Chapter 7
BY WAY OF SUMMING-UP

In the foregoing chapters all the five novels of John Cheever have been studied with special reference to "fact and fiction" in them. In the present concluding chapter some of the observations made in them may be brought together by way of summing-up. Cheever turned to novel writing effectively, long after he had been established as a master of the short story and an accomplished raconteur. He viewed himself as an "enthusiastic novelist", but yet wrote only five novels over a quarter of a century, although he was enviably prolific in writing short stories - prolific but neither indifferent nor complacent. He regarded writing as his vocation, an activity which enabled him to make 'the most sense', out of his life. Therefore would not take either himself or his readers for granted. He took several years to complete a novel and did not feel tempted to speed up the writing of novels or increase their number even over his first two novels, The Wapshot Chronicle and The Wapshot Scandal, were well received and brought him coveted awards of the day. He wrote a novel when he felt that he had something new and meaningful to say. That is why no two novels of Cheever are alike or repetitive, not even the closely connected Wapshot novels. Such integrity in a writer is rare to come by, especially in one who has established reputation and could be easily commercially successful. Therefore this aspect of Cheever's deserves to be emphasised.

All the novels of Cheever are products of his mature years. The suburban human scene is the immediate focus of his fiction, short and long alike. It is there that he finds the people and themes for his work. He has been criticised adversely for this reason by some. He has also been
found fault with as not being sufficiently socially conscious, and as being out of step with the prevailing winds of time. There is hardly any place for politics, and the burning topics of the day in his fiction, which are the grist for most writers of fiction. Cheever's novels have shown that there can be fiction worthy of the serious attention of the adult mind without bringing politics or social issues which are of ephemeral and not enduring interest. More importantly, Cheever's fiction, his novels in particular, demonstrate that the suburban world is as legitimate and fertile as any for the contemplation and concern of a serious novelist. They also show 'as rich a variety of people as one can find anywhere in the country, people whom you can get to know intimately and with whom sustain a relationship' (Cheever's own words to Shirley Silverberg in an interview). The characters and situations in his novels illustrate the truths of this statement.

Further, the suburbia serves Cheever as a window through which the wide world of humanity is seen, and larger pattern of human experience discerned in the lives of the suburbanites. Both good and evil aspects of suburban life are portrayed by him. Those who appear in his novels are mainly of the ordinary and average, whose counterparts can be found anywhere in the world, in their hopes, aspirations and dreams, their fears and misgivings, failures and despairs, their oddities and eccentricities, love of the beautiful and moral good, and their virtues and weaknesses. The novels show how they are worthy of our attention. Therefore the appeal of the novels is universal, in spite of their being grounded in American life. Ezekiel Farragut in Falconer might appear as not of the ordinary and average, because he is a man of learning and a professor. But in his general conduct and behaviour, and in his response to
suffering he does not appear to be different from others. That Cheever is able to find potentialities for growth and transcendence, may be seen in such ordinary people as Leander Wapshot, Honora Wapshots and Coverly Wapshot (The Wapshot Chronicle), Eliot Nasties (Bullet Park), Farragut (Falconer), Sears, Chisholm and Betsy Logan (Oh What a Paradise It Seems), etc.

On the whole Cheever's novels may be said to be in the realistic tradition of fiction, although they accommodate the fabulous, the fantastic, and the improbable now and then. Bullet Park is an instance. They maintain a realistic surface convincingly and create the illusion of social reality. Men and women are also presented persuasively. So that the average reader is made to feel that the social world created and those that appear in it may exist in reality and the events described may actually happen. However Cheever is no mere novelist of manners, his ultimate interest being in the human individual and what goes on in his mind and heart. Faithful adherence to and reproduction of actual and verifiable facts and minute particulars of external social reality, which is the method of the 'documentary' and 'journalistic' novelist, is not Cheever's objective or method. Had it been so, he could not have written Falconer - which has plenty of raw material for social documentation - the way he has done. Without sacrificing verisimilitude he aims by and large successfully, at the truths of probability which the reader's imagination can grasp and appreciate without any difficulty.

