

Adultery as Writing and Language Games in John Updike's A Month of Sundays

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Abstract

Updike's A Month of Sundays tells the story of Thomas Marshfield, an adulterous minister that recalls Arthur Dimmesdale in The Scarlet Letter by Hawthorne. Marshfield writes playfully about his affairs with some female parishioners, trying to justify his extramarital sex on theological grounds. By contrast, Dimmesdale delivers speeches and agonizes over the sin of adultery. I will argue in this paper that Marshfield's embrace of adultery can be attributed to a Barthian thought consonant with the characteristics of writing while Dimmesdale's agony has something to do with the Puritan tenet continuous with the traits of speech. In Western tradition, speech is conceived as unified with truth while writing as risking the contamination of truth. The difference between speech and writing is significant when each is brought face to face with adultery, which is usually seen as a breach of the marriage contract. At another level, Puritanism and Barthianism can each be represented by the speaking subject and the pole of addressee in language games. The speaking subject is invested with the power of pronouncing what is the true being or the correct method. Hence, it is regarded as just to be brought into conformity with the true being. But the addressee can never emerge onto the status of the speaker since the former can never grasp the full meaning of the latter. Thus their ideas remain within the realm of opinions, unable to be made into the conclusions of a reasoning. This difference further explains the contrary attitudes held by the two priests toward adultery. This paper studies the literary representation of adultery in the two intertextual works to see how it responds to writing, speech, and language games.

摘要

鄂卜岱克的小說《避靜一月記》，以日記體方式敘述馬希菲爾德牧師的故事。這位因通姦而強制休息一個月的神職人員，讓人聯想到霍桑《猩紅字》的丁斯岱爾牧師。不同的是，前者用書寫方式論述自己的通姦始末，筆調戲謔詼諧，而且企圖從神學觀點為自己的婚外情辯護。丁斯岱爾牧師擅長演說，他的音調風靡無數信眾，但通姦罪行卻始終盤據他的心頭，終至讓他命喪演說台前。本論文從書寫與口說的差異，說明何以兩位牧師會對通姦有南轅北轍的態度。在西方形而上傳統裡，口說向被視為直接反應思維，因而契合真理，而書寫則有背離真理之虞。通姦是一種違背婚姻約定，另闢蹊徑尋求快感的作法。用口語與書寫來研究通姦，深具意義。自另一層次而言，語言遊戲裡的說話主體，有權宣佈何為正確方法，但受話者永遠無法成為說話主體，因為無法完全掌握言談的真正意義。受話者的觀念因而停留在意見的層次，無法成為推理的結論。兩者

的差異進一步說明清教思想何以痛惡通姦，而馬希菲爾德信服的巴斯神學，可以寬容通姦。本論文研究比較這兩本形成互文的作品，企圖從書寫、口說、語言遊戲三方面來探討通姦論述。

A Month of Sundays¹ (1974) tells the story of an adulterous minister that recalls the Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale in The Scarlet Letter (1850) by Nathaniel Hawthorne. As John Updike states in an interview, "I gave Dimmesdale's version . . . in A Month of Sundays" (Burgin 10). Set in late 1973, the Rev. Thomas Marshfield has a month of enforced rest and recreation in an Arizona desert retreat after his adultery being reported to the bishopric. The manageress of the omega-shaped "motel" is a lady called Ms. Prynne. As if to suggest her association with Hester Prynne of The Scarlet Letter, it is so recorded in Marshfield's diary: "Named, if my ears, still plugged with jet-hum, deceived me not, Ms. Prynne" (MS 6). Among other signs of their association, Ms. Prynne has a "figure of perfect elegance on a large scale . . . dark and abundant hair."² This is precisely how Hester Prynne is depicted by Hawthorne: "The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair" (SL 60). Another linkage to Hawthorne's masterpiece can be found in the name of his wife, Jane Chillingworth, and his father-in-law, the Doctor Reverend Wesley Augustus Chillingworth, professor of ethics at the divinity school he attends. The name Chillingworth evokes the wronged husband in The Scarlet Letter, Roger Chillingworth. Coupled by other parallel signs, the two literary works invite an intertextual reading.

Made up of the diary the Rev. Marshfield keeps in the retreat, A Month of Sundays deals with the issue of adultery from the perspective of the priest. During the month of recuperation, he writes *ad libidum* in the mornings and plays games in the afternoons and evenings. In the writing, he "preaches, jokes, confesses, analyzes, criticizes, pleads, and puns" (Schiff 22). There are mistypings in the play of language. There are playful narratives trying to justify adultery on theological grounds. Writing, originally designed to remedy his "distraction," turns out to egg him on to more wanton lewdness. Beginning somewhere in his diary entries, he suspects that his manageress, Ms. Prynne, has been stealthily reading his manuscript. A game of seduction thus starts as Marshfield writes along. By contrast, in The Scarlet Letter, the Rev. Dimmesdale is known for delivering speeches, not for writing. The resonance of his speeches has moved a great number of listeners to tears and firmed up their faith in the Christian God. Unlike Marshfield, he feels profoundly guilty of the adultery he has committed. Even his sermons are informed by a sense of guilt. He even "longed to speak out from his own pulpit at the full height of his voice, and tell the people what he was" (SL 140). In Marshfield and Dimmesdale, we see a difference in views on adultery and a contrast between writing and speech.

Great portions of Dimmesdale's speeches go unreported, however. Even those which are listed are put in writing, not audibly recorded. It would pose an

¹ For the sake of distinction, A Month of Sundays will be abbreviated as MS in parenthetical pagination while The Scarlet Letter as SL.

