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Metonymy and Metaphor in the Fiction of John Cheever

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Abstract

Metonymy and Metaphor in the Fiction of John Cheever

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John Cheever has been categorized by critics as an American realist. This paper challenges that assumption through the use of Roman Jakobsen's distinction between metaphoric and metonymic writing. In Jakobsen's poetics, the metonymic and metaphoric poles are opposed. The former describes discourse in which the objective world is depicted through contiguous phenomena, a mode of writing that Jakobsen ascribes to realism. The metaphoric pole reveals "equivalences" selected by the author to denote how phenomena are similar, not merely contiguous. Cheever's narratives show a gradual evolution away from metonymic writing toward metaphoric. As David Lodge has explained, this evolution can have a muted impact on the realistic text if the author draws his figurative language from the field of contiguities, or context, of a setting; Cheever's fiction illustrates this process. This paper also points out that Cheever's adoption of metaphoric prose occurred more rapidly after publication of his first novel, and that his use of metaphoric strategies allowed him to bring order to, or aestheticize, the narrative predicaments of his characters.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses John Cheever's narrative evolution. I argue that his art evolved from traditional realism in his early short stories and The Wapshot Chronicle to a hybrid of realism and antirealism thereafter. My chief goal here is not to amend existing biographical criticism but to decipher Cheever's fiction structurally.

David Lodge has written in The Modes of Modern Writing that Jakobsen's paper "Two Aspects of Language And Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" (1956) allowed him to conceptualize a way of discussing the formal properties of realist and anti-realist prose fiction. In Jakobsen's poetics the metaphoric and metonymic poles are opposed. The metaphoric pole represents discourse in which the writer selects "equivalences" between things real or figurative, the act of selection moving the discourse into an area of subjective impression. Conversely, metonymic writing is inherently suited to empirical description because it depicts not connections but combinations, duplicating reality as we encounter it outside of books. Lodge points out that "anywhere one touches down in the 20th-century" one joins the debate represented by Jakobsen's opposites – the quarrel over whether art should preoccupy itself with the so-called objective world or the subjective world of the artist.

The appeal of Jakobsen's theory is that it provides a single optic by which to measure narrative changes between Cheever's early and mature work. It also provides a vocabulary, when allied to Lodge's discussion of the typography of modern fiction, through which we can speculate about the uses and effects of metaphor and metonymy in Cheever's career. Specifically, Lodge points out that metonymic and metaphoric writing has corresponded to artistic worldviews in our century.[1] Modernist fiction has exploited "the perception of similarity" – in symbolist or mythopoeic elements – to overlay some pattern, some aesthetic, on our disorderly world. Metaphor "is overtly exploited as a comic or magic principle by which the anarchic flux of experience can be ordered and made tolerable" (Lodge 129). Cheever exploits comic and magic principles

in his mature stories and novels to achieve this very goal. His characters reconstitute unpleasant experiences by imagining more comfortable worlds, by dreaming of solutions. On a plot level, the stories and novels show a tendency toward happy endings that simple probability – that is, the chain of contiguities our common sense recommends to us – would block.

The working proposition in the coming argument is that satire and irony are species of metaphoric discourse because they juxtapose metonymies not found in nature. Satire is an illustration of the "principle of selection" in language because it draws our attention to contrasts. I point out below that these contrasts become more common in Cheever's mature prose. Assisting our understanding of these unnatural combinations is the (often) non-mimetic narrator, loosely disguised as a prominent male character, who further underscores by his remarks the poignancy or humour of certain events, objects or statements. In general, every depiction of the world in Cheever's fiction that mimics the natural contiguities of life works in the service of realism as Jakobsen defines it. Every artificial contiguity amounts, in effect, to a "selection," and works in the service of art.

The insufficiency of this approach is obvious. Much of the charm of Cheever's writing is tonal, is the "reciprocity of differing tones" in his irony (as George Hunt has praised it)[2], and Jakobsen's terms are not designed to explain such variations *within* metaphorical prose. The complex, often confusing nature of Cheever's later satire is evidenced by his varied critical reception. One reviewer, Cynthia Ozick, spoke eloquently for many critics (and readers, no doubt) when she said of The Wapshot Scandal that it is "all chiaroscuro, all febrile play; play derived from the hints and darts of fantasy, from a yearning for the brightness that precedes disillusionment" (Boscha 59). Seeking clarification in his life experiences, other critics have learned that Cheever seems to have fictionally reconstituted his memoirs to thwart biographical criticism, as though his letters and journals were written with an eye on posterity. I discuss the hazards of biographical speculation in my chapter on the short stories. In sum, though

Cheever's life seems to offer abundant opportunity for exegesis, no such exploration can satisfy a modern critic wary of the intentional fallacy. And Cheever himself warned that his fiction was not crypto-biography.

A further problem besetting Jakobsen's structuralism is that the process by which we derive meaning from Cheever's stories – perhaps especially as North Americans – relies heavily on our intuitions as readers, and specifically on our understanding of the cultural iconography of his subject-matter. Jonathan Culler, in The Pursuit of Signs, points this out in a discussion of Donald Davison:

> Since we do not believe that responses to metaphors are random or purely idiosyncratic phenomena, we will attempt to account for responses by positing norms, conventions, codes, structures... [Thus] we will repeat at a slightly different level Eco's move in positing a network of conventional associations to account for the production of a metaphor. (209)

In practice, then, even in the fiction containing detailed, verisimilar settings, Cheever's point of view may seem elusive because of the complex tonality of his metaphorical prose and the interpretive assumptions his buried associations contain. "This is in part," Culler adds, "because one can never construct a position outside tropology from which to view it; one's own terms are always caught up in the processes they attempt to describe" (209). Another theorist, Stein Olsen, has also generalized on the insufficiency of structuralism as I practice it here:

> One objection to the view of the literary work as a semantic 'structuralist' unit is that this is simply not the way the reader sees it or understands it.... Literary theory is not concerned about the 'reality' hidden beneath [a text]. Discoveries concerning the unconscious mental structures underlying literature can no more help critics and readers in their interpretive and evaluative tasks than

> a similar theory about language can decide whether a sentence is correct, incorrect, clumsy or unsuitable. (Olsen 23).

I hope to prove this statement an exaggeration. For one thing, it contradicts what Lodge attempts in his use of Jakobsen. For another, Cheever openly declared that his narrative evolved in form as he encountered "the anarchic flux" of Cold War America. To respond to Olsen, Cheever's abandonment of metonymic realism may or may not have demonstrated the onset of an "unconscious mental structure," but it certainly corresponded to a conscious change in his fictional strategy. As Cheever himself put it, narrative is a product of one's times: "Narrative is a synonym for life – for a chain of lives. Forms are evolved by the societies they serve, and narratives should reflect the exaltations, the discursiveness, the spontaneity and pratfalls one finds in a day" (quoted in Hunt 31). By the mid-fifties, something in American society had altered his approach to realism:

> The decade began for me with more promise than I can remember from my earliest youth. The war was over. Most of its reverberations were (for me) ended....I could work in peace. However, halfway through the decade, something went terribly wrong. The most useful image I have today is of a man in a quagmire, looking into a tear in the sky. I am not speaking here of despair, but of confusion. I fully expected the trout streams of my youth to fill up with beer cans and the meadows to be covered with houses; I may even have expected to be separated from most of my moral and ethical heritage; but the forceful absurdities of life today find me unprepared. Something has gone very wrong, and I do not have the language, the imagery, or the concepts to describe my apprehensions. I come back again to the quagmire and the torn sky. (quoted in Waldeland 89)

In sum, one reason Cheever wrote more metaphorically after the mid-fifties was that the "forceful absurdities" of America made traditional realism an insufficient means of depicting the objective world.

The paper is divided into three chapters, the first of which is the longest. It surveys an admittedly selective array of Cheever's short stories, the first ones drawn from a recently published collection of his more obscure magazine work, Thirteen Uncollected Stories (1994). My rationale for this choice is that little has been written about these stories, but they nonetheless illustrate the realism that marked Cheever's urban period. I next move on to stories anthologized in 1953, 1958, 1964 and 1973, commenting on the progression in each from metonymic writing to metaphoric. I chose certain stories in The Enormous Radio (1953) and later collections because of their being set in suburbs, hoping thereby to show how settings are drawn less precisely, or with fewer metonymic details, as Cheever's fiction matured. In general, the chief characteristic of Cheever's later suburban stories is their inclusion of improbable plot turns and dreams to resolve predicaments. Both narrative devices violate the rule of natural contiguity associated with realistic fiction.

My second chapter maps a similar movement, from metonymic discourse toward metaphoric, in the Wapshot novels (1957 and 1964). The reader must pardon this chapter's cursory plot summaries – both plots are highly crowded. I argue here that a key element in these novels is Cheever's use of pastoral. Pastoral is a metaphoric device because it offers an imaginative model of, or construct for, the good life – it does not purport to realism. On the other hand, as Lodge points out in a discussion of Proust, a recurrent metaphor can work in the service of realism because the narrative conditions us to accept certain "spatio-temporal" proximities as genuine expressions of how the narrator thinks. This fairly describes the surprising realism of Cheever's pastoral metaphors. To use Jakobsen's word, they extend "contexture" to include not merely natural contiguities in the objective world but subjective contiguities, or proximities, in the narrator's mind. Effectively, this inclusion means that certain

sections of both novels – the ones involving a character's imaginative recreation of a comforting natural world – read more realistically than a narrow interpretation of Jakobsen's poetics would allow.

My final chapter discusses what I call the later novels – Bullet Park (1969), Falconer (1977) and Oh What a Paradise It Seems (1982). The tendency in Scandal to subordinate metonymic description to metaphoric, or for the narrative to grow more discursive and preoccupied with the narrator's consciousness (commonly disguised as a character) continues in Bullet Park. Cheever admittedly designed the book as a metaphor for the suburbs, and the result is that our sense of natural contiguity is violated throughout by symbolism or satiric incongruity. The unnatural juxtaposition of random phenomena (for instance, Hammer and Nailles being neighbours) alchemizes them into metaphors. The lukewarm reception of Bullet Park and its subsequent commercial failure is said by Cheever biographers to have caused his precipitous fall into self-destructive alcoholism.[3] Ironically, however, his creative renewal after a period in a detoxification center seems to have made possible the dry-eyed realism, the metonymic style, of Falconer. I argue that this prison novel represents a hiatus in Cheever's career because its protagonist, Ezekial Farragut, forsakes the consolations of imagination. Cheever's final novel – a novella, really – marked his return to the almost purely metaphoric discourse of Bullet Park.

Throughout this paper I quote the Jakobsen article on which Lodge based his study of the typography of modern fiction. The article contains certain words and phrases that I set within quotation marks, including "the selection axis of language" "equivalences," "the principle of combination," and "forwarded by contiguity." In my second chapter I discuss the idea of how metaphors can be non-disruptive of realism when they draw their analogies from "the field of contiguities" of the setting. This phrase and theory belong to Lodge.

I also refer to traditional realism as a set of qualities, a base line from which all metaphoric writing deviates. Lodge defines such writing as an approximation of historical reporting, but more particularly it "depends on certain assumptions, especially the assumption that there is a common phenomenal world that may be reliably described by the methods of empirical history, located where the private worlds that each individual creates and inhabits partially overlap" (40). Conversely, modernist fiction, which Lodge associates with metaphor and I associate with Cheever's mature fiction,

> is concerned with consciousness, and also with the subconscious and unconscious workings of the human mind. Hence the structure of external "objective" events essential to traditional narrative art is diminished in scope and scale, or presented very selectively and obliquely, or is almost completely dissolved, in order to make room for introspection, reflection and reverie. (44)

I also refer in this paper to an often fractious critical debate over Cheever's novels. The prevailing critical complaint is that the post-Wapshot Chronicle novels were disjointed affairs, loosely connected short stories or yarns that by their incoherence confounded the reader's need for rounded characterization, ironic reconstruction or explanations of motive. This complaint, it seems to me, is valid: one's maiden response to these novels is that they hang together (as one critic put it) by "spit and wire." The complaint is less valid from the perspective that Cheever's novels (and certain short stories) play with character mechanization and a discursive narrator to demonstrate the loss of selfhood in a technological society. I make the point that two of Cheever's novels – Bullet Park and Oh What a Paradise It Seems – substitute symbolist elements for plausible characterization for just this reason. A cynical view of these retreats from realism is that they relegate to airy fantasy our common human wish to improve ourselves, to mediate our conflicts. The sanguine view is that

Cheever's mature fiction demonstrates the infinite plasticity of the human mind, and what Michael Byrne aptly calls "the optimistic imagination."

CHAPTER ONE: CHEEVER'S SHORT STORIES

Cheever's short stories fall into three types. The first are highly realistic stories published in small magazines in the '30s, 40s and early '50s. The second are hybrids of realism and antirealism, published almost entirely in The New Yorker and using both the city and the suburb as settings. These constitute the bulk of Cheever's published fiction. The third type are stories retaining Cheever's "modernist" emphasis on consciousness, but whose plots and characterization are so implausible that Cheever seems to forego the need to anchor his stories in the empirical world.

Though Cheever is thought of as an American realist, the stories and novels on which his reputation rests[4] – his suburban stories – are as much examples of "modernist" narration as they are of conventional realism. That is, Cheever's best stories strike a delicate balance between unmediated descriptions of the objective, concrete world and imaginative renditions of the subjective. One view of this evolution is that Cheever simply grew more confident in his own voice, embracing what Wayne Booth has called "the rhetoric of irony."[5] His narration became more formal and less experiential[6], or, in Jakobsen's terms, more metaphoric and less metonymic. We can also read this change as a fictional reaction to the social dislocations of the fifties and sixties, for Cheever's shift in style coincided with his statements in interviews that realism as he had practiced it seemed unequal to the task of fictionalizing contemporary culture.[7] I point out below that the decreased realism of Cheever's stories – beginning with his second collection, The Enormous Radio (1953) – was partly this: an American realist's retreat from the "real."

Cheever's earliest stories, those collected in The Way Some People Live (1943) and Thirteen Uncollected Stories (1994) are marked by linear chronology, metonymic empirical observation and a sense of a watching intelligence – in other words, by the hallmarks of traditional realism. In Jakobsen's terms, they are "forwarded by

combination," not selection. This means that the stories unravel as a sequence of chronological events, not mental associations, despite these events being filtered through the consciousness of the narrator. George Hunt has pointed out that Cheever's early fiction owes its "externalization of mood," its reluctance to explain, to Hemingway: "Hemingway's work imposed standards of simplicity and correctness" that reduced authorial commentary, Hunt explains(Thirteen xxii). Cheever acknowledged his debt to Hemingway, and his eventual decision to move beyond him, in a 1966 interview with John Hersey: "When I was younger I found reductiveness admirable. Now I find it reprehensible. The proper function of writing is to enlarge people, to give them their risk, if possible to give them their divinity, not to cut them down" (quoted in Thirteen xxiii).

Realism

This "enlargement" of character (and simultaneous minimization of metonymic realism) would wait, however. Cheever denies his early characters the "divinity" of broad thoughts. In effect, a sampling of Cheever's stories from his 20s (my selection from Thirteen Uncollected Stories runs from 1932 to 1938) demonstrates his close imitation of Hemingway's narrative control, his restricted view of character. "Bock Beer and Bermuda Onions" (1932), for instance, published when Cheever was only 20, is told from the narrow point of view of a middle-aged woman, Amy Henderson, whose widowhood and labour as an innkeeper – objective facts – seem as consequential as how she interprets them mentally. Realism is fostered through her thoughts being her own, not the narrator's – her efforts to make sense of her life seem broken, halting. This sense of her having "real" thoughts is wedded to her living in a "common, phenomenal world," one of the tenets of traditional realistic fiction:

> One can lose a husband in the war, she is thinking, open a house in the country and spend on thirty guests the substance one would have

> given to a husband. But a house full of guests and memory crowded with spring only makes the sum of her, flesh, blood, wrinkles, hair, a more final object to go up against April. She is aware of the ticking of every clock, the dripping of every gutter. She is aware of the passing of day and light, morning, afternoon, the confusion of twilight, evening. She is aware of the spring in the changes in the season. There's a swift ripple of green, fashioned from wheat between the two vegetable gardens. A terrible green that has trickled into the landscape like cold water. The river is full. The rains will be warm and bitter hammering at the tin roof. And she cannot hold this back. (Thirteen 20-1).

Amy's consciousness shows a limited understanding of the metaphoric nature of the seasons; her understanding is simply that "she cannot hold this back." The chief characteristic of Cheever's later stories is to enrich such introspection, to seed it with analogies that the thinking character could not herself imagine. The thoughts of Cheever's later characters are marked by the perceptive leaps we associate with metaphor, with what Jakobsen terms the selection axis of language. Amy seems incapable of metaphor. She does, however, by using the word "green," step slightly along this axis, for the word implies some tenuous grasp of her organic connection to the seasons. Still, this single metaphor leaves relatively unchanged the passage's impression of our overhearing Amy's discrete, contiguous thoughts, and hence its realism.

The relative "divinity" of Cheever's later characterization is made apparent by our comparing Amy Henderson with Asa Bascomb, the aging poet of "The World of Apples"(1973), a character his brother Frederick identified as Cheever himself.[8] Like Amy, Bascomb ponders his mortality, imperfectly understanding the "venereal dusk" that besets him. Cheever permits him a broader consciousness than Amy, however, and not merely because, as a writer and poet laureate, Bascomb is an alter ego. Rather,

almost all of Cheever's major characters in the mature stories think and speak exactly as urbane New Yorkers, a tendentiousness that dismayed some critics[9] In the following excerpt, for instance, the poet's thoughts move laterally outside the small orbit, or context, that Jakobsen insists makes mental substitution metonymic instead of metaphoric (Jakobsen 57-61). More simply, Bascomb's thinking illustrates Jakobsen's point that "selection" is the chief quality of metaphoric discourse:

> He had seen time destroy so much that he wondered if an old man's memory could have more strength and longevity than an oak; but the pin oak he had planted on the terrace thirty years ago was dying and he could still remember in detail the cut and color of dress his beloved Amelia had been wearing when they first met. He taxed his memory to find his way through cities. He imagined walking from the railroad station in Indianapolis to the Memorial Fountain, from the hotel Europe in Leningrad to the Winter Palace, from the Eden-Roma up through Trastavere to San Pietro in Montori. Frail, doubting his faculties, it was the solitariness of this inquisition that made it a struggle. (Collected 729)

That Bascomb's memory is allowed to move freely among associations here brings up a crucial – and much-discussed – distinction about realism. As Lodge points out, literary critics in our time have disagreed whether the proper paradigm of fiction should be experiential or formal. Virginia Woolf – among others – shatters this distinction by maintaining that novelists should abandon the vain enterprise of depicting reality as a mass of empirical detail; reality, instead, consists of the "semi-transparent envelope" of the beholding consciousness.

In "Modern Novels" (1919), she questions the theory that a growing accretion of random, metonymic, contiguous details is more mimetic than a stream of thoughts like those expressed by Bascomb:

> So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of conception....The mind, exposed to the ordinary course of life, receives upon its surface a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, composing in their sum what we might venture to call life itself; and to figure further as the semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo, surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (Woolf 33)

Illustrating this, the passage from Cheever's story is "forwarded" by evanescence, through our immersion in how Bascomb's mind recovers its signposts and bearings, an immersion in consciousness more than a scrutiny of the "objective" world. In her revision of this essay for The Common Reader, Woolf revised the concluding clause above: "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged: life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (Lodge 44). Cheever's later stories, this one being typical, are "forwarded" as much by consciousness as they are by the listed "gig-lamps" of sensory detail; their ruminative halo is at least as important as metonymy. Furthermore, although the Bascomb passage contains metonymic elements, their contiguity is a matter of selection by the character, not a random combination that would appear to a disinterested watcher. The "principle of equivalence" links the cities as significant places in Bascomb's memory.

