

# Exemplary Exegeses: Sermons as Allegories of Interpretation in John Updike's *A Month of Sundays*

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*Do not, I beg you, reflexively spurn the interpretation which my meditation upon these portions of Scripture has urged to my understanding (A Month of Sundays, 46-7).*

In John Updike's diary novel *A Month of Sundays* (1975),<sup>1</sup> the narrator-protagonist, the Reverend Thomas Marshfield, is ordered to spend a month in a desert sanatorium because of his adulterous indiscretions amidst his New England congregation. As a curative method, Marshfield is to keep a diary every day. In addition to this, at his own will, Marshfield also prepares four sermons, one on each Sunday. In each sermon, Marshfield expounds on a biblical text, giving his interpretation or exegesis of it.

Marshfield uses the biblical texts as pretexts for justifying his own adulterous or otherwise unorthodox behavior. The sermons and the exegeses also have thematic underpinnings not only in *A Month of Sundays* but also in Updike's fiction in general, as Robert Detweiler has

<sup>1</sup> John Updike, *A Month of Sundays* (London: André Deutsch, 1987). All subsequent references to the novel are to this edition and will be preceded by the abbreviation MS.

shown.<sup>2</sup> Updike's conservative, mainly Karl Barthian, religious views and the theological themes in his novels are almost as well-known as his uninhibited depictions of sex. Along with graphic sex scenes, most of Updike's novels feature sections in which the characters go to church, listen to a sermon, and/or discuss religious problems.

The possibility of self-interpretation in the sermons has, however, been ignored in criticism. For instance, Detweiler sees the Updikean homilies as reading interludes commenting on such themes as carnality and theodicy; as interpretive discourse, the sermons are Ricoeurian "models of inauthenticity that undermine the tradition of realism and prepare the reading community for a reconsideration of the possibility of a mystery."<sup>3</sup> In my reading, the homiletic exegeses in *A Month of Sundays* function as allegories of the main possible ways of interpreting the whole novel. The sermons thus function as *exempla*, and they indeed seem to have been followed in the novel's actual critical responses which, transferentially, repeat main interpretive alternatives prefigured in the exegeses. Or to put it in a less totalizing way, the diverse readings of the novel to a degree resemble the interpretive options that the sermons present.

Why John Updike and *A Month of Sundays*? In my view, the seventies marked a definite change in Updike's oeuvre. *Rabbit Redux* (1971) did not solely represent the modernist-realist mode that used to be associated with Updike in the 1960s. The novel's traits of self-consciousness, metafictionality, and textual heterogeneity resembled the commonplaces of American postmodern writing. In their textual play and structural complexity, *A Month of Sundays* and *The Coup* (1978) featured postmodern characteristics in a more sustained way. However, in the eyes of most critics, Updike has remained the same realistic depicter of middle-class American life, of minor personal crises in suburban settings, that he was early in his career. By the same token, Updike is still set apart from the innovative postmodern American writers. However, many of

<sup>2</sup> Robert Detweiler, *Breaking the Fall: Religious Readings of Contemporary Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 91-121. Detweiler's account of the sermons in Updike up to *Roger's Version* is the most exhaustive one so far. Sermons also appear in Updike's *post-Roger's Version* output, most importantly in *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996). The sermon scene in *Toward the End of Time* (1997) somewhat parachronistically ridicules feminist theology.

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Updike's latest works can be read as inventive and self-conscious *experiments* in the sub-genres of the novel. For instance, *Roger's Version* (1986) is a combination of metaphysical science fiction and the detective novel, resulting in a kind of techno-theologic whodunit. *S.* (1988) revives the (female) epistolary novel. *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996) taps the conventions of the popular family saga and Hollywood novel, whereas Updike's latest novel, *Toward the End of Time* (1997), is a futuristic piece set in 2020, mixing science fiction with Thoreau-esque meditation of nature.

Although interpretive prefiguration does not necessarily imply literary self-consciousness, the emphasis on textuality, generic recycling, or other characteristics usually encountered in postmodern writing, such as the textual apparatus seems to call for the kind of reading I am about to perform on *A Month of Sundays*.

