Aunt Muffin

Competing visions of John Cheever: priapic and puritan, heretical and orthodox, fanatical family man and chronicler of carnality

THOMAS MEANEY
Blake Bailey
CHEEVER
A Life
768pp. Knopf. $35.
978 1 4000 0439 4

John Cheever
COLLECTED STORIES AND OTHER WRITING
Edited by Blake Bailey
1,040pp. 978 1 5985 3034 6

COMPLETE NOVELS
Edited by Blake Bailey
960pp. 978 1 5985 3035 3
Library of America. $55 each.

Cheever in 1927 for smoking cigarettes, or for poor marks, or was even expelled at all, remains unclear, but Cheever exploited the experience for “Expelled from Preparatory School”, a story about a teenage drop-out who briezes at the thick generality of the school’s faculty. The only exception is a history teacher dismissed for preaching the innocence of Sacco and Vanzetti. Bailey suggests that Cheever knew this left-leaning element would appeal to the New Republic, whose assistant editor, Malcolm Cowley, became Cheever’s lifelong promoter and fellow father-in-law. But Cowley was also impressed by the carefully controlled chopper of the young author’s prose:

“I knew about the trees from the window frames. I knew the rain only from the sounds of the roof. I was tired of seeing spring with walls and awning to intercept the sweet sun and the hard fault. I wanted to go outdoors and see the spring. I wanted to feel and taste the air and be among the shadows. That is perhaps why I left school. These are the lines of a precocious, if madly pretentious, romantic seeing out for the territory. Looking back at “Expelled” many years later, John Updike nominated Cheever for the proclivity club of Rimbaud, Chatterton and Henry Green. But while his signature “childlike sense of wonder” was strongly on display, Cheever had not yet fruitfully mixed in the irony that dominated his next phase. It would take decades for his sentences to acquire their scorpion-like coil and sting. Bailey is more of a chronicler than a critic, and Cheever, along with his definitive life of Richard Yates, makes him the canon-keeper of the post-war American realists. The biography is best read as a compendium to the Journals, for which it serves as a reliable boast-detector. If Bailey devotes inordinate attention to Cheever’s sexual exploits, his subject demands it. The Journals of John Cheever, published posthumously in 1982, may be the fullest carnal portrait we have of a twentieth-century American male. Already at Thayer, Cheever (who got his reading done early) was mortified to find himself identifying with Prout’s Baron de Chuchur. Bailey goes further than Cheever’s previous biographer, Scott Donaldson, in believing the first sexual experience to have been with his brother, Fred. “I want my big brother to come back and be my love”, Cheever wrote wistfully in his fifties. After “Expelled” was published, he lived with Fred in Boston, where he kept company with burlesque star, mouthed off about Henry James in speak-easies, and was invariably described as “dapper”. (In one of the more bizarre subplots in the biography, we watch as Fred Cheever graciously makes the transition from an ardent Nazi sympathizer into the author of the unpublished work Who Are the Revolutionaries?: The Coming Revolt Against the Middle Class.)

By the time Cheever had graduated from Beacon Street bohemia to Greenwich Village in the 1930s, he was avidly bisexual. He prided himself on a particularly sticky situation with Walker Evans, who topped off his Depression age collection American Photographs with a shot of Cheever’s joyless room on Hudson Street. “When I was a young man”, Cheever wrote of the period: “I woke up one morning in the unclean bedsheets of squalid furnished rooms, poor and hungry and lonely, and thought that some morning I would wake in my own house, holding in my arms a fragrant bride and hearing from the broad loom beyond my window the voices of my beloved children. And so I did.”

The bride was Mary Wintenitzer, a Jewish girl from an academic family, who complicated Cheever’s receptability. A short bout of faithfulness followed, although Cheever confides to Bailey that he was avidly bisexual. He was in love with his marriage than his wife. “I love my wife’s body and my children’s innocence”, he writes over and again in the Journals like a fanatical family man trying to keep the faith. But at the same time, “every comely man, every bank clerk and delivery boy was aimed at my life like a loaded pistol”. Continued on page 4

31.03.09 Paris

Before President Sarkozy, there was only one Petit Nicolas, the cartoon creation of Jean-Jacques Sempe and René Goscinny (who already had an immortal to his name, Astérix the Gaul). Nicolas has been a naughty schoolboy for the past fifty years, since his first appearance in Sud-Ouest Dimanche, a regional newspaper, before migrating into a children’s magazine, and, after two years, into a series of books. For his fiftieth birthday, Nicolas has been honoured with an exhibition at the Hôtel de Ville in Paris, with 150 original artworks on show, together with a reconstruction of Goscinny’s office, and original manuscripts (Goscinny is responsible for the words, Sempe the pictures). The exhibition is free and runs until May 7.
FICTION

