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Cheever in Charge

Blake Bailey. *Cheever: A Life*. Knopf. March 2009.
Blake Bailey, ed. *John Cheever: Collected Stories and Other Writings*. (Library of America, No. 188.) Library of America. March 2009.
Blake Bailey, ed. *John Cheever: Complete Novels*. (Library of America, No. 189.) Library of America. March 2009.

John, your reputation in American literature is very, very shaky. God

knows what will happen to it. —Jean Stafford to Cheever in 1978

What happened is that it continued to decline. In the lurching stock market of literary fame, John Cheever's has been fading for decades. "Who is reading him now?" the *New York Times* asked recently—in the course of an article on the television show "Desperate Housewives." *Times* media critic David Carr refers almost apologetically in his recent memoir to having been born "into a John Cheever novel… a suburban idyll where any mayhem was hidden," using the allusion as shorthand for the unremarkable and banal. This God- and sin-haunted man and the writing he produced so meticulously over the course of a half-century have come to stand, in our collective literary consciousness, for dullness, complacency, and an utter lack of relevance.

There are reasons for this. Many aspects of Cheever's work—the domesticity, recurrently Christian vernacular, and near-complete absence of nonwhite actors—sound quaint to the contemporary ear. On a deeper level, the whole tradition of lyrical realism, of which Cheever, along with John Updike, is the quintessential postwar avatar, has increasingly come to be regarded as metaphysically suspect. In a thoughtful *New York Review of Books* essay, the novelist Zadie Smith recently wondered if a form where "even the mini-traumas of a middle-class life are given the high lyrical treatment" has exhausted itself. Smith sees lyrical realism at an "anxiety crossroads where a community in recent crisis—the Anglo-American liberal middle class—meets a literary form [the novel] in long-term crisis." This is not a favorable climate for a writer whose primary audience was readers of the *New Yorker*, who celebrated his Yankee seafaring lineage, and who held, to the end of his days, an abiding faith in the power of traditional narrative.

This spring's double-barreled canonization—Blake Bailey's *Cheever: A Life*, firmly in the contemporary blow-by-blow biographical style, plus two volumes of Cheever ensconced in the Library of America—at least allows us finally to pose the question: Was Cheever great?

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John Cheever was born on May 27, 1912, in the fading Massachusetts port town of Quincy, the son of a failed businessman and a powerful, eccentric mother. He was, writes Bailey, "a pudgy, unathletic boy who preferred to stay home playing with his puppet theatre," in sharp contrast to his virile and handsome older brother Fred. Sent to the private Thayer Academy at the age of 13, he alternated between there and Quincy High School until he was finally expelled from Thayer for reasons that even Bailey, a first-rate literary gumshoe, is unable to establish. Cheever promptly turned the experience into a short story, "Expelled," that Malcolm Cowley published in the

October 1, 1930, issue of the *New Republic*.

What followed was a career that could have only happened to a man of Cheever's particular gifts, luck, and charm, and in the particular era in which he lived. He came to New York in 1934 and published his first story in Harold Ross's fledgling *New Yorker* in 1935; over the next half-century, one-hundred twenty-one more would follow. After stints with the W. P. A. and upstate at the newly founded writers colony Yaddo, he met and married Mary Winternitz. She was to be his only wife, although Bailey shows at great length that their marriage was a marathon exercise in hostility and resentment. After serving out his Army time stateside, Cheever buckled down to work, cranking out such masterpieces of concision and inflection as "The Enormous Radio" and "The Season of Divorce." These early stories, set in the swirl of postwar Manhattan, have a sardonic bite and eye for the telling sociological detail that put them above the comparable work of his peers; but, unable to complete his novel, and with a wife and one child and another on the way, in 1951 Cheever found himself priced out of New York City. He recounted his mixed feelings about having to move to Westchester in a 1960 piece for *Esquire*. "My God, the suburbs!" he recalled thinking. They were "a loss of privacy, a cesspool of conformity . . . where the place name appeared in the *New York Times* only when some bored housewife blew off her head with a shotgun." And yet there is a spaciousness and even manliness to the suburbs that Cheever, by the end of the essay, has come to admire:

