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What We Keep: Time and Balance in the Brother Stories of John Cheever

David Raney

- 1 Tolstoy famously maintained in *Anna Karenina* that "All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (1). John Cheever, born two years after the Russian master died, spent much of his literary career examining both sorts, and the forces that drive wedges between family members or bind them together. Arlin Meyer has singled out as one of Cheever's consistent subjects "the family and the intricate web of emotional and moral concerns which compose it" (23-4). Among these concerns, one that Cheever explores in considerable depth in his short fiction is the relationship between brothers. Some of the brother pairs he creates are primarily sympathetic, others almost primordially antagonistic, but taken together they develop two of Cheever's main themes: a pervasive alienation from modern mass culture and, paradoxically, a deep distrust of nostalgia. This is the double axis along which some of Cheever's most compelling characters try to come to terms with themselves.
- 2 "For my father," writes Susan Cheever in her 1984 memoir *Home Before Dark*, "the past was a seductive and dangerous place." He had watched his mother's "use of the quaint, the antique, and the nostalgic diminish his own father" and had noted "the emptiness" of lives propped up only by early promise or family ancestry. Cheever, she observes, "never saved anything" – not even carbon copies of the manuscripts he mailed to publishers. Favorite books he gave away; letters and other personal papers he burned. "Mementos," Susan concludes, "were for failures and old ladies" (52-3).
- 3 Yet for all his reflexive rejection of the past Cheever was uneasy, too, with the pace and direction of much of modern America. His public image remains largely that of the urbane *New Yorker* writer, spinning tales of suburban married life and cocktail-party intrigue, but his fiction often harshly criticizes the world it evokes so well. Benjamin Cheever, editor of his father's letters, remarks on his sense of Cheever "striking out at late twentieth-century American society" in his work – by, for example, having a character in his novel, *Oh What a Paradise It Seems* (1982) spike a grocery-store bottle of teriyaki sauce with ant poison and replace it on the shelf (379).

- 4 The “deepening dissatisfaction with modern life” to which Cheever’s biographer Scott Donaldson points - with “its standardized and cheapened mass culture, above all its excessive mobility and rootlessness” (201)- emerges in the early work as well. Cheever’s first novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957), maintains a generally sunny tone, but the sequel *The Wapshot Scandal* (1964) and *Bullet Park* (1969) are much darker. “You’re getting angrier and angrier,” Malcolm Cowley wrote Cheever after reading *Scandal* in galleys. In October 1960, while at work on that novel, Cheever spoke at a symposium at Berkeley and criticized the “abrasive and faulty surface” of the nation’s previous twenty-five years, declaring bluntly that “Life in the United States in 1960 is Hell” (Donaldson 179, 204). His story “The Death of Justina,” from the same year, is a savagely comic indictment of the advertising industry and modern bureaucratic absurdities. It begins, “So help me God it gets more and more preposterous, it corresponds less and less to what I remember and what I expect as if the force of life were centrifugal and threw one further and further away from one’s purest memories and ambitions” (428).
- 5 Norman Johnson in *The Wapshot Scandal* stands with many Cheever characters in feeling that America is simply too vast, anonymous, and confusing: “He was a traveler, familiar with the miseries of loneliness, with the violence of its sexuality, with its half-conscious imagery of highways and thruways like the projections of a bewildered spirit” (55). In a scene near the book’s end Mr. Applegate, rector of Christ Church, prays drunkenly during Christmas Eve Mass for the victims of such a world:
- Let us pray for all those killed or cruelly wounded on thruways, expressways, freeways and turnpikes. Let us pray for all those burned to death in faulty plane-landings, mid-air collisions and mountainside crashes. Let us pray for all those wounded by rotary lawn mowers, chain saws, electric hedge clippers and other power tools.... (301)
- 6 Five years later *Bullet Park* opens with an image of another modern conveyance, this time rendered with a nostalgic glow:
- “Paint me a small railroad station then, ten minutes before dark... The architecture of the station... resembles a pergola, cottage or summer house... The lamps along the platform burn with a nearly palpable plaintiveness” (3).
- 7 But the tone doesn’t persist. One character is sucked under an express train, leaving only a loafer behind. (Cheever has another abducted at gunpoint from a train, in the 1954 story “The Five-Forty-Eight.”) A woman lives in terror of dying on the New Jersey Turnpike, and does. The novel is replete with foolish religious figures, quack psychiatrists, and a deranged killer – what reviewer Benjamin DeMott in *The New York Times* called a “grand gatherum of late 20th-century American weirdos” (1).
- 8 Cheever’s ambivalence toward past and present comes into particular relief when his stories focus on brothers. This topic, like that of nostalgia and “progress,” was a highly charged one for Cheever. When brothers appear in his stories they tend to take center stage, and they figure prominently in his novels as well. *The Wapshot Chronicle* traces in comic-picaresque fashion the wanderings of teenagers Moses and Coverly Wapshot, and *The Wapshot Scandal* follows them into adulthood. In both books Moses and Coverly are very close yet very different personalities – Moses the capable and handsome one, Coverly more sensitive and diffident. The third novel, *Bullet Park*, has no brothers but offers a pair of main characters who function in much the same way. A number of critics have seen these characters, named Hammer and Nailles, as schematic variants on the brothers-in-conflict theme.¹ In his fourth novel, *Falconer* (1977), the fraternal