Like "Bock Beer," "Autobiography of the Drummer" (1935) belongs to Cheever's "gig-lamp," or more traditionally realistic period. By this I mean that metonymic elements dominate the story, and its metaphors are non-disruptive. Also, "Autobiography" digresses to the "common phenomenal world" more than the

protagonist's thoughts. As in "Bock Beer," too, the narrator's depression-era memoir conveys a sense of respect for the empirical world, almost as though named objects were transparently more "real" than adjectives or adverbs. Other features of realism appear too. In Jakobsen's terms – metonymy and metaphor –, the narrator resists comparisons of his joblessness to experiences outside the experiential context of his life, and metaphysical analogies are almost non-existent. Syntactically, the narrator's sentences lack even the basic transitional phrasing – the conjunctive adverbs of Cheever's later fiction – that would convey a sense of his understanding what is happening to him. The narrator of "Autobiography" speaks of his life as a series of economic gains and setbacks resembling Woolf's gig lamps; he lacks the intelligence to bridge experiences in a comforting generalization:

> After that I tried to find another firm that manufactured the kind of shoes I was used to handling but I couldn't find one. They were all selling out or liquidating. Finally I went on the road selling cheap shoes for a firm in Weymouth, Massachusetts. This was the first time in my life that I had ever sold cheap shoes and hated to do it. You had to sell a thousand pairs to make what you could make on a hundred pairs in the old days. My sales hardly covered my commission and salary and expenses. I worked hard and I sold a lot of shoes but I couldn't make any profit. It was like trying to stop it from raining with my two hands. In the last years I never made more than three thousand dollars. (Thirteen 42-3)

Perhaps in keeping with the story's emphasis on "objective" facts over subjective impression, the drummer speaks as a man to whom things matter more than thought: "We have been forgotten... Everything we know is useless. ... We have been forgotten like old telephone books and almanacs and gas-lights and those big yellow houses with cornices and cupolas that they used to build. That is all there is to it" (Thirteen 44).

Since many of Cheever's later stories dramatize poverty, we can measure his retreat from metonymic writing like the above by contrasting it with a later story's. The drummer's "gig-lamps," so to speak, contrast with the "luminous halo" of compensatory musing that dulls the sting of bankruptcy in a similar story, "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" (1958). Cheever suffered from severe money problems even after The Wapshot Chronicle had won him the 1958 National Book Award, so the later story can be read as a newer fictional treatment of a familiar penury. Both are first-person accounts, but as Lodge points out, the later story is "modern" in that it "[draws] attention to the inherent ambiguity of human report, and by inference, to the ultimate impossibility of 'realism'" (41). The unreliability of the following passage lies in Johnny Hake (the impecunious narrator) using connotative words – "corruption," "premonition," and the archaic "clearinghouse" – that ironize his personal crisis, making it seem melodramatic and overwrought to the reader. Cheever seems vaguely present, urging us to reconstruct some value on the far side of Hake's impoverishment:

> I have experienced all kinds of foolish melancholy - I've been homesick for countries I've never seen, and longed to be what I couldn't be – but all these moods were trivial compared to my premonition of death. I tossed my cigarette into the toilet (ping) and straightened my back, but the pain in my chest was only sharper, and I was convinced that the corruption had begun. I had friends who would think of me kindly, I knew, and Christina and the children would surely keep alive an affectionate memory. But then I thought about money again, and the Warburtons, and my rubber checks approaching the clearing-house, and it seemed to me that money had it all over love. I had yearned for some women – turned green, in fact – but it seemed to me that I had never yearned for anyone the way I yearned that night for money. I went to the closet in our bedroom and put on some old blue sneakers and a pair of

> pants and a dark pullover. Then I went downstairs and out of the house. The moon had set, and there were not many stars, but the air above the trees and hedges was full of dim light. I went around the Trenholmes' garden then, gumshoeing over the grass, and down the lawn to the Warburtons' house. I listened for sounds from open windows, and all I heard was the ticking of a clock. I went up to the front steps and opened a screen door and started across the floor from the old Ritz. In the dim night light that came in at the windows, the house looked like a shell, a nautilus, shaped to contain itself. (Collected 305)

Hake's thoughts of money in the first few sentences compare his bankruptcy to other disappointments: these associations briefly establish Woolf's "luminous halo." The last few sentences divert our attention from Cheever's "saying" to "seeing," moving the discourse closer to the metonymic pole. Notably, however, two or three word-groups in the last part color the passage with "equivalences" -- the buried metaphor of "light" and the overt simile of the nautilus. These word-groups barely alter the experiential nature of this passage, but they do show that even Cheever's plainest suburban realism contained metaphoric coloring. In Jakobsen's terms, such passages project "the act of selection into the axis of combination," if only slightly. A basic tenet of such passages is that our interest, as readers, will migrate from the narrative predicament of the character to the consciousness of the author if the mimetic pull of the empirical is too weak. Here, because the empirical dominates, our focus remains on Hake himself. The submerged comparison of dark to mischief does not distract us from Hake's predicament; the distance between tenor (actual nightfall) and vehicle is too narrow.

Cheever was capable of more disruptive metaphors, however. In The Wapshot Scandal, for instance, Cheever in one paragraph shifts our attention from a metonymic rendition of a beach-lunch to Leander's thoughts about it to a series of extravagant

similes that convey either Leander's madness or the utter abandonment of psychological realism.

> [Leander] undressed behind a dune and was disappointed to find Mrs. Sturgis and Mrs. Gates preparing to have a picnic on the stretch of beach where he wanted to swim and sun himself. He was also disappointed that he should have such black looks for the old ladies who were discussing canned goods and the ingratitude of daughters-in-law while the surf spoke in loud voices of wrecks and voyages and the likeness of things; for the dead fish was striped like the cat and the sky was striped like the fish and the conch was whorled like an ear and the beach was ribbed like a dog's mouth and the moveables in the surf splintered and crashed like the walls of Jericho. (302)

Unlike Johnny Hake's escape into moonlit thievery, this paragraph centers Leander's associations, "forwarding" the text through metaphor.

To return to our earlier point, Johnny Hake's untrustworthy narrative "I" – a mark of antirealism – resurfaces in several of Cheever's mature stories. In his urban stories, Cheever seems comparatively reluctant to undercut the dignity of his characters by ironizing their revelations, but "Bayonne" (1936), moves Cheever's fiction one step closer to the "modernity" of an unreliable narrator. The focal character, a plain-looking waitress, fancies herself attractive to her male customers. We infer the opposite from an attempt to convince herself of her charms: "She was not pretty but she was attractive in the way she answered their questions and reached across their shoulders and in the way she carried herself" (Thirteen 89). Two last urban stories, "The Teaser" (1937) and "His Young Wife" (1938) resemble "Bayonne" not in their use of an unreliable narrator, but in their realism. In both, Cheever compels the reader to infer meaning from gesture, allows the plot to be forwarded by contiguous

events lacking explanation, adheres to a linear chronology, and celebrates the focal character's dignity by eschewing irony.

A comparison between "The Teaser" and "O Youth and Beauty"(1958) illustrates the relative realism of the former. The teaser, an aging stripper, wins back her job at a cabaret by performing her act with red hands painted on her fanny. Cheever depicts her act without the "comment" of irony or even suggestive metaphor, the story's sole exploration of motive occurring in the last sentence:

> "God, she's wonderful," [a watcher] said. He was laughing and breathing so heavily that he could hardly speak. "She's had someone paint a coupla red hands on her fanny. She's wonderful."
>
> Instead of laughing with Cohen, Harcourt acted as if he hadn't heard, and walked away through the flats, and to the mail-rack, away from the clapping and stamping. He walked into the cold alley and stood there feeling as if he had sat beside her on all those desperate days and nights when she had sat in her hotel room, thinking it up, watching the traffic below her window. (Thirteen 120)

Harcourt's interpretation that the stripper's unemployment was "desperate" implies an unarticulated respect. The stripper is an individual, not a type, because the narrative omits peculiar juxtapositions. Comparatively, Cheever's treatment of suburban housewives in his mature stories and novels lays emphasis on their commonness, their unoriginality, instead of their distinctiveness. The later Cheever suggests that adults are comically befuddled. The theme of self-deception is explored with a richer irony, moving reader interest from the appearance of a character to her universality, or a random aspect of the setting. In Bullet Park (1967), for instance, Nellie Nailles is rendered as a "type" as much as an actual woman: "Nellie was not the sort of hostess who, greeting you at a dinner party, would get her tongue half-way

down your throat before you'd hung up your hat... .She was a frail woman whose committee work, flower arrangements and moral views would have made the raw material for a night-club act" (29). Similarly, Louise Bentley, an undistinguished housewife going about her work in "O Youth and Beauty"(1958) appears to us immersed in domestic drudgery, Cheever juxtaposing a series of depressing household duties to imply that Mrs. Bentley's plight is universal:

> Louise looked pretty enough on Saturday night, but her life was exacting and monotonous. In the pockets of her suits, coats, and dresses there were little wads and scraps of paper on which was written: "Oleomargarine, frozen spinach, Kleenex, dog biscuit, hamburger, pepper, lard.... " When she was still half awake in the morning, she was putting on the water for coffee and diluting the frozen orange juice. Then she would be wanted by the children. She would crawl under the bureau on her hands and knees to find a sock for Toby. She would lie flat on her belly and wiggle under the bed (getting dust up her nose) to find a shoe for Rachel. (Collected 250)

As a native of Cheever country, a member of America's affluently troubled middle-class, Louise falls into the range of Cheever's satire. The socks she seeks and the products she buys may well be found in every home across America, but this very sameness transforms her into a representative of all domestic prisoners. In Jakobsen's terms, Cheever's decision to juxtapose her various duties is incongruous, violating our sense of her actual life.

"His Young Wife" (1938) dramatizes a love triangle in Saratoga, a setting Cheever knew intimately.[10] An older husband exposes his younger rival as a reckless gambler by engineering the latter's cash-out at the races; his young wife, disabused of

her infatuation, returns. The story's conclusion provides a more expansive explanation of motive than many earlier stories while still eschewing the ironic characterization of stories to come:

> She put down her drink and walked over to where he was standing and when he took her in his arms she began to cry. Her sobbing was hard and quick like the breathing of a person who is tired. But it didn't hurt him because he knew she wasn't crying out of longing or fear or regret or pain or any of those things that would have hurt him if they had been the cause of her tears. She stayed in his arms for a long time, crying like a young kid over the rediscovery of her own immense happiness. (Thirteen 134)

After his initial period of urban realism, Cheever seldom expressed a like affirmation without the insulation of irony. In The Wapshot Chronicle (1957), for instance, Leander Wapshot says of love that it is "not always larky or fractious" and that "Man is not simple" (259-60). Cheever's maturing point of view necessitated a fuller range of narrative styles. As Professor George Hunt has written,

> Cheever's comic stylistic techniques [in the later stories] entail a continually abrupt shifting of gears from realism to fantasy, from the abstract or general statement to the concrete detail and back; a seeming solemnity of tone that suddenly issues into something approximating the mock-heroic, catching us unawares; and the odd juxtaposition of different items in a list with the last detail of comic climax. (63)

The effect of such narration, often, is to consume the reader in Cheever's halo of shifting voices and tones, turning the narrator into the affective center of the discourse. What interests us is in such discourse is how the author feels about his characters more than the characters' verisimilitude.

An early example of the transfer of interest from a character's thoughts to a non-mimetic "consciousness" occurs in the story "The Pot Of Gold" (1951). The story's closing paragraph apparently begins in the plausibly free indirect speech of Ralph Whittemore, an ambitious but inconsequential entrepreneur, but veers – beautifully – into implausibly imaginative analogies.[11] Whittemore's realization – that he has undervalued his life's real treasure, his wife – has by mid-paragraph been fused with the narrator's spacious analogies. To borrow Woolf's phrase again, a luminous halo envelops Whittemore:

> She turned on the stool and held her thin arms toward him, as she had done more than a thousand times. She was no longer young, and more wan, than she might have been if he had found the doubloons to save her anxiety and unremitting work. Her smile, her naked shoulders had begun to trouble the shapes and symbols that are the touchstones of desire, and a light in the lamp seemed to brighten and give off heat and share that unaccountable complacency, that benevolence, that the spring sunlight brings to all kinds of fatigue and despair. Desire for her delighted and confused him. Here it was, here it all was, and the shine of the gold seemed to him then to be all around her arms. (Collected 139)

The story's comparison of Laura's bare shoulders to "the touchstones of desire" illustrates how a strong metaphor that would disturb a fully "realistic" text sits comfortably in a narrative "forwarded" by thought. Cheever's urban stories generally eschew the imputed "divinity" of such thought.

To jump ahead several years, Cheever's description of Francis Weed and Anne Murchison in "The Country Husband"(1958) is much more satiric than his depiction of the naïve bride in "His Young Wife." An illustrative scene is Weed's first encounter with Murchison, a fetching babysitter. The satire, in Jakobsen's terms, lies in Cheever's

juxtaposition of unlikely elements, his violation of natural contiguity. We do not expect the older man to pull the babysitter to him "roughly" because the scene's preceding details adhere to our expectation that an older man will hold his lechery in check:

> "You're new," Francis said.
>
> "Yes. Mrs. Henlein is sick. I'm Anne Murchison."
>
> "Did the children give you any trouble?"
>
> "Oh, no, no." She turned and smiled at him unhappily in the dim dashboard light. Her light hair caught on the collar of her jacket, and she shook her head to set it loose.
>
> "You've been crying."
>
> "Yes."
>
> "I hope it was nothing that happened in our house."
>
> "No, no, it was nothing that happened in your house." Her voice was bleak. "It's no secret. Everybody in the village knows. Daddy's an alcoholic, and just called me from some saloon and gave me a piece of his mind. He thinks I'm immoral. He called just before Mrs. Weed came back."
>
> "I'm sorry."
>
> "Oh, Lord!" She gasped and began to cry. She turned toward Francis, and he took her in his arms and let her cry on his shoulder. She shook in his embrace, and this movement accentuated his sense of the fineness of her flesh and bone. The layers of their clothing felt thin, and when her shuddering began to diminish, it was so much like a paroxysm of love that Francis lost his head and pulled her roughly against him. She drew away. (Collected 392)

The passage typifies Cheever's mature narration. It fosters traditional realism through plausible dialogue, then adroitly selects details of conduct that universalize the

lecherous husband. The sentence "She shook in his embrace, and this movement accentuated his sense of the fineness of her flesh and bone" contains no universalizing mockery; nor does the evocation of Anne Murchison's body as a thing of beauty, reminding us instead of the story's other celebrations of pure instinct and spontaneity. The sentence "Francis lost his head and pulled her roughly against him," however, by depicting Weed as the suppressed adulterer in all country husbands exploits the stock comedy of frustrated male passion, largely forgiving the man his uncontrollable urges. Francis Weed, conflated with *all* dissatisfied husbands, has become a type, and the scene itself transcends its metonymic origins to seem not a *part* of a life but a representation of all lives.

Cheever's second collection, The Enormous Radio (1953) contains further examples of mimesis disrupted by shifts in ironic tone. What especially distances this next collection from his urban stories, however, is Cheever's use of myth and fantasy. In these next, logical impossibilities – an telepathic radio, a woman who stalks the dying – evoke our disbelief while Cheever's "comic stylistic techniques" restore our trust. Except for their partial use of New York City as a setting, these stories resemble Cheever's mature suburban tales in their mixture of improbable plots and closely observed, metonymically accurate settings.

A Key to Cheever's Metaphors

A credible explanation for Cheever's increasing fabulism from this point forward is suggested by his later stories "A Vision of the World" and "The Angel of the Bridge," both published in 1964. The first story eschews linear chronology entirely, "forwarded" by the narrator's musings more than action. The second is plotted around the male character's discovery of a paralyzing agoraphobia, but likewise features a "modernist" concern more with consciousness than with objective events.

Both stories tell us that Cheever's fiction provided him a means of ordering a world he found incoherent, an America replete with "forceful absurdities."

Both stories describe the "objective" world as fallen, as unredeemable but through imaginative reconstruction. The narrator of "Vision" apprehends this gracelessness in one of his neighbours, a suspected felon who has recently paid his bail of fifty thousand dollars with pocket money. Thinking of this, the narrator feels himself and his neighbors "dancing on the grave of social coherence"(Collected 607). Other causes of social incoherence range from freeways to bomb shelters. We hear that the narrator's wife is melancholic, for instance, because her sadness falls short of the sadness she sees on television. The narrator also complains that the supermarket features such colourful, unpredictable product displays that "one needs a camera these days" to fairly describe America's consumer culture. As he sees it,

> The uninhibited energies of the imagination had created the supermarket .... Compared to [this] my wildest reveries had the literalness of double-entry bookkeeping. It pleased me to think that our external life has the quality of a dream and that in our dreams we find the virtues of conservatism.... What I wanted to identify then was not a chain of facts but an essence -- something like that indecipherable collision of contingencies that can produce exhaustion or despair. What I wanted to do was to grant my dreams, in so incoherent a world, their legitimacy. (Collected 606-7)

The "dream" to which he would grant legitimacy -- the source of the title-- features "all the world's drains, right-angle drains, crooked drains, root-choked and rusty drains all gurgl[ing] and discharg[ing] their waters into the sea" (610). The equivalent of these drains is obviously American culture, which the dream implies is clogged, choked, and crooked. The story's hard rain would restore the "coherence" of landscapes marred (as he puts it in another story) by "freeways and buffalo burgers ... [e]xpatriated palm trees

and monotonous housing developments, [and] the destruction of familiar landmarks" (Collected 584).

Wayne Stengel has written that "Vision" explains the dominance of metaphoric discourse in Cheever's later fiction. As Cheever confided in his journal, "That bridge of language, metaphor, anecdote and imagination I build each morning to cross the incongruities in my life seems very frail indeed" (quoted in Home Before Dark 199). In Stengel's words, Cheever was "convinced, by mid-century, that the quotidian, grotesque realities of American life had grown uniformly hostile and threatening"(Boscha 85), and the only way out was through a discerning exercise of imagination.

The idea of Cheever's fiction "bridging" social incoherence is literalized in a second story from the same collection, The Brigadier and the Golf Widow. In "The Angel of the Bridge," a man discovers that he shares his family's technophobia – his brother shrinks from tall buildings and his mother from airplanes. Whenever the narrator crosses a bridge (the bridges in the story being actual spans into New York City), he feels his "sense of reality ebbing. The roadside and the car itself [seem] to have less substance than a dream" (Collected 585). Specifically, whenever he crosses the Tappan Zee bridge, his vertigo assumes the form of disgust with the modern world. With deft surfictional artifice, Cheever contrives that this agoraphile should meet a singing hitchhiker as he sits paralyzed in his car at the foot of the Tappan Zee. She sings him over the span with her harp, restoring "blue-sky courage":

> She sang me across a bridge that seemed to be an astonishingly sensible, durable, and even beautiful construction, designed by intelligent men to simplify my troubles, and the water of the Hudson below us was charming and tranquil. It all came back – blue-sky courage, the high spirits of lustiness, an ecstatic sereneness.

(Collected 587)

The artificially rapid transformations of Cheever's characters in The Enormous Radio (1953) and subsequent stories really amount to a retelling of "The Angel of the Bridge." That is, characters in these stories extract themselves from predicaments through soothing reveries and visions, alternatives to the objective, anarchic world that Cheever assailed as full of "forceful absurdities."

Forms of Metaphoric Discourse

The bridge of imagination in Cheever's work takes several forms. In stories like "The Cure," "Torch Song" and "The Swimmer" (all from The Enormous Radio, 1958) he marries convincing empirical description to implausible plots drawn from legend and myth. For instance, the swimmer traverses Westchester County as a sort of counter-Ulysses, wandering through verdant backyards but finding at journey's end no faithful Penelope, no Telemachus, no triumphant restoration to hearth and throne. "Torch Song" updates the images of complex females found in the myths of Persephone and Aphrodite.[12] These additions universalize the individual voices of the characters -- spreading over them a kind of forgiveness. The swimmer seems less alone and blameworthy if we think of his travels through Westchester County as a myth re-enacted, for instance.[13]

Inevitably, Cheever's fictional "bridges" invite discussion of his life, for the obstacles he places before his characters resemble the obstacles he faced privately.[14] The critical material is replete with such discussions, for they promise illumination of how Cheever transformed real problems - alcoholism, bisexuality, a fractious relationship with his brother – into fictional predicaments. Fueling this rich speculation are Scott Donaldson's biography (1989), Susan Cheever's two memoirs (1985 and 1991), an edition of Cheever's correspondence (1992), a thinly disguised autobiographical novel by his son, and his published journals (1994).

