

Comic Orphan-Heroes in John Cheever's Novels

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In her review of John Cheever's provocative novel *Falconer* (1977), Joan Didion, one of the rising women writers and Cheever's fellow Episcopalian, called it a novel about "homelessness"¹ — that sentiment which she shares with him, working within the contemporary American literary scene which is all but dominated by writers of minority ethnic groups on the one hand and post-modern writers experimenting in new styles on the other.

"Homelessness" has been Cheever's persistent theme though its solemn significance has tended to be eclipsed by the gentle Cheeveresque landscape of middle-class Protestant American society, conveyed in the polished Cheeveresque style of lyricism laced with mild humorous irony. His sense of "homelessness", or orphancy, is partly attributable to his unfortunate adolescence when his father deserted the family.² Another part of his "homelessness" is the awkward sense of trailing, amid the hybrid, noisy civilization of the latter half of the twentieth century, the remnant heritage of the world of his New England forefathers. It is a long-lost world with a value system of honor, courage, and cleanliness, where it is generally believed — to cite from a part of George Garrete's analysis of the conventional WASP — that "open or public display of emotion is clear evidence of a defect of character".³

Nevertheless, Cheever's theme of "homelessness" sometimes transcends the personal and parochial spheres and entails the perennial search for the guiding authority of a father and longing for reconciliation — that painful quest found in the myth of orphan-heroes whose history dates back to Oedipus and Orestes of Greek tragedy and Moses and Jacob of Judaic-Christian mythology. However, Cheever's brand of orphan figure is not a tragic hero like Oedipus or Orestes, nor is he a dedicated founder of a faith like Moses or Jacob. He is a contemporary American comic orphan, but an aggrieved orphan all the same.

This paper is a study of how Cheever deals with his twentieth-century comic orphan-heroes who grapple with their depressing, overwhelming sense of orphancy and deprivation, and who look for the possibility of renewed filiation and blessed existence within the contemporary spiritual wasteland. The works taken up here shall be restricted to novels, and the large body of short stories shall be excluded, since the theme of the orphan's spiritual-psychological development is explored more fully in the longer fiction.

I

The Wapshot Chronicle (1957) delineates the comic efforts to preserve the family heritage of a Massachusetts North Shore family founded by their seventeenth-century

ancestor, Ezekiel Wapshot. Capturing tradition and claiming an illustrious lineage is their mode of finding a father and home.

Leander Wapshot, the present patriarch of the family, is an orphan because during his formative years his father ran away from home, leaving Leander solely on his own to inherit the family tradition and mold his own personality. The idea of tradition and order that he has taken pains to engrain in himself is derived both from stereotypical urban commercial values of the business world where he apprenticed himself as a young man and also from the rural ritualistic male values of his ancestral village, St. Botolphs, particularly of his own clan. Underlying it all is his primary concern to insure the immortality of the entire Wapshot family. He will be satisfied when his sons have "gone out into the world and proved themselves and found wives and would now be rich and modest and concerned with the welfare of the blind and retired seamen and would now have many sons to carry on their name."⁴

Leander's smug conventional sense of tradition and place is apparently counter-balanced with his "taste for romance and nonsense". (11) His personal history betrays his erratic, unstable character: working at a hotel, associating with an actress, acting with a traveling theatrical company, working briefly in a factory in St. Botolphs, going to sea, being often unfaithful to his wife and thus acquiring some degree of notoriety, smoking during service at church, and even trying a criminal adventure of forging nickels.

However, all that seemingly unpredictable eccentricity in him is the other side of the same coin, the orphan's desire for integrity. One way of approaching it is through established tradition and the other way is through his own personal tradition. This two-sided desire is symbolized by the old ship *Topaz* which he operates as a local pleasure boat, and to which he nails his own identity. Representing the seafaring period in his life as well as in the entire family history, the ship is a token both of his personal youth, strength, romance and of the ponderous family heritage. Hence his mental disorientation and derangement when the *Topaz* finally terminates its marine usefulness and is brought ashore as a floating gift-shop. He all but suspends his life as a normal social being and cannot suppress his impulse to fire his pistol on the opening day of the curio-shop. The violence demonstrated on this occasion signifies his will not so much to disrupt the party which ousts him from the post of family breadwinner and inaugurates his wife in that office as to suspend the passage of time which threatens to deprive him of his last means to sustain his unique being within a larger context of tradition. It is a desperate act of clutching at his notion of a father and home.

Stylistically speaking, the vehicle for this theme of thirsting after individuality and tradition is the journal form which is interspersed throughout the main third-person narration of the novel. Leander's journal, making accounts of the past, is a constant reminder of history and enmeshes various present-day occurrences in the whole outline of the Wapshot chronicle. This is not only because the journal throws light on the relevant past from Leander's viewpoint but also because keeping a journal in itself is a family tradition handed down the line of sea captains. Therefore,

the picture of Leander sitting down, in his old age, to write his portion of the journal is a live representation of the orphan's act of search for illusory immortality.

The function of the journal form, besides evoking the past, is to supply a comic perspective to Leander's quest. It gives him away as a strictly provincial man and hinders his struggle as an orphan from attaining universal dimension. At the same time, following the comic convention of the unreliable narrator of the personal record written in the first-person speech, it reveals him to be a self-deluded fabricator of his past and a dreamy intermediary of a fantastic tradition.

The limitation and inadequacy of his understanding of universal human existence is most symbolically exposed in his reaction to his purgatorial dream of the Lost Garden and the following redeeming vision of the Tree of Life. Two nights before his death, he dreams of meeting millions of naked, barefoot people walking ashamed and lewd in a hellish wasteland. The sense of shame in nakedness and carnality alludes to the myth of Adam and Eve. However, the dream does not sufficiently transmit the bitter sense of seizing the Tree of Wisdom. Leander only feels "sickened at its ugliness" (278) rather than participating in the universal pain of sin. As he thus lacks the tragic sense of humanity, the vision of the Christmas tree, the Tree of Life, which visits him on the following morning is equivocal and elusive. Although he feels that he is facing the "bare facts of humanity" (279), his commitment in the shared condition of mankind is not profound. The tree with its "fragrance and vitality" (279) is at best an expression of Leander's innate love of nature and simple joys of life.