tension that governs much of Cheever's work leads to actual fratricide: the protagonist is in prison for braining his brother with a fire iron. Cheever's last work of fiction, the brief and elegiac *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*, contains no filial conflict at all. Cheever seems by then, the year he died, to have gotten the theme out of his system.

- 9 Considerable critical attention has been paid to brother relationships in Cheever's novels² but relatively little to similar dynamics in his short stories. Book-length studies of Cheever's work are perhaps naturally weighted toward the novels rather than the approximately 200 stories, with their more limited individual focus and field of play. But Cheever made his reputation as a short story writer, and the bulk of his published work is in that form. He published his first story twenty-seven years before his first novel; the intervening decades saw nearly 120 of his stories in print. Cheever's story output decreased somewhat as he made his mark as a novelist, but the publication in 1978 of *The Short Stories of John Cheever*, a selection of sixty-one of his finest, reconfirmed in readers' and critics' eyes his mastery of the form. The themes of Cheever's novels run through his stories and often appear there first, worked out within tight fictional boundaries before being amplified in the novels.
- 10 It is telling that in all of Cheever's fiction, with all its families, only twice do brothers appear who play no important role. In "The Country Husband" (1954) two sons and a daughter are introduced and as quickly forgotten, and in "Percy" (1968) the narrator unobtrusively mentions taking (as Cheever did) a walking tour of Germany with his brother, who then disappears for good. Elsewhere when brothers appear they dominate, and their relationship is generally one of conflict. It might be objected, of course, that in the short story, of all forms, gratuitous minor characters dilute the narrative flow. Why toss in a sibling who merely skulks around a story's perimeter? This consideration does not account, though, for the scarcity of marginal brothers in Cheever's fiction. Its dozens of families abound with children of minimal narrative importance. Yet with the above exceptions none are brothers, who simply do not play minor roles in Cheever's world. One or more daughters turn up in seven stories, a single son fills out the cast of three, sister-brother combinations figure in five more, and in several others there are references to unnamed offspring of still lesser stature. When Cheever needs marginal children to round out a fictional family, he makes them brother-sister or sister-sister. (Nowhere does he examine such a relationship in depth.) When he elevates a filial conflict to importance, he invariably chooses brothers.
- 11 A likely factor in this scarcity of fictional brothers, and one reason for the intensity with which Cheever invests them when they do appear, is the author's relationship with his own brother. Seven years older than John, Frederick Cheever was a major influence in his life and the object of both his warm affection and icy resentment. Wary like many authors of discussing the confluence of fact and fiction, Cheever was especially so regarding Frederick, even in interviews in which he was effusive and eloquent on all other topics. Cheever would agree to the parallels between his mother and Sarah or Honora Wapshot, for instance –telling Annette Grant in a 1969 interview, "Most of it is in the novel; it's true"– and in garrulous moods he would speak in a general way about Frederick. But he always balked at the suggestion that their relationship entered his fiction even indirectly. In an interview conducted by his daughter Susan for *Newsweek* in 1977, for example, Cheever asserted that "the strongest love of my life was for my brother" (69), adding, a year later to John Hersey "I don't suppose that I have ever known a love so broad.... [It] seems to have been a very basic

