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JOHN CHEEVER AND THE RUNTY LITTLE MAN

Some Reflections on Biography

JOHN W. CROWLEY

SIXTEEN YEARS AGO, blissfully ignorant that another scholar had already done what I proposed to do, I devoted the summer—more than one hundred hours of research—to compiling a checklist of John Cheever's writings. This was before the publication of *Falconer*,¹ when, despite his long and remarkable career, Cheever had fallen into relative obscurity; and it seemed to me that some enterprising scholar—into which category I must surely then have placed myself—might profitably invest in writing Cheever's biography. But first things first. Having managed to track down nearly every elusive item, I decided to consult the author himself about a few bibliographical loose ends, serenely confident that he would be more than delighted to help. After all, I probably imagined, my project could be a boon to Cheever's literary reputation!

In 1974, as we now know, Cheever had plunged to the nadir of his alcoholism—he was to enter the Smithers Center for treatment within months of my contacting him (I suggest no causal connection)—and he was in no mood to be entertaining the inquiries of a scholarly admirer and aspirant biographer. "One of my numerous eccentricities," he replied to my letter, "is to pretend that I'm not John Cheever. . . . I tell the family that John Cheever is a runty little man, flying over the Urals and nipping vodka from a flask." What I took then to be a perverse pose of dissociation—one that effectively cooled my ardor for writing Cheever's life—has now become for me an emblem of the dilemma of contemporary biography. For biography must begin with the assumption that the subject *is* essentially him- or herself.

Or must it?

As the most conservative of narrative genres, one still reliant by and large on the conventions of the Victorian novel, biography has become the last refuge of classic realism. As it developed alongside the novel during the nineteenth century, biography became another vehicle for the interests of the emergent middle classes. As William H. Epstein remarks, "The 'charm of biography' was a spell cast over all of Victorian life, inscribing a doctrine of pursuits by which the assured and evolving career of industrial capitalism could intersect with the 'track of godliness' traced by the body of Christ."² Based on the same faith in empirical means of knowing, the novel and biography both posited, in their very narrative patterns, the primacy of the autonomous bourgeois subject. Whereas in the novel this

1. J. Cheever, *Falconer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).

2. W. H. Epstein, *Recognizing Biography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 145.

selfsame subject became the rounded character of realism, given (as it were) a personal history and an interior depth, in biography he—and, conventionally, it *was* he—became a public figure and, often, an “author.” Any life, but especially the life of the author, emerged as a familiar cultural commodity, recognizable in part for its very emplotment.

“A good biography is itself a kind of novel,” writes Cynthia Ozick, noting the long-standing reciprocity between the genres. “Like the classic novel, a biography believes in the notion of ‘a life’—a life as a triumphal or tragic story with a shape, a story that begins at birth, moves on to a middle part, and ends with the death of the protagonist.”³ In tracing the trajectory of the individual life—what Epstein calls “recognizing the life-course”⁴—Victorian biography and the nineteenth-century novel not only ran parallel but often intertwined.

In the twentieth century, however, with the triumph of modernism and now postmodernism, the genres have tended to diverge, with biography retaining far more realistic features than the novel. As one study suggests, “the foregrounded story, the authorial presence, traditional chronological design, and the stately scene setting of the major biography are no longer typical of contemporary fiction.”⁵ It could be argued that generic lag has produced the paradoxical situation where the most innovative approaches to biography are to be found in such recent novels as Bernard Malamud’s *Dubin’s Lives*, William Golding’s *Paper Men*, Steven Millhauser’s *Edwin Mullhouse*, and Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*—all of which owe something to such earlier experiments in fictional biography as Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* and J. P. Marquand’s *The Late George Apley*.⁶ Although Leon Edel and other respected practitioners have adopted the narrative sophistication of the modernist novel, the genre has remained unperturbed by “self-reflexivity, ontological uncertainty, distrust of the structures of explanation, the uncertainty over ‘the real’ and ‘the fictional’ ”⁷—in short, by the various species of thought that are now grouped under the genus of “post-structuralism.”