### **Reading before and after Reading**

My approach in this article ties in with the kind of narratology or reader-response criticism that investigates how fiction comments or, more systematically, interprets itself. The narrator's commentary can be conceived as a set of reading operations usually performed by the narratee(s) and readers, both implied and actual. The narrator thus functions as a precursive reader, at least supposedly helping actual reception. There are also characters who read or interpret in a narrative without being narrators or narratees, but who may have similar functions with regard to interpretive help. Characters, like real people in the real world, tend to interpret the events around them, and this activity not only "reads," i.e., decodes the fictional texts, but also bears some resemblance to actual readers' interpretive endeavors, "reads" their reading of itself.<sup>4</sup> This phenomenon is what Barbara Johnson calls "the transferential

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structure of all reading,"<sup>5</sup> and it is a recurrent interpretive concept in various recent approaches, ranging from psychoaesthetics to post-structuralist or deconstructive criticism.

Interpreting characters contributes to the actual reader's or interpreter's reception of the given work by assuming his or her role and thus foregrounding (at least some) interpretive strategies. An interpreting character can also function as a systematic reader, providing whole models for deciphering the text to such a degree that they seem to have "founded" critical schools of interpretation. In her discussion of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, Shoshana Felman shows how the novella provides the reader with the main possible interpretations of itself.<sup>6</sup> The text, Felman claims, anticipates critics' interpretations and disputes by dramatizing their very readings and disputes.

In a similar fashion, Barbara Johnson states that in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* the opposition between Billy and Claggart is also that between two models of reading, between two concepts of language.<sup>7</sup> The opposition between Billy and Claggart anticipates and dramatizes critics' conflicting interpretations of the novel. The two characters can be seen as founders of two main readings *Billy Budd* – "acceptance" and "irony" schools respectively – whereas Captain Vere holds a third, median position between these extremes, and reads historically.<sup>8</sup> Hence, as Johnson carefully argues, each actual interpretive stand seems to repeat positions already inscribed in the story.

To interpret narrative fiction in this manner is, of course, to read it allegorically. The need to interpret, and its conscious metacritical treatment inherent in allegory, have especially interested poststructuralist or deconstructionist critics. Paul de Man coined the term *allegory of reading*, which refers to the interpretive discrepancies and aporias disclosed by a rhetorical, figurative mode of reading. In his deconstructive

5 Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1982), p. 145. For a metacritical account of transference in critical discourse, see Mikko Keskinen, "Psychocultural Reception: On the Transferential Structure of Reading," in Erkki Vainikkala, ed., *The Cultural Study of Reception* (Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, 1993), pp. 101-114.

6 Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness: Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), p. 231.

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readings, de Man concentrated on those parts of texts that deal with their own functioning in the form of metalinguistic or metacritical statements. The metastatements are not necessarily explicit, but often need to be interpreted as being such. For example, the part in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* which prefers reading indoors to playing out in the sun can be read as a metafigural comment on the aesthetic superiority of metaphor over metonymy.<sup>9</sup> But a rhetorical reading of the passage discloses that the "figural praxis and the metafigural theory do not converge and that the assertion of the mastery of metaphor over metonymy owes its persuasive power to the use of metonymic structures."<sup>10</sup> A text not only shows the tropological aberration of its basic concepts, but also allegorically prefigures its misreadings or the impossibility of reading (adequately).<sup>11</sup> A text may present at least two mutually exclusive interpretations, thus inviting a deconstruction of itself, which makes real understanding (in the meaning of one totalizing interpretation) impossible.

In the present article, I shall use my own coinage *allegory of interpretation* as a counterpart to de Man's term. By preferring my own concept I wish to emphasize the allegory as a systematic and modeling principle rather than as an aporetic force. This is why I shall account for the Updike novel's actual (critical) reception and see if it follows the models provided by the text itself.

### Lawfully Married: Reading Mismatches

Marshfield cannot expound the Bible in the way he is used to: he lacks both the primary and secondary sources and, at the other end of the communication process, an actual audience, i.e., parishioners: "I must preach. But without a Bible, without a copious and insipid encyclopedia

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of sermon aids and Aramaic etymologies, without an organist, without a congregation" (MS, 41).