The chief obstacle to biographical exegesis of Cheever is that he apparently reconstituted his experiences with calculated guardedness – a problem quite apart from the unreliability of *any* such extrapolation. For instance, Robert Morace points out in an excellent survey of the critical material on her father that Susan Cheever's "annotative mentality" has falsified "The Angel of the Bridge":

> [Collins and Donaldson] have both commented on the chapter in Home Before Dark in which Susan Cheever quite arbitrarily links an event for 1951 – while walking across the Queensboro Bridge with her father her hat blew off her head and into the East River below – with a short story Cheever published ten years later, "The Angel of the Bridge." The linkage, Collins and Donaldson rightly believe, tells us little about Cheever and still less about the story (and, I would add, least of all about any leakage of semisecrets). It does, however, tell us a great deal about Susan Cheever, albeit indirectly. (Boscha 227)

Morace adds that "Cheever studies have been all too free of contemporary theory":

> As Mikhail Bahktin has explained, "The author's relationship to the various phenomena of literature and culture has a dialogical character [...] even had he created an autobiography or confession of the most astonishing truthfulness, all the same he, as its creator, remains outside the world he has represented [...] Every image is a created, and not creating thing..." (Bahktin 256). Curiously enough, Cheever appears to have reached the same point intuitively that Bahktin did theoretically. Not only did Cheever frequently and openly distance himself from himself in his journals – imaging himself as a boy of fifty named Johnny Cheever, as an old man walking in the woods, as the John of John and Mary whose very

> names are talismans that will protect them from divorce, and as a self paradoxically and positively confronting "the terrifying singularity of my own person" (Journals 222). He also understood that an image does not bear a necessary relationship to any real and recoverable antecedent. (Boscha 235)

Morace goes on to argue that we ought to interpret Cheever's journals through their "signifying practices" – the patterns by which "Cheever and his journals are semiotically conditioned and (re)reconstituted" (242). To do so, as I mentioned in the introduction, would immerse us in a study of how reader intuition fills the spaces left empty by the text, and inevitably of how Cheever relies on certain assumptions to fill these spaces.[15]

Ultimately, then, the tendency of Cheever's characters to find solace in dreams is best approached as fiction, not crypto-biography. My own approach in what follows is to catalogue two or three different means by which Cheever transforms a "real" problem into an imaginative solution. Though it seems an exciting possibility that a semiology of Cheever's fiction might explain why certain objects and phenomena in his stories trigger a sense of alienation or comfort, we might more usefully conclude that imaginative escape itself is the unifying methodology of Cheever's later work, and that the causes of the author's incoherence – his sense of the country gone wrong – are both too numerous and problematic to catalogue.

Cheever followed the urban mythmaking of The Enormous Radio with his first experiments with the subject that made his name: the suburb. As "Angel" and "A Vision" foretell, his stories henceforth assumed the challenge of staging imaginative, implausible transformations in fundamentally plausible settings – bringing magic to Westchester County. Susan Cheever explained the biographical truth behind this fictional enterprise, her perception that her father both accepted and mythologized the neighbours he saw each morning and evening:

> He watched the suburban women's daily migration to the railroad station to drop off their husbands, and sometimes they were a band of angels wearing nightdresses under their coats, and sometimes they were the Furies, nagging and shrill at the wheels of their mortgaged station wagons. He watched the men coming home on the train, and sometimes they were successful gentlemen of good will, and sometimes they were debauched failures fleeing from their own lewd mistakes. (Home Before Dark 88)

Fittingly then, these first suburban stories begin metonymically and end in metaphor. The given details of setting draw us into the stories as though we were visitors, moving us spatially and temporally past the spreading elms and soft lawns of Shady Hill. Then a shift occurs – the lawns become symbolic of all lawns, the early combinations "equivalences." John Leonard has described this shift from metonymy to metaphor thus:

> Cheever enters his stories the way the rest of us leave our homes, opening the door, stepping out, getting rained on by the day. The awareness of each story seems random; it is composed of what is noticed. But watch: the noticing begins to fix on discrepancies. What is perceived is out of sync with what is felt. What is said is so often wholly inappropriate to the circumstances ... that the story itself becomes a mugging. It's as if we had agreed to pretend that politeness is a reality; then rudeness, aggression attack not only our notion of ourselves but our notion of how the universe is supposed to be organized. (quoted in Hunt 53)

Certainly, the biding appeal of Cheever's suburban stories is their creation of a world of lawnmowers and rose gardens that somehow coheres despite the fabulous uses to which he puts these objects. As we shall see in his next collection, however, the overt

allegorizing of "The Enormous Radio" and "The Swimmer" would yield to a subtler blending of fantasy and realism, of metaphoric turns in metonymic stories.

The Housebreaker of Shady Hill (1958) features four suburban stories. Each contains a character who comforts himself through imaginative a self-fashioning brought about by sensory arousal, by the quickening presence of nature. Wind and rain are as much as characters in these stories, whispering intimations at the ears of wayward men. The "complication" in the title story is the narrator's job loss. Implausibly perhaps, Johnny Hake goes from housebreaker to moral exemplar in the space of a cloudburst, his transformation sped by the scent of rain "flying up to [his] nose." Notably, Hake's transformation, though overly abrupt, leaves the realism of the story intact, in part because its trigger is such a naturally occurring element as rain. That is, if we conceive of realism as a naturally occurring chain of events (that is, a random, contiguous chain), then realism is best preserved by a symbol masquerading as a fully contextual detail. The cleverness of the coming epiphany is that rain (as opposed to a tombstone, or even a full moon) cues the burglar's revelation. Metaphor enters on the back of metonymy, disguising itself as weather:

> While I was walking toward the Pewters', there was a harsh stirring in all the trees and gardens, like a draft in a bed of fire, and I wondered what it was until I felt the rain on my hands and face, and then I began to laugh. I wish I could say that a kindly lion had set me straight, or an innocent child, or the strains of distinct music from some church, but it was no more than the rain on my head – the smell of it flying up to my nose – that showed me the extent of my freedom from the bones in Fontainebleu and the works of a thief. There were ways out of my trouble if I cared to make use of them. I was not trapped. I was here on earth because I chose to be.

> And it was no skin off my elbow how I had been given the gifts of life so long as I possessed them, and I possessed them then – the tie between the wet grass roots and the hair that grew out of my body, the thrill of my mortality that I had known on summer nights, loving the children, and looking down the front of Christina's dress. I was standing in front of the Pewters' by this time, and I looked up at the dark house and then turned and walked away. (Collected 319)

As I will argue in my next chapter, such nature-based epiphanies leave undisturbed the realistic text by drawing their metaphors – here, the equation of rain and wisdom – from a world of associations consistent with the narrator's view of the world. Because the text conditions us to believe that sensory arousal foments nostalgia and sentimentality, we can comfortably believe that a thief could so abruptly discover his better self.

Elsewhere in the story, too, Cheever juxtaposes the falseness of Hake's life with the visiting, beneficial, but somehow unreal atonements of water and light. Hake redeems, by raking leaves, a painful afternoon reading newspaper reports of other thieves; the sky above him reminds him of his better self: "What could be more contrite than cleaning the lawn of the autumn's dark rubbish under the streaked, pale skies of spring?" (Collected 313). When he remembers his sweetly oblivious wife, he adds, "I could not tell her that we were broke... She had sweetened much of my life, and to watch her seemed to freshen the *wellsprings* [my italics] of some clear energy in me that made the room and the pictures on the wall and the moon that I could see outside the window all of vivid and cheerful" (Collected 303). When Hake stands forlornly at his window plotting his first heist, he notices, "There was a little wind; it seemed to be changing its quarter. It sounded like a dawn wind – the air was filled with a showery sound – and it felt good on my face" (Collected 305). Nature is never mentioned in the story without the implication that it can purge mankind of harmful

self-deceptions. And because these winds and rains occur so naturally in the stories, their transformative magic seems less unreal, more naturally contiguous.

Another mark of Cheever's "bridges," of the imaginative ordering of his characters, is that wisdom -- the voice of our better self -- is often conveyed by a dream. When Hake falls asleep this night of liberation from his father ("the bones in Fontainebleu"), he dreams of what another character calls "some simplicity of feeling and circumstance":

> I went back to bed and had pleasant dreams. I dreamed I was sailing a boat on the Mediterranean. I saw some worn marble steps leading down into the water, and water itself -- blue, saline, and dirty. I stepped to the mast, hoisted the sail, and put my hand on the tiller. But why, I wondered as I sailed away, should I seem to be only seventeen years old? But you can't have everything. (Collected 319)

Such passages mark the progressive discursiveness of this collection and Cheever's rising confidence in his narrative voice. More importantly, the obvious privileging of dreams corresponds to Woolf's observation that realism inheres not in "gig-lamps" (though, within the dream, such mundane objects are named) but "the light of conception."

The collection's longest story, "The Country Husband," like "Housebreaker," begins plausibly, unraveling in a chain of normally contiguous events. We saw above how Cheever moved a scene involving the babysitter, Anne Murchison, away from the "axis of combination" by selectively depicting Francis Weed as a lecher. Cheever does as much through comic juxtaposition elsewhere, too. To open the plot, Francis Weed, is airbound to Shady Hill from a business trip in Philadelphia. Then the "mugging" begins: Weed's hijacked plane crash-lands in a field, he sits within hours with his bickering, neglectful family, and no-one believes (or apparently cares about) his accident. We happen to know, biographically, that this plane crash did occur[16] -- what

changes the story from a plausibly contiguous chain of events to a metaphoric situation is that the narrative "selects" coming juxtapositions with the crash that turn Weed's situation into the universal comedy of *all* country husbands. The plane crash, however plausible, is comically juxtaposed with the family dinner. The dinner is juxtaposed with the appearance of a numbingly beautiful babysitter, and so forth. The themes of the story are ventriloquized through Weed in due time, but long before that we apprehend the selection axis of language at work in the plot.

This point begs a question – under what circumstances do a story's contiguous events betray a patterning beyond the random, a meaning? One answer is that comedy and irony and satire in Cheever's fiction are a function of created expectations. In his suburban stories, in particular, Cheever adroitly renders functioning moral communities against which violators like Johnny Hake or Francis Weed can be roundly calumniated. The stories teach us when to laugh or scowl. Of course, the moral credibility of these communities is itself, occasionally, ironized, leaving the reader to decide whether right falls on the side of the violator or the judge. In "Housebreaker," for instance, Cheever describes Shady Hill as follows, not long before Johnny Hake lifts a wallet from his neighbour's bedroom:

> We have a nice house with a garden and a place inside for cooking meat, and on summer nights, sitting there with the kids and looking into the front of Christina's dress as she bends over to salt the steaks, or just gazing at the lights in heaven, I am thrilled as I am thrilled by more hearty and dangerous pursuits, and I guess this is what is meant by the pain and sweetness of life. (Collected 300)

This is the voice of Johnny Hake, but it could well be that of Francis Weed. For example,Weed observes of Shady Hill (after praising it), that his neighbours "seemed united in their tacit claim that there had been no past, no war – that there was no danger or trouble in the world" (392). Both characters are deeply immersed in the

moral uncertainties of their time and place, and what may seem affirmative to one reader may read ironically for another. The point is that Cheever's mature suburban fiction manipulates the reader's ironic reconstitution of value continually, creating expectations that control our sense of plausible sequence.

I made the point above that Cheever's characters resort to dreams to express opposition to narrative predicaments. For all the good reasons to live in Shady Hill (or, as we shall see, Proxmire Manor or St. Botolphs of the Wapshot novels), there are always drawbacks, and time and again the chief drawback, for husbands and fathers, is confinement. Men of a certain age feel their desire domesticated by these communities, their public lives reduced to impersonation. The stories oscillate between approval and condemnation of such self-sacrifice, but it may be notable that Cheever's most lyrical passages – and his most audacious metaphors – are reserved for dreams, not quotidian reality. Even measured against the thrilling exactness of his eye for gesture and setting, Cheever's language is most beautiful when it labors at the task of describing how the spirit transcends the body. In "The Country Husband," for instance, the chronological narrative is devoted to the farcical details of Francis Weed's pursuit of the baby sitter, a species of metaphor only insomuch as Weed is conflated with other aging Lotharios. Weed's experience of Shady Hill is otherwise dreary, an impression Cheever conveys by moving him through the plot as an inconsequential member of the community. Only in his dreams does he seem to live:

> Getting back into bed, he cast around in his mind for something he desired to do that would injure no one, and he thought of skiing. Up through the dimness in his mind rose the image of a mountain deep in snow. It was late in the day. Wherever his eyes looked, he saw broad and hardening things. Over his shoulder, there was a snow-filled valley, rising into wooded hills where the trees dimmed the whiteness like a sparse coat of hair. The cold deadened all sound but the loud, iron clanking of the lift machinery. The light on the

> trails was blue, and was harder than it had been a minute or two earlier to pick the turns, harder to judge – now that the snow was all deep blue – the crust, the ice, the bare spots, and the deep piles of dry powder. Down the mountain he swung, matching his speed against the contours of a slope that had been formed in the first ice age, seeking with ardor some simplicity of feeling and circumstance. (Collected 394)

Such dreams act as similes, for the "realism" of the babysitter plot remains untouched by Weed's equation of skiing with her charms. The analogy exists alongside the real; it does not replace it. Most significantly, this dream of skiing occupies more text than most of Weed's encounters in the empirical world – it conveys a sense of the character living fully within his reverie, being only half alive outside it. Realism here is of a different sort than the story's plodding, accidental encounters with real people: it must rely on the authenticity (as we perceive it) of Weed's vision. Are the images his own or the theme-conscious narrator's? The answer is, of course, both, since Cheever's mature stories conflate his own authorial commentary with his first-person narrator's intelligence. Dreams are psychologically plausible, then, in the single sense that the narrator *always* possesses such intelligence, waking or asleep. His sleeping metaphors are simply more imaginative.

Weed's suffocation by the quotidian, among gig-lamps and dull care, is further underlined by a subsequent encounter at the train station where, still smarting from his rejection by the babysitter, he has a "vision" of a woman in a passing sleeping-car:

> Then he saw an extraordinary thing; at one of the bedroom windows sat an unclothed woman of exceptional beauty, combing her golden hair. She passed like an apparition through Shady Hill, combing and combing her hair, and Francis followed her with his eyes until she was out of sight. Then old Mrs. Wrightson joined

him on the platform and began to talk. (Collected 394)

Tedious conversation with Mrs. Wrightson induces Weed to insult the dowager, instantly bringing grief to his daughter and wife (for Mrs. Wrightson, a social maven, instructs her friends to visit retribution on the Weeds). The cynicism of these combined scenes – the thrilling but futile dream, social life as impersonation – lies in Weed's liberation being mental, not actual. The narrator suggests the rival, if not superior, quality of this imagined happiness when Weed reflects, "[What] evidence was there that his life with Julia and the children had as much reality as his dreams of inequity in Paris or the litter, the grass smell, and cave-shaped trees in lovers Lane?" (Collected 406).

"O Youth and Beauty," also from The Housebreaker of Shady Hill, recounts the short happy life of Cash Bentley, a character whose end reminds us of Francis Macomber of the Hemingway story.[17] Like Macomber, Cash is murdered by his wife, but his happiness lies not in hunting but in vaulting furniture at cocktail parties. The story opens plausibly, reporting what follows a Shady Hill party, but closes implausibly on a plot level with the shooting of Cash in mid-air. Its initial contiguity ends with incongruity. Like Weed, Bentley suffers a mid-life crisis, but Shady Hill is indicted in his death only obliquely, in that Cash seems reduced by social propriety to vaulting sofas to demonstrate his youth and beauty. Like other stories with characters who rely on dreams or implausible plots for egress, Cash's murder is a kind of escape from the real through euthanasia. His death bridges the "incoherence" of his growing old ungracefully in Shady Hill.

One other form of narrative sleight-of-hand bears mentioning: Cheever's use of euphemism. His coloured phrasing can be read as another attempt at imaginative, or metatextual "bridging" of incoherence, for his connotations impose a sort of order on what could be frightfully random. In other words, the aesthetic ordering of Cheever's fiction takes place at two levels, if not more – through incongruous plot devices *and* in

single-word euphemisms. Both devices illustrate how writing that tends to the metaphoric pole could foster antirealism if handled more clumsily; Cheever's use of these is flawless. In "Husband," for instance, Weed laments "the strenuousness of containing his physicalness within the patterns he had chosen." The euphemistic "physicalness" dignifies his lust for the sitter, leavening it to a wish for *human* connection with something beyond mere sex, something less offensive than a tryst with a minor. The use of "patterns" to describe Francis Weed's decision to juggle his obligations in Shady Hill connotes both respect for what he does *and* potential disdain. Reading such words, we feel our values challenged in every paragraph – often within sentences[18] –, but we also feel ourselves protected within a secure artistic vision from which we can expect an ending.[19]

Critics have been virtually unanimous in praising this dexterity, this "slight of mood," with the significant exception of Cynthia Ozick. Her review of The Wapshot Scandal was perhaps the most hostile broadside ever directed at Cheever's fiction – the more so for its intelligence. Ozick complains, *inter alia*, that Cheever's eloquence falsifies the beauty of St. Botolphs, perpetuating a "baseless and fraudulent" nostalgia (Bosha 59). She also accuses Cheever of using wordplay to obscure (not enrich) his point of view. Explicit statements of disappointment are carefully avoided in Cheever's fiction, Ozick argues; instead "he eschews statements and leaves it to the falling tread of his elegiac lines. Among these his disbelief must be *detected*, for he covers everything over with the burden of beauty and sensibility. Exquisite apprehension of one's condition cancels failure; 'some intensely human balance of love and misgiving' cancels brutality. Eloquence cancels all things inscrutable" (Boscha 59). She also mocks the abruptness of Cheever's sensory epiphanies:

> It is a sad country where a decision -- a return, a renewal, or recovery -- is made not because anything has happened, but because something is all of once felt: an epiphany of the spirit, a revelation without relevance. Smell the rain! See how the lights lands! -- and

> suddenly restoration is achieved, forgiveness flows from the spleen. It is a country so splendid and melancholy, so like an artificial (though thoroughly artistic) rose that anyone writing in it can measure his stature by the inch worm. (Boscha 60).

Ozick persuades. She seems, however (like many hostile reviewers of Bullet Park), to utterly renounce the affective power of the modernist text, the essence of which (to quote Woolf) remains "the mind receiv[ing] upon its surface a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel." Ozick doesn't say so, but perhaps the more playful, transformative moments in Cheever's fiction upset reviewers because his settings are so richly appointed with authenticating detail – they expected a like realism from the plot. From this perspective, when Cheever's narrative substitutes a "subjective" reality for an objective, he seems to have lost interest in the traditional fictional dream, forsaken his design. The possibility that these moments, however illogical, could be read as imaginative responses to disorder is seldom raised. As we shall see, Cheever's novels after The Wapshot Chronicle forsake probability and plausible setting more freely still.