3 Thomas Meneney

Blace Bailey Cheever - A Life
John Cheever Collected Stories and Other Writing, Complete Novels

5 Henry Shukman

Wind In Trees
An Idle Bash
The Run

14 John Levett

34 John Mole

Spawlers and Bamboo

12 John Shakespeare

Jacob Simon

Hugo Williams

Then and Now

17 Jon Barnes

Andrew Porter

Watchmen (Various cinemas)

19 Frances Wood

Tu Hua Brothers - Translated by Eileen Cheng-yin Chow and Carlos Rojas

Anthony Cummins

Lara Pawson

Sara Newman

Joseph Farrell

Ben Jeffrey

Alexander Starihit

22 Andrew Sullu

David Healy Mania - A short history of bipolar disorder

23 Caroline Moorehead

Douglas Preston, with Mario Speil The Monster

24 Ian Thomson


Alan Bell

J. Mordaunt Crooke Braccesone - The biography of an Oxford college

26 Rebecca Langlands

Helen King

Fay Gillister et al, editors Vertues, Fostos and Paul

Mary Jaeger Archmedes and the Roman Imagination. Liba Tabu Acta and the Moon - Explaining nature in Ancient Greece and Rome

27 Susan Hacck

Steven Shapin The Scientific Life - A moral history of a late modern vocation

29 Peter Simons

Hans-Johann Glock What is Analytic Philosophy? Timothy Williamson The Philosophy of Philosophy

30 Chris Andrews

Gwyn Fox Subtle Subversions - Reading Golden Age Sonnets by Britian Women. Nigel Griffiths et al The Spanish Ballad in the Golden Age - Essays for David Pattison

34 John Puklinkhorne

Christopher Southgate The Grooming of Creation - God, evolution, and the problem of evil. Timothy O'Connor Thesm and Ultimate Explanation - The necessary shape of contingency


34 Elizabeth Lowry

Rachel Cusk The Last Supper - A summer in Italy

35

This week's contributors, Crossread

36 J. C.

Spring permutations. Muriel Spark and Derek Stanford, Bourgeois TLS

Continued from page 3

By his late forties, all the guns were firing at once: Cheever resumed his homosexuality as if making up for lost time. Bailey describes some sordid scenes from later years; one moment, Mary is taunting Cheever about his chronic impotence; the next, he is offering to read a male student's work in exchange for a helping hand with the "painful accruals of semen that must be discharged."

Cheever's first published collection of stories was a modest success. But The Way Some People Live (1943) lacks the expansive quality of the mature work. In these early vignettes, Cheever writes like an amateur sociologist with underfed insights: "In the history of communities there are few migrations as futile as the suburban pursuit of respectability."

He later suppressed the collection, even denying its existence in his introduction to The Stories of John Cheever (1976). Bailey has included the book in his generous Library of America volume, which also features Cheever's valuable writings on Chekov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Saul Bellow and Malcolm Cowley, and now far surpasses the standard Cheever Omnibus.

Cheever's next collection, The Enormous Radio (1953), wriggled further outside the New Yorker straitjacket. "Plot implies narrative and a lot of crap", Cheever wrote in the Journals. But many of the stories seem to be aping Kafka by way of Alfred Hitchcock. In the title story, a couple in an East Side townhouse buys an expensive new radio that, they soon discover, picks up all the arguments coming from the other units in the building. They get the device repaired, but soon start having shouting matches just like the ones they overheard. The best of Cheever's New York fables - "The Forty-Five-Eight", "The Bus to St. James" and the indelible "Torch Song" - have a feel of Edward Hopper, capturing every possible posture of despair.

"Goodbye, My Brother" (1951), one of Cheever's most celebrated stories, marked his departure from unmitigated irony. A black sheep brother comes home prepared to wreak his family's happiness... but is nearly plagued into death by the story's narrator, who upholds and glorifies the social order.

This conservative streak was new for Cheever and the duty to write about social mores became for him a kind of mission:

I think that the task of an American writer is not to describe the misgivings of a woman taken in adultery as she looks out of a window at the rain but to describe four hundred people under the lights reaching for a foul ball. This is ceremony. The umpires in clerics, sitting out the souls of the players; the faint thunder as ten thousand people, at the bottom of the eighth, head for the exit. The sense of moral judgments embodied in a migratory vastness.

Migratory vastness is nowhere more apparent than in "The Death of Justina" (1960). The story is a mad dash to the finish line that confirms Cheever as the great sprinter of American short fiction. A man named Moses who lives in the Westchester suburbs has been ordered by his doctor to quit drinking and smoking. The symptoms of withdrawal are not encouraging: "At break­fast on Monday my English muffin stared up at me from the plate. I mean I saw a face there in the rough, toasted surface. The moment of recognition was fleeting, but it was deep, and I wondered who it had been."

