The Potential Self As Brotherly Enemy

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Poe's 1839 "The Fall of the House of Usher", Cheever's 1951 "Goodbye, My Brother", Baldwin's 1957 "Sonny's Blues", and Updike's 1964 "The Christian Roommates" belong together here in terms of their re-configuration of the Cain-and-Abel theme of the "brotherly enemy"; this "impossible dream of brotherly love" is treated as a religious/family topic, as confrontations between the protagonists and their demons, as psychoanalytical aspects of the double or split personality, as projections of/into the variously similar setting, as autobiographical re-tellings of personal experiences and obsessions, or as the problematic relationship between writer and reader. This final major assumption is not really developed and remains at that stage, i.e. as a premise to be considered some other time.

One more time we owe it to Dean Flower, the editor and critic who, in his invaluable *Counterparts*, conveniently grouped together about twenty American short stories under various controlling themes and/or images; in one particular case, the topic is that of brotherly love turned sour, and the four stories are—chronologically: Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (Burton's *Gentleman's Magazine*, Sept. 1839), John Cheever's "Goodbye, My Brother" (*The New Yorker*, Aug. 25, 1951), James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" (*Partisan Review*, Summer 1957), and John Updike's "The Christian Roommates" (*The New Yorker*, April 4, 1964). That Updike and Poe or Baldwin and Cheever or whatever combination of the four writers may have very little in common is not discouraging for the comparativist's perspective, who is primarily interested in the way some motifs or themes may capture the imagination and require the creative efforts of the least expected authors under surprisingly similar impulses.

And in this case, we are not only talking about one hundred and twenty-five years of American short story writing, but about over two millennia of re-writes and spin-offs, in various languages, of the Cain-and-Abel myth. This well-known Biblical story (*Genesis* 4:1-18), taken over in variants in the Quran or Palestinian, Turkish, Armenian and many Western texts (see Ashliman, 2013), gives us a picture of Cain as a farmer, a tiller of the ground, whose offering to God does not please Lord as much as his brother's (as shepherd's), so he murders Abel and thus becomes a restless wanderer, a fugitive (East of Eden), being marked/cursed for life as the originator of evil, violence, jealousy, or greed and unrighteousness and criminal tendencies in general; in his turn, Abel, the keeper of sheep, is variously described (*Book of Enoch* & *passim*) as a martyr or judge of the souls, while their descendants raise other problems concerning their sisters, intermarriage, the role of the devil and others; both Freud and Jung turn the story into the Oedipus/Electra complexes, the split/double personality theory and the archetype of fratricide.

From several points of view, closest to the Bible story seems to be Poe's "The Fall..."(sic!); first, the Ushers had long been a family based on intermarriage and one remembers that Cain and Abel both had twin sisters; as far as Poe's twins, Roderick and Madeline, are concerned – "sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them". Moreover, to make the horror more "plausible", Poe has each of the twins kill the other: Roderick (and the narrator, his friend) put Madeline living in the tomb first and later, her ghost (or whatever) breaks down the door and falls upon her brother; so the lamentation over (the history of) human failures includes both Cain and Abel (who, like Eve in one of the versions, could not know what murder was). Still another version has it that Cain's debauched descendants died in Noah's flood (i.e. the tarn closing above the "house of Usher").

When they first meet in the Harvard dormitory (Room 14), Updike's "roommates" also seem to be "on the verge of a kind of marriage", but soon enough we hear Orson tell Hub – "I think you are insane!" and "I don't know Hub what you are doing to me"; and there is a "confession" of why Orson doesn't like Hub and has no respect for him, resulting in "I hate the bastard" and the radical decision that "we shouldn't room together next year".

Cheever's real brothers are upper middle class Pommeroyes, who live with the illusion of being unique (not only as they meet for a vacation – final? – in their island house); also, Cain-like, the narrator remembers how 25 years before he hit Lawrence ("Little Jesus", "The Croaker", a quarrelsome hypocrite of the Abel type in George Gordon Byron's 1821 *Cain*), so now he clubs his younger brother over the head with a wet root (*infra*): "Then I wished that he was dead, dead and about to be buried, not buried but about to be buried, because I did not want to be denied ceremony and decorum in putting him away, in putting him out of my consciousness". As they finally part, the "life-long rift between the brothers" (Mathews, 2004) is like Poe's family fissure widening into a chasm.

