Cheever; or, The Ambiguities (1984)

Elizabeth Hardwick

In his last years, John Cheever, a man more disorderly than his proud art and his courteous, somewhat remote, manners revealed, tried to set his house in order. After a heart attack nearly fatal, he gave up a fervent addiction to alcohol, quit smoking--and all the while was preparing to die of cancer.

Cheever's was a lyrical talent quite mysterious in its movements. It was always plain that the writer was a New Englander. His stories of New York City and the surrounding prosperous suburbs are filled with men and women who seem, like himself, cast up on the shores of Manhattan's East Side and his suburban Shady Hill and Bullet Park as exiles from values less fretful and uncertain than they now know. Their expectations from life are high and yet reasonable, or so it seems to them. The poisoned dwellings they make for themselves take them by surprise.

The shadowy and troubled undergrowth of Cheever's stories brings to mind something of the temper of Melville and Hawthorne--and Cheever himself is a sort of *Pierre*, a study in ambiguity. His special tone is nostalgic, tender about memories of natural illuminations, the fine day, a sunset, the wind on the sea, and the first years of married love. The nostalgia is curiously, and with great originality, combined with a contemporary and rootless compulsion to destroy, even to crash by repetition, the essence of nostalgia, as when the remembered victories of the college track star become a drunken, fatal vaulting over the sofas in the living room ("O Youth and Beauty!").

In the beautiful story, "Goodbye, My Brother," there is a characteristic balance or imbalance between the most destructive of family hatreds and the final melodies of celebration: "The sea that morning was iridescent and dark. My wife and my sister were swimming--Diana and Helen--and 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." Beautiful, full of grace, black and gold in the water. The rapturous cadence seems to come from a vision of hope uncorrupted by the traumas this imagination so swiftly and deftly uncovers beneath the glistening of good taste, privilege, and hereditary goodwill.

"The Housebreaker of Shady Hill," about a man stealing from the houses of his neighbors, has the sweat of financial need and moral collapse lying on the pages. The atmosphere is overcast, clammy with the literal bankruptcy and the criminal solution of Johnny Hake, "conceived in the Hotel St. Regis, born in Presbyterian Hospital, raised on Sutton Place." The execution of the dark thefts is more brilliantly accomplished than Hake's atonement and return to the light world "become so sweet." Violence is to be contained by the memory of "summer nights, loving the children, and looking down the front of Christina's dress." The sentiments, the sacraments, secular and otherwise, are called upon again and again as a protection against self-destruction. It is by language, precise, original in its shaping, almost effortlessly evocative, that Cheever rescues the sentiments from sentimentality, from a mere consoling assertion.

In "The Swimmer," the suburban pools of house after house, backyard after backyard, are imagined to be a continuous river, a "quasi subterranean stream that curved across the country." A disintegrating man passes through one after another, some surrounded by people eating peanuts and drinking cocktails, and some deserted. He is making his way home to what turns out to be an empty house, the gutters loose, the handles on the garage door rusty, the family gone, the swimming pool river merely a deranged dream of reconciliation. This modern story is as resonant as an ancient tale. The suburban pools are elevated to a symbolical challenge like that faced by the wanderers in old forests.

Another homely object, "The Enormous Radio," is lifted beyond the anonymity of mere usefulness. On the radio, the nice wife, hoping for proper music, begins to hear the quarrels and distasteful dispositions of her apartment-house neighbors coming through the speaker. The radio gradually becomes a monstrous instrument of exposure, and there is something of the inscrutability of "The Turn of the Screw" about the story. Is it themselves the young couple is listening to?"

Just who is the man, John Cheever, the Episcopalian anarch? Susan Cheever, his daughter, has written a memoir, *Home Before Dark*, about the writer as a son, a brother, and a father. She has chosen a tone of elegiac candor. The commemorative aspect is suitable to the 1982 death of this extraordinary man and to the pain of family grief. The candor is suitable perhaps to where the culture is now in matters of lapidary inscription. Candor has come to be the sum of the duties attending the documentation of lives by biography or by the reflection of autobiography. Weakness, temptation, indiscretion, infirmity--it must be said these are interesting. Revelations give "life" to the dead authors known previously to most only through their works and the shape of the head on book jackets. "O quiet form upon the dust, I cannot look and yet I must."

