Where would it be hidden? Who would forever stoke Hell's boilers? What infinite source of energy would maintain opulent Eden, feeding its dark-eyed houris, swelling its heavy-hanging fruits, renewing the streams and splashing fountains in which God, as described in the ninth sura of the Qur'an, takes eternal good pleasure? What of the second law of thermodynamics?(5).

It so happens that 'materialist forces,' as well as the physics, biology, chemistry that Ahmad has learnt at school, are just as dangerous as the devils outside. These materialist forces appeal to reason, while faith has little to do with it. The expectations are that the protagonist will have to wage Jihad within himself in addition to some form of outer Jihad, thus adding some more touches to the more straightforward appellation that Updike has conferred upon him by the very title of the novel.

The beginning of the novel, apart from introducing the main character as the terrorist of the title (the name Ahmad plus the devils trying to take his God), sketches the first topographic coordinates of the novel, placed at the end of the first paragraph of the first chapter: a public space like one of Central High School's halls is figuratively pictured as an epitome of much more than the whole of America, standing for the Godless materialist world in its entirety: 'this world is all there is—a noisy varnished hall lined with metal lockers and having at its end a blank wall desecrated by graffiti and roller-painted over so often it feels to be coming closer by millimeters'(3).

It will soon become apparent that the fictional representations of the secular, Godless Central High School, as well as two distinct places of learning and worship – Jorileen's African American Christian Church and Shaikh Rashid's mosque will assume center place in the protagonist's apprenticeship, which will unfold from April to the beginning of the fateful month of September. That will not be September 2001 but, processing the temporal hints that the narrative supplies, September 2004. It will be expected that Ahmad prepares to be one of the epigones of the 9/11 attacks, and the third commemoration/ anniversary of that moment will be the time for him to play his role.

Among the devils that Central High School displays at the beginning of the narrative, Tylenol, the African American bully that confronts Ahmad is far less dangerous than one of the 'good' students there: Joryleen, the attractive African American girl. It soon turns out that, in addition to being a devout believer in quest for the Straight Path and a rational being

[1] John Updike. Terrorist. London and New York: Penguin, 2007: 4. From now on, references to *Terrorist* will refer to this edition, consisting of simple, parenthetical page references.

beset by Cartesian doubt, Ahmad is also the fictional representation of a young man made of flesh and blood. The human 'devil' that will acquire a central position, after Joryleen, in the mapping of most of the various spaces that shape the novel's literary cartography, is Jack Levy, the nonobservant Jew, the guidance councilor, as it will be demonstrated before long.

Initially, Joryleen links, through the spaces she territorializes in her own identity narrative, three types of 'devils' that Ahmad's faith rejects: the secular space of Central High School, where she is 'well liked' and integrated, the 'inner' space of feelings and of the senses, as well as the African American 'soot-stained ironstone church beside the lake of rubble'(49), where she goes to sing and have a good time in her community. These spaces will be interwoven in the novel's narrative texture, with specific, relevant pieces being gradually added to previous ones, thus completing the overall puzzle in which, at least in the first part of the novel, Central High, Shaikh Rashid's mosque, and Joryleen's Christian Church assume prominent positions. It is worth stressing from the beginning that the five sections or chapters of the novel contain each a combination of the more private places and more public spaces that the cartographic design accompanying the narrative is made of. The climactic scene of the narrative will exploit the last important space introduced in the novel, the Lincoln Tunnel, linking the point of departure in the smaller urban space of New Prospect and the by now iconic post 9/11 metropolitan space of Manhattan.

The most institutional space that the two secondary characters (Joryleen and Jack Levy) share with Ahmad is what Louis Althusser would link to one of the most powerful ISAs, the education system. This system, like the other ISAs, interpellates subjects, thus determining and controlling their identities. In *Terrorist*, as previously seen, the image, as perceived by Ahmad, of one of the halls of Central High figuratively stands for the whole of the Godless, materialist world.

