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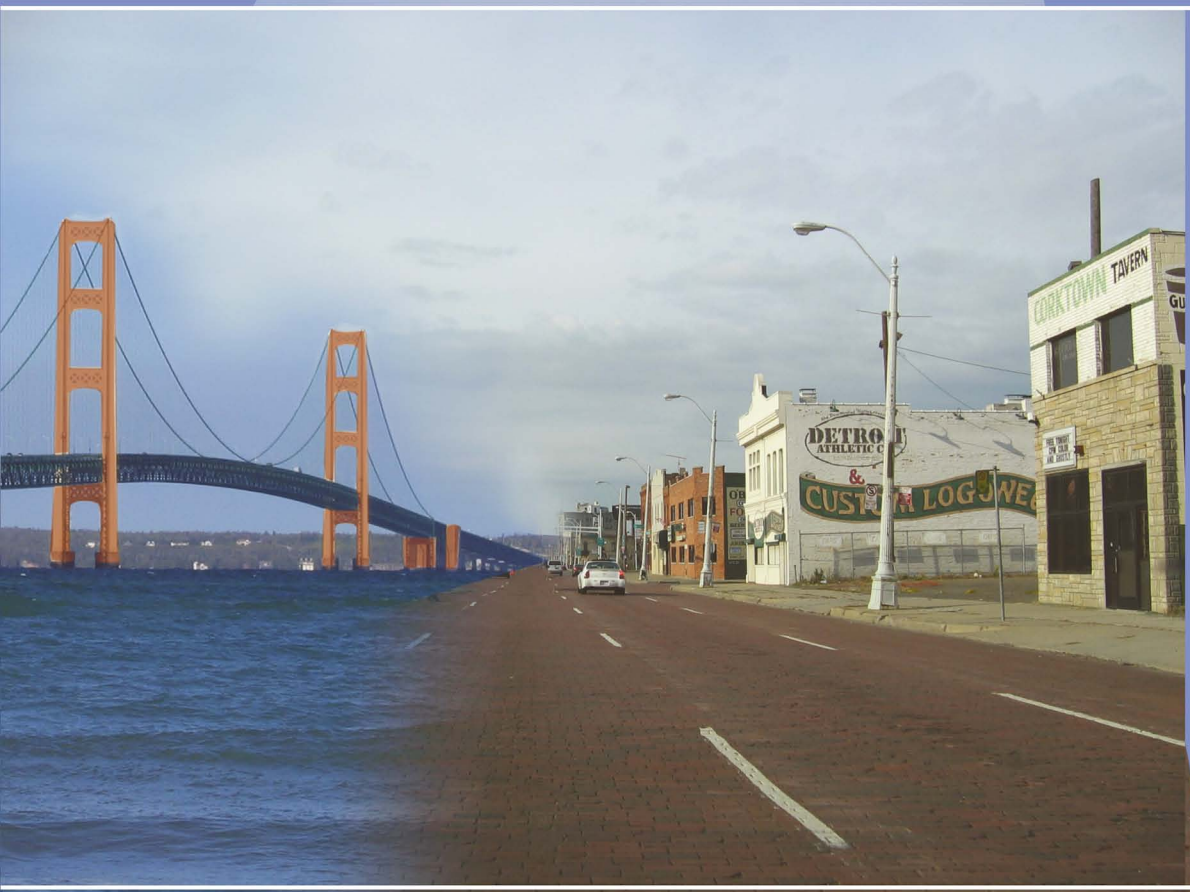
"This isthmus of a middle state". The Suburban Fiction of John Cheever, John Updike and Richard Ford



Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego Katowice 2009

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Déjà vu was still a problem in the area. A toll-free hotline had been set up. There were counsellors on duty around the clock to talk to people who were troubled by recurring episodes. Perhaps déjà vu and other tics of the mind and body were the durable products of the airborne toxic event. But over a period of time it became possible to interpret such things as signs of a deep-reaching isolation we were beginning to feel. There was no large city with a vaster torment we might use to see our own dilemma in some soothing perspective. No large city to blame for our sense of victimization. No city to hate and fear. No panting megacenter to absorb our woe, to distract us from our unremitting sense of time. ...

Although we are for a small town remarkably free of resentment, the absence of a polestar metropolis leaves us feeling in our private moments a little lonely.

Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

Introduction

The present book studies the development of American suburban fiction from its inception in the 1940s to the early twenty first century. The main subjects of inquiry are: 1) portrayal of the suburb from the socio-spatial perspective; 2) investigation of the suburban lifestyle and mentality in the fiction of John Cheever, John Updike and Richard Ford. In order to ensure balanced proportions, I decided to include all of the novels and selected short stories of John Cheever, the Rabbit tetralogy by John Updike and Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe cycle.

As suburban literature tends to engage with the realist tradition while exposing its protagonists to social and political tensions, the work of two critics, Lionel Trilling and John Gardner, treating of the interface, will be invoked. The former's concept of "reality" as well as both Trilling's and Gardner's understanding of realism will come under scrutiny along with liberal (Trilling) and conservative (Gardner) conceptions of art *vis-à-vis* society in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American fiction. In analyses of Cheever's, Updike's and Ford's texts, relations between the middle class and materialism/consumerism will be interrogated.

This Introduction is divided into three sections: 1) an outline of the history of the suburb in the context of American civilization; 2) a discussion of Lionel Trilling's concept of adversarial criticism; 3) a discussion of John Gardner's "moral fiction".

1. The Suburb

The pastoral mode in Western literature, with its twin *topoi* of innocence-corruption, nature-worldliness, progress-backwardness is predicated on the dichotomy between the country and the city. Adumbrated by Theocritus, it received its mature form in Virgil's *Eclogues*, the rhetorical writings of Quintilian and Juvenal's satires, reflecting the rise of Rome as a metropolis conceived of as an independent organism, distinctly different from the countryside, which nonetheless lent itself to interpretation through bucolic discourse.[1] This essentially dualistic vision was inherited by American culture but the late eighteenth century saw an important twist to the pattern. Following the lead of Robert Beverley's ambiguity about the myth of the garden in relation to America, a frequent ambiguity in colonial literature, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur and Thomas Jefferson formulated their modulations of pastoral. For Crevecoeur in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), the ideal and most habitable area is the "middle settlement" between the sea ports and the wilderness, between the over-refinement of Europe and the barbarity of the frontier. Jefferson's version of the myth (*Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1781) is a rural scheme with a self-sufficient husbandman, a rational yeoman farmer at the centre.[2]

However, it was more than a century later that a workable idea appeared in Ebenezer Howard's *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1898) of uniting country and city. He discusses a third alternative, besides town and country, the garden city, situated on the outskirts of urban centres whose primary economic attraction (he calls it a "magnet") would be the combination of drawing high wages in a city occupation and paying low rents in the surrounding countryside. This middle landscape was to be placed between the city and Crevecoeur's perfect rural settlements. In other words, suburbia was beginning to take shape.[3]

The appearance of the first suburbs in the USA was caused by the post-Civil War economic boom. Between Appomattox and the end of the nineteenth century New York's population increased by 200 per cent, Chicago grew tenfold, Cleveland — sixfold, Philadelphia had become a city of one

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[1] R. Williams: *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford University Press 1975, p. 46.

[2] L. Marx: *The Machine in the Garden. Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York: Oxford University Press 1967, pp. 114 and 122. Jefferson's attitude to this Virgilian conception of America underwent considerable modification, especially in his late life, after the two terms of office as president, when he came round to accept the prospect of moderate industrialization as a prerequisite for national sovereignty.

[3] S. Donaldson: *The Suburban Myth*. New York: Columbia University Press 1969, pp. 26—27.

million inhabitants. The pressure to leave the congested downtown districts was enormous. In consequence, suburban settlements began to ring, at first, Boston, New York and Philadelphia. The process accelerated in the 1920s but it was after Second World War that it became a planned activity reaching massive proportions emblematized by Abraham, William Jaird and Alfred Levitt of the Levitt and Sons contracting firm.

In the early 1940s the company obtained a government contract to build 1600 war workers' houses in Norfolk, Virginia.[4] After the war they returned to Long Island where they had started in 1929 and in 1946 built 2250 houses in Roslyn (the price range was $17,500 to $23,500). Simultaneously, however, they began to buy up land in the Town of Hempstead for what was to become the largest housing project in US history. After greatly extending their operations, coordinating (vertical integration of subsidiary companies; exclusive subcontracting) and mechanizing work, they completed Island Trees, renamed Levittown, not much later, in the autumn of 1947. It was initially intended for war veterans renting and/or buying their first homes under the terms of the GI Bill. The basic model was a two-bedroom Cape Cod house of 750 square feet, plain and practical, not meant to excite refined taste but to provide accommodation at the most affordable price. Soon there were scarcely any left for rental, since their price of $7,990 made purchase possible for most middle-class families (ranch houses in the same development sold for $9,500). Levittown became a community of 17 400 detached, single-family houses and 82 000 residents for whom much more was provided than just shelter. Curvilinear streets contributed to the desired effect of a garden community; trees were planted; village greens, swimming pools, baseball diamonds and as many as sixty playgrounds provided leisure time facilities. Many cultural critics refused to grant the place merit, Lewis Mumford disliked the idea of social uniformity in a place where most people belong to the same income bracket, both he and Paul Goldberger found the design backward and ugly. Yet the residents were enthusiastic, and the Levitts proceeded to build another Levittown in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and a third one in Willinboro, New Jersey, both within commuting distance to Philadelphia.

Irrespective of developer and financing plan involved, the post-Second World War II (between 1945—1973) housing projects reveal a number of shared characteristics. The first is peripheral location — mass production technology made it cheaper to build out of town than to revitalize inner-city lots. Second, the new developments were characterized by low density as even row houses fell out of fashion and detached houses surrounded by their own plots became the order of the day. The third characteristic

[4] The discussion of Levittown is based on: K.T. Jackson: *Crabgrass Frontier*: *The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press 1985, pp. 234—245.

was architectural uniformity. Until the 1920s most American regions had recognizable local styles, but in the years following the Great War the Cape Cod became the first national house model; coast to coast, American subdivisions were beginning to look very much alike. The improved Cape Cod won the day after the Second World War, to be soon replaced by the split-level, the ranch, the modified colonial — a succession of styles that had one thing in common: they were national, not regional. Fourth, mass production, large-scale government financing, economic prosperity resulting in high wages and low interest rates rendered house purchase more easily available. The fifth common characteristic was economic as well as racial uniformity. The former was ensured by the prices, the latter by realtors and community authorities. William Levitt officially refused to sell to black customers until the early 1960s making it clear that either the housing problem is solved or an attempt is made to solve the racial problem, but combining the two is impossible. (Ironically, as the original residents moved up and out, the Levittown of New Jersey had become a largely black suburb [38 per cent of the population in 1980]). In most American cities such decisions created latter-day racial segregation reinforced by automobile ownership, i.e. an additional economic factor. Although zoning had first been introduced in New York in 1916 to limit land speculation and congestion, it was subsequently used to protect affluent residential districts from intruders (mostly blacks and poor people) and industry.

The most exhaustive study of suburbia from the anthropological standpoint is *Crestwood Heights*: *A Study of the Culture of Suburban Life* by Elizabeth Loosley, David Riesman, John Seeley and Alexander Sim.[5] The suburb in question is situated in central Canada and is meant by the researchers to be representative of similar places in all of North America. In selecting it for scrutiny they decided that "[t]he community should be (1) close to Big City, (2) autonomous with respect to its school system, (3) of a high degree of literacy and (4) economically well off".[6] Since it is located in the neighbourhood of a large university, as well as for reasons stated above, the sort of suburb discussed here is substantially different from a lower middle class one, like the Long Island Levittown. Crestwood Heights is a separate municipality within a larger urban area but it is also a community in the sense of a network of human relations as they are revealed in the operation of the many local institutions: family, civic centre, church, school, club, charity organization, Women Voters' League and so on.

Relations between the suburb and Big City are of crucial importance. The names given to suburbs, such as Spruce Manor or Maple Dell, indicate

[5] E.W. Loosley, D. Riesman, J.R. Seeley and R.A. Sim: *Crestwood Heights*: *A Study of the Culture of Suburban Life*. New York: Basic Books 1956.

[6] Ibid., 428.

closeness to nature and a quality of homeyness, with a possible spot of exoticism thrown in in Spanish names like Buena Vista Park.[7] In the Chicago metropolitan area there are as many as twenty-four communities with either "Park" or "Forest" in their names, including a Park Forest and a Forest Park. The names are not supposed to provide accurate description, instead they are intended to evoke bucolic imagery (East Paterson, New Jersey became Elmwood Park and East Detroit — Erin Heights). "That name [Crestwood Heights — K.K.-T.] suggests, as it is clearly meant to do, the sylvan, the natural and the romantic, the lofty and serene, the distant but not withdrawn; the suburb that looks out upon, and over the city, not in it or of it, but at its border and on its crest".[8] A Crestwood Heights address connotes a great deal of prestige; it betokens a distant, superior location while involving the practical but highly desirable consequence of being within reach of metropolitan facilities. Obviously, commuting is a basic consideration. The distance between home and office must be sufficient to render the former a refuge, yet not too large lest traveling to work become a serious liability. Time and energy must be managed sensibly so as to make the best of both worlds: downtown occupation and suburban residence.[9] Since such a community as Crestwood Heights is a privileged one by many standards, the element of aspiration, ambition is vital. A suburb like this does not reflect American reality, it chases the American Dream.

However, there is a twist to the Dream. Since the community consists of transient nuclear families, and social status cannot be measured by kinship or other traditional ties of belonging, there is an increased tendency to seek prestige through material prosperity. This is revealed in both material objects (house, automobile, furniture, works of art) and in non-material status indices ("stocks, bonds, membership in exclusive clubs, attendance at

[7] Inevitably, street names in such developments will follow suit, as in Garrison Keillor's satire: "The *streets!* Harold has readers on Melody Lane, Flamingo Way, Terpsichore Terrace, West Danube Pass, Ventura Vista, Arcadia Crescent, Alabaster Boulevard — look at the checks, it's as if everyone who left town resolved never to live on a numbered street or an avenue named for a President or a common plant, nor on a Street or Avenue *period*, but on Lanes, Circles, Courts, Alleys, Places, Drives, Roads, Paths, Rows, Trails, with names like Edelweiss, Scherzo, Galaxy, Mylar, Sequoia, Majorca, Cicada, Catalpa, Vitalis, Larva, Ozone, Jasper, Eucalyptus, Fluorine, Acrilan, Andromeda — an atlas of the ideal and fantastic, from Apex, Bliss, and Camelot through Kenilworth, Londonderry, Malibu, Narcissus, to Walden, Xanadu, Yukon, and Zanzibar, plus all the forestry variations, Meadowglade, Meadowdale, Meadowglen, -wood, -grove, -ridge". G. Keillor: *Lake Wobegon Days*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber 1991, pp. 251—252. Kenneth Jackson concurs with Keillor's satire when he points out that beginning in the 1920s American residential developers started to abandon the grid plan and "name rights-of-way with utter disregard for topography, function and history". K.T. Jackson: *Crabgrass Frontier…*, p. 273.

[8] E.W. Loosley *et al.*: *Crestwood Heights…*, pp. 4—5.

[9] Ibid., pp. 26—27.

private schools"[10]). Yet vying for status is not supposed to indicate just vanity and greed. Suburbanites claim they pursue the Dream for the sake of their children. Life is centred around children, the reward of the good life is there all the time, since the adults see their children grow and participate in the joys of family life, but it is also constantly deferred. Living in Crestwood Heights is in itself a reward, but it is hardly a blithe life. Privilege means constant exertion and sacrifice, and the Crestwooders are prepared to pay the price with anxiety and struggle.[11] The suburban frame of mind has to reconcile the dialectic pressures of competition with neighbourliness, family-oriented life with vigorous participation in community affairs, the craving for consumption of material abundance and deeply felt advisability of deferring some satisfactions for children's sake (I shall return to the place of children in the suburban life style when discussing William Whyte's study).

Despite the fact that most residents are certain they will live in a succession of houses, each of those dwelling places must meet the same basic requirements. Size is crucial. "The house … must be large enough to ensure privacy and symbolize success — but not so large as to chill contact or to make maintenance crippling".[12] Although it is customary to underline that one's is a "home", not merely a "house", a Crestwood residence keeps careful equilibrium between privacy and display. The areas set aside for hospitality and display: the living-room, dining-room, in some houses the hall or reception room, the "rumpus" room are kept strictly apart from the more private upstairs rooms (in some houses the kitchen and the householder's study belong to yet another realm — there are infinite degrees of privacy).[13] However, should the visitor venture upstairs, s/he is accompanied on the first trip and carefully instructed which door to enter in order to spare her/him the embarrassment of having to knock on the bathroom door, entering a bedroom or laundry room. To be on the safe side, "[t]he bedroom doors are so hung that they can be left ajar, for the tightly closed door in the emancipated house should not be necessary, but at the same time they should screen the bed and dressing table from the casual glance".[14]

This aspect of self-conscious theatricality of living is best exemplified by the picture window. Since it is not located at the back, overlooking the garden, but in the front, its function is both to give the view of the street (though for this function alone a much smaller window would be sufficient) and to allow the observer to look in. "The window is spacious, but it will not open; it is large, but it is often hooded by heavy drapes; it reveals an

[10] Ibid., p. 7.
[11] Ibid., p. 6.
[12] Ibid., p. 26.
[13] Ibid., p. 49.
[14] Ibid., p. 55.

interesting room, but the revelation merely encourages the imagination to speculate on all others".[15] There is obvious coquetry in that.

In consequence of the above arrangements, lifestyles and living standards in Crestwood Heights are matters of nuance. Although convention dictates general rules of proper conversation, such as avoidance of controversial topics or repressing true emotions for the sake of amiability and entertainment of the guests, what is actually talked about differs depending on those present, and thus a suburbanite may conform to people slightly higher or lower than themselves in status, but the difference should not be too large. Questions of social position, as well as taste, however, are highly volatile. There is a great deal of anxiety about some material possessions, like works of art, with which the house is decorated. Lacking the necessary wealth and/or judgment, sometimes also the desire, to buy paintings of very famous artists, the suburbanite acquires objects which are supposed to provide him with pleasure and confirm his status. "Rather than a Renoir, Crestwooders will buy an Emily Carr, a William Winter, an Arthur Lismer; or, at a lower economic level, good reproductions of modern artists. But these purchases pose nagging questions. Is the object still in style? Is it *passé*? Or is it already 'coming back' "?[16] In a very mobile society these are difficult questions. Residents of Crestwood Heights are too transient to be able to confer prestige on their own possessions; instead, they desire for these possessions to attest to their status.

Transience indeed appears to be one of the chief characteristics of the suburban way of life. In his celebrated *The Organization Man* William Whyte focuses on a different kind of community, an apartment court tract housing development, his main case study being Park Forest, Illinois. The dominant group of residents at the time of Whyte's research were young executive trainees in the 26—35 age bracket and their families. Because of their age and very high upward mobility they tended to look on Park Forest as a way station.[17] As corporate policy involves frequent transfers, the suburbanites are eager for stability, or at least tokens thereof. Whyte found them touchy on the subject of annual turnover rate, running in Park Forest between 35 per cent for the rental apartments and 20 per cent for the homes area.[18] In Levittown, Pennsylvania, this anxiety manifested itself in a very emblematic manner. In one Protestant church with a growing congregation the minister decided to introduce cathedral chairs instead of fixed pews. This was resented by many church members and it was only after some effort that the clergyman was able to ascertain that what they specifically disapproved

[15] Ibid., p. 50.
[16] Ibid., p. 51.
[17] W.H. Whyte: *The Organization Man*. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1967, p. 259.
[18] Ibid., pp. 279, 263.

of was the fact that the chairs moved, suggesting transience. Once kneeling stools were added to hold the chairs firm, the complaints stopped.[19]

What Whyte emphasizes is that life in the package suburb is communal, with analogies pointed out by residents themselves, variously, to the early colonial settlements, the frontier, the college dormitory ("sorority house with kids"), the Army post.[20] One of the consequences is the fever of participation in civic organizations. Although they may stress they are not joiners, they feel compelled to assert their belonging. Additionally, volunteering for the Elks, the Husanwif Club, the League of Women Voters, the Rotary Club, the Great Books Course or the Protestant Men's Club is enforced by the fact that one's neighbours belong to so many organizations that they impose a standard of civic involvement. Since the court way of life is predicated on exchange, even rotation of many possessions (children's bikes, toys, silverware, books), a premium is put on group acceptance.[21] In consequence, the court breeds pressure to conform in things large and small. In some cases, for instance, residents of an area agree to unify the design and colour scheme for garages, and lack of adjustment is frowned on in so many subtle ways any *Kaffeeklatsching* society has at its disposal that the result is either toeing the line or nervous breakdown.[22] Indeed, the court residents sometimes admit to a feeling of imprisonment in the group, yet they persevere since they regard their immersion in the group as a moral duty. The group becomes both a tyrant and a friend, participation binds the community members even as it cramps their freedom. Thus in a way the communitarian tyranny is self-imposed, the suburbanites are bullied by their own sense of normalcy and the only way to cope with the situation is to recognize the predicament for what it is — the inevitable consequence of belonging. The more benevolent the pressure, the more important it is to realize its true nature.[23] Thus the court imposes intimacy, forcing the residents to open up; it is even possible to trace spatial lines along which friendships are made in package suburbs, some friendships are almost inevitable because of certain predictable patterns of social life.[24]

Despite all that, suburbanites are strongly egalitarian and adamant in their belief in the classlessness of suburbia. Though personal backgrounds differ and a sizable proportion are no more at first than aspirants to the middle class, the suburb is indeed a powerful leveller. Whyte goes as far as

[19] Ibid., p. 347.

[20] Ibid., pp. 258—259. It should be pointed out that Park Foresters' sophistication enables them to analyze sociological implications of their way of life.

[21] Ibid., pp. 264—265.

[22] Ibid., pp. 330—331.

[23] Ibid., pp. 333—336.

[24] Ibid., pp. 323 and 304.

to call it "the second great melting pot",[25] which is especially true of political attitudes — the tendency is for people to become more conservative, newcomers to suburbia from former metropolitan Democratic wards turning Republican. The putative classlessness becomes problematic when it comes to approving and financing relative luxuries, such as the Aquacentre pool in Park Forest, which turned out to be a socially stratifying factor contributing to the emergence of a country-club set of sorts.[26] Another situation in which the egalitarian spirit was put to the test was the possibility of admitting Negroes. A minority were idealistic enough to embrace the idea, many, particularly former downtown Chicago residents who left precisely because the inner city was being taken over by blacks, were against it. Eventually, like in Levittown, the residents voted to drop the plan. The very introduction of the project proved divisive, leaving a festering wound especially in moderate Park Foresters by exposing them to a conflict of ideas they could not resolve.

However, the suburb is not all about egalitarianism and its failings, the suburban temper combines the egalitarian spirit with a pronounced tendency to climb the ladder. Dwellings are constantly modified, but purchasing household appliances and furniture is subject to careful consideration. Buying a dishwasher when most of one's neighbours do not have one may be regarded as showing off and sour the relations; conversely, lagging behind with acquisition of a state-of-the-art television set is bound to be noted. In other words, "[i]t is the group that determines when a luxury becomes a necessity",[27] precarious balance must be preserved at all times between keeping up and keeping down with the Joneses. The only steady aspect of the process is its upward tendency. In both Park Forest and Levittown, Pennsylvania, as Whyte demonstrates, a tendency made itself felt to go upmarket in customers' tastes and shopping habits. Indeed, so rapid is the revision of what constitutes the acceptable living standard that many suburban mall operators find it difficult to keep up with the dynamics of patrons' buying patterns.[28] However, this process has its internal logic and duration.

> Because small differences are magnified in suburbia, people can upgrade themselves in one location just so long; after they reach a certain income level, there is a strong pressure on them to move, for they cannot otherwise live up to their incomes without flouting the sensibilities of the others.[29]

[25] Ibid., p. 276.
[26] Ibid., pp. 286—287.
[27] Ibid., p. 289.
[28] Ibid., p. 291.
[29] Ibid., p. 292.

And conversely, the most serious aspect of suburban vulnerability is the danger of falling below a certain income level that makes keeping up possible. The magnifying glass effect brings great pressure to bear upon residents who may find it hard to endure especially if they are newcomers to the middle class. Tottering on the brink of the suburban good-life standard is acceptable for a limited time only, in the long run it is bound to meet with disapproval as "[s]uburbia does not condone shabby gentility".[30] The community will not allow its self-image and quality of life to suffer — either you keep up or you move out.