² The passage, which is quoted from MS 213, may give the impression that Ms. Prynne is as charming as Hester Prynne. In fact, she does not have the good looks of her opposite number. This is pretty evident from a much earlier description: "Face of a large, white, inexplicably self-congratulating turtle. White neck extended as if to preen or ease a chafing" (MS 6). The point to be made here is that Updike's reinscription is not meant to be an exact equivalent of signs. Rather it is done in terms of intertextuality.

insurmountable difficulty to really bring his spoken language to a comparison with Marshfield's written language. Under such a condition, Marshfield's playful writing offers an invaluable help in that it deliberately plays on the distinguishing trait of writing, that is, a digression from norm.³ Speech, by contrast, is traditionally conceived as closer to truth because it directly reflects human consciousness. The difference between writing and speech may thus be compared to that between a playful use of language and a common use of language. This difference, though at the risk of oversimplification, holds a key that may explain the varying views held by the two priests on adultery.

Adultery is objectionable to some people because it undermines social order, law, and authority. But in transgressing the constraints of marriage, it promises passionate abandon which may awaken institutionally stifled impulses. To thinkers and writers alike, the appeal of adultery lies, as Georges Bataille asserts in *Eroticism*, precisely in the possibility of freeing up "full and limitless being" confined "within the trammels of separate personalities" (109, 21). Tony Tanner goes one step further in linking the 'chaos' of adultery to the 'chaos' of language. In his *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression*, he suggests that "[p]uns and ambiguities are to common language what adultery and perversion are to 'chaste' sexual relations" (53). By extension, in *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes claims the relationship among writer, text and reader to be an erotic one. He clearly favors *jouissance*, the extreme and disconcerting enjoyment, over *plaisir*, a homely enough feeling, since the former "unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language" (14). *Plaisir* obviously is associated with marital sex while *jouissance* with adultery.

Issues surrounding adultery boil down to whether one should submit unconditionally to the dictate of a norm or a contract. The answer coming from language games⁴ is a definite no. In *Just Gaming*, Jean-Francois Lyotard insists that it is illusory to seek to ground prescriptive statements on descriptive, or theoretical, statements. As it is impossible to derive obligation, he suggests that people pattern themselves after a pagan,⁵ who "effects new moves" and "opens up the possibility of new efficacies in the games with their present rules" (62). This is similar to what

³ In Western metaphysical tradition, writing has been considered twice removed from truth because it does not have direct access to human mental activities. From the perspective of Jacques Derrida, writing is not secondary to speech, nor is it merely an instrument of the mind. Writing, according to Derrida, is rather a process of self discovery. These two viewpoints do not see writing as a faithful reflection of the image forming in the mind.

⁴ The term "language game," in the words of Ludwig Wittgenstein, "is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (Wittgenstein, sec. 23). This suggests the coexistence of innumerable language games, "without any one of them being able to claim that it can say all the others" (Lyotard, *Just* 58). As Lyotard points out in *The Postmodern Condition*, each of them is defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put" (10). Though no game is possible without rules, "rules do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players" (10). The gap between rules and legitimation is rephrased in *Just Gaming* as the relation between two language games: that of prescription and that of description.

⁵ A pagan is a person who believes in many gods. But as is used by Lyotard, it refers to a person who practices paganism. As he puts it in *Just Gaming*, "when I speak of paganism, I am not using a concept. It is a name . . . for the denomination of a situation in which one judges without criteria. And one judges not only in matters of truth, but also in matters of beauty (of aesthetic efficacy) and in matters of justice, that is, of politics and ethics, and all without criteria. That's what I mean by paganism." (16)

Liotard calls maximization of concept: "A sort of field where one can run and let oneself go to see how far one can reach with a given concept" (75). The language games as elaborated on by Lyotard talk about freeing up new possibilities of rules by challenging the alleged link between prescription and description.

Bringing these ideas to bear on adultery as intertextually represented in the two works, I will argue in this paper that Marshfield's embrace of adultery can be attributed to the prevalence of a milieu consonant with the characteristics of writing and language games. I will also argue that Dimmesdale's profound sense of guilt has something to do with a setting continuous with speech. Treated in terms of intertextuality,⁶ Marshfield and Dimmesdale may each be seen as embodying a concept of adultery placed within varying systems of signs, thereby providing the forum for a dialogue between the present and the past.⁷ On the surface, adultery repeats itself in every society and every era. But a closer analysis will reveal difference behind every repetition. Each concept changes with the shift of frame. This paper uses The Scarlet Letter and A Month of Sundays as examples to study how discourses of adultery change in terms of speech, writing, and language games.

In The Scarlet Letter, Hester Prynne advises Dimmesdale to flee the New World and place himself "among the wisest and the most renowned of the cultivated world. Preach! Write! Act! Do anything, save 'to lie down and die!' Give up this name of Arthur Dimmesdale and make thyself another" (SL 188). This advice seems to be heeded. For in A Month of Sundays, the name of the priest is now Thomas Marshfield. And he is placed in America of 1970s, generally considered the most advanced in the world. He literally preaches, writes, and acts. There is ironically a Ms. Prynne who reviews his manuscript. At the end of his fourth written sermon, a comment scribbled by her runs, "Yes--at last, a sermon that could be preached" (MS 212). He acts, instead of bowing down to a sense of guilt born of adultery. Writing does help him shake off the fetters of a convention that forbids adultery.

By contrast, Arthur Dimmesdale is given prominence in his role as an eloquent speaker. The Puritan priest, "gnawed and tortured by some black trouble of the soul" (SL 138), has achieved a brilliant popularity by giving speeches. Speech appears to resonate with a mind that is bound by the norm, any violation of which evokes a profound sense of sin. Judging by his near-total submission to orthodoxy, it is appropriate that Dimmesdale is portrayed as a person who delivers speeches, instead of writing. For speech has traditionally been conceived of as giving access to truth through its proximity to a self-present consciousness while writing is dismissed as obstructing that access by replacing an ideal transparency with its opaque material inscriptions. The logocentric prejudice always identifies truth and reason with the instance of spoken language whereas truth, if put into writing, risks contamination. In a community where adultery is strictly prohibited, it is only natural that an effective

⁶ By intertextuality, I am referring to that originally introduced by Julia Kristeva and defined as the transposition of one or more systems of signs into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position. This process comes about through a combination of displacement and condensation, and also involves the destruction of the old position and the formation of the new position. For more detail, please see Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language 59-60.

