Evil in the Pueblo: Possibilities of Life in N. Scott Momaday's House Made of Dawn

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The question I'd like to ask in this paper is whether we can understand a literay text coming from a culture different from our own. The example I have chosen deals with the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico as they are portrayed in N. Scott Momaday's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968). To what extent can we say that the book makes sense if you are not a Pueblo yourself? If you are not an Indian? If you are not American?

There are obviously realities that will always evade us. At one point, for instance some of the characters descend into a man-made cave called a *kiva*. That is a part of a native religious ritual and believers are not permitted to reveal what they see or do inside the *kiva*. Momaday, who is part Pueblo, knows of course, but he won't tell us anything about what is going on underground. We encounter here with something that has to remain unknown to us. Yet, we may contend that maybe that is not essential. What matters is what the characters actually do when they are outside the *kiva*. In other words, we may assume that their entering the *kiva* will have consequences outside the *kiva*, that is in their daily lives as it is described in the book. We may also contend that, as the novel is mostly read by non-Pueblo readers, its meaning must necessarily be outside the *kiva*.

The book's meaning is thus most probably much more abstract. Such will be my starting point: at what different levels is it possible to interpret a text?

It would seem that, when we read a novel, our mind has to ask itself a minimum of three types of questions. 1°) We have to reconstruct the events described or alluded to in the book: this character does this, then that... Anyone who has (tried to) read *House of Made of Dawn*, is aware that it is all the more difficult as the chronology of the novel is especially jumbled. (Faulkner is never very far behind Momaday). 2°) Textual details (objects, actions, etc.) have then to be interpreted. It is obviously not sufficient to describe them. They possess implications on several other levels: moral, religious, political, etc. In other words (and, we might say, by definition) in a work of art everything makes sense, or, if one prefers, everything is symbolic. In addition to that, as Momaday's book makes abundantly clear, there is no universal symbolism. Spiders and serpents for instance carry a signification that has nothing to do with a western, Christian vision of them. In this respect, we will have to start from as many textual details as possible and then generalize about them in the context of the novel. 3°) Most readers don't remain passive in front of what they read. Why read a book depicting a universe that is not our own, characters whose lives have apparently nothing to do with ours? On the other hand, these events, these people, these symbols seem one way or another to make sense for us. To begin with, it is often difficult not to pass judgment about the content of the book we are reading: I like or disapprove of this or that. In addition, the book tells us indirectly about ourselves and the world around us. When the book is good (and that could indeed be a criterion to

assess the value of a book) we see things we hadn't noticed before even though they unquestionably were present before our eyes. Books seem to fulfill what we could call a pragmatic function: they suggest to us new possibilities of life. Put differently, as Gilles Deleuze repeatedly said it, literature leads us from interpretation to experimentation. All readers are different and each and everyone of us transfers in their own lives different perceptions discovered in a given book. As I will try to show, in the case of N. Scott Momaday's novel, most probably the reader's task is to build his or her own "house made of dawn," whatever the phrase means. More generally, as I will also try to demonstrate, this book about native culture invites us to rediscover our own western culture.

Other cultures make sense for us because we also have a culture of our own (or, should we say, cultures and subcultures of own own, as we all are always simultaneously part of several communities). These two cultures are different, yet their confrontation produces meaning and new possibilities that may lead to changes in the lives of some of us. Such could be one of the key functions of literature. That is something *House Made of Dawn* makes particularly clear at least in two respects. On the one hand, one of the secondary characters is a trickster figure whose influence on the main character (and on the reader?) is extremely important, as he is constantly criticizing everything, obliging the protagonist not to take anything for granted, and getting him to change through a series of psychological shocks. Secondly, the book begins with the word "*Dypaloh*," (indicating that a story is about to be told to us) and ends with "*Qtsedaba*" (indicating the end of a story). Reading is represented as a sort of ritual, not