The process of suburbanization is seen by some social critics as a pernicious phenomenon. Kenneth Jackson, for instance, views it as part of the fragmentation of the modern city in the USA pointing out a shift in how the very word "suburb" has been used. Originally, it indicated a relationship between the city and its periphery, nowadays it implies a distance and distinction from it.[31] With the exception of Indianapolis, Memphis, Jacksonville, Oklahoma City, Houston, Phoenix, and Dallas, most American cities in the late twentieth century were unable to extend their boundaries through annexation of outlying areas. Instead of consolidation and urban development, suburbanites "are worried about real-estate values, educational quality, and personal safety".[32] In all three respects cities as such, particularly the inner city, compare unfavourably to suburbia whose residents choose not to be absorbed into Big City.

Their resolution manifests itself in the distance from the city centre and the means to defeat the distance — the automobile. However, availability of cars, useful as they are to the individual, has dire consequences for people's civic participation and sense of belonging. According to Kenneth Jackson

> [a] major casualty of America's drive-in culture is the weakened "sense of community" which prevails in most metropolitan areas. I refer to a tendency for social life to become "privatised", and to a reduced feeling of concern and responsibility among families for their neighbors and among suburbanites in general for residents of the inner city.[33]

This is certainly true, although one cannot help observing that apart from the processes of urban alienation and fragmentation there is a simple shift of sensibility at work here which has more to do with size than civic attitudes: many cities have grown so large that it is very difficult to identify with them. Once the metropolis becomes too extensive and complex to un-

[30] Ibid., p. 284.
[31] K.T. Jackson: *Crabgrass Frontier…*, p. 272.
[32] Ibid., p. 276.
[33] Ibid., p. 272.

derstand, let alone circum-ambulate, dwindling human scale begins to account for social anomie. But even that needs to be qualified — as has been said earlier, the suburbanite is apt to participate in an inordinate number of social activities but they have to be based in the local community, the Greater Chicago or the Los Angeles metropolitan region are too unwieldy and abstract concepts to evoke loyalty. On the other hand, such critics as Kenneth Jackson or Robert C. Wood are correct in pointing out suburban resistance to urban culture in America.

> What is striking in the lives of most residents is the frequency with which they choose not to avail themselves of the variety of experiences the metropolis affords, the manner in which they voluntarily restrict their interests and associations to the immediate vicinity, and the way in which they decline contacts with the larger society.[34]

Yet this phenomenon must be viewed in the context of the tremendous technological changes affecting American civilization since the late nineteenth century.

Front porch life and sidewalk social intercourse have largely disappeared as a result of some modern inventions. The sociability of the past was in a way enforced by bad ventilation and heat. Before window screening was introduced in the late 1880s, gnats, flies and mosquitoes moved freely through living quarters; the veranda lifestyle, prevalent in the USA until the Second World War, which encouraged and facilitated meeting friends, courting as well as kitchen activities such as shelling peas, arose largely because the climate rendered indoor life difficult. The advent of the automobile decreased interest in some of these aspects of social intercourse, since one no longer had to wait for things to happen on the sidewalk and could drive to the theatre or a meeting with friends. Subsequently, the invention of the phonograph, radio, television encouraged people even more to move indoors; so did the telephone. The lethal blow to the communal intercourse of front-porch life was delivered by the introduction of air-conditioning, invented by Willis H. Carrier in 1906, making life so much easier, more hygienic, family-oriented, besides making it possible to reclaim waste land to build new towns and cities.

Suburban life, boosted by increased home ownership and the flourishing do-it-yourself industry, has shifted to the back yard. The modern suburban ideal is a three- or four-bathroom house provided with "a patio or a swimming pool for friendly outdoor living. Many back yards are overequipped, even sybaritic, with hot tubs, gas-fired barbecue grills, and

[34] Ibid., p. 279.

changing cabanas".[35] Leisure-time activities have become focused around the house. In that sense the suburban spirit is indeed homebound and indifferent to the allure of urban life.

Kenneth Jackson makes one more important assertion. Although he is able to demonstrate the draining away of middle- and upper-income urban dwellers to the outer boroughs and later to suburbia in historical perspective, he claims that the process was not inevitable. The coming of the automobile did precipitate the process, but even that is not sufficient to explain its massive proportions and enormous impact on contemporary social life. Although many urban professionals still have to rely on downtown offices and operations centres to conduct their business, the modern American city, due to a number of highly idiosyncratic socio-historical circumstances, has become segregated by income and race.[36] In terms of the general standards of civilization, suburbia has benefited from this shift, the inner city has become the loser and the traditional social structure of the city has had to be redefined. A new type of man has emerged, along with a specific lifestyle.

A number of sociologists and journalists, most of them women, have focused on the gender aspect of the rise of suburbia. Margaret Marsh, who studies the phenomenon in the Progressive Era, the 1920s and after the Second World War, emphasizes that although the original form of the suburban ideal revolved primarily around men, involving questions of property ownership while attempting to retain the graces of the agrarian lifestyle, the early twentieth century saw the emergence of a new ideal which included the concept of domesticity.

> Animated by vast socioeconomic and technological changes, which included new gender roles and new attitudes toward childrearing, upper-middle class women and men alike looked to the suburbs as the appropriate place to develop a new kind of family life. In the years before the United States' involvement in World War I, middleclass suburbanites took up the idea of marital togetherness, husbands became intensely involved in the day-to-day domestic lives of their families, and both parents interested themselves in childrearing. For many of the suburbanites themselves, suburban life did seem almost idyllic. But the idyll was costly to others, and the price of suburbia was the exclusion of heterogeneity.[37]

By the 1920s, this connection between conjugal togetherness and suburban life had congealed into an almost inseparable unity. The myth, however, modulated from the initial model of almost complete masculine domestic-

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., p. 275.

[37] M. Marsh: *Suburban Lives*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 1990, p. 182.

ity to one in which men were beginning to lose interest whereas women were running the affairs at home, organizing events for the whole family, including the husbands, to participate in as well as assuming the responsibility for keeping romance alive.[38]

The suburban discourse of the 1950s harked back to the 1920s. The central idea was still marital togetherness, involving participation in housework (keeping the garage clean, lawn mowing, playing with children), yet a mutual sense of entrapment was making itself felt. As suburbia burgeoned, becoming accessible to larger segments of the society, notably the skilled white working class, home ownership climbed while double income families proliferated. Pressure on women began to rise; "…to buy the washer and dryer, to acquire a second car so that the children could be driven to the Girl Scouts or baseball games, women continued to hold down jobs outside the home".[39] At the same time, the Eisenhower era saw a different phenomenon, relating mainly to upper-middle class families.

In her famous *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan discusses the large-scale movement to the suburbs in terms of the idea of seeking fulfilment in the home, a momentous shift in the social consciousness of college-educated American women. Leaving the city for suburbia, women in upper-income families usually decided to become full-time housewives.[40] Friedan argues that some time after the birth of the first or the second child, the mystique of fulfilment in the home "hits" American women so that they are ready to give up their jobs and move to the suburbs in order to provide a better environment for the children to grow up in. In the case of families where the wife intends to follow an independent career, the family is more likely to remain in the city where university evening courses as well as abundant cleaning help and day-care centres facilitate work towards a graduate degree and pursuit of professional life.

In suburbia, these highly qualified women gradually abandon ambitions in community life so that most volunteer jobs are taken by men. The excuse customarily made is that a housewife cannot take time away from her family. However, Friedan demonstrates, the mechanism is different: once she has taught herself not to seek commitment outside the home, "she evades it by stepping up her domestic routine until she is truly trapped".[41] Even the open plan of the split-level house or the "ranch", which effectively does away with woman's privacy by ensuring that she is never separated from the children, does not make it necessary to keep expanding the housework. According to Friedan, "housework is not the interminable chore that wom-

[38] Ibid., p. 184.
[39] Ibid., p. 186.
[40] B. Friedan: *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Dell 1970, p. 233.
[41] Ibid., p. 235.

en claim it is".[42] Brainwashed by the feminine fulfilment idea, the suburban housewife is no longer able to conceive of her life in any other capacity.

As the process of suburbanization of the USA continued, however, it was beginning to be obvious that the very idea of suburb was undergoing dramatic changes. One, starting in the 1960s, was the impact of feminist thought which promulgated alternative concepts of feminine fulfilment while dismantling the myth of the exceptional suitability of suburbia for childrearing. This in turn was made possible because the bedroom suburb was not a suburb anymore, it had become a "technoburb" (Robert Fishman's term), an entirely new kind of city, with fully independent facilities and institutions. The logic of decentralization of housing, education, industry, population transfer, has run its course. The ties with Big City, at first only weakened, have been severed. An era has ended. Margaret Marsh foresees a moment in the near future when the middle-class suburb of the mid-twentieth century filled with Cape Cod detached houses, like Levittown, will become a museum artifact, like Monticello or Williamsburg.[43]

Students of suburbia in the USA are almost inevitably its harsh critics. The bulk of literature on the suburb is hostile to its subject matter, the socio-political perspective is for the most part liberal, generalizations made are very often grossly irrelevant. From William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique,* studies of the subject are barely able to conceal their own bias. The suburb's greatest sins supposedly include: uniformity; relentlessly middle-class character; excessive civic activity; transience; inordinate focus on childrearing; female domination; suburbs are "Beulah lands of return to religion; political Jordans from which Democrats emerge Republicans".[44] Some critics, such as John Keats or Max Lerner, praise the town of the past (their own past; obviously, a Paradise Lost of their privileged upper-middle class childhoods) and condemn contemporary suburbia, seldom stopping to reflect that the majority of people in those well-nigh prelapsarian times could not afford the kind of life Keats and Lerner eulogize. The suburbanite is accused of excessive conformity and moulding his opinion after his friends and neighbours (as if it were possible to be entirely independent in one's values) or too individualistic and competitive. Likewise, scholars present suburban life as a mess: schools are either inadequate or surreptitiously streamed to accommodate only the most gifted students; even church attendance is viewed as a corollary of the vile middle-class ways — on weekdays one shops for groceries, on Sunday for redemp-

[42] Ibid., p. 238.
[43] M. Marsh: *Suburban Lives…*, p. 188.
[44] S. Donaldson: *The Suburban Myth…*, p. 5.

tion.[45] Such criticism fails to account for the fact of suburbs being very different from each other; charging all with the problems of some renders the critical process absurd.

The view frequently taken by some critics, for instance Hal Burton and John Keats, is that get-rich-quick developers ravage the country erecting shoddy residential estates which will inevitably degenerate into little better than slums in next to no time. They blame the builders for cupidity while blithely ignoring the fact that the USA at the peak of the suburban boom of the late 1940s and 1950s was starved of affordable housing. Similarly, standardization of design, so often made repugnant, results from the attempt to keep construction costs down, not from attraction to ugliness. Furthermore, the common tendency of many suburban home owners to introduce alterations is discounted as irrelevant. For many social commentators

> [t]he point is that all these alterations and redecorations are not efforts to express individuality at all, but merely attempts to keep up with the Joneses. The suburbanite, clearly, can't win. If he leaves his home as he found it, he is accused of standardization and conformity; if he attempts to alter his home, he is accused of a shallow competition for status.[46]

Given the social and political bias of most critics of suburbia, it is only to be expected that their solution to the problems, real or imaginary, of the suburb: uniformity and ugliness, will be in more enlightened supervision, specifically, more planning. What they seem to overlook, however, is that case studies in their own books, like Levittowns across the USA or Park Forest, Illinois, are communities which had the benefit of very thorough planning and still they came under very severe criticism.[47]

Even the practice of friendship and neighbouring incurs the critics' scorn. From Max Lerner to John Keats to J.D.J. Sadler one comes across images of suburban socializing as silly and stifling. As has been said earlier, in the discussion of Crestwood Heights and in the account of *The Organization Man*, there may be an element of compulsion in the patterns of social relationships in some communities at some times. Yet reducing all suburban bonding to *Kaffeeklatsching* in the morning, bridge playing in the evening, in short, meaningless contacts based on mere spatial proximity, limiting one's possibilities for individual growth, is by far an inadequate and unjust description.[48] Besides, if there is so much neighbouring going on it becomes difficult to fully accept the grim vision of some feminist studies in which

[45] Ibid., p. 19.
[46] Ibid., p. 9.
[47] Ibid., p. 7.
[48] Ibid., p. 12.

one of the most serious indictments of suburbia is woman's loneliness.[49] It takes plenty of ill will to vilify the suburb so much.

Similarly, the picture of the suburbanite usually involves one of the two extremes: he is either portrayed "as an apolitical animal, apathetic, unintelligent, nonparticipating"[50] or else as too dedicated, too politically conscious, but always misguided in his archaic allegiance to the local community instead of the metropolitan area; what is even worse, he is likely to vote conservative. In this classic no-win situation he is either accused of escaping his social obligations in choosing not to identify with the whole urban organism (that is the line taken by Peter Blake in *God's Own Junkyard*), however large and difficult to identify with, or conceived of as a sinister, egoistic schemer (C.W. Griffin's stance).

The uncritically liberal position most critics of the suburb assume provides a partial explanation of this lopsided vision. However, as Scott Donaldson argues, underlying the bitterness of the attack is something more profound: unrealistic, inflated expectations. Put together, what these various critiques of suburbia come down to is nothing less than failure to realize the collective American dream — the almost rural community of enlightened responsible yeomen, i.e. an essentially eighteenth-century concept updated to include the best modern civilization has to offer.[51] If some people expected so much, they were bound to be disappointed. The problem of the suburb is not that it is irresponsible, ungenerous, too old-fashioned or too modern, the problem lies in the overblown expectations of most critics and some suburbanites. A myth founded on so contradictory hopes must fail.

2. Lionel Trilling's Adversarial Criticism

The impact of Lionel Trilling's work on American literature will be evaluated here from the perspective of three problem areas: 1) the notion of reality; 2) liberalism; 3) his mode of criticism in general and criticism of the novel specifically. *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) remains his most influential work, and within it the essay called "Reality in America". Trilling's polemic with V.L. Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought*, in particular, the legacy of the latter's view of reality constitutes the bulk of the essay. According to Trilling, this view, predicated on middle class presuppositions about

[49] Ibid., p. 20.
[50] Ibid., p. 16.
[51] Ibid., pp. 2—3, 22.

culture, opposes "the genteel and the academic" and is "in alliance with the vigorous and the actual".[52] Parrington supposedly believes in an immutable, external, irreducible reality; the artist's supreme task and skill is this reality's competent, sincere reflection whereas his great sin consists in "turning away from it", hence his mistrust of the fantastic/unreal/romantic.[53] In other words, *Main Currents in American Thought* endorses "the chronic American belief that there exists an opposition between reality and mind and that one must enlist oneself in the party of reality".[54] In another essay Trilling adds that "[t]he word *reality* is an honorific word and the future historian will naturally try to discover our notion of its pejorative opposite, appearance, mere appearance".[55] He deprecates Theodore Dreiser's writing, its "awkwardness, the chaos, the heaviness which we associate with 'reality'. In the American metaphysic reality is always material reality, hard, resistant, unformed, impenetrable, and unpleasant".[56] This scathing reading of Dreiser is meant simultaneously to be a vindication of Henry James, one of the critic's favourite novelists.

Arguing against such simplistic positivism, Trilling asserts that "to miss the primacy of complication — of ambiguity, variousness, difficulty — is to fail to grasp the very nature of America's everyday actuality".[57] Against Parrington, he insists, for instance, that Hawthorne's rendering of reality, the *substantial* reality, the ideas, is competent and beautiful. According to Phillip Barrish, in this kind of argument

> Trilling both explains his taste for Hawthorne and demonstrates his own critical acumen by pointing us toward the *real* earthiness in Hawthorne's work, a substantial actuality that is in itself constituted by epistemological difficulty and which a critic such as Parrington, for all his talk about hard realities, cannot locate.[58]

His taste allows him to dismiss the validity of the rough, material, "down-below" (Stuart Hall's word) conception of reality, or, to put it differently, interrogate its purchase on real reality and argue not only his own vision of the relative merits of such writers as Henry James or Nathaniel Hawthorne, but also joust for prestige that accrues to a critic capable of impos-

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[52] L. Trilling: *The Liberal Imagination*: *Essays on Literature and Society*. Middlesex, England and Victoria, Australia: Penguin 1970, p. 17.

[53] Ibid., pp. 18—19.

[54] Ibid., p. 24.

[55] Ibid., p. 217.

[56] Ibid., p. 26.

[57] P. Barrish: *American Literary Realism, Critical Theory and Intellectual Prestige, 1880—1995*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001, p. 134.

[58] Ibid.

ing his own terms of debate, particularly those defining the fundamental categories like reality. What is at stake is the consensus on the prerequisites for relevant criticism.[59] Thus when Trilling contests Parrington's accolades for Dreiser, he insists on a more complex vision of reality while asserting his own superior ability to distinguish, name and mediate it. On the other hand, the authority he seeks, the authority of competent assessment of the intricacies of cerebral fiction, is reinforced by his involvement in radical criticism in the 1930s.

> Throughout Trilling's career, this hey!-reality-is-right-in-front-of-your-eyes move does play a less prominent role in his criticism than does the reality-is-too-complicated-for-your-simplistic-epistemology move, but at key moments he employs the former to supplement the latter. And, at every juncture Trilling insists that to better grasp the nature of literature's constitutive reality, however he at that moment defines it, is also to have better taste.[60]

Shuttling between these two stances: exhortation to literal, ingenuous reading of reality and dropping excessive sophistication that stands in our way of such an attitude; and denial of the authority of down-to-earth, visceral, non-pretty reality as cognitively false, Trilling establishes a virtually unassailable critical position in that he controls how reality is understood in the criticism of realist literature.

His second major preoccupation is liberalism and liberal literary criticism. Trilling believes that liberalism is America's only intellectual tradition, conservatism and reaction being incapable of producing viable ideological systems. However, while discounting the systemic feebleness of the right, he is aware that liberalism is "a large tendency rather than a concise body of doctrine",[61] a sentiment rather than an idea. This sentiment, although primarily political, relates to a certain vision of life, upholding specific emotive attitudes, hence the connection between politics and literary criticism.

The place of emotion in liberal sensibility is complex. Liberalism values some emotive concepts, such as happiness, and endeavours to organize them into a system but in the process it reduces its worldview to what it can effectively explain, developing protocols of knowledge which rationalize the reduction. Thus in an attempt to enhance life, freedom and rationality, it limits its concept of the human mind to mechanical reflexes.[62] This unwitting, subconscious simplification constitutes one of the great dangers of

[59] Ibid., p. 132.
[60] Ibid., p. 137.
[61] Ibid., p. 10.
[62] Ibid., pp. 12—13.

modern liberal discourse. It is the task of literary criticism, Trilling asserts, "to recall liberalism to its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty".[63] Literature is especially well suited to this job since contemporary writing so often engages with politics, but also because it gives the most complete account of the various intellectual challenges mentioned above.

In accordance with these multiple tasks Trilling's critical *oeuvre* contains only one extensive study, his doctoral dissertation published as *Matthew Arnold* and two short books: on E.M. Forster and S. Freud, the bulk of it being essays, articles and reviews (they make up his most influential books *The Liberal Imagination* [1950], *The Opposing Self* [1955] and *A Gathering of Fugitives* [1956]). It is then tempting to go along with his own opinion that his concerns were diverse, the texts being mostly ordered by publishers. W.M. Frohock disagrees with this view, identifying in Trilling's work what he terms "a unity of concern".

> About the most scattered and disparate subjects he is forever asking the same questions: about the moral implications of our arts, about the ideational substructure of politics, about the position or predicament of an intellectual class in an anti-intellectual world, about the impact of our discoveries of the irrational and subrational, about the relation of fiction to the structure of society, about the nature of culture itself.[64]

Most of the above questions appear irrespective of what problem or subject Trilling is addressing and most constitute the central concerns of post-Second World War liberalism.

Douglas Tallack points out that in *The Liberal Imagination* "Trilling calls for a less complacent, more self-critical liberalism than that of the 1920s and 1930s".[65] In this period, while rejecting psychoanalysis as a remedy, he nonetheless formulated his conception of tragic realism on the basis of Freud's rendering of humanity's basic dilemmas, particularly that of inevitable limitations. At the same time, by the late 1940s, having found Marxism irrelevant in the face of the complexities of the modern society and Trilling had come under the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr's Progressive-Pragmatist existentialist theology, especially Niebuhr's trope of irony in understanding the problems of the USA as a liberal superpower wielding weapons of mass destruction as well as his view of the historical relativity of the unity of the

[63] Ibid., p. 14.

[64] W.M. Frohock: *Strangers to This Ground*: *Cultural Diversity in Contemporary American Writing*. Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press 1961, p. 21.

[65] D. Tallack: *Twentieth-Century America*: *The Intellectual and Cultural Context*. London and New York: Longman 1991, p. 231.

self.[66] Trilling's radicalism before the Second World War granted him the experience and authority needed to refashion Popular Front progressivism in a way which would be acceptable to the New York intelligentsia. According to Alfred Kazin,

> [p]art of Lionel Trilling's importance on the American literary scene is probably explained by the fact that he has solidified, both in his novel of ideas, *The Middle of the Journey*, and in criticism like *The Liberal Imagination*, that reaction against the false liberalism of the thirties that most intellectuals will accept only from someone whose own experience has been on the left.[67]

This project of "solidification" was partly made possible by "the deep-seated conservatism of Popular Front aesthetics",[68] as it was revealed in *Partisan Review*, particularly, by Philip Rahv and William Phillips in the late 1930s. When the literary right had shed its loyalties to the established order and the left's radicalism had eroded, "culturally oriented criticism … perforce gravitated toward the various models of the 'alienated' avant-garde",[69] Gerald Graff explains. Left and right began to modulate into a community of tastes and ideas which tilted at all systems no matter what their ideological provenance. Trilling's "adversary culture" changed meaning from subverting the established order from inside or opting out of it to denote a sort of "apolitical politics of alienation".[70] Subsequently, a self-serving ideology of modern individualism emerged from this fusion.

Trilling's evolution from Popular Front radicalism in the 1930s to liberalism in the 1940s to neoconservatism two decades later reflects a more general pattern in many pre-war socialists. On the other hand, his orthodox Jewish family background as well as the fact that until 1931 he was on the board of the *Menorah Journal* point to something different. Trilling was the first Jewish faculty member in the English Department at Columbia, but twelve years elapsed between his MA in 1926 and Ph.D. in 1938, and another ten before he became Professor of English.[71] The respective stages of his belated academic career must have contributed to his ideological growth, at first accounting for his radicalism, later inclining him to turn right.

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[66] Ibid., pp. 229—230.

[67] A. Kazin: *On Native Grounds. An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1956, p. 409.

[68] D. Tallack: *Twentieth-Century America…*, p. 232.

[69] G. Graff: "American Criticism Left and Right". In: *Ideology and Classic American Literature*. Eds. S. Bercovitch, M. Jehlen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987, p. 97.

[70] Ibid.

[71] D. Tallack: *Twentieth-Century America…*, p. 410.

By the late 1950s Trilling's perception of the relation between literature and social stability, at first Arnoldian in character, had become more and more sceptical. The cultivation of the adversarial self, estranged from society and indifferent to moral good, that he witnessed in post-war America, disturbed him as "from his secular perspective, the social relationship [was — K.K.-T.] the only source of obligation and authority".[72] Clinging to the earlier belief in the generally beneficial influence of great literature on man's moral imagination and social awareness he found that modern literature recurrently repudiated the connection. His discomfort at this realization can be seen in *A Gathering of Fugitives* (1956) where he identifies "the anti-catharsis, the generally antihygienic effect of bad serious art, the stimulation it gives to all one's neurotic tendencies, the literal, physically-felt depression it induces".[73] In his later texts he questions the idea that art can be of any social use. In *Beyond Culture* (1965) he voices his anxiety about the joint effect of modernist literature and expansion of higher education: the detachment of "the reader from the habits of thought and feeling that the larger culture imposes",[74] which results in perverse fulfilment of the subversive potential of "adversary culture" that consists in exhortation to "the transgression of limits and the cultivation of experience".[75]

The next point to be considered here is Trilling's conception of the novel *vis à vis* reality. In the essay "Manners, Morals and the Novel", following D.H. Lawrence and Henry James, he identifies the basic substance of the novel to be manners of the American middle class, or to be more precise "the attitude toward manners of the literate, reading, responsible middle class of people who are ourselves".[76] Trilling believes that a society's view of manners reveals its concept of reality. He studies the place of money in fiction, snobbery, ambition, to observe that the American novel "diverges from its classic intention which … is the investigation of the problem of reality beginning in the social field".[77] He points out, accurately, that most American fiction writers of genius in the past were only "tangentially" interested in social reality. Trilling praises Henry James for being the only major author who was aware of the necessity of basing fiction on "the ladder of social observation"[78] or, as he puts it elsewhere, "it is inescapably true

[72] S.L. Tanner: "Literary Study and Social Order". *Humanitas* 1999, 12 (2), p. 48.