This impossible dream of brotherly love takes the same life-ending connotations with Baldwin's narrator's suicidal desperate brother: first, "*I told him* that he might just as well be dead as live the way he was living" – with his "weird and disordered music" – and then "*he told me* that he was *dead* as far as I was concerned"; or earlier: "The moment Sonny and I started into the house I had the feeling that I was simply bringing him back into the danger he had almost died trying to escape..."; and that is mainly because, for the narrator/reader/teacher, "everything I said sounded freighted with hidden meaning..." (compare with Lawrence in Cheever).

Against this background of the Biblical myth (see, for instance, the paradisiacal touches in Roderick's "rhapsody" of "The Haunted Palace" – "In the greenest of our valleys/By good angels tenanted..." – and his "devotion to the orthodox beauties of music" plus his "chief delight" in the *Vigiliae Mortuorum secundum Chorum Ecclesiae Maguntinae*, an indication of Poe's awareness of Catholicism and his contacts with leading Catholic luminaries in Philadelphia – "the city of brotherly love"), religion by and large seems to provide a major source of otherness; most explicit here is Updike, who brings together in his story, as Harvard dormitory Christian roommates wrestling in a love-hate relationship, a protestant Methodist and a self-converted Episcopalian strongly influenced by Gandhi; and the reader learns in the end that the former's life (Orson's) "has gone much the way he planned it, and he is much the kind of man he intended to be when he was eighteen...; in one particular only – a kind of scar [n.b.] he carries without pain and without any clear memory of the amputation – does the man he is differ from the man he assumed he would become: he never prays" (as opposed to Hub's constant praying); not only Cain and Abel, but also Jacob wrestling with the angel.

In his turn, James Baldwin (1924-1987), son of a clergyman – and roommate of Marlon Brando for a time – was always in search of attaining a sense of self in “a world of fury, exile [France, Switzerland, Turkey], desolation and destruction” (*Isaiah* 51: 14,22), so he makes Creole and Sonny’s bandstand “keep it [the blues] new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness and death...” as “the only light we’ve got in this darkness”. And Sonny’s blues are those of the brothers struggling in him: “He and the piano stammered, started one way, got scared, stopped; started another way, panicked again, got stuck. And the face I saw on Sonny I’d never seen before. Everything had been burned in, but the fire and fury of the battle which was occurring in him up there”.

Similarly, Cheever’s Pommeroy (a transparent allusion to the “apple” of Eden) family is one of the ministers with deep connections going back to America’s Puritan past, who were also eulogized by the likes of Cotton Mather, the patriarchal lawgiver of Colonial America; the clash between Lawrence and his family is reflected in the one between the narrator’s mythological references and the Christian look embodied by the former; moreover, Lawrence’s wife, Ruth, matches Lawrence’s dissatisfaction by reminding the reader of her ascetic, long-suffering namesake in the Old Testament; and the Cheever “Sonny” raises in his brother similar questions: “Oh, what can you do with a man like that?...How can you put his finger for him on the obdurate truths before which fear and horror are powerless?”; so almost the last words we hear from Lawrence are “Where’s Ruth? Where’s Ruth? Where in the hell is Ruth?”

With her own demons, most likely, as our four stories are all about the way protagonists/observers-narrators deal with their demons (see Flower, 1971): Poe’s observer flees the spectacle of self-destruction in a panic: “I fled aghast...; the fissure rapidly widened... and the deep dark tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘House of Usher’”. In “Sonny’s Blues” the father suffers from the memory of his brother, the mother suffers from seeing her family suffer, the narrator suffers after the death of his daughter, his brother’s arrest and from his inner struggle with identity; in “Goodbye, My Brother” Lawrence’s highly problematic engagement with the past (his father’s drowning – and the Shakespearean “full fathom five our father lies” – and a life-long series of personal failures, i.e. “goodbyes”) results in a “Kafkaesque desire for absolution” (Mathews, 2004). By expelling his demons, Updike’s “double individuals”, trapped in perpetual adolescence, struggle between Christian piety and Christian social zeal or between accommodation and rebellion; the demon/potential self – as enemy and brother – has always got to be in charge of committing “the crime” for the protected self, who remains fascinated – sympathetic yet horrified – by what he might have done and is relieved that somebody else has committed their crime (Flower, 1971).