A little later, more touches will be added to the way the protagonist views the school from which he tries hard to detach himself, on his way to Heaven: 'The halls of the high school smell of perfume and bodily exhalations, of chewing gum and impure cafeteria food, and of cloth—cotton and wool and the synthetic materials of running shoes, warmed by young flesh'(7). This reminds the reader of Ahmad's attraction to Joryleen, but also of what less 'depraved' hobbies they share, unlike many of their schoolmates, who do drugs: he is an athlete, doing track, while Joryleen sings in the glee club.

After a few more pages, a more comprehensive subjective account of Central High is given, again through the mediation of free indirect discourse. The third person narrator sees the building and what is has stood for in the history of the town of New Prospect through the 'alien' eyes of the protagonist. Unlike young Harry Angstrom in the early Rabbit novels (who is 26 in RR, 36 in RRed), Ahmad, only 18, appears to be a more mature, more critical social, economic, and cultural historian. His vision is largely Updike's. It is the writer's attempt to see through an intelligent Muslim's eyes what America is all about:

> When constructed in the last century, the twentieth by Christian reckoning and the fourteenth after the Prophet's Hegira from Mecca to Medina, the high school on its little rise hung above the city like a castle, a palace of learning for the children of millworkers and of their managers alike, with pillars and ornate cornices and a motto carved in granite, knowledge is freedom (11).

Now the former palace of learning, completing the initial image the novel begins with, is 'rich in scars and crumbling asbestos,' with 'its leaded paint hard and shiny,' with its tall windows 'caged'(11), standing on the desolate margins of 'a wide lake of rubble that was once part of a downtown'(11), a vision that reminds the reader of the similar cartographic perspective on the city of Brewer at the beginning of *Rabbit Redux*.

Central High is now linked to its decayed neighborhood, which allows a more comprehensive, newer and older perspective. The school's downtown neighborhood allows a

minute description of New Prospect's images from its more prosperous past, with a wealth of both *civitas* and *urbs* information: public buildings, traffic, amenities, cultural life and economic activities giving life to a thriving community. Initially, the city was named New Prospect for the view from the beautiful falls of the river that falls through it. The river attracted industry in the late 19th century, which was largely supported by 'the optimism that helped emigrants from Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East endure fourteen-hour days of strenuous, poisonous, deafening, monotonous labor'(12). New Prospect gradually lost its economic significance in the twentieth century, as industry moved south and west, closer to cheaper labor and iron ore and coke deposits.

Then, the countercultural 1960s are seen through the changing fortunes of the city's public toilets, formerly an immaculate place for ladies and gentlemen. They are closing, having turned into 'foul-smelling lairs for drug deals, homosexual contacts, acts of prostitution, and occasional muggings' (11-12).

The rest of the inner city is equally desolate, equally seen through the eyes of the focalizer, through the words of the narrator, through Updike's cartographic narrative design: 'Where six-story department stores and the closely stacked offices of Jewish and Protestant exploiters once formed a continuous façade of glass, brick, and granite, there are bulldozed gaps and former display windows covered by plywood crawling with spray-painted graffiti.' Ahmad does not fail to pass his judgment on the spray-painted graffiti, again reinforcing his initial view of the school's hall and what it represents in a Godless world of alienation: 'Sinking into the morass of Godlessness, lost young men proclaim, by means of property defacement, an identity'(13).

The mixed voices continue their commentary, noting the new boxes of aluminum and blue glass which have been erected amidst the ruins of the former industrial town. These office buildings are seen as 'sops from the lords of Western capitalism—branches of banks headquartered in California or North Carolina, and outposts of the Zionist-dominated federal government'(13). Apart from the banks, these have to do with welfare enrollment and army recruitment, seen as meant to keep most of the poor from rioting.

In the cartographic design of the novel, in the desolate, ruined downtown of New Prospect, the City Hall, a post-Civil War architectural 'gaudiness,' stands 'within sight of Central High School, a block to the west.' The church that Joryleen attends guards 'the eastern edge of the lake of rubble'(14). The once proud structure of the City Hall is now a shadow of the past, having transferred its bureaucracy to more modern, less spectacular structures. The African American church, though, although itself having seen better days, architecturally speaking, will be relevant in the novel's topography and accompanying narrative. It is here that a particular scene of Huntington's class of civilizations theory will be enacted. For the time being, after the City Hall is viewed, Ahmad notes the thick-walled church that 'advertises, on a cracked signboard, its award-winning gospel choir,' a detail reminding the reader about the argument between Ahmad and Joryleen. Joryleen had invited Ahmad to see her perform in the church's choir, the latter had reproached the girl for her apparent frivolity and lack of faith.