love" (31). He remains expansive on "the brother figure" until Hersey specifically links fact and fiction, and then withdraws, slightly defensive, as if realizing he has said too much.

Cheever: The brother appears in a great many stories. I strike him in some, I hit him with sticks, rocks ; he in turn also damages me with profligacy, drunkenness, indebtedness, and emotional damage...

Hersey: A minute ago, you said, "I strike my brother." How close are you to your narrator?

Cheever: It seems to me that any confusion between autobiography and fiction debases fiction. (31)

- 12 One reason Cheever may have been hesitant to discuss his relationship with Frederick in detail is that it altered in the early 1930s from the "strong," "broad," "basic" bond of love that he usually chose to describe. The brothers were very close as youngsters and inseparable for a time. After their parents' separation and John's expulsion from Thayer Academy at age seventeen –which resulted in his first published story, "Expelled," in *The New Republic* the following year– John and Frederick settled in Boston, where they lived together for four years. Frederick supported them financially while John tried to write, and by all reports they supported each other emotionally as well and were rarely seen apart. Whether they suffered a specific falling-out which Cheever never brought to light or the relationship simply became stifling is not clear. Cheever remarked to Hersey that during this period he and Frederick were "extremely close – morbidly close" and that it seemed to him that "two men living with such intense intimacy was an ungainly arrangement, that there was some immutable shabbiness about any such life" (31). On another occasion he referred to the Boston period as that "Siamese situation" (Coale *John* 3), and he described their relationship to a psychiatrist in 1969 as "psychologically incestuous" (Donaldson 249). In 1934 they separated, John moving to New York to try his fortune as a writer there. Cheever later said of the split, "I walked, so far as possible, out of his life" (Hersey 31).
- 13 "So far as possible" did not entail a complete break. For a time Fred sent John \$10 a week while he struggled to establish himself as a writer, and John occasionally visited his brother and his wife on trips to Massachusetts. Forty years after they parted company, during a black period at Boston University in which Cheever very nearly drank himself to death, Fred called every day "to see if I [was] still alive," the author reported (Donaldson 55, 288). But the two were never again close.
- 14 Whatever the reasons for the initial fall from grace of the Cheever brothers,³ their relationship had a powerful effect on John's fiction. "The brothers story I've told fifty times, I guess," the author admitted to himself and an interviewer toward the end of his life; "Sometimes I think I am not telling it, but I am" (Donaldson 54). The earliest and clearest manifestation is the story "The Brothers," included in Cheever's first collection, *The Way Some People Live* (1943). Only the fifteenth story Cheever published, it stands well above most of his apprentice work. The story revolves around Tom and Kenneth Manchester, brothers from New England who after the divorce of their parents become deeply attached to each other, take a small apartment in the city, and lead a "singular life... from which they jealously excluded the rest of the world" (156).⁴ Kenneth has a job; the younger Tom does not. One of the rituals they develop during four years of living together (the same span as the Cheevers') is to visit every Saturday the farm of widow Amy Henderson and her daughter Jane. The farm's stone gate, tall maples and cool porch make a welcome retreat from the city.