Susan Cheever has written novels, but none is as confidently composed as *Home Before Dark*. Here, she has had the assistance of the thirty volumes of the journals kept by her father. These are not mere jottings. Each excerpt she has called upon, and it is to be hoped the calling does not undermine the publication of this valuable testimony, shines with a limpid fluency and eloquence. The journals are passionately confessional, somehow a defiance of the other side of the coin, the appropriate John Cheever. Confession is the last resort, or even the first, of the captive, and what we learn in this memoir is that Cheever existed life-long in captivities imposed by the complications of his nature, his masks, his loyalties, and the protection of his talent.

He had an unsettling sense of a lost or ambiguous heritage. New England, and especially the villages and towns around Boston, likes to greet each new dawn with the word "old": old families, old names, old money. This, by entail, becomes the right schools and occupations, "antique" woods in the parlors, Canton china, and so on. Genealogical support for the blue eye, fair face, and Anglo-Saxon name; affirming portraiture is a sort of kitchen scholarship.

Thus, Cheever liked to say that his family came to the new world by way of the passage of Ezekiel Cheever on the *Arbella* in 1630; "The roughnecks had come on the *Mayflower*." Susan Cheever puts the esteemed Ezekiel on the *Hector* in 1637. But no matter, the Cheevers were by the nineteenth century an "established Brahmin family," most of them engaged in seafaring. The ambiguous circumstances came in the branch; that is, the name endured among prosperous, greatly respected parts of the family, one of whom Susan Cheever rather apologetically calls upon, but status did not endure for all of the Cheevers, not quite.

As so often happens to a sensitive, insecure descendant, the real trouble, the downward slide, happened right at home. Cheever's father sold his interests in a shoe factory that bore his name, invested in stocks and went broke: ruin at home. His mother set herself up in the genteel but socially declasse gift-shop business, a move very galling to the men of the family. The father began to drink, and the parents separated amid the usual unrestrained household warfare. In the journals, some four decades later, we have Cheever's memories--written under the transformation of style, that proper affront to the crassness of reality. "An afternoon when he returned home from school and found the furnace dead, some unwashed dishes on the table in the dining room and at the center of the table a pot of tulips that the cold had killed and blackened."

There was trouble at Thayer Academy, and Cheever left school in his junior year. Just what brought about the expulsion is not quite clear: smoking, bad grades, fractious behavior--the accounts given by the delinquent student varied. An older brother, Fred, was a consolation and support, he being, or seeming in youth to be, a plausible and successful New England product. "His love for his older brother, who nurtured and supported him--and whom he was later called on to nurture and support--became the most complicated attachment in his life," Susan Cheever writes. Cheever himself remarked, "When it became apparent that it was an ungainly closeness, I packed my bag and shook his hand and left." Later, he told his daughter that he had wanted to murder his brother and at the same time to live with him after the family collapsed. "Much of the conflict in my father's heart, and many of the themes in his work, grew out of his love for Fred."

The brother's success did not last; indeed, his losses were great--job, money, marriage, and the decline, due in some degree to drink, into an embarrassing, empty heartiness. Thus, the common tendency of families to mistake who will make it to the finish line. The central role of the brother does not truly take shape in the memoir, and one has to accept it, unfleshed by dramatic characterization, as the repeated

assertion of Cheever himself. Of the brothers in the fiction, one, Moses Wapshot, is a romantic projection of fulfilled hopes, quite unbelievable; two, the sullen, complaining intruder in "Goodbye, My Brother" and the murdered sibling in *Falconer*, are outstandingly vicious.

Cheever did not live with his brother. Instead, he came to New York. It was 1`930, and he was eighteen, and that same year he published his first story, in *The New Republic*. In a few years, 1935, he had his first story in *The New Yorker*. The foundation of this precocity are not examined in the memoir, and we do not know what was read, studied, or the level of aspiration. That his literary hopes were not commonplace we can judge by the act of the submission to *The New Republic* and early publication in *Hound and Horn*, *Story* magazine, and others, and his fling with lowercase letters in the manner of Cummings. The reader we hear about is the reading of a father to his family, not the solitary reading of the writer. Throughout the daughter's memoir, Cheever's life as a writer is seen by the listing of publication of books, some successful, some less so, by his struggles with the opaque paternalism of *The New Yorker*, by the years of poverty and the years of spending, by late honors and prizes. Certain correspondences between the "candor" of the daughter's memoir, striking revelations, quite detailed, of pitiful hours of drunkenness and homosexual inclination and flight from marriage, loyalty to marriage, and the use in fiction of these "themes" are offered in a perfunctory way. That certain masks might be required for the act of writing are overwhelmed by the masks of a social being, that is, the son and the father.