Modernism and Postmodernism

Cheever's third collection, Some People, Places and Things that Will Not Appear in My Next Novel (1961) numbers four suburban stories and the intriguing title work, more an essay than fiction. One of its best pieces, "The Death of Justina" was Cheever's most hostile rendition to date of the suburb (he had, by this time, bought a Dutch colonial house in Ossining).[20] This story takes place in Proxmire Manor, Shady Hill renamed, and is forwarded equally by an implausible plot and the narrator's thoughts. What differs its resolution from the "metaphoric" escapes described so far is the presence of a long, essayistic passage at its start. Cheever talks here of the pace of modern life handicapping the artist, anticipating perhaps his final

novel, in which self-conscious fictionality suborns even weak renditions of "objective" experience:

> Fiction is art and art is the triumph over chaos (no less) and we can accomplish this only by the most vigilant exercise of choice, but in a world that changes more swiftly than we can perceive there is always the danger that our powers of selection will be mistaken and that the vision we serve will come to nothing. We admire decency and we despise death but even the mountains seem to shift in the space of a night and perhaps the exhibitionist at the corner of Chestnut and Elm streets is more significant than the lovely woman with a bar of sunlight in her hair, putting a fresh piece of cuttlebone in the nightingale's cage. Just let me give you one example of chaos and if you disbelieve me look honestly into your own past and see if you can find a comparable experience.... (Collected 505-6)

The story's "vision" is of a more compassionate world. When his wife's old cousin Justina passes away on his couch, the narrator discovers that Proxmire Manor has made unlawful both burials and death within its borders. He also learns that his boss doesn't care about his loss, asking the narrator to rewrite an advertising jingle for a restorative tonic called Elixircol instead of attending to the burial. Once again, in the face of such impersonation, the narrator dreams. Transported, he shops at a food market peopled by American ethnic caricatures, including himself -- "wearing a rayon-acetate pajama top printed with representations of the Pinta, the Nina, and the Santa Maria in full sail" (Collected 514). At the check-out counters, gorilla-faced clerks rip open selected packages and dispatch the shoppers to some kind of "dark water."

The dream depicts Americans in their endearing diversity, vilifying the keepers of the system. The narrator's transformation in his dream is a recognition of common humanity, an emotion expressed more clearly when undertakers arrive for Justina: "the

priest was a friend and a cheerful sight, but the undertaker and his helpers, hiding behind their limousines, were not; and aren't they at the root of most of our troubles, with their claim that death is a violet-flavored kiss? How can a people who do not mean to understand death hope to understand love, and who will sound the alarm?" (515). This non-mimetic, authorial intrusion announcing the story's theme – a clear violation of the plausibility of free indirect speech – extends the antirealism of the plot.

Cheever closes this story with the 23rd Psalm; the narrator submits its text *verbatim* to shill Elixircol. The Psalm resembles Cheever's other dreams in the single sense that, like them, it will not come true; that the Lord shall feed the narrator "in a green pasture and bring [him] forth beside the waters of comfort"(Collected 516). is not more probable than a folk singer conjuring away one's fear of bridges. Both dreams vaunt the transformative power of art, however – the need for metaphor in a world without perspective.

Still in this collection, "The Lowboy," like "The Enormous Radio," animates a household object to call attention to a character's myopia. The narrator's brother, possessive from childhood, covets a family heirloom for its power to invoke his family's past, to make concrete his nostalgia. This obsession with his ancestors makes him unmindful of his present family, however, and the lowboy intervenes – conjuring up his relatives – to inform him that his idealized past was wretched. The beneficiary of the lowboy's magic is the watching narrator, who understands for the first time that "we can cherish nothing less than our random understanding of death and the earth-shaking love that draws us to one another" (Collected 487). Once again, this non-mimetic, didactically beautiful sentence violates the plausibility of the story's free indirect speech – a violation of the natural contiguity of thought, if you will. A similarly clever, universalizing rhetorical question ends the story:

> The lowboy stood in the dining room, on its carpet of mysterious symbols, and the silver pitcher was full of the chrysthanthemums.

> Richard spoke to his wife and children in the tone of vexation that I had forgotten. He quarreled with everyone; he even quarreled with my children. Oh, why is it that life is for some an exquisite privilege and others must pay for their seats at the play with a ransom of cholers, infections, and nightmares? We got away as soon as we could. (487)

"The Wrysons," like so many other residents of "Cheever country," want things in Shady Hill to remain exactly as they are. And like them, their only out will lie in imagination. "They seemed to sense that there was a stranger at the gates – unwashed, tirelessly scheming, foreign, the father of disorderly children who would ruin their rose garden and depreciate their real estate investment, a man with a beard, a garlic breath, and a book" (Collected 378). The fact that The Wrysons cherish "upzoning" and class distinctions at the exact historical moment when Americans are building bomb shelters gives Cheever his plot twist. For Irene Wryson dreams monthly of the same disaster: a pilot drops a hydrogen bomb near Shady Hill, and she must run to save her only daughter. As the blast nears her backyard shelter, she dreams that she runs to her daughter's bedroom to dress for travel. Opening the medicine cabinet, however, she sees that it is not ordered – unlike the rest of her life – and cries "as if the door of the medicine cabinet had been a window opening on to some dazzling summer of the emotions" (380). The dream, thematically, tells her that the family bomb shelter will never protect her from chaos – only love will.

While both the bomb and bathroom belong to the "real" world, their imagined confluence releases Mrs. Wryson from herself. As usual, the woman's better self is actuated through art, or in this case, a dream. One gathers that Cheever did not think people like the Wrysons capable of independent spiritual awakening. Her "dazzling summer of the emotions" does not occur in real time within the story. Neither she nor her husband will overcome the miscommunication that leads them both to conceal their fears. Notably, however, because Mrs. Wryson's dream of violation and release

seems so highly artificial and tacked-on, the story's other, more metonymic renderings of setting and action retain their verisimilitude (as we saw in Francis Weed's dream of alpine skiing in "The Country Husband"). In the Wrysons' little world, escape comes across as evanescent and unreal, social rectitude as permanent.

"The Scarlet Moving Van" uses exaggeration, not a dream, to depict the inflexibility of Cheever's suburb-dwellers. Like dreams, exaggeration violates the realistic text through false juxtaposition. Its exaggeration is the characterization of a newcomer to B —, an unnamed suburb. His name, Gee-Gee, stands for "Greek God," a nickname he earned as a college athlete. Gee-Gee and his wife, Peaches, arrive in B — - one day in a Scarlet Moving Van, but they must shortly leave, Gee-Gee having alienated his neighbors by speaking too frankly at parties. Though Gee-Gee is nearly dimensionless, Cheever uses him to highlight the drawbacks of the community, which he compares to a "hill town":

> the ailing, the disheartened, and the poor could not ascend the steep moral path that formed its natural defense, and the moment any of its inhabitants became infected with unhappiness or discontent, they sensed the hopelessness of existing on such a high spiritual altitude, and went to live in the plain. Life was unprecedentedly comfortable and tranquil. B — was exclusively for the felicitous. The housewives kissed their husbands tenderly in the morning and passionately at nightfall. (Collected 425)

We catch here the same semi-serious indictment of the suburbs voiced in "The Wrysons," of course, and "The Country Husband" and "The Death of Justina," each expressed by non-mimetic authorial commentary.

The last story in Cheever's 1961 collection, "A Miscellany of Characters That Will Not Appear," a slight renaming of the book's title, introduces two new trends in Cheever's coming work. Firstly, it anticipates Cheever's last novel's commerce with

postmodernism, for "A Miscellany" calls attention to its fictionality. Secondly, because it contains no discernible pattern, its list of now-scorned subjects ("All parts for Marlon Brando" and all sex scenes, among others) appearing in no particular order, it lacks the ordering aesthetic of a modernist novel.

If the story seems audaciously different for Cheever, it also makes claims Cheever would not fulfill. He claims to henceforth reject, for instance, "all scornful descriptions of American landscapes with ruined tenements, automobile dumps, polluted rivers, jerry-built ranch houses, abandoned miniature golf links [...] and streams paved with beer cans, for these are not, as they might seem to be, the ruins of our civilization, but are the temporary encampments and outposts of the civilization that we – you and I – shall build" (Collected 552). One hardly knows what to make of this reversal. Cheever does, in his last two collections, pay little attention to the topographical desecration of America. His rendition of its psychological ruin continues no less scornfully, however. In sum, this story's mandate sounds forward-looking, but perhaps we can better understand it as a summary of Cheever's past preoccupation – indeed, "scornful renditions" were central to his work.

The title work of Cheever's next collection, The Brigadier and the Golf Widow (1964), uses the lunacy of the private, domestic bomb shelter to again draw attention to the "incoherence" of postwar communities. In her review of the 1967 novel Bullet Park, Joyce Carol Oates asked why such places as Bullet Park or Shady Hill should be the locus of such tremendous disappointment: "It is not the settings – the commuter's pastoral and high-priced hell," she wrote, that accounts for how Cheever's characters think, "but some indefinable relation between people and setting, some mysterious infection of the brain by the times themselves, which can only be understood in relationship to what has been promised" (Boscha 109). In the story at hand, as Oates suggests, some indefinable relation between a bomb shelter and its owners remains unexamined until an unrelated crisis brings it into focus. Cheever uses the bomb shelter as a symbol of division between people, of hardening, for though Mrs. Pastor is

distraught by her husband's adultery, she realizes in a moment of introspection that she too is guilty of betrayal:

> She couldn't contemplate her husband's foolish profligacy without drinking more gin. And then she remembered the night -- the night of judgment -- when they had agreed to let aunt Ida and uncle Ralph burn, when she had sacrificed her three-year-old niece and he his five-year-old nephew; when they had conspired like murderers and had decided to deny mercy even to his old mother. (Collected 600)

Notably, the foregrounded metaphor of the bomb shelter causes no rupture in realism. Odd a metaphor as it is, such structures existed: it arises naturally from context. The antirealism of the story is America itself, massed behind this symbol of "vital forfeits," for as the narrator muses, "[T]he burden of modern life, even if it smelled of plastics -- as it seemed to -- bore down cruelly on the supports of God, and Family, and the Nation. The burden was top-heavy, and she seemed to hear the foundations give" (Collected 599). No American could sanely contemplate the implications of bomb shelters, and yet they existed. Their incongruity was real, not a narrative device.

Significantly, Cheever allows the Pasterns no genial resolution of their rift, no happy ending, even in fantasy. And he seems to attribute this incompatibility, this failure of spirit, to the pace of modern life: "We travel at such velocity these days that the most we can do is remember a few place names. The freight of metaphysical speculation will have to catch up to us by slow train, if it catches up with us at all" (602). "Metaphysical speculation," of course, is what the Pasterns lack. But it is also what Cheever seemed to need, and to be seeking a new form for.[21] In the story's opening sentences, for instance, Cheever plainly articulates his need for a postmodern aesthetic in an age of bomb shelters:

> I would not want to be one of those writers to begin each morning by ex-claiming, "O Gogol, O Chekov, O Thackeray and Dickens,

> what would you have made of a bomb shelter ornamented with four plaster-of-Paris ducks, a bird bath, and three composition gnomes with long beards in red mob caps?" As I say, I wouldn't want to begin a day like this, but I often wonder what the dead would have done. But the shelter is as much a part of my landscape as the beach and horse-chestnut trees that grow on the ridge. I can see it from this window where I write. (588)

Falconer and Oh What a Paradise It Seems – the novels that post-date this story – would reveal two new approaches to this challenge. Falconer marks Cheever's return to an externalization of mood, as marked his period of urban realism. In Falconer, it seems, the impulse to transform what upset him, to order incoherence, remained, but the narrative also takes a dry-eyed look at vulgarity that Cheever's short stories are prone to aestheticize. Falconer is devoid of verbal and imaginative beauty, at least of the kind we appreciate in the short stories; instead, it multiplies the vulgar particularities that would naturally "combine" in a prison. Paradise is another matter altogether. If anything, "the principle of equivalence" – Jakobsen's criterion for metaphoric discourse – is stronger here than in any other novel.

CHAPTER TWO: THE WAPSHOT NOVELS

The chief controversy in Cheever criticism concerns the coherence of his novels. Even his harshest critics conceded that Cheever was an unsurpassed short story writer.[22] His novels, however, are flawed by incoherence, or as Carlos Baker put it, a lack of "architectonics" (Boscha 20). Baker's review of The Wapshot Chronicle (1957) typifies this critical opposition: "Cheever is a wonder with the limited scene, the separate episode, the overheard conversation, the crucial confrontation ... but the novel is held together largely by spit and wire" (Boscha 25). Other, more approving reviews of Cheever's novels point out that this spit and wire – the comforting voice of the narrator in free indirect speech, the voice of a Boston Brahmin – draws together the fiction's "centrifugal" parts: "If [The Wapshot Scandal] successfully resists the centrifugal movements of its characters, credit is due more to Cheever's comic spirit than his craftsmanship. Every episode in this extremely episodic book is stamped with the author's special view of life" (Boscha 25).

As we shall see, Cheever's novels – Falconer (1977) aside -- increasingly forsake traditional realism, forsake metonymic detail, forsake "seeing," for the "saying" of the narrator's observations. Thus, The Wapshot Chronicle contains the most unmediated description and Oh What a Paradise It Seems (1982) the least, though the seeds of Cheever's antirealism appear in the first novel. My working definition of realism, explained in the introduction, has at its core the distinction between metonymy and metaphor. As I shall show in this chapter, The Wapshot Chronicle is "forwarded by contiguity," or metonymic detail, and The Wapshot Scandal, as its title implies, is forwarded less by contiguous events than by the reactions of the narrator to events, pushing it further along the selection axis of language, or metaphor.

Pastoral Metaphors and the "Control of Context"

One significant metaphor appears in both novels, and interrupts (as does some satire) the metonymic realism of Chronicle: a pastoral idealization of rural New England. St. Botolphs, Massachusetts, the real and sentimental home of the Wapshots, appears in the first novel as a fairly plausible fishing village peopled by local eccentrics. As the Wapshot boys emigrate westward, however, encouraged by their Aunt Honora to see the world (and by her written will to father children), St. Botolphs changes from a real place – that is, a place depicted through metonymy – to a metaphor. It becomes an incantation, an idyll, a state of mind. Since pastoral is a metaphorical mode – it doesn't describe agrarian society realistically, but offers an imaginative model, a metaphor of, the good life – the streams of St. Botolphs *should* be generically less "real" than the suburbs in which the boys remember them, but this is not always so. As I shall discuss, both these novels satirize the suburbs so thoroughly that these modern settings read as stage-sets, generic backdrops, "the suburban myth," before the narrator's non-mimetic jeremiads about progress. Against these symbolic suburban settings our sense of St. Botolphs changes, for the narrative asks that we compare one metaphor, the pastoral, with another, Cheever's dystopic suburb. Especially if one has read Cheever's other fiction, this idealized St. Botolphs – like the dreams of unplugged drains and singing angels in Cheever's short stories – seems to represent the narrator's means of "ordering" a fallen world, a metatextual device that weakens mimesis.

The turning of St. Botolphs into metaphor begins slowly, for the village is at first introduced in Chronicle as an enclave of genial loners, not caricatures. Of course, what constitutes a normal cross-section of human idiosyncrasy is subjective, and I point out below that at least one local personality is a caricature, but there is little doubt that Chronicle's characters are more rounded than those of Scandal.[23] A more significant difference between these novels is that the first provides a wide array of detail about the "common phenomenal world," while the second forsakes such detail. In Chronicle, (to quote Jakobsen) the narrator "metonymically digress[es] from the plot to the atmosphere and from the character to the setting in space and time"

(Jakobsen 59). The narrator in Scandal digresses to metaphor, or to non-mimetic commentary. The introductory paragraph of Chronicle typifies its metonymic settings:

> St. Botolphs was an old place, an old river town. It had been an inland port in the great days of the Massachusetts sailing fleets and now it was left with the factory that manufactured table silver and a few other small industries. The natives did not consider that it had diminished much in size or importance, but the long roster of the Civil War dead, bolted to the cannon on the green, was a reminder of how populous the village had been in the 1860's. St. Botolphs would never muster as many soldiers again. The green was shaded by a few great elms and loosely enclosed by a square of storefronts. The Cartwright block, which made the western wall of the square, had along the front of its second story a row of lancet windows, as delicate and reproachful as the windows of a church. Behind these windows were the offices of the Eastern Star, Dr. Bulstrode the dentist, the telephone company and the insurance agent. The smells of these offices -- the smell of dental preparations, floor oil, spittoons and coal gas -- mingled in the downstairs hallway like an aroma of the past. In the drilling autumn rain, in a world of much change, the green at St. Botolphs conveyed an impression of unusual permanence. On Independence Day in the morning, when the parade had begun to form, the place looked prosperous and festive. (Chronicle 3)

As is true of most Cheever topographies, a few details depict a lot: here, the cannon, some great homes, lancet windows. These establish "the setting in place and time." Unlike many objects in Bullet Park, however, or in The Wapshot Scandal, these

objects seem present not to symbolize the entire town but to render *parts* of the town: they occur in their natural, spatial contiguity. Temporally and spatially, the narrator "walks" the reader through the village; this sense that we are viewing the village as an actual series of locations, and not as a metaphor, strengthens mimesis.

Cheever settings are almost never purely metonymic, however; certain details here are metaphoric. The "realism" of the passage will depend on the number, power, and kind of these analogies. As Lodge points out, metaphoric devices in a realistic text are subject, generally, to *the control of context* – "either by elaborating literal details of the context into symbols, or by drawing analogies from a field associated with the context; and to incline toward simile rather then metaphor proper when drawing attention to similarity between the things dissimilar" (113). In the passage above, context controls metaphor in exactly these ways. That the cannon "was a reminder," for example, is a dead metaphor, having no effect on realism. Secondly, the comparison of lancet windows "as delicate and reproachful as the windows of a church" exemplifies the realistic text because the analogy is drawn from "a field associated with the context": lancet windows and church windows are naturally contiguous in New England. Lastly, the reference to the smells of the offices, mingling "like an aroma of the past," respects context in the sense that the past in St. Botolphs is a visual, if not an olfactory presence. The clause is also a simile, which by definition tends to leave its metonymic referent intact.[24]

This reference to "an aroma of the past," comfortably non-disruptive, is the first of many sensory revelations in the two novels. These moments occur, typically, when a troubled male character (like Johnny Hake) has his senses dilated by rain or wind, causing his mind to flood with a comforting nostalgia. (Ozick called such a moment "a revelation without relevance.") The elements of this nostalgia are the broad skies and fields of an imagined home, are the iconography of pastoral. The non-disruptiveness of these moments – their contextuality – is partly due to the fact that wind and rain – Cheever's sensory triggers – belong to every imaginable context.

Pastoral metaphors typically occur against backdrops of life-draining suburban sprawl. This juxtaposition creates, as I mentioned, a mimetic rivalry, one metaphor against another. Neither purports to realism, though each may contain metonymic elements that foster mimesis. Two ways of reading passages in which these two metaphors compete is through what Lodge calls "the authenticity of subjective consciousness" and through the process of ironic reconstruction explained by Wayne Booth. Booth points out that readers seek stability in ironic texts. Given a choice between a non-ironic celebration of pastoral and a satire, the reader will side – unless pastoral is itself ironized – with the text's celebration of nature. However, in Cheever's suburban stories and novels, the reader is challenged to make sense of a point of narrative stability – pastoral – that is clearly a metaphor. How can it seem to us convincing? At this point we come back to Lodge. He observes in a discussion of Proust that some analogies, though they seem to violate context, can seem mimetic because their author sees their tenor and vehicle in "spatio-temporal proximity": they truthfully depict how their implied author (and the text, as we have been conditioned to read it)[25] interprets the world. Lodge writes:

> If the analogies through which Marcel explores his spatio-temporal context are somewhat extravagant, or tenuous or idiosyncratic, this is entirely appropriate to the whole enterprise of The Remembrance of Things Past. The important point to emphasize is that Proust displays the movements of the individual consciousness as it encounters a reality, a context, which is coherent and intelligible to the reader, which is the world that Proust and Marcel and the reader inhabit. This makes [Remembrance] an extension rather than a deviation from the realistic novel tradition, [because it] entails subordinating analogy to context"(116).

Cheever's pastoral metaphors are faithful to a sentimental vision, a host of spatio-

temporal associations, that somehow cohere. Of course, the narrative encourages this sense of "proximity" between nostalgia and the senses by emptying such passages of irony.