⁷ In "Esch Is Luther," Milan Kundera raises this idea. He declares: "I thought of the art of the novel, which, alone of all the arts, is capable of becoming that privileged place where humanity's distant past can converse with its present. To arrange this rendezvous seemed to me one of the three or four great tasks, one of the three or four great possibilities available to the future of the novel" (780).

orator like Dimmesdale is depicted as a person tormented by an act violating what is commonly taken as truth and reason.

To explore the cause or causes behind the formation of Dimmesdale's attitude, we may start with the sacred office he holds. As a clergyman, he is at the head of the social system then. In his capacity as a priest and at the top echelon of social ranks, he is "only the more trammelled by its regulations, its principles, and even its prejudices" (SL 190). Hence, he has "never gone through an experience calculated to lead him beyond the scope of generally received laws" (SL 190), as he is predisposed to fixity, orthodoxy, and restriction. "In no state of society would he have been what is called a man of liberal views" (SL 122). Faith gives him the spiritual anchor while confining him within its iron framework. In an emotional outpouring in the presence of Hester Prynne, he laments: "Were I an atheist--a man devoid of conscience--a wretch with coarse and brutal instincts--I might have found peace, long ere now" (SL 182). "Atheist" is a key word to notice. If he were an atheist, he might be a person who, as Lyotard suggests, "effects new moves" and "opens up the possibility of new efficacies in the games with their present rules," instead of believing in "the signified of what they are saying," or "stick[ing] to this signified," or "think[ing] that they are in the true" (Lyotard, *Just* 62). But as a Puritan priest, he cannot turn a blind eye to the contrast between what he seems and what he is after committing adultery. For he is bound by the conviction that "experience has a fixed meaning and moral significance" (Brodhead 156).

The source of this conviction can be found in Puritan theologies. In John Calvin's formulation, a "sense of divinity" or a "seed of religion" is engraved in the hearts of every human being.⁸ At the moment of conversion, the innate reason is elevated as grace realigns it "according to the laws of 'method'" (Miller 200). "Faith is but the lifting up of the understanding, by adding a new light to them" (Miller 200). It is the sight of existing truths, exactly as a telescope is the revelation of new stars. The real meaning of the Word of God "will be forthcoming if the Word of God is studied by the true method" (Miller 203). Put in this light, experience has a fixed meaning and moral significance. The lifting up of understanding, the elevation of reason, or the realignment according to the laws of method bespeaks the moment of conceptual *Aufhebung* --"the emergence of a logic or an order of meaning undreamt of previously" (Norris, *Derrida* 72). Speech is privileged over writing in conveying the moment of revelation. In the metaphysical tradition, speech thus unifies with truth and reason.

The union of speech with truth and reason finds a good example in the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. Speeches delivered by him are regarded by audiences as inspired by the Deity. The people "fancied him the mouthpiece of Heaven's messages of wisdom and rebuke and love" (SL 139). On the Election Sermon, his eloquent voice has carried the souls of the audience so aloft that it meets with universal praises. As people attending that speech report, never had inspiration "breathed through mortal lips more evidently than it did through his. Its influence could be seen . . . descending upon him, and possessing him . . . and filling him with ideas that must have been as marvellous to

⁸ In his highly influential writing, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), Calvin identifies two main grounds of a general knowledge of God. The first ground is a "sense of divinity" or a "seed of religion" implanted within every human being by God. It is as if something about God has been engraved in the hearts of every human being. The second ground lies in experience of and reflection upon the ordering of the world. The fact that God is creator may be gained from an inspection of the created order. The above information is indirectly quoted from Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*, 152-53.

himself as to his audience" (SL 231-32). To his audiences, the Holy Spirit reveals itself through the speeches of the priest. The Rev. Dimmesdale also looks upon himself as a medium of God's revelation. The sense of sin arising out of adultery appears to him to have tarnished this medium. That is why he resorts to self-flagellation in order "to purify the body and render it the fitter medium of celestial illumination" (SL 141). In the Puritan priest we see a "genuine impulse to adore the truth" (SL 139), and "a professional teacher of the truth" (SL 149). The apt tool he adopts to convey what is deemed the God-inspired truth is speech.

In our analysis of the union between speech and truth, we find it is the sense of sin that makes the preacher's sermons so effective and so forceful. At least twice after ravaging moments of deep remorse does Dimmesdale preach to a chorus of praises and warm responses. The awareness of sin brings him down to the level of his listeners so that he can sympathize with their sufferings and speak to them "in the heart's native language" (SL 138). Those with their purity of life, however, fail to have their speeches strike deep into the minds of the people for they do not speak the same language. Similar ideas can be found in Calvin's understanding of Christianity. Calvin argues that "God reveals himself verbally, in the form of words" (McGrath 130). In revelation, Calvin asserts, "God adjusts himself to the capacities of the human mind and heart. God paints a portrait of himself which we are capable of understanding" (McGrath 130). This idea of divine accommodation to human capacities in revelation points to God's design to "convince and convict us of our sin" just as "human rhetoric in a court of law is designed to secure a verdict" (McGrath 132). By lowering himself to the level of his listeners, Dimmesdale is made more aware of his own sin.