Then Leander's last advice bequeathed to his sons finalizes his petty bigotry and self-delusion. After listing many detailed practical instructions, he waxes solemnly proverbial: "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." (238) These pseudo-Benjamin Franklinesque maxims expressed in a facetiously corny language not only discloses Leander's restricted experience and mentality but also gives a lie to his own history which he has fictionalized in his mind and his journal: he is not particularly brave if he is foolhardy; he does not relish his wife's love or her intelligence; neither is he a devout believer of the Lord even if he admires the world He has created.

In the last analysis, Leander's entire life is a dream-like experience, happily enclosed within itself. In this context, Prospero's monologue which Leander chooses to be read at his funeral is an ironically true rendering of his life: "Our revels are now ended. These our actors/ As I foretold you, were all spirits, and/ Are melted into air, into thin air. . . . We are such stuff/ As dreams are made on, and our little life/ Is rounded with a sleep."⁵ The mode of his death — death by water — clearly hints at his likeness to Prospero, the magic king of romance. Drowning in the sea never to be seen again — his body is unrecovered — Leander is a minor contemporary comic orphan-hero, invested with mythic importance, who tenaciously lives, dies, and haunts his fabulous world of the past. Surely enough, in *The Wapshot Scandal* he will reappear on his ancestral estate as a phantom presence.

II

Whereas the principal weaving skein of various episodes and journal accounts in *The Wapshot Chronicle* is Leander's sense of tradition barely maintained in the small village of St. Botolphs, the binding scheme of a similarly loose structure of anecdotes in *The Wapshot Scandal* (1964) is the sense of loss of that tradition on the part of his two sons residing in spiritual wastelands distant from home. The problem for them is how to return home and to inherit the eroded spiritual legacy of their family after coming into material legacies.

The world of Moses, the elder son, is a typical middle-class suburban town over-cast with an atmosphere of "abrasive boredom"⁶ and hypocrisy, where the abyss of meaninglessness gapes wide. One of the most harried victims of such a stultifying environment is Moses's wife Melissa, who was orphaned when her parents were killed in her seventh year. Suffering from the uncomfortable sense of not quite belonging to her place in life, she makes up her mind to relinquish all pursuits of purpose in life and to view life as a sort of place for fun. She adopts this decadent philosophy as a pain-killing device when she contracts a feverish cold and catches a glimpse of darkness and death that wait at the end of her vacant life: she sees "life as a diversion, a festival from which she was summoned by the secret police of extinction when the dancing and music were at their best." (112) The section devoted to portraying Melissa is simultaneously the most sympathetic and the most satiric part of *The Wapshot Scandal*. As her pathetic physical-psychological disease is uncovered, so is the even fouler, more deep-seated illness of mental rigidity and inanity in her society. In this connection, the degenerate psychiatrist and the inept pastor are singled out as conspicuous, bizarre instances of modern social malaise.

Melissa finally forsakes her family and country and plunges into a dissipated life with a young paramour in a foreign land, hoping to forget the somber fear of death and dancing away to her last. The form her life takes is reminiscent of that of the lady in T S Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

'What shall I do now? What shall I do?
I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
With my hair down so. What shall we do tomorrow?
What shall we ever do?'

The hot water at ten.

And if it rains, a closed car at four.

And we shall play a game of chess,

Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door. (131-138)

Melissa is a lady playing the game of life until Death knocks on her door.

However, Cheever is not merely reiterating what Eliot exposed about modern life in 1922. Melissa's case also "precedes the real flowering of the women's movement and is an early version of a heroine besieged by an identity crisis"⁷ in the fic-

tion of the 1970's. She is the dissatisfied, perturbed, restless woman, experiencing her midlife crisis and casting about for but never locating an adequate direction to satisfy her need for self-fulfillment : her society is not yet ready to furnish her with gratifying options. In the scene where she makes her last appearance, Cheever presents this inconstant wife in exile as a tragi-comic victim of a mindless society.

The problem of orphanacy and of how to find a spiritual home and to relate to human history is even more difficult for Coverly, the younger son. He is a psychological orphan by nature because he was conceived accidentally in a hotel room during his parents' trip, and his father considered abortion. This barren condition of his birth is another faint echo of T S Eliot. It is like the origin of Gerontion, the shriveled old man who was "Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp" ("Gerontion"). Because of the curse of psychological semi-orphanacy, he is continually hindered from manhood and self-fulfillment. In adolescence he fails his father's ritual tests of virility. In youth he chooses for his career the inhibiting job of computer taping in Civil Service and selects for his spouse another orphan, who takes out on her husband her sense of forlornness. In essence, their life is an exaggerated picture of the contemporary domestic climate where no sympathetic emotion exists, and where sexual relation is "the crux, the readiest source of vitality in their marriage". (66) As an inhabitant of this spiritual wasteland, Coverly survives somnambulistically by pretending that nothing heartbreaking has happened. His "habit of eliminating facts" (73) is his pain-killer to assuage the agony of orphanacy.