An illustration of this "subjective" authenticity and the rival play of pastoral and suburban metaphor occurs in a scene before Melissa Scaddon and Emile Cranmer become lovers. Cheever describes a drive-in and a superhighway at some length, lingering over their technical qualities. He also describes the cost – in barns, farms and trout streams – of the projects, ironizing their beauty only slightly by calling them remnants of "a golden past." Somehow the barns and trout streams occupy the sympathetic center of the passage, and are more "coherent and intelligible" to the reader than the asphalt and cars. The reason behind this lies partly in the text and partly outside it. Within the narrative, Cheever has carefully conditioned us, through comic juxtaposition, to find technology hateful. He also conditions us to associate nature with serenity. Thus, in the passage appearing below, our textual associations foster the sense that urinals and vending machines are more plainly metaphorical than barns and meadows. This impression is strengthened by the American cultural sense (or desire really) that "the golden past" Cheever speaks of was *not* a myth but an historical reality, a pre-industrial America Leo Marx has termed "an undefiled, green republic, a quiet land of forests, villages, and farms dedicated to the pursuit of happiness" (6). Together then, these factors affect the realism of the passage:

> The Moonlite Drive-In was divided into three magnificent parts. There was the golf links, the roller rink and the vast amphitheater itself, where thousands of darkened cars were arranged in the form of an ancient arena, spread out beneath the tree of night. Above the deep thunder and the noise from the screen, you could hear – high in the air and so like the sea that a blind man would be deceived – the noise of traffic on the great Northern Expressway that flows southward from Montreal to the Shenandoah, engorging in its

> cloverleaves and brilliantly engineered gradings the green playing fields, rose gardens, barns, farms, meadows, trout streams, forests, homesteads and churches of a golden past. The population of this highway gathered for their meals in a string of identical restaurants, where the murals, the urinals, the menus and the machines for vending sacred medals were uniform. It was some touching part of the autumn night and the hazards of the road that so many of these travelers pleaded for the special protection of gentle St. Christopher and the blessings of the Holy Virgin. (Scandal 90)

One could argue, of course, that the list of bucolic places "engorged" by the highway is no more naturally contiguous than the vending machines and murals Cheever presents as perfectly uniform; both represent, at bottom, the selection axis of language. Again, though, because Cheever's narrative teaches us that nature is life-enhancing and drive-ins not, we sense that nature is a stable value on which we can reconstruct the description's irony. Thus, the drive-in and highway seem more disruptive of combination – more metaphoric – than the barns and homesteads.

A similar series of disruptions of this kind occurs around Coverly Wapshot, who like his brother disappears from the second novel's latter chapters and whom we first meet in Scandal on a melancholy return to St. Botolph's to dispose of his parents' estate. Mindful of a happy boyhood, Coverly walks at West Farm from room to room, but Leander's ghost – or so he thinks – drives him out. His fond rendition of family history smacks of pastoral idealization, a rendition that Cheever chooses not to ironize. Once again we sense here that an inherently artificial association of bucolic images – a violation of Jakobsen's combination requirement in the realistic text – is somehow "authentic" subjectively to the narrator:

> All the bedroom doors stood open, and here, in the dark, he seemed to yield to the denseness of the lives that had been lived here for

> nearly two centuries. The burden of the past was palpable; the utterances and groans of conception, childbirth and death, the singing at the family reunion in 1893, the dust raised by a Fourth of July parade, the shock of lovers meeting by chance in a hallway, the roar of flames in the fire that gutted the west wing in 1900, the politeness at christenings, the joy of a young husband bringing his wife back after their marriage, the hardships of a cruel winter all took on some palpableness in the dark air. (Scandal 23)

As in most Cheever fiction ("The Lowboy" is an exception), the past is a happy country, if not a perfect one. Coverly's imagined past is emptied, especially, of the comic contiguity that turns Cheever's suburban settings on their heads – the bomb shelters, plaster-of-Paris statuary and sofa-races that would mark a strictly "historical" account of West Farm. The tone of this description – which is to say, the semantic implications of its selected contiguities – certainly differs from late renditions of Talifer, where Coverly finds work in a missile research facility. The following description juxtaposes selected features of an office building in Talifer and a visible pasture, but the narrator tellingly compares the glass of the building to "oily water" that virtually occludes "the light of day":

> The computation and administration center where Coverly worked appeared from a distance to be a large, one story building, but this single story merely contained the elevator terminals and the security offices. The other offices and the hardware were underground. The one visible story was made of glass, tinted darkly the color of oily water. The darkened glass did not diminish but it did alter the light of day. Beyond these dim glass walls one could see some flat pasture land and the buildings of an abandoned farm. There was a house, a barn, a clump of trees and a split-rail fence, and the abandoned buildings with the gantries beyond them had a nostalgic charm.

> They were signs of the past, and whatever the truth may have been, they appeared to be signs of a rich and a natural way of life. (Scandal 192)

Again, if we consider the contiguities in the passage, both illustrate the selection axis of language. Perhaps the one-story building – if the eye merely scanned it – is topped by a brilliant, star-spangled flag, or the split-rail fence contiguous with a burnt-out Chevrolet: "reality" would be neither as bucolic nor oppressive. What distinguishes the passages, then, are contrary expectations of technology and nature -- expectations the text creates through non-mimetic remarks by the disguised narrator.

The bucolic surroundings of Coverly's workplace re-emerge after Moses leaves the wayward Melissa. The brothers meet at Talifer, and their reunion, while healthy, is sanctified by Coverly's showing his brother the farm described above. As they walk, however, a gantry line explodes, inducing the narrator to observe that "sporadic and senseless panic sometimes swept Talifer" (Scandal 193). The pasture, by contrast, is an earthly paradise:

> Coverly might have shown his brother the computation center or let him see the gantry line through the binoculars but instead he drove Moses to the ruined farm and they walked there in the woods. It was a fine winter's day in that part of the world and Coverly brought to its brightness and space considerable moodiness. The orchard still bore some crooked fruit and the sound and fragrance of windfalls seemed to him as ancient a piece of the world as its oceans. Paradise must (he thought) have smelled of windfalls. A few dead leaves coursed along the wind, reminding Coverly of the energies that drive the seasons .... No planes could be seen in the blue sky but they could be heard roaring like that most innocent of roarings when a sea shell is held by some old man to the ear of a child.

(Scandal 192)

Remarkably, this last comparison (plane sound/ sea shell) shows how "subjective" analogies can seem mimetic, for at this moment the narrator and Coverly and the reader share an aesthetic preference for the sounds of nature that the metaphor panders to. What should be disruptive – an analogy that defies normal contiguity – respects the "combination" of the narrator's vision of the world.

Metonymy in The Wapshot Chronicle

Before the Wapshots leave St. Botolphs, as I mentioned, its depiction is metonymic and realistic. The plot moves forward chronologically (with the exception of Leander's journals), and the *context* of the village setting controls metaphor. As in the introduction listing the village's lancet windows and smells, the return of Coverly and Leander after a fishing trip to Canada moves spatially across the visible town, the narrator pausing only to equate the sensory evening with "the power of memory":

> There was always a handful of passengers. Coverly went up to the cabin and Leander let him take the wheel. The tide was going out and they moved against it slowly. It had been a hot day and now there were cumulus clouds or thunderheads standing out to sea in a light of such clearness and brilliance that they seemed unrelated to the river and the little village. Coverly brought the boat up to the wharf neatly and helped Bentley, the deck hand, make her fast, and knocked together the old deck chairs, upholstered with carpet scraps, and lashed a tarpaulin over the pile.... Walking up Water Street toward the fair grounds Leander let out several loud farts. It was a summer evening so splendid that the effect it had over their senses was like the power of memory and they could have kicked up their heels with joy when they saw ahead of them the match board

> fence and within it and above it the lights of the fair, burning gallantly against some storm clouds in which lightning could be seen to play. (Chronicle 60-1)

Once again the passage duplicates the spatial and temporal experience of walking, the narrator's equations of the fair and nostalgia being adequately contextual – that is, consistent with our conditioned expectation of spatio-temporal proximity – that the skein of realism is preserved. Natural contiguity rules the passage. The fact that we see things more than hear about their significance corresponds with Lodge's point that the realistic text is like film, for the "axis of combination" is employed instead of the "principle of equivalence" that connects elements in metaphor.[26] In the analogy about the summer evening and memory, the narrator, "instead of disguising himself as an eye, a lens, seems to address us as a voice" (Lodge 101), but it is a voice we can almost attribute to Coverly or Leander. As we saw above, of course, even such "saying" is non-disruptive of the realistic text because the narrator's "spatio-temporal" associations are broad. As the narrator puts it elsewhere, "the smell of salt marshes, straw matting and wood smoke is the breath of St. Botolphs" (38) – these things are also, it seems, the natural furniture of the narrator's mindscape.

A similar authenticity marks Leander's journal. Leander chronicles his boyhood and manhood with heartfelt but limited intuition, his syntax and diction whitewashed of the mental acumen that sometimes turns Cheever's narratives into a "saying" that is non-mimetic. In these journals Leander encounters St. Botolphs in its bewildering randomness, arriving at conclusions haltingly. We enjoy, as readers, the marvelous sense of eavesdropping on a plausible life, largely because the listed events in Leander's journal seem not symbolic but metonymic. When Leander does attempt some synthesis, some drawing together of his experiences, he speaks and thinks mimetically -- as would a man of modest understanding. As the narrator says of him, "we cannot

imbue [Leander] with wisdom and powers of invention that he does not have and give him a prime ministerial breadth of mind" (Chronicle 82). Thus:

> Sturgeon in river then. About three feet long. All covered in knobs. Leap straight up in air and fall back in water. Viewed from horse car running then between St. Botolphs and Travertine. One bobtailed car. You got in at the back end. Dingey Graves was driver. Been to sea. One voyage to Calcutta. Gave me free rides always and sometimes let me drive the horse. Hold the reins and see the sturgeon leap. Boyish happiness. (Chronicle 99)

"Boyish happiness," Leander's broadest inference in the entry, forsakes the narrator's loquacity for the mimesis of colloquial speech. The journal in its entirety remained such a fond invention for Cheever's fans and family that it was quoted at his funeral,[27] and in fact constitutes the closing words of this first novel: "Fear tastes like a rusty knife and do not let her into your house. Courage tastes of blood. Stand up straight. Admire the world. Relish the love of a gentle woman. Trust in the Lord" (Chronicle 307). So the journal ends, but the bulk of it is a record, and one can read it as the heart and soul of this "chronicle" of a salt water boyhood.

One of the reasons we miss Leander in The Wapshot Scandal is that he alone among the characters seems fully psychologized, seems fully made real through his journal entries. Melissa, Coverly, Betsy and Moses seem at first, also, to have fictional hearts and minds, but the narrator abandons these for the "febrile play" of his own commentary.

A parallel plot develops in Chronicle. Just as his father was compelled by poverty and a forceful mother to leave his home at a young age, Moses must leave West Farm by the fiat of his Aunt Honora, who undermines her own well-being, ultimately, by atomizing the family. Cheever depicts Americans as simultaneously nomadic and nostalgic, a subject I discuss below. The parallel between Leander and Moses is

germane to realism only in that the journal's "boyish happiness" is replicated by a similar "chronicle" in Moses's life. The narrative's reluctance to overdub what Moses would plausibly think at this point is deliberate, it seems, for Moses eventually – in the closing chapters of Scandal – conceptualizes in perceptive complete sentences. Here he seems to think and act as his father's son:

> He nearly fell down, swearing loudly, but his rod was bent and then the trout surfaced with a crash and made for the logs at the mouth of the pool ... Moses kept him away from these, the fish zooming this way of that and the thrill of its life shooting up into Moses' arms and shoulders. Then, as the fish tired and he got out his landing net, he thought: What a life; what a grand life! He admired the rosy spots on the fish, broke its back and wrapped it in fern, ready now for a big day, a day in which he would catch his limit or over. But he fished that pool for an hour without getting another strike and then waded on to the next and the next, about as reflective as a race-track tout, but not insensitive to the stillness of the woods around him, the loud, prophetic noise of water and then, by looking down to the pool below him, to the fact that he was not alone. Rosalie was there. (Chronicle 71)

Despite the relatively simple diction of the passage, two sentences disrupt its impression of issuing from Moses as we know him. One is the analogy of the "racetrack tout," which seems to be drawn from outside the context of the scene and, to my ear, from the spatio-temporal context – as we here understand it – of the narrator's mind; and another is the phrase "prophetic noise," which also seems alien to Moses. One reads these passages with a sense of their being neither the gig-lamps that Virginia Woolf felt so non-mimetic in Wells and Galsworthy nor the "luminous halo" she would substitute for metonymy. On the whole, however, the tone and diction of the passage are faithful to Moses's limitations.

Such wrinkles in free indirect discourse are almost inconsequential, for most of Cheever's paragraphs are expert combinations of "metaphoric" narration and colloquial speech. Moreover, even Cheever's disruptive metaphors enjoy "subjective" credibility, are drawn from a context that seems credible to the narrator himself, and hence to us. Another example of the subtlety of metaphor in a basically metonymic passage occurs at the start of Chronicle as the Wapshots gather as a family at West Farm. Like the introduction, this vista is replete with naturally contiguous things. In this description, however, we detect a slight movement toward metaphor, because the viewing eye is stationary, not mobile, and the watcher's choice of detail suggests that Cheever may have wanted to dilute the pastoral wholesomeness of the village through comic incongruity:

> The house is easy enough to describe, but how to write a summer's day in an old garden? Smell the grass, we say. Smell the trees! A flag is draped from the attic windows over the front of the house, leaving the hall in darkness. It is dusk and the family has gathered. Sarah has told them about her journey with Mr. Pincher. Leander has brought the Topaze into port. Moses has raced his sailboat at the Pocamasset club and is spreading his mainsail on the grass to dry. Coverly has watched the table-silver-company ballgame from the barn cupola. Leander is drinking bourbon and a parrot hangs in a cage by the kitchen door. A cloud passes over the low sun, darkening the valley, and they feel a deep and momentary uneasiness as if they apprehended how darkness can fall over the continents of the mind. (Chronicle 29)

Notably, this passage begins as a conscious contrivance, a shattering of the fictional dream. This impression of artistic control, of manipulation, is furthered by the watcher's choice of detail. First, mention of Mr. Pincher's mare brings to mind a highly comedic episode at the Fourth of July parade, and the memory of this

incongruous event co-exists with the present setting, altering it. Second, the twin images of one son watching baseball from a barn while the other dries his mainsail courts a wholesomeness that the narrative elsewhere parodies. As the narrator remarks about a similar scene, for instance, "The abandoned farm evoked a spate of vulgar and bucolic imagery – open fires, pails of fresh milk and pretty girls swinging in apple trees – but it was nonetheless persuasive" (Scandal 30). This scene, too, is persuasive, but one reads it with a sense of it inching toward caricature. Its success – like so many others – is that the "principle of equivalence" intrudes so subtly into the "axis of combination" – the send-up is so innocuous. For example, it seems unlikely that Leander should be drinking bourbon beside a parrot cage, yet the juxtaposition is not impossible.

More noticeable incongruity occurs in passages describing Clear Haven, an architectural grotesquerie where Moses romances Melissa Scaddon. Melissa, the ward of an elderly relation of the Wapshots, Justina Wapshot Molesworth Scaddon (a five-and-dime-store heiress who lords it over the visiting Moses and three eccentric housemates – Count D'Alba, General Burgoyne and Mrs. Enderby) enters the narrative as a reasonably sweet love interest for Moses and ends it in Scandal as a plaything for a grocery boy. To bed his fiancée secretly, Moses has to cross the "spatchcocked" roofs of Cousin Justina's "demesne," Clear Haven, encountering as he goes a trip-wire and the Count D'Alba *au naturel* in a dormer window. In terms of combination and selection, we fully expect Moses to cross the roofs of love with difficulty, but the description multiplies and varies his impediments, selecting and inserting the unexpected. As I discuss below, the male's desire for sex is invariably the subject of picaresque in Cheever's fiction. Moses joins the likes of Francis Weed ("The Country Husband"), his father, Coverly and Mr. Pastern ("The Brigadier and the Golf Widow") in finding that love and lust, as Leander writes, are seldom "larky":

> As far as he can see in the rainy dark the only way to get to the other side of the house lay past this distant row of dormers and he had started for them when a length of wire, stretched knee-high

> across a part of the roof, tripped him up. It was an old radio aerial, he guessed charitably, since he was not hurt, and started off again. A few minutes later he passed a rain soaked towel and a bottle of sun-tan lotion and still further along there was an empty bottle of vermouth, making the room seem like a beach on which someone, unknown he felt sure to Justina, had stretched out his bones in the sun. As he approached the ledge to the first lighted dormer he saw straight into a small room, decked with religious pictures, where an old servant was ironing. The lights in the next window were pink, and glancing in briefly he was surprised to see the Count D'Alba standing in front of a full-length mirror without any clothes on. (Chronicle 219)

Of course, we would not expect to meet Count D'Alba in real life, nor find ourselves on an errand like Moses'. The passage would seem to read, then, as a kind of surrealism, a violation of our sense of contiguity. This disjuncture engages us metaphorically, however, for its violation of the combination principle encourages us, as Lodge observes, "to play over the juxtaposition, and perhaps discover metaphorical meanings in it" (204). Certainly, a comic "meaning" seems to draw the incident into coherence, to make it a metaphor for how *all* carnality is funny. Also, as the narrative encourages us to liken what happens to Moses to Leander's journal entries about love, this indeed seems its purpose. Leander is *all* lovers, not a particular fool.

A general rule in Chronicle is that Cheever's topographical description is less metaphoric than his human portraits. An example occurs when Mr. Pincher's mare draws a wagonful of ladies through the residential area of the village. We've been introduced to the physical topography of the village in the introduction, and the narrative has likened its smells to the power of memory. I made the point that this metaphor was non-disruptive. We subsequently learn that the *human* topography of the village is peculiar. Again, the yarn-spinner in Cheever seems to surface in these

portraits. Their effect is the same as metaphor: they move St. Botolphs off the coast of Massachusetts into the country of the mind. Unlike the introduction's plausibly contiguous storefronts, this passage pushes contiguity toward "the principle of equivalence" – the townspeople are "equivalently" peculiar:

> Beyond Pluzinski's the road turned to the right and they could see the handsome Greek portico of Theophilus Gates' house. Theophilus was president of the Pocamasset Bank and Trust Company and as an advocate of probity and thrift he could be seen splitting wood in front of his house each morning before he went to work. His house was not shabby, but it needed paint, and this, like his wood- splitting, was meant to put honest shabbiness above improvident show. There was a FOR SALE sign on his lawn. Theophilus had inherited from his father the public utilities of Travertine and St. Botolphs and sold them at a great profit. On the day these negotiations were completed he came home and put the FOR SALE sign on his grass. The house, of course, was not for sale. The sign was only meant to set in motion a rumor that he had sold the utilities at a loss and to help preserve his reputation as a poor, gloomy, God-fearing and overworked man. One more thing. When Theophilus invited guests for the evening they would be expected, after supper, to go into the garden and play hide-and--go-seek. (Chronicle 20)

We can accept the narrator's remark that the banker was "an advocate of probity and thrift," but the game of hide-and-seek seems so improbable that Theophilus (or anyone who plays with him) becomes a caricature. Because caricature juxtaposes qualities not found in nature, this passage shatters our sense of natural contiguity. Still, a modicum of realism lingers, as the caricature exploits our existing sense that the physical town exists.

Three Sources of Satire

The three chief sources of satire in the novels are sex, technology and American nomadism. In the case of technology, we know from biographical materials on Cheever that he was appalled by the "the missile and supermarket culture" of the fifties, and in particular by the encroachment of highway 9A on his home in Ossining.[28] Cheever's satire grows fairly bitter when he turns to the technology of atomic weapons. Sex is satirized with a lighter touch, as both novels simultaneously seem to celebrate and mock the initiation rites of young men. The third subject of satire, the American tendency to wander, to be nomadic, runs as an undercurrent through both novels, an existential hum in the lives of Cheever's men, especially, and is closer in tone to the satire on sex than technology. Waywardness and sex are part of human nature, these novels imply; regressive technology is not. In Jakobsen's terms, satire is created in all these areas through a shuffling of the natural contiguity of detail. This incongruity is emphasized through non-mimetic commentary by the narrator.