unlike a trip. Indeed the novel possesses a dynamic quality in that that it describes a series of transformations. Readers have to produce mental operations in their minds if they wish to understand the importance of the changes taking place in the text. In order to do so, we of course don't start from scratch. We make use of categories belonging to our culture and adapt them to try and understand what is taking place in another culture. Tzvetan Todorov in his book *Nous et les autres* is perhaps the theoretician who has developed the clearest implications of these assumptions. Todorov shows that, when we look at cultures — our own and others —, we should adopt a twofold approach: there is something universal about man (in other words, no-one is inferior or superior to the others) and at the same time all cultures are different and specific. If we separate these two considerations and ignore either of them, we run the respective risks of ethnocentrism and racism. Todorov concludes that mankind is the one species that arrives at an understanding of all the other cultures. To do so however, the only possibilitiy offered to us is to start from inside our own culture, using the only categories at our disposal, but using them in a critical way.

If we try to arrange the book's main events in chronological order, we find that it relates the life of a young Pueblo Indian named Abel, who returns home at the end of Worl War II. He finds it impossible to adapt to life in the village. In particular, he behaves erratically in a number of traditional tribal rituals. He finally kills an albino member of the tribe for unspecified reasons. (The albino's skin is white?) After serving his prison term, he is "relocated" in Los Angeles where he leads a miserable life. After he has antagonized a white policeman, he is almost

beaten to death and left lying unconscious on a beach. A native religious leader cum trickster figure tries to shock him into giving up his meaningless life. He also receives the help of Ben, a Navajo friend, before returning to the Pueblo. His grandfather has died. He organizes the burial of this highly respected old man and takes his place in the Dawn Race. The ending of the novel is left ambiguous and there is a possibility that the young man dies while performing the ritual. On the whole, the book describes a long healing process. Abel very slowly (re)constructs his identity. He finds that he has to establish a series of meaningful connections to time (the past), space, the others and a number of abstract entities such as the presence of evil.

From Pueblo culture to our own culture

Momaday's novel exhibits a large number of patterns of behaviour whose logic escapes us by and large — with some possible exceptions. The culture represented within the book is not ours, and yet it is unquestionably structured, just like our own culture is structured — though along different lines. In the course of the book, the protagonist slowly understands some of the connections between what seems to him — and to us — fragments of a giant puzzle. He finally perceives that a place is possible for him inside his community, that he can play a meaningful role and that he is presented with a number of possibilities to organize his future life. The cultural fragments are alien to us, but the process involved to make sense of them has a signification for us. When we read the book, we have to go through similar mental operations as basically our brain

works in the same way as that of the protagonist.

Abel first of all will have to replace his grandfather. That duty can be seen as a problem of generations: we live in time and the present supersedes the past. The reason is that we are part of a society and it is essential for a community to impose a body of values upon its members if it doesn't want to collapse. Abel goes from anomie to some sort of integration, and that process indirectly reveals the basic values of Pueblo society.

One of the key passages is to be found at the end of the novel. Francisco, the grandfather, as he is about to die, remembers his own coming of age initiation when he was still a young adolescent. The meaning of the passage is that you do not have an identity of your own as long as you are not a recognized member of your community. You enter society not on your own terms. On the contrary, you have to undergo a process of transformation: in fact, you enter society on its own terms as you adopt its values. In a scene reminiscent of William Faulkner's "The Bear," Francisco has to kill and bring back a bear. Of course, it is a hunting episode and finding food is important for the group. The meaning of the passage however exceeds that basic need. It is an immemorial ritual. You have to repeat that ritual and do it the way your ancestors performed it in order to become fully part of your society. The boy leaves the village to be on his own and enters the forest. The ritual is above all a trip and the book's readers are expected to go on a similar trip inside their minds. Francisco first follows a sort of tunnel before he emerges into a clearing. The passage from darkness to light evidently symbolizes a birthing process. It also symbolizes the passage from night to dawn

