

A Farewell to Goodbyes: Reconciling the Past in Cheever's "Goodbye, My Brother"

Peter Mathews

As critic Charles C. Nash notes, one of the recurring themes in John Cheever's fiction is provided by the metaphorical struggle between two brothers. Scott Donaldson, Cheever's biographer, traces the source of this quarrel back to Cheever's real life conflict with his brother, Fred: "Later, as he drove me back to the ferry, he spoke with feeling of his recently deceased brother. 'Some people have parents or children,' he said. 'I had a brother.' There seemed no appropriate response. 'For a long time I couldn't take him,' he added, and then, quietly, 'I still can't'" (ix). A key text that unites these elements is Cheever's short story "Goodbye, My Brother" (1951), which details the clash between Lawrence, the brother of the title, and his family. By dissecting Cheever's carefully constructed framework, it becomes clear that the divisions in the Pommeroy family are representative of spiritual and historical forces that transcend the particularity of the situation. The effect of the narrative voice is to initiate a move beyond the surface story, thus showing how these forces penetrate every level of discourse, from the level of everyday life (in the family's clashes with Lawrence) to its deeper, more metaphysical levels (in the story's religious, historical, and mythical references). Cheever thus uses the surface narrative to explore a clash of values through three intertwining discursive prisms: history, religion, and the law.

But as many critics have pointed out, Cheever's story is not structured around the brother of the title—as a character, Lawrence barely speaks more than a few lines in the entire narrative—but instead explores the narrator's own psychology. Wendell Mayo, for example, writes: "We no longer have a narrator defined in relative terms—'I' and not 'Lawrence'—but in terms of difference: 'I' and 'not-I'" (96). Mayo's interpretation is affirmed by Cheever's own reflection in a

1953 letter to Malcolm Cowley, in which he reveals that Lawrence was, in fact, absent from the story's earliest drafts.

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. (*Letters* 160)

The function of the narrator is to evaluate his family's ideas, and the story is the scale on which he weighs the different worldviews he encounters in that milieu. His effectiveness is guaranteed by the double consciousness with which Cheever imbues him. Indeed, the narrator shifts continually back and forth between lyrical celebrations of life and gloomy ruminations about Lawrence's character. David Raney writes: "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 act than his thoughts, to which we have no access but the narrator's speculation. 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" (71). For the narrator, the external clash between Lawrence and his family, and the irreconcilable nature of their values, is repeated at the internal level: in the end, the narrator is forced to reconcile these conflicting philosophical positions in his own life.

Cheever emphasizes this process of reevaluation through a subtle series of textual repetitions. In a superb piece of analysis, Patrick Meanor traces many of the historical repetitions that occur in the story.

[T]he summer house, or Eden, of the Pommeroy family is called Laud's Head, a name which, if one knows some English religious history, undoubtedly refers to one of the most famous Anglican Archbishops, Wil-