George Hunt so believed that sex and love lie at the center of Cheever's enterprise that he titled his study The Hobgoblin Company of Love, after a journal entry of Leander's. The entry reads as follows:

> Man is not simple. Hobgoblin company of love always with us. ... Life has worse trouble. Sinking ships. Houses struck by lightning. Death of innocent children. War. Famine. Runaway horses. Cheer up my son. You think you have trouble. Crack your skull before you weep. All in love is not larky and fractious. Remember. (Chronicle 259-60)

As Hunt explains, a hobgoblin is a mischievous sprite, a prankish fairy, a character like Puck or Robin Goodfellow. Cheever's characters are both bedeviled and assisted by this spirit, and as one reads, especially, about their sexual misadventures and triumphs,

one feels – as one might while watching A Midsummer Night's Dream – that their mistakes are forgivable, and that love *is* both larky and fractious. Hunt puts it beautifully: "[Cheever] is fascinated by metamorphoses of all kinds and entertained by the farcical, especially when it discloses the whirligigs of love and desire. Furthermore, Cheever's sensibility seems to inhabit comfortably that intermediate realm between dream and reality, and to enjoy easy access to both the normal world of everyday business, of getting and spending, and that moonlit world where spirits dwell" (Hunt xvi). The "moonlit world" may contain metonymic elements, of course, or even unravel, after its fashion, as a series of plausibly connected events. What seems most remarkable about Cheever's satires on sex is that the fabulous and the improbable begin in such believably metonymic settings.

Instances are many. Late in her affair with Emile, for instance, Melissa visits a doctor for a routine examination. The room is plausibly metonymic, as is Melissa's initial disrobing. .In Jakobsen's terms, the incongruity of the groping doctor is anchored in reality by the plausibly "combined" details of the room, but the passage is then made non-mimetic by Melissa's free indirect speech:

> She went to the doctor for an examination the next afternoon. She stretched out on the examination table, wearing a slip. The room was uncomfortably warm. The doctor touched her, she thought, with a gentleness that was not clinical, although this might, she knew, be the summit of her confused feelings, distorted by lewd dreams, drunkenness and a nearly sleepless night. As he handled her breasts she thought she saw in his face the undisguisable sadness of desire....What could she do? Discuss the weather? Criticize the Zoning Board? Evoke what seemed to be the fragile and dishonest chain of circumstances that kept them from ruin? (Scandal 183)

As for Melissa's state of mind, she seems to fall into the arms of the doctor out of both

confusion and selfishness. The first motive would prove more damning of her than the second, but the story attenuates our understanding of her motivation by mortgaging her consciousness to non-mimetic musings and rhetorical questions. Denied an autonomous consciousness, Melissa seems less blameworthy. She also, like the doctor, seems spellbound by desire, controlled by an impulse outside her will, and like the scenes purporting the unfreedom of various suburbanites, this turns her into a "type" more than a person. Ozick's complaint that Cheever's characterization is "all febrile play" is somewhat valid. The clever question in the excerpt permits the narrative to fudge responsibilty, replacing moral closure with a non-mimetic generalization about the human comedy.

As is true of Melissa, the closer Moses gets to the "truth" of sex, the more his days are spent in the "hobgoblin company of love," the more the text is filled with free indirect speech resembling the narrator's voice more than his own. For instance, after a particularly satisfying night with Melissa – this is in Chronicle, before she cuckolds him – Moses reflects, "The women that Moses loved seemed to be the morning sky, gorged with lights, in the river, the mountains and the trees, and with lust in his trousers and peace in his heart he walked happily over the grass" (Chronicle 221). The joke here, the hobgoblin element, is that lust and peaceful happiness are never paired – Moses thinks naively. The reader understands this irony, so immediately reconstructs a meaning on the other side of Moses' certainty – as the narrator intends.

We can forgive Melissa slightly her promiscuity – like Emile and Dr. Cameron she seems to lack an ethical heritage – but her moral inferiority to the devoted Moses lends the novel a misogynistic quality. Cheever seems to imply that love has a hobgoblin quality because the female of the species is capricious and disloyal, an impression confirmed by his portraits of Betsey and Sarah Wapshot and Rosalie and Honora, each one the servant of impulse. Betsey, especially, seems implausibly cruel. Shortly after an attempted block party blows up for lack of visitors – in fact, not a

single neighbour attends – Betsey accuses Coverly of beating her, a patent falsehood. Then the narrator fills Coverly's thought bubble with denial:

> The only way he could cling to his conviction that the devastating blows of life fell in some usable sequence was the claim that these special blows had not fallen; and so making this claim he made a bed on the sofa and went asleep. This curious process of claiming that what had happened had not happened and what was happening was not happening went on in the morning when Coverly went to get a shirt and found that Betsey had cut the buttons off all his shirts. (Scandal 60)

As we see, the narrator's non-mimetic commentary is at the center of this passage. The non-realism continues on the plot level after Coverly leaves Betsey and comes back to her within a day. Their reconciliatory love-making is described in an erotic excess of metaphor, illustrating the point that metaphors drawn not from "context" or the "field of contiguity" disrupt realism:

> "Oh, sugar," groaned Coverly, his feelings swamped with love, and he raised her up in his arms. Then the verdure of venery, that thickest of foliage, filled the room. Sounds of running water. Flights of wild canaries. Lightly, lightly, assisting one another at every turn they began their effortless ascent up the rockwall, the chimney, the flume, the long traverse, up and up and up until over the last two ridges one had a view of the whole, wide world and Coverly was the happiest man in it. But according to him none of this had happened. How could it have? (Scandal 63)

Another form of satire on sex concerns homosexuality. Shortly after Betsey abandons Coverly (to return the next chapter), he dallies with a male colleague. "And now we come to the unsavoury or homosexual part of our tale and any disinterested

reader is encouraged to skip" (Chronicle 249). However plausible this interlude, its presentation is satirized by incongruous detail (for instance, at dinner, Coverly's counterpart "butter[s] his parsnips"), and this incongruity is veiled in layer upon layer of non-mimetic commentary. The mere fact that Coverly considers such an action generates a superflux of analogy similar to his reconciliation with Betsey:

> He had thought with desire of going to sea with a pederast and Venus had turned her back on him and walked out of his life forever. It was a withering loss... Venus was his adversary. He had drawn a mustache on her gentle mouth and she would tell her minions to scorn him. She might allow him to talk to old woman now and then, but that was all. (Chronicle 252)

The second source of satire in both novels is technology. Many of Cheever's short stories and novels emphasize that the America of his childhood has been diminished somehow by modernization. His last novel, Oh What a Paradise It Seems, centers on the pollution of a pond where the narrator fished as a child. In The Wapshot Chronicle and The Wapshot Scandal, the technological enemy is manifold, including the arms race and our over-reliance on cars. We may conclude that Cheever opposed any invention that lessened our humanity.

An example of Cheever's satire on technology occurs in a tax collector's visit to old Aunt Honora. Norman Johnson spends his first night in St. Botolph's at the aging Viaduct House. Installed, he scorns the primitive chamber pot in his bathroom: "These primitive arrangements disturbed him. Imagine using a chamber pot at a time when men freely explored space! But did astronauts use chamber pots?" (Scandal 47). With implausible devotion to the modern, Johnson spies a local church that night as he walks, and muses:

> It was a white frame building with columns, a bell tower and columns that vanished into the starlight. It seemed incredible to him

> that his people, his inventive kind, the first to exploit glass storefronts, bright lights and continuous music, should ever have been so backward as to construct a temple that belonged to the ancient world. (Scandal 47)

Despite this church appearing before us in its natural spatial contiguity – Johnson walks past it –, non-mimetic narrative play is its real source of interest. This play has a structure; it exudes irony by combining and contrasting phrases that show the visitor to have his priorities wrong. Our natural sense of proportion tells us that Johnson's idea of pleasure is peculiar – his list is too reliant on mechanical distraction. On the other hand, the phrase "the ancient world" euphemises the village forefathers who constructed the church spire for reasons the narrator implies are unassailable and wise. Both the euphemism and Johnson's list illustrate the selection axis of language.

Cheever pushes his satire on technology well beyond this point in his presentation of Dr. Cameron, the nominal head of Talifer's research facility and Coverly's sometime boss. Cameron seems to occupy the story in the same capacity as Norman Johnson, but his sins are those of the powerful. Even by the disjointed standards of this novel the complete chapter devoted to Dr. Cameron's absurd congressional roasting seems careless. We learn through a long-retired nanny (efficiently subpoenaed) that his institutionalized son had been locked in closets and beaten for defying his exacting father. In the middle of the hearings an aged visitor approaches the microphone to deliver a superbly articulate, extemporaneous speech to the scientist. Oddly, the old man's polemic is delivered without irony:

> "We possess Promethean powers but don't we lack the awe, the humility, that primitive man brought to the sacred fire? Isn't this a time for uncommon awe, supreme humility? If I should have to make some final statement, and I shall very soon for I am nearing

> the end of my journey, it would be in the nature of a thanksgiving for stout-hearted friends, lovely women, blue skies, the bread and wine of life. Please don't destroy the earth, Dr. Cameron," he sought. "Oh, please, please don't destroy the earth." (Scandal 171)

As Booth has written, Cheever's best irony delights us through its "reciprocity of differing tones" (7), its mixture of affirmation and skepticism. Suggesting that an old man we hardly know is all innocence and goodness and Dr. Cameron all vileness, this passage forsakes this reciprocity; it preaches. It also forsakes the non-mimetic narrative play that compensates for the impossible plot, the play that absorbs us in ironic reconstruction.

Another subject of satire in the books is American nomadism, or what Cheever calls "driftingness." The narrator mentions in Oh What a Paradise It Seems that Americans live the paradox of being inveterate consumers and, simultaneously, nomads: "Most wandering people evolve a culture of tents and saddles and migratory herds, but here was a wandering people with a passion for gigantic bedsteads and massive refrigerators"(9). Their "love of permanence" being at odds with their mobility, Americans suffer chronic dis-ease. This discomfort, essentially, is what explains the movement of the Wapshot boys from home, what universalizes them, despite Honora's will being the proximate cause of their flight. As is true of Cheever's satires on male lust, this subject – this character paradox – is handled with a light parodic touch, which means that the given incongruities of any scene are modest instead of extravagant. For instance, the morning the boys leave St. Botolphs by train for Washington and New York (Moses publicly and Coverly as a stowaway) the train that bears them off enters the station as a symbol into a field a natural contiguity. We seem to be standing with Sarah and Leander and Moses on the platform, then the narrative digresses not to metonymic details of setting but to non-mimetic commentary:

> Moses left the next night on the 9:18, but there was no one to see him off but his parents.... Standing on a platform they could hear in the distance the noise of the train coming up the east banks of the river, a sound that made Sarah shiver, for she was at that age when trains seemed to her plainly to be the engines of separation and death. Leander put a hand on Moses's shoulder and gave him a silver dollar....We are all inured, by now, to those poetic catalogues where the orchid and the overshoe appear cheek by jowl; where the filthy smell of old plumage mingles with the smell of the sea. We have all parted from simple places by train or boat at season's end with generations of yellow leaves spilling on the north wind as we spill our seed and the dogs and the children in the back seat of the car, but it is not a fact that the moment of separation a tumult of brilliant and precise images – as though we drowned – streams through our heads. (Chronicle 90)

The aside "as though we drowned" links this passage to the synaesthetic analogies (quoted in the previous chapter) that visit Leander the morning he dies. Though both passages seem to imitate the onrushing thoughts of a person in crisis, neither Leander nor Moses could plausibly think so wisely. In terms of realism, then, both use non-mimetic narration as a means of handling a complex subject. In Jakobsonian terms, this passage's unexpectedly sophisticated mental associations are a violation of a naturally contiguous depiction of reality. Because the only "spatio-temporal" associations to date have come in single, usually pastoral metaphors, the rush of metaphors here seems not to issue from "subjective" authenticity so much as artful contrivance.

Like St. Botolphs, Talifer enjoys a brief rendition as a real place through the "combination axis of language" before it falls to satire, to metaphoric status. Talifer is an object lesson in the human cost of waywardness, of the American need to scatter. Its failings remind us of the attacks on eerily similar suburbs in "The County Husband,"

"The Scarlet Moving Van" and other stories. Ostensibly, American car culture is the cause of a heated argument one night at a party Coverly and Betsey attend. Cheever introduces an eventually ludicrous argument on the cat's feet of plausible conversation:

> After dinner Mr. Cranston told a dirty story and then got up to leave. "I hate to rush," he said, "but you know it takes us an hour and a half to get back and I have to work in the morning."
>
> "Well, it shouldn't take you an hour and a half," Mr. Brinkley said. "How do you go?"
>
> "We take the speedway," Mr. Cranston said. [Mr. Brinkley responds with some advice].
>
> "If they go back to the shopping center," Mrs. Brinkley said, "they'll get stuck in all that traffic at Fermi Circle. If they don't want to go out by the computation center, they could head straight for the gantries and then turn right at the road block."
>
> "My God, woman," Mr. Brinkley said, "will you shut your big damned mouth?" [More argument follows.]
>
> "Who smashed up the car last year?" Mrs. Brinkley screamed. "Who was the one who smashed up the car? Please tell me that." (Scandal 160-1)

We see again the abruptness with which Cheever could mechanize his characters or turn his setting symbolic. The passage works as satire perhaps better than the Dr. Cameron chapter because its exaggerations follow what we construe as a normal chain of events – the gathering of genial strangers for conversation. A similar satire on rootlessness occurs when a woman named Gertrude Lockhart, an acquaintance of Melissa's, hangs herself in her garage because of a string of vexing domestic problems. The ridiculousness of the chain of events that kills her raises her suicide above particular tragedy to symbolic tragedy. As the narrator explains it, pretending that the death is incomprehensible, "it was not true that nothing happened in Proxmire Manor;

the truth was that eventfulness in the community took such eccentric curves that it was difficult to comprehend" (Scandal 82). Among other problems Mrs. Lockhart was beset by a backed-up sewer, an oil-fired furnace that fails in a cold snap and a package of bacon that, resisting her frantic efforts to shear it open, encases the woman in a metaphor – "an immutable transparency." The appeal of the passage is that any two of the events could occur simultaneously, could be naturally contiguous, and this much realism makes the satire more viable.

A peculiarity about Scandal's emphasis on movement, on waywardness – neither the Wapshots nor their consorts spend much time in their adopted homes – is that the narrative inevitably includes a passing array of new, often singular settings. In part because these settings are described only perfunctorily, without the sort of extended description applied to St. Botolphs, a small number of metonymic details must suffice to depict them. Inevitably, perhaps – as we noticed of the Moonlite drive-in and I-95 – these details become representations of the whole, not metonymic parts of it. This, combined with the sheer number of these settings – Melissa and Moses fly to Nantucket and Europe in sequential chapters, for instance – alters the reading experience. The latter half of Scandal is a bleak mixture of obscure characters and woodenly symbolic settings.

Scandal's abandonment of the Wapshots and the ascendancy of peculiar settings suggested to critics that Cheever had lost interest in his chief characters. Why else foreground Emile and Dr. Cameron? Hilary Corke's review typifies the complaint that Scandal forsakes realism:

> This looseness [of plot] is not confined to construction. It runs right through, down to the small details. For instance, in an incident which has neither antecedent nor after-history, Coverly Wapshot puts the vocabulary of Keats through a computer.... And he goes on to philosophize about this. But one doesn't have to be anything of a

> statistician, one needs no more than an a elementary sense of the way of the world, and how its languages are put together, to be sure that a frequency count yields something of the nature of the *of and that* to it. If one is going to fool about with science, and then draw wise conclusions, one has to make one's science, if not accurate, then at least conceivable. Or, if one is going to be frankly fantastic, one must not imbed one's fantasy in a wholly realistic context. (Boscha 45)

Plausible or not, Coverly finds little solace in his Keats project; it joins Betsey's dream of perfectly convivial neighbours as a vain effort to humanize Talifer. In both these characters' cases, Scandal seems to tell us that planned communities destroy our sense of self, and that Americans can only find this self in a remembered home. The home needn't appear on any map – all one needs is memory. We will see that Cheever uses Paul Hammer's waywardness in Bullet Park to suggest that people without sentient memories are confused.

Scandal seems to dramatize the alienating effect of wandering by foregrounding the manic activities of characters who seem unimportant. Benjamin DeMott observed in his review of The Wapshot Scandal that Cheever may have had this exact purpose behind such frigid characterization:

> The objection to the fictional method by which [implausible characterization] stands as an outward sign is that the method is anti-human in effect. One defense of the method is that a sound way to teach the worth of feelings is to tell what the world would be like if there were no feelings. Another defense is that comic writers have always mechanized their characters. (Boscha 50)

This effect of reading Scandal is as DeMott describes; one remembers little of the characters, somewhat more of the setting, but most of all a sense of the rushing

anonymity of life in Cold War America. Separated from their origins, Emile and Melissa and Dr. Cameron fall victim to morbid, perverse, or passing impulses, a self-fashioning abetted by the sameness and anonymity of tract homes and driveways. These characters lack the horse sense that Chronicle grants the Wapshots. As we shall see in Bullet Park, the retreat from metonymic settings and plausible characterization begun in Scandal will grow yet stronger.

CHAPTER THREE: CHEEVER'S LATER NOVELS

Bullet Park

Bullet Park sold only 33,000 copies in 1967, failing to earn back Cheever's advance.[29] According to Scott Donaldson (Biography 248) and Cheever himself, the novel's failure resulted largely from Benjamin DeMott's damning front-page review in the New York Times Book Review (27 April 1969). Cheever wrote, "The manuscript was received enthusiastically everywhere, but then Benjamin DeMott dumped on it in the Times, and everyone picked up their marbles and ran home" (quoted in Boscha 114).

DeMott echoed the standing complaint that Cheever's novels lacked plausibility and structure. Bullet Park, to DeMott, seemed "broken-backed ... tacked together as flimsily as the Hammer-Nailles ploy suggests," and full of "mere notations of nudies, nuts, non-sequiturs" (Boscha 99). Despite the fact that "Cheever is brilliantly attentive to the discontinuity that nowadays butts anybody who ventures off his porch," and "there's no denying [the novel's] seeming congruity with contemporary life," it was bound to disappoint readers "who value accounting of motives, explanations of why people are sick or won't go to school or wish to commit murder" (Boscha 100). Revealingly, DeMott also declared, "The novel is a world of explanations, and the story is a world of phenomena"; by this standard, Bullet Park was not a novel.

DeMott's review illustrates Lodge's point that "anywhere one touches down in the 20th-century" one finds critics who seem "unhappy with a tolerant aesthetic pluralism" (52). DeMott in 1967 sounds a lot like John Bayley in 1968, for instance, whom Lodge quotes complaining that Frank Kermode attaches too much weight to the "knowingly fictive, the explored illusion," and further believes that the "most enlightened literary artist ... is the one who is most aware that the paradigms of his art

are formal, not experiential" (56). The antirealism of Bullet Park was to many critics its failing, not an enlivening artistic paradigm.

At no other time would Cheever's detractors have more to work with. Bullet Park is, from the first, a metaphor, which Cheever admitted after reading an especially bleak review: "I may have made a mistake in using a suburb as a social metaphor" (quoted in Boscha 114). How this metaphor manifests itself in the novel's bouillabaisse of dreamy flashbacks, empirical description and far-fetched dialogue is complex, to say the least. DeMott's review reveals not merely his own preference for fictional realism, but the bewildering variance, between critics, over what the novel attempts to say. Even John Updike, himself a practitioner of the "explored illusion," said of Bullet Park that it barely held together, though it also impressed him as "a slowly revolving mobile of marvelously poeticized moments" (Boscha xxix).