and the renewal of the creation of the world. Killing the bear then involves a two-fold procedure. First, it looks as if the bear has taken the boy to the right place and then stopped in order to wait for him. The bear and the hunter look at each other, they are about the same height and the scene seems to constitute a sort of "mirror stage". The boy identifies to the bear as if the animal was a metaphor conferring a new identity upon him. Then, he eats part of the animal's liver. This time, it seems possible to speak of a metonymy: the boy receives what he calls "bear power." The role of that whole scene in the novel is to offer a kind a reflection on what identity exactly is. Momaday shows us that for Francisco it has nothing to do with the white man's vision of identy: "I am myself." Such an equation is solipsistic and is in the last analysis meaningless — not to say a sign of pride... For a native like Francisco, we derive our identity through an active act that links us to nature. Only nature is meaningful (perhaps because it is immemorial and certainly more dependable than we are). "I am bear." The poet Rimbaud knew it when he tried to eschew a superficial conception of identity when he proclaimed: "Je est un autre".... Faulkner knew it too. In his hunting expedition, Ike MacCasling needs the guidance of the Indian Sam Fathers.

More generally, in *House Made of Dawn*, society represents a kind of wisdom which the characters have to rediscover. Very often, that wisdom is expressed through binary oppositions. Abel will not be fully integrated as long as he doesn't possess the two elements of a number of key Pueblo binary oppositions. One of them runs through the novel: the eagle and the snake. They are complementary and both are necessary. It is question of vision and there is

not one way to look at reality, but two: eagle vision (holding the land) and snake vision (being held by the land). To identify to an eagle solely would be a sign of pride and would destroy the balance that binds us to society. In the same way, when he is in Los Angeles, Abel is reminded of the fable of the cripple and the blind. Without the help of the other, each of them is irretrievably weak. (And humans are fundamentally weak and helpless...)

What Abel has to rediscover — at the most abstract level, the only one that will make sense for non native readers — is that it is man that makes sense of things and of himself and that the only way of doing so is in relation to nature. That is what the grandfather taught his grandchildren when they were young. One day, he took them to see the great black *mesa*. "They must know it as the shape of their hands, always and by heart." (197) As Francisco explains to them, "the sun rose up on the black *mesa* at a different place each day." Time and space cannot be separated. The grandfather's conclusion is: "they must live according to the sun appearing, for only then could they reckon where they were, where things were, in time." (197) We all need time and space — and tradition — to construct our own identity.

Communities periodically impose a series of rituals upon their members. The problem addressed by these rituals is that of integration. They enable us to make sure we know what our place in the world is, and secondly to solve the problems that may arise in our lives. In the novel, these rituals are all fairly traditional and belong to the scapegoating type: an animal is sacrificed in order to solve the problems of the community. It is of course entirely

psychological — and symbolic — for the individuals who take part in the rituals. Usually killing the animals obliges them to channel their energy and aggressivity in the prescribed direction. Such is the case of the Pecos Bull ritual, the rooster pull, the Sun Dance (a buffalo is put to death), etc. The "rooster pull" is described at great length, obviously because Abel fails to play the role expected from him in it. It is of course an old fertility rite with the animal's blood being sprinkled upon the earth. But it also points to a problem of fertility for the protagonist who is cut off from the community and remains the prisoner of his own anomie. The Albino senses Abel's predicament and chooses to strike the young man with the rooster. (We have of course to bear in mind that the Albino is a real person, but also a symbol, a part of Abel's mind). Abel however does not join in the ritual. In fact, he has never been really part of the tribe. When he was young, he killed a wounded eagle out of pity. You don't kill an animal out of pity. Pity is a personal emotion and, in the community, there are strict rules that govern the way animals are put to death. Not following them is akin to opting out of the community.