The radical questions raised by poststructuralism have reoriented or disoriented (depending on your point of view) the study of *autobiography*, the burgeoning interest in which has everything to do with what post-structuralist theory calls “the problem of the subject.” As Michael Sprinker asserts, “a pervasive and unsettling feature in modern culture [is] the gradual metamorphosis of an individual with a distinct, personal identity into a sign, a cipher, an image no longer clearly and positively identifiable as ‘this one person.’ ” Such dis-ease about the “self” leads to the idea that every autobiography, indeed every text, is

*an articulation of the relations between texts, a product of intertextuality, a weaving together of what has already been produced elsewhere in discontinuous form; every subject, every author, every self is the articulation of an intersubjectivity structured within and around the discourses available to it at any moment in time.*⁸

Under the pressure of such theoretical speculation, the premise of autobiographical referentiality—what allows a reader to move confidently from knowledge of a text to knowledge of a self—has been shaken.

3. C. Ozick, *Art & Ardor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 6.

4. Epstein, *Recognizing Biography*, 138–71.

5. Eric Homberger and John Charmley, eds., *The Troubled Face of Biography* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), xiii.

6. B. Malamud, *Dubin’s Lives* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979); W. Golding, *The Paper Men* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1984); S. Millhauser, *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer, 1943–1954* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972); J. Barnes, *Flaubert’s Parrot* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985); V. Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1928); J. P. Marquand, *The Late George Apley: A Novel in the Form of a Memoir* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1937).

7. Homberger and Charmley, *The Troubled Face of Biography*, xiv.

8. M. Sprinker, “Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography,” in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. J. Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 322, 325.

The deconstruction of the “self” would seem to confound the traditional practices of biography, a genre that also relies on the premise of referentiality between texts, literary and otherwise, and the “identity” of the subject—and, furthermore, on the “real” status of life events. For Epstein,

it no longer seems possible to treat a biographical “event” as a “natural” occurrence in the concrete world; rather, the contemporary theoretical crisis suggests, we must treat a biographical “event” as an epistemological operation to which ontological status is frequently, if inappropriately, granted, as a transient, discursive moment in a constantly receding and endlessly replicating semiotic wonderland.⁹

9. Epstein, *Recognizing Biography*, 36.

If the “subject” of any biography and the “events” of her or his life are no more or less than a construction of narrative discourses, then any biographical “John Cheever,” for instance, is no more or less eccentric than his runty little man cruising, bottle in hand, over the Urals. No “John Cheever” can be other than a text always already inscribed in the writing of the biographer, whose own “self” is likewise a textual construction.

WHAT, THEN, IS A BIOGRAPHER TO DO? A question all the more compelling, perhaps, at a time when biography is a flourishing and often a best-selling genre, when it seems there are ever so many literary biographies left to write—for instance, of noncanonical writers newly recovered from ages past or of twentieth-century authors from the passing generation whose papers are arriving in the archives. Malcolm Bradbury points to the exquisitely ironic dilemma posed by our living simultaneously in “the age of the Literary Life” and “the age of the Death of the Author”:

the age of the author studied, pursued, celebrated and hyped; and the age of the author denied and eliminated, airbrushed from the world of writing with a theoretical efficiency that would be the envy of any totalitarian regime trying to remove its discredited leaders from the record of history.¹⁰

10. M. Bradbury, “The Telling Life: Some Thoughts on Literary Biography,” in *The Troubled Face of Biography*, 134–35.

What, then, is a biographer to do? One alternative sometimes favored by conventional practitioners is to dismiss poststructuralist theory as a lunatic assault on intellectual decency and common sense—or worse, as Bradbury’s barbed analogy suggests, a tool of Stalinism plied by academic commissars. “If deconstruction rejects the historical,” sniffs Ann Thwaite, biographer of Edmund Gosse, “considering that all works of literature only exist in relation to the reader reading them now, then the biographer must be totally against deconstruction.”¹¹ Michael Holroyd, biographer of Lytton Strachey and G. B. Shaw, agrees that the writer of lives must resist “deconstruction” for “much the same reason that poets and novelists have opposed literary biography itself—from the fear that his magical properties will be destroyed and his work rendered valueless.”¹²