Through Ahmad's 'alien' or 'Muslim' eyes, one of the central shibboleths of Judaism, Islam and Christianity is introduced through the perception of a 'blasphemy' in the architecture of the church which, like many 'non-Puritan' churches, deals in 'graven images.' Its stained glass windows are 'blasphemously assigning God a face, and gesturing hands, sandalled feet, and tinted robes—in short, a human body with all that is unclean and encumbering about it'(14). For the time being, the American Arab Muslim focalizer remarks that, very much like in the wars of the Reformation, religion attracts hatred. It is the post – 9/11 age.

There is also announced the above-mentioned cultural shock that Ahmad will experience when he finally accepts to go to Joryleen's church, which is, in addition to the seriousness of the religious issue involved, a source of comic contrast in Updike's text between three views on what religious social life is all about: the previous hierarchical, pious, reserved congregation of whites, the current African American congregants and Ahmad's own idea about what religion is. Again, Updike's 3rd person narrator is made to tell what Ahmad sees:

> The church's decorous glory days of pious white burghers in the hierarchically assigned pews also belong to the past. Now African-American congregants bring their dishevelled, shouting religion, their award-winning choir dissolving their brains in a rhythmical rapture as illusory as (Shaikh Rashid sardonically puts forward the analogy) the shuffling, mumbling trance of Brazilian *candomblé* (14-15).

Before the traumatic/ comic scene of Ahmad going to church (i.e., Joryleen's), Jack Levy is introduced, not at Central High, where he works as a guidance councilor, but at home, where he very unconvincingly plays his family role as Beth's husband. However badly he currently plays that role, Jack assumes a central position in the novel's cartography, as previously mentioned. Both his guidance councilor's role and his disappointment in his current family life will lead to a connection with Ahmad's private space in more ways than one.

The mosque is linked to Ahmad's acknowledged teacher, mentor, failed surrogate father, Shaikh Rashid. The mosque has a far from dignified location, occupying a modest space at 2781 $^{1}/2$ West Main Street, between the less sacred spaces of the pawn shop and the beauty parlor. Actually, as Jack Levy remarks, West Main Street, where the mosque is located, has just been renamed Reagan Boulevard. Neither the mosque nor its imam, Ahmad's acknowledged teacher, seem to carry much weight, at first. The mosque appears at first to display a lesser impact, considering the devils that seem to undermine the imam's faith. Will Shaikh Rashid remain Ahmad's surrogate father figure all the way? Will there be a link between the mosque and another landmark in the spatial cartography that the novel will dramatize? Its far from solemn, dignified environment creates cartographic discrepancies which are likely to elicit humorous effects rather than awe-inspiring attitudes on the part of the reader.

It takes little time within Shaik Rashid's Qur'an class taught to Ahmad for the latter to become critical of his teacher's faith. The imam recites beautifully in flawless Arabic about the Hutama, Hell's fire, but he appears to assign to it a purely figurative meaning. Ahmad's fundamentalism rebels against the devils in his mentor's interpretation, thus associating his secular teachers to his religious one: He 'does not like Shaikh Rashid's voice when he says this. It reminds him of the unconvincing voices of his teachers at Central High. He hears Satan's undertone in it, a denying voice within an affirming voice. The Prophet meant physical fire when he preached unforgiving fire (6-7). Gradually, it will turn out that the imam does not take physical fire figuratively only. He prepares his apprentice for physical fire as well, although the latter is unaware of it for some time.