Cheever met his wife in 1938 when he was twenty-six years old, and they married three years later. That it was a profound attachment for forty years and that the knowledge of a strained and, inevitably, tormented union influenced his life greatly can be seen in his best stories about the married people they hoped to be or feared to be. Somewhat curtly, the daughter sums it up. "This pattern--my father as the alternately pursuing and rebuffed, resentful male, and my mother as the passive, coerced, resentful female--was held to as long as they were together." There were children, moves from here to there around Manhattan and the suburbs, and the final settling into the house in Ossining and the dogs, the neighbors, the garden.

> "In many ways my father's life can be divided into two distinct parts. The first forty-five years or so were devoted to a struggle for stability: the establishment of a professional reputation, the creation of a family, earning enough money to survive, and most of all the search for some kind of home--some place of his own that might confirm his credentials as a gentleman and soothe his insecurities."

And his last twenty years a struggle to escape the trap and "most of all to escape the pressure to continually surpass himself as a writer." But this cannot be true. Writing is not "the establishment of a professional reputation" as if one were a doctor or lawyer; it is not properly in the sentence with creation of a family and the purchase of a home.

Cheever came to New York in the 1930s, the Depression years. He was scarcely more than a boy, and his making his way as a writer of stories is quite astonishing. It was altogether saving that he came to New York. The North Shore or the South Shore around Boston would not have served. His own pretensions are to the point here. "His aristocratic New England background was partly sham, and his patrician airs were mostly his own invention." Displacement is at the center of his view, and, indeed, he was displaced, first from New England and then again in the literary landscape of his time. As a writer, he lived in a scene dominated at first by southerners and later by the arrival of brilliant Jewish fiction writers, neither congenial to his creative sources. He did not have at hand the small-town and rural grotesques of the southern sort, nor were his style and preoccupation similar to the intellectual aspirations and skepticism of the Jewish immigrant experience as seen by Saul Bellow, for instance.

He was poor in New York and, of course, given is own attraction to the pits and to risk, he was liberal in spirit. But he was not radical, not stung by the bees (or wasps) of the political battles of the period, although he knows the country and the minds in it. By the direction of the sentences, the ease of the meters in prose, by names, by floating images attached to stuffs and dishes and furniture, we are aware of a self-education as frenzied as that of any scarecrow in the public library.

The American bourgeois world and its pains are his quarry. Summers on the islands in Massachusetts, skiing weekends, going with your child to catch the private-school bus and meeting a mother and having an affair, spending too much in the memory of what one was supposed to have to spend. His was an Anglican New York and its suburbs a hungover Barchester. But because it was New York, it had the rocking unsteadiness of a metropolis quite different from the Edinburgh staunchness of Boston. The husbands had to catch the 8:10 into Manhattan and come home on the five o'clock quite uneasy, not knowing what they were bringing with them and not knowing either what they would find when they arrived.

The landscape of Cheever's fictions in the 1930s and 1940s did not pause at driveways where the dogs with names like Jupiter were family members. His branch of the family might have fallen back, but the mask of a well-bred patrician remained; he looked like one and spoke like one. Where no one knows your parents and your grandparents, inner being and surface at last unite against the provincial domination by fact. "There seemed to be money everywhere, and the Whittemores, who slept in their worn overcoats in the winter to keep themselves warm, seemed separated from their enjoyment of this prosperity by only a little patience, resourcefulness, and luck" ("The Pot of God"). This was the reality that produced the stories, and there was a certain price to be paid since the artfully our-of-place man was also dislocated for a time in the prevailing hierarchy of literature.

The New Yorker printed his stories, and this was fortunate, no doubt. At the same time, he was undervalued, not neglected but also not elevated by the attention of the best critics of the day such as Edmund Wilson and Alfred Kazin. It was felt that he was a minor John O'Hara, a talent much coarser than Cheever's. *The Way Some People Live* (1942) and *The Enormous Radio* (1953), collections of brilliant short stories, appeared without causing a racket. We are not told how Cheever felt in these matters, but a dispiriting tension would be fitting to the bland reception to one's best work. It was not until his first novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957), that the general public and the prize committees took notice. This circumstance brings to mind the dismal delay in Faulkner's stock until after *Intruder in the Dust*, a near parody of his previous work.