Cheever is a writer capable of representing life dually. In *The Wapshot Scandal* his dual vision of life, especially the duality of darkness and radiance, is best manifested in Coverly who can opt for light notwithstanding his deep-rooted dark orphanacy. Coverly's reaction to his experience of a brush with death is different from Melissa's. A hunting arrow whistles over his head exactly as he stoops to tighten his shoelace during his dejected rambling through a farmland. This death, missed by the skin of his teeth, gives him an invigorated sense of himself and his integrity, and it dawns on him that "he was not the victim of an emotional and genetic tragedy ; he had the supreme privileges of a changeling and he would make something illustrious of his life." (125)

Nevertheless, the enlightened awareness of the right to exist and the determination to do something prominent by way of proclaiming his uniqueness materialize in an absurd conduct. He feeds the vocabulary of John Keats to the computer so as to rearrange the words in the order of their frequency and he gets the following result : "Silence blendeth grief's awakened fall/ The Golden realms of death take all/ Love's bitterness exceeds its grace/ That bestial scar on the angelic face/ Marks heaven with gall." (132) The implication of this episode is trebly ironic. To begin with, even in his attempt to release himself from the constricted state of being a taper in the government office and a male slave at home, he uses the very machine which eradicates his personality. This is a bitter irony. Secondly, while he sees poetry in this mechanical rearrangement of words simply because it rhymes, he does not comprehend its message which faithfully describes the desolate scene of contemporary society and

which must be the author's side comment on Coverly's own life. Finally, to finish up the role of the butt of the author's ironic thrust, Coverly is overjoyed, despite the gloomy content of what he thinks is a poem, that he has made an unprecedentedly important discovery and has thus proved his distinctive identity.

In order to discover the lost spiritual home, Coverly with such a faulty, immature insight, has to confront the death of Cousin Honora, who represents the spiritual side of the Wapshot legacy. When she becomes invalid, she prefers to kill herself through starvation, performs all the "singular and arcane rites of approaching death" (295), and then envisions the gates of Heaven. As Coverly nurses her, he is compelled to stare into the fact of death and the bold soul of the moral matriarch of his family. As a result of this experience, he concludes that "the greenness of her image, in his memory, would not change and she would be among them always in their decisions." (296)

When he has stumbled in this way on the ethical, spiritual heritage of the family, Coverly can celebrate the last bleak Christmas holidays in St. Botolphs with a controlled but sympathetic heart. During the dinner, to which several blind old people are invited, he receives the intimation of the basic human condition of blindness and darkness :

... they seemed to bring with them a landscape whose darkness exceeded in intensity the brilliance of that day. A blow had been leveled at their sight but this seemed not to be an infirmity but *a heightened insight, as if aboriginal man had been blind and this was some part of an ancient, human condition*, and they brought with them into the parlor the mysteries of the night. They seemed to be advocates for those in pain ... for those who dream in terms of missed things ... for all those who fear death. (306-307) (Italics mine)

With such a deep-felt compassion for mankind and an appreciation of Honora's charitable tradition, he seals his identity to St. Botolphs. However, by now St. Botolphs is only a legendary town, deteriorating and soulless. In this context, we have to consider the ominous introductory chapter of the novel. On Christmas Eve in the opening chapter, the rector of Christ Church is already agnostic and drunk, and a lonesome old man foresees the advent of an ice age — the freezing of the human soul — before he drowns in a river. On the last Christmas Eve, the same rector is a downright drunkard ; and around the church steeple, "that symbol of our engulfing struggle with good and evil" (309), lightning *plays* during the thunderstorm.

The image of thunder and rain in Cheever's fiction is more often positive than negative. Thunder often arouses in the hero a memory of youthful strength ; and rain is a symbol of blessing, renaissance, and love, as it is in most New England minds. Only at few times is thunder a source of fright, and can rain be a dark dampening, destructive force. In the case in question, both the thunder and the rain

appear and sound to have a negative and cataclysmic connotation. The last monument of spiritual tradition is threatened with ruin.

Here are the narrator's pessimistic last words: "I will never come back, and if I do there will be nothing left, there will be nothing left, but the headstones to record what has happened; there will really be nothing at all." (309) After all that pilgrimage in orphanancy toward fuller humanity and filiation, Coverly gives us the impression that he has not achieved growth typical of a tragic orphan-hero but still remains homeless, orphaned, unidentified and passes into oblivion. Cheever intentionally creates this calamitous final effect by the tone of the concluding sentence and by the structure of the entire novel — ending with the same scene as in the beginning, and that in a further dissipated air.

III

For all the cynical tone in *The Wapshot Scandal*, when we look over the entire Wapshot saga, we may say that Cheever smiles at the Wapshots' well-meant coremious search for home. He smiles that "coaxing, ironic smile"⁸ to quote from Ihab Hasaan's commentary on *The Wapshot Chronicle*. In *Bullet Park* (1969), however, Cheever is inclined to smirk, rather than smile, at Bullet Parkers who are uniformly engaged in a perpetual "masquerade party"⁹ of buying clothes at Brooks Brothers, catching trains daily, showing up in church once a week, going to weekend parties, etc., without ever being asked one's individual identity. *Bullet Park* is a contemporary satire on the sick middle-class suburbia floundering in the bog of marriage and on its retinue of incapable healers. At the same time — and more significantly — it is an ironic novel about genuinely doleful orphans in almost religious quest of real home and real humanity.

Eliot Nailles, one of the three orphan characters, is the most shallow, callous one and a typical example of suburban masqueraders. His only noticeable peculiarity is "the intensesness of his monogamy" (23) in striking contrast with the promiscuity of his neighbors. His belief in "holiness of matrimony" (23), however, is not a result of piousness or virtuous love but is simply another means of holding his life together. Just as his neighbors have recourse to extramarital affairs for filling the vacuum in their lives, Nailles seems to cling still harder to his marriage in order to keep himself from slipping into the void.

Despite all his complacency and "his rigid sense of social fitness" (50), there is a void in his life because he is an orphan of a sort. In his youth there was no communication between himself and his ineffectual father. He ardently wanted to love his father, but "his only filial opportunity" (128) — and a very shabby one, indeed — was to help the drunken father up the steps to the house. His orphanancy, in turn, is reflected unfortunatously in his relationship with his son. The best he can manage to bring about is only a cheap simulation of a tête-à-tête presumably sacred to a male parent and a son. But even such a make-believe intimacy is to be irremediably shattered when the son's unreserved criticism of his mediocre way of life and his basical-

ly materialistic frame of mind drives him to murderous rage.