[73] L. Trilling: *A Gathering of Fugitives*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich [1956] 1978, p. 99.

[74] L. Trilling: *Beyond Culture*: *Essays on Literature and Learning.* Harmondsworth: Penguin 1967, p. 12.

[75] D. Tallack: *Twentieth-Century America…*, p. 314.

[76] L. Trilling: *The Liberal Imagination…*, p. 210.

[77] Ibid., p. 214.

[78] Ibid.

that in the novel manners make men".[79] Yet even here the question of taste in conjunction with social class is paramount — Steinbeck's "doctrinaire affection" for plebeian characters is as lambasted as his prejudice against the middle class.[80]

Trilling raises the dilemmas of moral realism; he claims that his times are unique in attaching enormous significance to moral righteousness.[81] However, he asserts, there are few American books that endeavour to go beyond determinist analysis of living conditions and lauding progressive sensibility in their depiction. What he finds lacking is the investigation of self-congratulatory attitudes, earnest attempts to interrogate "moral indignation" as "the favourite emotion of the middle class".[82] The need for moral realism is barely a question of undue refinement, it is called for by social intercourse. It is the novel that has performed the greatest service to mankind in being "the most effective agent of the moral imagination",[83] a means to teach people about "the extent of human variety and the value of this variety".[84] Differing in social emphasis, Trilling echoes here again the main drift of D.H. Lawrence's argument.

The final point about Trilling I want to make concerns a certain blind spot in his body of thought. When he criticizes writers like Theodore Dreiser, dismantling the latter's claim to authentic colloquialism, he may be venting his irritation with Dreiser's diction but there are two more important things at stake. As has been said earlier, Trilling objects to the sort of writing which targets primarily the seamy side of life on aesthetic grounds yet when he deplores the novelist's cultivation of his lower-class background he may also be waging a personal war. Pointing out that each writer is a product of their milieu and that what is more important is how the writer succeeds in transcending these limitations, Trilling expresses his repugnance to the determinist/naturalist literary attitude, be it sincere or merely posturing, while hinting at himself as an example to the contrary. Yet what this opposition overlooks is the very scope of American culture, "the variations of regional taste and their power over what has been written in America".[85] In other words, tilting at Midwestern philistinism or plebeian crudeness Trilling fails to understand that his own purchase on "the American reality" constitutes only a segment of it, that to embrace the values of New York liberalism may entail the inability to appreciate other areas of experience

[79] Ibid., p. 218.
[80] Ibid., p. 219.
[81] Ibid., p. 221.
[82] Ibid., p. 222.
[83] Ibid., p. 223.
[84] Ibid.
[85] W.M. Frohock: *Strangers to This Ground…*, p. 34.

and styles of expression. An element of combativeness in his writing may be to blame, perhaps also the self-vindication of an ethnic who overcame great adversity in establishing himself as one of the most magisterial voices in the American criticism of the twentieth century.

3. John Gardner's Moral Writing

John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction* was published in 1978 to a chorus of bewilderment and denunciation evoked partly by the radicalism of the book's theoretical principles and partly by the critical account of the work of many contemporary novelists. A common reading of Gardner's study was to regard it as a reaction to the excesses of postmodernism, setting the book against John Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) or Ronald Sukenick's *The Death of the Novel* (1969). Although I will later argue against too easy an acceptance of this approach, as a working hypothesis it certainly is viable. In Part I "Premises on Art and Morality" Gardner claims that many current forms of culture relegate to a peripheral position what should remain at the centre: "Some, like 'conceptual art', evade or suppress the moral issue. Others, like 'post-modernism', accidentally raise the issue of art's morality and take the wrong side".[86] "Taking the wrong" side means indulging in false relativity or assuming postures of fashionable despair, attitudes which appear to have the support of modern science and philosophy. Gardner is immune to this sort of fashionable logic, he refuses to yield to despair and asserts that the more disheartening the scientific vision is, the more scope there is for serious intellectual and moral restoration.[87]

Obviously, he is no Moral Majority preacher, his carefully thought-out argument engages with art as well as modern society.

> That art which tends towards destruction, the art of nihilists, cynics, and merdistes, is not properly art at all. Art is essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death, against entropy. … Art asserts and reasserts those values which hold off dissolution, struggling to keep the mind intact and preserve the city, the mind's safe preserve. Art rediscovers, generation after generation, what is necessary to humanness.[88]

[86] J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction.* New York: Basic Books 1978, p. 55.

[87] D. Cowart: *Arches and Light*: *The Fiction of John Gardner.* Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press 1983, p. 10.

[88] J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction*…, p. 6.

As David Cowart points out, in almost all Gardner ever published art constitutes part of the scheme to combat *Weltschmerz* and death.[89] Moral art always seeks to enhance life, it endeavours to uphold truth. Through references to such writers as Edgar Allan Poe, Marcel Proust and Wallace Stevens, Gardner comes to formulate the core of his artistic creed: "Truth, Goodness, and Beauty are thus, in varying degrees, the fundamental concerns of art and therefore ought to be the fundamental concerns of criticism".[90] Otherwise, he concludes, criticism risks irrelevance. Thus the questions raised by Gardner, besides addressing problems of moral philosophy or ethics, "advocated a return to a judgmental as opposed to a purely or largely exegetical criticism".[91] In a larger perspective, what he emphasizes is utilitarian criticism.

Gardner is impatient with false intellectualism manifesting itself in a predilection for obscurity. Since most readers want to find in a work fiction characters they can identify with or at least understand and accept, he argues,

> an academic striving for opacity suggests, if not misanthropy, a perversity or shallowness that no reader would tolerate except if he is one of those poor milktoast innocents who timidly accept violation of their feelings from a habit of supposing that they must be missing something, or one of those arrogant donzels who chuckle at things obscure because their enjoyment proves to them that they are not like lesser mortals.[92]

Fake elitism combined with inflated appreciation for avant-garde rhetoric was particularly disagreeable to him because it indicated not only cheap literary taste of the contemporary writer and reader alike but also insecurity of the latter faced with the ever-increasing pace of artistic production that has lost balance and strives to cater to the merely fashionable, closing the vicious circle. "The widespread and growing feeling of sympathy for the freakish, the special, the physically and spiritually quirky"[93] may in itself be valuable as it broadens the scope of contemporary sensibility yet this extension has its price: in the process of partisan inquiry into the bizarre we tend to dismiss the questions of wisdom and the artist's craft, valorizing oddity instead.[94]

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[89] D. Cowart: *Arches and Light…*, p. 12.

[90] J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction…*, p. 144.

[91] D. Cowart: *Arches and Light…*, p. 18.

[92] J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction…*, p. 69.

[93] Ibid., p. 21.

[94] This is one of the places in Gardner's argument which lend themselves to a larger reading than just a critique of postmodernism — the quote above may be understood as a description of Gothic writing or grotesque.

Reasons for this shift are complex, the most profound being "commitment to sincerity rather than honesty (the one based on the moment's emotion, the other based on careful thought)".[95] Dividing classic American literature into escapist, i.e. conformist and conservative, and serious, marked by individualism, Gardner is appalled to see that the pattern is undergoing a twist — escapist fiction becomes more and more cynical and nihilistic, despair has become the order of the day, the reader is more apt nowadays to admire chic suicide than celebration of life. He grants that at the root of it all is a failure of American democracy: "…in reaction against stultifying conformity, we have learned not only not to scorn the moral freak but to praise him as somehow superior to ourselves".[96] To focus Gardner's argument one more time: it is not bad that the new sensibility has emerged, but it is wrong that modern civilization has adopted it as its chief mode of expression.

We need to differentiate between true morality, Gardner points out, which upholds life and compassion (his Christian approach is often in evidence), and discreditable moral fashion. Once civilized people fall prey to intellectual whim, it becomes possible to regard well-publicized murderers as interesting, thus yielding to confusion; one "may begin to feel guilt … for possessing a moral code at all".[97] Again, this is not to say that Gardner rejects the liberal notion of guilt altogether, on the contrary, he concedes that the moral progress of humanity rests on developing refined ideas of personal as well as communal guilt. However, one has to tread with caution, especially the moral artist who, unless he wants to become paralyzed with debilitating doubt, "must guard against taking on more guilt than he deserves, treating himself and his society as guilty on principle. If everyone everywhere is guilty — and that seems to be our persuasion — then no models of goodness, for life or art, exist; moral art is a lie".[98] On the other hand, if, following in Rousseau's footsteps, we assume that the society is always to blame, we abolish personal guilt; either way, we make a grave error of logic while evading our moral obligation. If the artist is so riddled with doubt that he is uncertain of the existence of unquestionable virtues, he can only give us inferior art. Still, this is better than exhorting the reader to emulate the despicable. Art instructs, we are reminded, it does so with varying degrees of validity, but the crux of the problem is that on the one hand we are unable to embrace religion as its underlying principle, on the other hand the secular explanation of art's impact lands us in an irresolvable difficulty of having to prove the correctness of somebody's notion of truth over somebody else's. Expanding on Yeats's vision in "The Second Coming", Gardner

[95] J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction…*, p. 43.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid., p. 77.
[98] Ibid., p. 44.

asserts: "In the name of democracy, justice, and compassion, we abandon our right to believe, to debate, and to hunt down truth".[99] Rightly conceived, art seeks truth out of responsibility to the human community.[100] As Gardner says in his elegy to the memory of his friend, the sculptor Nicholas Vergette, the moral artist's great challenge is "flooring the ancient abyss with art",[101] it is by far not enough to just reflect "the ancient abyss". Whether the anomie and vacuity perceived be real or imagined, they have to be overcome. In the face of general intellectual defeatism he advocates affirmation of life and a literature with a firm moral underpinning, one that exceeds the shallowness of the mental code of the middle class.[102]

Thus Gardner repeatedly takes up the problem of what he views as true art, which he sometimes refers to as "moral", sometimes as "classical". His attitude is partly prescriptive, and although *On Moral Fiction* is a book of criticism, its author is also a creative writer, which renders his position awkward.

> [I]t is true that art is in one sense fascistic: it claims, on good authority, that some things are healthy for individuals and society and some things are not. Unlike the fascist in uniform, the artist never forces anyone to anything. He merely makes his case, the strongest case possible. He lights up the darkness with a lightning flash, protects his friends the gods — that is, values — and all humanity without exception.[103]

Following the lead of Percy Bysshe Shelley, he believes that the true (enlightened) artist is an unacknowledged legislator of the world. Under his guidance, man can mould his character and destiny, a vision in which Gardner evinces a nearly Romantic belief in man's unbounded capacity for personal growth.[104]

His postulates receive their most succinct formulation when he claims that "real art creates myths a society can live instead of die by".[105] By this he does not mean cheery, breezy, uplifting tales but myths of profound reflection. Although he finds the luridness of modern art objectionable, he

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[99] Ibid., pp. 41—42.

[100] D. Cowart: *Arches and Light*…, p. 1.

[101] J. Gardner: *Poems*. Northridge, California: Lord John Press 1978, pp. 22—25.

[102] D. Cowart: *Arches and Light*…, p. 13.

[103] J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction*…, p. 101. The term "fascist" appears also in John Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion" in a passage in which he discusses the idea of "the controlling artist" in such terms. See also: R.E. Morace: "New Fiction, Popular Fiction, and John Gardner's Middle/Moral Way". In: *John Gardner*: *Critical Perspectives*. Eds. R.E. Morace, K. VanSpanckeren. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press 1982, p. 134.

[104] D. Cowart: *Arches and Light*…, p. 9.

[105] J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction*…, p. 126.

does not oppose the tendency to make the world of fiction more realistic than in the past. However, he cannot accept the creative attitude in which the more cruel and offensive the language of a book, the more genuine the book is believed to be. True art can guard against such debasement. Even though an artist is always in a way egotistic, Gardner admits, the true artist craves "noble achievement and good people's praise", whereas the false artist seeks power and his cronies' flattery.[106]

Despite numerous affinities, "moral fiction" is not coextensive with realism. Gardner was aware of serious limitations of realist literature, his own novels demonstrate a variety of narrative approaches, but he reiterates that the question of truth matters more in realistic art than it does in more imaginative writing.[107] Understood as grounded in verifiable factuality, truth, or verisimilitude, is central to Gardner's view of the relations between art and human behaviour.

> Gardner and the realists have the same goal — truth in fiction — but go after it each in his own way. The realists reacted against sentimentalism and espoused "real life". Gardner has reacted against the very different kind of realism implicit in, for example, the existentialism of Sartre and has espoused the philosophic idealism that began to go out of fashion in the nineteenth century. What is more important is their agreeing that "Art makes people do things". Several recent studies which have explored what John Cawelti calls the "complex relation" between popular literature and individual behavior have supported both the assumption shared by Gardner and the realists that art does influence life and his contention that art is a major factor contributing to social unity.[108]

Construed along these lines, so different from Wilde's witticisms about art's essential amorality that underlie contemporary cultural attitudes, the dialectic operative between life and literature brings in again, from a different perspective, the momentous question of the artist's responsibility to the community. In an interview for *Atlantic Monthly* published in the same year *On Moral Fiction* came out, Gardner reaffirmed his position: "If we celebrate bad values in our arts, we're going to have a bad society; if we celebrate values which make you healthier, which make life better, we're going to have a better world".[109] However, according to Gardner the problem of responsibility relates to the problem of technique. Retreat into sophistication and

[106] Ibid., p. 120.

[107] Ibid., p. 141.

[108] R.E. Morace: "New Fiction, Popular Fiction, and John Gardner's Middle/Moral Way"…, p. 144.

[109] D. Edwards, C. Polsgrove: "A Conversation with John Gardner". *Atlantic Monthly* May 1977, p. 44.

indulging in technique for technique's sake — the mistake that postmodern fabulists make — dooms literature to irrelevance. Robert A. Morace finds this exhortation to truth and responsibility exhilarating as it comes from a popular writer with considerable reputation as an innovative fictionist.[110]

The relations between experiment and tradition as well as responsibility and imaginative freedom constitute the fundamental tension of Gardner's thought. In the *Atlantic Monthly* interview referred to above he identifies himself as "on the one hand a kind of New York State Republican, conservative. On the other hand … a kind of Bohemian type".[111] It is for such candour that Gardner incurred a great deal of criticism from liberal quarters. When in 1980 John Barth cavilled at a resurgence of the "family novel" and more generally traditional literary values, he articulated an irritation with the new cultural climate of the commencing Reagan era, but when he sarcastically identified Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority with the impending doom of Moral Fiction in American letters, he clearly targeted John Gardner.[112] The attack is understandable in personal terms, since *On Moral Fiction* contains a deprecatory account of Barth's fiction from *The Sot-Weed Factor* on, but the charge of preachy conservatism in politics is unwarranted. Gardner does not approve of didactic art (he finds "didacticism and true art … immiscible"[113]), either; nor does he espouse social causes congenial exclusively to the Grand Old Party electorate (his 1976 novel *October Light* presents such phenomena as the civil rights movement and feminism in a liberal fashion[114]). However, Gardner angered many others besides Barth, provoking their response in kind: Joseph Heller finds his criticism dull and carping, John Updike sneers at his affirmation of life as naïve, Bernard Malamud blames him for insensitivity.

Reception of *On Moral Fiction* was conditioned by the strongly polemical character of the book. After all, Gardner does lay himself open to high-minded rebuttal by so outspokenly criticizing major American fiction writers of the 1960s and 1970s, especially those of the postmodern persuasion. However, this may be a superficial reading. In 1979 Stephen Singular put forward a good case for the bulk of the book having been completed as early as 1965, thirteen years before publication.[115] Obviously, there are numerous references to the literature between 1965 and 1978, but that may

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[110] R.E. Morace: "New Fiction, Popular Fiction, and John Gardner's Middle/Moral Way"…, p. 145.

[111] D. Edwards, C. Polsgrove: "A Conversation with John Gardner…," p. 43.

[112] D. Cowart: *Arches and Light…*, pp. 16—18.

[113] J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction…*, p. 19; see also p. 137.

[114] D. Cowart: *Arches and Light…*, p. 18.

[115] S. Singular: "The Sound and the Fury Over Fiction". *New York Times Magazine* 8 July 1979, p. 34.

be partly beside the point. If the book's main line of argument was formulated by 1965, Gardner's concern must have been with much more than just the antics of such writers as William Gass in *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife*, E.L. Doctorow in *Ragtime* or John Barth in *Giles Goat-Boy*. What he seems to grapple with is a larger modern crisis of thought and form, a crisis affecting both life in the American republic and the state of its arts. "In literature, structure is the evolving sequence of dramatized events tending toward understanding and assertion; that is, toward some meticulously qualified belief".[116] Otherwise, we end up reading somebody's opinion without drama, e.g. an essay, or poring over drama devoid of belief — the sad, degenerate form today's fiction takes in its deplorable attempt to offer its reader no more than technical skill for perusal. Either the triple postulate of Truth, Goodness and Beauty, or failure, both artistic and moral.

4. Concluding Remarks

Trilling's and Gardner's theories will be used selectively in analyses of Cheever, Updike and Ford as the three novelists belong to different areas of contemporary fiction. Although all three work in what can be viewed as aspects of realism, Cheever's recourse to fable, Updike's documentary technique and "mean-streak" protagonist as well as Ford's postmodern scepticism call for varying critical approaches. What they do share is the suburban substance of their works, hence references to the ideas discussed in the first section of Introduction will be made more evenly throughout this study. In textual readings emphasis will be laid on social, psychological and narrative aspects of suburban discourse as a conscious, willed doctrine of moderation, "a middle way", or the condition of being situated "on this isthmus of a middle state", Alexander Pope's formulation of the human place in the scheme of things (Epistle II of *An Essay on Man*).

Part One, "John Cheever's Wasp Fables", is divided into three chapters: the first constitutes an inquiry into the opposition between St. Botolphs and the modern subdivision in *The Wapshot Chronicle* and *The Wapshot Scandal*; in the second, a study of three other novels (*Bullet Park*, *Falconer* and *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*) is undertaken, the common denominator being the shared element of criminality; the third treats of the rhetoric of suburbia in the short stories. In Part Two, "John Updike: Life and Adventures of a Romping Rabbit", the first chapter, foregrounding the themes of life-as-

[116] J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction…*, p. 65.

maze and immaturity, is a reading of *Rabbit, Run*; the second studies the social upheaval of the 1960s in *Rabbit Redux*; the third is an investigation of the discourse of wealth and "plutography" in *Rabbit Is Rich*; and the fourth one focuses on the imagery of consumerism and death in relation to Florida in *Rabbit at Rest*. Part Three, "Richard Ford: On the Realty Frontier", is divided into four chapters. Chapters One and Two study Haddam from the personal and community perspectives on the basis of *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, respectively. In Chapter Three an analysis of the workings of capitalist land speculation in *The Lay of the Land* is conducted; finally, Chapter Four constitutes a comparative reading of babbittry in Updike and Ford.

Part One

John Cheever's Wasp Fables

Chapter One

St. Botolphs as New England Village: The Wapshot Novels

In 1946 a book by Eric Hodgins was published that was to initiate a new phenomenon in American fiction. *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* tells a story of a wealthy New York married couple building a suburban residence in Connecticut, the protagonists are upwardly mobile young executives. The world of $ 50,000 plus split-level houses and *Kaffeeklatsches* did not reflect the experience of many Americans yet it appealed to both the proliferating numbers of post-war house-buyers and those aspiring to this kind of life. The excitement of the great building boom produced a series of novels about conservative upper-middle-class suburbs.

> Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, Jean Kerr's *Please Don't Eat the Daisies*, John Cheever's *Bullet Park*, John Marquand's *Point of No Return*, Peter De Vries's *The Macquerel Plaza*, Max Shulman's *Rally Round the Flag, Boys* all poked either hilariously or scaldingly, at the dream of a green and pleasant oasis not far from the office.[1]

The suburban novel gave rise to many works of popular culture, beginning with a motion picture based on Hodgins's best-seller, such as *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best* or *Life with Riley*, showing America's increasing fascination with the life-style portrayed, yet the most enduring artist in the genre is clearly John Cheever, the Ovid of Ossining as *Time* magazine dubbed him.

It is useful to approach Cheever (1912—1982) by first looking at the criticism of his work. He had the singular good fortune to enjoy favourable

[1] K.T. Jackson: *Crabgrass Frontier*: *The Suburbanization of the United States.* New York: Oxford University Press 1985, p. 282.

reviews right from the start — the 1930 publication in the *New Republic* of "Expelled", his first short story based on his own expulsion from Thayer Academy in Milton, Massachusetts, for smoking, neglecting his studies and pestering teachers with what they considered irrelevant questions, attracted attention. The writer was then eighteen, and the expulsion had taken place the year before. He moved first to Boston, then to New York City, writing book synopses for Metro Goldwyn Mayer, spending time at the Yaddo Writers' Colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, becoming a literary *protégé* of Hazel Hawthorne and, to some extent, Malcolm Cowley (it was Cowley who accepted "Expelled" for the *New Republic*). In 1935 "Brooklyn Rooming House", the first of 119 Cheever stories was published by *The New Yorker*. In the highly politicised decade he remained largely indifferent to politics, on the one hand, looking up to such personages as John Dos Passos, on the other, being named "the final example of bourgeois deterioration" by a radical friend (this ended his relationship with the Communist Party).[2] The paradox of Cheever's disinterest in politics while being enlisted in various causes persists in his life: he was to become a much-translated author in the Soviet Union, presumably because he was believed to be an exponent of Western decadence, and travelled to Eastern Europe repeatedly (especially Bulgaria and Russia). Probably the only instance of his deliberate public involvement was his participation in a campaign to vindicate Elizabeth Ames of Yaddo (he owed a great deal to her) after she was attacked by Robert Lowell in 1949.

As has been said above, the early reviews were generous. "At first, his work found favor with intellectuals because his dark vision, often shading off into the depressive, seemed to confirm the then-fashionable disdain for American values as exemplified in the suburban middle class".[3] The general tendency in Cheever criticism is bound up with locale in his fiction: the more suburban it becomes, the more disapproving are the reviewers. Up to the 1957 publication of *The Wapshot Chronicle*, critical assessment was sometimes condescending but usually welcoming, the novel itself was praised for its combination of zest and quaint, innocent merriment; the next year "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" drew commending remarks from Granville Hicks who points out the writer's special skill in transmuting the otherwise unpleasant suburban world into very rewarding fiction.[4] With the passage of time, ambivalence about Cheever's subject matter grew. The year 1964 saw the appearance of *The Wapshot Scandal* and a cover story in *Time* on March 27. The article hails Cheever as a chronicler of "the American middle class enter-

[2] *Conversations with John Cheever.* Ed. S. Donaldson. Jackson and London: University of Mississippi Press 1987, p. IX.

[3] Ibid., p. 209.

[4] S. Donaldson: *The Suburban Myth.* New York: Columbia University Press 1969, p. 207.

ing the second decade of the Affluent Society".[5] The magazine writer praises him for "the dignity of the classical theater" accorded to a world consigned to ridicule — "commuterland, derided by cartoonists and deplored by sociologists as the preserve of the dull-spirited status seeker".[6] Vindicating the suburb is all the more difficult, the article argues, as it runs counter to the general intellectual climate in the country, "the US bourgeoisie has not been encouraged to think well of itself; indeed, it has been made accustomed to having its very virtues excoriated by the writing classes".[7] At the same time, the pitfalls of a simplistic reading of Cheever for "realism" are pointed out.

These balanced reservations notwithstanding, his fiction continued to be interpreted from the perspective of social criticism, left and right. James Scully in *The Nation* jibes at Cheever being defeated by his subject (in a review of *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow*) while Cynthia Ozick's article in *Commentary* accuses the Wapshot novels of idealizing St. Botolphs, a gross misinterpretation indeed.[8] John Dyer is more correct when, discussing the "Not Edited for the Old Lady from Dubuque" editorial policy of *The New Yorker* where over a hundred Cheever stories were published, he attempts to elucidate the intricacy of Cheever's project by identifying "the parodist" with "anti-suburban wits" and "that which is parodied" with "suburbanite readers".[9] Expanding on the distinction, "[w]e might describe the split in the author's ideological allegiance by saying that his realism, albeit parodic, is the provincial, respectful agent in a Cheever story, whereas the shot of satire is more in league with the urban wit".[10] The implications of the realism of his short stories as well as his ideological placement in the machinery of magazine publishing will be studied in Chapter Three.