- 15 The snake entering this garden is Jane's attraction for Kenneth. Her frustration at his obliviousness is increased by the brothers' tendency to act, apparently even to think, in concert. The crisis comes when Jane feigns a sprained ankle to attract Kenneth's attention. Tom sees her throw herself to the ground, observes her transparent happiness as Kenneth ministers to her, and grasps the situation. His uppermost emotion is not jealousy, though, but dismay. It occurs to him for the first time that his and Kenneth's "devotion to each other might be stronger than their love of any girl or even their love of the world" (169), and he decides to go away. Their closeness, he perceives, is too easy and exclusive; he feels "a sharp thrust of responsibility for them both – they must live and not wear out their lives like old clothes" (173).
- 16 Tom's leaving strips the comfort and familiarity from both brothers' worlds. Tom looks at the well-worn road home and decides that "no road of Europe or any other country could have seemed stranger." Kenneth continues to visit the Henderson farm but sees the sky, grass, and hills "as if he had never seen them before.... He walked through the fields clutching involuntarily at the air... looking around him like a stranger at the new, strange, vivid world" (175). As mystified and distraught as the brothers are, this is without question an affirmative ending for Cheever, for the world has been thrown open again. The love of blue sky and water, of the wonders of creation and human intercourse, is pure Cheever, and to refresh one's perspective on that world can only be good – even if it costs, as it does Tom and Kenneth, a painful separation.
- 17 "The Brothers" depicts a relationship whose insularity is rent by an outside force. Ten years later Cheever wrote of the wedge from within, of brothers divided not by cloying intimacy but by angry differences, and again conformity and nostalgia play major roles. In the splendid "Goodbye, My Brother" (1953) the Pommeroy family gathers at a beach house in Massachusetts to commune with old memories and assess the changes wrought by the previous year. Among the grown children present are the narrator, whose name we never learn, and his brother Lawrence, a "gloomy son of a bitch" who does everything in his power, it seems, to weigh down the spirits of the others. He asks for the one kind of liquor not in the house, refers to his sister's new friend as "the one she's sleeping with now," pesters the cook about wages and unions, and forecasts the imminent demise of the cottage: "If you had an unusually high sea, a hurricane sea, the wall could crumble and the house would go. We could all be drowned" (6-7). He pries up a shingle with his jackknife to scorn the artifice by which the house has been made to look old, refuses to play tennis with the less talented members of the family, and declines to join them in any game, dance or other activity, preferring to ridicule it all at a distance as immature and corrupt.
- 18 During a walk on the sand in which the narrator finds his enjoyment of the summer day and the beach marred by Lawrence and "the company of his pessimism," he confronts him: "What's the matter? Don't you like it here?... Come out of this gloominess." Lawrence replies blandly that he has only returned to say goodbye, will be selling his equity in the cottage and "didn't expect to have a good time," then catalogues the family's failings:
- "Diana is a foolish and promiscuous woman. So is Odette. Mother is an alcoholic.... Chaddy is dishonest. He always has been. The house is going to fall into the sea." He looked at me and added, as an afterthought, "You're a fool."
- 19 The narrator, furious, strikes Lawrence from behind with a driftwood root, bloodying his head and driving him to his knees, and contemplates finishing the job:

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. (18-19)

- 20 But he binds Lawrence's wounds before leading him out of the undertow to a "higher place" and walking away. Lawrence and family leave the next morning, and the story ends with a paean to "the inestimable greatness of the race, the harsh surface beauty of life" to which the wounded brother has blinded himself. The justly famous final image is of the narrator's wife and sister – Diana and Helen, a classical touch – swimming in the sea, which throughout the story has provided for every character except Lawrence "the cleansing force claimed for baptism":

I saw their uncovered heads, black and gold in the dark water. I saw them come out and I saw that they were naked, unshy, beautiful, and full of grace, and I watched the naked women walk out of the sea. (21)