The text of the first sermon is from St. John (8:11): "Neither do I condemn thee." The text deals with adultery; the Pharisees accuse a woman of committing adultery but, instead of accepting Jesus's invitation to cast the first stone, flee. It is only then that Jesus utters those words and advises her to go and "sin no more."

After discussing the text's place in the Gospel by John and in the Christian canon in general, Marshfield suddenly pays attention to a seemingly marginal and contingent detail. While the woman was being accused by the Pharisees, Jesus "with His finger wrote on the ground, as though He heard them not" (MS, 42; John 8:9). The Gospel does not tell what Jesus wrote, but Marshfield interprets why he wrote: "He wrote idly, irritating His vengeful questioners, and imparting to us yet another impression of our Lord's superb freedom, of the something indolent and abstracted about His earthly career" (MS, 42). These words could describe Marshfield's writing as well: he partly writes what he writes to irritate his "questioner," Ms. Prynne. The parallel between Jesus and the Reverend as writers can be stretched further. John T. Matthews expounds on Jesus' cryptic writing:

Symbolically, his writing reflects his reinscription of the Old Testament law (and there is much interpretive speculation that Jesus actually begins to write out the laws covering witnessing, adultery, punishment, or even vindictiveness). He writes twice to signal, perhaps, that there is no difference between the original author and himself; his reinscription of the law may be an interpretation or reading of it, but his interpretation is authorized by the claim that "I and the Father are one."<sup>12</sup>

In a similar fashion, on the authority of his authorship, Marshfield reads, interprets, and reinscribes his own text by commenting and explicating it. The interpretation is supposedly correct, because the writer and the reader are one.

Marshfield also offers a radically new interpretation of marriage and adultery, as if to write out a new law concerning them. The Mosaic law stipulated death by stoning for an adulteress, but it also required at least

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two eyewitnesses to the crime. By forcing the Pharisees to recognize their own sinfulness, and thus to leave the woman alone with no one to witness against her, Jesus also makes it impossible for himself to condemn her without breaking the law.<sup>13</sup> In other words, Jesus reverses the spirit of the law by enforcing the letter of it. Marshfield applies a similar kind of reading method – turning a double-bind to work against itself; following a law to its extreme – to the problem of adultery. If looking at a woman "to lust after her," as Jesus put it in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt.5:28), means adultery, then it seems unavoidable since "who that has eyes to see cannot so lust?" (MS, 44) and since God ordered men to "be fruitful, and multiply" (Deut. 22:28). Thus, "[a]dultery is not a choice to be avoided; it is a circumstance to be embraced" (MS, 45). Consequently, adultery and marriage are not, according to Marshfield's reasoning, each other's opposites but secretly united: "Verily, the sacrament of marriage, as instituted in its adamant impossibility by our Saviour, exists but as a precondition for the sacrament of adultery" (MS, 47).

Marshfield follows Jesus' method in enforcing the laws and letting them develop until there is an aporia, a logical cul-de-sac. Unlike Jesus, however, Marshfield reverses the traditional hierarchy of marriage and adultery by making the former just a precondition of the latter. In doing so, Marshfield takes a non-deconstructive turn and privileges one term of an opposition over the other.

Although Marshfield seemingly harmonizes the opposites by distorting and manipulating the text so that they co-exist in a sacramental paradox, he cannot stop the opposing forces from undermining each other. At least the doubting reader or narratee is likely to assume that Marshfield's motivation for his reading of the text is to get a pretext for his behavior.