The sin of adultery does not dissipate because the preacher allows that awareness to color his speech. Instead, Dimmesdale is driven more and more desperately into the scene of unbosoming himself in public before meeting his death. It seems that the sense of sin is steadily tightening its grip over him as he sinks into the pattern of remorse and speech. From the earliest equivocation with which he addresses Prynne, "if thou feelest it to be for thy soul's peace . . . I charge you to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer" (SL 73), to the second scaffold scene where he responds at the prodding of Pearl, "Then, and there, before the judgment seat, thy mother, and thou, and I, must stand together. But the daylight of this world shall not see our meeting!" (SL 149), and finally to the last scaffold scene, "in the name of Him . . . to do what . . . I withheld myself from doing seven years ago" (SL 235). He is convinced and convicted of his own sin. Speech and its related factors conspire to imprison him within a framework of iron-clad belief which does not admit of any transgression without bringing the offender to see his own sin.

As adultery transgresses the contract of marriage, Dimmesdale can never bring himself to see this act as anything other than a deadly sin. It keeps his conscience "in an irritated state" and threatens "to disorganize and corrupt his spiritual being" (SL 184). But Hester Prynne sees adultery in a different light. She tells the guilt-ridden priest, "What we did had a consecration of its own" (SL 186). Their extramarital sex indeed can find a justification in it if its circumstances are taken into consideration. First of all, it occurs after a long period of separation from her husband who may most likely be at the bottom of the sea. Besides, it is unrealistic to expect a young and beautiful wife to persevere with a marriage arranged out of the possible consideration to help her poverty-stricken family. A marriage with an old and deformed scholar, unless strengthened by a keen love, can hardly fortify itself against the intrusion of a young, charming, and popular priest. As if to reflect the sacred picture she depicts of adultery,

the scarlet letter A she is condemned to wear on her chest is artistically embroidered. In her hands a sign of stigma is turned into a dazzling work of art. What the letter A stands for also undergoes a change from the intended "adultery" to "able" and finally to "angel." Refusing to be bound by the world's rule and guidance, she assumes "a freedom of speculation" (SL 159) not found on the part of Dimmesdale. It enables her to see new promises of adultery.

But to the Puritan priest, adultery does not mean new possibilities but rather an endless curse. It agonizes and tortures him. The three scaffold scenes testify to the intensity of his suffering. The source of this stinging infliction is, as indicated in our earlier discussion, his Christian faith. Its binding force can be detected from the distracted state Dimmesdale is in after leaving the forest where he has accepted Hester Prynne's advice to start a new life elsewhere. "What is it that haunts and tempts me thus?" cries the minister to himself. "Am I mad? or am I given over utterly to the fiend? . . . And does he now summon me to its fulfilment, by suggesting the performance of every wickedness which his most foul imagination can conceive?" (SL 208). Here we are given a glimpse of what a person will act when denied the accustomed guidance and rule. Unregulated behavior may reveal in each act new possibilities though it may violate existing laws. But the Puritan preacher, with his "natural piety," to borrow Chillingworth's observation of him, frowns upon it as a wicked performance. The reluctance or fear to transgress morally sanctioned codes explains why he can never overcome his perception of adultery as an unforgivable sin.

This suggests the burden of faith and moral codes. In the forest scene, Dimmesdale laments, "Were I an atheist--a man devoid of conscience--a wretch with coarse and brutal instincts--I might have found peace, long ere now" (SL 182). Were he an atheist or a pagan,⁹ Dimmesdale might be given a chance to rival Hester Prynne, who has "wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness" (SL 189). It is a state similar to what Lyotard calls paganism--"a name for the denomination of a situation in which one judges without criteria" (Lyotard, *Just* 16). Without the assurance of criteria, one is placed in a situation where it is necessary to keep inventing new criteria in order to make judgment. One works case by case. Instead of seeking for the basis of all statements, "one will realize that practice constitutes a new context for the statements of the constitution, and that this context requires that such and such a thing be prescribed" (Lyotard, *Just* 28). The emphasis on context-specific prescriptions precludes the possibility of a metalanguage.¹⁰ In other words, as every statement is in the same sphere of language games, no discourse can emerge from the realm of opinion into that of knowledge or theory. Hence, no theoretical discourse can be taken as the basis of its statements.

Christian faith has long been taken as a metalanguage. Christian God is allegedly the source of all truths. He is a master of the word and his word is performative. In the

⁹ An atheist, of course, is different from a pagan. A Marxist is technically an atheist but he or she is convinced of a society's justice if it models itself on a true and correct description. This is what distinguishes a Christian from a pagan. But there are many types of atheists. Here it is used in the sense of "a man devoid of conscience" and "a wretch with coarse and brutal instincts," instead of a person bound by a belief in a true being. In this way the two share the idea that prescriptions "are not derived from an ontology" (Lyotard, *Just* 59).

¹⁰ Lyotard uses the term metalanguage to refer to a descriptive or theoretical statement that serves as the basis of prescriptive statements. In formulating the concept of paganism, he argues against the grounding of prescription on description or cognition to drive home the idea of judging without criteria.

words of Martin Luther, "God reveals himself to us, as the Speaker, who has, in himself, an eternal uncreated Word, whereby he created the world and all things, with slight labour, namely, with speech, so that to God it is not more difficult to create than it is to us to name" (qtd. in Feuerbach 79). Here God is depicted as the Speaker who created the world and all things with speech. All the thought is centered on the speaking subject, a subject "that speaks, that does, and that causes to do" (Lyotard, *Just* 37). The relation of the addressee to this author of meaning, according to Lyotard, is that of servitude. It represents the deep conviction that one will be just if one is brought into conformity with this true being. We see in this command the source of what torments the pious Dimmesdale.

To the Puritan priest, the torture comes from a compulsive desire to conform to a God who is the paragon of perfection, the model of reason, and the source of ultimate truth. Hence, the Rev. Dimmesdale wonders "that Heaven should see fit to transmit the grand and solemn music of its oracles through so foul an organ-pipe as he" (SL 212). His puzzle arises from a perceived gap between God's grand perfection and his own debased foulness. In Puritan theologies in seventeenth-century New England, there were eager attempts to apply the correct method and there were also eager attempts to reveal the "seed of religion" engraved in the hearts of every human being. "Puritan theologians were ready . . . to interpret [the Bible] by deductions according to reason's laws articulated in dialectic" (Miller 202). What follows from these is, if put in the terms of language games, to ground prescriptive statements on descriptive or theoretical statements. In the case of the Rev. Dimmesdale, the sense of sin is derived from the failure to pattern his behavior after the source of all truths.