In his 1962 *Contemporaries* Alfred Kazin complains yet again about Cheever's alleged social realism:

> It is a pity in a way … that contemporary American fiction must derive so much of its strength from the perishable values of social information. … So Cheever, in the *New Yorker* style, sometimes takes such easy refuge in the details of gardens, baby-sitters, parks, dinners, apartment houses, clothes, that he goes to the opposite extreme of the beat writers (who present the sheer emptiness of life when human beings are not attached to a particular environment): he falls into mechanical habits of documentation, becomes a slyer John O'Hara.[11]

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[5] "Ovid in Ossining". http://www.time.com

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] S. Donaldson: *The Suburban Myth…*, pp. 207—208.

[9] J. Dyer: "John Cheever: Parody and the Suburban Aesthetic". http://xroads.virginia.edu

[10] Ibid.

[11] A. Kazin: *Contemporaries*. Boston: Little, Brown 1962, p. 215.

This is a misreading, on at least two counts. First, Cheever's social observation serves a much larger idea, i.e. portraying middle class Americans "as figures in an Ovidian netherworld of demons";[12] second, the world he "documents" is varied and stratified (there are numerous kinds of suburb) therefore his descriptive skills are indispensable in elaborating it.

Although he is impatient with some entrenched social ideas, his work is scarcely conceivable as a defence of suburbia like, for instance, Phyllis Mc Ginley's.[13] He said in 1958:

> There has been too much criticism of the middle-class way of life. Life can be as good and rich there as any place else. I am not out to be a social critic, however, nor a defender of suburbia. It goes without saying that the people in my stories and the things that happen to them could take place anywhere.[14]

Yet the suburban novel cannot escape involvement in social debate. The most famous representatives of the genre, such as Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* or John P. Marquand's *Point of No Return*, usually purvey politically fashionable *clichés*; rhetorically moderate, they are "basically, novels 'against' the organization rather than novels 'against' the suburbs which happen to be the home of the organization man".[15] Cheever's attitude is more subtle, less given to ideological allegiances. Although he may be seen as technically inferior to, let us say, John O'Hara, the latter "is limited to a bleak and ironical view of existence in which nothing can compensate for economic and social deprivation of status".[16] On the contrary, the emphasis of John Cheever's work is on a moral vision, a specific setting is a means to exploring souls, not a mere exercise in social observation.

In his early collections of short stories (*The Way Some People Live* [1943] or *The Enormous Radio* [1953]) the focus is metropolitan — they are set on the Upper East Side. Beginning with *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill* (1958), downtown New York locations give way to suburbia. Although he would later assert that he loved the city and that his family's move away from the East Side was made entirely for his children's sake, the pattern of his life mirrors that of the upper middle class after the Second World War. Samuel Coale claims that growing up in Quincy, a satellite village of what Cheever once termed "Athenian Boston", "developed in him an identification with

[12] "Ovid in Ossining". http://www.time.com.

[13] S. Donaldson: *The Suburban Myth…*, pp. 203—204.

[14] R. Waterman: "Interview with John Cheever". *Saturday Review* 13 September 1958, p. 33.

[15] S. Donaldson: *The Suburban Myth…*, p. 197.

[16] "Ovid in Ossining". http://www.time.com

those social aspirations [of the middle class — K.K.-T.] and provided him with an outpost close enough to the affluent and social hierarchies he both satirized and admired".[17] Such collections as *Some People, Places and Things That Will Not Appear in My Next Novel* (1961), *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow* (1964) or *The World of Apples* (1973) rely so much on myth, fable, archetype, legend, even fairy tale that one is compelled to realize: Cheever's ambition extends much further than chronicling suburban life, although he sticks to the mores and routines of the middle class for his material.[18]

Much of the unwarranted ideological edge in criticizing Cheever's image of suburbia is removed when one realizes how different are the communities he portrays. Maple Dell is crowded, it exudes a pronounced sense of transience and appeals primarily to couples raising their children but wanting to move out as soon as possible; prestigious Shady Hill, on the other hand, attracts wealthy residents, it is "a destination suburb"; Proxmire Manor is genteel but morally sordid.[19] Because of these differences, the starting point of numerous discussions of the Wapshot novels is how Cheever tropes St. Botolphs and in what relation it stands to Quincy, Massachusetts, his birthplace which was made famous by Henry Adams in his *Autobiography*.

When Adams enlarges on what he calls the "double nature" of his family tradition, he refers to the two family realms: one in Quincy, the other in Boston, the former is country, the latter town. "Though Quincy was but two hours' walk from Beacon Hill, it belonged in a different world".[20] Even though as a young man Henry sided with the country, the summer freedom and the colonial grandeur of the paternal side of his family's life, "he felt also that Quincy was in a way inferior to Boston, and that socially Boston looked down on Quincy".[21] The relative backwardness of rural amenities explained that feeling, but between Adams's childhood there in the 1840s and Cheever's seventy years later the paradigm had undergone considerable change.

The relation between Quincy and St. Botolphs is obviously not a direct transfer, as Lewis Nichols says, "[t]here is a bit of Quincy in the Wapshots' St. Botolphs, plus bits of Newburyport, Mass., remembered by his father, and bits of the farmland around Hanover (near Plymouth), Mass".[22] According to the article in *Time* referred to earlier, there is a great deal more fictionalization at work: "Unlike its St. Botolphs counterpart, the old family home-

[17] S. Coale: *John Cheever.* New York: Frederick Ungar 1977, p. 9.
[18] Ibid., p. 10.
[19] S. Donaldson: *The Suburban Myth…*, p. 206.
[20] H. Adams: *The Education of Henry Adams.* Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999, p. 14.
[21] Ibid.
[22] L. Nichols: "A Visit with John Cheever". In: *Conversations with John Cheever…*, p. 8.

stead in Quincy was not the biggest house in town, and his family was not the first family, and Quincy, of course, is a fairly routine middle-class 'suburb' of Boston".[23] Additionally, there is an element of impoverished respectability in Cheever's family past that he grappled with in ingenious ways.

However, what he aims at is retrieving some of the moral urgency of New England history, he preaches to the emancipated bourgeoisie of the necessity "to pay homage to … tribal gods of purity and order",[24] even if his message happens to be scandalizing and mythically unorthodox.

> In St. Botolphs it is easier than it is in actual 20th century Quincy to see life as a system of divinely imposed sanctions, and to be aware that a nation founded by theological zealots ignores at its mortal peril the severe moral system of its Puritan progenitors.[25]

John Cheever's genius consists both in infusing High Suburbia with moral seriousness it lacks in a permissive age and conferring on it an organic cohesion. Life in St. Botolphs is regulated by age-old rites, natural, religious, civic. "He sees man not in modern terms as an individual but as the center of a system of obligations".[26] Cheever's characters "belong" in the deep sense of the word: they are conscious of numerous ties to family, community, race; they discharge duties that turn a disjointed, chaotic existence into a quest.

Like Henry Adams, teenage Moses Wapshot, on a fishing trip north with his father, conceives of the world as divided into two halves. One is fishing, camping near Canada, eating canned food, exertion; the other is St. Botolphs. Until his departure

> he had not realized how deep his commitment to the gentle parochialism of the valley was — the east wind and the shawls from India — and had never seen how securely conquered that country was by his good mother and her kind — the iron women in their summer dresses.[27]

One must not mistake this well-nigh bucolic portrayal for idealization or mere picturesqueness. Cheever is more outspoken on the subject in a hilarious scene of Leander Wapshot coming to Honora's house to claim his rug and, on her refusal to return it, engaging in a tug-of-war with her and her maid Maggie. "It was a very unpleasant scene, but if we accept the quaint-

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[23] "Ovid in Ossining". http://www.time.com
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] J. Cheever: *The Wapshot Chronicle*. New York: Harper and Row 1989, pp. 56—57.

ness of St. Botolphs we must also accept the fact that it was the country of spite fences and internecine quarrels".[28] The point is not indulging in quaintness, however humorous it may be, rather, the novel oscillates between genial self-criticism of a self-contained community and very serious efforts at mapping the network of roots and obligations.

When Moses is preparing to leave home to go to Washington, his mother gathers what she believes he might need

> in a strange place — his confirmation certificate, a souvenir spoon he had bought at Plymouth Rock, a drawing of a battleship he had made when he was six, his football sweater, prayer book, muffler and two report cards.[29]

Yet when she realizes that her son will leave these objects behind anyway, she replaces them in a drawer. The idea of completeness of life at St. Botolphs is best conveyed in Leander's advice to his sons found after his death. The note contains advice on things weighty as well as trivial; fundamental and serious as well as quaintly fogeyish, couched in a language that is hilarious both in its selection of topics and ship's log diction.

> Never put whisky into hot water bottle crossing borders of dry states or countries. Rubber will spoil taste. Never make love with pants on. Beer on whisky, very risky. Whisky on beer, never fear. Never eat apples, peaches, pears, etc. while drinking whisky except long French-style dinners, terminating with fruit. Other viands have mollifying effect. Never sleep in moonlight. Known by scientists to induce madness. Should bed stand beside window on clear night draw shades before retiring. Never hold cigar at right-angles to fingers. Hayseed. Hold cigar at diagonal. Remove band or not as you prefer. Never wear red necktie. Provide light snorts for ladies if entertaining. Effects of harder stuff on frail sex sometimes disastrous. Bathe in cold water every morning. Painful but exhilarating. Also reduces horniness. Have a haircut once a week. Wear dark clothes after 6 p.m. Eat fresh fish for breakfast when available. Avoid kneeling in unheated stone churches. Ecclesiastical dampness causes prematurely gray hair. 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.[30]

For all its comedy, this passage contains plenty of reference to the sort of advice found in the Pentateuch, especially the Book of Deuteronomy. The celebratory, life-affirming tone is redolent of Gardner's precepts and Christian

[28] Ibid., p. 80.
[29] Ibid., p. 89.
[30] Ibid., pp. 306—307.

focus. In addition, the tribal aspect of the message is emphasized, turning St. Botolphs into an almost ethnic village that survives through difference from the world at large, especially Washington and New York.[31]

Indeed there are markers in the Wapshot novels of ethnic or, perhaps, regional difference. Leander's xenophobia is one,[32] the fact that people in New York laugh at Coverly's stories of St. Botolphs and his "catarrhal accent"[33] is another, Moses's surprise at some people's behaviour in Washington "[b]ecause you wouldn't see anything like that in St. Botolphs"[34] is still another; likewise, Honora's suggestion that Moses should go "to someplace like New York or Washington, someplace strange or distant".[35] When Coverly visits Cousin Mildred in New York, she talks about her husband in a condescending manner because he cannot boast illustrious ancestry: "He's an adorable man and a wizard in the carpet business, but he doesn't come from any place really. I mean he doesn't have anything nice to remember and so he borrows other people's memories".[36] Not coming "from any place really" is a very serious deprivation in the novel's terms, whereas St. Botolphs provides its inhabitants with one the most comprehensive forms of belonging in modern fiction.

Leander's reluctance to visit his sons is explained in terms of his rich life experience that renders too much travelling futile. Yet the true reason is that he finds the world elsewhere fraying and decomposing. St. Botolphs does not spare the Wapshots anomie and fragmentation but there seems a way to reach beyond spiritual desolation in a good place inhabited thoughtfully and sincerely, observing its rituals and proprieties. The modern sense of chaos and absurdity cannot be avoided but life can be at least partially redeemed by rootedness.

The general tendency in the Wapshot novels is that they become more episodic as they move away from St. Botolphs to the cities and suburbia.[37] Another shift accompanies the process: the smells disappear along

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[31] Joshua Gilder said to Cheever that in some respects his work manifests elements of ethnic sensibility and may be compared to the work of ethnic writers. "Cheever looked a bit bewildered at the suggestion that in some ways one might think of him as an ethnic writer; he smiled and found amusing the proposition that one could draw a parallel between himself and Philip Roth." J. Gilder: "John Cheever's Affirmation of Faith". In: *Conversations with John Cheever…*, p. 228.

[32] J. Cheever: *The Wapshot Chronicle…*, p. 102.

[33] Ibid., p. 154. Leander himself speaks with an English accent, we read in the second Wapshot novel: "He said 'marst' for 'mast' and 'had' for 'hard'". J. Cheever: *The Wapshot Scandal…*, p. 18.

[34] Ibid., p. 132.

[35] Ibid., p. 86.

[36] Ibid., p. 119.

[37] S. Coale: *John Cheever…*, p. 77.

with the provincial New England landscape,[38] an indication of decline for Cheever, very much an outdoor type of man. The dramatic lives of Coverly and Moses are linked with suburbia. The former's first married home is in Remsen Park, a cheap prefabricated subdivision, "a rocket-launching station"[39] described in *The Wapshot Scandal* contemptuously as "the low-cost development".[40] It is a dismal place,

> [a] community of four thousand identical houses … The place could not be criticized as a town or city. Expedience, convenience and haste had produced it when the rocket program was accelerated; but the houses were dry in the rain and warm in the winter, they had well-equipped kitchens and fireplaces for domestic bliss and the healthy need for self-preservation could more than excuse the fact they were all alike.[41]

Cheever plays with *clichés* of suburban life when he specifies how this sort of background inspires in Betsey, Coverly's wife, dreams of a large family and how she embraces middle-class routines. Since the house is rented completely furnished, its only difference from the other four thousand dwellings is the content of a parcel from Coverley's mother. Thus they "set up housekeeping with the blue china and the painted chairs that Sarah sent them from St. Botolphs",[42] *bric-à-brac* being one of the customary means of domesticating a new place. Yet Betsey's greatest pleasure is shopping at the local mall. She goes there "not because she need[s] anything but because the atmosphere of the place please[s] her",[43] a stock image of suburban life.

On the whole, Remsen Park is a hostile place with neighbours who are either suspicious and inarticulate (Mrs. Frascati), or too supercilious to accept an invitation for a cup of coffee since they have a college degree and an air of refinement (Mrs. Galen). Betsey feels that she is "being scrutinized and scrutinized uncharitably"[44] and that she cannot count on friendship. Still, she persists in adapting to suburban mores, like purchasing "some canvas chairs for the back yard and some wooden lattice to conceal the garbage pail",[45] until she finally befriends another couple and has them over "to christen … the back yard with rum".[46] In what is another set of subur-

[38] Ibid., p. 72.
[39] J. Cheever: *The Wapshot Chronicle…*, p. 226.
[40] J. Cheever: *The Wapshot Scandal.* New York: HarperCollins 2003, p. 244.
[41] J. Cheever: *The Wapshot Chronicle…*, p. 226.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., p. 227.
[44] Ibid., p. 236.
[45] Ibid., p. 237.
[46] Ibid.

ban stereotypes, during the party Max Tellerman complains to Coverly of his wife's, Josephine, habit of ruinous shopping sprees that make him consider leaving her; at last, in his cups, Max makes a pass at Betsey. Talifer, their next place of residence is similarly unfriendly. Betsey's attempts at social life fail, she grows dissatisfied with housekeeping, watches television all day long, eventually, her and her husband's sexual relationship breaks down.[47]

Despite cataloguing suburban *clichés* and chronicling the Wapshot family's disintegration in the wake of leaving the sanctuary of St. Botolphs in order to join modern life, Cheever is not critical of American civilization in general. According to Bruce Benidt, who visited the novelist in 1978:

> He says that even suburbia, which he sometimes draws with dark shadings, can reflect the hopefulness of man. Even where the houses are identical to start with, he says, people strive to improve their places with landscaping and shrubs, by adding or subtracting something of their own. "Vulgarity is overwhelmed by invention", he says, pleased by the thought.[48]

In another interview Cheever is more outspoken and asserts that "[h]ousing developments which were ugly in the beginning have taken on, twenty-four years later, the characteristics of their owners — a triumph of human invention".[49] Not only does he stress the dynamism of the suburbs, he regards them as an improvisation: "It still is an improvisational way of life. It still is an invention. It doesn't cling to tradition".[50] But this assertion needs to be taken with a pinch of salt as it is evident that Cheever's fictional world is predicated on careful balancing of precise observance of a large body of tradition with frame-breaking, irony and self-doubt. This can be frequently seen in the relations between the Wapshot brothers and, opposed to them, their wives who do not seem to see the point of sticking to some forms, for instance, when, after Honora's death, Coverly insists on staying in her house for Christmas even though Betsey dreams of going to Florida and on being asked for reasons he simply reiterates "I promised".[51] Complying with this kind of request from a dead person is beyond Betsey's comprehension, life as a "system of obligations"[52] appeals only to her husband.

On the other hand, though, her awareness of the suburban code impels her to seek out the right sort of people, she even approaches a neighbour

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[47] J. Cheever: *The Wapshot Scandal…*, p. 63.
[48] B. Benidt: "Conversation with John Cheever" In: *Conversations with John Cheever…*, p. 177.
[49] S. Silverberg: "A Talk with John Cheever". In: *Conversations with John Cheever…*, p. 88.
[50] J. Callaway: "Interview with John Cheever". In: *Conversations with John Cheever…*, p. 245.
[51] J. Cheever: *The Wapshot Scandal*. New York: HarperCollins 2003, p. 293.
[52] "Ovid in Ossining". http://www.time.com

about "a list of twenty-five or thirty of the most interesting people in the neighbourhood"[53] in order to get herself started in an appropriate milieu. Betsey is class-conscious; the society in Talifer is stratified in accordance with position held at the missile site where Coverly works into the aristocracy, the middle class and the proletariat. Similarly, in Proxmire Manor, Mrs. Cranmer sometimes walks past a twelve-room brick and stucco mansion that belonged to her before her husband's death and reflects on her degraded state, while her current abode is a downmarket "two-family frame house",[54] the standard component of residential estates in North America.

> They appear in the suburbs of Montreal, reappear across the border in Northern lumber and mill towns, flourish in Boston, Baltimore, Cleveland and Chicago and go underground briefly in the wheat states to appear again in the depressed neighborhoods of Sioux City, Wichita and Kansas City, forming an irregular and mighty chain of quasi-nomadic domiciles that reaches across the entire continent.[55]

On the whole, however, Proxmire Manor (in contrast to Talifer) is upper-middle class, a destination suburb which inspires in its inhabitants specific expectations and concomitant neuroses.

Proxmire Manor is known along the commuter railway line as the place where a lady got arrested for a parking offence. Another indicator of deceptive quaintness is the Easter Egg farce — a local grocery store publicity drive in which Easter eggs are placed on the front lawns of the neighbourhood houses, some of them redeemable for package tours to European cities. At some point, Melissa muses, somewhat anxiously, if there is "any danger left in Proxmire Manor".[56] The name itself evokes menace — the manor's proximity to the mire. During a party at the Wishings' house Melissa stumbles on a tryst of two housewives but she is convinced that "[i]t must have been someone from out of town, someone from the wicked world beyond Proxmire Manor".[57] She is determined to erase the discomfort of the discovery. Similarly, when she finds her husband's daily notes on his "drink score": "12 noon 3 martinis. 3:20 1 pickmeup. 5:36 to 6:40 3 bourbons on train. 4 bourbons before dinner. 1 pint moselle. 2 whiskies after",[58] she chooses to replace them in the hall table drawer and forget.[59]

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[53] J. Cheever: *The Wapshot Scandal…*, p. 37.

[54] Ibid., p. 231.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid., p. 97.

[57] Ibid., p. 49.

[58] Ibid., p. 50.

[59] Christina Robb points out that "Cheever's father liked to drink and he set an example of New England laconism for his sons by which it was all right to drink to excess as long as

Melissa's willed composure begins to fracture when she starts her love affair with Emile Cranmer, the local delicatessen delivery boy. A housewife's love affair with a service man is one of the suburban *clichés*, a perennial erotic fantasy. Cheever pursues the idea by sketching an idyll only to besmirch it. Proxmire Manor is introduced as a typical "high suburb": "The village stood on three leafy hills north of the city, and was handsome and comfortable, and seemed to have eliminated, through adroit social pressures, the thorny side of human nature".[60] In the same breath we are informed by Melissa'a friend that Gertrude Lockhart, an acquaintance of hers, is a "slut" who has seduced the milkman, the laundry boy, the man who reads the gas meter, the ditch digger. In consequence, there is a plan afoot to get rid of the Lockharts, which demonstrates how suburban propriety is safeguarded. The Lockharts have a mortgage with a repair clause and the bank manager — a neighbourhood boy — notifies them that they are obliged to have the old roof on the house replaced. Since they cannot afford it, another neighbourhood boy will come forward with an offer of purchase, the Lockharts will sell and leave. Eventually, however, Gertrude Lockhart hangs herself in the garage, which has Melissa wondering about all the events in Proxmire Manor which are "more easily forgotten than understood",[61] a common mechanism of suppression of the unwanted and unlikely in suburban life.

The same mechanism, this time involving Betsey in Talifer, assumes an equally gruesome form. One spring Saturday afternoon she sees a neighbour taking down storm windows and falling off his ladder in the process. She looks at his inert body long enough to ascertain that something serious must have happened yet she gives no alarm and returns to watching television. When she hears the ambulance several minutes later, she begins to wonder:

> How could she account for her unnatural behaviour? The general concern for security seemed to be at the bottom of her negligence. She had not wanted to do anything that would call attention to herself, that would involve giving testimony or answering questions. Presumably her concern for security had led her to overlook the death of a neighbour.[62]

What the novel's narrator phrases so succinctly and paradoxically constitutes one of the familiar forms of suburban behaviour. Sociologists report

you didn't talk or act immoderately". C. Robb: "Cheever's Story". In: *Conversations with John Cheever…*, p. 207.

[60] J. Cheever: *The Wapshot Scandal…*, p. 46.

[61] Ibid., p. 99.

[62] Ibid., pp. 32—33.

a strange numbing of sensibility in some residential estate dwellers that is responsible for their acting the way Betsey Wapshot does in the fragment cited above. According to M.P. Baumgartner, there is a tendency in suburbia not to take notice of other people's activities and not to attract attention to oneself.[63] In consequence, an illusion of unperturbed peace arises caused partly by alienation. Betsey's induration in the face of her neighbour's death exemplifies this chilling aspect of the suburban way of life, although it is not widespread; indeed, excessive involvement in others' lives would be far more characteristic (this view is taken by William T. Whyte). Still, the problem is there, a ghastly reminder of the potential consequences of the utopia of zoning trouble out of social existence.

The incident above must be viewed in the context of Cheever's comprehensive picture of suburbia. Unlike many twentieth-century intellectuals, who declare love for "city and country, but not the suburbs",[64] he embraces an unfashionably opposite idea.

> I resent the preconception of the suburbs as a place where people live in uniform houses, make love to each other, and then commit suicide. I have never encountered a more diverse and non-stereotyped group of people in a greater variety of circumstances anywhere on the earth. I find living in the environs of the city a comfortable and stimulating life.[65]

On the one hand, Cheever's fiction amounts to a vindication of the suburb, giving it its due, and restoring the obvious variety of scene and character to a fictional area declared a wasteland by others. But on the other hand, as Alfred Kazin argues, "[t]he Wapshot novels are wholly allegories of place showing the degeneration of the New England village, 'St. Botolph's,' into the symbolic (but spreading) suburb that is 'Proxmire Manor'."[66] Engaging with both aspects of the suburbanization of the USA constitutes the underlying principle of Cheever's project.

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[63] M.P. Baumgartner: *The Moral Order of a Suburb.* New York: Oxford University Press 1988, *passim*.

[64] S. Donaldson: *The Suburban Myth.* New York: Columbia University Press 1969, p. 23. This assertion was formulated by David Riesman in his essay "The Suburban Sadness".

[65] S. Silverberg: "A Talk with John Cheever". In: *Conversations with John Cheever…*, p. 87.

[66] *Alfred Kazin's America. Critical and Personal Writings*. Edited and with an introduction by Ted Solotaroff. New York: Perennial 2003, p. 247.