As an allegory of interpretation, Marshfield's reading is a cautionary tale of the power of binary oppositions in Western thinking: even a heretical reading of a sacred text adopts its logic, albeit in a reversed

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form. The sermon also exemplifies the tunnel vision brought about by the unproblematized presupposition of *man* standing for human beings in general. Marshfield's sophisticated (he does act like a sophist) reasoning of the unavoidability of adultery collapses when Jesus' teaching and Marshfield's question are read as a woman. In a heterosexual context at least, Jesus' statement that looking at a woman to lust after her equals adultery excludes women as possible adulteresses, or even as lusty beings. In a similar fashion, Marshfield's question – "who that has eyes to see cannot so lust?" – could be answered with the party he systematically ignores in his line of argument: a woman.<sup>14</sup>

Marshfield's two major flaws in his seemingly elaborate and innovative reading of the Bible allegorize two possibilities of a subversive interpretation of the whole novel: genuinely deconstructive and gender-conscious ones.<sup>15</sup> Marshfield's reading marries a mismatch on the preformative authority of a clergyman, but does not respect the rights of the significant other.

### **Seeking after a Sign(ifier): Generation of a Facetious Reading**

The second sermon deals with the miracles of Christ and how they have been interpreted. Marshfield proceeds on the basis of Jesus' response to his mother asking him to perform a miracle: "Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour has not yet come?" (MS, 102; John 2:4), and to the Pharisees seeking for a sign: "Why doth this generation seek after a sign? Verily I say unto you, There shall be no sign be given unto this generation." (MS, 102; Mark 8:12). Marshfield sees these instances as

14 Paradoxically, the womanizing Marshfield could be described with John's words depicting Jesus's perception after he made the Pharisees flee: "[he] saw none but the woman" (John 8:10). Marshfield looks at women – to lust after them but not to account for them.

15 For the few (at least partly) actualized deconstructive readings of the novel, see Robert Detweiler, "Updike's *A Month of Sundays* and the Language of the Unconscious," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* XLVII:4 (1979): pp. 609-25, and Matthews, pp. 351-80. For the seemingly oxymoronic "deconstructive theology" that Marshfield's exegesis resembles, see Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

proofs of the human being's insatiable appetite for miracles, for supernatural entertainment. On the other hand, there has been an opposite trend in conceiving the miracles. Marshfield introduces a German school of theologians who have tried to reduce the miracles to natural causes, of which he disapproves.

Marshfield offers a third possibility of interpretation by stressing the naturalness of the miracles (MS, 103), and the fact that many of them are festive or facetious (MS, 105). Marshfield perceives these non-healing miracles as a sort of comedy (MS, 105-06). For example, walking upon water, turning water into wine, blasting a fig tree, or conjuring a coin in a fish's mouth to be handed to a tax collector are given a reading which analeptically puts Jesus in the same line of comedians as W.C. Fields, Charles Chaplin, and Abbott and Costello. This offers another way of reading the whole novel.

Marshfield is supposed to write his diary to heal himself, to perform a sort of miracle, which, according to his own reading of Jesus' curative miracles, would not be humorous. But his account is comic, which seems to hint that he is not healed at the end of the novel.<sup>16</sup> Rather, Marshfield performs, in writing the diary, a facetious miracle of stylistic play, of innovative use of language. The second sermon thus allegorizes an interpretation accounting for the surface, for the signifiers of the novel, without regarding them as necessary and transparent vehicles for transmitting the inner meanings, the signified. This also implies that such a reading will not be as much interested in the novel's thematic concerns – at least if regarded as different from the form – as in the articulation or production of meaning.<sup>17</sup>

16 Because Jesus is finally resurrected and is thus alive in the end of his story, his life can be called comic, as opposed to tragic, which implies the protagonist's death (cf. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973], p. 43). Similarly, Marshfield survives, but it is questionable whether or not he really changes at the end or merely gives an illusion of it. The majority of critics have believed in Marshfield's change; the few doubting critics include H. Porter Abbott (*Diary Fiction: Writing as Fiction* [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984], p. 46), Carol Iannone ("Adultery, from Hawthorne to Updike," *Commentary* [October 1988]: 56), and Detweiler, *op. cit.* p. 104.