Its opening sentence establishes this mix of realism and nonrealism: "Paint me a small railway station then, ten minutes before dark." Our attention is drawn to both the experiential, to borrow Bayley's term, and the narrator's creation – "Paint me" – of a setting. I discussed in the previous chapters how the narrator can create a world of associations in "spatio-temporal proximity" that allows such obvious narrative interventions to preserve the context of a realistic text, but this narrative simply forsakes conventional mimesis. In this same sentence, for instance, the word "then" is ambiguous, possibly referring to a time, but more than not creating emphasis for a point the narrator has yet to make. As details of setting accrete – the Wekonsett River, lamps, a pergola – the narrator adds, intriguingly, "The setting in some way seems to be at the heart of the matter." Seems? As in the title Oh What a Paradise It Seems, the word "seems" precipitates clarification. Like the word "then," however, it draws us into speculation that loosens the mimetic pull of the setting. The river and the lamps contend with a rival play of tones in the narrator's voice.

Notably, Cheever will leave unexplained whether "the setting" *is* at the heart of the novel. I propose an answer below, but an uncritical reading merely draws one's attention to contradictions – scenes in which the suburb is destructive of character and scenes in which it seems an earthly paradise. These contradictions move the narrative toward ironic instability. One senses that after the novel's last sentence, the one that soured many critics with an impression of deep cynicism – "and everything was as wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, as it had been" – that Cheever *wanted* to foil ironic reconstruction. The points of view of the principal characters certainly lead to this. Paul Hammer asserts that Bullet Park needs "nothing less than a crucifixion," for instance, to be awoken from its expensive complacency, but Hammer himself is insufficiently psychologized or plausibly motivated to win our sympathy. Nailles, likewise, is insufficiently developed to carry the thematic weight he does. Neither character seems rounded. As Joyce Carol Oates puts it, Hammer and Nailles are merely "sub-ideas, national traits, creatures portrayed in moments of nervous or senseless collision with each other" (Boscha 109).

Given such mechanization, ironic instability, and the fact that Cheever admitted his setting to be metaphorical, what remains that seems realistic? One answer lies in DeMott's remark that Cheever "brilliantly attends to the discontinuity" of the late '60s. If the combination axis of language lies behind realism because it forsakes "similarity," it stands to reason that realism must also be fostered by dissimilar anecdotes, characters, or even chapters in a novel. As Lodge puts it, "Writing that emphasizes the *differences* [my italics] between things in the world, that emphasizes the uniqueness of individuals, places, objects, feelings, situations, will tend to operate mainly along the axis of combination or contiguity, in Jakobsen's terminology" (132).

As was true of The Wapshot Scandal, then, part of the realism of Bullet Park is structural – its presentation of unrelated incidents, its depiction of human society as a series of chance and potentially sulphuric encounters. "Differences between things" is the operative subtitle of this novel. This sense of natural contiguity is held in tension,

however, with various obviously symbolic elements. Hammer and Nailles, to begin, are simply too symbolically paired to be seen as anything but metaphors. They represent opposite values – reality and appearance, and they would seem completely implausible – like Dr. Cameron – if their dialogue were more stilted. Hammer believes (through his "chance" conception and the counsel of a crazy mother) that communities like Bullet Park are cynical fronts for human vice. Nailles, to the contrary, values "the fitness of things" above all else. Adding to this primary opposition, we learn through the narrator of others whose lives seem to be held together by an illusion of gentility, or whose simple expectations are scuttled by the comic factuality of life in Bullet Park. Adding to the sense of "equivalence" in the community is the sense that everyone but Hammer seems to expect more of Bullet Park than it can offer – the discovery of a self through setting. The remark that "setting" is at the heart of the novel seems to mean that too many Americans have no inner self; like Melissa and Emile, their self is a social construct. We can read the oppressive alienation of the natives of Bullet Park as evidence of realism or symbolism, depending on whether their lack of a coherent culture (in our eyes) unites them or separates them.

If we read the novel as an illustration of Lodge's point that differences between people is the core of realism, we see that the collapse of "similarity" in Bullet Park – the shelter of shared values -- occurs in both particular incidents and in the three-part division of the novel. Hammer's primary function in part three, for instance (after parts one and two contrast his world with that of Nailles), is to "hammer" at the suburbs. His opposition to people like Nailles is lent some credibility by what Nailles confesses to his son, Tony. Nailles points out that everyone seems always to be "chopping at the suburbs," but he "can't see that playing golf and raising flowers is depraved.... People seem to make some connection between respectability and moral purity that I don't get" (65). As he also remarks, however, the country to which Bullet Park belongs (this being 1967) honours men who "talk about freedom and independence more than anybody else but they furnish the money and the armaments

and the technicians to crush freedom and independence whenever it happens" (66). He lists a number of such hypocrisies, implying that Bullet Park's indifference to the nation's problems belies its moral health. As George Hunt has written, Cheever was sensitive to the accusation that "during this period American cities and especially their suburbs were deemed not part of the problem but *the* problem, symbolic of hypocrisy, complacency and moral rot, enclaves that smother the human spirit" (151). The novel's rendition of "difference," consequently, is not solely that the natives of Bullet Park have nothing in common; it is that Bullet Park is *in*different to the rest of the nation.

An awareness of moral rot – their own or the community's – simmers just below the consciousness of the characters, but the narrative's depiction of the moral bankruptcy of these people divides them instead of making them seem similar. Mrs. Heathcup, for instance, whose home Hammer purchases, describes her husband's suicide with apparent indifference, too impressed by the sociability of her neighbours to take heartfelt stock of her loss:

> When I say that he passed away I don't want you to think that he died in his sleep. While he was painting I heard him talking to himself. "I can't stand it any longer," he said. I still don't know what he meant. Then he went into the garden and shot himself. That was when I found out what kind of neighbors I had. You can look all over the world but you won't find neighbors as kind and thoughtful as the people in Bullet Park. As soon as they heard about my husband passing away they came over here to comfort me. There must have been ten or twelve of them and we all had something to drink and they were so comforting that I almost forgot about what happened. I mean it didn't seem as though anything had happened. Well here's the living room. Eighteen by thirty-two. We've had fifty guests here for cocktails but it never seemed crowded. I'll sell you the rug for half of what I gave for it. All wool.

(12)

Despite the narrator's seeming forgiveness of the widow's befuddlement, the frequency of such amoral speeches leaves the impression of an atomized, divisive community, not an America of redeemable sinners. Mrs. Heathcup light-heartedly bemoans her widowhood, for instance, but there's really nothing funny about being lonely: "There's nothing in this place for a single woman. Speaking of tribes, it's like a regular tribe. Widows, divorcees, single men, the tribal elders give them all the gate" (11). She also praises the Gory Brook Country Club, adding, "I hope you're not Jewish. They're very strict about that" (12). We can adduce that another "difference" in the novel's portraiture is that these suburbanites are practicing bigots.

Another drawback to Bullet Park is that it suffocates the human spirit; the price of decorum is sameness and boredom. In passages where the narrator merely comments on this, as he does in the coming remark, Bullet Park comes across as an idea, a metaphor for dystopic living, not as an actual place: "A stranger might observe that [Bullet Park] seems very quiet, but only because he'd come inland from the sounds of wilderness – gulls, trains, cries of pain and love, creaking things, hammerings, gunfire" (9). In other words, Bullet Park is *too* quiet, and the generalization unites both the widow and golfer in symbolic confinement. In contrast to the make-believe suburb, the named features of "wilderness" are metonymic qualities of a "reality" the narrator holds up as enviable.

To repeat, the realism of this community depends on one's view of its dysfunctionality. If its natives seem to us alienated, their "differences" emphasized, the narrative "operates along the axis of contiguity." If its natives seem similar, the community is a metaphor. Adding, then, to our impression of the community's realism is the fact that its values and its sense of decorum are thin; even Nailles – the novel's apologist for genteel society and the nuclear family – finds it hard to believe that his neighbours are civil people. Marietta and Paul Hammer, seated near him in

church, appear to be model citizens, but (as he ponders) they *could* be depraved: "someone less sympathetic...would have singled [Hammer] out as one of those men who, at the summit of their perfection, would be discovered to have embezzled two million dollars ... to finance the practice of his savage and unnatural sexual appetites" (18). Hammer, of course, does worse: he attempts murder. Nailles loves his wife Nellie with all his soul – "should Nellie die he would immolate himself on her pyre" – but Nellie almost has sex with three different strangers. So it goes in Bullet Park, where the temptations of the flesh demonstrate how needful people are of a shared, prohibitive morality.

As I say, however, the novel's presentation of chance, contiguous incidents and interpersonal fractiousness is held in tension with the narrator's comforting, non-mimetic commentary, an "ordering" voice imposed on chaos. This tension marks all of Cheever's mature fiction. Every house, car, street lamp or breeze gives rise to a generalization, and the kindly tone of these remarks is such that the chance, contiguous nature of what they synthesize is altered. In Jakobsen's terms, the narrative alternately seems metonymic and metaphoric, describing random encounters or human difference while reconstituting chaos in the unchancy world of the storyteller's mind. Nellie Nailles, for instance, strives to recover her equilibrium after a disturbing trip to New York City by listening to a fellow shopper discuss her "good English cretonne." The stranger's banality cues the narrator to observe, "How contemptible was a life weighted down with rugs and chairs, a consciousness stuffed with portables, virtue incarnate in cretonne" (31). One of Nailles's fellow commuters, Shinglehouse, is pulled one morning beneath an express train, inducing Nailles to ponder, expansively, "the mysteriousness of life and death" (61). Indirect speech turns every setback into wistful comedy or, as Ozick puts it, "exquisite eloquence cancels failure." Nailles is described as a chemist who now sells Spang, a mouthwash, but the narrator's appropriation of his thoughts pushes the description of half-credible product-names toward a full-blown satire on consumerism:

> Saffron operated a small laboratory in Westfield but it was basically the manufacturing firm that produced a patent floor mop called Moppet, a line of furniture polish called Tudor, and Spang, a mouthwash. Nailles was principally occupied with the merchandising of Spang and he was definitely restive about this. It seemed to reflect on his dignity. He had argued with himself frequently on the score. Would he be more dignified if he had manufactured mattresses, depilatories, stained-glass windows or toilet seats? No. In the TV commercials for Spang, boxers in the ring objected to one another's bad breath. Bad breath came between young lovers, friends, husbands and wives. In a sense this was all true, he told himself. Bad breath was a human infirmity like obeseness and melancholy and it was his simple task to cure it. Sexual compatibility was the keystone to any robust marriage and bad breath could lead to divorce, alimony and custody suits. Bad breath could sap a man's self-esteem, posture and appearance.... bad breath drove children away from home. The wise statesman in his councils was not heeded because his breath was noxious. Bad breath was a cause of war. (101)

Such passages act as metaphors in that they connect the novel's episodes and indirect speeches by the hint that Nailles, like most Americans, is immersed in a bankrupt culture, and is restive for good reason about the shallowness of his life. His quest for a vocation is exactly what joins him to other Americans. What one experiences, consequently, when reading such passages, is a feeling of *both* difference and similarity. Their "difference" is that the world of Bullet Park is ruled by "the anarchic flux of experience," as Lodge writes, and by a shared confusion, but the selfsame passages evoke the oneness of a people made absurd by the economy:

> Are there songs for this place, the stranger might wonder; and there

> are. Songs to children and by children, songs for cooking, songs for undressing, water songs, ecclesiastical doggerel (We throw our crowns at Your feet), madrigals, folk songs, and a little native music. Mr. Elmsford (six bedrooms, three baths, $53,000) dusts off his tarnished Psalter which is something he never mastered and sings: "Hotchkiss, Yale, an indifferent marriage, three children and twenty-three years with the Universal Tuffa Corporation. Oh, why am I so disappointed," he sings, "why does everything seem to have passed me by." There's a rush for the door before he starts a second verse but he goes on singing. "Why does everything taste of ashes, why is there no brilliance or promise in my affairs."... Then there are the affirmative singers: "Bullet Park is growing, growing, Bullet Park is here to stay, Bullet Park shows great improvement, every day in every way.... " (9-10)

In sum, incoherence and coherence co-exist here – the comforting coherence of the narrator's non-mimetic commentary and the structural incoherence of the plot's vignettes. In a letter, Cheever answered DeMott's accusation that the novel seemed unplanned with the remark that it was *so* well planned that "it could be read backwards" (quoted in Donaldson Biography 247). The untutored reader would fail to notice this patterning, however: the novel's local incidents are simply too lively, too affecting, to speak metaphorically. However comforting the narrator's commentary, also – however much we sense that all Americans in 1967 deserved pity – the characters' "differences" eclipse their similarities. As I explain below, a similar tension marks Falconer. Mythopoeic elements are interwoven with its often vulgar anecdotes, and the affective power of these stories eclipses the novel's motif of Christian redemption.

Falconer

The mixed reception of Falconer (1977) illustrates how critical opinion continued to begrudge Cheever his nonrealistic narratives. Among the novel's admirers, Walter Clemons (in Newsweek) praised the "grace" of Cheever's prose, the "transcendence" of his imagination and the "almost incantatory" mood of its narrative. Leo Braudy, writing in The Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing, granted that "its mood is more important that its matter," but also called it "irresolutely plotted." Others, like Braudy, decried its apparent plotlessness, repeating the backhand insult that Cheever wrote wonderful short stories, but a series of these did not a novel make. It also seemed that the subject matter – a fratricide's admission of guilt, a dry-eyed look at prison brutality and homosexuality – had fostered an expectation of psychological realism that Cheever had failed to meet. Joyce Carol Oates's review is representative:

> In Cheever's imagination the concrete, visual world is transformed into emotion, and emotion into something akin to nostalgia. The senses, alerted to a patch of blue sky or swirl of leaves or a sudden shaft of sunlight, are stimulated to a recollection that transcends the present and transcends, when Cheever's writing is at its most powerful, the very instrument of perception that is its vehicle. Hence the peculiar airiness of Falconer [the prison], the translucent quality of its protagonist, Ezekial Farragut (prisoner 734-508-32, fratricide, zip to ten), the insubstantial quality of the narrative itself -- though it purports to be located in a very real penitentiary and has been interpreted, by various critics, as a triumph of "realism." (quoted in Boscha 146)

Oates correctly summarizes how Cheever's narratives move from the empirical to the abstract, from metonymic details to metaphors. As we saw in the Wapshot novels, the

"peculiar airiness" of these non-mimetic passages is a recourse to memory, to an idealized past, to an imagined pastoral. As I shall point out below, however, much of what passes for Farragut's consciousness in this novel is a plain renunciation of such imaginings. For this and other reasons, Falconer can be deemed more realistic than Bullet Park.

Its primary realism is psychological. Falconer's characters speak in prisonese, speak obscenely, free of the "ventriloquism" (and false urbanity) of an ironizing narrator. In this they remind us of Cheever's "urban" characters. Partly because the novel is recounted in the first person and, perforce, restricts Ezekial Farragut to an incremental understanding of his own nature, the narrator also gives us less of the sort of ordering commentary that runs through Bullet Park. Granted, the narrative mode of these incidents is itself metaphoric, since the prisoners recount how things have made them feel, transforming their experience, but one tale of woe begets the next, adding the impression of randomness to the plot. Time, not the narrator's sympathy or commentary, moves the story along. The patchwork of talking is ultimately "ordered" by a pattern of Christian confession and redemption – the watchphrase for spiritual wholeness is "getting clean" –, but as in Bullet Park, it can ill compete with the vulgar particularity of the prisoners' stories. What is more, this pattern would seem to the untutored reader "in excess of any wholly logical explanation," as Lodge has written of Dubliners (129).

As in the urban stories, too, the damping of non-mimetic commentary dignifies the characters. Allowed the autonomy of speech, they seem both admirable and real. Since Cheever, as we have seen, often sheltered his characters from adversity -- through dreams, euphemism, and impossibly fortuitous plot turns – these characters, left to cope on their own, convey the novel attitude that sober reflection, not the crutch of imaginative transformation, will bring them happiness.

The key to this interpretation is the content of Farragut's dreams, which invert the reveries in "A Vision of the World" and "The Angel of the Bridge." Cheever will return to what one critic has called "the optimistic imagination" in his last novel, but the dreams in Falconer renounce escape, nostalgia, and conventional hope. What they affirm – to take a biographical aside – is Cheever's apparent acceptance of his own imprisonment, his own guilt. As Susan Cheever observes in Home Before Dark, "My father identified with the prisoners. Like them he was at once guilty and innocent, like them he was outside society, like them he was trapped, confined – but by nothing as simple as armed guards and iron bars" (170). Escape in the novel lies in confession, not flight. Redemption for Farragut lies not in pastoral, dreams of women, songs on bridges, or any of Cheever's other analogies for shelter, but in knowing himself. The sum effect of this strategy is that plausibly contiguous incidents are multiplied and left alone, for the narrative would stress that true wisdom is hard-bought.

Three major dreams illustrate Farragut's renunciation of escape from the obdurate facts of his life. Farragut rejects the compensations of each dream, and a host of smaller passages confirm that he now locates self-knowledge in abject self-scrutiny. When Farragut's lover Jody takes leave of him for another prisoner, for instance, Farragut imagines (while awake) a fragrant farmhouse, a stock Cheever dreamscape. But psychological jailbreaks hold no interest for him:

> If he could explain this duality by the smoke of a burning match, he could not explain how the vividness of his farmhouse memory deeply challenged the reality of the office where he stood. To weaken and dispel the unwanted memory, he forced his mind beyond the office, which was indeed artificial, to the incontestable fact that it was the 19th of July, the temperature outside was ninety-two, the time was three-eighteen and he had eaten for lunch scallops or cod cheeks with sweet tartar sauce, sour fried potatoes, salad, half

> a roll with butter, ice cream and coffee. Armed with these indisputable details, he seemed to scourge the farmhouse memory as one opens doors and windows to get the smoke out of a room. He was successful at establishing the reality of the office and while he was not truly uneasy about the experience, it had very definitely raised a question for which he had no information at all (106).

Farragut's relative lucidity here is rare; more commonly, he seems baffled. Here, however, he intuits that "with the exception of organized religion and triumphant fucking, Farragut considered transcendent experience to be perilous rubbish. One saved one's ardor for people and objects that could be used. The flora and fauna of the rain forest were incomprehensible, but one could comprehend the path that led to one's destination" (106).

Day by day, Farragut better understands that peace lies in self-knowledge, not transcendent experience. Consequently, we learn to read the narrative with a keener intuition, knowing that we must cull, as does Farragut, a wisdom from the happenstance of his life. We come to expect neither narrative intervention nor obvious metaphors. Farragut's second dream features more of Cheever's standard substitutes for brute reality – "a beautiful woman... the presence of one of the great beaches on a sea island, a nursery rhyme" – and the prisoner tries, unsuccessfully, to summon these images in his barren cell. But he can invoke only starkness, the metonymic "facts" of his quarters:

> Then one evening in his cell, as he was reading Descartes, he heard the music and waited for the woman and the sea. The cell block was quiet. The circumstances for concentration were perfect. He reasoned that if he could pin down a line or two of the jingle, he would be able to reassemble the rest of the reverie. The words and the music were receding, but he was unable to keep abreast of their

> retreat. He grabbed a pencil and a scrap of paper and was about to write down the lines he'd captured when he realized that he did not know who or where he was, that the uses of the toilet he faced were completely mysterious, and that he could not understand a word of the book he held in his hands. He did not know himself. He did not know his own language. He abruptly stopped his pursuit of the woman and the music and was relieved to have them disappear. They took with them the absolute experience of alienation, leaving him with a light nausea. He was more shaken than wounded. He picked up the book and found that he could read. The toilet was for waste. The prison was called Falconer. He was convicted of murder. One by one he gathered the details of the moment. They were not particularly sweet, but they were useful and durable.... the reverie returned to him again and again, but he shrugged it off vigorously since it had nothing to do with the path he took or his destination. (108)

Farragut's disillusionment likens him to Sartre's Antoine Roquentin, and his reference to "nausea" recalls the book of the same name.[30] Both characters rediscover the "real" through at-hand objects. Notably, here, the short sentences gathered around "[H]e was convicted of murder" contain Farragut's first admission of his fratricide, an important step closer to forgiveness, to getting clean. Most significantly, the observation that the reveries "had nothing to do with his destination" rejects the use of dreams in other Cheever fiction. Farragut's dignity hinges on his renunciation of dreams, on his acceptance of his sinfulness.