11. A. Thwaite, “Writing Lives,” in *The Troubled Face of Biography*, 32.

12. M. Holroyd, “How I Fell into Biography,” in *The Troubled Face of Biography*, 102.

What, then, is a biographer to do?—assuming that other than “realistic” biography is to be written. Bradbury himself, author of postmodernist

13. Bradbury, "The Telling Life," 140.

fictions, concedes that the genre, if it is to remain vital, has little choice but to follow the contemporary novel "down the labyrinth of writing, with all its refracted images . . . where biography's own construction becomes part of contemporary writerly anxiety."¹³ Rather than conceal its own intertextuality, then, a poststructuralist biography might, perhaps, seek to defer the totalizing of a "subject" into a "self," in part by deranging the conventional narrative patterns, in part by foregrounding its own enabling themes and tropes.

For example, traditional biography nearly always employs one or another epigenetic scheme, usually a psychological one that, in this century at least, derives directly or indirectly from Freudian psychoanalysis. Biography usually suggests that the self emerges psychodynamically, that childhood "conflicts" within the nuclear family are determinants in the formation of identity. Of course, the common epigenetic models posit a human subject that is more accurately described as a representation of white Western middle-class manhood, and psychoanalysis itself has been thoroughly interrogated by feminists and others. For my purposes here, however, it is not necessary to pursue the complex matters of how biography as a genre has been marked by race, class, and gender because, after all, Cheever's case fits the hegemonic pattern.

LET US SUPPOSE, then, that a traditional biographer, armed with an understanding of traditional (i.e., pre-Lacanian) psychoanalysis, wished to write something about John Cheever and his father. It would be difficult, in fact, to imagine a biography of Cheever that did not privilege this relationship, since it appears to bear so crucially on both his life and his work. This bearing seems all the more crucial because Cheever himself, as his daughter reports, "became increasingly reluctant to talk about his early years, especially to psychiatrists, who invariably zeroed in on his anger at his dominating mother and his identification with his weak father."¹⁴ That such reticence can, however, be seen as a kind of identification with the father is suggested by the possibly apocryphal tale that Cheever told *Time* in 1964:

*Once, when I was old enough to talk to my father as an adult, we were sitting together in front of a big fire, a nor'easter roaring outside. We were swapping dirty stories, the feeling was intimate, and I felt that this was the time when I could bring up the subject. "Father, would you tell me something about your father?" "NO!" and that was that.*¹⁵

This silence—more accurately, this prohibition to talk—was Cheever's example of "something very dark and mysterious about my family."¹⁶ But the mystery of the father—or fathers—was something he found himself plumbing both in public interviews (an unexplored genre that falls between biography and autobiography) and in private ones, bound by the rules of psychoanalysis. As Cheever explained to John Hersey in 1977, "Whether or not he was an adequate father is something that has been thrashed over on psychiatric couches for years. No conclusions have been reached." But then he went on to describe a certain kind of conclusion: "Psychiatrically,

14. Susan Cheever, *Home before Dark* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 2. This book was the first detailed source of information, not all of it strictly reliable, on Cheever's life. More recently, Scott Donaldson has published *John Cheever: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1988), a superb example of traditional life writing. My own speculations about what a Cheever biography might do were drafted before the appearance of Donaldson's book, which does not put Cheever on the couch but does, nevertheless, rely on a loosely psychoanalytic frame of reference for making sense of Cheever's inner life.

15. "Ovid in Ossining," *Time*, 27 March 1964, 68.