There is something parodic in *The Wapshot Chronicle*, although not of the previous work but of the writer, the seafaring Yankee. Writing the novel, or trying to write a novel, took more than twenty years. The first pages are heavy with ancestral adornments, with the treacherous attractions of New England pedantry. The portrait of a not-long-dead founder of the Wapshot (Cheever) family: "He appeared in a yellow velvet cap, trimmed with fur, and a loose green velvet gown or bathrobe as if he, bred on that shinbone coast and weaned on beans and codfish, had translated himself into some mandarin or hawk-nosed Renaissance prince, tossing bones to the mastiffs, jewels to the whores, and swilling wine out of golden goblets with his codpiece busting its velvet bows."

Bullet Park (1969) was a commercial failure, despite the success of *The Wapshot Chronicle*. In between, he did the stories in *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill* (1959), and these, like the earlier collections, are what he could so wisely compose in the pure and confident manner of his genius for the short form. *Bullet Park* is not quite serious, that is the trouble. Hammer and Nailles are the names of the two families; such is the beginning folly. Hammer, a suburbanite but actually the bastard son of outlandish, bejeweled parents, tries to immolate Tony, the beloved son of Nailles, in the chancel of Christ's Church and would have done so without the intervention of a kindly guru from the Temple of Light. A certain aspect of Halloween on the streets of Bullet Park.

The Wapshot Chronicle has a biographical interest. Here is the first of Cheever's confessions to homosexual inclinations and the first of what might be called his "gentrification" of the homosexual pass and of the homosexual affair in the later novels. Homosexuality and alcoholism return the thoughts to Susan Cheever's memoir, *Home Before Dark*. These two afflictions or profound wishes shoot out of the memoir with a marked propulsive force.

"It became clearer and clearer that my father was the worst kind of alcoholic. He seemed intent on destroying himself. I suppose he had always been an alcoholic." An invitation to teach at Boston University was accepted, with devastating results. "He narrowly missed being hit by a car as he crossed Commonwealth Avenue in a haze. The police threatened to pick him up for public intoxication--he had lain

down on the grass in the Public Garden to share a bottle of hooch in a paper bag with a bum.." At last, broken in health, he was sent to an alcohol-rehabilitation center in New York and on from there to AA and abstinence, no doubt painful. In the stories and novels, there is an unusual amount of drinking. Some of it is more or less unconscious state business such as, "she said, fixing herself another drink"--that sort of line again and again. (A like stage business can be found in the fiction of many alcoholic writers.) But in the stories, drunkenness was often central to the action--cocktail parties, dinners with their insults, shameful outbursts, tears in the bedroom. In the period and the setting there was a naturalness to being drunk, and the plots it occasioned flowed into remorse and ruin and aroused, tenderhearted, forgiving emotions: "Oh, those suburban Sunday nights, those Sunday-night blues! Those departing weekend guests, those stale cocktails, those half-dead flowers, those trips to Harmon to catch the Century, those post-mortems and pickup suppers!" ("O Youth and Beauty!")

That was one thing, drinking. "My father's sexual appetites were one of his major preoccupations, and his lust for men was as distressing to him as desire for women was self-affirming and ecstatic." In the course of writing the memoir, Susan Cheever was telephoned by a young man who had "letters" and perhaps wanted to sell them; she interviewed another who had an unhappy story to tell. On one of his visits to a university, Cheever met Rip, "who would be his close friend, lover, confidant for the rest of his life. The writer's journals of 1978 tell it all:

> "Absolute candor does not suit me, but I will come as close as possible to describing the chain of events. Lonely and with my loneliness exacerbated by travel, motel rooms, bad food, public readings and the superficiality of standing in reception lines I fell in love with Rip in a motel room of unusual squalor. His air of seriousness and responsibility, the bridged glasses he wore for his nearsightedness and his composed manner all excited my deepest love."

In his last years, John Cheever was much honored. His complete stories were collected, and the reception and sales were at last an acknowledgment of their fineness. He also wrote two novels, very curious both of them, and one of them, the bizarre *Falconer*, the best of his work in the long form.

Oh What a Paradise It Seems (1982) is the last of his novels. The confessional mode here is most charmingly engaged, and the torments of conscience and doubt poor Coverly Wapshot endured over a discreet homosexual pass have been swept away with a sunny air of innocence quite perverse. This short book is rich with the love of nature and memories of skating on ponds now being used as dump sites--and rich with embarrassments.