That our Cains and Abels are not eight but four – one in each story – is most explicitly stated by Cheever in a 1953 letter to Malcolm Cowley: “The brother story, in its bare outline, was the story of one man. There was no brother; there was no Lawrence. (In the finished story he speaks only a few lines and the bulk of his opinions are given to him by the narrator.) I tried to bury this outline then under several others so that the story would unfold like an uncooked onion” (Cheever, 1988: 160). Which is a straightforward “creative process” commentary on the unnamed narrator’s double consciousness (*infra*); for most of the time, the reader has no access to Lawrence’s thoughts (who “always likes to stay a little ahead of his companion”) – just the narrator’s speculations; and so, “in driving away his brother, the narrator drives away self-destructive feelings of despair and negation and lets in cold air morning light and the dark, iridescent sea”. And that double consciousness is something the narrator-brother seldom

conceals: “We had disliked Lawrence, but we looked forward to his return with a mixture of apprehension and loyalty, and with some of the joy and delight of reclaiming a brother [a reader?]”. So, they were “loyal to one another in spite of our differences”, because, perhaps, “any rupture in this loyalty is a source of confusion and pain”.

And this reminds closely of Roderick’s damnation, which seems to also be that of the narrator-observer; or of Baldwin’s (and, of course, Du Bois’s) “double consciousness” in the older, more responsible brother: “as the cab moved uptown... it came to me that what we both were seeking through our separate cab windows was that part of ourselves which had been left behind...”; or the same burden of love, responsibility and suffering blurring the identity lines in the forced relationship between Updike’s Harvard roommates, who found themselves in a constant psychological warfare, mostly in Room 14, next to Room 12, which was that of “the writers”, i.e. John Updike/Kern and Christopher Lasch/Dawson.

Thus, space also provided a meaningful background for these brotherly enemies; and not just a background (an island, an isolated castle...), but a functional component, as Updike insists when describing the Harvard undergraduate mass of students sorted and catalogued by the “rooming process”: “That jostling conglomerate, so apparently secure and homogeneous, broke down, under habitual exposure, into double individual-roommates”(2003: 167). In this “forced cohabitation”, the great university “processes thousands of such boys” – Easterners and Midwesterners (Henry Palamontain and Orson Ziegler), atheists and Jews and negroes, writers, jokers, philosophers, vegetarians..., who are gradually “restored to the world” as polarized personalities. If not unfinished (“We live in a housing project” informs the narrator in “Sonny’s Blues”), then the habitat is worn down by decay and dilapidation (paralleling the approaching dissolution of the sister in Poe), or the house foundations are on sinking sand (like the family values in Cheever’s story).

The psychological implications of these brother/sibling-enemy stories are so subtle, intricate, complex and compelling that no reader can afford to overlook the autobiographical elements in all of them. Several contemporary Poe critics, for instance, had no difficulty in recognizing Roderick as an obvious projection of the author, beginning with the hero’s physical appearance:

A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surprisingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely molded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy; hair of a more than weblike softness and tenuity; these features, with an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple, made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten.

However, Poe is also known to have transformed some of his (many) obsessions into the grotesque/arabesque (sic) characteristics of his fiction; the “fissure” in his family and the flaw in his own character (drink, opium... *infra*) become the fissure seen in the castle at the beginning (“a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn...”) and the end of the story; Edward H. Davidson describes this widening fissure as the fracture in the individual personality; Roderick’s illness – like Poe’s, most likely – is given by fantasy suppressing reality, by an exterior self lost to the interior world of the imagination, i.e. the mental and physical components of a single being (*supra*); “an excessive nervous agitation”, as

“his voice varied rapidly from a tremulous indecision (when the animal spirits seemed utterly in abeyance) to that species of energetic concision – ...that leaden, self-balanced and perfectly modulated guttural utterance, which may be observed in the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement”.

On the other hand, Baldwin, during the Jim Crow and the Civil Rights era of the 1950s, experienced the consequences of parental abuse, racism, homophobia and expatriation, so his hero had to match the darkness inside to the darkness outside: “Instead of trying to find escape routes from the darkness, they [Sonny’s quartet] are improvising together to create a new kind of (indigo) light” (Sustana, 2019). Sonny’s blues are, once again, about singing and suffering, about the seven years’ difference (chasm, fissure) between the brothers, or between music (Sonny’s) and algebra (taught by the narrator); consequently, improvisation is essential: the notes that are played with the chord progression can be changed in speed or pitch to match the singer’s voice and attitude; the brotherhood template is that of sadness (in one – the chords), attempting to match rage and fury (in the other – the voice); and Baldwin does not miss the occasion to notice “the cup of trembling” (*Isaiah*, 51: 17,22: “Awake, awake, stand up, O Jerusalem, which has drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of his fury; thou hast drunken the dregs of the cup of trembling, and wrung them out”).