- 21 "Goodbye, My Brother" has provoked various responses, but it is easy to agree that Lawrence is a distasteful character. Richard Rupp calls him a "stingy, mean-spirited, moralistic philistine" (247), and Frederick Bracher refers to the blow from behind as "the kind of reflex that makes one stamp on a spider or batter a venomous snake" (171). But there is more going on in the story than a good brother becoming fed up with a bad one and finding release in violence, more than "a biblical reversal in which an Abel-figure strikes Cain" (Waldeland *John* 29). "Goodbye, My Brother" offers the first important instance of a theme that will weave through Cheever's fiction for the next quarter century: brothers as opposing sides of the same personality.
- 22 One clue to this undercurrent comes after Lawrence has been knocked down and the narrator stands over him, torn: "I would still have liked to end him, but now I had begun to act like two men, the murderer and the Samaritan" (20). Earlier, and more subtly, the brothers are linked by the form of narration. The "I" of the story seems at first a patient, long-suffering and trustworthy narrator, but as the tale progresses we realize that a great deal of Lawrence's gloominess is not demonstrated but ascribed to him, proceeding less from his acts than his thoughts, to which we have no access but the narrator's speculation.
- 23 Lawrence does, to be sure, say irritating and unnecessarily frank things, but we note that the narrator is not himself free of the disappointment and invidiousness that seem to emanate from his brother. He intimates as much in the second paragraph: "I teach secondary school, and I am past the age where I expect to be made headmaster." He remarks that Chaddy "has done better than the rest of us" and is their mother's favorite. More importantly, the majority of Lawrence's dark opinions come to us straight from the "good" brother in a kind of narrative ventriloquism. The narrator remarks, for instance, that the first night's meal "had been planned to please Lawrence. It was not too rich, and there was nothing to make him worry about extravagance" (5). We have no evidence at this point that Lawrence loaths extravagance, but we accept the statement and graft this feature onto him on the strength of the dependable narrative voice we've so far encountered. But details of this sort begin to pile up. The clouds at sunset have a light that "looks like blood," the narrator tells us, and when Mrs. Pommeroy makes a scene Lawrence remains on the terrace "as if he were waiting to see the final malfeasance." These are not Lawrence's observations. It is the narrator, too, who labels the restorative effect of swimming an "illusion of purification" while attributing the thought to his brother: "If Lawrence noticed this change... I suppose that he would have found in the vocabulary of psychology, or the mythology of the

Atlantic, some circumspect name for it... but it was one of the few chances for diminution that he missed" (10).

- 24 Here and throughout, the narrator displaces his own digruntlement onto Lawrence, and he becomes increasingly open about reading his brother's mind. The transference is most overt in the traditional family backgammon game. Lawrence does not play but looks on silently. The narrator tries to divine what he is thinking, and "through watching his face," he reports, "I think that I may have found out." For the remainder of the game he lists these thoughts in detail, all bleakly cynical and all, clearly, his own. An example: "His observations were bound to include the facts that backgammon is an idle game... and that the board, marked with points, was a symbol of our worthlessness" (12). Each perception is similarly prefaced ("Lawrence would have noticed... I suppose Lawrence thought...") and the narrator, filling in the blanks, fools himself that the family critique which emerges is not his doing. But in the process he calls Odette a flirt, Chaddy over-competitive and their mother sentimental and interfering, well before Lawrence makes the almost identical accusations that drive him to such fury. Lawrence is without question an unpleasant person but he is also a scapegoat, manifesting a side of the narrator that the latter does not wish to acknowledge. As Samuel Coale puts it, "For a man intent on denying the reality of Lawrence's gloomy vision, the narrator spends a lot of time recreating the depth, the imagery and the scope of that vision" ("Cheever" 198). In order for the narrator's "lyric appreciation of the world" to win out over his fatalistic side he must locate that portion of himself in Lawrence and try to destroy it.
- 25 Much of Cheever's own life was a similar battle between ebullience and the sporadic bouts of depression which haunted him for years. Cheever once remarked that "Goodbye, My Brother" emerged from just such a struggle, that the two Pommeroy brothers represent halves of himself as he alternately "rejoiced and brooded during a summer on Martha's Vineyard" (Hunt 273). In first draft, in fact, as Cheever wrote to Malcolm Cowley in 1953, "Goodbye" was "the story of one man... There was no brother; there was no Lawrence" (*Letters* 160). The story's dark brother, Scott Donaldson observes in his 1988 biography, "lies both within and without, just as Cheever had a brother he simultaneously loved and hated and was himself inhabited by both the demon of depression and the angel of joy" (139). In casting fictional brothers, Cheever gave himself a stage for the exorcism of some very personal demons.
- 26 The central issue around which these struggles revolve is frequently nostalgia, which sometimes seems to Cheever's characters an important reservoir of memory and ritual, at other times merely a luxuriant stagnation. The Pommeroy brothers take opposite sides here. Lawrence reviles every tendency to cling to the past while his brother defends tradition as unifying and comforting. Lawrence eyes the artificial weathering of the beach house and scoffs, "Imagine the frame of mind this implies. Imagine wanting to live so much in the past that you'll pay men carpenter's wages to disfigure your front door." The family, its friends, indeed the entire northeastern U.S., the narrator remembers his brother saying years earlier, was "unable to cope with the problems of the present" and had, "like a wretched adult, turned back to what we supposed was a happier and a simpler time" (9). For the narrator, though, any self-deception involved in nostalgia is trivial compared to its yield of love and security. Nostalgia provides an escape, if only temporary, from the rush of the present, and as he