TLS APRIL 3 2009
While Moses is at the office, he receives word that his visiting aunt has expired on the way there. Exasperated and rushed, he dashes off the copy:

Does your face in the morning seem naked and seared with alcoholic and sexual excess and does the rest of you appear to be a greyish pink lamp, covered all over with bottle hair? ... Is your sense of small fading, is your interest in gardenning waxing, is your fear of heights increasing, are your sexual drives as morning and intense as ever, and does your wife look more cramped than you like a stranger with common checks who has wandered into your bedroom by mistake? If any of this is true you need no longer, the true juice of youth.

This sort of send-up of "stuteness" unnerved Cheever. It's like Lillie's comedy of "Just an" climaxing when in me that I did it fifteen years ago". The black comedy of "Justice" climaxes when Moses learns that an over-zealous zoning law prohibits Justice from being buried or even dying in the neighborhood.

All this would be par for the course for Cheever if it did not also include Moses's supermarket dream:

Music was playing and there must have been at least a thousand shoppers pushing their wagons among the long corridors of consumables and victuals. Now there is—or isn't there—something about the posture we assume when we push a wagon that offends us? Can it be done with gaiety? I bring up this suspicion because the multitude of shoppers seemed that evening, as they pushed their dark wagons, penitent and unsealed. There were all kinds, this being my beloved country. There were Italians, Finns, Jews, Negroes, Shephard's, Cohens—anyone who had needed the voice of liberty—and they were dressed with that summertime abandon that the supermarket recording mingled with such bitter disgust. Yes, there were grandmothers in shorts, big-buttock women in knitted pants, and men wearing such an assortment of clothing that it looked as if they had dressed hurriedly in a burning building. But this, as I say, is my own country and in my opinion the caricaturist who vilifies the old lady in shorts vilifies himself. I am a native and I was wearing buckskin jump boots, chino pants cut so tight that my sensual organs were discernible, and a rayon-acetate pajama top printed with representations of the Pinta, the Nina, and the Santa Maria in full sail.

Here is Cheever at his best: hugely comic, racy and Whitmanian (even if the masses are rendered sexless), baldly patriotic with just enough leftover irony to keep the bathos at bay.

Compare the passage with Don DeLillo's much more reverent scene from the end of White Noise (1985):

The supermarket shelves have been rearranged. It happened one day without warning. There is agitation and panic in the aisles, dismay in the faces of the older shoppers. They walk in a fragmented trance, stop and go, clusters of well-dressed figures frozen in the aisles, trying to figure out the particulars, discern the underlying logic, trying to remember where they'd seen the Cream of Wheat. They see no reason for it, find no sense in it. The scurrying pads are with the hand soap now, the condiments are scattered. The older the man or woman, the more carefully dressed and groomed. Men in Sansabelt slacks and bright knit shirts. Women with a powdered and fussy look, a self-conscious air, prepared for some anxious event. . . . Everything we need is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The calls of the famous and the dead.

For DeLillo, too, the supermarket is the appropriate site for the apocalypse. But whereas he contemptuously glares at his nothing less than enchanting the world for memory we have not understood", he wrote in his Journals, and the best of his stories channel that primordial mystery.

But Cheever was an uneasy mystic. He often felt passed over by the very sense of wonder he was trying to express. "Having triumphantly separated himself from the foolishness of religion", he nevertheless wrote of himself being in "the unhappy frame of mind of a man who has been excommunicated". After watching a drunken yacht-club dance on Martha's Vineyard in the summer of 1956, Cheever ruefully observed that "the nation like a miserable adult, turns back to the supposed innocence of its early life". It can be tempting to consider Cheever a faithful guardian of the American Golden Age, preternaturally aware of the nostalgia he is preserving, but it would be more accurate to say he assimilated the country's exile from innocence with his own. In his late masterpiece, Falconer (1977), he flaunted that innocence with a masterful prison novel of homosexual love. There was a Nixon-Goesto-China aspect to the enterprise: only a writer with Cheever's establishment credentials could transform the subject that had once haunted him into a national bestseller.

Wind In Trees

When trees toss in high wind and a suspicion of rain travels across their dark faces, I long for the old summers under smoky oaks. Whoever I am, it's not who I thought.

Who is it the rain and wind wake with their sigh? That tree-lover, summer-lover—try and find him, was he ever there? Did he love? Was he love?

Shh, say the trees, listen closer, listen closer.

HENRY SHUKMAN