Chapter Two

Homicidal Grounds: *Bullet Park*, *Falconer* and *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*

Bullet Park, of the eponymous 1969 novel, was termed by Samuel Coale "Cheever's lethal Eden",[67] another suburb with menacing overtones in the name, like Proxmire Manor. We are introduced to the place by a real estate agent with an equally sinister name of Hazzard, an indicator of the novel's "theme of 'no security' in domestic existence".[68] Cheever does not specify historical details in exploring the social realities of the life of the upper middle-class; in the manner of a latter-day Anthony Trollope his fiction records "The Way We Live Now," or, as Alfred Kazin puts it, "the quality of life in the United States".[69] The novel's geographical setting is easier to identify than its temporal framework. Such names as the Wekonsett River, Tremont Point, Greenacres, Lascalles, Meadowvale or Clear Haven[70] point to suburban New England. The names of Paul Hammer's neighbours: Tichnor, Cabot, Ewing, Trilling, Swope[71] also indicate a tight regional and ethnic identification of his prose. For all Cheever's protestations to the contrary, for instance in his conversation with Joshua Gilder, he writes out of his experience as a WASP suburbanite, just like Updike.[72] In this sense Samuel Coale is correct in employing the terms "tribe" and "tribal elders"[73] in the context of *Bullet Park*.

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[67] S. Coale: *John Cheever…*, p. 95.

[68] G. Kinnane: "'Shopping at Last!': History, Fiction and the Suburban Tradition". *Australian Literary Studies* 1998, p. 41 ff.

[69] *Alfred Kazin's America. Critical and Personal Writings…*, p. 245.

[70] J. Cheever: *Bullet Park.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1969, pp. 3, 64.

[71] Ibid., p. 236.

[72] J. Gilder: "John Cheever's Affirmation of Faith"…, p. 228.

[73] S. Coale: *John Cheever…*, p. 96.

The theme of threat to domestic security is elaborated through a simple structural device of setting up a model of suburban life in Part One, setting up its opposite in Part Two and bringing the two into conflict in Part Three. Indeed the novel has a fragmentary character which may indicate the disparity of the realistic and the fantastic in the two realms portrayed. Gary Kinnane believes that the realistic element is very limited here, as "John Cheever's work eschews realism for a mode that shifts between fable and surrealistic black comedy".[74] Yet there is plenty of painstakingly observed detail, Alfred Kazin even names the novelist, along with John Updike and Jerome David Salinger, a "professional observer"[75] whose "suburbsville" abounds in social difference as well as spiritual incisiveness.

There are a number of families in Bullet Park which "set the standards and uphold the values of the suburban scene:"[76] the Llewellens and the Ridleys who live as if their marriages were business ventures; the Wickwires are "celebrants", they are engaged solidly for months to come, they are the life and soul of the neighbourhood, always aware that "cocktails and dinner in their time and place [are — K.K.-T.] as important to the welfare of the community as the village caucus, the school board and the municipal services".[77] The Nailles family is conventional, with Eliot Nailles being a passionate monogamist and a somewhat mechanical Christian who accepts a measure of authority from other people and institutions and is content to occasionally be told what to do under some circumstances.

Cheever burlesques transience, one of his grand themes, when he makes Nailles join in a ludicrous game of using car signals suggested by the evening paper to compensate for communication breakdown: "The reason for this was that … society had become so automotive and nomadic that nomadic signals or means of communication had been established by the use of headlights, parking lights, signal lights and windshield wipers".[78] In this way Bullet Parkers can express their stand on social and political issues or even assert their faith in religious truths. Cheever's focus, from the very opening sentence containing a description of a commuter train station, is on mobility as a manifestation of transience. Referring to the arrival of a stranger in search of a house to purchase, we read that "[t]he people of Bullet Park intend not so much to have arrived there as to have been planted and grown there, but this of course was untrue. Disorder, moving vans, bank loans at high interest, tears and desperation had characterized

[74] G. Kinnane: "'Shopping at Last!': History, Fiction and the Suburban Tradition", p. 41ff.
[75] *Alfred Kazin's America. Critical and Personal Writings…*, p. 245.
[76] S. Coale: *John Cheever…*, p. 96.
[77] J. Cheever: *Bullet Park…*, p. 6.
[78] Ibid., p. 21.

most of their arrivals and departures".[79] Yet there are saving graces in this nomadic world: intimacy; routine turned ritual; a basic decency of specific people and of the suburban way of life. Like Trilling, Cheever believes that the manners of the middle class constitute the most appropriate subject of the realistic novel.

When Paul Hammer, the demonic intruder, watches a mail delivery from his terrace he witnesses an almost religious rite of communal life in which people "opened their boxes in a way that seemed furtive, intimate, almost sexual. It was a little like undoing one's trousers. They groped inside for some link to the tempestuous world — bills, love letters, checks and invitations".[80] Suburban life is regulated by rituals and an attachment to objects ("The loss of any object was for both of them acute as if their lives rested on some substructure of talismans"[81]); when Eliot Nailles loses his wallet he is thrown completely off balance, although he does not need the wallet that day. His wife's voice on finding it is "the pure voice of an angel, freed from the mortal bonds of grossness and aspiration", and he calls her his "deliverer". Objects, just like routine activities, are far from meaningless, order must prevail at all costs. When a psychotherapist comes to see Tony Nailles, he addresses Nellie in the language of a supercilious intellectual who looks down on a shallow suburbanite: "There is a tendency in your income group to substitute possessions for moral and spiritual norms".[82] Faced with this charge, Nellie makes an inventory of her family's claims to respectability: weekly church attendance, perfunctory though it may be; telling no lies; the fact that they do not gossip or read one another's mail. This, she realizes, is "a poor show", but at the same time she refuses to be made to feel guilty about the code of suburban decency.

Her husband is more articulate in his conversation with their depressed son. He is unable to understand why "people always chop … at the suburbs," reiterating Cheever's own frequently voiced surprise at the prejudice against the suburb. He goes on: "I can't see that playing golf and raising flowers is depraved".[83] He discusses a number of neighbours who are successful while living immoral lives and posits a non sequitur between the two; likewise, he fails to see why a man who makes a living contracting business with foreign dictatorships should be the more repulsive for his alleged hypocrisy in being nice to his wife and children — a stock image in the critical iconography of the suburb.

[79] Ibid., pp. 4—5.
[80] Ibid., p. 236.
[81] Ibid., p. 241.
[82] Ibid., p. 45.
[83] Ibid., pp. 66—68.

The great enemy of the suburban family is routine, as Cheever perversely demonstrates in the story of Nellie dating another man in a hotel room, but getting a fit of cramps as a result of bad food, in consequence of which, we read, "her chasteness, preserved by … some spoiled sturgeon eggs was still intact, although she carried herself as if her virtue was a jewel — an emblem — of character, discipline and intelligence".[84] Since this is one of three occasions on which Nellie might have cheated on her husband had not something unexpected intervened, Alfred Kazin may be right when he claims that "Cheever's characters … disabused with their famous 'way of life' (always something that could be put into words and therefore promised, advertised, and demonstrated)" are often driven to acts of "inner subversion",[85] although, as has been shown, mental readiness to transgress is not always followed with its realization. The most exhaustive example of Cheever's method of criticizing the suburb while simultaneously rendering the critique jejune appears at the beginning of the narrative, when Paul Hammer is taken to Powder Hill and sees a pink plush toilet-seat cover, a suburban "talisman", drying on a washing line.

> Seen at an improbable distance by some zealous and vengeful adolescent, ranging over the golf links, the piece of plush would seem to be the imprimatur, the guerdon, the accolade and banner of Powder Hill behind which marched, in tight English shoes, the legions of wife-swapping, Jew-baiting, booze-fighting spiritual bankrupts. Oh damn them all, thought the adolescent. Damn the bright lights by which no one reads, damn the continuous music which no one hears, damn the grand pianos that no one can play, damn white houses mortgaged up to their rain gutters, damn them for plundering the ocean for fish to feed the mink whose skins they wear and damn their shelves on which there rests a single book — a copy of the telephone directory, bound in pink brocade. Damn their hypocrisy, damn their cant, damn their credit cards, damn their discounting the wilderness of the human spirit, damn their immaculateness, damn their lechery and damn them above all for having leached from life that strength, malodorousness, color and zeal that give it meaning.[86]

Besides once more revealing the ethnic, or perhaps racial, character of the place, Cheever lists what the detractors of the suburb usually point out — its philistinism, superficiality, ostentation, self-righteousness and duplicity, the routine-ridden existences of poseurs and libertines. Yet the imaginary adolescent ranting about his revulsion at suburbia is "ranging over the golf links", very much part of the suburban scene, himself a denizen of a place

[84] Ibid., p. 112.
[85] *Alfred Kazin's America. Critical and Personal Writings…*, p. 246.
[86] J. Cheever: *Bullet Park…*, p. 5.

like Powder Hill. Indeed, there are few references to the world outside. These include the appearances of Swami Rutuola: in his house in the black slum, in the Nailles home and finally at the Lewellens' party, where he is taken for a delivery man and directed to the back entrance (another marker of the racial homogeneity of the suburb) and a brief mention of smoke rising from an unspecified ghetto on the river and unconfirmed rumours of shooting.[87]

However, the most important external factor is Paul Hammer, the illegitimate son of Gretchen Shurz Oxencroft, an eccentric of working class background, and Franklin Pierce Taylor, a wealthy member of the Socialist Party. Hammer was raised partly by his mother, partly by his paternal grandmother in a number of places in Europe and America. His illegitimacy accounts for his migratory life, posing a threat to "organized society and the fabric of suburban manners within the social and moral boundaries of Bullet Park".[88] Hammer's father was a stunningly handsome man with the physique of a gymnast, who posed for mythological sculptures for the facades of numerous European hotels, "a male caryatid".[89] This fantastic element rubs off on his son, the opposite of the ordinariness and regularity of suburban family life.[90] Hammer is aware of himself as an alien in Bullet Park. When he cuts the grass on his lawn the way his neighbours do, he is elated by the deception involved and finds "[t]he imposture … thrilling".[91] At his demented mother's instigation, Hammer wants to awaken the world by crucifying the most typical suburbanite and Eliot Nailles is chosen "for his excellence".[92] Despite the novel's derivative biblical pattern, there is undeniable originality in its overall conceptual framework. As Samuel Coale adroitly puts it,

> [i]n *Bullet Park*, Cheever has invested the suburban life style with all the trappings of a newly made myth. Rites and rituals help to shape the suburban consciousness. If subscribed to religiously, they promise order, de-

[87] Ibid., p. 239.

[88] S. Coale: *John Cheever…*, p. 100.

[89] J. Cheever: *Bullet Park…*, pp. 170, 151—152.

[90] We are warned by the novelist against making too much of his mythological references. As he remarks somewhat sneeringly: "The easiest way to parse the world is through mythology. There have been thousands of papers written along those lines — Leander is Poseidon and somebody is Ceres, and so forth. It seems to be a superficial parsing." A. Grant: "The Art of Fiction, No. 62: John Cheever". *The Paris Review*, Fall 1976, quoted in: The Paris Review 2005, p. 22. He does like, though, he admits, "the resonance" of mythological overtones and explains that when he was growing up in southern Massachusetts one was expected to acquire a good grasp of mythology.

[91] J. Cheever: *Bullet Park…*, p. 235.

[92] Ibid., p. 232.

> corum, and a comfortable and comforting morality. The new suburbanites of Bullet Park believe that they can overcome human frailty and weakness if only they can perform these rites faithfully and completely.[93]

Life in Bullet Park is regimented, which results in impoverishment due to mechanical participation blunting human sensitivity, but also in enhancement, the way strict observance of a religious ceremony may invest the occasion with transcendental meaning. Such mundane events as the volunteer fireman assembly, and admission to the local fire department are accorded this kind of significance. The saturation of the novel with references to classical, biblical or even oriental myths allows Cheever to ritualise suburban life, but also confer demonic gravity on Hammer as the element of fortuity and rootlessness, antithetical to Nailles's conception of order. The intruder is only able to successfully assimilate superficial aspects of suburban life — for instance, like many other Bullet Parkers, Paul Hammer drinks; they drink to alleviate boredom and disillusionment, he needs liquor "to make the ecstasy of his lawlessness endurable".[94] Whether he mows his lawn, applies for admission to the volunteer fire department or drinks, he is a spurious suburbanite. The defeat of Hammer, Samuel Coale argues, is an attempt on the novelist's part "to legitimize and justify the existence of suburbia in Cheever's own mind once again".[95] Likewise, Alfred Kazin detects in his work the author's "effort to cheer himself up. His is the only impressive energy in a perhaps too equitable and prosperous suburban world whose subject is internal depression, the Saturday-night party, and the post-martini bitterness".[96] This is true insofar as Eliot Nailles prevails, and is able to continue life, with the aid of tranquillizers purchased illegally in various disreputable locations. Only then, as Cheever tells us at the book's closure, could everything be "as wonderful, wonderful, wonderful as it had been".[97] By this stage, suburban life has become both a self-imposed therapy for what Kazin names "inner subversion" and a means of exorcizing the external threat, the Hammer-like demons inhabiting Bullet Park. By introducing "vice into paradise, contrariness into order, immoderation into a state of balance, or of reality into delusion"[98] Cheever forces his characters to shed their innocence. The restoration of this innocence at the conclusion of *Bullet Park* is conducted with a difference that shows his suburban convention

[93] S. Coale: *John Cheever…*, p. 102. This is the sort of myth Gardner has in mind when he stresses that a writer should create myths man and community can live by.

[94] J. Cheever: *Bullet Park…*, p. 236.

[95] J. Coale: *John Cheever…*, p. 104.

[96] *Alfred Kazin's America. Critical and Personal Writings…*, p. 247.

[97] J. Cheever: *Bullet Park…*, p. 245.

[98] J. Dyer: "John Cheever: Parody and the Suburban Aesthetic". http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA95/dyer/cheever4.html

to be predicated on the familiar snake-in-the-garden or worm-in-the-apple motif. Whether such rhetoric indicates the novelist's personal struggle to come to terms with the suburb remains a matter of conjecture, yet the way Cheever toys with both tragedy and comedy in this novel to finally arrive at the "reaffirmation of the status quo" is essentially a comedic procedure. To see the novel in its tension between tragedy and comedy, between the "bland decency"[99] of his characters and the eschatological gravity of their plight is to understand the troping of the suburb in *Bullet Park*.

Cheever was dissatisfied with some aspects of the novel's reception. He did not like the fact that "Hammer and Nailles were thought to be social casualties",[100] as he explains in an interview with Annette Grant: "Neither Hammer nor Nailles were meant to be either psychiatric or social metaphors, they were meant to be two men with their own risks".[101] Reducing characters to such large metaphors, in his view, is the opposite of "the proper function of writing. If possible, it is to enlarge people. To give them their risk, if possible to give them their divinity, not to cut them down".[102] This sort of perspective brings us to the questions that so preoccupied John Gardner: morality, truth, reality and realism in a work of fiction.

Asked about his creative method, Cheever (like Gardner) declares his mistrust of too technical an approach to composition. He believes in working with "intuition, apprehension, dreams, concepts", disparate elements which come together to make up a story. In contrast to this, "[p]lot implies narrative and a lot of crap. It is a calculated attempt to hold the reader's interest at the sacrifice of moral conviction. Of course, one doesn't want to be boring … one needs an element of suspense. But a good narrative is a rudimentary structure, rather like a kidney".[103] This perception, in which narrative as such stands in some kind of opposition to single events, characters or ideas, disciplining them, making them comprehensible, but at the same time bending and potentially distorting the intended meaning, accounts for the episodic structure of his novels and his caution about metaphorical readings.

Insistence on authorial intention including the crucial factor of "moral conviction" may lead to didacticism (detectable in Gardner's approach). Cheever sees the danger and blames it on a certain cognitive misunderstanding while professing a belief in the internal moral logic of creative literature.

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[99] S. Coale: *John Cheever…*, p. 102.

[100] A. Grant: "The Art of Fiction, No. 62: John Cheever", p. 26.

[101] Ibid., p. 27.

[102] Ibid., p. 26.

[103] Ibid., p. 13.

> Fiction is meant to illuminate, to explode, to refresh. I don't think there's any consecutive moral philosophy in fiction beyond excellence. Acuteness of feeling and velocity have always seemed to me terribly important. People look for morals in fiction because there has always been a confusion between fiction and philosophy.[104]

Discounting the possibility of applying systemic morality to literature, he leaves open the possibility of fragmentary, non-consecutive application.

Similarly, he is dubious about the question of truth, and lies, in relation to reality as fiction may require that the writer should lie.

> For one thing the words "truth" and "reality" have no meaning at all unless they are fixed in a comprehensible frame of reference. There are no stubborn truths. As for lying, it seems to me that falsehood is a critical element of fiction. Part of the thrill of being told a story is the chance of being hoodwinked or taken. … The telling of lies is a sort of sleight of hand that displays our deepest feelings about life.[105]

Cheever's belief in the absence of verifiable, "stubborn truths" independent of the work of fiction and his perception of lies as essential to it reveal a novelist who is sceptical of the customary critical labels as his method is entirely of his own making. Furthermore, he is careful not to let himself be pinned down on the intimate relation between the social world he mines for material, his own life and the books that transmute these areas of experience. Although he says in his journal that he regards himself as a spy who has insinuated himself into the middle class but has now "forgotten [his] mission and … taken [his] disguises too seriously",[106] he finds any pretence to social relevance of his books impossible to support.

That is the case when, asked about the relation of verisimilitude to reality, Cheever declares: "Verisimilitude is, by my lights, a technique one exploits in order to assure the reader of the truthfulness of what he's being told. … Of course, verisimilitude is also a lie. What I've always wanted of verisimilitude is probability".[107] Consequently, when Annette Grant asks him whether he considers himself a realistic writer, he differentiates between artists who are able to create a persuasive vision of the world and those who engage in documentation (he thus disagrees with Alfred Kazin who accused him of mechanical documentation of middle-class life). Refusing to put himself in their company he claims: "Documentary novels, such as those of Dreiser, Zola, Dos Passos — even though I don't like them

[104] Ibid., p. 23.
[105] Ibid., p. 3.
[106] J. Cheever: *The Journals of John Cheever*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1991, p. 16.
[107] A. Grant: "The Art of Fiction, No. 62: John Cheever", p. 3.

— can, I think, be classified as realistic. Jim Farrell was another documentary novelist".[108] Where Cheever belongs, technically and conceptually, is with writers like Francis Scott Fitzgerald, whom he admires very much, able to vividly convey the sense of a situation irrespective of means employed. Maybe what he resents about the "documentary" novelists he mentions is the socio-political texture of their work which is at odds with his sensibility; this in turn leads to a different understanding of "documentation" — what may be superfluous cataloguing in a book about working class characters in turn-of-the-century Chicago, is eminently useful in the bourgeois framework of a suburban novel.

Cheever is one of the few American fiction writers who overcome what Lionel Trilling identifies as the crippling opposition of reality versus mind in that, like the European novelistic tradition, he puts emphasis on social observation. In a novel such as *Bullet Park*, the protocols of middle class life are not set against the book's ideational message. Cheever is close to Trilling's perception of social relationship as the primary source of obligation and authority while inclining towards an approving vision of liberal Protestantism as against the latter's radicalism. The novelist also embraces a similar outlook on "the moral imagination" of the novel. Far from easy didacticism, Cheever finds a literature that cherishes neurosis immoral. Underlining personal sensitivity as well as social awareness he is not only able to implement Trilling's postulate of adversarial art but also ridicule the complacency of his characters even as he invests the suburban way of life in general with the redemptive qualities of what Gardner named moral fiction. Perceptibly more conservative than Trilling, Cheever draws his authority from a deeply felt sense of organicism of the New England communal tradition. W.M. Frohock's concept of regional modalities of taste in America, invoked in Introduction, may explain the divergence of the two sensibilities involved, especially in conjunction with ethnic identity. Yet the precariousness of liberal Jewish metropolitan individualism, so much in evidence in Trilling, overlaps with Cheever's portrayal of the suburban WASP experience in so far as the tensions of modern civilization urge constant redefinition of what is moral life and moral writing.

Cheeever's fourth novel, *Falconer* (1977), is set in prison and as such is not concerned with suburbia directly. However, it contains a variety of references to the upper-middle class one recognizes from his other works: Farragut, the protagonist, is a well-to-do academic (his given name is Ezekiel, like that of the first Cheever in New England, the founder of the first school in Massachusetts); his wife has a love affair with a woman, he is bisexual; murder among the wealthy; commuting to work in the city. In abandoning his familiar setting

[108] Ibid., p. 18.

> Cheever at a single stroke extricated himself from his own ambiguous feelings towards suburbia … No longer does he seem to be celebrating the spurious pastoralism and good life of *New Yorker* suburbanites, all too easily mingling his moments of natural lyricism with the comfortable amenities enjoyed by the suburban upper classes.[109]

Focusing on situations rather than characters' response to them allows the novelist to elaborate an essentially "comic angle of vision on the foibles of modern suburban life".[110] The change of perspective in *Falconer* enables Cheever to interrogate the consequences of pursuing merely material well-being. The book is predicated on the realization that "the dream of suburban stability and comfort, however decent and valorous to the middle-class mind, is yet a dream, unreliable, transitory, and easily shattered".[111] In this way Cheever's portrayal of a way of life links up with a moral vision, a plea for self-examination and pursuit of self-transcendence.[112]

In contrast, *Oh What a Paradise It Seems* (1982), Cheever's last book, returns to some of the familiar rhetorical devices of the Wapshot novels. Similarly to St. Botolphs, the village in the novel, sometimes also referred to as "town", exists in a selectively conceived *in illo tempore* space. One of the markers of its being out of time is the lack of fast-food establishments in consequence of a computer error of institutions that decide about franchise sites. Another is the fact that the local historical mansions have not yet been converted to serve as hospices,[113] a process seen across the USA as part of the relentlessness of modernization that Joseph Schumpeter termed "the perennial gale" of capitalist innovation. (This idea will be treated at length in relation to Richard Ford's novels).

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[109] S. Coale: *John Cheever*. New York: Frederick Ungar 1977, p. 111.

[110] Ibid., p. 117.

[111] Ibid., p. 118.

[112] With the passage of time, as biographical material accumulates, we begin to acquire a sense of the tragicomic self-absorption Cheever laboured under, combined with his deceptive self-mythology. The recent book by Blake Bailey (*Cheever*: *A Life*, New York: Knopf 2009), very thorough and not always sympathetic, unearths plenty of information which confirms and expands the earlier image of the novelist as a tangle of contradictions. Susan Cheever's memoir-cum-biography *Home Before Dark* (1984), an annotated collection of the writer's correspondence edited by his son Benjamin in 1988, Scott Donaldson's biography published the same year as well as well as excerpts from Cheever's journals edited by Robert Gottlieb and published in *The New Yorker* in 1990—1991 all showed the novelist as a tortured and self-incriminatory soul, yet Bailey takes us further. His study allows the reader to see the full extent of Cheever's self-doubt, his inability to enjoy anything and the impact of his tardy homosexual acknowledgement on his family. In this perspective, we may start to appreciate the tragicomic anguish revealed in *Falconer*, the novelist's most confessional book, where the protagonist, like the writer himself, considers himself a metaphysical mistake.

[113] J. Cheever: *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1982, p. 5.

The ecological motif, however, points up a strongly realistic aspect of suburban life, namely its transient character discussed by William H. Whyte in Part Seven of *The Organization Man*. Horace Chisholm, a secondary school biochemistry teacher turned environmentalist finds out at a town planning board meeting that a projected shopping centre's construction would involve poisoning and, eventually, destroying wetlands feeding the local drinking water supply. The motion is carried since the damage will take at least ten years to make itself felt, and by that time all inhabitants expect to be living elsewhere. In Chisholm's agitated state of mind this decision looms as a token of "[t]he diminished responsibilities of our society — its wanderings, its dependence on acceleration, its parasitic nature".[114] (This, obviously, must not be taken for the book's general message, as Chisholm is a high-minded, confused man whose wife finds him anachronistically "immobile").

Repeatedly, Cheever contrasts upper and lower middle class characters bringing into focus the differences in culture and lifestyle. The novel abounds in comic scenes like the one on the beach involving a young upwardly mobile family and an elderly lady, clearly a wealthy one, who keeps saying: "'Oh what have we done to deserve such a beautiful day!' Betsy didn't know what she was talking about".[115] Gratitude for the good life in the established classes contrasts here with the coarseness of social climbing. On the one hand, there is Lemuel Sears living it up, ordering for dinner at a fancy restaurant a Montrachet, one of the world's finest white wines; on the other hand — the rich inventory of the set pieces of lower middle class suburban life exemplified by the Salazzo family. They live in Hitching Post Lane, a name hilariously indicative of the inhabitants' social standing as well as of their transience. The architecture of the neighbourhood

> was all happy ending — all greeting card — that is, it seemed to have been evolved by a people who were exiles or refugees and who thought obsessively of returning. The variety of homesteads was international. They were English Tudor, they were Spanish, they were nostalgic for the recent past or the efficient simplicities of some future.[116]

After a bad day when no customers have arrived in his barbershop whereas new bills have, Sammy Salazzo coasts home to save petrol only to find his wife and two daughters engrossed in watching a silly game show on television. He can hardly make himself heard over the television. When he gets no supper and his wife quarrels with him about money, he shoots their dog

[114] Ibid., p. 75.
[115] Ibid., pp. 70—71.
[116] Ibid., p. 25.