16. *Ibid.*

our relationship was never in any way consummated, but he did leave me his journal, which I used in a novel of mine called *Wapshot Chronicle*. So we achieved the kind of thing that I think writing can attain, which is a profound and a posthumous peace."¹⁷ Talk was inconclusive, that is, but writing somehow was not. Moreover, the writing in particular of *The Wapshot Chronicle* was seen by Cheever as a means to posthumous peace.

A traditional biographer might be drawn by such an idea toward a narrative of Cheever's life like the one outlined by Malcolm Crowley:

The writer, if he has something of his own to say, begins under the sign of the mother, which is also the sign and banner of rebellion—against tradition, against the existing order, against authority as represented by the father. The change comes after a crisis in middle-age, or even before it in many cases. The writer becomes reconciled with his father, indeed with all the Fathers who suffer from having wayward sons. . . . Cheever said more than once that the Wapshot books were "a posthumous attempt to make peace with my father's ghosts."¹⁸

Crowley's is a recognizably Freudian model, with a Jungian overlay (the midlife turnabout), which could easily be elaborated into Eriksonian modalities. The biographical Cheever constructed by this model would be inscribed within the "Oedipus complex." The biographer need only fill in the blanks of a narrative already written by psychoanalysis: the story of an oedipally conflicted son who works through his neurosis, at the climax of his literary career, in the writing of his first novel. The evidence for filling this narrative is plentiful enough.

If I were doing it, I would establish a genealogy of "oedipal" texts, starting with "The Autobiography of a Drummer," one of Cheever's earliest stories, moving on to "Publick House," which seems to anatomize Cheever's family romance, and arriving at the genesis of the Leander character in the Wapshot novels. My theme would be the laying of the father's ghost through the banishment of oedipal rage and fear.

THE DETAILS of this hypothetical narrative would be as follows. First, I would stress the ambivalence of "The Autobiography of a Drummer," Cheever's attempt at the beginning of his career (when he was still rechristening himself "Jon") to identify himself with the inner suffering of a character whose history resembles that of Frederick Lincoln Cheever, a prosperous shoe salesman who lost his job, his pride, everything, in the Depression.

The narrator of this first-person story, also a shoe salesman, was once quite successful, but his livelihood has been rendered obsolete by the operation of Gresham's law in the shoe industry. Abandoned by time itself, the narrator finds himself old, broke, and alone, sunk in despair but denying it. "We have forgotten," the story ends:

Everything we know is useless. But when I think about the days on the road and about what has been done to me, I hardly ever think about it with any bitterness. . . . Although sometimes I feel as if my

17. Scott Donaldson, "John Hersey Talks with John Cheever," in *Conversations with John Cheever*, ed. S. Donaldson (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 153.

18. M. Crowley, "John Cheever: The Novelist's Life as a Drama," *Sewanee Review* 91 (Winter 1983): 14.

*life has been a total loss. I feel it in the morning sometimes when I'm shaving. I get sick as if I had eaten something that didn't agree with me and I have to pull down the razor and support myself against the wall.*¹⁹

19. J. Cheever, "The Autobiography of a Drummer," *New Republic*, 23 October 1935, 295.

Driven literally to the wall, this fatherly narrator may be seen to be embraced by the empathetic imaginative act that brought him into being. But we may also see an act of oedipal revenge and judgment in the portrait of a powerless old man who cannot comprehend the reasons for his own impotence.

20. Whereas "The Autobiography of a Drummer" was never collected, "Publick House" appeared in Cheever's first book: *The Way Some People Live* (New York: Random House, 1943). But like all but one of these early pieces, it was omitted from *The Stories of John Cheever* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978).