A third big dream exploits the imagery of ships. Farragut imagines himself a passenger on a cruise ship, "experiencing a familiar mixture of freedom, boredom and sunburn" (173). "Idle and a little uneasy," he drinks, plays deck tennis, gets laid. Then a schooner carries him off. Aboard the smaller vessel, he watches the larger ram an

island and burst into flames. Its pyre and an enormous column of smoke are the last things he sees before waking, "the dream's colors quenched by the greyness of Falconer" (174). The cruise ship obviously stands for imagination, the schooner his actual life.

Shortly afterwards, a burst of rainfall inverts the epiphanies of "Housebreaker," "Goodbye, My Brother" and the water scenes in The Wapshot Chronicle; rain is no longer freeing. Rain frees Johnny Hake from his father's bones, but Farragut, standing in barren confinement, now finds in it "but a trace, a memory of this primitive excitement" (124). Since memory, in Cheever's fiction, is used to transform reality, this loss of memory signifies a rejection of the imagination, a preference for the real.

The ending of Falconer has troubled some critics; Farragut's occupation of a body bag smacks too obviously of Christian rebirth, or of an ending in which plausibility is sacrificed to metaphor. The ending "would strike us as embarrassingly awkward in a children's book," Oates wrote (quoted in Boscha 146). This is certainly more true if one has been oblivious to the novel's thematic clues, its motif of redemption, its proleptic incidents. The ending has been explained by George Hunt as the rich culmination of various specifically Christian allusions:

> Farragut's progress of escape is Dante-esque, a leave-taking from hell, followed by a journey through purgatory into paradise.... The images emphasized [in the conclusion] are those of an apocalyptic vision: Gehenna, the advancing hordes in the heavens, the beckoning pure white light, the knot of people waiting for their clothes to be washed clean again....The stranger pays Farragut's bus fare, and then a second symbolic action follows, reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount. (223)

However accurate these explanations, the common reader is likely to experience, foremost, the novel's conclusions as another piece of prison life, not as a metaphor.

The massacre of the prison's cats provides another instance of how a vulgar incident signifies something greater – in this instance, how Falconer mistreats its human prisoners. Farragut seems to confirm this by praying, immediately after, for the neglected and the weak: "Blessed are the meek," he begins, "but he couldn't remember what came next" (41). Aware of the Christian structure of the novel, we might read this amnesia thematically, as a metaphor for how the prison neglects its meek. Unaware, we simply might read it as plausible indirect speech, however, or as neither, still transfixed by the grotesqueries of the cat scene.

To pick another example, Farragut wakes to a blank mind the morning after the massacre. Void of memory and "in panic," he casts "wildly and desperately around for a word, a metaphor, a touch or smell that would grant him bearing, but he was left mostly with methadone and his unruly keel" (51). The words "grant him bearing" neatly cue us to other thematic passages in which Farragut wrestles with his past, takes stock of who he is, evaluates his previous "bearings" – his heterosexuality, for instance – but they're also interwoven with less significant observations, and the effect is to reduce their significance. The novel's foregrounded references to theme are almost always this subtle.

An exception is Farragut's observation, as he watches a strip-search, that the other prisoners are men like himself –"fallen." The word connotes the symbolism of mankind's fall and redemption, a pattern above the narrative. Even this revelation is presented as the plausible culmination of a series of mundane thoughts, however, almost as though Cheever were trying to depict Farragut's mind at work, not the falsely insightful narrator:

> Farragut felt impotent. No girl, no ass, no mouth could get him up, but he felt no gratitude for this cessation of his horniness. The last light of that sweaty day was whitish, the white afterglow you see in the windows of Tuscan paintings, an ending light but one that seems

> to bring the optical nerve, the powers of discernment, to a climax. Naked, utterly unbeautiful, malodorous and humiliated by a clown in a dirty suit and a dirty hat, they seemed to Farragut, in this climax of the light, to be criminals. None of the cruelties of their early lives – hunger, thirst and beatings – could account for their brutality, their self-destructiveness and their consuming and perverse addictions. They were souls who could not be redeemed, and while penance was a clumsy and a cruel answer, it was some measure of the mysteriousness of their fall. In the white light they seemed to Farragut to be fallen men. (153)

Significantly, it has taken Farragut an entire novel to understand his brotherhood with Chicken, Tennis, Tiny, and the others. Perhaps Cheever's short stories seem to falsify this process by their brevity, the beauty of their language, and their improbable epiphanies.

Oh What a Paradise It Seems

This sense of embracing the real, of dispelling illusion, occupies little space in Cheever's last published work, the politely-praised novella Oh What a Paradise It Seems (1981). Whimsical and – again – wildly plotted, the book extends the limits of what Oates called Cheever's "visionary outrageousness" (Boscha 147). Like most of Cheever's mature fiction, it also defies easy generic typing.

Paradise both exploits and rejects modernist conventions. Its emphasis on consciousness – Lemuel Sears takes us backward and forward through his life –, its veering chronology and scant allusions to the empirical world move it closer to metaphoric discourse than metonymic. Its abrupt, dramatically inconclusive ending and its unsolved mysteries seem efforts at disruption, however, as does its calling attention to its own fictionality. The narrative seems to want to undermine the very

sense of order it manufactures. In Jakobsen's terms, these disruptions upset the book's metaphorical status at the highest level, blocking our response to it as a coherent analogy for life.

Cheever's first means of undermining the book's optimism – or, more specifically, the pastoral vision that runs through the Wapshot novels and much of the short fiction – is by calling his story a story. "At the time I'm writing this story," several chapters begin, while the novel opens, "This is a story to be read in bed in an old house on a rainy night." Equally, a tone of arbitrariness attends the naming of specific objects: "The dogs are asleep and the saddle horses – Dombey and Trey – can be heard in their stalls across the dirt road beyond the orchard" (3). As in Bullet Park, the named details of the world seem far less important than what the watching narrator – sometimes Sears, often not – makes of them. Then, as the world established by the narrator coheres, characters or elements that seem to have had some importance drop away, leaving us to wonder about the author's priorities.

Chapter Three begins with the introduction of an interloper near Beasley's Pond, a "well-formed" young man the narrator admits some attraction to. As quickly as he appears, however, Cheever dismisses him, the story returning – reluctantly – to the plot about the desecration of the pond: "I would much sooner be occupied with such matters ... than with the purity of the water"(24), the narrator admits. It becomes difficult to position oneself in relation to the storyteller. Likewise, the narrator later remarks that the house occupied by Sam, a minor character, is beneath contempt, but it is described in great detail, the narrator conceding "it is with utmost reluctance that I describe [it]" (25). Such remarks disrupt the "dream" of the novel even as they create it.

The "metaphor" of the novel (as a work of art we ponder as an approximation of life) is also disrupted by its incomplete conclusion, leaving various mysteries open-ended. Cheever ends the story in mid-drama, and its chief mystery – who polluted

Beasley's Pond - is left unsolved. We never learn, in addition, who kills the environmentalist, Chisolm, whose thoughts dominate an entire chapter. Similarly, an untruthful mayor moves in and out of the story without explanation. Rene Harcourt, described at great length, vanishes from the story without fanfare. The ending leaves the reader at loose ends:

> The Salazzos packed their charcoal broiler and their stand-up swimming pool and vanished. Betsey told no one but Henry that she had threatened to poison the community, and she did not tell Henry until sometime later. But, you might ask, whatever became of the true criminals, the villains who had murdered a high-minded environmentalist and seduced, bribed and corrupted the custodians of municipal welfare? Not to prosecute these wretches might seem to incriminate oneself with the guilt of complexity by omission. But that is another tale, and as I said in the beginning, this is just a story meant to be read in bed in an old house on our rainy night. (100)

None of this uncertainty matters, of course, if the narrative's asides, analogies and allusions -- the furniture of the protagonist's mind - convey a coherent worldview. What happens, however, is that much of what passes for consciousness in Sears is random and unimportant, conveying a sense of unserious (though attractively playful) trifling. The disguised narrator flits rapidly between preoccupations (sex is a large one), pausing seldom to convey deep feeling. This pattern is the reverse of Falconer. There, the prisoners' confessions - contiguous, realistic - absorb us fully because they convey such *depth* of feeling. Here, the book is "forwarded" by Sears's thoughts, by his analogies, but they exude such perfect equanimity that he seems to feel as strongly about sex as he does about the pond, the decorations and music of the grocery store as he does about a gay lover, psychiatry, jogging, rain, religion, or democracy. This balancing seems to counter even the subjective realism of a well-wrought consciousness.

At the conclusion, for instance, the pastoral tradition in Cheever fiction and the plot itself would recommend that Sears should be plausibly moved by the restoration of Beasley's Pond. He seems to be. This lyrical coda is preceded by an explanation, however – again in the putative voice of Sears – , of how water aeration cleans polluted water, a passage that reads as straight jargon. The juxtaposition violates our sense of natural contiguity, our sense that one man could deliver both speeches. The technical passage reads, in part, "The apertures -- which are die-formed check valves -- were sized and spaced to meet water depths and desired circulation rates. The weight of lead keel embedded in the tubing was heavier than water despite the advanced stagnation in Beasley's Pond. We then connected this piping to nine three-quarter-horsepower compressors with 9,000 feet of weighted feeder tubing" (98).

The next voice we hear is the narrator's, but its tone – and the lyrical quality of its images – is exultant:

> The thought of stars contributed to the power of his feeling. What moved him was a sense of those worlds around us, our knowledge however imperfect of their nature, our sense of their possessing some grain of our past and of our lives to come. It was that most powerful sense of our being alive on the planet. It was that most powerful sense of how singular, in the vastness of creation, is the richness of our opportunity. This sense of that hour was of an exquisite privilege, the great benefice of living here and renewing ourselves with love. What a paradise it seemed! (100)

So ends the novel. Lodge observes in a discussion of postmodernist texts that the impulse to fracture a work of art, to interrupt the illusion that the narrative is a coherent analogy for life, can take several forms. The twinned passages at hand hint at Cheever's use of two such methods. The useless and multiple explanations of water filtration could be said to represent "permutation," as Lodge explains it: "by presenting

the reader with more details than he can synthesize into a whole, the discourse affirms the resistance of the world to interpretation" (237). More likely, however, is "discontinuity," illustrated through the work of Richard Brautigan: "in the disorientation produced by abrupt and unpredictable shifts in register from one section to another... the effects of bafflement, anguish and contradiction are felt" (Lodge 233).

Of course, to attribute a postmodernist motive to Cheever would probably misrepresent the optimism of the novel. Provocative as are its shifts in register and open plots, it seems more likely that Cheever, dying through its composition,[31] chose simply to cast aside (as he was wont to) the subject-matter that he found unpleasant in favour of what Michael Byrne calls "the optimistic imagination" (quoted in Boscha 197). Byrne argues that the novel reads like a work of postmodernism in form, but its content echoes the ordering narratives we saw in "The Angel of the Bridge" and "A Vision of the World." As Byrne puts it, "so constant is Cheever's insistence on benevolent order that any sinister element in the plot is summarily resolved or cryptically abandoned."

As I wrote in the introduction, the chief characteristic of Cheever's narrative evolution is his use of metaphoric writing to impose "order" on chaos. Byrne's judgement that Cheever's imaginative ordering is optimistic is perhaps too simple, for the biographical materials reveal that Cheever was a man of violent and contradictory impulses – "He loved everything and he hated everything," Susan Cheever has explained. If we extend our analysis to include this insight, perhaps we can add that metaphoric writing in Cheever's work universalized *two* tendencies, both present in the man himself – the tendency to hope and the tendency to flee. Cheever's stories contain few happy resolutions, few actual victories for environmentalists or wayward sons. His characters flee the public realm for private comforts. Something tremendously hopeful attends his fiction, however – the sense, perhaps, that humans are infinitely adaptable, our minds more resourceful than we realize. John Updike, speaking at Cheever's funeral, mentioned the joy his friend discovered even in loss:

How much he loved water, light, and all the literally priceless things that Nature lavishes down upon our preoccupied and hastening lives! How much *joie de vivre* co-exists in his fiction with the tragic shadows, with his biting sociology and his sensitivity to human waste, unfulfillment, and cruelty. ... His span of life, no more and no less than the biblically allotted span of three score and ten, fills me with pleasure in its contemplation, and gratitude. I feel lucky to have known John. I think all who knew him were lucky. There was something about him intensely graceful – full of grace – that made life seem a treasure. So it was. So it is. (quoted in Hunt 321)

Endnotes

[1] The implications of a distinction between modernist and realist fiction are broad. Lodge says of realist fiction that its "fundamental principle is that art imitates life ... and must tell the truth about life and contribute to making it better, or at least more bearable." Modernist texts, conversely, demonstrate that life imitates art: "we compose [in these] the reality we perceive by mental structures that are cultural not natural in origin, and it is art which is most likely to change and renew those structures when they become tired and mechanical." See Lodge 70.

[2] In Cheever's best satire, Hunt writes, "[His] ironic skepticism remains as a negative background or support, but unexpectedly a fervent or lyric voice intrudes, probing toward mystery, toward affirmation, a voice no longer sotto voce but pitched higher, delighting in its embrace of some aspect of natural creation or humanity's potential. The artistic effect is that the ironic focus established earlier manages to temper the fervor and vice-versa; the negative perspective of irony is thus, in a way, itself ironized by the positive probing. This reciprocity of differing tones is what delights us" (7). I note that Cheever forsakes this reciprocity – arguably the best thing about his mature fiction – only once, when an aged visitor to a congressional hearing assails Dr. Cameron in The Wapshot Scandal. See Hunt 7.

[3] See Donaldson Biography 253-90.

[4] Cheever's chronicles of the suburb can be read as demographic portraits, in a sense, of a new and influential sector of American society. As Professor George Hunt has written, "[A]fter at least two literary generations and countless imitators, we tend to forget how original Cheever's stories were in the early 1950's. These stories concern what was then a new class in America: a middle class that worked in the city and lived in the country, one with few ties (beyond visits) with the preceding generation and yet one fervently devoted to the next generation – a middle class in more ways than one. ... Cheever was the first to give this new class a distinctive voice, one congruent with their own new and complex circumstance." See Hunt 7.

[5] As Wayne C. Booth writes, "[I]f every human statement is ... surrounded with nuances that are assumed to be understood by speaker and listener (though often the assumption is unjustified), it is more obviously clear that elaborate inferences are always required while reading what we call literature" See Booth 8. In Cheever's case these inferences are especially complex, I would suggest. I think they require the reader to have experienced, personally or vicariously, the suburbs that Cheever depicts. Joyce Carol Oates says as much in a review of Bullet Park: "If there is a psychological integrity to Cheever's writing it is because of his assumption, a justified one, that his readers will bring to these people enough personal anguish to invest them with an extra dimension; otherwise they are cartoon figures, they do not exist. So much is taken for granted by Cheever that this novel, read in some distant un-Americanized culture, or perhaps read in the distant and unimagined future, will probably be incomprehensible." See Boscha 109.

[6] The word "experiential," as I discuss in the introduction, is used in this paper to mean empirical. In Chapter Three I quote Professor John Bayley's opinion that good literature is more "experiential" than formal.

[7] Cheever's disappointment with the nature of American progress is the subject of speculation in Donaldson's biography. Donaldson dates his changed perspective to the composition of The Wapshot Scandal – roughly the years 1960 to 1964. "[A]s Cheever immersed himself in the book, his sense of the world around him deepened and dimmed. Everywhere he encountered heedless, headlong change – change that in its rapidity and power transmogrified people as they moved from one abode to another, one job to another, one marriage to another, only to gaze emptily at the ruins of what had been their way of life." See Donaldson 1988 179.

[8] Valhouli, James. Interview with Frederick Cheever, November 1974.

[9] Typical of the accusation that Cheever's characters are vehicles for non-mimetic speeches is David Segal's review of The Brigadier and the Golf Widow: "[Cheever's characters] not only think they can be turned off, they can be. They are not fleshed out, their sadness is not a sad sadness. His stories belong where they are usually found, in a thin column in The New Yorker; they comment on the advertisements on either side for solid gold taxi whistles and for the sports jacket that will really make you feel casual." See Boscha 84.

[10] See Cheever, Susan 33-35.

[11] I address the connection argued by David Lodge between realism and imaginative analogies below, pointing out that certain metaphors, though they draw their vehicles from outside the field of contiguities in a given passage, enjoy an authenticity based on the author's "spatio-temporal" proximity to the referent. See Lodge 115-16; Iser 35-40.

[12] See Hunt 232..

[13] See Hunt 280-83.

[14] Matching Cheever's stories to his journals and the revelations in recent biographies is certainly an entertaining, if indefinite endeavor. For instance, one of his journal entries from the late fifties – the entries are dated only vaguely – links a lovely image from "The Country Husband" to his own affairs. The image is that of a thread supporting us above a moral and economic abyss. The journal reads, in part, "That this love, this passion, has not reformed my nature is well known. But there is some wonderful seriousness to the business of living, and one is not exempted by being a poet. There is another world – I see this – there is chaos, and we are suspended above it by a thread. But the tread holds." See Journals 97.

[15] That Cheever assumed a certain kind of "implied reader" raises the issue of his being a New Yorker writer, of his writing to satisfy a set of expectations created by the magazine. See, for a discussion of The New Yorker and Cheever, Waldeland 26-27 and Donaldson Biography 136-37.

[16] Cheever had read about a similar crash. See Valhouli.

[17] The stories also read similarly because the killing of the husband is described but not explained, leaving us to wonder whether the wives shoot accidentally.

[18] Ozick comments that "Cheever's is a prose on which the ironic has been forced by conscience and will: so that often the second half of the sentence will contrive to betray the first half – whether by anti-climax, an unexpected intrusion of the mundane or a slight shift in tonality from the oratorical to the humble, or a shudder of fatalism suddenly laid on the glory of the perceived world." See Boscha 58.

[19] For a discussion of how readers need "fictive concords," see Kermode.

[20] For a biographical aside on the effect of the house on Cheever and his wife Mary, see Home Before Dark 121.

[21] The journals support the claim I make in the introduction that Cheever was growing dissatisfied in the fifties with his style. He writes, "I read Nabokov, who is florid and who now and then makes a mistake and puts me at ease: brings me down from the 'lover's fine sense of crises,' from my ideal of a prose that carries its vitality like a scraped wire. Something in between. But every time I think of a story I see it set up in the magazine opposite a cartoon; and I must realize that the people who read my fiction have stopped reading The New Yorker"(Journals 120).

[22] Benjamin DeMott, for instance, whose bleak review of Bullet Park would largely cause its commercial failure, said of Cheever's work in The Wapshot Scandal that "if this writer is what is called a minor figure, he is also an American original: witty, suggestive, intelligent, aware of the endless fascination of the junk with which his world and ours is furnished, and able almost at will to make his audience laugh out loud." See Boscha 50.

[23] See Waldeland 48.

[24] Lodge quotes Frye on this distinction between simile and metaphor. See Lodge 112.

[25] The reading process consists of the creation of expectations, and these imaginative expectations will fill the spaces inevitably left empty between statements. Cheever's "spatio-temporal" associations, ironically, are apt to undermine the originality and liveliness of his text even as they preserve realism. As Wolfgang Iser writes, "Whenever the flow [of expectations] is interrupted and we are led off in unexpected directions, the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections – for filling the gaps left by the text itself" (280) By this reading, the complaints of critics that Cheever's disjunctive episodes are vexing seems to me partly hypocritical, as the reviews convey such obvious relish in the effort to infer their patterns. See Iser, "The Reading Process, A Phenomenological Approach." The Implied Reader. The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1974.

[26] Lodge likens realism to film insofar as both duplicate the experience of moving – spatially and temporally – past a subject. See his discussion of Dickens in these terms. Lodge 99-103.

[27] See Donaldson Biography 357.

[28] Frederick Cheever talks about John's aversion to the highway in his interview with James Valhouli.

[29] See Donaldson Biography 248.

[30] No critical source I am aware of makes this connection, but the word "nausea" appears nowhere else, to my knowledge, in Cheever's mature fiction, and the parallels are extensive.

[31] See Donaldson Biography 340-59

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