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So Long, See You Tomorrow: The House that Maxwell Built

I am reminded sometimes, when reading a particularly engaging story, of a magician whose bag of tricks depends on the notion that “the hand is quicker than the eye.” One of the most remarkable things about a magician is that he can make us see and believe in what is not, in fact, there. A space becomes filled with meaning, all because the magician says that it has meaning, and that in place of empty space, a meaningful object will appear. Literary sleight-of-hand was not foreign to William Maxwell. “Writers—narrative writers—are people who perform tricks,” he said in a speech he delivered in 1955, “The Writer as Illusionist” (909). Maxwell declares that the reader is “continually being taken in” by all narratives (910). In other words, readers like a good ruse—like children, we are drawn to the magician in his black cape and top hat. In *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, William Maxwell pieces together a delicate reliquary of regret out of seemingly thin air—whispers of memory, conjured by words—and we believe in that structure, as much as we believe in the solid substance of our own memories of life as we knew it in the “once upon a time.” He is the consummate trickster in *So Long*—luring us into a story that he himself questions throughout, and, holding this story together, a wispy, half-there sculpture. Born in a small town in Illinois, Maxwell spent much of his writing career exploring the life he knew there, and the themes that emerged from that life. In novels and short stories, he reenacts his grief over his mother’s untimely death and the

devastating changes in his childhood—the resulting emotional distance between him and his father seems particularly painful. While many of his works could be called at least partly autobiographical, none is more so than *So Long*, in which we see the fullest and most honest treatment of the themes of loss, grief, and regret; at the beginning of chapter two, he tells us that this book “is a memoir” which he writes as “a roundabout futile way of making amends” (6), and, at the heart of this memoir, he places a sculpture by Alberto Giacometti. Entitled *The Palace at 4 a. m* (1932), this sculpture, made of wood, glass, and wire, gives Maxwell an image with which to tie together two stories: the story of his grief over his mother’s sudden death from influenza, and the story of Clarence Smith and Lloyd Wilson, two friends ultimately destroyed by adultery. While Giacometti’s sculpture provides the narrative scaffolding, Cletus Smith, Clarence’s son, provides the emotional bridge between the stories. For purposes of this analysis, I will limit my discussion to only one strand of this story.

A house under construction acts as the catalyst for Maxwell’s memories of his mother’s death and his friendship with Cletus Smith, and the story that brings them together. After Maxwell’s father remarries, he and his new wife decide to build a new house. Maxwell, lonely and disoriented, visits the construction site, where he remembers first meeting Cletus: “Before the stairway was in, there was a gaping hole in the center of the house and you had to use the carpenters’ rickety

ladder to get to the second floor. One day I looked down through this hole and saw Cletus Smith standing on a pile of lumber looking at me. I suppose I said, 'Come on up.' Anyway, he did"(27). At the time this occurs, Maxwell isn't aware of the tragedy that has befallen Cletus and his family. As far as he is concerned, he and Cletus are just two boys walking through the spaces where walls would soon be, teetering atop the beams like tightrope walkers. It is not until later, when Maxwell begins writing this novel, that he associates his meeting with Cletus with his mother's death, or the murder/suicide involving Cletus's father and their neighbor, Lloyd Wilson. Maxwell doesn't trust his memories, however: he admits that perhaps he and Cletus had met in some other way; he wonders if his name was Cletus; he even muses that Cletus "was not very different from an imaginary friend" (31). The only thing he is sure of is that "we played together in that unfinished house day after day, risking our necks and breathing in the rancid odor of sawdust and shavings and fresh-cut lumber"(28). In this partial house/home, Maxwell had discovered a haven, a place where he could believe things could be different: "I had the agreeable feeling, as I went from one room to the next by walking through the wall instead of a doorway, or looked up and saw blue sky through the rafters, that I had found a way to get around the way things were" (25). At the end of every afternoon, the two boys would go to their homes, never knowing what the next day would hold. "When the look of the sky informed us that it was getting along toward

suppertime, we climbed down and said ‘So long’ and ‘See you tomorrow,’ and went our separate ways in the dusk” And one evening this casual parting turned out to be for the last time. We were separated by that pistol shot”(31). When the Maxwells move to Chicago, William is surprised to see Cletus walking down the hallway of the big city school, so much so that does not speak to him. Although he later feels guilty, he doesn’t know what he could have said that would not have embarrassed them both. This memoir, entitled with the phrase the two boys said to each other at the end of each afternoon, constitutes Maxwell’s apology to Cletus and a sort of gift to himself, to lay the whole matter to rest, once and for all.