The title of the book is borrowed from "The Night Chant," a Navajo healing ritual. It is interesting to note that Abel, a Pueblo Indian, needs the help of a Navajo met in California in order to embark upon the long road towards integration. Once again, it seems that you cannot solve your problems by yourself. Navajos are indeed well-known for their healing rituals, especially as regards warriors returning from a battle and — physically and mentally — corrupted by violence. The words of the Chant act in what we could call in a psychosomatic manner. Abel is slowly led by the

rhythm and the repetition of the words to assume once again his body, make it whole, and of course at the same time reconstruct his mental identity. The Chant acts as if it was a sort of map where you have to situate yourself. Abel who has lost all sense of direction in his life is now able to establish new links with the universe. Here again, the intellectual categories involved are made of binary oppositions: male/female, dawn/evening, etc., and of course geographical oppositions: "May it be beautiful before me / behind me / above me / below me." (147) An individual who has no centre thus slowly begins to acquire one. In other words, whatever your culture, the self is something that is organised, has a meaning, follows directions.

The end of the novel is particularly obscure. It describes the Dawn Race, a ritual in which at last Abel takes part immediately after the death of his grandfather. It is not quite clear for the reader whether the young man is physically running at the very end of the passage, or whether he is montionless — and running only in his imagination. The question is perhaps not very important. If we consider that our problem is that of the construction of values, it is here sufficient to remember that the reader is "running" in his or her imagination, and that is what matters. What is the meaning of this ultimate ritual? It is once again a fertility ritual connected with rain. Rain is of course important for an agricultural community based in New Mexico. (And fittingly Abel finally starts singing the "Night Chant", the Navajo healing ritual). It follows that the values are maybe not the values of our western communities. Time is seen here as cyclical, with spring following winter, and life replacing death. The passage

mainly describes the appearance of dawn, which marks the beginning of the race. It is possible to consider that for non Pueblo readers the scene makes sense at three separate levels: (i) you have to rediscover and reassert your identity at regular intervals. Abel would say that you have to repeat creation which is here embodied by dawn. (Indeed the phrase "House made of dawn" means the universe in which our lives acquire their meaning). (ii) "He was running". The text is perfectly explicit: what matters is "the running itself." "He" at long last acquires an identity — in the act of running. What matters is the fact that an individual is actually being part of a ritual. There is apparently no goal. It is an "–*ing*" process, that is to say an open-ended process. There is nothing outside the race. There is no religious transcendence out of this world that would confer meaning on the ritual. It is purely secular and — in the case of Abel — personal. We could even suggest that Abel's efforts have nothing to do with the possibility of rain later in the season. (iii) The race is geographical as is identity. It starts from the village which is seen as a stable origin to which you always return. The race then reaches the limits of (social) space, reasserts the frontier between the known world and what is outside (especially evil supposed to be hidden in the dunes). Dawn is a repetition of space. The running is a recreation of space. Time and space both enable Abel to recover an integrated identity. In all cultures, people establish links between self, space and time. The possibilities of combinations are endless, but there seems to be a kind of universal grammar that permits us to understand at least partially at what level an individual's problems lie.

Polyphony and the interpenetration of cultures

If we look closer, things are in fact more complex than what we have said so far. There are four points which we must accept. (i) No community possesses a homogeneous culture. People belong to several (often contradictory) sub-cultures. Unity and wholeness are illusory concepts. It would be better to recognize that everything and everybody are divided. As far as the novel is concerned, it definitely looks like a polyphony, or more precisely a collection of points of view. (ii) We are in most cases part of foreign cultures in one way or another. In today's world, no community is wholly isolated from outside influences. In other words, purity is another concept we should get rid of. (iii) Many literary texts describe the (often uneasy) negotiations between different trends of a specific culture. *House Made of Dawn* is about the mental transformations undergone by a protagonist torn between conficting cultural demands. (iv) As a consequence, readers who follow the plot of the novel become to some extent involved in these negotiations. In the end, a number of elements of the foreign cultures become part of our systems of reference. To put it differently, the other and its culture(s) become part of our selves. This can certainly be seen a process helping us as it were to become richer as it opens to us new possibilities of life.

