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
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John Cheever

COLLECTED STORIES AND OTHER WRITING
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"The Wapshot Chronicle", "The Wapshot Scandal", "Bullet Park", "Falconer", "Oh What a Paradise It Seems"
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John Cheever wrote many of his best stories in his underwear. In the late 1940s in New York, he would leave his East Side apartment dressed in a suit, descend with the other men in the elevator, strip down to his pants in the basement, and write in a storage room until noon. The routine became a legend – as Cheever surely intended – but it obscures something fundamental about the man. Critics have variously labelled Cheever "the Chekhov of the suburbs", "the connoisseur of the commute", "the last Puritan"; he is seen as either the champion of post-war American conformity, or its greatest apostate, either a minor writer who wrote made-for-order prose for the ivory slabs of the *New Yorker*, or a major one who anticipated postmodernist tactics by a generation.

That Cheever is a writer who has been misunderstood owes much to his self-woven web of tensions. Expelled from Thayer Academy at the age of fifteen, he accepted an honorary degree from Harvard at sixty-six. His first real job was editing a city guide for the New Deal, but he later shunned his former colleagues and tried to return his social security cheques. He was an all-star alcoholic, who ordered doubles "as if a single would poison him", yet was back on the wagon for the final lap of his life. He despised homosexuals ("unserious, humorless, and revolting"), but pursued men with reckless abandon. First and foremost a WASP – "remember that you are a *Cheevah*", he told his children – he claimed to feel like an immigrant in the country his family had lived in for more than 400 years.

Blake Bailey's new biography invites us to read Cheever's life as a double act of recovery. With access to more than 4,000 pages of unpublished journals, he captures his subject's profound social anxieties largely in his own words. Born in 1912 to a down-at-heel Boston family of dubious Puritan stock, Cheever both mocked his family's habit of revising its own past and used it to his advantage. "Don't ever wear an overcoat", Frederick Cheever, a shoe salesman, cautioned his son, "you might be taken for an Irishman." The remark, Cheever liked to point out, was one only an Irishman would make. But Cheever himself regaled journalists with his family's seafaring tales and Revolutionary War heroics, compulsively claiming an ancestor at the Boston Tea Party. "I rearrange the details to make them more interesting and significant", he confided in his *Journals*. In *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1956), his first and most popular novel, he hoisted the family lore up the mast and signalled himself the spokesman for the East Coast upper middle class of which he was never quite a member.

But before the novels came the stories on which Cheever's reputation still rests. Whether he was expelled from Thayer Academy 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 bristles at the thick gentility 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 chop 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 fruit. 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 mildly pretentious, romantic setting out for the territory. Looking back at "Expelled" many years later, John Updike nominated Cheever for the prodigy 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 Proust's Baron de Charlus. 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 stars, 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 gracelessly 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 lawn beyond my window the voices of my beloved children. And so I did.

The bride was Mary Winternitz, a Jewish girl from an academic family, who both sealed and complicated Cheever's respectability. A short bout of faithfulness followed, although Cheever often gives the impression of being more 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".

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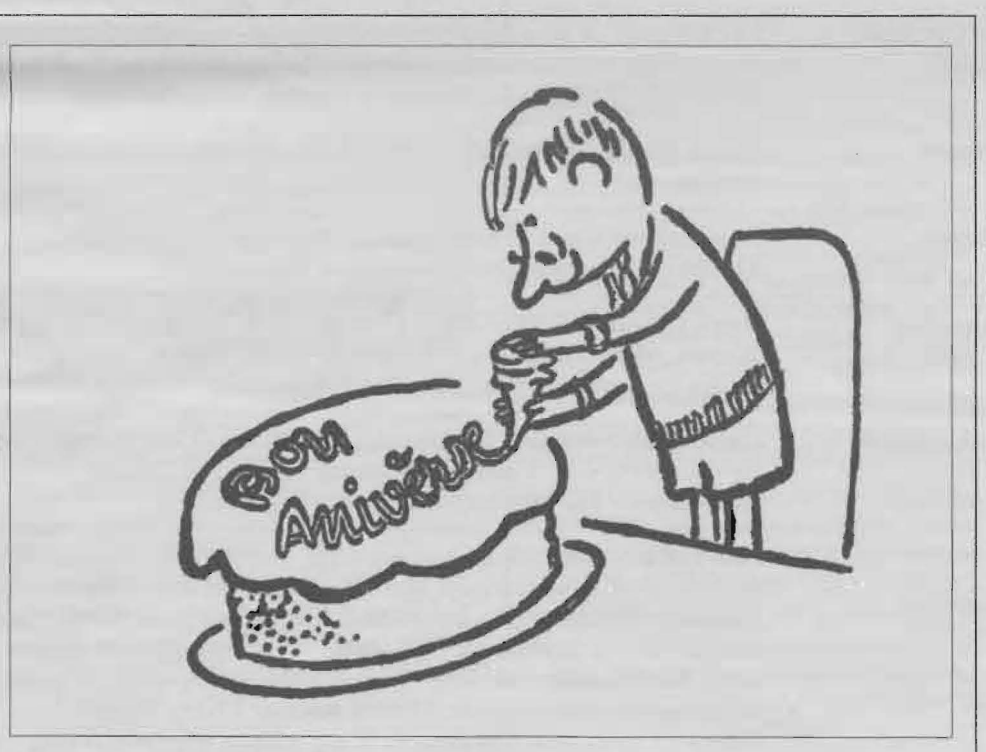