Buster in desperation. In their kind of suburb "[t]he occupancy of a house [is — K.K.-T.] signified by the fact some sort of brazier for cooking meat over coals [stands — K.K.-T.] in the backyard",[117] its portability suggesting transience. Accordingly, at the end of the novel, when the Salazzos are preparing to leave and they pack "their charcoal broiler and their stand-up swimming pool", another emblem of transit suburbia, Hitching Post Lane retrieves its original meaning.

Transience attaches to most of Cheever's protagonists. As Shirley Silverberg says, "if his characters lead lives of quiet desperation, it is not so much because they are materialistic suburbanites but rather because they are spiritual nomads, traveling in an unmarked wilderness where the past has been lost and the future has not been found".[118] However, in an "imp of the perverse" sort of provocative gesture, the narrator of *Oh What a Paradise It Seems* ends the novel with a refusal to pursue other sub-plots and characters: the death of the environmentalist, corruption of municipal authorities, wilfully restoring the initial bucolic serenity, the same kind of closure as in *Bullet Park*. Commenting on the Transcendental, "cranky, granular, impulsive, confessional style" of the book's ending John Updike notes that its wisdom has a benevolent twist to it: "If such root affirmations ring, in this late age of median strips and polluted ponds, with a certain deliberate and wry gallantry, that, too, is accommodated in the tale — in the burlesque of its consumerism, the ogreish farce of its politics, the chemical pranks of its natural resurrection".[119] The pastoral note at the end sounds discordant also because it brings up memories of personal loss. As usual, Cheever offsets suburban peace with fallibility of man and corruptibility of nature, his idylls always doomed.

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[117] Ibid.

[118] S. Silverberg: "A Talk with John Cheever"…, p. 88.

[119] J. Updike: *Hugging the Shore*: *Essays and Criticism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1985, p. 294.

Chapter Three

Shady Hill and Other Banlieues: The Short Stories

The sociocultural pattern of short fiction production differs substantially from the mechanisms operative in novel writing, especially if the stories are intended for magazine publication. As early as 1904 Gertrude Atherton complained about the dire consequences of American literature after Mark Twain and Bret Harte being "bourgeois", i.e. "the most timid, the most anaemic … that any country has ever known … It might … be the product of a great village censored by the village gossip".[120] She notes that "it is the ambition of every new writer to 'get into the magazines' "[121] and that every respectable household buys periodicals and makes them available to young readers long before novels are judged permissible. In this way readers' tastes are shaped, which is insidious enough, but what is more detrimental, authors themselves are influenced by their expectations of regular remuneration, which "begets timidity; and timidity is a leech at the throat of originality".[122] The brand of realism promoted by the magazines, deprecated as "Littleism", is guided by "the most curious convention … that this world is not as it is, but as it ought to be",[123] leading to a number of self-limitations and taboos. In consequence, Atherton avers, American writing becomes "the expression of that *bourgeoisie* which is afraid of doing the wrong thing … of that element which dares not use slang, shrinks from audacity,

[120] G. Atherton: "Why Is American Literature Bourgeois?". In: *American Literature, American Culture*. Ed. G. Hutner. New York: Oxford University Press 1999, p. 194.

[121] Ibid., p. 197.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid., p. 198.

rarely utters a bold sentiment and as rarely feels one".[124] Additionally, there is the crippling effect of excessive attention to the tastes of genteel women readers whose sensibilities may be easily offended. Here Atherton refers to "Uncut Leaves", a New York institution where writers publicly read stories prior to their projected magazine publication. The result of some of these readings was suppression of risqué material lest the "sensitive ladies present … be distressingly affected".[125] Finally, Atherton puts down the narrow-mindedness of the American middle class to "the levelling influence of the literary powers",[126] thus, in this bourgeois dialectic, dull-witted readers limit the new books' scope through public control practices such as "Uncut Leaves", the books in turn impoverishing the readers' minds.

Nancy Glazener discusses realist literature in the same period (the second half of the nineteenth century) in more complex terms, not as a tool employed by the established classes to enforce their value system but rather as a set of processes whereby the dominant class attempts to investigate its own social positioning while more or less consciously imposing its ideology on others; on the whole, however, she views realism as comprising diverse, often conflicting impulses.[127] Among a variety of mutations, she distinguishes "two discourses used to promote realism throughout the late nineteenth century, one organized around connoisseurship and another around nationalism", combining to form "'high realism', an ensemble that consolidated the authority of the cultural wing of the bourgeoisie".[128] By the time Cheever had become a published author, the realities of literary production had changed dramatically, new modes of sensibility had come into existence, new social structures and paradigms of reception. His rhetoric retains elements of a poetic of connoisseurship while the broad nationalist formula of the late nineteenth century has been supplanted with High Suburbia of the upper middle class.

As Glazener explains, "realism was something that had to be read for", rather than a corpus of texts or a set of literary characteristics, the readers being encouraged to detect the realistic message by the literary establishment. "Sometimes reading for realism was identified with valuing texts about American contemporary life and construing their representations as 'typical' rather than 'idealizing' … sometimes it was identified with read-

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid., p. 199.

[126] Ibid.

[127] N. Glazener: *Reading for Realism*: *The History of a U.S. Literary Institution, 1850—1910*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1997, p. 13.

[128] Ibid., p. 14. The question of cultural connoisseurship was central to Lionel Trilling's thought. However, for reasons discussed in Introduction, he substituted liberalism for nationalism.

ing for 'character' rather than 'plot'".[129] Although far from accurately describing his discourse, all of these principles of early realism are crucial in analyzing Cheever's work. The substance of his characters' lives is palpably contemporary; he does aim at the typical; as has been demonstrated in the discussion of the Wapshot novels, he is more adept at dealing with character than plot. But on the other hand, there are elements of surrealism, black comedy, pastoralism etc. Thus a reading strategy is called for in which the traditional components of realism will be accommodated without overriding the writer's dissent from it.

One of Cheever's preoccupations is portraying suburban mores, particularly dinner table conversation as their manifestation. As has been explained in Introduction, this type of conversation has a number of rules, the chief being propriety of subject, i.e. avoidance of drastic subject matter. In "The Country Husband" Francis Weed recognizes the maid in his friends' house as a French woman who was punished in his presence, just after the Second World War, for consorting with a German officer under Nazi occupation. Sharing his memory would be inhuman on the woman's account, but it would also violate the suburban decorum.

> The people in the Farquarsons' living room seemed united in their tacit claim that there had been no past, no war — that there was no danger or trouble in the world. In the recorded history of human arrangements, this extraordinary meeting would have fallen into place, but the atmosphere of Shady Hill made the memory unseemly and impolite.[130]

Like the scene in *The Wapshot Scandal* where Betsey does not react to her neighbour's death, this one also exemplifies the tendency in suburbia to shut out unwelcome aspects of life, such as death or social problems. (This phenomenon will be dealt with at greater length in relation to Richard Ford's novels).

Concerned mostly with High Suburbia, Cheever's stories address the problem of zoning as an exclusionary social practice as well as mental attitude. Two of the most articulate examples are the stories called "The Wrysons" and "The Death of Justina". The Wrysons of the former story are contentious philistines who go in for gardening and are obsessed about preserving things as they are, dreading change and onslaught of the lower middle classes.

> The Wrysons' civic activities were confined to upzoning, but they were very active in the field, and if you were invited to their house for cock-

[129] N. Glazener: *Reading for Realism…*, p. 14.

[130] J. Cheever: *Collected Stories*. London: Vintage 1990, p. 428.

> tails, the chances were that you would be asked to sign an upzoning petition before you got away. This was something more than a natural desire to preserve the character of the community. They seemed to sense that there was a stranger at the gates — unwashed, tirelessly scheming, foreign, the father of disorderly children who would ruin their garden and depreciate their real-estate investment, a man with a beard, a garlic breath, and a book.[131]

The satire of the passage contains a number of stock images of post-Second World War suburbia. The residents are moneyed prigs, anti-intellectual and xenophobic. Yet at the same time "Cheever addresses questions of human agency in the American suburbs of the mid-twentieth century … describing suburbanite as vacillating between opposite poles of control and confusion, between the dream of what the suburban lifestyle offers and the reality … that questions that dream".[132] The writer's own attitude also vacillates, creating parodies of varying depth and seriousness of intent, occasionally lapsing into apology.

In "The Death of Justina" the parody of zoning is more elaborate. Cousin Justina, paying a visit to visit Moses Wapshot and his wife, dies in their parlour and Moses is informed that he cannot bury her due to zoning regulations. The Wapshots live in Zone B where several years ago somebody had planned to open a funeral home. "We didn't have any zoning provision at the time that would protect us and one was rushed through the Village Council at midnight and they overdid it. It seems that you can't bury anything there and you can't die there".[133] Two solutions to the problem are offered: Justina's body can be driven to Zone C, then her death will be legal and a death certificate written out, or the Mayor will have to be contacted in order to obtain an exception to the zoning laws. However, for the second option to be feasible a majority vote of the Village Council is necessary and most of the members are away. The Mayor impresses on Moses the gravity of the situation:

> "Yes, yes", he said, "it is difficult, but after all you must realize that this is the world you live in and the importance of zoning can't be overestimated. Why, if a single member of the Council could give out zoning exceptions, I could give you permission right now to open a saloon in your garage, put up neon lights, hire an orchestra, and destroy the neighbourhood and all the human and commercial values we've worked so hard to protect".[134]

[131] Ibid., p. 413.

[132] J. Dyer: "John Cheever: Parody and the Suburban Aesthetic". http://xroads.virginia.edu

[133] J. Cheever: *Collected Stories…*, pp. 554—555.

[134] Ibid., pp. 556—557.

It is easy to see why John Dyer calls Cheever's parody of the suburbs "complicitous"[135] — for all the black comedy of the passage, the general zoning regulations sound reasonable. But behind both the criticism and the complicity there is the larger project of legislating death out of the suburban realm, relegating it to a soothingly remote location.

Elimination of death enables general felicity, a quasi-Arcadian trope Cheever frequently employs. In "The Scarlet Moving Van" he introduces the image of what is called "hill towns", however, not geographically but in the socio-cultural sense.

> The land, in fact, was flat, the houses frame. This was in the eastern United States, and the kind of place where most of us live. It was the unincorporated township of B-, with a population of perhaps two hundred married couples, all of them with dogs and children, and many with servants; it resembled a hill town only in a manner of speaking, in that the ailing, the disheartened, and the poor could not ascend the steep moral path that formed its natural defense, and the moment any of the inhabitants became infected with unhappiness or discontent, they sensed the hopelessness of existing on such a high altitude, and went to live in the plain. Life was unprecedentedly comfortable and tranquil. B- was exclusively for the felicitous. The housewives kissed their husbands tenderly in the morning and passionately at nightfall. In nearly every house there were love, graciousness, and high hopes. The schools were excellent, the roads were smooth, the drains and services were ideal.[136]

The mock pastoralism of this passage sets up a composite picture of upper middle class families living in an attractive environment, enjoying the superb facilities as well as their privileged seclusion. Cheever's rhetoric here reflects Nancy Glazener's formula for a realism in which the middle class interrogates its social positioning while attempting to impose its values system on others.

Divisions within the middle class and a corresponding stratification of the suburbs is illustrated in the same story, when Charlie Folkestone visits his former neighbour who did become "infected with unhappiness and discontent" and had to move to the plain.

> Y- was several cuts below B-. The house was in a development, and the builder had not stopped at mere ugliness; he had constructed a community that looked, with its rectilinear windows, like a penal colony. The streets were named after universities — Princeton Street, Yale Street, Rut-

[135] J. Dyer: "John Cheever: Parody and the Suburban Aesthetic". http://xroads.virginia.edu

[136] J. Cheever: *Collected Stories…*, p. 462.

> gers Street, and so forth. Only a few of the houses had been sold, and Gee-Gee's house was surrounded by empty dwellings.[137]

Like in the Wapshot novels, there is a vast difference between affluent suburbs and lower middle class subdivisions. The former retain something of the grace and organic mythology of St. Botolphs, the latter resemble Remsen Park with its angular layout and spiritual sterility.

Lionel Trilling argued that the main concern of the novel as a genre is "manners" and money, in other words social stratification and its dynamics, manifested in such propulsions as ambition and greed. This formula, which applies primarily to the realist novel, defines likewise most writing in the realist mode. The social vision of Shady Hill (another Cheever location with penumbral moral overtones, like Proxmire Manor, though the name obviously follows the onomastic principles for upper middle class suburbs in suggesting a superior location and mature trees), the setting for the 1958 *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories*, is one of elaborate stratification. Situated somewhere between Albany and Westchester County, its residents wealthy commuters to New York, the place has only one problematic neighbourhood called Maple Dell.

> Now, the neighborhood of Maple Dell was more like a development than anything else in Shady Hill. It was the kind of place where the houses stand cheek by jowl, all of them white frame, all of them built twenty years ago, and parked beside each was a car that seemed more substantial than the house itself, as if this were a fragment of some nomadic culture. And it was a kind of spawning ground, a place for bearing and raising the young and for nothing else — for who would ever come back to Maple Dell? Who, in the darkest night, would ever think with longing of the three upstairs bedrooms and the leaky toilet and the sour-smelling halls? Who would ever come to the little living room where you couldn't swing a cat around without knocking down the colored photograph of Mount Rainier? Who would ever come back to the chair that bit you in the bum and the obsolete TV set and the bent ashtray with its pressed-steel statue of a naked woman doing a scarf dance?[138]

Maple Dell has one of the classic suburban characteristics, i.e. it is chiefly a setting for raising children, although Cheever's biological language ("spawning", "the young") conveys the sense of the residents' modest means. The small lots, housing tract layout and lower middle class interior aesthetic, mediated by a narrative voice of superior social standing and thus presupposing the

[137] Ibid., p. 468.
[138] Ibid., pp. 378—379.

residents' dissatisfaction which must result in upward mobility, make up an image of a way-station, reinforced by the expensive cars at the curb, markers of the inhabitants' transience. Maple Dell is a stopover on the way to a more respectable place, a destination suburb like Shady Hill proper.

Development of land for tract housing is the upper middle class's bogey in Cheever's stories. In "The Trouble of Marcie Flint" he weaves this dread into a satire on suburban philistinism in which the potential construction of a library is opposed by the residents as it may attract developers to Shady Hill. Mayor Simmons enlarges on his attitude when the motion to build a library is defeated:

> 'I'm glad the library's over and done with,' he said. 'I have a few misgivings, but right now I'm against anything that would make this community attractive to a development.' He spoke with feeling, and at the word 'development' a ridge covered with identical houses rose in his mind. It seemed wrong to him that the houses he imagined should be identical and that they should be built of green wood and false stone. It seemed wrong to him that young couples should begin their lives in an atmosphere that lacked grace, and it seemed wrong to him that the rows of houses could not, for long, preserve their slender claim on propriety and would presently become unsightly tracts.[139]

As has been argued before, Cheever does not defend suburbia as such — that would be impossible if only because the hierarchy of suburbs is complex and, as in the fragment above, the interests and points of view may differ considerably. The position taken by Mayor Simmons is echoed, more tortuously, by Mrs Selfredge who, during a discussion of the library, brings up the case of Carsen Park where a development inside its boundaries was approved. As a result, taxes skyrocketed and schools fell into decline; subsequently, "three murders … took place in one of the cheese-box houses in the Carsen Park development".[140] The fact that this has nothing to do with the library project escapes everybody's attention. The primary logic here is that of preservation of privilege, both Mayor Simmons and Mrs Selfredge have a vested interest in taking up the cudgels for High Suburbia. Focalization in "The Trouble of Marcie Flint" proceeds in two directions: revealing a social mechanism (upzoning) as well as studying characters in situations of what was called "risk" in reference to *Bullet Park*.

The suburban scene in Cheever's stories is delimited by the fact that urban, usually New York, episodes are sketchy and the characters' jobs in the city are seldom specified as well as by the frequent commuting scenes. In "The Five-Forty-Eight" Blake leaves his downtown job, boards a train,

[139] Ibid., pp. 383—384.
[140] Ibid., p. 377.

passes through a stretch of industrial landscape, the slums, before reaching his suburban railway station. His love affair takes place in the city, the blackmail scene on the train while travelling through the industrial area, thus preserving the apparent innocence of the suburb by attempting to follow the zoning pattern, a frequent trope in Cheever's fiction.

Blake is a model suburbanite conforming to a number of rules regulating middle-class life.

> He was a slender man with brown hair — undistinguished in every way, unless you could have divined in his pallor or his gray eyes his unpleasant tastes. He dressed — like the rest of us — as if he admitted the existence of sumptuary laws. His raincoat was the pale buff color of a mushroom. His hat was dark brown; so was his suit. Except for the few bright threads in his necktie, there was a scrupulous lack of color in his clothing that seemed protective.[141]

Unlike Lionel Trilling's "we, of the liberal persuasion", appealing to a shared sense of superiority, Cheever establishes common ground with his reader by stressing the ordinariness of the middle class. Blake "knew no secrets of any consequence. The reports in his briefcase had no bearing on war, peace, the dope traffic, the hydrogen bomb, or any of the other international skulduggeries".[142] Although Cheever ridicules many of the "sumptuary laws", the general picture in his stories is predicated on the belief in the redeeming nature of regularity, good appearances[143] and social rites.

Social life and civic activity intertwine in the suburb, fund-raising often following the party route. The former is exemplified in Mrs Pastern's mission ("The Brigadier and the Golf Widow"):

> It was the day to canvass for infectious hepatitis. Mrs Pastern had been given sixteen names, a bundle of literature, and a printed book of receipts. It was her work to go among her neighbors and collect their checks. … Charity as she knew it was complex and reciprocal, and almost every roof she saw signified charity. Mrs Balcolm worked for the brain. Mrs Ten Eyke did mental health. Mrs Trenchard worked for the blind. Mrs Horowitz was in charge of diseases of nose and throat. Mrs Trempler was tuberculosis, Mrs Surcliffe was Mothers' March of Dimes, Mrs Craven was cancer, and Mrs Gilkson did the kidney. Mrs Hewlitt led the birth-control league, Mrs Ryerson was arthritis, and way in the distance could be seen the slate roof of Ethel Littleton's house, a roof that signified gout.[144]

[141] Ibid., p. 312.
[142] Ibid., p. 310.
[143] Ibid., p. 419.
[144] Ibid., p. 641.

Canvassing for charity organizations and related fund-raising drives, one of the constitutive elements of the suburban ethos, are perceived as both commendable and ludicrous in that they take up so much of some characters' lives. Similarly, Cheever's narrators' ambivalence is aroused by: dinner parties, cocktail parties and teas; the question of being invited or excluded from the list,[145] fine degrees of class, paradigms of popularity[146] and social climbing. This sphere of life calls for the existence in every suburb of "an ambassadorial pair",[147] a couple of great personal accomplishments, capable of organizing sporting events, efficient fund-raisers, good mixers, adept at handling the drunk — "direct, mild, well groomed, their eyes twinkling with trust and friendliness".[148] A great deal of social life in Cheever's stories (like in the Wapshot novels) involves alcohol abuse, yet the characters are portrayed as struggling to abide by the rules of propriety. Amy of "The Sorrows of Gin" sometimes witnesses her parents drinking and observes that: "They were never indecorous — they seemed to get more decorous and formal the more they drank";[149] Blake of "The Five-Forty-Eight" likes to put down a drink before going home after work in a bar crowded with suburbanites doing the same.[150] However, the stories are no mere chronicles of petty vices. As Samuel Coale argues, the genteel texture of Cheever's work,

> [w]hich can be mistaken for the glossy finish of suburban conventions in those tales seemingly mesmerized by the comfortable crises of *New Yorker* fictions, is often the result of a lyric and graceful repetition of images and objects; his plots, which reveal modern psychological existence as essentially chaotic and disconnected, are the results of the romancer's technique and vision that is intent upon breaking through the public display of social conventions and peering more deeply into the nature of man in both his moral and psychological dimensions.[151]

Repetitions in the stories produce a comic effect while according scenes and characters a gravity that is clearly mythic. Cash Bentley's ("O Youth and

[145] Ibid., pp. 343, 785.

[146] In Chapter 25 "The Web of Friendship" of *The Organization Man* William T. Whyte demonstrates that there is a complex set of spatial rules determining how friendships are made in the suburbs and what kinds of personal connections are likely to emerge in a community of a given residential pattern. "In suburbia friendship has become almost predictable", he says. W.T. Whyte: *The Organization Man.* Harmondsworth: Penguin 1967, p. 304. This idea is also discussed in Introduction to the present work.

[147] J. Cheever: *Collected Stories…*, p. 488.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Ibid., p. 268.

[150] Ibid., p. 310.

[151] S. Coale: "Cheever and Hawthorne: The American Romancer's Art". In: *Critical Essays on John Cheever.* Ed. R.G. Rollins. Boston: G.K Hall & Co. 1982, p. 206.

Beauty!") habit of running a hurdle race over living room furniture at the end of a party acquires the pathos of struggle for dignity against debasing, dehumanizing processes of modern life; his accidental though ritual death likewise relies on repetition; his and Louise's "quarrels and reunions, like the hurdle race, didn't seem to lose their interest through repetition".[152] It is customary for Cheever's characters to be deluded by their dreams, hopes, ambitions, fears;[153] his visions of fulfilment and order do not always follow the rules of realistic composition.

The rupture between immoral behaviour and punishment is one of the manifestations of transgression against the middle class code studied in the stories. Francis Weed ("The Country Husband") offends his neighbour on the commuter train and reflects on the act: "The realization of how many years had passed since he had enjoyed being deliberately impolite sobered him",[154] making him also realize that many of his suburban friends and neighbours were simply fools or bores, and that, guided by good breeding, he unnecessarily tolerated them. His rudeness is condoned, yet it sounds discordant. Similarly, Johnny Hake's ("The Housebreaker of Shady Hill") theft is undiscovered, his mounting calamities are miraculously reversed, so that he "did not understand … how a world that had seemed so dark could, in a few minutes, become so sweet".[155] This, as John Dyer puts it, "reaffirmation of the status quo is a comedic tool" but obviously Cheever's method is "double-coded", his stories being always about "the Fall of Man", "about the introduction of vice into paradise, contrariness into order, immoderation into a state of balance, or of reality into delusion".[156] The paradigm consists in upsetting the balance temporarily to recover it with a slight twist. Even by bringing devils into a conversation on a suburban train, and threatening to kill Blake, a model suburbanite, (a motif employed also in *Bullet Park*), a stranger to Shady Hill (Blake's pursuer) exposes the middle class world only to a glimpse of its vice before order is restored.[157]

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[152] J. Cheever: *Collected Stories…*, p. 278.

[153] J. Dyer: "John Cheever: Parody and the Suburban Aesthetic". http://xroads.virginia.edu

[154] J. Cheever: *Collected Stories…*, p. 432.

[155] Ibid., p. 349.

[156] J. Dyer: "John Cheever: Parody and the Suburban Aesthetic". http://xroads.virginia.edu

[157] M.E. Grenander has noted a tendency in serious American literature for perceptions of crime to differ from its statutory definition, even in the suburban fiction of such authors as John O'Hara, John Cheever and John Updike, often associated with middle class notions of law-abiding propriety: M.E. Grenander: "The Heritage of Cain: Crime in American Fiction". *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 1976, 423 (1), pp. 47—66.

One of the few instances in which the principle of suburban equilibrium is irreparably disturbed is "The Scarlet Moving Van". In this story Gee-Gee's habitual rudeness to people when drunk gets him into trouble with every community he moves to. His habit rubs off on Charlie Folkestone and eventually the Folkestones "had to move, and began their wanderings, like Gee-Gee and Peaches".[158] Thus, in comparison with other Cheever stories, this one is just a variant on the theme of suburban migration. However, the narrator abstains from excessive sympathizing — ambiguous as he is about transience, he tries to reconcile himself to the dislocations resulting from the fact that post-1945 American mobility makes it necessary for large segments of population to keep moving.[159]

"The Country Husband", one of Cheever's most anthologized stories, addresses two other aspects of the suburban way of life. One is a depletion of imagination, a direct consequence of the exclusion of social ills: since nothing untoward happens in most people's lives, they lose the capacity to imagine that something can. This is illustrated by Francis Weed's experience of surviving a plane crash yet being unable to get anyone interested in it as his account sounds too farfetched. The other aspect involves Clayton Thomas, a self-righteous young man who is planning to move to New York since he finds Shady Hill given to drinking, materialism and phoniness.