Only when this violent verbal-psychological collision shoves the son into psychosomatic infirmity and binds him to bed for days, Nailles is thrown into real grief of pain and suffering which he has tried to fend off all his life. Here enters the need for pain-killing methods, and Nailles turns to anodynes to keep himself floating on the tide of life. Life feels so excruciating and humiliating but for the comfortable numbness created by narcotics that his addiction stays with him even after their life finally returns to normalcy. Ironically, the places where he meets the drug pusher in order to anaesthetize himself are supermarket parking lots, public toilets, laundromats, and cemeteries — places which characteristically epitomize naked facts of human life and death. The intimation may be that he must peep into the dark viscera of human existence before he gets away from it.

Tony, son of such an unenlightened father, is virtually another orphan-hero and looks for a surrogate father in the Black guru, Swami Rutuola.¹⁰ The swami is the last one in the list of four healers hired out to the Nailles household for curing Tony's mysterious illness. The other three — the optimistic but inefficient general practitioner, the bestial, wordly psychiatrist, and a completely unknowing specialist in somnambulatory phenomena — they are all brought to severe ridicule by Cheever, much harsher ridicule than in the cases of the psychiatrist and the minister in *The Wapshot Scandal*, whom the author treats at least with some pity. In contradistinction, the swami is obviously not a charlatan but a religious man in the primitive sense of the word. However, he is an ambiguous one, a weird but moving incarnation of Cheever's dual vision of darkness and light in life.

He is an assistant carpenter by trade — in that sense a Christ-like figure — and designating his rented room the Temple of Light, he keeps a votive candle burning there. On the other hand, the presence of wax flowers in the same room and the location of the room, which is on the second floor of a funeral parlor, are indicative of death, the exact opposite of light, the exact opposite of Christ. Besides the condition of his room, his eyesight manifests the antithesis of darkness and light. One eye is "lively, bright, and communicative" (127), but the other eye has lost its light and is immovable. His blindness just like the blindness of the Christmas guests in *The Wapshot Scandal* is allusive to "an ancient human condition"¹¹ of pain, fear, disappointment, and death — that region of darkness.

Furthermore, his sightless eye is ambivalent in itself. Theoretically speaking, it looks vacantly into the dark; but raised toward heaven "in a permanent attitude of religious hysteria" (127), it reveals a visage of the mythical half-blind king of the kingdom of the blind, who sympathizes with benighted citizens and prays to transcendental power so as to intercede for them. Nevertheless, the swami cannot even name that transcendental power and accordingly does not even know where to direct his gratitude when his prayers are answered. Hence his attitude of perplexed "religious hysteria" rather than devotion to a certain formal religion. He is still half in the dark, not quite out in the open light.

At best, the swami is merely a "spiritual cheerleader" (136) as he calls himself;

but he proves to be effective in that capacity, for he disperses Tony's sadness and bestows on him a restored sense of himself. What is palliative is not the queer magic incantation but the swami's personal compassion for Tony's lonely affliction. Tony, a psychological orphan, has found a surrogate father and is appeased — appeased temporarily and probably falsely because his life henceforth shows no sign of spiritual maturation.

The most forlorn orphan character in *Bullet Park* is Paul Hammer, the villain. He is a wandering bastard, that particular kind of orphan, with an incurable sense of sorrow. Relevant to the theme of bastardy is his last name "Hammer" which is in itself a reminder of his chance, uncalled-for existence. For it was given to him, out of sheer whim, by his capricious rich grandmother simply because the gardener happened to pass by the window with a *hammer* in his hand while the naming was being discussed. Hammer's whole life, since the time of his birth out of wedlock is literally a history of exile and travel from one place to another, yearning for a parent, home, and identity. Just as the theme of recapitulation of tradition in *The Wapshot Chronicle* is highlighted by the style of Leander's journal, so is the similar theme of *Bullet Park* underscored by the figure that Hammer's quest-journey makes.

Before we proceed with the analysis of Hammer's problem, we must briefly recall the prototype of bastard characters in comparison and contrast with regular orphan heroes. The first bastard in Judaic-Christian mythology is Ishmael, the illegitimate son of Abraham, who is driven out into the desert upon a prophecy that "his hand will be against every man, and everyone's hand against him."¹² Another Biblical definition of a bastard is "he whom the father chasteneth not".¹³ In view of these features, orphan heroes and bastard heroes are identical twins: they are both fatherless and outcast from home, under various circumstances, into the desolate, hostile world; and as a result, they both lack proper "chastisement", admonition, or guidance from the father.

The difference seems to be, however, that some orphans may ultimately win the right to filiation and grace through suffering and atonement, while bastards, offsprings of Ishmael, are fated to eternal wandering and unprovidential status. Orestes, the orphan-avenger, earns the forgiveness of his sin after enduring in exile the painful, maddening sting of conscience. Oedipus, the patricide, responsible for his own orphan-cy, is eventually absolved of his sin through his anguished, repentant years in a sacred wood. Their spiritual redemption is an equivalent of actual homecoming and recovery of birthright. Likewise, the Biblical figure Moses, orphaned as a baby and then banished from his adoptive home as a youth for murder, is anointed by God the Father of his race. So is Jacob, the deceiving traitorous son, who flees from home but is twice blessed in dreams by the same God the Father. On the other hand, Ishmael, the bastard, is expelled for good from his society although God's angel promises his prosperity in his own right. There is no legitimate homecoming for him, either actual or spiritual, and he remains in the periphery forever. This will be the case with Hammer as we shall see.

Before Hammer reaches his final dangerous resolution to cope radically with his

personal state of orphanacy and with the overall wretched human existence in contemporary society, he has a long period of making trials of three different pain-killing methods. The most consequential of them is to sit in, or more preferably to live in, a room with yellow walls, a room which seems to promise an orderly, decent, useful, and, above all, peaceful life for him. In his mind, the color yellow is a healthy, clean color. At the same time, it may suggest the happier part of his life when he was favored by his grandmother for his cute yellow curls. The episode of his first night of sleeping in the yellow room is the only pastoral scene in the novel. To collaborate his sense of being restored, he jumps into a pool on the lawn — a cleansing ritual — and the water of the pool along with the coincidental rain enlarges his happiness and increases his feeling of innocence and limberness.