Like in the Beck books, Updike is also trying to create a credible Jewish American voice and identity. Jack Levy, the nonobservant Jew, 63, is first shown, early in the morning, in the private place of his home, as 'tenderly nursing' a 'taste of dread,' his recurrent dreams being 'soaked through with the misery of the world.' He styles himself a "*Weltschmerz* specialist" (this is initially reminiscent of Larkin's famous remark, 'desolation is for me what the daffodils were for Wordsworth'). Following in his grandfather's footsteps, Levy does not expect much from a 'Jewish God':

> Not that the Jewish God had ever been big on promises— a shattered glass at your wedding, a quick burial in a shroud when you die, no saints, no afterlife, just a lifetime

> of drudging loyalty to the tyrant who asked Abraham to make a burnt offering of his only son. Poor Isaac, the trusting shmuck, having been nearly killed by his own father was as an old blind man tricked out of his blessing by his son Jacob and his own wife, Rebekah, brought to him veiled from Paddan-aram. More lately, over in the old country, if you observed all the rules—and for the Orthodox it was a long list of rules—you got a yellow star and a one-way ticket to the gas ovens. No, thanks: Jack Levy took a stiff-necked pleasure in being one of Judaism's stiff-necked naysayers (24).

The 3rd person narrative displays instances such as the one above in which Jack Levy becomes the focalizer, thus mediating the ways the narrative unfolds, accommodating elements of the novel's literary topography and how they are territorialized, more or less enthusiastically, by another questioning character. He is first shown reading, ironically, 'the dying, ad-starved local daily, the *New Prospect Perspective* (19). Like the daily's perspectives, like Newark's perspectives, his prospects are depressing. He is also shown in the evening, next to his wife, in a far from exciting situation, reminiscent of the domestic scene featuring Rabbit and Janice at the beginning of *Rabbit, Run*. Will Jack Levy run, like 26-year-old Rabbit? For the time meaning, Jack commutes between his home and his workplace, Central High School, where he is a guidance counselor. The main facts of his CV go from his being a prize student at Central High, class of '59, then attending CCNY, then, after a spell in the army, an MA at Rutgers and finally becoming a teacher and then a school counselor at Central High. Harry Angstrom felt like a trapped rabbit in Rabbit, Run. Jack Levy feels equally trapped in his 'curriculum vitae as tight as a coffin'(22). He has no great expectations, he has no promising prospects or perspectives. His son is away in Texas, with a career and family or his own. At first, he feels that he has become redundant. 'This is no country for old men,' he seems to be saying. It is worth mentioning, in passing, that one year after *Terrorist* was published, the film version of Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* won four Oscars.

Jack being a counselor at Central High will connect his narrative with Ahmad's in what will be considered here as the novel's cartography and the new prospects that it invites. So far, it is the high school which features prominently in this cartography, with Ahmad, and then Levy, then Joryleen, as the main presences territorializing its space. The final section of the novel, which rounds off the literary cartography of the fictional world, is meant, in the terrorist plot in which Ahmad has been led to get involved by what he had considered to be his spiritual father, Shaik Rashid, to feature the last section of his terrestrial journey before he reaches Allah the All Poweful: the Lincoln Tunnel, which connects New Jersey and Manhattan. Ahmad is driving his truck loaded with explosive from New Prospect, New Jersey toward the tunnel. When he is made to stop, because of the traffic, he is joined by the other surrogate father, ironically, the Jewish American Jack Levy. Levy has learnt about the plot and Ahmad's intention to blow his truck up while in the Lincoln Tunnel.

However, as the suspense builds up and the protagonist is about to push the button and become what the title of the novel says, the Lincoln Tunnel becomes a place of interaction and reunion. It becomes a place that brings together the funny African American kids making faces at him from the car moving ahead of him in the tunnel and the surrogate father sitting next to him, Jack Levy. The latter has chosen to risk his life and to ride with Ahmad toward a return to normal life or to nothingness, as he is not much of a believer, like his surrogate son, in an afterlife. The kids ahead of them complete the picture, stressing the importance of life in God's or Allah's plenty, where imperfection, innocence, diversity, and the commonality of human experience are brought together in a way that makes Ahmad remain what he actually is, a sensible, intelligent young American. What might have become

a 'landscape of fear,' to borrow Yi-Fu Tuan phrase,[2] has become a tunnel of human connection.

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[2] The title of Tuan's seminal work is *Landscape of Fear*.