But if Dimmesdale were born in a different age and had a different version of faith, what would become of him? Would he still be tortured by the act of adultery? In the Rev. Thomas Marshfield we find a perfect case to examine the issue of adultery as it is embedded in a different circumstance. As mentioned near the beginning of the paper, *A Month of Sundays* is made up of the diary Marshfield keeps in the retreat. The medium used to express his views is writing, not speech, which is exactly the opposite of Dimmesdale's case. Writing, in fact, is intended to be a cure of adultery. In *A Month of Sundays*, as James Schiff argues, "there is undoubtedly a strong relationship between writing and adultery" (26). But as John T. Matthews suggests, "Marshfield comes to understand that writing repeats . . . adultery" as it tries "to cure it" (156). Besides, Marshfield is a Barthian. "[T]he central concept in Updike's utilization of Barthian theology is that God is 'Wholly Other,' that there is an abyss between the human and the divine that no bridge can cross."¹¹ Since God is Wholly Other, it is impossible to know for sure the divine plan. As a result, what is deemed ethically or morally good may not be so in the eyes of God. This idea holds the promise of weakening the Puritan tenet of conforming to the true method.

The impact of Barth's theological thoughts on the discourse of adultery will be dealt with in terms of language games. Writing, as mentioned in our earlier discussion, also has a close relationship with adultery. Before going further with the complicated issue of writing, I will begin by exploring the implications of the Barthian preaching,

¹¹ The passage is quoted from James A. Schiff, *Updike's Version: Rewriting The Scarlet Letter*, 30. But the information contained in it comes from George W. Hunt, S.J., *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things: Sex, Religion, and Art*, 18; Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 24. Barth is a very influential neoorthodox Swiss. His major ideas can be summed up as follows: Faith in divine revelation is central while ethics is insignificant.

specifically its effect on adultery. The Barthian conception of God as "Wholly Other" recalls the Jewish thought or Levinas's thought. Levinas's thought, according to Lyotard, privileges the pole of the addressee, which marks a significant shift from the idea of the Christian God as the speaking subject. The core of Levinas's thought on this is "that the one who speaks is always the other, without a capital o. It is always the one who is speaking to me, and inasmuch as he is issuing prescriptions to me or asking me something while talking to me, I cannot put myself in his place. . . . since his request cannot come from me" (Lyotard, *Just* 39). The unbridgeable difference between the speaking subject and the addressee is in a way similar to the irreducible gap between the word of God and the word of man, as the title of a book by Barth suggests.

In *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Barth argues that God's will is discontinuous with man's. "His will is not a corrected continuation of our own. It approaches ours as a Wholly Other" (24). Even the righteousness of our morality, of the state, or of the law, as Barth contends, is far from the manifestation of God's will. He goes on to ridicule the Kantian ethics, which he considers the most significant of its kind, as founded on a presupposition which turns against all humanity. "Kant grounds the conception of the moral personality on the idea of the autonomous will, but he teaches that the only will that can be called good is one that governs itself according to a law . . . superior to any self, universally applicable, and capable of being accepted as a law for all humanity" (152-53). Since no personality has their will governed by the idea of humanity, no pure, autonomous human being with a good will, Barth asserts, ever lived or will live in our world. Thus, Barth calls on every individual to follow conscience, "in which God's righteousness is manifest" (10), instead of seeking freedom in things human, including church. The call for a direct communion with God via one's conscience is followed by an urged return to faith, which means "letting God speak within" (25).

The Barthian conception may raise serious doubt about its fundamental difference from Puritanism since both emphasize the seed of faith within us. But in *A Month of Sundays*, the Rev. Marshfield, an avowed Barthian, is not crushed down by adultery, but rather finds his own act justified on theological grounds. By contrast, the Rev. Dimmesdale, the Puritan priest, is tortured by adultery and finally succumbs to a keen sense of sin arising from it. There must be some significant difference between the tenets of these two theologies which accounts for the widely different results. I will attempt to clarify their difference in terms of language games. Puritanism is shown to privilege the speaking subject in our earlier discussion. I will argue that the Barthian thought valorizes the pole of the addressee, just like the Jewish or Levinas's thought.

The Barthian emphasis on the dictate of conscience, at the first glance, may give the impression that God is once again privileged as the speaking subject. But a closer analysis may reveal otherwise. To borrow Levinas's thought in our elaboration, the relation with God as the Wholly Other or, as he calls it, the Absolutely Other "is such that the request that is made of me by the other, by the simple fact that he speaks to me, is a request that can never be justified" (Lyotard, *Just* 22). The model here is the relation of God to the Jewish people, with God's initial statement to Moses: "Let them obey me!" But what should they obey? The content of the act of obedience is not immediately known. On the one hand, the Jewish God puts himself in a prescriptive position without describing what it is he is prescribing. On the other hand, one is put in a condition of listening to a discourse that does not describe anything. In both cases, the

addressee is unable to put himself in the position of the sender of the statement because he can never be sure of its meaning.¹²

As the privileging of the pole of the addressee suggests, no one can emerge from the position of listening and come to have a full grasp of the utterer's message. In other words, nobody has a totalized view of anything, nor can anyone synthesize it into a unifying meta-discourse. Prescription thus remains within the realm of opinions and can never find its grounding in a descriptive or theoretical discourse. With prescription left hanging in midair, to be just is no longer a matter of conforming to laws. It poses a sharp contrast to the entire ontological tradition, especially Puritanism, which teaches that one will be just if brought into conformity with the true being. The difference between Puritanism and Barthianism lies precisely in their attitude toward conformity.