17 For example, Sue Mitchell Crowley ("John Updike and Kierkegaard's Negative Way: Irony and Indirect Communication in *A Month of Sundays*," *Soundings* 68:2 [1983]: 212-18) and Marie-Hélène Davies ("Fools for Christ's Sake: A Study of Clerical Figures in De Vries, Updike and Buechner," *Thalia* 6:1 [1983]: 64-67) emphasize the novel's playful, ironic, parodic, and humorous aspects. Both George Steiner and Donald J. Greiner point out the thematic function of the novel's style: "However, as in Joyce, so in this latest Updike it

It could be argued that those critics who appreciate Marshfield's comic style at the same time deny his overtly expressed change for the better; analogously, the critics, who do not find his discourse comic unwittingly, express their belief in his healing. Marshfield's double-bind thus covers, if we are to believe in the law of the excluded middle, the logical space of interpretation to the brim. As a stylistic and interpretive whole the novel's cup is even overflowing.

### The Location of Writing: Reading Spaces

The third sermon expounds on Deuteronomy (32:10): "He found him in a desert place."<sup>18</sup> The sermon's emphasis is on the 'environment, on the symbolic setting of the Bible. The desert is described as a sort of paper with characters inscribed on it: "but upon the desert [...] that encircles the world of Bible as parched sand girdles an oasis [...]" (MS, 161). On a more cosmic level, the earth can be seen as a sign spaced off by emptiness: "bitter black space surrounds our genial and hazy planet" (MS, 161).<sup>19</sup> Marshfield sees the desert in modern cities as well: "The pavements of our cities are deserted [...]. In our monotonous suburbs houses space themselves as evenly as creosote bushes, whose roots poison the earth around" (MS, 163).

Reading the textualized environment also ties in with the transcendental. The Spaniards named the Death Valley, "the harshest

<sup>18</sup> is in the puns and acrostics, even at their most brutal, that the heart of meaning lies" (Steiner, "A Month of Sundays: Scarlet Letters," in David Thurburn and Howard Eiland, eds., *John Updike: A Collection of Critical Essays* [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1979], p. 97); "How Marshfield says what he says is the key to his tale" (Greiner, *John Updike's Novels* [Athens: Ohio UP, 1984], p. 171). Such critics are, however, a minority among the professional readers of *A Month of Sundays*. Most critics have dismissed the novel exactly for its overabundant indulgence in "style" – jokes, Nabokovian wordplay, and excessive irony – which subordinates characters and serious thematic concerns. (For a useful survey of the novel's critical reception, see Greiner, pp. 170-71, 182-83).

<sup>18</sup> Marshfield, without a copy of the Bible available, replaces the original "land" with "place," which changes the extract from a geographical plane onto a more general one. The change may not be thematically coincidental, as I am trying to show in my reading of the sermon.

<sup>19</sup> Also in Updike's *Rabbit Redux*, the word *space* combines the cosmological with the typographical.



basin of the American desert," as *La Palma de la Mano de Dios* ("The Palm of God's Hand") (MS, 165). Thus, reading the environment is "palm reading," finding the supernatural in the natural. It also means, in Marshfield's rhetoric, finding life in what apparently looks dead, or at least giving a personifying reading of impersonal organisms:

And do we not see, around us [...], the Joshua tree lifting its arms awkwardly in prayer, and hear the organ-pipe cactus thundering its transcendental hymn? What a chorale of praise floats free from the invisible teeming of desert life [...]! [...] Living-stone cactuses mimic the stones they push between [...]. [...] The seeds of desert plants wait cunningly [...]. [...] the Mariposa lily remembers itself, and the sticky yucca blossom invites the yucca moth, and the night-blooming cereus its lunar brother, and the tiny claret-cup cactus holds up its cup to drink. (MS, 165-66.)

The desert is, then, like a book to be deciphered. Unlike a man-made book, however, this specific volume of the book of nature forms a natural narrative with an unconventional, transparent message: "What lesson might we draw from this profusion? The lesson speaks itself. Live. Live [...]." (MS, 166.)