Although Alberto Giacometti is, perhaps, best known for a series of bronze elongated sculptures such as *Walking Man* (1947) and *Standing Woman* (1948), in *The Palace*, he captures a memory fresh with joy but also tinged with regret. In a letter written to his friend, Matisse, a letter from which Maxwell quotes at length in the novel, Giacometti explains the origin of the sculpture:

It is related without any doubt to a period in my life that had come to an end a year before, when for six whole months hour after hour was passed in the company of a woman who, concentrating all life in herself, magically transformed my every moment. We used to construct a fantastic palace at night—days and nights had the same color, as if everything

happened just before daybreak; throughout the whole time I never saw the sun—a very fragile palace of matchsticks. At the slightest false move a whole section of this tiny construction would collapse. We would always begin it over again. (26)

While much of the sculpture's meaning remains mysterious, even to the sculptor, it clearly evoked a strong reaction in Maxwell, as he tells us in the novel:

When, wandering through the Museum of Modern Art, I come upon the piece of sculpture by Alberto Giacometti with the title 'Palace at 4 a.m.,' I always stand and look at it—partly because it reminds me of my father's new house in its unfinished state and partly because it is so beautiful. . . .But anyway, it is made of wood, and there are no solid walls, only thin uprights and horizontal beams. (25 – 26)

As he describes the piece in detail, he notes the strange bird-looking creature, the “backbone of some animal” and the “imposing female figure” (26). These figures intrigued Maxwell, and while the reader may interpret them in any number of ways, Maxwell's interest lay mostly in the sculpture's bonelike structure of half-walls, in its resemblance to that construction site where two worlds connected: the world without a mother that he had learned to accept, and Cletus's world, which he could only imagine.

In *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, then, Giacometti's "fragile palace of matchsticks" emerges as a motif for Maxwell's complex feelings of regret: grief over his mother's death, his lost youth, and the lost opportunity to reconnect with Cletus. It is as if he thought that by speaking to Cletus, he could have brought them both full circle, closing the loop of things left unsaid, of acts left unfinished. Although the sculpture, as an object, is a reminder of what is solid, it also indicates that this solidity may be a mirage. In a similar way, even as Maxwell carefully builds his memories in the novel, he undercuts their authenticity at every turn. : "What we, or at any rate what I, refer to confidently as memory—meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subject to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion—is really a form of storytelling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling. Too many conflicting emotional interests are involved for life ever to be wholly acceptable, and possibly it is the work of the storyteller to rearrange things so that they conform to this end. In any case, in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw"(27). Throughout the story, we read phrases such as "details. . .made up out of whole cloth,"(32 - 33), or "I have a hazy half-recollection" (43). As he questions his memories, ironically, we believe in them even more, because although things are never exactly the way we remember them, we continue to reconstruct them. In connecting his grief over losing his mother to Cletus's grief over losing his father, Maxwell finds a

way to come to terms with both, to somehow walk back through a door that had been shut years before.

Paul John Eaken claims that the image of the sculpture, as it refers to the half-finished new house, “develops his sense of the house as a structure of wish” (136). But it is much more. In the context of the novel, Maxwell’s wish is twofold: after his mother dies, he remembers thinking that things would be alright again if he could just use some “supernatural sleight of hand” to bring his mother back “from the cemetery.” His other wish, tied to this first one, is that he could take back that moment in which he passes Cletus in the hallway. As Maxwell tells his readers, the sculpture is “terribly spare and strange” and thus similar to this half-constructed house, with its high beams and gaping spaces. In its spareness, it frames a sense of the openness of the future, but also a sense of the unfinished nature of life itself. This frame draws attention to the space within it, the figures that inhabit the space, move through it, live in it. Because the sculpture is semi-transparent, the artist can see with little obstruction what happens within. *So Long*, in this sense, presents to us multiple frames of reference in its exploration of the past: Maxwell’s boyhood home, the construction site, Cletus’s house, which Maxwell creates out of his own imagination; the barn where Lloyd Wilson is murdered. As houses are framed before they are finished, and pictures are framed, frames suggest boundaries and limitations as well as context and perspective. Just as land is framed in

by plots, a novel's plot is limited by its framework. We like to imagine that our lives have a linear, narrative plot with a beginning, middle, and end, replete with heroes, villains, twists, turns, and balancing tensions. We often cling to the idea that things will turn out alright in the end, that there will always be time, that we *can* go home again. However, the idea that life is full of endless possibilities is a fiction that we tell ourselves, especially when we are young, less so as we get older. The frame, in very sense of the word, becomes smaller, smaller, and smaller yet, our bones become more and more brittle, until the life too which we have grown accustomed has changed: time's frame has narrowed and opportunities to connect and reconnect have disappeared. As much as he would like, Maxwell cannot bring his mother back from the cemetery; he cannot return to that hallway and speak to Cletus.