The Barthian attitude is clearly a refusal to be bound by prescriptions. The dictate of conscience, which Barth takes as God speaking within, is never anything other than a discourse that describes nothing. The addressee thus cannot put himself or herself in the position of an utterer since its exact meaning can never be grasped. In other words, he or she can never emerge from the sphere of partial knowledge onto a vantage point which commands a full view. Put under this perspective, every prescription is no more than the statement of an opinion, one not pegged to a descriptive or theoretical discourse. Hence, Barthianism turns away from a conformist attitude and adopts a more flexible approach. It is a posture which can be aptly described as "the maximization of concepts."

Concept, according to Lyotard, has "the status of knowledge or rational politics" (Lyotard, *Just* 75). Related to it is Idea, which "is an almost unlimited use of the concept: one has concepts, and one maximizes them. . . . A sort of field where one can run and let oneself go to see how far one can reach with a given concept" (Lyotard, *Just* 75). Formulated in this way, Idea loosens up the restraint of concept because it does not stick to a fixed point, hence without a true being to conform to. But, unlike theories raised by some poststructuralists, it does not signal the reign of nihilism. The maximization of concept, instead, implies a finality or a horizon, within which we are allowed to make judgment.¹³ This finality or horizon is a vaguely defined field in which not one, but many options, can be found. The idea of having a distinguishing characteristic without being explicit about it is also seen in the Barthian conscience. It serves as a basis to regulate our judgment without handing out iron-clad rules. By giving a sense of being good or bad, right or wrong, it does not tell you exactly what to

¹² Here I would elaborate on this idea by quoting a passage from Lyotard's *Just Gaming*:

God commands. One does not know very well what he commands. He commands obedience, that is, that one place oneself in the position of the pragmatic genre of obligation. . . . God himself we know nothing about; there is nothing to say about it. . . . There is a law, but we do not know what this law says. . . . "Be just." But we do not know what it is to be just. (52)

¹³ In *Just Gaming*, Lyotard declares that although he cannot say what is just, he is certain of what is unjust. He proceeds to cite suppression of different views as a glaring case of injustice. From what is unjust, he argues, emerges a finality or a horizon, within which we can judge what is just. As a further elaboration, what is deemed unjust is a concept. To maximize this concept, we may derive a wide set of what is just. What is noteworthy, it does not impose on us the only rule of justice, nor does it fall into the realm of nihilism. To our discussion of adultery, these two points are particularly significant. Adultery is not something to be encouraged or promoted. But it is simply inhuman to honor the sanctity of marriage at whatever cost to either party of the married couple.

do. In an epigraph to *A Month of Sundays*, Paul Tillich is quoted as saying, "This principle of soul, universally and individually, is the principle of ambiguity." Just as it is ambiguous, a considerable latitude is thus allowed in choosing to do what the conscience prompts.

In *A Month of Sundays*, the leeway gives the Rev. Marshfield a chance to develop a perspective radically different from the Rev. Dimmesdale. As a Protestant minister "publicly pledged to goodness and fidelity," Marshfield, however, "evinces no distinct guilt" even when he "scorns his wife, betrays one mistress, is [i]mpotent with another, exploits the trust and unhappiness of some who come to him for guidance" (MS 202). Instead, he has "a sense of events as a field of rubble in which he is empowered to search for some mysterious treasure" (MS 202). In fact, he is looking for new possibilities in events happening to or around him. Worldly views cannot tie him down, nor can the church. This attitude is reflected in his hostility toward ethics and also in his skillful use of the Bible to defend acts of adultery. Compared with Dimmesdale's conformist attitude, Marshfield's refusal to be bound by prescriptions reveals a Barthian mindset.

As the Rev. Marshfield admits, "Reading Barth gives me air to breathe" (MS 90). Karl Barth's prose is categorized by him as among the few positive things in life. Wesley Chillingworth, professor of ethics, even goes so far as to ask him in some interviews: "What is it . . . that you find so heartening in Barth? Wherein lies this specificity that pleases you?" (MS 55). The old scholar's questioning may sum up the enmity existing between Barthianism and ethics. Ned Bork, Marshfield's assistant minister, is more explicit in his criticism: "It sets up a diastasis with nothing over against man except this exultant emptiness. This terrible absolute unknowable other. It panders to despair" (MS 90). But to Marshfield, "Doing right is, to too great an extent, a matter of details, of tinkering. That great gush of heavenly excessus runs dry in a desert of rivulet distinctions. . . . Ethics is plumbing, necessary but dingy. Ethical passion the hobgoblin of trivial minds" (MS 192). This statement partly explains why ethics never appeals to him.

In fact, ethics and social service represent everything he hates about academic religion and church work. As Marshfield preaches in his sermon, God's way is not ours. To him, it is an absolutely unknown other. What follows from this argument is that doing right is irrelevant to God's will. This distrust in morality can be traced to Karl Barth, who ridicules even the Kantian ethics as founded on a presupposition which turns against humanity. In *A Month of Sundays*, Dr. Chillingworth's course in ethics is satirized for "its safe and complacent faithlessness, its empty difficulty . . ." (MS 50). Kant's categorical imperatives and *Achtung*, or respect, are made comical when the intrusion of this portion coincides with Jane, the old professor's daughter, allowing the young Marshfield to caress her breast through her sweater. Hegel's identification of morality with the demands of the state is given a ironical twist by the arrangement that it occurs in synchrony with the free access of his hand to her breast. Ethics stands exposed as "slave virtues" and "herd virtues." The disparaging of ethics extends to social service of church work. The church's social service is caricatured as preposterous. The conception of ethics and social service as inadequate underlies the Barthian emphasis on the dictate of conscience, which is allegedly the voice of God speaking within.