> I sometimes go back to walk through the ghostly remains of Sutton Place where the rude, new buildings stand squarely in one another's river views and where the rents would make your head swim, but now my old friends seem insular in their concern about my exile, their apartments seem magnificent but sooty . . . and their doormen only remind me of the fact that I don't have to tip a staff of twenty at Christmas and that in my own house I can shout in anger and joy without having someone pound on the radiator for silence. The truth is that I'm crazy about the suburbs and I don't care who knows it. Sometimes my sons and I go fishing for perch in the Hudson, and when the trains for the city come bowling down along the riverbanks I salute the sometimes embarrassed passengers with my beer can, wishing them God-speed and prosperity in the greatest city in the world, but I see them pass without a trace of longing or envy.

The move to the suburbs instigated the second phase of Cheever's career, which properly begins with the publication of his great story "The Country Husband" in 1954. "The Country Husband" remains a singular achievement in postwar American fiction: a long short story with the emotional heft of a novel, it endows a chain of mundane events—a dinner party, connubial quarrel, and psychiatrist

appointment—with the power and mystical resonance of allegory. It was followed by more stories set in Shady Hill, a fictional suburban universe as sharply drawn and, eventually, as fully inhabited as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. In 1958, Cheever finally published his first novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle*, about two brothers (the Wapshots) growing up in a family much like Cheever's had been. It won the National Book Award in 1958; the sequel, *The Wapshot Scandal,* won the William Dean Howells Medal in 1965. Neither novel has lost an ounce of its power; both are marvelous picaresques, full of humor, sex, sadness, wonder, and loneliness.

The stylistically inventive yet erratic final phase of Cheever's fiction commenced with "The Swimmer" (1964), the story of a man who does not realize that his house has been foreclosed on and his life is in ruins. The story's combination of the supernatural and the elegiac was a foretoken of the increasingly strange and sometimes forced fictional variations to come. Although the later work suffers at times by comparison with the effulgent clarity of the early, it is notable for its willingness to experiment, blending together the quotidian with the surreal. *Bullet Park,* with its tenuous hold on narrative credibility, and *Falconer,* a bizarre and yet oddly moving prison fable, completed Cheever's transition from "*New Yorker* writer" to modernist fabulist. As if to commemorate the journey, Robert Gottlieb assembled Cheever's *Collected Stories* in 1978. The book won the Pulitzer; less than four years later, Cheever was dead. All told, to absorb the five-decade sweep of Cheever's fiction is to see the workings of a career and literary vision that, while subtler in its modulations, was no less ambitious and varied than that of his more-celebrated peers. This is not a new observation; Saul Bellow, one of these peers, identified Cheever as a "self-transformer," noting that "the reader of his collected stories witnesses a dramatic metamorphosis."

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Metamorphosis aside, certain themes, narrative strategies, and motifs recur in Cheever's fiction. The first of these is Cheever's Christianity. A devout, if erratic, Episcopalian who had a talismanic respect for the Book of Common Prayer, he invested his characters' inner moral language with the cadence of liturgical rhythms. The sociological or satiric deployment of their churchgoing eventually gives way, in his fiction, to the use of Christian iconography with something approaching humanist irony, juxtaposing symbols and rituals with a relentless catalog of human fallibility. A keen example opens *The Wapshot Scandal,* where Christmas Eve blessings are being performed by a Mr. Applegate, who "gave the impression of a portly and benign ecclesiastic, but when he removed his eyeglasses to clean them his gaze was penetrating and haggard and his breath smelled of gin." Cheever goes further, proceeding from the satiric to the psychological, for Applegate is burdened by "the feeling that all exalted human experience was an imposture, and that the chain of

being was a chain of humble worries. If he had confessed to the vice of drinking and to his serious doubts about blessedness, he would end up licking postage stamps in some diocesan office, and he felt too old for this."