> 'Well, there's a lot here I don't approve of,' Clayton said gravely. 'Things like the club dances. Last Saturday night, I looked in toward the end and saw Mr Granner trying to put Mrs Minot into the trophy case. They were both drunk. I disapprove of so much drinking.' …
>
> 'And all the dovecotes are phony,' Clayton said. 'And the way people clutter up their lives. I've thought about it a lot, and what seems to me to be really wrong with Shady Hill is that it doesn't have any future. So much energy is spent in perpetuating the place — in keeping out undesirables, and so forth — that the only idea of the future anyone has is just more and more commuting trains and more parties. I don't think that's healthy. I think people ought to be able to dream big dreams about the future. I think people ought to be able to dream great dreams.'[160]

Such wholesale criticism of the suburb is not infrequent in Cheever. Nor is Clayton Thomas's attitude hard to understand in the context of the New England tradition of acute self-consciousness and moral austerity. John

[158] J. Cheever: *Collected Stories…*, p. 474.

[159] William T. Whyte studies the problem in terms of the relations between our traditional notion of "rootlessness" and shifts in class structure, or, in other words, between our negative associations with transience and the phenomenon of modern mobility: W. Whyte: *The Organization Man…*, pp. 246—247.

[160] J. Cheever: *Collected Stories…*, p. 437.

Dyer argues that one of the tensions informing Cheever's work is that of an introspective, Puritanical conscience set against the amorality of suburbia. "The peculiar thing about the suburbs is that there are few moral codes enforced there; suburbs are amoral places where people tend to ignore each other".[161] In consequence, they lack systemic support in solving their spiritual predicaments; they make grave mistakes, become egotists or deluded freaks.

However, a different tone prevails in Cheever's portrayal of the suburb in his stories. The trend is to grant his characters dignity, sometimes even mythicize their lives and quotidian surroundings. Ten-year-old Amy Lawton, one of the focalizing voices in "The Sorrows of Gin" perceives the suburban train station in Shady Hill as a place of romance: mysterious, exotic, thrilling.

> The railroad station in Shady Hill resembled the railroad stations in old movies she had seen on television, where detectives and spies, bluebeards and their trusting victims, were met to be driven off to remote country estates. Amy liked the station, particularly toward dark. She imagined that the people who traveled on the locals were engaged on errands that were more urgent and sinister than commuting.[162]

Yet most of the time Shady Hill is mythicized along different lines. In "The Country Husband" Cheever bends pastoral discourse, foregrounding the place's peace and the residents' benignity in contrast to the memories of the plane crash Francis Weed experienced earlier in the day and his children's quarrel at dinner. His technique will be elucidated by means of comparing two descriptions of crepuscular Shady Hill.

> It was a pleasant garden, with walks and flower beds and places to sit. The sunset had nearly burned out, but there was still plenty of light. Put into a thoughtful mood by the crash and the battle, Francis listened to the evening sounds of Shady Hill. 'Varmints! Rascals!' old Mr Nixon shouted to the squirrels in his bird-feeding station. 'Avaunt and quit my sight!' A door slammed. Someone was cutting the grass. Then Donald Goslin, who lived at the corner, began to play the 'Moonlight Sonata'. He did this nearly every night. He threw the tempo out the window and played it *rubato* from beginning to end, like an outpouring of tearful petulance, lonesomeness, and self-pity — of everything it was Beethoven's greatness not to know. The music rang up and down the street beneath the trees like an appeal for love, for tenderness, aimed at some lovely housemaid — some

[161] J. Dyer: "John Cheever: Parody and the Suburban Aesthetic". http://xroads.virginia.edu

[162] J. Cheever: *Collected Stories…*, p. 263.

> fresh-faced, homesick girl from Galway, looking at old snapshots in her third-floor room. 'Here, Jupiter, here, Jupiter', Francis called to the Mercers' retriever. Jupiter crashed through the tomato vines with the remains of a felt hat in his mouth.[163]

The bucolic garden is offset by memories of the plane crash and the quarrel; Mr Nixon's annoyance with the squirrels raiding his bird-feeding station is counterpointed with Clayton Thomas's condemnation of dovecotes as phony several pages later; Donald Goslin's pedestrian rendering of Beethoven transmogrifies the splendour of the "Moonlight Sonata" into a mawkish georgic; the routine of lawn-mowing, an image of stolidity, is set off against Jupiter's friskiness.

A reprise of the scene closes "The Country Husband". The sentimentalism of the previous passage (an augury of Francis's infatuation with another woman) gives way to the imagery of marital sexuality, classical references providing a double-coded framework of mock pastoralism of suburban life and the Weeds' reconciliation.

> A door on the Babcocks' terrace flies open, and out comes Mrs Babcock without any clothes on, pursued by a naked husband. (Their children are away at boarding school, and their terrace is screened by a hedge.) Over the terrace they go and in at the kitchen door, as passionate and handsome a nymph and satyr as you will find on any wall in Venice. Cutting the last of the roses in her garden, Julia hears old Mr Nixon shouting at the squirrels in his bird-feeding station. 'Rapscallions! Varmints! Avaunt and quit my sight!' A miserable cat wanders into the garden, sunk in spiritual and physical discomfort. Tied to its head is a small straw hat — a doll's hat — and it is securely buttoned into a doll's dress, from the skirts of which protrudes its long, hairy tail. As it walks, it shakes its feet, as if it had fallen into water.
>
> 'Here, pussy, pussy, pussy!' Julia calls. …
>
> But the cat gives her a skeptical look and stumbles away in its skirts. The last to come is Jupiter. He prances through the tomato vines, holding in his generous mouth the remains of an evening slipper. Then it is dark; it is a night where kings in golden suits ride elephants over the mountains.[164]

Suburban precautions: sending their children away to boarding school and growing a tall hedge had to be taken to ensure the Babcocks' conjugal bliss. The mythical matrix superimposed on this image turns the "passionate and handsome" couple into the imaginative aspect of the picture of lovers in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn". The other side, what Keats calls a "Cold

[163] Ibid., pp. 424—425.
[164] Ibid., p. 446.

Pastoral", is the reality of the Weeds' life — Julia's cutting her last roses, aging, unlike the Babcocks. Mr Nixon is as set in his ways as most Cheever suburbanites, predictability and regularity being their saving graces. Frolicsome Jupiter is offset by the appearance of the martyred cat, "sunk in spiritual and physical discomfort", dressed in a doll's dress thus forced to assume a false and burdensome role. The jaunty dog and the miserable cat illustrate yet again Cheever's dichotomous vision of suburbia, its hedonism side by side with its woe. The word "generous" in the passage is crucial in that it defines the writer's attitude to his work; as he often emphasized, the artist's role is giving, sharing, hence generosity. The image of the nocturnal suburb in the last sentence shades into what Wallace Stevens called a "supreme fiction", an oneiric figure dignifying humdrum bourgeois life with "artifice".

Art and artists subsist on the periphery of Cheever's world. The music teacher of the eponymous story is a vaguely exotic character who meets a gruesome death, outside the perimeter of the suburban frame of mind. This "other" realm comprises also female paramours and characters engaged in spiritual quests. In "Marito in Citta" Mr Estabrook's lover's name is Mrs Zagreb while Charlie Pastern of "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow" becomes involved with Mrs Flanagan, certain "that he could handle the Irish".[165] Thus both threats to the suburban order are ethnically alien and easily othered in Cheever's Waspish world.

Arguably the most sustained mythicization appears in "The Swimmer" where Neddy Merrill, hungover from Saturday night drinking with his friends, decides to return home by water, swimming the length of every swimming pool in the county: "He seemed to see, with a cartographer's eye, that string of swimming pools, that quasi-subterranean stream that curved across the county".[166] As usual, High Suburbia provides the backdrop of leisure and affluence, Neddy Merrill passing through garden after garden in his trunks. He sees autumn constellations come out in the sky although it is midsummer, in one pool he realizes that he is no longer as fit as he was at the beginning of his quest. Some people who used to curry favour with him turn obnoxious. An obstacle appears in the form of Route 424, where he is seen from passing cars standing on the shoulder of the road in his trunks waiting for an opportunity to cross, "barefoot in the deposits of the highway — beer cans, rags, and blowout patches — exposed to all kinds of ridicule".[167] He is jeered at and has objects thrown at him. On his return, he finds his house empty.

Neddy Merrill as a Christ figure and his quest as life are obvious symbols. Yet the humiliations of his pilgrimage, his vague idea that he is do-

[165] Ibid., p. 642.
[166] Ibid., p. 777.
[167] Ibid., p. 781.

ing something "original" and "legendary" are offset by the mundane social context: everybody, even the priest, drinks too much; partying seems to be people's only concern. On the other hand, there is a faintly affirmative ("moral" in Gardner's terms) spiritual element as Neddy Merrill wants to "enlarge and celebrate"[168] the beauty of the day with a long swim. It is a bland suburban celebration, but at the same time there is perceptible idealism in the undertaking; as John Dyer puts it Cheever "walks the line between deriding the suburban myth and exalting it".[169] Besides, Neddy Merrill's pride in his fitness belongs to the specifically New England tradition of salubrious living which Cheever elaborated also in the Wapshot novels and *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*.

In some stories the suburban way of life is only connected with such notions as decency, in some others it has a much broader significance. A passage in "The Death of Justina" sounds decidedly Gardnerian:

> Fiction is art and art is the triumph over chaos (no less) and we can accomplish this only by the most vigilant exercise of choice, but in a world that changes more swiftly than we can perceive there is always the danger that our powers of selection will be mistaken and that the vision we serve will come to nothing.[170]

The above serves as an introduction to the story of having to bend zoning regulations in order to be able to bury a dead visitor. Thus on the one hand, Cheever engages with the suburban tendency to eliminate death, on the other hand, he links suburbia with order. The idea of order often assumes the form of routines of middle class life. Bertha of "The Fourth Alarm" joins an amateur theatrical group and becomes progressively detached from her family. Trying to understand her, her husband goes to a play in which the audience are commanded to undress and put down all their valuables. However, he decides not to part with his wallet, watch and car keys. He needs them to drive back home to his children, provide for them and regulate his life. Thus Bertha's metropolitan/artistic defection is juxtaposed with her husband's tenacious middle class hard-headedness. Giving up the three objects in the theatre would have amounted to relinquishing his suburban identity.

A more complex image mediates Mr Lawton's and Amy's thoughts of the world and home ("The Sorrows of Gin"). Coming for his fugitive daughter to the railway station, he seems to guess at her reasons for running: glock-

[168] Ibid., p. 777.

[169] J. Dyer: "John Cheever: Parody and the Suburban Aesthetic". http://xroads.virginia.edu

[170] J. Cheever: *Collected Stories…*, p. 549.

enspiel music somewhere in the Alps, Italian churches, sweeping vistas, the romance of travel, the chimera of adventure; intimations of exoticism sometimes flitting through his own mind as well. Yet what he is unable to communicate to his daughter is his experience of business travel as "a world of overheated plane cabins and repetitious magazines, where even the coffee, even the champagne, tasted of plastics",[171] the tedium of work, drink, and bills to pay: "the buttonless shirts, the vouchers and bank statements, the order blanks, and the empty glasses".[172] His failure consists in the inability to share the realism and self-limitation of middle class life. Besides an echo of Emerson's diatribes against travelling abroad, there is a reference to "plastics", in Cheever's fiction always an emblem of the sinister world of industrial civilization (cf. *The Wapshot Scandal*).

Charles Flint in "The Trouble of Marcie Flint" goes through with what remained faint stirrings of longing in Amy Lawton's mind. He abandons his wife and the USA in order to move to Italy in pursuit of romance. There is also a negative reason for leaving, as he notes in his diary:

> I am a fugitive from the suburbs of all large cities. What holes! The suburbs, I mean. God preserve me from the lovely ladies taking in their asters and their roses at dusk lest the frost kill them, and from the ladies with their heads whirling with civic zeal. … God preserve me … from women who dress like *toreros* to go to the supermarket, and from cowhide dispatch cases, and from flannels and gabardines. Preserve me from word games and adulterers, from basset hounds and swimming pools and frozen canapés and Bloody Marys and smugness and syringa bushes and P.T.A. meetings.[173]

Flint's catalogue contains a number of complaints against the suburbs voiced both by Cheever's other characters, e.g. Clayton Thomas, and such sociologists as J.D.J. Sadler, John Keats or William T. Whyte: phoniness, too much drinking, silly routines and leisure activities; civic fervour, status seeking and materialism. The image of unfeminine women dressing like bull fighters links up obliquely with his denunciation of adultery in so far as he sets off in search of romance himself. However, by the time he reaches Genoa he is certain he must go back to look after his children and shelter his wife "with the curve of my body from all the harms of the dark".[174] Again, the suburb prevails over adventure and rebellion.

"The Worm in the Apple" constitutes Cheever's most complex treatment of suburban mythology in that "the interaction of irony, parody, and

[171] Ibid., p. 274.
[172] Ibid., p. 273.
[173] Ibid., p. 375.
[174] Ibid., p. 390.

satire"[175] in the story results in a number of narratological, moral and socio-political tensions. First of all, it references other tales such as "The Sorrows of Gin", "Just Tell Me Who It Was" or "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" in the 1958 collection (*The Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories*) to produce a framework embedded in some cultural discourses of the 1950s. "The Worm in the Apple" is an embryonic story (only four pages long) about the Crutchmans, a generic middle class family, followed from Helen's courtship by Larry to their marriage and move to Shady Hill after the Second World War, the birth of Rachel and Tom, their children; subsequently, the marriages of the children.

The narrator maintains a stance of self-questioning ambivalence informing the reader that, on the one hand, "[t]he Crutchmans were … very, very happy" (the opening sentence) and "they got richer and richer and richer and lived happily, happily, happily, happily" (the ending),[176] on the other hand, suggesting the fundamental improbability of their happiness, hence a number of suspicions entertained as to its reality. The worm-in-the apple attitude is exemplified in the passage below:

> Their house, for instance, on Hill Street, with all those big glass windows. Who but someone suffering from a guilt complex would want so much light to pour into their rooms? And all the wall-to-wall carpeting as if an inch of bare floor (there was none) would touch on some deep memory of unrequition and loneliness. And there was a certain necrophilic ardor to their gardening. Why be so intense about digging holes and planting seeds and watching them come up? Why this morbid concern with the earth? She was a pretty woman with that striking pallor you so often find in nymphomaniacs. Larry was a big man who used to garden without a shirt, which may have shown a tendency to infantile exhibitionism.[177]

Readers of suburban fiction in the 1950s as well as readers of non-fiction about the suburb would have been thoroughly familiar with the list of the family's putative faults and transgressions: the picture window, an almost indispensable feature of a house, appears to advertise something the Crutchmans are perversely at pains to conceal; likewise, the wall-to-wall carpeting (becoming standard in the decade), is supposed to shelter them from some kind of alienation; fondness for gardening, the most common pastime in the suburbs, allegedly indicates morbidity (this idea has also been discussed in relation "The Wrysons"); according to home-made

[175] J. Dyer: "John Cheever: Parody and the Suburban Aesthetic". http://xroads.virginia.edu

[176] This is a familiar device in Cheever — *Bullet Park* has a very similar ending.

[177] J. Cheever: *Collected Stories…*, p. 370.

Freudianism, Helen's complexion along with Larry's semi-nudity while gardening seem to hint at sexual irregularities in the couple. As they go from strength to strength, they incur ever more suspicion even though nothing seems to corroborate it. The Crutchmans are ordinary, successful, perhaps a little boring since they are such typical High Suburbanites.

Cheever's technique in the story "is an inversion of the methods he uses in the other stories"[178] in the collection. Whereas the narrative of the Lawtons ("The Sorrows of Gin") uncovers their alcoholism, Johnny Hake ("The Housebreaker of Shady Hill") becomes a thief and there are numerous stories of adultery ("The Five-Forty-Eight", "The Trouble of Marcie Flint", "The Country Husband", "Just Tell Me Who It Was", "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow", "Marito in Citta", "Artemis, the Honest Well Digger"), "The Worm in the Apple" reveals nothing objectionable about the Crutchmans. If we follow John Dyer's argument that the multiple ironies of the narrative combine to produce the effect of parody of other suburban stories' narrators and protagonists, a question arises about the objective of such procedure. Dyer claims that the story has a satiric thrust.

> By subverting the reader's expectations of an expose of the Crutchmans' faults, "The Worm" satirically highlights the fallaciousness of Cheever's (and our) impulse to search for the worm in the apple. … It is a parodic attack on critics of the suburbs who seek the worm in the suburban apple, and … in this sense it is an antidote to the cynicism of the other stories.[179]

In accepting the milk-and-honey fairy tale rhetoric, Cheever interrogates suburban fiction's tendency to employ *clichéd* themes and characters as well as correspondingly *clichéd* critique of the genre. In addition to textual strategy, the paradigm of "The Worm in the Apple" derives from two factors: first, magazine publication; second, the fact that it was written and published during the post-war suburban boom. For these reasons Cheever's work was likely, as Nancy Glazener puts it, to be "read for realism", that is for relevance to an important social phenomenon and in terms of representativeness of his world. His reliance on character rather than plot, according to Glazener another typical feature of the realist short story, impinges on the polemical tone of "The Worm in the Apple". Cheever's social positioning and his narrative attitude make his work upper middle class in cultural identity (Gertrude Atherton's understanding of the term "bourgeois" carries sinister connotations of ideological domination which belong to the cognitive apparatus of early twentieth-century critical discourse) and

[178] J. Dyer: "John Cheever: Parody and the Suburban Aesthetic". http://xroads.virginia.edu

[179] Ibid.

aesthetic. The concept of "Littleism" invoked at the beginning of this chapter, viewed as a self-limiting impulse in magazine-published realist short stories, becomes here a self-conscious theme rather than conformist artistic approach, the politics of the *Atlantic*-group or "Uncut Leaves" giving way to very different paradigms of publishing policy in and reception of *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Playboy* or the *Saturday Evening Post* where Cheever's stories first appeared.

Part Two

John Updike: Life and Adventures of a Romping Rabbit

Chapter One

The Warren: *Rabbit, Run*

As the Rabbit tetralogy takes us through suburban Pennsylvania viewed over more than three decades, it is necessary to focus the study of the Harry Angstrom cycle on selected ideas. Thus in Part Two emphasis will be put on how Updike engages with the middle class in general; what constitutes the main controversy of the books in question; how the themes of mobility and gardening are used; the troping of money and consumerism; the problems of family and masculinity.

Jack De Bellis identifies "middleness" as one of the novelist's major concerns, attributing it to two factors: 1) being born and reared in Shillington, a small town in Pennsylvania, 2) a keen personal sense of being "stuck in the middle," a beneficial predicament that exposes one to individuals and communities in dynamic relations of movement and anxiety.[1] Updike himself has declared:

> My subject is the American Protestant small-town middle class. I like middles. It is in the middles that extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules. Something quite intricate and fierce occurs in homes, and it seems to me without doubt worthwhile to examine what it is.[2]

However, the intensity of *Rabbit Run*, first published in 1960, resides not so much in middle-class consciousness *per se* as in the young Angstroms' inability to negotiate the demands of suburban adulthood. Recalling the impact of the novel's publication William Pritchard points out that its im-

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[1] J. De Bellis: *The John Updike Encyclopedia*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press 2000, p. 272.

[2] J. Howard: "Can a Nice Novelist Finish First?". *Life* 4 November 1966, p. 74.

age of "humanity in its lower-middle and working class manifestations as observed in southeastern Pennsylvania"[3] led many reviewers to believe the author's general attitude to be one of dismay, disgust, detestation. Musing on the Angstroms' relative lack of sophistication, Donald Greiner claims that "they do not know how to cope with the tensions of living as a family on the margin of the middle class … How can they join the middle-class treadmill when they cannot define the middle-class dream?"[4] Rabbit's dilemma at the beginning of the novel is that of having to choose between the routine of middle-class life and the pursuit of self-expression; how he vacillates between the two makes up the great drama of the tetralogy, although his inability to identify the problem as socially and psychologically inevitable also adds something essential to Updike's project.

The question of Harry Angstrom's inarticulacy is handled skilfully as in many passages of the novel the narrative voice blends the protagonist's perspective with that of someone very much like John Updike himself. What is more, Rabbit as a character always aroused intense critical responses: for Gary Wills he represented the complacency of the middle class; the reviewer of *The Wall Street Journal* considers him well-nigh wholly unsympathetic; in *Time* he is viewed as weak and "hollow". On the other hand, the *Saturday Review* finds in Updike's protagonist something admirable; for Louis Menand in *Esquire* his vulnerability and loneliness are profoundly appealing, whereas the *New Republic*'s Hermione Lee balances his callousness against his tenderness and empathy, likening him to Joyce's Leopold Bloom.[5] As Donald Greiner reminds us, the novelist himself called Rabbit's attraction to opposing ideas the "yes, but" quality[6] — standing in the long line of American fictional protagonists since Natty Bumppo he is impelled to follow his instincts even as the tempering influence of social convention beckons (this dynamic relation is played out in the entire cycle, the increasing proportion of the social component defining his rising identification with the middle class, even though the "yes, but" attitude remains with Harry to the end of *Rabitt at Rest*). Despite John Gardner's disapproval of Updike's fiction, it is clear that the former's distinction between sincerity and honesty is resolved in the Rabbit series in favour of honesty as Harry Angstrom's quest is drawn with sustained unity of purpose. What differs Updike's approach from Gardner's is that Rabbit, not entirely a sympathet-

[3] W.H. Pritchard*: Updike*: *America's Man of Letters*. South Royalton, Verm.: Steerforth Press 2000, p. 47.

[4] D.J. Greiner: *John Updike's Novels*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press 1984, p. 50.

[5] M. Boswell: *John Updike's Tetralogy*: *Mastered Irony in Motion*. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press 2001, pp. 41—42.

[6] D.J. Greiner: *John Updike's Novels*…, p. 50.

ic character, does not lend himself to analysis in terms of life affirmation, upholding life and the triple unity of Truth, Goodness and Beauty.

The drama of Harry Angstrom grappling with adulthood and demands of middle class life in *Rabbit, Run* unfolds against a rich, precise panorama of East Coast suburbia. As Updike once said: "My fiction about the daily doings of ordinary people has more history in it than history books".[7] The novel abounds in references to closely observed places, socio-political events, brand names of merchandise people buy, see or use; meticulous descriptions of house interiors and landscapes. The expository passage on Rabbit's house and neighbourhood reads (the camera eye focalizer follows the protagonist's footsteps as he is running home after an exhilarating show of his basketball skills to a band of schoolboys):

> At the end of this block of the alley he turns up a street, Wilbur Street in the town of Mt. Judge, suburb of the city of Brewer, fifth largest city in Pennsylvania. … Past a block of big homes, small fortresses of cement and brick inset with doorways of stained and bevelled glass and windows of potted plants; and then half the way up another block, which holds a development built all at once in the thirties. The frame homes climb the hill like a single staircase. The space of six feet or so that each double house rises above its neighbor contains two wan windows, wide-spaced like the eyes of an animal, and is covered with composition shingling varying in color from bruise to dung. The fronts are scabby clapboards, once white. There are a dozen three-story homes, and each has two doors. The seventh door is his.[8]

Brewer is an industrial city, the neighbourhood Angstrom inhabits, a New Deal development, is crowded, cheap frame houses emanate poverty and neglect. But even the larger houses down Wilbur Street, "the small fortresses of cement and brick" are tacky, their windows full of potted plants, markers of lower middle-class taste.

His parents, a working-class couple, live several blocks down the hill, on Jackson Road, where Harry was raised. They own a half of a two-family brick house, his mother perpetually envying the neighbours their half of the building as its windows get all the light; his father nursing a whole array of disappointments, grudges and prejudices of his social class, a bitter, disgruntled man, his outlook a mixture of longing for welfare state security and national as well as racial prejudice. Their neighbours on Jackson Road were like the Angstroms — cranky, cantankerous, some of them fighting couples, the routines of their cramped lives occasionally interrupted by the

[7] Ibid.

[8] J. Updike: *Rabbit, Run*. New York: Fawcett Crest 1983, p. 12.

mover's trucks as some family's breadwinner found a better job elsewhere. Harry inherits many of his parents' values. For instance, when his running takes him downtown, now overrun with delinquent blacks, he gets a fright. "Being a small-town boy, he always has a fear of being knifed in a city slum".[9] He runs faster to reach a safer place.