- tells Lawrence (using, appropriately, a childhood nickname), "We need a vacation, Tifty. I need to rest. We all do" (19).
- 27 The nostalgia/stagnation theme comes to its sharpest point in another tale of brothers, "The Lowboy." Appearing first in *The New Yorker* in 1959, the story is in some ways a reworking of "Goodbye, My Brother." Again we encounter "good" and "bad" brothers, and again the plot offers a conflict between family past and immediate present and a "last encounter with my brother" (404). The cynosure this time is not a beach house but a piece of furniture, an heirloom lowboy. The narrator, again unnamed, wants the piece but describes his request as "halfhearted," while brother Richard's is nothing of the sort: "He telephoned to say that he wanted it – that he wanted it so much more than I did that there was no point in even discussing it" (405). Richard pouts and bullies his way to possession of the lowboy and drives it away, lavishing on it the caresses of a lover.
 - 28 When the brothers next meet, Richard has had the piece appraised and found it to be worth thousands of dollars, and his fascination has become obsessive. Richard puts a silver pitcher atop the lowboy and a Turkish carpet beneath it, both chosen to match identically the arrangement he remembers from boyhood. "While he never told me what happened next," the narrator says, "I could imagine it easily enough." Reveling in the past, Richard settles in front of the lowboy on a rainy night and, drink in hand, conjures up a parade of ghostly relatives. "I sensed," says the narrator, "that Richard was in some kind of danger" (408). After a quarrelsome dinner party with Richard's family, the narrator smashes all the heirlooms in his own house, declaring, "We can cherish nothing less than our random understanding of death and the earth-shaking love that draws us to one another... Cleanliness and valor will be our watchwords. Nothing less will get us past the armed sentry and over the mountainous border" (412).
 - 29 This patch of purple prose reminds one of the endings of both "A Vision of the World" ("I sit up in bed and exclaim aloud to myself, 'Valor! Love! Virtue! Compassion!'"") and the 1954 classic "The Country Husband" ("It is a night where kings in golden suits ride elephants over the mountains"). While not perhaps as effective as the latter, it does suggest the nobility that Cheever felt was involved in throwing over those vestiges of the past which bring no vitality to the present. The effort of it all inflates his language, and an effort it is, for again the attitudes of the brothers are closer than they initially seem. Richard is small in body and soul, the narrator tells us ("Oh I hate small men") and has performed, "perhaps for eternity, the role of a spoiled child" (404). But it is the narrator, not the past-conscious Richard, who remembers that "thirty years ago one went into his room to play with *his* toys at *his* pleasure and to be rewarded with a glass of *his* ginger ale" (404); who responds to his brother's claim with the childish retort "Everything has always been yours, Richard"; and who protests his apathy a bit too much: "I did not really care, but it seemed that my brother did... I did not want it, I had never really wanted it" (408).
 - 30 The point is not that Richard and his brother share some characteristics (it would be odd if they shared none) but that the narrator finds it necessary to cope with his own less admirable instincts by projecting them onto his brother. It is even clearer in "The Lowboy" than in "Goodbye, My Brother" that this is going on – the narrator, after all, admits to imagining the ghostly visitations that accompany Richard's descent into obsession – and it is just as clear what is at stake: a proper appreciation of the world and of people as one finds them. In this the narrator of "The Lowboy," like his