The emotional contours of Cheever's faith have a hard, questioning nature; as John Updike—not only a friend, but possibly Cheever's most penetrating and simpatico critic—put it, "he sniffed out corruption with the nose of a Cotton Mather or a Hawthorne. The Puritan admonition to look into the darkness of our hearts was not lost on him." Consciously or not, Cheever was influenced by the Protestant strain of existential Christianity that runs through Kierkegaard to Tillich, Barth, and thence Niebuhr, a deeply skeptical belief system that regards God as hidden, out of reach, and accessible only in moments of despair. "I come from a Puritan family," he once wrote,

> and I had been taught as a child that a moral lies beneath all human contact and that the moral is always detrimental to man. I count among my relations people who feel that there is some inexpugnable nastiness at the heart of life and that love, friendship, bourbon whiskey, light of all kinds … are merely the crudest deceptions.

Cheever felt it his duty to redress the imbalance: "My aim as a writer," he continued in the preface to the *Collected Stories,* "has been to record a moderation of these attitudes—an escape from them if this seemed necessary." Updike, again, captured this perfectly when he described his friend as being "the arena of a constant tussle between the bubbling *joie de vivre* of the healthy sensitive man and the deep melancholy peculiar to American Protestant males." Although Cheever was born in the American 20th century, when such a "tussle" was no longer the exclusive prerogative of his class and nation, he was ill-suited to adapt to the strident and increasingly public chaos of the American milieu. In his life, he handled his "escape" from his dark Puritan heritage with two time-honored forms of medicine: alcohol and sex. The former nearly killed him; the latter was a source of near-lifelong shame. But in his fiction Cheever could give his characters the redemption that so fitfully eluded him. What pulls his protagonists back from the abyss is often a deus ex machina of a particularly deist stripe, frequently taking the form of rain (one character listens to it "with the attention and curiosity with which we follow music"). His hapless characters experience revelation only after their own human resources have failed them, which is both their tragedy and their redemption.

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Cheever often spoke of the moral facet of his writing, praising *Madame Bovary*, that paragon of high lyrical realism, as "a highly adventurous moral tale"; his famous

statement of intention was "a determination to trace some moral chain of being." Not define or establish, but "trace": the word in its delicacy is a key to the subtlety and ambiguity of his conception. This ambiguity takes its most forceful formal expression in narrative structures that hinge on abrupt reversals in perception. In *The Wapshot Scandal*, Honora Wapshot takes pity on a young stowaway, touched by what she perceives as his ill fortune:

> After dinner Honora taught him to play backgammon. He picked up the game very quickly, she thought, and was a remarkably intelligent young man. It seemed a great shame to her that he should waste his youth and his intelligence in loneliness, sorrow, and boredom.

Her companion slights her and then returns the next day for another meal, after which he falls asleep:

> She saw then that he was not young. His face was lined and sallow; there was gray in his hair. She saw that his youthfulness was a ruse, an imposture calculated to appeal to some old fool like herself … Asleep, he looked aged, sinful, and cunning, and she felt that his story of the two children and the lonely Christmas had been a lie … He slept until four, woke, pierced all of her skepticism with one of his most youthful and engaging grins, said that he was late and went out. The next time she saw him, it was three in the morning and he was taking her money belt out from under the carpet.

The prosodic dexterity in play here—the author's inhabitation of the old woman's voice (shopworn phrases like "remarkably intelligent young man"), the rolling triple adjectives, Biblical in their rhythm and sense, the unexpected verb ("pierced"), the brusqueness of the last sentence, as devious as a sucker punch—unites the two essential characteristics of Cheever's vision: the impossibility of accurate moral judgment and the unreliability of perception. Honora's altruistic instincts open her up to robbery, as her shifting perceptions are played out through a series of surprises, tucked inside one another. Underneath these reversals lies a deep epistemological skepticism. This skepticism, when coupled to a conventional narrative vocabulary, creates a dissonance—a level of tension, of simultaneous comfort and unease—that gives psychic force to descriptions of the most mundane elements of human commerce.

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It's an enlightening experience to read Blake Bailey's biography, though not in the way I would have expected. Bailey is a fine writer and an obviously indefatigable

researcher, but in terms of a general sense of Cheever's life, there is not much in his book that you can't get from Scott Donaldson's *John Cheever* (1988). Spending seven-hundred pages in close proximity to this haunted, irascible, petulant, and deeply humane man's life has only confirmed my ultimate ignorance of exactly how literary attraction works and what motivates our affinity for a person's words, the majority of which, in this case, were committed to paper quite some time before I was even born.