Cheever’s complicated relationship with his real-life older brother, Fred, makes Harold Bloom (2004: 15) believe that “there is no other story that is more intrinsically representative of its author, or more personal” than “Goodbye, My Brother”. John even talked once of their “ungainly attachment”, so critics have come to connect it to his bisexuality (parodied, for instance, in a 1992 episode of the TV sitcom *Seinfeld*) and alcoholism, not just the familiar neuroses of city dwellers (the brothers shared, for some time in 1933, an apartment together on Beacon Hill, Boston – so neither Poe nor Updike are very far away) and modern suburbanites, but also the mores of the fading aristocratic families (like the Ushers?) of New England.

Up to a certain point (in “The Christian Roommates”) the reader is kept wondering if Updike’s omniscient narrator “identifies” with Orson, only to discover on the next page that Updike is/may be Kern, in a different room, and that Orson liked Dawson, i.e. Lasch; in fact, both “couples” – Orson/Hub and Dawson/Kern – are poorly matched, so the enemy-brother theme is simply duplicated; it may not be just a coincidence that Christopher Lasch’s best (known) book is his 1979 *The Culture of Narcissism*, where his acute sense of inner emptiness appropriately anticipates Updike’s dark picture of life in *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981); the real life roommates – cultural historian and social critic Christopher Lasch and novelist/short story teller John Updike – find their fictional counterparts in the two ambitious provincials of Room 12 in the Harvard dormitory: a “subtly vicious... farm boy driven by an unnatural sophistication” (Kern) and “an atheist... of a terrible temper...” (Dawson).

As all (these) stories have a significant number of autobiographical elements in them, it does not seem difficult – even for a non-psychoanalytical critic – to see the four authors as struggling themselves to keep at bay their respective Cains/demons and have them conveniently transferred onto others, i.e. their readers; they are all in a love-hate relationship with their “Lawrences”, who “try to read significance and finality into every gesture that we make, and it is certain of Lawrence that when he finds the inner logic to our conduct, it will be sordid”; Cheever’s narrator constantly attempt to see/imagine how Lawrence/the reader felt (“that in watching our backgammon he was observing the progress of a mordant tragedy in which the money we won and lost served as a symbol for more vital forfeits...”) or saw (“spiritual

cannibalism made visible..., under his nose..., the symbols of the rapacious use human beings make of one another...”) or heard (the waves “as a dark answer to all his dark questions...”), or what he would have “noticed, concluded, or pointed out...”; he, the teacher, supposes all the time how “Lawrence’s sad frame of mind... went from one broken thing to another...” or what would have occurred “to his baleful and incisive mind...”, which had decided to make “everything tense and unpleasant”; whence his long series of “good-bye-s” (to father, mother, roommate – sic –, to Yale, Episcopal church, Roosevelt administration, his neighbors, to Chicago, Kansas, Cleveland... and the sea...).

So he, the Cain narrator, hates his imaginary brother (Lawrence did not exist as a character in a first version of the story – *supra*) and decides to “put him away..., out of [his] consciousness”; and again, as he/Lawrence “always liked to stay a little ahead” of him, the writer/narrator/teacher picks up a root, “heavy with sea water”, and gives his brother/the reader “a blow on the head that forced him on his knees on the sand...”; the sand of this coast, which he would have seen to be “the edge of the known world” as there, “to the east [of Eden]... lies the coast of Portugal”, one step away from “the tyranny of Spain.” And on the last page we – the real readers – hear Lawrence – the fictional reader and the writer’s potential self – complain: “My brother did it. He hit me with a stone – something – on the beach”. This way Cheever drives home the whole point in his and the other three stories: the impossible dream of brotherly love, that between Cain and Abel, narrator and counterpart, writer and Baudelaire’s 1857 “double”, his “hypocrite lecteur”, “semblable” and “frère”, or Barth’s 1968 “dogged..., print-oriented bastard” – the reader; whereupon this reader, having willingly suspended his disbelief in authors pretending they do not hate him, needs to reconsider his position.

A position that would have to include the belief that the reader’s potential self is the writer (just as the writer’s is the reader) – the writer of letters and e-mails, of pamphlets and blogs, of applications, reports and graffiti, of memoirs and travel notes, of stories, plays, and novels; on the other hand, this reader also shares in the complementary conviction that the age-old spinner of tales was unmistakably the creation of the similarly age-old listener and that, correspondingly, in the Gutenberg age, the reader has been the creator of the novelist. Thus, listener and story teller or reader and novelist easily belong in the brother-as-enemy categories explored in our four American stories and, probably, to various extents and innumerable degrees of explicitness, in all stories; but this would be an assumption requiring a different set of investigative instruments and research methods, so we shall leave it at that for the time being.

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