However, the yellow room offers only illusive fragile security. When the color fades and is changed into pink, Hammer is again a prey to hypochondria and forced into another series of the mad orphan's pilgrimage, at the end of which he makes a decision to wake the smug world by crucifying a typical middle-class young man of no "genuine emotion or value" (166). The major incentive is an insight imparted to him incidentally during a memorial procession for an assassinated man: a thought that grief is the only common human experience that can be shared. He wills to administer an occasion for common grief to the unconscious middle-class world that keeps on masquerading and carousing. One other significant factor of his atrocious determination is that such an act of crucification has been suggested impulsively by his mother. In undertaking to carry it out, he wishes to claim a real filial relation to the crazy mother.

A dejected type by nature, and without initiative, however, he does not execute sacrificial homicide. He succumbs to his passing desire to smoke a cigarette and consequently allows Nailles enough time to rescue Tony. Thus the course of his life, which has been invariably steered more by chance than by his will, comes to a standstill owing to another accidental turn of action. Unlike the ambivalent religious atmosphere of the swami's prayer scene, this mock Abraham-Isaac episode is depicted without any appreciable sense either of tragic piety or of demonic defiance. The ending is ironical. After having assimilated grief into their optimistic outlook on life, the Nailles family are settled back comfortably in their former affluent life: "Tony went back to school on Monday and Nailles — drugged — went off to work and everything was as wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful as it had been." (243) When Tony is healed of his crippling woe by the swami, Cheever writes, "Everything was as wonderful as it had been." (139) This time the author repeats the word *wonderful* four times with a smirk, meaning to make it sound hollow and to indicate how frighteningly *unchanged* everything is despite all that pain and suffering on all sides. All the religious quests for homes and fathers thus come to one futile end, and Hammer is written off and institutionalized as an insane criminal, still a citizen of nowhere. Hammer is, after all, a mad bastard, an extreme Ishmaelian figure, born to everlasting alienation from the father and from society.

IV

Whereas *Bullet Park* ends with a miscarried murder case, *Falconer* begins with an already committed crime of fratricide. Superficially, it is a prison novel whose gritty, candid language and subject matter, inspired by Cheever's two years' experience of teaching a writing course at Sing Sing Prison, daze some critics who have been accustomed to Cheever's world of mellow domestic atmosphere. Essentially, however, it is in the same line of comic novels about orphans, only in a quite extended line. It is a novel about how a sense of belonging and identity is won strenuously through the act of expiation under the condition of forced imprisonment.

As Ezekiel Farragut, a contemporary Cain figure, reminisces about his past, lying in his cell, we learn that he is an aggravated assortment of all the other orphan heroes that Cheever has created before. First of all, the once-prestigious family into which he was born unwanted, like Coverly Wapshot, is in a more run-down shape beyond repairment than the Wapshot family, and it intensifies his sense of insecurity and alienation. Secondly, not only the father but the entire family rejects him. Thirdly, and above all, what is most germane to his orphanancy is his own apologetic attitude toward life, developed under the inimical conditions. Assuming that his existence is undeserved and, therefore, he has no right to complain about any threat from the external world to truncate his life, he suppresses terror, indignation, and even mild shock, at each brush with death and quietly resumes life with the help of drugs. Indeed, he is a heavy case of drug addiction, much more serious and hopeless than Eliot Nailles.

Nevertheless, there is a singular positive property in his addiction. Opium not only counters the antagonistic environment, but it also uncovers for him the beauty of nature and the blessedness of life. In one section of *Confessions of an English Opium-eater*, Thomas de Quincey elucidates the virtues of opium :

whereas wine disorders the mental faculties, opium, on the contrary (if taken in a proper manner), introduces amongst them the most exquisite order, legislation, and harmony. . . . the opium-eater (I speak of him who is not suffering from any disease, or other remote effects of opium) feels that the diviner part of his nature is paramount ; that the moral affections are in a state of cloudless serenity ; and over all is the great light of the majestic intellect.¹⁴

Farragut is not a moderate taker of drugs, but, nonetheless, he feels that the consciousness of the opium eater is much broader and more representative of the human condition than the consciousness of ordinary people. In his mind, opium, which is made of grass — and, therefore, is “a distillate of earth, air, water, and fire”,¹⁵ the four basic elements of the universe — is almost the only way to link him to nature and the universe against the current of technological society, and to resuscitate him

as a mortal human being on earth. In this respect, he fits in Ronald Wallace's definition of the contemporary American comic hero: a fusion of the two traditional comic types, namely the fool and the wit.¹⁶ Narcotic Farragut, who is inclined to "erotic crudeness, facile scorn, and chagrined laugh" (218), is the villainous-clownish eye-sore of his family and society; but he is simultaneously a wise critic of society because his fluid eccentricity serves as the back lining of a mirror to reflect back the diseased mechanical rigidity of society for us to see.

In fact, it is Farragut's critical rage at "men of such stupidity" and "lives that were without awareness and distinction"(46) that motivates him to strike at his brother Eben. To complicate the matter, however, Eben, who looks so much like Farragut that they are sometimes taken for twins, seems to mirror the wordly, complacent part in Farragut himself, the burdensome relic from their miserable childhood of growing up in a disintegrating family of faded reknown. Eben and his present household, in which everybody, especially the suicidal daughter, feels forsaken, is a reconstruction of their own tragic past and a shadow of the bitter fact of Farragut's orphancy that was destined even before he was born. Therefore, the attack upon Eben is, at least in one sense, a ritual self-slaughter, as well as an enactment of the Cain myth of murdering the brother who is the apple of the father's eye.

In spite of Farragut's declaration of innocence, the tone of his account of the crime and the trial is slightly faltering: "The widow testified that Farragut had struck his brother eighteen to twenty times, but she was a liar, and *Farragut thought* the doctor who corroborated this lie contemptible." (212) (*Italics mine*) The inserted phrase "Farragut thought" implies that Farragut thinks so, but not the author — or that Farragut would like to think so despite the truth. Farragut just might have actually smitten his alter ego of a brother fiercely, wishing to smash the mirror of his own despicable aspect. This disparity between pretension and reality is one of the conventional tenors of comedy, and especially in the case of the first-person narrative, the comic effect is heightened by the hero's unconscious disclosure of bias in his personalized story. *Falconer* is written in the third-person speech, but the central point of view is unmistakably the hero's own, and almost everything is reported through the filtering lens of his eyes, brain, and heart. Consequently, the grave signification of the momentarily raised authorial voice.