In "Publick House," written some five years later,²⁰ the father is absent altogether, except as he is displaced into the figure of the cranky and toothless grandfather who bewails his daughter's transmutation of the family home into a quaint wayside restaurant and antique shoppe. "I'm sick of these god-damned tearoom people and I'm sick of this god-damned tearoom food. I'm an old man. I'm sick and tired of being pushed around," he rails at his daughter. "You've sold all my things. You've sold my mother's china. You sold the rugs. You sold the portraits. You've made a business out of it—selling the past. What kind of business is that—selling the past?"²¹ Obviously not a good one; the story ends with the mother, "as if she had been drinking," delivering a bitter parody of her own tour-guide spiel for the tearoom people. Witness to the family strife, and oppressed by it, is the young man (bearing Cheever's father's middle name of Lincoln) on whose sensitive consciousness the story centers. The situation of the story replicates the events of Cheever's own adolescence, when he suffered his father's ruin and shared his helpless outrage at his wife's commercial enterprise; and it also anticipates a major plot device in *The Wapshot Chronicle*.

21. J. Cheever, "Publick House," 183.

In both of these early stories, the fatherly character is strikingly weak and, yet, Cheever seems to be identifying himself with him—in just the way his psychiatrists kept telling him he did. If Cheever was writing under the "sign and banner of rebellion" (in Cowley's phrase), what he resisted was not so much the authority of the father as the *lack* of such authority. For him to become reconciled with the father, the father's authority had first to be discovered by the son and then experienced as truly powerful.

22. J. Cheever, "The National Pastime," in *Stories*, J. Stafford, J. Cheever, D. Fuchs, and W. Maxwell (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Cudahy, 1956).

Such a powerful oedipal father did not fully emerge in Cheever's work until the early 1950s, when he was reaching the signal age of forty. Then, in line with Cowley's model, we find Cheever confronting the emotional threat of the father and striking the banner of rebellion. The key stories are those in which Leander Wapshot first appears. In "The National Pastime," the narrator attributes his humiliating phobia of baseball to the apparently murderous designs upon him of his eccentric father, Leander, whose claim to an inherited fortune has been voided by his son's having been born.²² Cheever makes use here of what was apparently one of the darker family secrets. Susan Cheever reports that he had been told by his mother that his conception had been a dreadful mistake, "a drunken accident between two people who no longer cared about each other."²³

23. S. Cheever, *Home before Dark*, 6.

Likewise, in "Independence Day at St. Botolph's," Mrs. Wapshot, the victim of a philandering husband (here named Alpheus) and of her own puritanical prudery, says of her two sons: "I didn't want either of them to

be born.’”²⁴ In this story the onus of prenatal rejection has been shifted from the father to the mother; and in both stories the narrative moves toward reconciliation with the father, who, as in the *Wapshot* novels, is associated with the saving power of nature, ritual, and sensation. In “The National Pastime,” the son ultimately manages to “lay Leander’s ghost” by overcoming his baseball phobia at Yankee Stadium.²⁵ Both stories also evoke the existing order of the father’s world; Leander/Alpheus is a creature both of St. Botolph’s and of the old family house. The appearance of a fully delineated father character in Cheever’s work brings a fully imagined fictional world for him to inhabit. That is, Cheever arrived at the point of writing *The Wapshot Chronicle*, which I will not consider here in detail.

For I wish to restate at this point that my aim has not been so much to construct an oedipal narrative for Cheever as to demonstrate that such a narrative, if it were to be used, would already have been written by psychoanalysis. Indeed, in the fictional patterning of his own life story, Cheever made use of the same psychoanalytical tropes that are likely to write his would-be biographers. Any conventional biography of Cheever, that is, will be implicated in the textuality of his own narratives of the “self.”

