JOHN CHEEVER: ESCAPING THE CONFINEMENTS OF AMERICAN SUBURBS

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> Fiction is our most intimate and acute means of communication. It is really the only way we can talk to one another about those things that are most profoundly our concerns: Loneliness, love, anxiety, aspiration, fear.[1]

This highly motivated writer, John Cheever, views his fiction as a vehicle of sharing his own excitement about being alive as well as his comprehension of the human condition. Although his stories do not often take his readers beyond suburban America, the repeated theme of Cheever's work, that of human confinement, is universal in its relationship to human suffering. Cheever wants to think his view of suburbia appeals to the wanderer or to someone used to loneliness. "Here is a profoundly moving display of nostalgia, vision of love, none of it more than thirty years old, including most of the trees," Cheever wrote in a 1978 article for *Newsweek*[2]. In examining the suburbs, Cheever describes the recent trend of successful businessmen to move to the sprawling outskirts of cities. The study of a lonely confinement in these suburbs permits Cheever to create sometimes tragic tales. Since his characters are exempt from the problems of economic insufficiency they are open to all the torments of economic surfiet. They drink too much, fornicate with guilt and no pleasure, and ride commuter trains from happiness to success without danger[3]. Critic Samuel

1) John Cheever, "Fiction Is Our Most Intimate Means of Communication," *U.S. News and World Report*, May 21, 1979, p. 92.
2) John Cheever, "Why I Write Short Stories," *Newsweek*, October 30, 1978, p. 25.
3) John Watson Aldridge, *Time To Murder and Create: The Contemporary Novel in Crisis*, (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966), p. 174.

Coale wrote, "To ignore Cheever's work would be to ignore a great deal life as it is commonly lived in these United States in the latter half of the Twentieth Century."[4] Coale added that the landscape about which Cheever writes is limitless.

Indeed, Cheever allows unique light to fall on the hungover and sometimes criminal infested suburban landscape. His most important contribution to story-telling appears to be a new exposure of the discontented suburbanite who would seem, at a glance, so fulfilled in his affluent lifestyle. Reading Cheever's work means experiencing the frustration of human confinement and escaping with his protagonist from that confinement—whether to the freedom of self or to death. Before realizing the trauma of human confinement, one must understand the boundaries of Cheever's suburban America.

Critics have attacked Cheever's fictional universe, the suburb, by labeling it exclusive and snobby. They maintain that the world is bigger than the suburbs, according to John Breslin's article in *America*. But Breslin contends that the sweep of Cheever's imagination is more important than geography and that human longing is universal.[5] Cheever's attention is focused on the contortions of the human heart and psyche which he finds on the suburban social scene. His characters, often exiled by their own errors or passions, are confined by "the improvised sense of right and wrong that, socially, we are in agreement on ...being stuck in sentimental or erotic contacts that are extraordinarily painful and difficult to extricate oneself from."[6] They count their sins and try for goodness in a world they fail to understand. Joan Didion wrote, "I can think of no other writer who tells us so much about the way we live now."[7] Within the general suburban confinement are the various neighborhoods, Bullet Park, Shady

4) Samuel Coale, *John Cheever*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., Inc., 1977), p.10.

5) John B. Breslin, "John Cheever in the Critics' Circle," *America*, February 17, 1979, p.115.

6) John Hersey, "Talk with John Cheever," *New York Times Book Review*, March 6, 1977, p.24.

7) Joan Didion, "The Way We Live Now," *National Review*, March 24, 1964, 1964, p. 240.

Hill, and St. Botolphs, which become the setting for much of Cheever's fiction.

To approach a house and hear quarreling inside, to search for home and find error in expection, and to lose children and jobs is to explore suburbia. Bullet Park, the setting for one novel, was named for the paradox of "bang" with park, Cheever explained.[8] The words do not fit together: one connotes violence and the other, restfulness. The two main characters in *Bullet Park*, Hammer and Nailles, are as misfit as the title of the book. When introduced the two men realize they have intertwined fates,

> The look they exchanged was deeply curious and in some ways hostile. The stranger evidently anticipated the unwanted union that the sameness of their names would enforce in such a place Bullet Park.[9]

The two men were generally opposite: Nailles was orderly, a monogomist, a decent and conventional representative of Bullet Park; whereas, Hammer was a loner, wanderer, and one outside the realm of Bullet Park.[10] When Hammer moves to Bullet Park he is given a tour by a real estate agent named Hazzard and he faces a newly intertwined fate with Nailles within the boundaries of the suburb.

