

Foreword

“LET’S BEGIN BY MAKING one thing clear,” the British novelist David Baddiel states in his review of Adam Begley’s 2014 biography *Updike*: “John Updike was the greatest writer in English of the last century. Unquestionably, he was the best short story writer; I would argue the best novelist, certainly of the postwar years; one of the very best essayists and in the top 20 poets.”¹ In fairness to the naysayers, however, Baddiel also puts the case that is often made against Updike, how he writes well but has little to say, that he is, in the oft-quoted words of Harold Bloom, “a minor novelist with a major style . . . but . . . the American Sublime will never touch his pages.”²

I have no wish to participate in this argument. But I hope this book can clarify the *kind* of writer John Updike is. Admirers and detractors alike often speak as though he is a realist whose stories delineate character with psychological insight. While there is truth in this assessment, it misses the larger truth that myth plays a critical role in Updike’s fiction, giving his stories much greater moral and theological *gravitas* than may first meet the eye.

In 1968, John Updike gave an extensive *Paris Review* interview to Charles Thomas Samuels in which he spoke about the mythic undertones in his work. Asked by Samuels why he had chosen to employ a mythic parallel in *The Centaur* (the one Updike novel where the myths break clearly into the open), Updike pointed out that the characters in *The Centaur* are *guises*, “concealing something mythic, perhaps prototypes or longings in our minds.” Samuels then asked Updike why he had not done more work in this mode. “But I have worked elsewhere in a mythic mode,” the author protested, citing some of the underlying mythic themes in *The Poorhouse Fair*, *Rabbit, Run*, and *Couples*. Still not satisfied, Samuels put one more question to John Updike: “Even if your other novels have underlying mythological

1. Baddiel, “Suburban Legend,” *New Statesman*, May 2, 2014, 42.
2. Bloom, ed., *Modern Critical Views of John Updike*, 7.

or scriptural subjects, they don't obtrude as they do in *The Centaur*. So let me rephrase my question. Why didn't you make the parallels more obvious in other books?" At this point Updike stated the cornerstone of his literary strategy: "Oh—I don't think basically that such parallels should be obvious. I think books should have secrets, like people do. I think they should be there as a bonus for the sensitive reader or there as a kind of subliminal quivering."³

If John Updike "has nothing to say," it may be because the reader has been largely unaware of the allegorical way in which the questions that he raises and the issues that he explores are often presented. A writer can't help but appear shallow if the reader fails to notice the depths that are already there. I am by no means the first person to suggest that allegory is a key to understanding John Updike. In her 1973 study *Fighters and Lovers: Theme in the Novels of John Updike*, Joyce B. Markle makes much of Updike's "mythic underpinnings" in *Couples* and other early Updike novels.⁴ George W. Hunt's 1980 study *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things: Sex, Religion, and Art*, similarly shows Updike transcending the limits of realism and uniting "the keenly observed detail with the symbolic."⁵ Even more penetratingly, Alice and Kenneth Hamilton explore the allegorical depths in Updike's novels and short stories in their 1970 pioneering work *The Elements of John Updike*.⁶

Since these early studies, however, critical interpretation has tended to overlook the allegorical nature of Updike's work, perhaps because Updike's allegories frequently nudge the reader in the direction of the Bible and the Christian gospel. Literary critics are not usually interested in the gospel. They may be interested in *religion* understood in a general or abstract kind of way. But Updike is no more abstract about religion than he is about sex. "Away with personhood!" his protagonist cries in *A Month of Sundays*. "Mop up spilt religion! Let us have it in its original stony jars or not at all!"⁷

3. Plath, ed. *Conversations with John Updike*, 35–36.

4. Markle, *Fighters and Lovers*. A large portion of Markle's discussion of *Couples* takes place under the chapter heading "The Mythic Underpinnings," 125–145.

5. Hunt, *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things*. Hunt notes: "It is true that Updike's novels will, in the main, be 'realistic,' in that they refrain from distorting the world and our common-sense perception of it, and yet their metaphoric structure and the metaphoric probing within them allows these novels to transcend the limits of realism, and unite the keenly observed detail with the symbolic" (6).

6. Hamilton and Hamilton, *The Elements of John Updike*.

7. Updike, *A Month of Sundays*, 25.

The allegorical signals in John Updike's fiction direct us to faith convictions of a quite specific sort: religion "in its original stony jars."

The Hamiltons are especially skilled at uncovering the multiple layers of meaning that Updike repeatedly packs into these stony jars. Typical is their detailed discussion of "You'll Never Know, Dear, How Much I Love You" which runs almost twice the length of the story itself!⁸ Kenneth Hamilton once told me that he and Alice were planning to write a sequel to *The Elements* tentatively titled *The Myths of John Updike*. But then Alice took ill and they had to abandon the project. Their sequel, I believe, would have strengthened their allegorical argument significantly. Now that Alice and Kenneth have both died, it behooves us to follow their lead. This I am attempting to do with help from the Hamiltons themselves (cf. their myth-illuminating articles on *A Month of Sundays* and *Rabbit Redux* reprinted in this book).

I have also been helped greatly by family and friends. Thank you Bruce McLeod, Bryan Buchan, Biljana Dojcinovic, Harold Wells, Jim Taylor, Jack de Bellis, Robert Attfield, Philip Marchand, Muriel Duncan, Caley Moore, James Kay, and Donald Greiner for critical comments and stylistic advice. Thank you David Updike for the lovely introductory tribute to your father. Thank you Jan Nunley for your illuminating interview of Updike. Thank you J. D. McClatchy for your moving tribute in the wake of John Updike's death. Above all, thank you Sandra, Todd, Ian, and especially Marion for your never-ending love and support.

This book is published under my name and I stand by its contents. But more than most books it is a group effort which includes of course the friendly and capable people of Wipf and Stock, Brian Palmer in particular on the administrative side, and Rodney Clapp and Heather Carraher on the editorial side. It has been a joy working with you all.

I began this chapter with raves about Updike by a British critic. Let me close with the well known but truly prophetic encomium by the great American critic, William Pritchard: "He is a religious writer; he is a comic realist; he knows what everything feels like, how everything works. He is

8. Hamilton and Hamilton, *The Elements of John Updike*, 14–25. The Hamiltons wrote copiously but rarely gratuitously about Updike. I once asked Kenneth Hamilton why he and Alice hadn't discussed Updike's brilliant short story "Tomorrow and Tomorrow and So Forth" in *The Elements*. Hamilton grimaced and said that they had indeed written about this story but could not in the end decipher the symbolic significance of the protagonist's locker combination (18–24–3). Alice finally suggested they write to Updike and ask for help, but no, said Kenneth, that would spoil the fun.

FOREWORD

putting together a body of work which in substantial intelligent creation will eventually be seen as second to none in our time.”⁹

SAMPLE

9. The well-known prophetic words are taken from Pritchard’s 1972 review of *Museums and Women* in *The Hudson Review*.