As an allegory of interpretation, the sermon seems to direct the reader's attention to the letter, which "killeth not" but is similar to "the spirit which giveth life," to twist Paul's words (2 Cor. 3:6). According to Crowley, the sermon paradoxically shows how "the desert, our world, is at once dead [...] and alive [...]."<sup>20</sup> The ambiguity of the borderline between mutually exclusive categories was already introduced by the novel's second epigraph, in connection with soul; the peritext also made the first remark on universality and individuality. Put together, these references further reinforce the connection between the outer and the inner, between the world and diary, between environment and Marshfield. The text of the day allegorizes Marshfield's situation in two senses: he is supposed to find himself in the desert and, if the desert is metaphorically paper, by writing, by inscribing his narrative on it.<sup>21</sup>

As in the sermon, the environment is often seen as a sort of (arche)

<sup>20</sup> Crowley, "John Updike and Kierkegaard's...", p. 225.

<sup>21</sup> The "transferential" or allegorical nature of the day's text is hinted at the very beginning of the sermon: "Moses is speaking of Jacob, but it might well be of himself [--]" (MS, p. 161). Analogously, Marshfield is expounding on Moses' narrative of Jacob but is at the same time telling about himself. Marshfield's very name incorporates environmental opposites: *marsh* relates to nature, hostility, and disorder, whereas *field* is connected with culture, life-giving, and order.

writing, textualized entity in the novel. The motel itself "has the shape of an O, or, more exactly, an omega" (MS, 4).<sup>22</sup> Marshfield sees the rim pattern of a plate as "intertwined arabesques," which he had "traced and retraced with [his] eyes until it seemed the very pattern of eternity" (MS, 147). The desert sand is "parched" (MS, 161), dinosaur bones tell a "sedimental narrative" (MS, 179), apparently as clearly and unconventionally as the lesson above, and a barbaric doctrine is "preserved in the creed like iguanodon footprints in limestone" (MS, 209).

Marshfield's (arche-)writerly paradox which comprises such mutually exclusive entities as life and death, nature and culture, the inner and the outer, the singular and the general does not, however, manage to resolve the inner tensions between them. Rather, Marshfield's interpretive gestures, which aim at a reconciliation or a cancelling of oppositions, foreground the very artificiality and conventionality of such an interpretation. Nature seen as part of culture ceases to be nature. The personified or anthropomorphized wild nature is, in fact, cultivated, colonized by conventional language. In the metaphor of the book of nature, the main stress falls on the book.

### **Minding the Body: Solvent Reading**

The final sermon reads the fifteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the verse of the day being: "we are of all men most miserable" (I Cor. 15:19). Before going into the text's basic concern, the mystery of bodily resurrection, Marshfield digresses to narrate his experiences on a bus trip hosted by Ms. Prynne. When shopping for

<sup>22</sup> George Hunt (*John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things: Sex, Religion, and Art* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], pp. 187-88) provides a lengthy list of the omega's structural and thematic functions in the novel: it reflects the novel's structural shape; it ties in with religion, with the Book of Revelation in which Christ is described as Alpha and Omega; sexually, it connotes the female pudendum; and, as the last letter of the alphabet, suggests the limitations of writing as well as an allusion to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, which the novel rewrites. Suzanne Henning Uphaus (*John Updike* [New York: Ungar, 1980], pp. 100-01), for her part, sees the omega as a man's head and shoulders, which suggests that the novel's action takes place, at the first level, inside Marshfield's head.

souvenirs, Marshfield was offered two pamphlets by a religious youth, a freakish Jesus look-alike. The first text predicts the end of the world on the mixed basis of astrology, numerology, and eschatological historicism. As a whole, the pamphlet stands for overinterpretation, for an untenable reading. The pamphlet's style is in keeping with its content:

You see what Jesus show [sic] me? Isn't that wonderful how God shows His people! Begins the 12th (November), day after the *Peace, peace* and then on (January) 31st with war, war! Savvy? – And sudden destruction! You in the U.S. have only until *January* to get *out* of the States before some kind of disaster, destruction of judgment of God is to fall because of America's wickedness! (MS, 207; emphasis in original.)

But, as Marshfield suggests, this kind of overinterpretation is accepted by the critical community of "us," i.e., the congregation of ministers: "is not the content, as distinct from the style, the content of our life's call and our heart's deepest pledge?" (MS, 207). The other pamphlet provides, in contrast, a simplified, watered-down reading of the Atonement:

God is our great father in Heaven and we are his children on Earth. We've all been naughty and deserve a spanking, haven't we? But Jesus, *our big brothel*; loved us and the Father so much that he knew the spanking would hurt us both, so he offered to take it for us! (MS, p. 207; emphasis in original.)