Cheever has drawn material for his fiction from a variety of sources: the history and tradition of his family of which he was proud, his personal life and experiences, situations and
people (including the members of his own family) he has observed in his surroundings, urban and suburban, and elsewhere (including some countries of Europe where he had travelled widely and resided for some time), his memories and recollections of people and places, and above all people and situations invented by his fertile and mobile creative imagination. All these constitute the 'facts' on which his novels are built. His 'fiction' is the fictive transmutation and recreation of these disparate facts, apparently random and even disorderly, into ordered and organised aesthetic wholes in the form of novels without violating verisimilitude, so that they convey through suggestion meaning and significance. In other words the 'facts' listed above get extended, enlarged, and heightened in varying degrees according to the needs of his particular novels, and thus transmuted into 'fiction' recapitulating universal verities. What has been said of the relationship between 'fact and fiction' in Cheever's novels may well be justifiably said of many other novelists devoted to the art of fiction.

Cheever did drew upon his own personal life and experiences, and family history, and had in mind some members of his family while fashioning some of his fictional characters. Leander and Sarah Wapshot in The Wapshot Chronicle, resemble his parents in some respects, and the resemblance between his mother and Sarah is somewhat closer. The intense and ambiguous relationship between brothers and brother-like figures (Nailles and Hammer in Bullet Park and between Farragut and Eben in Falconer which leads to fratricide) may have its origin in a like relationship between Cheever and his brother Fred. But these and other possible similarities do not make Cheever's novels autobiographical, because they are appropriate to the fictional contexts in which they appear. Therefore Cheever's repeated assertion that fiction is
not cryptoautobiography and that the two must be kept apart in the interest of fiction, is substantially just. Suppose one did not know anything about the facts of Cheever's life, this lack of knowledge does not in anyway affect the reader's understanding and assessment of his novels. They exist in their own right as self-contained wholes, and are independent of their actual origins. However, there is nothing wrong in using novelist's biography in a study of his novels provided it helps to elucidate them. But in Cheever's case this approach has not seemed necessary, although it would help to know the frame of mind and psychological background in which his novels were conceived.

All the locales of his novels - St.Botolphs, Remsen Park, Shady Hill, Bullet Park, Proxmire Manor, Janice, etc - are so many imaginary places designed by Cheever to explore certain human situations and themes. As Updike remarked, they are 'a terrain we can recognise within ourselves, where we are or have been'. Cheever is a morally concerned novelist, preoccupied with the perennial moral issues of everyday life, with the perennial question of good and evil (Bullet Park and Falconer), and with the difficult moral choices one has to make necessarily in one's life (The Wapshot novels). But he is never a didactic writer with a palpable design to influence the reader. On the contrary his novels sharpen the reader's awareness of moral issues, by engaging his emotional and imaginative responses to them.

Cheever's interest being in human beings as individuals as well as social beings ideas in the abstract do not engage his attention as a novelist. But there are themes and motifs which appear again and again in his novels. Although he said that 'love and death' were the two big
themes in which he was interested, the novels show that there are other closely related themes such as family relationships, relation between men and women, marital love, fidelity in marital life, traditional values and their viability in the context of a fast changing world and compulsions of modern life, loneliness and isolation, nostalgia, urge for transcendence. All these appear in varying degrees of importance and emphasis in all of his novels.

Since Cheever the novelist is preoccupied with spiritual and moral issues in the lives of his characters and their potentialities for transcendence, it is natural that religious concerns figure in his novels, Cheever himself was a man of deep religious faith and frankly admitted the fact. Of course religious dogmas are not discussed. The place given to religion in a novel depends upon its characters. In the Wapshot novels and Bullet Park, the chief characters regularly attend church and participate in its rituals as sincere adherents of their faith. But the significance of religion in their everyday life is not explored in any depth, although the mystery of evil does engage the novelist’s attention in Bullet Park. But in Falconer the religious content becomes overt and direct. Questions of sin, suffering, death and rebirth are woven into the fabric of the protagonist Farragut’s life and experience. Though religion is not invoked overtly in What a Paradise, it is permeated with a religious spirit and it is all about spiritual rebirth and regeneration.