predecessor, triumphs, for despite his tactics of displacement he glories in relationships and the physical world. "It was a spring day," he exults, "one of those green-gold Sundays that excite our incredulity... Considering the possibilities of magnificence and pathos in love, it seemed tragic that he should have become infatuated with a chest of drawers"(405, 407). Both Lawrence's rejection of the past and Richard's wallowing in it damage the soul, for Cheever, by inhibiting the ability to enjoy life in the present tense. Family traditions and totemic objects are valuable only in their human component, and when that value is drained from them by cruelty, greed, or the simple weight of time, then club the memory, he says, smash it on the floor, move on.

- 31 The last of Cheever's brother stories, "The Angel of the Bridge" (1961), continues this struggle between past and present but shifts the balance of sympathy a bit toward the past. It tells of a New York City man whose mother and brother are racked by phobias, his mother deathly afraid of airplanes and his brother unable to breathe in an elevator, convinced beyond argument that the building will fall down around him. His mother's ailment seems sad and strange to the narrator, but his brother's he greets with cruel laughter. It seems much less funny when the narrator himself is struck down by a fear of bridges, unable to make a crossing without jellied legs, darkening vision and an irrational certainty that the roadway is about to collapse. He visits a psychiatrist, who laughs at him in turn, and begins going to absurd lengths to avoid the longer spans over the Hudson. One day during an especially bad episode on the Tappan Zee a young girl gets into his stopped car, a hitchhiking folksinger carrying a small harp. She sings him across the bridge and restores "the natural grasp of things... blue-sky courage, the high spirits of lustiness, an ecstatic serenity." He considers calling his brother "on the chance that there was also an angel of the elevator banks," but decides the improbable detail of the harp would discredit his story and keeps silent. His brother remains afraid of elevators, and his mother still prefers old-fashioned transport : the story concludes with her moving – but not progressing – on skates at Rockefeller Center, going "around and around and around on the ice" (497).
- 32 Like "The Lowboy," based on an actual 1959 quarrel between the Cheever brothers over a family lowboy, "The Angel of the Bridge" is founded on fact. Cheever had a bridge phobia himself, and this has the effect, first, of making his descriptions of the attacks terrifying to read and, second, of lending additional interest to Cheever's unusually direct account of the rivalry between the story's brothers:

There has always been a strain of jealousy in our feelings about one another, and I am aware, at some obscure level, that he makes more money and has more of everything than I, and to see him humiliated – crushed – saddened me but at the same time and in spite of myself made me feel that I had taken a stunning lead in the race for honors that is at the bottom of our relationship. He is the oldest, he is the favorite... (492)
- 33 Cheever's complicated feelings for the older, salaried, athletic Frederick provided the mainspring for the fraternal tensions animating all these stories. That "Angel" was written a quarter-century after the brothers effectively ended their relationship testifies to the tenacity with which such emotions affix us.
- 34 Cheever's concern with the alienation of modern America, too, is made more explicit in "The Angel of the Bridge" than elsewhere. The narrator's mother skates "as an expression of her attachment to the past" for "the older she grows, the more she longs for the vanishing and provincial world of her youth." Her fear of an air crash distills

her larger aversion to the bewildering technology and breathless pace of the modern age:

"How eccentric were the paths she took, as the world seemed to change its boundaries and become less and less comprehensible" (490-1).