But Marshfield expounds on this "exegesis" and, again asking for his congregation's support, finds its inner motivation similar to the first: "Does not this pornography of faith, like the pornography of copulation printed in the same grimy shop, testify to a needed miracle, a true wonder, a miraculous raw truth [...]" (MS, 208). Marshfield hence harmonizes and neutralizes the interpretive differences of the two models for reading by reducing them to articulations of the same urge to justify belief.

After, as it were, warming up his skill to see similarities within differences, Marshfield turns to the day's text proper. Dealing with the problem of resurrection in terms of body and soul, Marshfield comes to the conclusion that people exist as bodies and conceive afterlife as continuation of ordinary, mundane life in which they live corporeally (MS, 209). From Paul's insistence on Christ's bodily resurrection, Marshfield draws the conclusion that "the soul is also the body."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Greiner, *op. cit.* p. 169.

Marshfield, thus, "solves" the mind/body problem by equating what traditionally has been considered as antithetical. But another paradox remains, as Crowley puts it: "Paul's vision of immortality as a bodily resurrection is at once impossible and necessary to us."<sup>24</sup> This means that "[n]o man, unless it was Jesus, believes" (MS, 210). What human beings can only do is to "profess to believe" (MS, 210; emphasis in original).<sup>25</sup>

Besides the pamphlets and the biblical text, the sermon also alludes to Miguel de Unamuno, Henri Bergson, and Claude Pascal. Pascal's *pensée* on the fact that he is located in time and space, and the question who has put him there (Qui m'y a mis?) (MS, 211) does not only concern man's relation to God but also a fictional character's relation to his or her author. Marshfield claims, referring to his profession: "We do not invent ourselves [...]" (MS, 211). Only a few lines later, however, he writes about a Mandarin "composing" himself (MS, 211), i.e., arranging or writing his own life. Marshfield traces the presupposition in Pascal's question: "To ask the question is to imply an answer: there is a qui, a Who, who has set: we have not been accidentally fallen, we have been placed" (MS, 212). Trivially, Marshfield only exists, for us, in his own writing or composition. It is Marshfield who has put himself (and all the other characters) "there," in the book. But this does not imply that their existence has a specific reason or meaning. As Pascal's *pensée* puts it, "Il n'y a point de raison *pourquoi*" (MS, 212). However, Marshfield himself would probably not accept the transference of a religious axiom to the realm of his own writing. He does have a specific reason for writing, and his seemingly freewheeling discourse still aims at a definitive narrative closure. The last sermon "converts" Ms. Prynne to the Marshfieldian faith in desire: his words finally materialize as her flesh. The narrator and narratee momentarily become one flesh, dissolve into one another, but the narrative's asymmetrical power relations remain unresolved.

The fourth allegory of interpretation thus stresses the inner similarity and interchangeability of different approaches to a text on the basis that it contains one stable truth, be it as trivial as if someone has actually written

24 Crowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-26; emphasis in original.

25 The Reverend Clarence Arthur Wilmot in Updike's *In the Beauty of the Lilies* expounds on the same text (I Cor. 15:9) but with very different results. Wilmot cannot solve the mystery, except by drawing the conclusion that there is no God. Belief turns out to be, for Wilmot, necessarily impossible.

it, that various models diversely articulate it. The problem of different interpretations is "solved by dissolving their differences. On the other hand, the sermon allegorizes the narrative structure of the novel and the fictional status of its characters in a number of "metanarratological" ruminations.<sup>26</sup> The only way they exist "in the flesh" is in writing; to grasp or get hold of them is to deal with mental images brought about by letters on the novel's pages.