Let us now follow the stages of Farragut's spiritual rebirth that he goes through in Falconer Rehabilitation Center. The atmosphere of the scene of his entry into prison, with which the novel begins, is somewhat reminiscent of one of the early episodes in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, when Ishmael arrives in New Bedford and unknowingly steps into a Negro church. Ishmael stumbles on an ash-box in the porch, and he immediately recalls "these ashes from that destroyed city, Gomorrah".¹⁷ In like manner, when Farragut is thrown accidentally to his knees as he walks, enchained, into the prison yard, he has a scathing premonition that he will never regain liberty. Nevertheless, he is able to appreciate the beauty of the blue sky and is even struck with impressions of innocence and purity among the convicts. These impressions will turn out to be inappropriate in the prison where all sorts of evil and

squalor prevail ; but these first impressions foretell the sense of innocence and purity that Farragut will reach toward the end of the novel.

The first major incident involved in the theme of quest for home is his brief homosexual relationship with a younger inmate called Jody. There is a feeling of warm fraternity between the two men, which never existed between Farragut and his blood brother, and which now saves him from the otherwise torturing sense of "obscene nothing" and from "the torpor of solitude" (78). The picture of the two convicts sitting side by side on a mattress, smoking cigarettes is a perverted version of the scene of sympathetic communication between Ishmael and Queequeg in their shared room at Spouter-Inn in *Moby-Dick*. Moreover, their relationship offers him an opportunity to enact the knowledgeable, experienced father for the still rebellious Jody, although in civilian life he has been an incompetent father. In this way, Farragut plays the roles of a brother and a father for the first time in his life. However, unlike the Ishmael-Queequeg relationship, the Farragut-Jody relation is short-lived, for Jody breaks jail by himself.

The second significant episode is the commencement ceremony of the prison university, blessed by the presence of the cardinal from the local diocese. It is a humorous-serious evocation of what the swami in *Bullet Park* calls "prayer as a force and not as a conversation with God." (136) In proportion as the cardinal and the government officials, who busily arrive and take off in "the chopper", are rendered in slightly debasing terms, the earnest hope for salvation on the part of the criminals in captivity is expressed onomatopoeically in rising crescendo. Having waited anxiously for the occasion from early morning, they welcome the cardinal with a big applause which sounds exactly like "the noise of water striking stone" (136) and which clearly means politeness and gratitude. The quoted phrase is remindful of T S Eliot's *The Waste Land* again, where the speaker of the poem prays for "Not the cicada/And dry grass singing/ But sound of water over a rock" (353-355). Toward the end of the poem, the thunder will address the speaker and the rain will come. In *Falconer*, it is not the clergyman's grace or even God's grace that brings forth the wished-for sound of water, but the primitive religious fervor of the sinners themselves. Their "prayer as a force" induces the former sceptic Farragut to join in their rapturous Amens: "Amen said a thousand others, and the word, from so many throats, came up from the gallops field as a solemn whisper." (135)

The prisoners' unrefined religiosity is finally matched with the cardinal's mixed compassion for Jody when he detects Jody but lets him escape after the manner of the merciful priest in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. For all the mocking portrayal, the cardinal comes through as the most sympathetic character of all the clerical figures in Cheever's sardonic fiction.

The third stage of Farragut's spiritual pilgrimage from orphanhood toward grace and filiation is the vicarious experience of the riot which takes place in another prison. During the venereal disease examination, conducted for the purpose of diverting the prisoners' attention from the riot, Farragut discerns the irrefragable condition of man's Fall. The penitents coming naked and shameful before the civilian judge

of a doctor are ludicrously distorted versions of the original Adam standing before God, the supreme Judge, for the indictment of his sin of disobedience to God. As in Adam's case, the shame of their physical nakedness imports the shame of having their sinful souls bared. Cheever depicts the unclothed convicts standing in the afternoon light in the following manner :

Naked, utterly unbeautiful, malodorous and humiliated by a clown [the doctor] 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-destructive thefts and their consuming and perverse addictions. They were souls who could not be redeemed, and while penance was a clumsy and cruel answer, it was some measure of *the mysteriousness of their fall*. In the white light they seemed to Farragut to be fallen men. (162-163) (Italics mine)

Such poignant realization of "the mysteriousness" of man's Fall is not shared fully by any of the other Cheever protagonists. Leander Wapshot's disturbing dream of a hellish wasteland is only a thinly-textured, obscure tableau of the Original Sin, in comparison with Farragut's raw experience of naked shame that he feels with all the other criminal sinners.

Another impact of the news of the riot is having Christmas pictures taken as another means of distraction at a critical time. This event brings two revelations. First of all, when a plastic fir tree, with empty false gift boxes underneath it, inspires a fleeting hope for peace and happiness in the hearts of the strictly incarcerated men, the cogent mystery of the Christmas legend is revealed. Secondly, when an inmate called Chicken Number Two addresses his picture to Santa Claus because he has no one to send the greetings beyond the prison walls, he dramatizes the living death of the prisoners and the absolute loneliness of man. On this occasion Farragut has a trenchant perception that orphanancy is not an individual but universal symptom and also that even such condemned children of darkness as they are entitled to transient hope and light.

That acute comprehension of man's basically dual condition of insularity and solidarity, darkness and light, condemnation and grace abolishes Farragut's need for a desensitizing method and purges him of drug addiction, aided by the systematic remedial plan of the Department of Correction. In this connection, his pathological cleanness is confirmed by spiritual purification. During the dysentery epidemic, he runs a high temperature and dreams about celebrating the Holy Eucharist and being blessed singly by a priest.