- 35 The one thing uniting the story's brothers is their reaction to these modern afflictions, the narrator's delayed to allow for a moment of recognition. Just prior to his first phobia attack, as he watches his brother walk across a New York street, the narrator's viewpoint widens suddenly from scorn for one person's frailty to contemplation of mankind's range of private terrors:

He appeared to be an intelligent, civilized, and well-dressed man, and I wondered how many of the men waiting with him to cross the street made their way as he did through a ruin of absurd delusions, in which the street might appear to be a torrent and the approaching cab driven by the angel of death. (492)

- 36 When the narrator becomes the next victim of these "absurd delusions," Cheever again attributes the problem to the encroachments of contemporary culture, launching his most explicit attack on the tawdry American scene: the canned music and fake plants, "the Buffalo Burger stands, the used-car lots, and the architectural monotony" of the urban landscape. It occurs to the narrator that "it was at the highest point in the arc of a bridge that I became aware suddenly of the depth and bitterness of my feelings about modern life, and of the profoundness of my yearning for a more vivid, simple, and peaceable world" (495). Modern man here seems poised on a spidery bridge of his own making, aloft without the moorings of tradition and a sense of place. Though this sentiment is of course the narrator's and need not be read as Cheever's, the autobiographical underpinnings of "The Angel of the Bridge," like those of the other brother stories, suggest that in such pronouncements we are close to the voice of the author himself.

- 37 Cheever's shifting allegiances toward past and present emerge most clearly when he creates a protagonist and brother who play off each other. In all the filial jockeying for position, the past – Cheever's own, it is tempting to conclude – often seems a chimerical third character: the stifling relative, the obsessive love interest, the comforting old friend. One senses in "The Brothers," "Goodbye, My Brother," "The Lowboy," and "The Angel of the Bridge" a personal battlefield of sorts, a real stake in the outcome. This is not true of all Cheever's fiction. At times he lets his tremendous verbal facility run away with him and simply relies on the music of his lines to carry the day. He can seem glib and distant, a composer of brilliant sentences yet strangely uncommitted to his characters. (Malcolm Cowley wrote Cheever in 1971, "I've seen you losing patience with your characters for the last ten years or more."⁵) In these brother stories, though, the emotions feel close to the bone. They pit Cheever's disillusionment and bewilderment at modern life against his rejection of the "seductive and dangerous" past, the need to live fully in the moment against his deep wariness toward much of what his late-20th-century moment had to offer. These stories draw Cheever and his readers, in other words, toward one of the ineluctable facts of adult life: that balance, in Richard Rupp's words, "is not easily won, but it is everything" (249). As they struggle with each other and with the past, they come to seem less an assortment of disparate quirks and compulsions than one painfully divided self.

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NOTES

1. For examples of this view, see Chesnick (138), Coale "Cheever" (200), Donaldson (246), Hunt (177), and Waldeland "John" (268).
 2. The theme is discussed in Brennan (144), Coale "Cheever" (194, 198-9) and *John* (109-110), Didion (24), Donaldson (309-10), McElroy (75), O'Hara (21-4), and Waldeland *John* (44-7, 58).
 3. There are indications," according to Benjamin Cheever, "that Fred may have been my father's first homosexual partner, although it's also entirely possible that their love was platonic" (27). The break may also have been initiated by competition over a woman, Iris Gladwin, whom Fred won – and married, less than two months after John left for New York (Donaldson 54). In any case, the intensity of their bond influenced Cheever's fiction for decades.
 4. Page citations for "The Brothers" refer to *The Way Some People Live*; for all other stories, to *The Stories of John Cheever*.
 5. Letter of May 14, 1971, collection of Newberry Library, Chicago.
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