The village square of the Pueblo is characterized by two special places: the *kiwa* and the Roman Catholic Church. Readers learn nothing of what actually takes place inside the *kiwa*. That is a secret limited to the native believers. On the other hand, readers are partly privy to the priest's anguish. In the end, his point of view has become

modified. He has accepted some of the limitations of his traditional vision and his last words in the book are "I understand". Conversely, after performing the traditional native funeral rites for his grandfather, Abel asks the priest to bury him in a Christian way. It is true to say that Francisco was a faithful worshipper in the *kiwa*, but he also was the church trusted sacristan... Both Abel and the priest emerge richer from the old man's death. Such is life in the Pueblo. There is for instance both a highway and a wagon road leading to it. When we read the novel, it is indeed important for us to understand that symbols work both ways. A snake may be seen as a (negative) Christian symbol. At the same time, it is seen as a model by the Indians. It points to a connection to the earth and winds its way like the river, that is a symbol of life. Similarly, cobwebs are probably something a Westener considers dirty and to be avoided. For a native, it is a sign of beauty, symbolising the complexity of the universe in which everything is linked.

More generally, we can say that two conceptions of religion are present in the book, or more accurately there are more than two, as we need to be aware that there is not one single native religion (the Pueblos worship in a different way from the Navajos, and we should not forget Tosamah's peyote ritual which is part of the liturgy of the Native American Church, a 20th Century invention). It is however true to say that we are mainly confronted to two main religious visions. There are diametrically opposed, which obviously makes them symbolic. At one point, Angela, the white woman, looks at the Corn Dance. She looks at it in her own way and imagines that there is something the performers see outside the world. She projects upon them a westernized conception of mysticism

which posits some supernatural otherworld. On the other hand, for the Pueblo Indians, as the novel makes clear, only what is visible exists. Of course, Angela's reaction is not only cultural, but also personal. It reflects a basic feeling of malaise which expresses itself in this way. In the course of the book, she will however evolve. (She will help Abel later in Los Angeles too). One of the lessons of the novel thus seems to be the necessity of confronting different systems of value and the fact that we live in time and that nobody remains without changing.

Evil in the pueblo

Evil is a problem. It resists. Our intelligence tries to understand its real nature, but we always fail. It is something that apparently is too big, too complex for our minds. The problem concerns us as human beings. It also concerns the characters in the novel. Abel hesitates, then he learns and his attitude changes. What does the book tell us about evil? It is "something" present in the dunes, in holes in the middle of fields. It is invisible, hidden somewhere, "abroad in the night," (104) and no one can describe it. How do you act when you are confronted to evil?

Abel's first reaction is wrong, as he discovers later. He fights evil head on. That is the meaning of the murder of the Albino, whom Abel mistakenly sees as responsible for all the infortunate things that have happened to him. Is that because the Albino is "white" and as such symbolically linked to the white man's war from which Abel has just returned a broken man? The Albino is oddly reminiscent of

Melville's Moby Dick, the white whale that embodied all that was evil for Captain Ahab. It is clearly a question of point of view. Ahab is the only one who sees the whale in that way, and we must remember that the Albino is another member of the Pueblo. He is unquestionably innocent of what Abel accuses him of. We may suppose that the Albino is a projection of all that is "white" and seen as evil inside Abel. Killing the other man is but a futile attempt at exorcizing that evil. The murder is of course pointless and inefficient as any attempt at destroying evil ultimately always is. In fact, the Albino can be seen as a double of Abel, fighting "only in proportion as Abel resisted." (83). As a matter of fact, Abel seems unable to see the other aspect of the Albino, his fish scales which connect him to the idea of fertility and his snake-like appearance which links him to the earth. Abel is unaware that the Albino (consciously or not) tried to help him in the rooster pull ritual. Abel looks at him with what basically is a traditional Christian vision: snakes are associated to the devil, etc.