Waldeland interprets this episode quite literally and explains that "a young priest wanders into his cell" and that "afterwards, Farragut is almost irritated by the intrusion of this familiar form into his new life,"¹⁸ a new life of praying quietly on his

own. Considering the high degree of guarded security in the prison ward, it is impossible to conceive of a priest "wandering" into Farragut's cell even during the topsy-turvy epidemic period. Besides, Farragut is torpid when this "strange thing" (200) happens. Therefore, it is more logical to construe it as a visionary experience. Furthermore, Farragut's questions, "But how did he get in? I didn't ask for a priest. He didn't do this thing for anybody else. Why did he pick on me?" (201) reveal the basic mysterious aspect of divine grace all the more lucidly for his puzzled protestation — something that comes down from above unasked. This half-visionary, half-truthful moment of grace is a bona-fide religious expression, more penetrating than the foregoing scene of the commencement mass. It is an equivalent of Jacob's mystical dream experience in the Old Testament.

After such religious expiation, Farragut is capable of a genuine act of love. When he is asked to nurse Chicken Number Two in his own cell, not only does he comply with the request but he even voluntarily washes Chicken's body. This act of humbling himself and washing his neighbor, in spite of the neighbor's diffident refusal, may be suggestive of Jesus's example of washing Simon Peter's feet and commanding the disciples to follow suit in brotherly love.

This rite of Christian love is followed by the rite of spiritual communication and inheritance. Chicken confides in Farragut his belief in life, here, before, and after, and his interest in "what's going to happen next." (215) Chicken, like Melissa Wapshot, is unwilling to leave this life on earth which is like "a party" even in jail with maximum security; but he, unlike Melissa, looks hopefully beyond death into eternity and, therefore, is unshackled from the fear of death. This sense of freedom Farragut inherits through the mysterious ritual of holding Chicken's hand in his own and literally absorbing the dying man's spiritual existence in an atmosphere that is pervaded with tenderness, tenderness which stands out in the novel about distress and horror. Then the next necessary step for him to take is "to take his rightful place in things as he saw them." (217) He, an orphan, has earned his "rightful place" as Chicken's spiritual son, and hiding in the cements in Chicken's place, he makes his exodus into life out of the prison wasteland.

The burial sack has two implicative meanings here: first of all, it is the grave which buries away his former orphaned self; secondly, it is a womb in which he is carried and out of which he is newly born. This time he is born with a sense of purity and innocence that his original untimely birth totally lacked:

He had never, that he remembered, been carried before. (His long-dead mother must have carried him from place to place, but he could not remember this). The sensation of being carried belonged to the past, since it gave him an unlikely feeling of innocence and purity. How strange to be carried so late in life and toward nothing that he truly knew, freed, it seemed, from his erotic crudeness, his facile scorn and his chagrined laugh — not a fact, but a chance, something like the afternoon light on

high trees quite useless and thrilling. How strange to be living
and to be grown and to be carried. (218)

He does not return to civilian society with an overbrimming joyful sensation but with a humble feeling that life is "a chance, like the afternoon light on high trees." In Cheever's fiction, light is a metaphor for the blessedness of life, and it is a kind of light which momentarily breaks through clouds in soft radiance, not a light that beams steadily, but a light that alternates with darkness.

In the early part of incarceration, Farragut looked slightly like Melville's Ishmael, a hypochondriac bastard, but now at the end, he sloughs off the thin Ishmaelian skin that has covered up the sunny side of his nature. Buoyed up on a coffin, Melville's Ishmael barely survives Ahab's futile tragic quest for the Father of the Universe, and he returns as "another orphan" to the still Godless dark world. On the other hand, Ezekiel Farragut, Cheever's latest orphan-hero, outlasts his descent into the heart of darkness and comes back as a legitimate son of the Father and of the motley, lively universe of darkness and light.

Farragut's miraculous rebirth is finally reconfirmed as he strides in the rain — another symbol of purification — in a borrowed civilian coat which perfectly fits him, and without any more "fear of falling" (226). His feet are no longer so unsteady as to cause his "fall" on the street, nor is he any longer afraid of his "Fall" from grace. Cheever uses the word *nicely* to describe the way Farragut walks along as the novel ends. This commonplace word *nicely* corresponds to the prosaic word *wonderful* repeated four times at the conclusion of *Bullet Park*. However, the word *nicely* is free from that humorous irony in *Bullet Park*. It is a truly euphoric expression of arriving at the home, sweet home of this beautiful earth, and it is followed by the final sentence, "Rejoice, he thought, rejoice." (226) The word *rejoice* has a religious connotation, and is, therefore, a vocal statement of faith in grace bestowed on man. It is the kind of faith to which WASP writers who are true to their heritage may aspire, as George Garrett maintains they do.¹⁹ But Cheever's is a characteristically "lyric faith,"²⁰ and the image of the lone ex-culprit rejoicing in the rain with a vision of life as "something like the afternoon light on trees" is surely the best example of that lyric faith.

To this theme of retrieved faith, Farragut's first name Ezekiel is pertinent. It is a Biblical name which means in Hebrew one whom God strengthens. Cheever himself denies deliberate allusion to the Biblical story of the prophet,²¹ but we may see some vague affinity between the prophet who prophesied delivery from Babylonian captivity and Farragut who breaks out of imprisonment of orphanancy. Then, even if the name is not invested with any religious overtone, it carries solemn significance in Cheever's personal frame of reference, for it is the name of Cheever's *first* ancestor to have immigrated to America.²² In Farragut, Cheever has at last created the *first* hero to outgrow his orphanancy and complete his quest for a father and home.