Stripped of rigid restrictions, Marshfield follows the prodding of his mind and openly embraces adultery. In one of the sermons written during his one-month stay in the retreat, the priest cites the Bible to support his reading that Jesus and God do not

oppose adultery. His interpretation is an obvious departure from the orthodox reading, revealing ambiguity existing in written language. Put in the light of language games, biblical precepts are concepts which can be maximized to "see how far one can reach with a given concept" (Lyotard, *Just* 75), once the authority of the signified is dethroned. In other words, when the required conformity to a true method is ignored, a new horizon may emerge and unfold its various possibilities. In the case of Marshfield, since ethics is discredited, prescriptions can no longer find an anchor in theoretical discourses, thereby losing their claim to a true being. The return to conscience helps lift the lid of a rigidified, monolithic sense and makes possible a flexible, multifarious reading.

Marshfield's unorthodox construal of the Bible is particularly striking in a sermon entitled "Neither do I condemn thee." The title is borrowed from the words Jesus said to the woman caught in the act of adultery and brought to him for a trial. After introducing this episode, Marshfield goes on to argue that adultery is our inherent condition. To support this argument, he quotes a passage from the Bible: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (qtd. in MS 44). Biblical scholars usually take this passage as an admonition against lusting after women, even mentally. But Marshfield has a different reading. "But who that has eyes to see cannot so lust? Was not the First Divine Commandment received by human ears, 'Be fruitful, and multiply'? Adultery is not a choice to be avoided; it is a circumstance to be embraced. Thus I construe these texts" (MS 44-45). To a conventional Christian, Marshfield's construal obviously contravenes the correct interpretation sanctioned by the church.

To denounce it as a misreading, however, misses a significant point in our discussion of a flexible, multifarious reading. For the fashionable idea that every reading is a misreading rules out the possibility of a correct reading. This hermeneutic tenet aside, the explosion of a glittering array of interpretations signals the collapse of a dominant code, a correct method, and a fixed significance. Together, their demise finds an echo in ethics being discredited. Just like concepts being maximized, conscience cleared of the bondage of ethics opens up many new possibilities. Hence, the First Divine Commandment, "Be fruitful, and multiply," can be recontextualized into a support of adultery. And Jesus's admonition against lusting after women can be turned into a precept that champions extramarital sex. The horizon allowed for possible meanings is surprisingly wide when the cap of sanctioned ideas is removed.

A striking similarity suggests itself between this and adultery. To commit adultery is, in a way, to explore new possibilities in the current marriage, though at the expense of wedding vows. Transgression does not mean to abolish the marriage contract altogether, but rather to challenge its restrictions and to test how far one can reach with the act of violation. The whole process occurs within the horizon of marriage, though the vows of staying faithful are not observed. Since marriage is established on a contract that spells out chastity, sexual impulses are stifled and chances of passionate love deliberately shunned. Adultery means to grab at chances that arise and to wake up institutionally stifled potentials. "To [marriage] we bring token reverence, and wooden vows; to [adultery] a vivid reverence bred upon the carnal presence of the forbidden, and vows that rend our hearts as we stammer them" (MS 47). In marriage and adultery, we see reflected the relationship between concept and Idea as well as that between ethics and conscience.

A similar pattern is enacted in the case of Marshfield. A Protestant minister with a Barthian mindset, he finds himself surrounded by an ethical wife who emphasizes the right thing. As he puts it, "under my good wife's administration sex had been a solemn, once-a-week business, ritualized and worrisomely hushed" (MS 34). Thus his encounter with the church organist, Alicia, stokes a fire which has been sputtering along. The affair enlivens a life bored by a wooden marriage bed. "Life, that's what we seek in one another" (MS 28). Adultery becomes a means not only to revive stifled sexual impulses, but also to help "the modern American man recover his sense of worth, not as dogged breadwinner and economic integer, but as romantic minister and phallic knight, as personage, embodiment, and hero" (MS 46). In the adulterous minister's vision, what has been repressed or denied in marriage can be gratified in adultery.

Much like adultery, writing has the effect of waking up energy, which can lead to the creation of a new kind of expression. Adultery derives its creative force from the element of play which threatens the social order and law, while writing from its ambiguity which disrupts truth-claims. In the Western tradition, speech is adopted to communicate thoughts or ideas. But writing is seen as the secondary symbols, and so further removed from truth. Though, as Derrida argues, writing cannot be "totally inhabited by the voice,"¹⁴ it is "the 'free play' or element of undecidability within every system of communication" (Norris 28). That is why the element of play manifested in adultery can find its expression in writing. In its disruptive encounter with what is touted as truth, writing gains its force from the distance kept from mental activities. It is thus not a tool of the mind, nor an appendage of speech. "The metaphor of writing," as Derrida calls it, should be understood in this light. Since it is not transparent, writing problematizes the "pure and simple" presence, thereby promising to bring to surface what is called absence, or "the onto-theological exclusion of trace" (Derrida, *Writing* 197). Put in plain language, the ambiguity of writing may reveal a multiplicity of ideas behind a neat concept.

In *Orality and Literacy*, Walter J. Ong suggests that writing can greatly exceed the potentials of speech. As the first step out of the confines of oral utterance, he argues that "any semiotic mark, that is, any visible or sensible mark which an individual makes and assigns a meaning to" (84) can count as writing. Hence, a simple scratch on a rock, a notch on a stick, a footprint, or even a deposit of feces or urine can be writing to the person who sees a meaning in it. With writing in this full sense,

encoded visible markings engage words fully so that the exquisitely intricate structures and references evolved in sound can be visibly recorded exactly in their specific complexity and, because visibly recorded, can implement production of still more exquisite structures and references, far surpassing the potentials of oral utterance. (Ong 84-85)

Ong's idea about writing finds its predecessor in Plato's "Phaedo,"¹⁵ though it is stated in a different way. In the text, Plato has Socrates say that mind "is the cause of all" and it "places everything as it is best" (501). He complains that writing states "no valid causes of the arrangement of all things" (502). So, instead of relying on writing,

¹⁴ Derrida bases his argument on the reason that a necessary range of resources such as punctuations, spacing, diacritical marks exist only in the form of graphic inscription. To drive home his point, he even coins the word *differance*, which sounds exactly the same as *difference* but means differently. Besides, Derrida argues that writing can even exist separately from speech in such forms as sports and dance.