Lemuel Sears, "an old man but not yet infirm," stands next to a handsome young woman in the line at a bank. He is captivated and soon, after dinners and careful attentions on his part, it is a rainy night, people jogging on the street, and the girl, Renee, invites him to dine in her apartment. She meets him at the door wearing a wrapped, and as for him he is out of his clothes in a minute. "You were hardpacked," she says. A phrase from the army? It does somehow express the rather chirpy dash and potency of this distinguished personage with two wives in the grave. The affair goes on for some weeks, and he arrives at the apartment one night to find her dressed, ready to go out. He nevertheless "unbuckled his trousers and let them fall to his knees." Her answer is, "I'm sorry, but I cannot help you." Thinking flowers might be "a seductive force," Sears goes out to buy them and comes back to find her gone.

> "The elevator door opened. It was not she. It was the elevator operator. He was wearing street clothes and a hat. He went directly to where Sears stood and embraced him.... The stranger, whose name he hadn't learned, took him downstairs to a small room off the lobby, where he undressed Sears and undressed himself."

O wishes and fantasies. The little idyll proceeds in a stately way. "We've got to find something else we can do together," Sears says, and so they go on a fishing trip. They sleep together quite peacefully and Eduardo, his name, tells about his wife and sons and says that he will spend the rest of his vacation with his wife in Key West, a union package tour. Sears's last line when they part back in the city is, "Get a great tan."

Cheever is the straightest of homosexual lovers, and thus his last novels are not exactly a contribution to gay lit. The pastoral and nostalgic mood does not desert him, even at the cost of common experience. One might notice the absence of class tension or perhaps imagine that it exists in the passivity of Sears and also of *Falconer's* Farragut, who are so sweetly taken, so accommodating without making a signal. Even the girl Renee appears in her wrapper to begin the seduction. In this winsome dream of Lemuel Sears's--too many autumn leaves.

Falconer is a perturbation. The Cheever artifice, the fall to the dust, and a precipitous act it is, rash and brilliant in the fall. Of course, there is a well-educated gentleman with one of those signifying, protective names, this one Farragut. (Falconer is the name of an old, brutal prison, based on Sing Sing in Ossining, where Cheever went to teach the inmates.) Farragut has been brought to "this old iron place on a later summer's day." Before we know his crime, we see him busy in his cell writing to "his wife, his lawyer, his governor and his bishop." *His bishop,* yes, writing to his bishop while longing for his methadone, since Farragut (his family came to America in 1672 on the *Nanuet*) is a heroin addict, but a fine fellow for all that. He has killed his gross, self-satisfied brother with a poker when the brother screamed that his father didn't want Farragut. "He had an abortionist come to the house. Your own father wanted you killed."

So Farragut is in prison for life. It is all to be inside, and Cheever has, without any previous indication of such powers, created a large cast from the underside of society, created guards and routines, obscene dialogues and mumbled, self-serving prison monologues, all with great imaginative force. There is a "radiant and aching" love affair with Jody. Jody is an ignorant, cunning, petty hustler in jail, or so he says, for burglary, pistol-whipping, and kidnapping of a candy-store operator in order to steal some pari-mutuel tickets. Their meeting, as we would expect, comes through Jody's initiative. He wants Farragut because "you ain't homosexual." No cash, no reward? "From what Farragut had read he had expected this to happen, but what he had not expected was that this grotesque bonding of their relationship would provoke in him so profound a love."

Jody escapes, dressed in drag as an acolyte of the cardinal who has made a ceremonial visit to the prison. Back in town, out of the vestments, the cardinal recognizes Jody for what he is, an escaped convict. And then a Theater of the Ridiculous scene follows. The cardinal and Jody prance about Madison Avenue, and all the while TV actresses and assorted others kneel to kiss the ring and be blown the sign of the cross. He takes Jody to a private room at a tailor's and orders him a suit of clothes for his new life. A miracle.

In Cheever's fiction there are, now and then, moments close to profanation of his insistent churchiness, just as he is compelled to deviation from his insistent passion for women. In prison, having left Jody's private brothel, Farragut writes "Oh, my darling" letters to a mistress, just as Lemuel Sears passes back and forth without mishap from his ecstasy with the girl, Renee, to the love of the elevator man, Eduardo. Whether this is naivete, a startling unworldliness, willed illusion, or unguarded egotism is hard to say.

Cheever covers his tracks, but the writing dares his own horrors. And he will not give up the pastoral accent. Farragut, a heroin addict and a murderer, escapes prison by posing as a dead body on its way to the morgue. "He held his head high, his back straight, and walked along nicely. Rejoice, he thought, rejoice." And there you have it.

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