Religion being a going concern of life for Cheever, both as man and writer, he could not have any truck with the highly influential ‘absurdist’ view of both life and art, of his day. He was fully aware of the complexities and contradictions and absurdities, in contemporary life and human life in general. But he did not find any warrant to view the universe and all life as
"absurd", as not possessing any inherent truth, value or meaning and therefore as utterly inconsequential. Cheever takes a more afflative and affirmative view of life, and finds the novel as an eminently suitable artistic medium to give expression to what is 'astonishing in life'. The novel becomes a means of discovering what is positive and noble in life in spite of the fact that we all live in a fallen and falling world. Its potentialities for 'illuminating' life are not exhausted.

Though Cheever wrote only five novels qualitatively they form substantial body of work. Each novel for him is a new beginning and a new experience. The themes chosen for exploration every time are new. The Wapshot Chronicle, his first novel is concerned with a suburban family which has the traditional background of New England. It traces the attempts of the head of the family Leander Wapshot to transmit the value and way of life he has inherited to his sons Moses and Coverly who have to seek their fortunes in a world which has moved farther away from the New England tradition. Of the sons Coverly achieves a moderate success in absorbing the lesson taught by his father. The Wapshot Scandal presents a world much more removed from the tradition of St.Botolphs, their traditional home town of the Wapshots. The surviving members of the Wapshot family are caught up in the confusion of the fast changing modern world. While Moses, 'the older son of Leander, becomes a total wreck unable to adjust himself to the changed world, Coverly the younger son struggles very hard to bridge the world of St.Botolphs and the world of the metropolis. Melissa, the central woman character in the novel, without proper moorings and the support of a traditions, has to live a sad, lonely life an exile from home'. Bullet Park, the third novel, unexpectedly departs in its theme and technique from its predecessors. The first two are predominantly episodic and the reader has to exert himself to
bring the different strands together to form a unity. In *Bullet Park* Cheever concerns himself
with the mystery of the origin and manifestation of evil in human life. By deftly manipulating
the points of view and narrative voice, Cheever brings this novel much better structural unity
than the Wapshot novels.

*Falconer* startlingly moves in an altogether different direction from that of its
predecessors. Instead of the urban, suburban and civilized world, it takes us to a monstrous
prison house, *Falconer*, and makes it its locale. It is an entirely imaginary place, not a
reproduction of Sing Sing. The protagonist is a fratricide, though a man of learning and a
professor. To an unusual degree violence, physical, emotional, and psychic, and obscenities of
language appear in the novel. But paradoxically, the novel is actually religious in its spirit and
implications and successfully employs the Christian paradigm of fall, trial, and redemptive
rebirth. Perhaps this is the most unified novel structurally. Cheever's last novel *Oh What a
Paradise It Seems*, is yet another departure from all of the previous novels. Though short enough
to be called a long short story, it is rich in suggestion. The narrative is apparently placid and
tranquil as it is intended to be read on a quiet night suitable for a fairy tale. The chief characters
Lemuel Sears, Horace Chisholm, and Betsy Logan are of the ordinary and average, and engage
themselves in the purification and restoration of Beasley's Pond, an utterly polluted stretch of
water. The rebirth of the pond in the novel becomes an image, a metaphor for spiritual rebirth,
and presents a distant reflection of 'paradise' which was lost. The novel also embodies the
longing and aspiration for the recovery of lost innocence and the urge to return to the paradise,
which was once ours.
Oh What a Paradise It seems, which has a tranquil surface but implies great depth of meaning, is a befitting close to Cheever’s career as a novelist. True to his conviction his five novels in their own modest way reveal the deeper moral and spiritual aspirations of man. They affirm his faith in man’s potentialities for growth and transcendence, and his faith in life. This he does with a clear understanding of the confusions and complexities of the contemporary world in which most men have to live without the prop and support of a faith and a living tradition. Before this study of fact and fiction in the novels of Cheever is brought to a close, it would be appropriate to recall some of Cheever’s own words on his practice as a novelist:

My sense of literature is a sense of giving, not a diminishment. I know almost no pleasure greater than having a piece of fiction drawn together disparate incidents so that they relate to one another, and confirm that feeling that life itself is a creative process, that one thing is put purposely upon another, that what is lost in one encounter is replenished in the next, and that he possess some power to make sense of what takes place.

(Time 83, March 27, 1964, p.72).