¹⁵ To have an idea of how Derrida reads this text, please refer to his "Plato's Pharmacy," *Dissemination*, 61-171.

"Socrates does by mind all he does" (502). The complaint about writing reflects an obsession with essence. Since writing may reveal intricate structures not conceived by mind, it is dismissed as confusing the essence of each thing. This is vividly seen in the following talk: "[I]f anyone tells me that anything is beautiful because it has a fine flowery colour or shape or anything like that, I thank him and let all that go; for I get confused in all those, but this one thing I hold to myself simply and completely . . . that what makes it beautiful is only that beauty" (504). Here is the abstract idea of beauty vs. the fleshed-out substance of "a fine flowery colour or shape or anything like that." As we can infer from it, Plato clearly has detected the potentials of writing to develop well beyond the control of the mind.

In *A Month of Sundays*, writing exhibits the power of discovering new aspects unknown to the mind. The opening up of new horizons may pose a serious challenge to existing regulations because new situations can knock the bottom out of their efficacy. As a result, the restraining force of law and order may be weakened, thereby facilitating the growth of unbridled, wanton spirit. Seen in this light, the use of writing as a means to wean the Rev. Marshfield off adultery, not surprisingly, winds up landing him in an even bolder seduction. Since adultery is an act of breach, a violation of the present order, it is hard to imagine that the errant party can be led back to the fold of bondage by a means that is subversive in nature. That is precisely the case of the adulterous minister. When moving into the retreat, Marshfield is given a sheaf of blank sheets, enough for him to write on for a month. Writing is designed by his keepers as a way to cure his "distraction." But as he writes along, he is egged on to the act of seducing Ms. Prynne, Manageress of the retreat. Indeed, writing adds fuel to the flames of adultery.

To further explore continuities between writing and adultery, we can turn to the mistypings on the diary which registers the feelings Marshfield experiences as he recounts acts of adultery. The playful effect of the slips of the pen,¹⁶ or to be more precise, the slips of the typewriter, destabilizes the common use of language. Its result is the waking up of energy, which in turn may lead to the creation of a new kind of expression. Some mistypings on chapters 10 and 11 may serve as examples to illustrate this point. At the end of chapter 10, the sentence does not come to a full stop but carries on until the next chapter. "Well how do you think I feel . . . having you run in and fuck and hop back into your clothes and traipse off to some adoring deaconess after you've had your" (MS 81), the complaint of his mistress Alicia spills over into the next chapter. So chapter 11 starts with "Fun"? "Way with me"? "Kicks for the week"? (MS 82), to show that the narrator forgets exactly how she has put it. The spanning of one sentence over two chapters is a new kind of expression. The creation of the spill-over sentence, which in a way mimics the act of transgressing the proper realm of marriage, has something to do with the preceding slips of the pen, which can be viewed as violating the proper form of words.

¹⁶ The term "slips of the pen," which is easily associated with Sigmund Freud, may evoke the term "slips of the tongue." The existence of the latter may be cited as a proof that the playful effect of language errors is not exclusive to writing. But there is a difference between their occurrences. As Sigmund Freud asserts in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, "we make slips of the pen more readily than slips of the tongue" (131). Freud quotes Wundt as giving an explanation of this phenomenon: "In the course of normal speaking the inhibitory function of the will is continuously directed to bringing the course of ideas and the articulatory movements into harmony with each other. If the expressive movement which follows the ideas is retarded through mechanical causes, as is the case in writing . . . such anticipations make their appearance with particular ease" (qtd. Freud 131-32).

The mistyping on chapter 10 gives the Protestant clergyman a glimpse undreamt of before, paving the way for the new style of expression. When Marshfield hears noises one wintry night, he leaves his heavily sleeping wife behind on the bed to find the black car of Alicia parking for the second time at the cottage of his assistant priest, Ned Bork. When he recalls the scene he has seen at the first time, he hopes it is an optical illusion. "The naked foot I had classified as a favored* hallucination" (MS 75). The slip of the pen reveals the combined meanings of "favored" and "fevered." It shows the effect of straying from the intended "favored" into the unintended "favored," which is lexically senseless. This act of revolt against the dictate of the mind, nevertheless, allows some impulses to break out of the confines of encoded signs. The mistyped "favored" thus is full of promises not seen in the intended word "favored."

As a way of concluding the paper, the mistyped "favored" hallucination, together with other slips of the pen, sensitizes Marshfield to the presence of boundless possibilities imprisoned behind coded systems. The awareness of this can explain why he leaves one sentence unfinished at the end of chapter 10 and only completes it at the beginning of the next chapter. The three possible ways of rounding out the sentence suggest his unwillingness to let the tyrannizing mind drown out the nuances of meanings. Of course, as mentioned earlier, the act of spilling over a chapter is in a way similar to straying from the confines of marriage. In transgressing the form of a word, which is the case of mistyped words, or the tight control of the mind, which is the case of writing, or the restriction of marriage, which is the case of adultery, new possibilities are dangling before every attempt.

Writing, speech, and language games each has different degrees of gaining access to what is touted as truth. This paper uses them to explore how adultery responds to them. Adultery is repeated from time to time. But with the change of context, discourses of adultery vary as well. In studying the issue of adultery in the two intertextual fictions, I find my approach extremely fruitful since it helps me gain an insight into the extremely complicated relationship between the perennial issue of adultery and its literary representation as a cultural memory.

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