Another favorite neighborhood in Cheever's short stories is Shady Hill. This suburb is similar to Bullet Park—a resort to rest from jobs in the city, those who take for granted that everyone rides commuter trains and builds bomb shelters in their back yards. But when these characters do see the real world it seems to display incredible happenings or the appearance of such.[11] For example, one of the Shady Hill residents, Neddy Merrill, enters a short story with youth and sport and warmth,

8) Annett Grant, "The Hammer and the Nail," *Newsweek*, April 28, 1969, p.106.
9) John Cheever, *Bullet Park*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1969), p.20.
10) Coale, John Cheever, p. 96.
11) Aldridge, *Time To Murder and Create: The Contemporary Novel in Crisis*, p.175.

> He might have been compared to a summer's day, particularly the last hours of one, and while he lacked a tennis racket or a sail bag the impression was definitely one of youth, sport, and clement weather. He had been swimming and now he was breathing deeply, stertorously as if he could gulp into his lungs the components of that moment, the heat of the sun, the intenseness of pleasure.[12]

Cheever creates Neddy Merrill only to have him collapse under the confinement of his suburban existence after swimming through each pool in a cross-country route to his home. "...But he was so stupified with exhaustion that his triumph seemed vague. Stooped, holding on to the gateposts for support, he turned up the driveway of his own house."[13] He swims from a crazy illusion of the real as part of a hoax perpretrated, oddly enough, on himself by himself.[14]

Rather than in suburban America, Cheever sets his first novel, *The Wapshot Chronicle*, in an old New England town, St. Botolphs, where the lifestyle is a whimsical Puritan purgatory passing tradition from generation to generation—representative of the traditional values and nostalgia.[15] The sense of custom helps the Wapshot family to overcome their uncertainty and fear. One of the well-developed characters in the novel, Honora Wapshot, rests in her ancestral heritage to do as she pleases with pride and impulse. She feels compelled to judge the world and to set it in order, which is just what she does when she feels her nephew, Moses, has sinned by giving up the simple pleasure of boyhood fishing for the manhood temptation of a naked bather:

12) John Cheever, "The Swimmer," in *The Stories of John Cheever*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1974), p. 713.
13) Ibid., p.724.
14) Aldridge, *Time To Murder and Create: The Contemporary Novel in Crisis*, p. 175.
15) Ihab Hassan, *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), p.188.

> She did not go in for washing much more than her feet. The water was too cold or the sun was too warm. She stood, picked a leaf off her buttocks and went into the green wood; vanished. Her clothes would be there. His head was confused and the smell of the dead trout in his pocket seemed like something from his past. He unwrapped the fish and washed it in the running water, but it looked like a toy.[16]

Later when Honora overhears the couple returning from a sailing venture, she suspects the worst and excludes Moses from St. Botolphs to search for his fortune in the city. Although the Wapshot brothers move from St. Botolphs, the letters from their father keep strong the tie which binds them to their small-town home. Again, they are confined by the longing for what was so distinctly right and wrong, at least in Honora's eyes.

But Cheever alters the setting of his most recently published novel, *Falconer*, by providing physical confinement for Ezekial Farragut, the suburbanite convicted of fratricide. Cheever's goal in this book is to produce a darkness that possessed radiance.[17] In the dark surroundings of a prison Farragut has sustained faith in the invinciple potency of nature. These are experienced because of infrequent but spontaneous appearances in a bleek scene.[18] The appearances of light are often colored by vivid discriptions from Farragut's imagination. For example, Farragut compares the light in his cell to a lighted ski forest scene:

> The light in the prison, that late in the day, reminded Farragut of some forest he had skied through on a winter afternoon. The perfect diagonal of the light was cut by bars as trees would cut the light in some wood and the largeness and mysteriousness of the place was like the largeness of some forest—"[19]

16) John Cheever, *The Wapshot Chronicle*, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1957), p.71.
17) Hersey, "Talk with John Cheever," p.27.
18) Coale, *John Cheever*, p.113.
19) John Cheever, *Falconer*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975), p.162.

Farragut draws on his memories to provide light to his dismal confinement where prison cats are slaughtered and guards withhold treatment of methodone to heroine addicts. For Farragut, confinement is his loneliness and spiritual suffering within Falconer. Cheever plans redemption for Farragut from drug addition, felony, the cruelest of bad marriages, and a life strewn with regrets, wrote critic John Romano. "The retrospect of those previous landscapes sets off the simplicity and extremity of Farragut's present situation," Romano continued, "Guilty, jailed, about to be divorced, he no longer hovers in Cheever's ambiguous moral twilight. But the theme of fallenness is not to be left behind. It's just that Farragut can't fall any lower, having hit the bottom, the nadir."[20] In this way *Falconer* differs from Cheever's other stories in the depth of fallenness. Joan Didion draws a similar conclusion:

> I have every expectation that many people will read "Falconer" as another Cheever story about a brainwashed husband who lacked energy for the modern world, so he killed his brother and *who cares*, but let me tell you: it is not, and Cheever cares.[21]

What kind of escape does Cheever plan for Farragut, found at the bottom of existance? Farragut escapes only after undergoing a period of suffering and a purification.