The skeletal structure of *The Palace* provides for Maxwell a way to see through the walls of his memories, to re-examine his losses and regrets. The fact that Maxwell had grieved over his mother in previous novels and stories indicates among other things that he had remained unsatisfied with his treatment of this theme. In some ways, he was still haunted. Both Maxwell and Giacometti, like so many other writers and artists, wanted to achieve unity between what they perceived and the art they created. Robert Hughes has said that Giacometti's "obsession as a sculptor [was] the enormous difficulty of seeing anything clearly at all and the near impossibility of truthfully remaking what is seen into a

lump of clay or a scribble on paper” (Hughes). This “enormous difficulty of seeing anything clearly at all” is a significant point of intersection between Maxwell and the sculptor. Giacometti’s attempt, in *Palace*, to create some substantial structure that would represent his fleeting moments with his lover in the middle of the night, to call this moment not only to his mind but to create a space of reflection/recollection for his audience, is analogous to Maxwell’s aim in using the sculpture as a point of reference in the novel to which he comes back again and again as the story unfolds, and where, in the concluding pages, its image resounds even more loudly the poignancy of the loss he has suffered and his attempt to understand it. “When I dream about Lincoln,” he writes, “it is always the way it was in my childhood. Or rather, I dream that it is that way—for the geography has been tampered with and is half real, half a rearrangement of my sleeping mind” (130). Tied very closely, of course, with his memories of Cletus are deeper, more hurtful memories of the sudden loss of his mother, and his attempt to comfort his father, night after night as they paced the floors together, walking from room to room, their arms around each other. As he ages, Maxwell is still learning about himself, still trying to make sense, as we all do, of the pattern of events that are our lives. In *The Palace*, I think he finds the image that will bring structure, and a kind of closure, to his grief: “In the Palace at 4 a. m. you walk from one room to the next by going through the walls. You don’t need to use the doorways. There is a door, but it is standing open,

permanently. If you were to walk through it and didn't like what was on the other side you could turn and come back to the place you started from. What is done can be undone. It is there that I find Cletus Smith"(131-132). Ironically, however, Cletus stands for all of the things that can't be taken back, that can't be changed. *The Palace* stands for possibility, for the chance to redeem his actions. If, in some way, Maxwell blamed himself for his mother's death, in *The Palace*, she still lives. In this imaginary house, he takes his readers and we look in on Cletus's life after his father's suicide. What is done can't be undone, but perhaps the future can be rescued from the past. "He walks in the Palace at 4 a. m. In that strange blue light. With his arms outstretched, like an acrobat on the high wire. And with no net to catch him if he falls"(133).

In the last few lines of *The Wasteland*, we read these words: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." As Maxwell builds his memoir from bits and pieces of news, memory, and imagination he recreates his anguish, but also shelters himself from the complete ruins of regret. The memoir acknowledges that it is the bits and pieces of history that hold life together, eventually bringing meaning out of a sort of chaos. Maxwell's desires—to return to his boyhood and to the way things were before his mother died; to revisit that construction site; to relive that one moment when he sees Cletus in the hallway of his school so that he could, by speaking to him, set things right—drive the novel. The intersection between these two artists, Giacometti and Maxwell, is

the human need to remember all of it, even the painful parts, in order to conjure enough hope to go on. The fantasy palace that Giacometti created to, at least in some ways, commemorate his romantic *liaison* with his lover, becomes, in Maxwell's novel, a fantasy house in which he can imagine what could have been. By re-constructing this "fragile house of matchsticks," Maxwell sculpts a space within which he learns to accept that although what is done cannot be undone, in putting the past behind him, he would find his way forward. As he hopes for Cletus, he hopes for himself, that "he could go on and by the grace of God lead his own life, undestroyed by what was not his doing" (135).

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