31.03.09 **Paris**

Before President Sarkozy, there was only one Petit Nicolas, the cartoon creation of Jean-Jacques Sempé and René Goscinny (who already has 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, Sempé the pictures). The exhibition is free and runs until May 7.

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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 "punctual 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* (1978). Bailey has included the book in his generous Library of America volume, which also features Cheever's valuable writings on Chekhov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Saul Bellow and Malcolm Cowley, and now far supersedes 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 Five-Forty-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 wreck his family's happiness, but is nearly bludgeoned to 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 clericals, sifting out the souls of the players; the faint thunder as ten thousand people, at the bottom of the eighth, head for the exits. 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".

While Moses is at the office, he receives word that his visiting aunt has expired on the living room couch: "I would like to spare you the unpleasant details, but I will say that both her mouth and her eyes were wide open". Moses's supervisor insists he finish writing a commercial before he leaves. Exasperated and rushed, he dashes off the copy:

> Does your face in the morning seem rucked and seamed with alcoholic and sexual excess and does the rest of you appear to be a grayish-pink lump, covered all over with brindle hair? . . . Is your sense of smell fading, is your interest in gardening waning, is your fear of heights increasing, and are your sexual drives as ravening and intense as ever, and does your wife look more and more to you like a stranger with sunken cheeks who has wandered into your bedroom by mistake? If this or any of this is true you need Elixircol, the true juice of youth.

This sort of send-up of commercialese – which Cheever nevertheless sees as an opportunity for lyricism – would be taken up by his nemesis, Donald Barthelme, whose "stuntiness" unnerved Cheever: "It's like the last act in vaudeville and anyhow it seems to me that I did it fifteen years ago". The black comedy of "Justina" climaxes when Moses learns that an over-zealous zoning law prohibits Justina from being buried – or even dying – in the neighbourhood.

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 comestibles and victuals. Now is there – or isn't there – *something* about the posture we assume when we push a wagon that unsexes us? Can it be done with gallantry? I bring this up because the multitude of shoppers seemed that evening, as they pushed their wagons, penitential and unsexed. There were all kinds, this being my beloved country. There were Italians, Finns, Jews, Negroes, Shropshiremen, Cubans – anyone who had heeded the voice of liberty – and they were dressed with that sumptuary abandon that European caricaturists record with such bitter disgust. Yes, there were grandmothers in shorts, big-butted 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 sexual organs were discernible, and a rayon-acetate pajama top printed with representations of the *Pinta*, the *Niña*, and the *Santa María* in full sail.

Here is Cheever at his best: hugely comic, rangy 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 revered 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 pattern, 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 scouring 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 that 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 cults 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 customers, and levels a critique of capitalistic culture better left to Adorno, this is beside the point for Cheever: his story is populated by his equals, whose source of spiritual failure is much harder to locate. There is no operable truth in the story; Cheever instead gives his readers the exalted feeling of witnessing a revelation. His shoppers encounter thuggish men at the check-out counters, who savagely tear open their packages: "In every case the customer, at the sight of what he had chosen, showed all the symptoms of the deepest guilt; that force that brings us to our knees". What does this mean? We sense only the desolation of a chosen people who no longer believe their own fortifying myths. Right to the end, Cheever believed fiction's responsibility was nothing less than re-enchanting the world for his audience. "Literature is a force of memory we have not understood", he wrote in his *Journals*, and the best of his stories channel that primal 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 flouted that innocence with a masterful prison novel of homosexual love. There was a Nixon-Goes-to-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. If Cheever continues to be read – and a handful of his stories assure he will be – it is because he lit up this border territory between orthodoxy and heresy. He equated truth with a sense of rapture – and believed with the fervour of a fallen Puritan in the restorative power of a page of good prose.

"New York Corner (Corner Saloon)" (1913) by Edward Hopper; from the exhibition *Edward Hopper & Company* at the Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, until May 2

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