Farragut's release from confinement is merely a variation of Cheever's overriding theme of escape from human restraints. Falconer differs from other confinements as a physically restraining prison for an ex-suburbanite who returns to his old neighborhood freed from the imprisonment of self. For Cheever, the suburban experience created an attitude—a point of view from which to observe and judge the world. In addition, it is a condition of the soul, spiritual outlook or understanding that epitomizes

20) John Romano, "Redemption According to John Cheever," *Commentary*, May 1977, p.67.

21) Joan Didion, "*Falconer*," *New York Times Book Review*, March 6, 1977,p. 24.

modern man's alienated yet sporadically hopeful state.[22] Cheever views suburbia as a new realm of American living,

> Suburbia, which is the setting for most of my stories, reflects the restlessness, the rootlessness of modern lives. It is a way of life that had to be improvised. There were no suburban traditions. People had to learn how to get along with one another and how to establish a new society...."[23]

The virtues Cheever believes in—order, compassion, virtue, and kindness—redeem the suburban landscape from its own spiritual deadness and self-indulgence, according to Samuel Coale.[24] The spiritual deadness echoes in St. Botolphs with the same tones as in *Bullet Park*. Two excerpts will illustrate the religious temperment. Leander Wapshot attends church where he feels he is face to face with the bare facts of his humanity,

> He went to early communion, happily, not convinced of the worth of this prayers.... "We praise thee, we bless thee, we glorify thee," he said loudly, wondering all the time who was that baritone across the aisle and who was that pretty woman on his right who smelled of apple blossoms. His bowels stirred and his cod itched and when the door at his back creaked he wondered who was coming in late.[25]

Similarly, Nailles attends church with more attention for his physical surroundings and being than for the spiritual fellowship with other Christians.

> Nailles heard a cricket in the chancel and the noise of a tin drum from rain gutters while he said his prayers. His sense of church calendar was much more closely associated with the weather than

22) Coale, *John Cheever*, p.11.
23) Cheever, "Fiction Is Our Most Intimate Means of Communication," p.92.
24) Coale, *John Cheever*, p.51.
25) Cheever, *The Wapshot Chronicle*, p.301.

> with the revelations and strictures in Holy Gospel. . . . This division of Nailles' attention during worship had begun when, as a young boy, he had spent most of his time in church examining the forms captured in grained aok pews.[26]

Attending church for Nailles and Wapshot is more of a tradition than experience—almost like attending a neighborhood housewarming. Perhaps these characters are only reflecting Cheever's attitude toward church. Severe heart trouble darkened his world vision but it also heightened his sense of remarkable, mysterious recovery. He then became a churchgoer, finding spiritual solace and sustenance in liturgical ceremony and poetry of the Episcopal Church.[27] He revealed his feelings to John Hersey in a 1977 interview,

> I have been a churchgoer for most of my adult life—a liturgical church goer. . . . The current schisms of the church concern me not at all. It seems to be one of God's infinite mercies that the sexual disposition of the priest has never been my concern. The religious experience is very much my concern, as it is the legitimate concern of any adult who has experienced love.[28]

Cheever's concern with religion is demonstrated in his characters like Nailles and Wapshot who follow the liturgy of worship but seek little personal fulfillment in the religious service.

Thus, Cheever's hope for his characters in not always manifested within the church doors. His characters are released from their confinement, each in the way appropriate for his particular confined condition. That is, Farragut could not find true freedom in the Falconer swimming pool (even if there were one in the prison) because his crime is more violent than simply having a disillusion about life. But Neddy Merrill, the swimmer, can come to grips with life in a realistic way after "swimming

26) Cheever, *Bullet Park*, pp. 15 16.
27) Coale, *John Cheever*, p.8.
28) Hersey, "Talk with John Cheever," p.26.

across his county." In another short story, "The Enormous Radio,"[29] Irene Westcott's life is transformed from one of superficial meaning to the real pain and joy of living because of a malfunctioning radio. As she turns off the radio at the end of the story her attitude is opposite of the "suave and noncommital" voice which delivers the news of fatal accidents and the weather reports in the same tone. Cheever's talent is in making his readers care about the characters in his fiction as he works out his theme of confinement.