There's a feeling I get, very infrequently, when I'm tired, elated, or emotionally drained, of life for a split-second seeming close-up, tragic, and hard, yet far away, fundamentally comic, and droll. It's a powerful feeling, poignant and ennobling, and I learned how to have it by reading John Cheever. The explanation cannot to my mind be located in any specific element or technical aspect of Cheever's writing; it is just there, embedded in the man's phrasing, his wry outlook, the impossible to quantify shadings he gave to his observations, and the bemused yet loving attitude he seemed to take towards his own characters. An element of attraction that can be located: as Updike once observed, "the vintage Cheever short stories were written around, but never openly confessed, a central problem of alcoholism." There's a hole in the center of his men, as there was at the center of his life, and I know about that place. The image of Cheever in the winter of 1974-75, drinking himself to death in a barren apartment in Boston, has deep and personal resonance for me, because twenty-five years later and about a mile south of Cheever's Boston University apartment, in the shadow of Kenmore Square, I was embarked on the same project. Like Cheever I emerged, alive but deeply scarred. This is fatuous, I know, but Updike's observation speaks to an element of organizing one's thoughts, an emotional and verbal timbre. Alcoholics spend a lot of time maintaining facades, and they live in a constant state of emotional flux, of adjusting their mental attitudes; they come to be cunning mimics, psychological spies. Cheever was a connoisseur of facades, an expert mimic and spy.

For my money, the most haunting and personally alluring—not the best, most famous, or celebrated—of Cheever's work is the lovely, brooding *Wapshot Scandal,* a novel with prose that seems to accumulate a lambent sheen in inverse relation to the ugliness and desperation of the events described. One of the perils of reading a biography is that it can permanently color one's apprehension of even remotely autobiographical material, which can either heighten or damage the experience of literature. Still, *The Wapshot Scandal's* main character is Melissa Scaddon, the unfaithful wife of Moses Wapshot, and the pathos of her life—her refuge in an affair of nearly insupportable sordidness and cheapness—seems oddly to mirror Cheever's own accelerating decline in the mid-1960s, when he was descending into terminal estrangement from his wife, taking what solace he could in secret homosexual affairs that filled him with self-loathing, and beginning as a writer that fascinating slow dissolve from the effortless lyricism of the great mid-50s stories into something darker and stranger. Like Cheever, perhaps, Melissa is a fundamentally good person

who takes up with an ignorant and beautiful companion, and his portrayal of their relationship lays bare all of the fallibility and indignity of emotional need, the way it makes slaves and fools out of the best of us, and somehow lends it gravity and dignity.

Near the end of the book Emile, Melissa's lover, having taken out of boredom and anomie a job as a transatlantic dockhand, skips ship in Naples, Italy, where he ends up competing in a male beauty show. To his horror, the pageant turns out to be an auction: the young men are being sold into prostitution, into "a rub and a tumble without the sandy grain of a personality, a reminder of all the foolishness, vengefulness and lewdness in love" that "seemed to excite, in the depraved crowd, a stubborn love of decency." In a fit of misplaced pride and defiance, Emile stands before the hoarse, sweating crowd, his eyes blinded by the footlights, and awaits the bidding. A voice bids for Emile, and he is led, stumbling, towards the winner; it is Melissa, who takes him away from the dirt and noise of the piazza in Naples and up to her villa in the hills (in the suburbs). Somehow, the reunion of these two damaged, unhappy people is deeply moving; the episode has the strangeness and internal coherence of a dream, combining the deeply improbable with the matter-of-fact, the sordid with the romantic, suggesting in its hallucinatory whimsy a fairy tale based on lust, sun, bleached stone, and blue sky. In the end, Emile and Melissa settle into a permanent exile of strange timelessness and stasis. Like their creator during his lifetime, they have landed in purgatory: it is the best that he, and they—but maybe not we, if we are fortunate—could hope for.

—Michael Lindgren

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