To evaluate Farragut in relation to contemporary American comic heroes, in spite of some characteristic features which he originally shares with his contemporary

heroes, he undoubtedly marks a departure from them when he discards his "facile scorn and chagrined laugh" and ceases to take refuge in his own tenuous fictionalized world of imagination. According to Ronald Wallace, the radical difference between the traditional comic novel and the contemporary American comic novel lies in the fact that the latter, which focuses on the metaphysical rather than the social problem of man, "rejects the idea of reformation through ridicule",²³ which is the major function of the traditional comic novel. Instead, the contemporary counterpart "struggles to face the void without flinching, to endure the absurd, and by viewing life from a comic perspective, to enjoy the endurance."²⁴ Farragut stops being a drug-addicted, daydreaming comic escapist and inches his way back to society as a converted good Samaritan. However, if his psychological return to the human community is certain, his social return is not yet fully verified. Therefore, we may call him a contemporary American comic hero who has veered *half way* back to the camp of traditional comic heroes. Finally, to place him again in the context of the orphan-hero, he is an absurd orphan turned into a semi-religious son.

Cheever's comic orphan-heroes all seek after a father and home, but none of them except Ezekiel Farragut is really successful in his quest. Leander is, after all, only a derelict Prospero without a magic wand. Coverly, his unwanted son, is an ignorant heir to a ramshackle tradition. Eliot and Tony Nailles are a sleep-walking pair of father and son without any home or tradition to mention of. Paul Hammer is tightly bound to the status of a homeless, unblest, solitary bastard. Only Ezekiel Farragut, a Jacob-like younger son less favored and neglected by his father, fulfills the myth of Jacob to the end and is granted a blessing from God the Father in a dream. Then with that sanctified dream as an impetus for belief — just like Jacob — he finds a spiritual father, buries his orphan's self and is reborn into society. When we witness Cheever's final success in imagining a father, home, and light that he has fumbled for in all his works, we feel that his following words can be applied to his own career as artist, as well as to the spiritual pilgrimage of Ezekiel Farragut :

It seems to me almost that one's total experience is the drive toward light. Or, in the case of the successful degenerate, the drive into an ultimate darkness, which presumably will result in light. Yes, my fondness for light is very very strong and, I presume, primitive.²⁵

NOTES

1. *The New York Times Book Review*, March 6, 1977, pp. 1f.
2. See Jesse Kornbluth, "The Cheever Chronicle," *The New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 21, 1979, pp. 26f.
3. "Ladies in Boston Have Their Hats: Notes on WASP Humor," *Comoc Relief*, ed. Sarah B. Cohen (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1978), p. 213.
4. *The Wapshot Chronicle* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 277-8. Subsequent page references will be given in parentheses following the quotation.
5. William Shakespeare, "The Tempest" IV. i. 148-158, *Shakespeare Complete Works*,

- ed. Peter Alexander (London: Collins, 1966).
6. *The Wapshot Scandal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 45. Subsequent page references will be given in parentheses following the quotation.
 7. Lynne Waldeland, *John Cheever* (Boson: Twayne Publishers, 1979), p. 52.
 8. *Radical Innocence* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 194.
 9. *Bullet Park* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), p. 52. Subsequent page references will be given in parentheses following the quotation.
 10. According to Jesse Kornbluth's article in *The New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 21, 1979, Cheever himself relied on such surrogate fathers as Malcolm Cowley and Harold Ross, in his youth.
 11. *The Wapshot Scandal*, p. 306.
 12. "Genesis" xvi. 12, *The Bible Authorized Version* (London: The British & Foreign Bible Society, 1965).
 13. "The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews" xii. 7.
 14. *Confessions of an English Opium-eater* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1923), p. 55.
 15. *Falconer* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), p. 43. Subsequent page references will be given in parentheses following the quotation.
 16. See *The Last Laugh: Form and Affirmation in the Contemporary American Novel* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1979).
 17. *Moby-Dick* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), p. 18.
 18. Waldeland, p. 133.
 19. *Comic Relief*, p. 237.
 20. Samuel Coale, *John Cheever* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1977), p. 113.
 21. Cheever denied intentional allusion in answer to the present writer's question put to him during her visit with him at his house in Ossining, New York, on August 8, 1979.
 22. Information given privately to the present writer on August 8, 1979; it also appeared in Kornbluth's article in *The New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 21, 1979.
 23. *The Last Laugh*, p. 16.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
 25. John Hersey, "Talk with John Cheever," *The New York Times Book Review*, March 6, 1977, p. 1f.

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Comic Orphan-Heroes in John Cheever's Novels

Minako Baba

Working within the contemporary American literary scene which is all but dominated by writers of minority ethnic groups on the one hand and post-modern writers experimenting in new styles on the other, John Cheever, a conventional WASP writer born in 1912, has been quite outshone in fame by his contemporaries, such as Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, and he has been often classified as a genteel *New Yorker*-school writer — at least until the publication of his provocative novel *Falconer*. Such lopsided appraisal of his work has mostly to do with the gentle landscape of middle-class Protestant American society that he portrays in a polished style of lyricism laced with humorous irony.

However, under cover of the subject matter and the style, there has been the persistent grave theme of homelessness, or orphancy, which has apparently been inspired by his personal unhappy adolescence and by his awkward sense of trailing, amid the hybrid civilization of the latter half of the twentieth century, the remnant heritage of the long-lost world of his New England forefathers. This theme of orphancy, however, sometimes transcends the personal and parochial spheres, entailing the perennial search for the guiding authority of a father and longing for reconciliation. Furthermore, in pursuing this theme, Cheever develops the contrasting images and ideas of darkness and radiance. His orphan-heroes are distant cousins, as it were, of such tragic mythical orphan-heroes as Orestes and Oedipus and such blessed Biblical orphan-heroes as Moses and Jacob. Nevertheless, Cheever's orphans are characteristically comic.

The present writer will try to show how Cheever's comic orphan figures in the four novels endeavor to win filiation and reconciliation within the contemporary spiritual wasteland. In most cases, the lonely orphans finally remain self-deluded, ignorant, and orphaned — Leander Wapshot, Coverly Wapshot, Eliot Nailles, Tony Nailles, and Paul Hammer. Only Ezekiel Farragut in *Falconer* breaks through darkness, comes out into the light, and fulfills the role of quasi-Jacob to the end, transforming himself from an absurd orphan to a semi-religious son.