### Unruly Exemplarity: Reading Heretic Reading Heretically

*A Month of Sundays* differs from such texts as **Billy** Budd or *The Turn of the Screw* in that it does not present contestant interpretations personified by different characters. Marshfield does not indulge in interpretive quarrels with his fellow ministers, but the different readings are offered in his own homilies. One single narrator-protagonist seems to comprise the interpretive alternatives like the biblical man possessed by demons: "My name is Legion: for we are many" (Mark 5:9). Despite his singular appearance and autodiegetic position in the discourse, Marshfield seems to be demonically plural. But the diversity of his interpretations is partly an illusion. Each of the four sermons sets a paradox equating mutually exclusive alternatives. This equation, as I have tried to show above, does not fully succeed, but leaves room for a resisting reading which applies Marshfield's interpretations against his own reasoning.

Marshfield's four exegeses do not, as such, exactly cover the four main ways of interpreting the novel. The actual reader is not, hence, totally at the mercy of the exemplary exegeses in his/her pursuit of interpretation. For instance, the possibility of a resisting reading resides in what Marshfield ignores or suppresses. More fundamentally, to perceive and

<sup>26</sup> *A Month of Sundays* is the first novel by Updike to get a general metafictional reading, probably because the novel is so overtly self-conscious of its textual operations. For example, Hunt, *op. cit.* pp. 183-85 reads the novel through Robert Alter's standard study of self-conscious fiction, *Partial Magic*. See also Greiner, *op. cit.* pp. 172-73; Matthews *op. cit.*; Detweiler, *op. cit.*, pp. 609-12; and Judie Newman, *John Updike* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), pp. 109-14.

account for the prefigured models is not coded in the text, but come from without, e.g., from the critical community making it a legitimate approach at a certain historical moment (which I, for my part, hereby performatively prove).

The basic analogy between Marshfield's biblical exegesis and critical interpretation of the novel in which they appear yields interesting implications. To take the exegeses at face value is to grant the novel the status of the Bible, a sacred text, and Marshfield the role of Author-God. Also the very act of sermoning implies handing down interpretations from the heights of the pulpit. Only a heretic approach to Marshfield's heretic interpretations at least partly frees the reader from the "forced immanence" (MS, 23) of textually prefigured meanings. A heretic reader "willfully and persistently rejects" promoted meanings and "does not conform with an established attitude, doctrine, or principle."<sup>27</sup> This also applies to the narrative continuum of the four sermons as a whole; a heretic reading questions the narrative closure qua reconciliation and healing at the end of the novel that Marshfield explicitly promotes. On a structural basis, it could be argued that the fact that Marshfield is forced to write his diary, whereas the sermons are composed, voluntarily allegorizes the position where the reader's option for a heretic, resisting interpretation resides.

In this article, I have called Marshfield's sermons exemplary exegeses without problematizing the very exemplarity. Example, exemplum, and exemplarity are problematic both in theory and practice.<sup>28</sup> The practice of Marshfield's sermons and his exegeses in them demonstrate this problematic. Thus far I have read the sermons as allegories or models of interpretation and sought to find out if they have been followed in actual critical practice. But, bearing in mind the possibility that "all examples are not just exemplary examples but examples of example,"<sup>29</sup> this kind of reading turns out to be as insufficient as it is obvious. If Marshfield's

27 Cf. *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Portland House, 1989 ed.), s.v. 'heretic.' A heretic reading relates to choice (*heireisis*) as the etymology of the word suggests, but that choice is not made between the offered alternatives.

28 For discussions of many-faceted exemplarity, see, for example, the essays in Alexander Gellay, ed., *Unruly Examples: On the Rhetoric of Exemplarity* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995).

29 J. Hillis Miller, "Parabolic Exemplarity: The Example of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*," in Gellay, *op. cit.* p. 163.

exegetic examples thus turn to themselves, exemplifying exemplarity along with (or even rather than) models of interpretation, what features of example are hence exemplified? For example, the supposed clarifying function of the exegesises in regard to the possible interpretations of the novel rather problematizes them. On the other hand, the occasional obscurity of Marshfield's exemplary exegesises seems to shed light on, not what he apparently intends to hide, but on himself and his conduct. Thus, instead of suggesting that the reader follow the examples, s/he is forced to recognize the exemplary extra or surplus that gets unwittingly exemplified. Marshfield's urged interpretations are not to be spurned but reflected.