Let me return now to what Cheever said about his relationship to his father: that it was “never in any way consummated, but he did leave me his journal, which I used in a novel of mine called *Wapshot Chronicle*. So we achieved the kind of thing that I think writing can attain, which is a profound and a posthumous peace.” Notice two things about this passage. First, the arresting choice of the word “consummated”: a word with sexual overtones that are all the more audible now that we know (in part from late interviews) about Cheever’s lifelong struggle with his homosexuality. Second, the submerged logic: that “posthumous peace” is, by implication, a kind of consummation—or, rather, the result of a consummation that is constituted by the father’s act of leaving his journal to his son and the son’s act of using it. Writing itself—in inscribing the father’s journal into the son’s novel—is figured homoerotically as “laying” (making love with) the ghost of the father. Peace, one might say, comes from the pleasures of the (inter)text(uality).

The writing and reading of journals, as it happens, is a recurrent feature in all of the oedipal texts already discussed. “The Autobiography of a Drummer” is Cheever’s imagined version of his father’s journal, which was not yet in his possession: a (p)rewriting of the father’s text of himself.²⁶ In “Publick House,” Lincoln’s reconciliation both to the troubling present and to his mother’s sentimentalized version of the past is provided by his reading an old letter and a leaf from a ship’s log found in some family books. In “The National Pastime,” Leander reads to his son from his journal, which apparently resembles Frederick Cheever’s in its dry-as-dust preoccupation with mundane facts. And, as Cheever said, the fictional recasting of his father’s journal was the germ of *The Wapshot Chronicle*, a chunk of which originally appeared in the *New Yorker* as “The Journal of an Old Gent.” Finally, along with the variant fabrications of his own and his family’s past, Cheever has passed down his own voluminous journal, which—if it is ever released by the family—inevitably will be one of the texts that Cheever biographers will rewrite.²⁷

24. J. Cheever, “Independence Day at St. Botolph’s,” *New Yorker*, 3 July 1954, 23.

25. J. Cheever, “National Pastime,” 146.

26. Donaldson’s biography does not make it clear that the journals of Cheever’s father have survived—if they ever truly existed. (It may be that Cheever invented Frederick Cheever’s journals, as he did other details of his family’s history.) Donaldson points out that “some of the pithiness of Leander’s journal in *The Wapshot Chronicle* derived from the *Journals of Hezekiah Prince, Jr., 1822–1828*,” written by an ancestor of Cheever’s friend and neighbor Arthur Spear (Donaldson, *John Cheever*, 189).

27. Although Donaldson was allowed access to part of this journal, he does not quote from it directly. Brief passages do appear, however, in Benjamin Cheever, ed., *The Letters of John Cheever* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988). One may suppose, in light of the Cheever family’s battle royal with the publishers of some early uncollected stories, that the journal will not become fully open to scholarly inspection for some time to come. See Dan Santow, “The Millers versus the Cheevers,” *Chicago* (December 1988).

28. Donaldson, "Hersey Talks with Cheever," 155.

CHEEVER OFTEN COMPLAINED about the modern tendency to read fiction as autobiography. As he told John Hersey, in a formulation that Susan Cheever often heard as well, "It seems to me that any confusion between autobiography and fiction debases fiction. The role autobiography plays in fiction is precisely the role that reality plays in a dream."²⁸ Determined to uphold the gold standard of fiction, Cheever also privileged dream over reality. ("I'm not John Cheever . . . John Cheever is a runty little man. . . .") As Sprinker says of Freud's theory of dreams:

Just as Freud establishes a limit beyond which dream interpretation cannot pass and to which interpretation always returns to confirm itself, so autobiography, the inquiry of the self into its own origin and history, is always circumscribed by the limiting conditions of writing, of the production of the text.²⁹

29. Sprinker, "Fictions of the Self," 342.

30. Ibid.

The same is true, I think, of biography, the inquiry of one "self" into another "self's" origin and history. Neither biography nor autobiography can take place, in Sprinker's words, "except within the boundaries of a writing where concepts of subject, self, and author collapse into the act of producing a text."³⁰ Or, as the runty little man might have told John Hersey (if "John Cheever" had been there), the role fiction plays in biography is precisely the role that dream plays in reality. This is the nightmare from which traditional biography may not soon awaken. ♦