Abel is wrong on two accounts. First, confronting evil should not be a personal affair. (Such was Abel's mistake when as a boy he killed the wounded eagle out of pity). Evil is a social problem. It has nothing to do with the emotions and the illusory projections of an (ill-adjusted) individual. Second (and as a consequence), evil is to be dealt with through rituals. The Dawn Race for rain that ends the novel is partly a ritual confronting evil. One of the main characteristics of rituals is that they are repeated. That means that evil will never be destroyed. Rituals just help us to live with it, to contain it. In fact, the ritual (which, as we said, has no end, and just consists in running, with the "–*ing*" of the verb stressed) follows the dunes. It reasserts the

frontier between the community and evil, "as water flows in the way of least resistance." (103) That is the reason why the ritual is a kind of struggle, or, more accurately, "sheer exertion, neither lost nor won." Put differently, good and evil make up one more binary opposition. That opposition is part of Pueblo culture and deleting one of the two terms will always mean that we are trying to live outside society, which of course is an impossiblility.

If a western reader tries to look for philosophical references in his or her culture in order to understand this aspect of *House Made of Dawn*, maybe Spinoza could provide an answer. Spinoza (like Nietzsche later, in what we could call an ethical approach as opposed to a moral one) always insisted that we should act and not react. Another way of putting it is asking the question of what we should focus on: evil (in order to fight it and hopefully destroy it, as traditional morality demands) or life, creating new possibilities of life? The second choice seems less futile (less a waste of time and energy, we could say) and creating new selves, stressing the importance of building new relationships is what Abel tries to do at the end. Here again, the novel charts a process of education, opening several possibilities, and offering its readers a mixture of traditional western attitudes and native wisdom from which we are at liberty to choose.

Other people's crypts

It should go without saying that these social and cultural differences are not sufficient to account for what creates problems for the readers of *House Made of Dawn*. There are

also more individual realities. And yet, are they really individual? Can we say that something is not social one way or another? The last question I'd like to raise is that of the cause of Abel's anomie. I borrow Émile Durkheim's concept to describe a person for whom life has become devoid of goal or meaning and who as a consequence no longer feels part of society. Abel seems to be burderned by some kind of unconscious block upon which he has no leverage. The point about what seems to be a repressed trauma (unless it is a whole series of traumas) is that it is not his. The trauma seems to have been inherited. In other words, Abel is suffering from someone else's traumas, from an evil legacy he has received which prevents him from adjusting to his community and performing correctly in its rituals. In the last analysis, the problem would appear to be social. What is integration in Pueblo society?

Abel is judged different first because nobody knows who his father was. The only thing that is certain about him is that that unknown father was not a Pueblo. In addition to that, Abel was cursed by the witch Teah-Whau, apparently because his grandfather seduced the witch's daughter and bore her a still-born child before abandoning her. As a consequence of Francisco's sin, the witch in revenge brands Abel as it were with an evil curse. Thirdly, it would appear from Father Nicholas's diary that the priest committed the sin of adultery (probably with Teah-Whau) and actually sired Francisco. And fourthly, there is the added suggestion of incest. Was the witch's daughter also Nicholas's child? (Faulkner would have relished the possibility...) All these elements are mainly hearsay. It is impossible for the reader to determine whether they are true or not, yet they undeniably caused part of Abel's

anomie. Maybe, another way of putting it is that no one is pure. We all have repressed memories in our unconscious — that is our own memories. We also have other people's repressed memories. Society is an assemblage of individuals who cannot assemble, if only because they cannot coincide with themselves.

In the end, the real problem is a problem for the reader. "Your imagination comes to life," says Tosamah (128). The Dawn Race was (perhaps?) mainly run in imagination by Abel. The reader has to modify his or her perceptions of himself or herself and of the world he or she inhabits. This is something we have to do in our imagination. What does the opaque (for us) universe of New Mexico Jemez Pueblo teach us? Abel learns that you are not born a Pueblo Indian. You become one. It's not in your blood. It's in your mind. Maybe it is the same for us. We can become (partly) Indian. That is something for instance which particularly struck Hawthorne about Thoreau who had adopted Indian values without of course being an Indian himself. I offer it is more of a problem of pragmatics than a problem of interpretation. At the same time as we are confronted to Pueblo culture, we discover in our own life schemes which help us understand who we are and where we are. In other words, the problem is for us to build our own House Made of Dawn.

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