The attachment between reader and character in Cheever's novels is strong enough that together they struggle toward a salvation even after the character experiences drug addicton and commits fratricide as in *Falconer* or has an apathetic feeling toward his own son as in *Bullet Park*. As Samuel Coale writes, Nailles and his son Tony are far removed from one another but to Nailles, Tony is life itself. Before becoming sick and lying in bed for months, Tony uproots his father's life by telling that the only reason he loves him is to give him stuff.[30] While lying in bed Tony remarks that his house seems to be made of cards—like the card houses he made as a child to blow over. This remark seems to explain the emptiness of life for the Nailles family in Bullet Park. They are searching for identity of their own lives which Mrs. Nailles feels is like a masquerade party where buying clothes at Brooks, catching the train, and attending church weekly will keep anyone from asking about one's real identity. Hammer seeks to awaken this suburban world by sacraficing Tony like some kind of Old Testament prophet. To further the biblical image, Nailles frees his only son by breaking into the church with a chainsaw, the tool of a carpenter. The climax of *Bullet Park* moves with deliberate speed and single-minded attention, leaving bare bones of religious symbolism and ritual.[31] Finally, Hammer is convicted of insanity, Tony goes back to school, Nailles goes to work with his morning fix, "and everything is as wonderful, wonderful, wonderful as it had been." Hammer's outburst has made existance in

29) John Cheever, "The Enormous Radio," *The Stories of John Cheever*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1974), pp. 37–48.
30) Coale, *John Cheever*, p. 98.
31) Grant, "The Hammer and the Nail," p. 102.

suburbia preferable to chaos and Nailles is a believer in this suburban order.[32]

Unlike Nailles who remains in suburbia still a drug addict, Farragut returns to suburbia freed from his addiction, rejoicing in life. Like *Bullet Park*, *Falconer* is filled with religious imagery and Farragut's personal religious impulses are what sustain his spirit which is all he can possess while at Falconer. His escape is described in terms of resurrection from the dead.[33] The biblical imagery of Farragut's escape is vivid as he envisions his means of escape while washing a dying cellmate in Christ-like fashion—his sincere sympathy for his dying friend helps him reach for freedom for himself. After being carried to the cemetery in his friend's burial sack, he begins to cut himself free while two gravediggers wait for a third before digging the grave. A slip of his knife causes Farragut to actually bleed for his freedom, a picture of the redeeming blood of Christ. While waiting for a bus he meets a man who loans him his raincoat in biblical brotherhood.

Farragut escapes into freedom when released from confinement but Leander Wapshot finds his freedom in death at the conclusion of *The Wapshot Chronicle*. Cheever's theme here concerns loneliness as a basic human condition which no vision can entirely relieve. As mentioned earlier, Moses Wapshot, after appalling his aunt Honora by lusting after a woman, is pushed out of the protection of St. Botolphs to seek his fortune in the cities of the east coast. His father communicates regularly by letters in which he celebrates the natural world where he finds delight. Without Leander Wapshot's vision (love of nature, sense of tradition and place, and the ceremonial style of life), the novel becomes a series of disconnected mishaps leading to spiritual damnation and personal despair. The ordinary events at St. Botolphs take extra dimension when treated in a ritualistic manner which Cheever describes in terms of myths and biblical images to suggest ancient and lasting qualities.[34] For instance, Leander's dream before he walks into the ocean to die is rich with images of Hell.

32) Coale, *John Cheever*, pp. 102–103.
33) Ibid., p.113.
34) Coale, *John Cheever*, pp. 74–75.

> That night Leander dreamed that he was in a strange country. He saw no fire and smelled no brimstone but he thought that he was walking alone through hell. The landscape was like the piles of broken and eroded stone near the sea but in all the miles he walked he saw no trace of water.[35]

He leaves words of childlike wisdom to his sons, such as "Provide light snorts for ladies if entertaining....Bathe in cold water every morning.... Have haircut once a week...."[36] The values of *The Wapshot Chronicle* are as simple and longlasting as this advice or as the virtues of life at St. Botolphs. Leander Wapshot is a sort of diety in the world of *The Wapshot Chronicle* and, as Samuel Coale writes, Leander is misplaced in a modern world of unclear values.

Whether in the 1957 novel about the Wapshots or the vastly different 1975 story of Farragut, Cheever is occupied with representing the manners which express or conceal the heart contradictions and absurdities of the American upper middle class.[37] He is determined to discover beauty and possible redemption in the modern landscape by looking beneath the surface of the affluent society. Cheever's repeated theme of human confinement is varied in his short stories and novels but the theme remains that even given the physical and social comforts of an affluent life, man will still seek freedom. For Cheever, this human desire for freedom from confinement is as natural as man's inclination toward light and brightness—spiritual light.[38] As this fictionist successfully intwines the desire of his characters for freedom with mankind's inclination to light, he reveals to his readers a glimmer of freedom for their own lives.

35) Cheever, *The Wapshot Chronicle*, p.300.
36) Ibid., p.307.
37) Hassan, *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel*, p. 188; Coale, *John Cheever*, p.9.
38) Coale, *John Cheever*, p.8.

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