What starts Rabbit's first serious flight from his wife is a suburban routine: he is supposed to bring home his son Nelson staying the day with Harry's parents and his car, left at his wife's, Janice, parents. He feels oppressed by Janice's boozing and her messiness, her parents blaming him for Janice looking tired, his own mother carping about their daughter-in-law's sloppiness.

> The clutter behind him in the room — the Old-fashioned glass with its corrupt dregs, the choked ashtray balanced on the easy-chair arm, the rumpled rug, the floppy stacks of slippery newspapers, the kid's toys here and there broken and stuck and jammed, a leg off a doll and a piece of bent cardboard that went with some of breakfast-box cutout, the rolls of fuzz under the radiators, the continual crisscrossing mess — clings to his back like a tightening net. He tries to sort out picking up his car and then his kid. Or should he pick up the kid first? He wants more to see the kid. It would be quicker to walk over to Mrs. Springer's, she lived closer. But suppose she was watching out the window for him to come so she could pop out and tell him how tired Janice looked? *Who wouldn't be tired after tramping around trying to buy something with you you miserable nickel-hugger? You fat hag. You old gypsy.* If he had the kid along this might not happen. Rabbit likes the idea of walking up from his mother's place with his boy. Two and a half, Nelson walks like a trooper with choppy stubborn steps. They'd walk along in the day's last light under the trees and then like magic there would be Daddy's car at a curb. But it will take longer this way, what with his own mother talking slyly and roundabout about how incompetent Janice is. He hated it when his mother went on like that; maybe she did it just to kid him, but he couldn't take her lightly, she was somehow too powerful, at least with him. He had better go for the car first and pick the kid up with it. But he doesn't want to do it this way. He just doesn't. The problem knits in front of him and he feels sickened by the intricacy.[10]

In contrast to his wife Harry is portrayed as neat and he perceives the mess in the house as particularly disagreeable. Yet obviously what he feels to be "a tightening net" clinging to his back is more than just Nelson's broken toys scattered around the living room. The net comprises the totality of professional, familial and social commitments which baffle and oppress

[9] Ibid., p. 180.
[10] Ibid., p. 19.

Rabbit. As he explains to his high school basketball coach, Tothero, after being excellent at something (he means basketball) it is difficult to settle for second-rateness.[11] His life seems to be scarcely more: demonstrating MagiPeelers at store after store, coming back home to a pregnant drunk wife and dingy house, enduring innuendoes from his mother-in-law, attending to small family routines. Rabbit is unable to compromise and set his sights on objectives that would hold out promise of a middle-class existence. When he is leaving to fetch the car and Nelson, and Janice asks him to buy a pack of cigarettes (he himself has given up smoking), Harry has a feeling that a trap has been sprung. As he explains later to Jack Eccles, the Episcopalian minister:

> It just felt like the whole business was fetching and hauling, all the time trying to hold this mess together she was making all the time. I don't know, it seemed like I was glued in with a lot of busted toys and empty glasses and television going and meals late and no way of getting out.[12]

Although it is suggested by Eccles, Rabbit is unable to regard his difficulties as typical of early married life, his sense of constriction is too strong to consider other perspectives.

On an impulse, instead of going to his parents' to pick up his son, he dashes out of town. He gets on Route 422 to Philadelphia, he is drawn into it by the numerous interchanges, but then he realizes that he despises the city and wants to go south instead, to "orange groves and smoking rivers and barefoot women". As he is heading east, he has to get on Route 100 to West Chester and Wilmington, and then, instinctively, swings onto 23 taking him through the tiny towns of Coventryville, Elverson, Morgantown. At a filling station he wants to purchase a map, but the only one available is that of New York state, so again he leaves with a vague idea of where he is going, perhaps Florida. In Lancaster he picks up 222 and heads due south through Refton, Hessdale, New Providence, Quarryville, Mechanics

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[11] Ibid., p. 101. Two more points need to be raised here. First, as Ethan Fishman argues, mediocrity is one of the consequences of democracy according to Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Updike's Rabbit cycle studying this idea: E. Fishman: "What Makes Rabbit Run? Updike's Hero as Tocqueville's American Democrat". *American Politics Research* 1985, 13 (1), pp. 79—100. Second, sport is often presented in escapist terms in American culture: J.O. Segrave: "Sport as Escape". *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 24 February 2000, pp. 61—77. Thus Harry Angstrom is typical both in his fear of mediocrity and in looking back with nostalgia on his basketball years as an antidote to the pressures of adulthood. For a similar reading of Richard Ford's *Independence Day* see: C. Elliott: "Pursued by Happiness and Beaten Senseless: Prozac and the American Dream". *The Hastings Center Report* 2000, 30 (2), p. 7 ff.

[12] J. Updike: *Rabbit, Run…*, p. 100.

Grove, Unicorn to Oakwood, Maryland, where he gets on Route 1, which, the *Saturday Evening Post* tells him, goes through the most beautiful scenery in the world, all the way from Maine to Florida. "His problem is to get west and free of Baltimore-Washington, which like a two-headed dog guards the coastal route to the south". He goes through Westminster to Frederick where he takes 340 and drives on across the Potomac. After midnight, wishing he were in South Carolina, he realizes that the country around, probably West Virginia, resembles the vicinity of Mt. Judge. Near Hagerstown he gets on the Pennsylvania Turnpike which brings him back to Brewer.[13]

Harry Angstrom's night journey raises a number of important points. The uniformity of landscape in the megalopolis of the North East which makes it so difficult for him to get his bearings demonstrates the sweeping changes in post-Second World War America. Better roads and cheaper automobiles have rendered travelling less attractive, since the open country has so far dwindled that one moves increasingly from one suburb to another very much like the previous one.[14] This is a familiar point made by fiction and social criticism in the 1950s and 1960s about the epistemological uselessness of travelling in the USA. In *Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit Redux* Updike elaborates "that perception of sameness and psychic confinement engendered by an automotive culture [which — K.K.-T.] is emblematic of a more widespread decay of basic American values and dreams".[15] In this sense Harry Angstrom's experience typifies a shift in post-war civilization that has extensive ramifications.

One of these is "[t]he emergence of commercial 'strips', where commercial establishments of every sort were built along the roadside with little regard to planning or aesthetics",[16] before shopping malls replaced them. This is what Rabbit sees on Route 1, supposed to have the most beautiful scenery in the world, and is faintly repelled by on his nocturnal journey: "Shortly after Oakwood he comes to Route 1, which with its hot-dog stands and Calso signs and roadside taverns aping log cabins is unexpectedly discouraging".[17] The same kind of landscape can be seen in *Rabbit Redux* when the Angstroms are driving up Weiser Street in Brewer:

> [P]ast the Wallpaper Boutique, the roasted peanut news-stand, the expanded funeral home, the great stores with the facades where the pale

[13] Ibid., pp. 27—41.

[14] C. Golomb Dettelbach: *In the Driver's Seat*: *The Automobile in American Literature and Popular Culture*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press 1976, p. 43.

[15] Ibid.

[16] M.L. Berger: *The Automobile in American History and Culture*: *A Reference Guide*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press 2001, p. xxiv.

[17] J. Updike: *Rabbit, Run…*, p. 34.

> shadow of the neon sign for the last owner underlies the hopeful bright sign the new owners have put up, the new trash disposal cans with tops like flying saucers, the blank marquees of the deserted movie palaces.[18]

As they turn into Summer Street, where Harry's lover, Ruth, in *Rabbit, Run* used to live, his mind goes back to the bucolic landscape of the past but a disappointment awaits him: a highway has taken the place of the meadow.

> [T]he STOP signs and corner groceries flicker by, brick and sandstone merge into a running screen. At the end of Summer Street he thinks there will be a brook, and then a dirt road and open pastures; but instead the city street broadens into a highway lined with hamburger diners, and drive-in sub shops, and a miniature golf course with big plaster dinosaurs, and food stamp stores and motels and gas stations that are changing their names, Humble to Getty, Atlantic to Arco.[19]

Not only have the open vistas been supplanted by the clutter of chain store facades, also the names of the new business emanate a sense of defamiliarization and degradation: the plain Christian "Humble" gives way to "Getty", a foreign name suggesting acquisitiveness; the familiar "Atlantic", very much alive, is replaced by "Arco", the meaningless name of a business corporation.[20] Yet this is precisely Rabbit's native milieu, it is in a motel that he is reunited with his wife after a long period of estrangement — The Safe Haven Motel, boasting "Queen Size Beds; All Colour TVs; Shower & Bath; Telephones; 'Magic Fingers' ", where they check in like any strangers, having to show their baggage to the reception desk clerk so as to be admitted as man and wife, not lovers who routinely hire rooms for sexual encounters in places like this, each American road a standardized lovers' lane. Michael Berger discusses a number of studies on the "visual pollution" of "commercial strips composed of fast-food restaurants, gas stations, and motels; monotonous suburbs and subdivisions; congested cities; ugly and unnecessary roads; and, especially, billboards and how they degrade the environment in the name of 'progress.' "[21] Updike catalogues places cluttering the roadside

[18] J. Updike: *Rabbit Redux*. London: Penguin 1973, p. 339.

[19] Ibid., p. 340.

[20] C. Golomb Dettelbach: *In the Driver's Seat…*, p. 44.

[21] M.L. Berger: *The Automobile in American History and Culture*: *A Reference Guide…*, 354. In this context he refers to *Man-Made America*: *Chaos or Control? An Inquiry into Selected Problems of Design in the Urbanized Landscape* by Christopher Tunnard and Boris Pushkarev; Peter Blake's *God's Own Junkyard*: *The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape*; *Wasteland*: *Building the American Dream* by Stephen A. Kurtz, and Jan Jennings' *Roadside America*. However, it needs to be pointed out that not all scholars take an entirely negative view of roadside signage and the aesthetic of the commercial strip: Stephen Carr's *City Signs and Lights* emphasizes the necessity of improving visibility and legibility of signs; Charles F. Floyd and

because this is a familiar sight and because Rabbit is so characteristically vague about it, both recognizing and finding it mildly objectionable.

Yet driving around is hardly a solution. When he gets lost and has to consult a map, he finds its grid of lines as oppressive as his home situation: "The names melt away and he sees the map whole, a net, all those red lines and blue lines and stars, a net he is somewhere caught in".[22] Exasperated, he tears it to pieces and throws out the window. As Cynthia Golomb Dettelbach explains, "Rabbit's destiny and manhood are tied up with taking the car and driving where he wants to go; he must use the map to find a way out of the maze that is his present life".[23] Once the map is torn, he has nowhere to go but to head back. Already at the beginning, in what is "a typical urban/suburban scene",[24] of *Rabbit, Run*, where the boys playing basketball watch approaching Rabbit and wonder: "It seems funny to them, an adult walking up the alley at all. Where's his car"?[25] a link is established between the car, mobility, and adulthood. Rabbit's '55 Ford, purchased at a discount from his father-in-law in *Rabbit, Run*, is a means of enslaving him to the rest of the family as he now owes much to them. When he makes up with Janice and gets a job selling second-hand cars for her father, his dream of freedom/mobility is debased to become only a commodity.[26] The car does not make Rabbit free; furthermore, he sees that those who pursue the freedom/mobility phantom are unlikely to succeed, if only because at his father-in-law's lot odometers of used cars are turned back and sold to naïve customers. "The clunkers won't get very far, nor, Updike is implying, will the pursuit of freedom".[27] In *Rabbit Is Rich*, after Fred Springer's death, Harry Angstrom takes over the Toyota franchise but even professional involvement in automotive business does not entail mobility; indeed, he remains notably stationary, hardly venturing outside Brewer. He remembers with nostalgia the time when he was stationed in Texas in the Army as his only experience of travelling of sorts before he goes to a Caribbean island in *Rabbit Is Rich*. Thus if, as Dettelbach argues, Harry Angstrom's manhood and fate are predicated on the car, the connection does not mean identification of mobility with adulthood. The pattern changes from chaotic, mapless movement in *Rabbit, Run* to an almost entirely sedentary life in *Rabbit*

Peter J. Shedd argue in favour of more effective regulations (*Highway Beautification*: *The Environmental Movement's Greatest Failure*); and J.B. Jackson, while deploring the ugliness of the roadside built environment, envisages its more positive cultural usage (*Selected Writings of J.B.Jackson*).

[22] J. Updike: *Rabbit, Run…*, p. 39.

[23] C. Golomb Dettelbach: *In the Driver's Seat…*, pp. 46—47.

[24] Ibid., p. 44.

[25] J. Updike: *Rabbit, Run…*, p. 9.

[26] C. Golomb Dettelbach: *In the Driver's Seat…*, p. 48.

[27] Ibid.

Redux, in some respects a refusal to "run", to desultory mobility in the last two novels of the cycle.

Complementing the meaning of the automobile in the tetralogy is the metaphor of garden, both in its suburban and in its pastoral sense, frequently combined with religious imagery. There is the Smiths' rhododendron garden in *Rabbit, Run*; although in *Rabbit Redux* Harry Angstrom occasionally enjoys the routine of mowing his lawn of a Saturday morning, he does little else in his yard while worrying that "blacks are taking over the garden of America";[28] the vegetable patch in *Rabbit Is Rich*, lackadaisically tended by Janice, produces lettuce (i.e. money) that her husband, anxious about the place's state of neglect but not undertaking any work, picks for their consumption; also, toward the end of the novel, when the Angstroms buy a new house he dreams of resuming his gardening (on inspecting the house for the first time he resolves to lop off the branches of trees which brush against the walls causing dampness). Finally, in *Rabbit at Rest* there are two gardens, one carefully cultivated, the other wild.

In the middle of *Rabbit, Run*, balancing the first part associated with Harry Angstrom's flight and the second in which he gropes for solutions, there is an episode in which, at the Reverend Eccles' instigation, he takes a part-time job as a gardener for Mrs Smith. There is a great deal of symbolism at work here: the protagonist's surname is a unit of length equal to one hundred millionth of a centimetre, denoting his minuscule significance as a human being and the absurdity of his notions of grandeur incorporated in his one-time basketball celebrity and having set a county high school scoring record;[29] his nickname contains obvious references to Beatrice Potter's *Peter Rabbit*, but more importantly points up his animalistic nature, particularly his irrepressible sexuality manifested both in his ceaseless thinking about sex and in impregnating Ruth when Janice is still pregnant, what is more, it happens in spring, the time of rabbits' heightened procreative activity; Eccles is an ineffectual ecclesiast. Even the fact that angstroms are used to specify radiation wavelengths seems meaningful in that it ties up with Harry's mystic, Beatlike vagueness about pursuing what he terms "this thing", or "it".[30]

Eccles explains that a deceased parishioner of his, Horace Smith "was an incredible rhododendron enthusiast",[31] a phrase that he immediately realizes

[28] M. O'Connell: *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma*: *Masculinity in the Rabbit Novels*. Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press 1996, p. 27.

[29] L.E. Taylor: *Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral Patterns in John Updike's Fiction*. Carbondale, Illinois: Southern University Press 1971, p. 75.

[30] J. Updike: *Rabbit, Run…*, p. 126.

[31] Ibid., p. 121.

sounds awkward, although it introduces the desired religious element, and now his widow wants to hire a gardener. In the descriptions of Rabbit's work there for the first time in the novel two discourses of nature: nature as wildness, like that of Harry's sexual impulses, and nature subjugated to spiritual norms of order and beauty are conflated. The gardener brings to bear nurturing devotion upon the garden, not domination or exploitation.[32] Rabbit's transformation can be seen in the description of Mrs Smith's garden in late spring:

> He lops, lifts, digs. He plants annuals, packets the old lady gives him — nasturtiums, poppies, sweet peas, petunias. He loves folding the hoed ridge of crumbs of soil over the seeds. Sealed, they cease to be his. The simplicity. Getting rid of something by giving it to itself. God Himself folded into the tiny adamant structure, Self-destined to a succession of explosions. … Tulips. Those ugly purple tatters the iris. And at last, prefaced by azaleas, the rhododendrons themselves, with a profusion increasing through the last week of May. Rabbit had waited all spring for this crowning. … Close, he can get so close to the petals.[33]

The Emersonian touch here is unmistakeable. Larry Taylor argues that there is a "pastoral and anti-pastoral pattern"[34] in *Rabbit, Run*, embodied both in Eccles and Rabbit. Although the former is an Episcopalian minister, his grandfather was a Unitarian mystic whose belief in redemption through personal transcendence Eccles shares. The minister, perhaps unwittingly, seems to follow a similar brand of pastoralism to Rabbit's romantic simplifications about life. Instead of preaching on morality and responsibility, Eccles takes Harry golfing. They achieve a kind of understanding, a bond of mutual boyishness and Edenic yearnings:

> Down in the pagan groves and green alleys of the course Eccles is transformed. Brainless gaiety animates him. He laughs and swings and clucks and calls. Harry stops hating him, he himself is so awful. Ineptitude seems to coat him like a scabrous disease; he is grateful to Eccles for not fleeing from him.[35]

Their conversation prior to the game of golf is even more revealing of their shared pastoralism. After a fumbling attempt to describe hell, giving a small laugh in the process, the minister is able to remove Harry's defences and embolden him to confess that he feels there is something behind the visible world that wants him, Rabbit, "to find it". However, when we follow the ex-

[32] M. O'Connell: *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma…*, pp. 28—29.
[33] J. Updike: *Rabbit, Run…*, pp. 127—129.
[34] L.E. Taylor: *Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral Patterns in John Updike's Fiction…*, p. 79.
[35] J. Updike: *Rabbit, Run…*, p. 122.

planatory gesture of his hand, the scenery is not one of dells and waterfalls, but a suburban landscape: "they are passing the housing development this side of the golf course, half-wood half-brick one-and-a-half-stories in little flat bulldozed yards holding tricycles and spindly three-year-old trees, the un-grandest landscape in the world".[36] Although Eccles may sound sardonic in his rejoinder to Harry's declaration: "Of course, all vagrants think they're on a quest"[37] or a while later when he says: "It's the strange thing about you mystics, how often your little ecstasies wear a skirt",[38] at bottom he sympathizes with Rabbit's dream of Eden. The myth of "return to nature" that Harry clings to is appealing because it is decontextualized; put in its proper perspective, i.e. as a way of life that involves consequential readjustments to the web of human relations, the myth results in destruction.

> Updike's philosophical conservatism conceives of the romantic dream of returning to nature, in its worst sense, as the ultimate extension of the loss of traditional values, ideals, laws. Set into a society that persists in adhering to some prescriptive mores, Rabbit, as a "noble" urban savage, images modern man's tradition-less character and portends his concomitant problems. And the effectiveness of the novel resides in Updike's projection of this statement through the use of the tacky social setting and a line-up of only moderately sympathetic characters.[39]

Viewed in terms of the tradition of American pastoral, Rabbit's sensuality appears to belong among the Merry Mount maypole dancers of Thomas Morton.[40] Yet it useful to look at the forms of nature the protagonist of *Rabbit, Run* is drawn to as well as his perception of these forms.

On his night journey south, "down the map into orange groves and smoking rivers and barefoot women",[41] he remains a model suburbanite in that he never leaves his car with the exception of the moment of having his car filled with petrol and stopping over for a cup of coffee after midnight. Therefore his view of pastoral America is simplified, moving between idealizing the country station attendant and then blaming him for getting lost; imagining the healthy and pure life an Amish couple in a buggy he meets on the road must be leading only to deplore that they risk "getting killed trotting along with one dim pink reflector behind",[42] he calls them devils,

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[36] Ibid., p. 120.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid., p. 121.

[39] G. Brenner: "*Rabbit, Run*: John Updike's Criticism of the 'Return to Nature'". *Twentieth Century Literature* April 1966, 12, No. 1, p. 14.

[40] L.E. Taylor: *Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral Patterns in John Updike's Fiction…*, p. 75.

[41] J. Updike: *Rabbit, Run…*, p. 29.

[42] Ibid., p. 32.

fanatics and manure worshippers. When Harry and Ruth, a prostitute and his mistress, hike up Mount Judge, Updike's language oscillates between idyll and reality, constantly debunking Rabbit's bucolic fling. The mountain can only be approached through the decrepit city park, where retired men sun like pigeons, "the ornamental pool in front of the bandshell … drained and scum-stained",[43] and where they walk, the swain and his lass, satyr and nymph, up man-made steps gouged in the mountainside. Near the summit, the urban world is more powerfully present — by way of three flights of concrete steps they come out onto the parking lot of a hotel. What they see from there is no Arcadian grove but an urban vista:

> The city stretches from dollhouse rows at the base of the park through a broad blurred belly of red patched with tar roofs and twinkling cars and ends as a rose tint in the mist that hangs above the distant river. Gas tanks glimmer in this smoke. Suburbs lie like scarves in it. But the city is huge in the middle view, and he opens his lips as if to force the lips of his soul to receive the taste of the truth about it, as if truth were a secret in such low solution that only immensity can give us a sensible taste.[44]

Brewer is a large industrial city, besides, in the megalopolis there is no getting away from urban landscape and the challenge of the middle class. It is too early for Harry to embrace a more challenging view of life than the pursuit of the titillations of adolescence. Yet the anti-pastoral overtone of the incident is clear — after the near-epiphany on the mountain top we are informed abruptly that Harry and Ruth "take a bus down".[45] Larry Taylor views Rabbit's dilemma as the fundamental problem of all American culture, viz. the inability to understand the meaning of the loss of Eden: "The entire American tradition, from *The New English Canaan* to *Rabbit, Run* contains characters who, like Theocritus two thousand years earlier, refuse to accept the loss of Eden as an inexorable fact, and consequently create Edens and Idyls in art and in their minds".[46] Translated into modern terms, what Harry Angstrom balks at is the paradigm of "middle" life, the domestic and professional routine emblematised by the suburb.

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[43] Ibid., p. 105.

[44] Ibid., p. 108.

[45] Ibid., p. 109. See also: L.E. Taylor: *Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral Patterns in John Updike's Fiction…*, p. 79.

[46] L.E. Taylor: *Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral Patterns in John Updike's Fiction…*, p. 85.

Chapter Two

Middle America under Fire: *Rabbit Redux*

The mixed urban/suburban scene in *Rabbit, Run* shifts entirely to suburbia in *Rabbit Redux* (1971). At age thirty-six, Harry Angstrom has been a house owner for three years. When Earl, his father, and he knock off for the day at the printing plant where they are employed, they head for their respective suburbs: Earl Angstrom takes a bus to Mt. Judge, his home all his life,

> Harry takes number 12 in the opposite direction to Penn Villas, a new development south of the city, ranch-houses and quarter-acre lawns contoured as the bulldozer left them and maple saplings tethered to the earth as if otherwise they might fly away.[47]

The architectural style ("ranch-houses") as well as inadequate landscaping indicated by the surviving construction time lawn shape show the new development to be lower middle class in character, the motif of recently planted trees emphasizing transience of its inhabitants, an idea that reappears several times later, e.g. when he watches his wife standing next to a "spindly planted maple that cannot grow" (a token of their stunted marriage) and reflects that "[t]heir neighbours in Penn Villas, are strangers, transients — accountants, salesmen, supervisors, adjusters — people whose lives to them are passing cars and the shouts of unseen children".[48] When Harry inspects the scene of his burned house and hears birds singing, he is surprised, as the familiar complaint in new suburbs is that it takes a long time for trees to grow which would attract birds: "Birds — birds in Penn Villas, where? there are no trees old enough to hold them — flicker

[47] J. Updike: *Rabbit Redux*. London: Penguin 1973, p. 10.
[48] Ibid., p. 57.

into song".[49] It seems that the neighbourhood is imperceptibly growing, making life there more attractive. This is what Rabbit thinks as he assesses it one autumn Saturday preparing his lawn for the winter:

> And he looks, and sees that his neighbours have trees, saplings like his, but some already as tall as the housetops. Someday Nelson may come back to this, his childhood neighbourhood, and find it strangely dark, buried in shade, the lawns opulent, the homes venerable. Rabbit hears children calling in other yards, and sees across several fences and driveways kids having a Saturday scrimmage, one voice piping, "I'm free, I'm free", and the ball obediently falling. This isn't a bad neighbourhood, he thinks, this could be a nice place if you gave it a chance. And around the other houses men with rakes and mowers mirror him.[50]

Saturday lawn mowing, the prime suburban ritual is described repeatedly, but earlier in the novel, it leads to a sense of isolation rather than the place's potential, like in the passage below where the question of transience appears once more against the background of typical suburban activities such as circulating petitions:

> All around him, in the backyards of Vista Crescent, to the horizons of Penn Villas with their barbecue chimneys and aluminium wash trees, other men are out in their yards; the sound of his mower is echoed from house to house, his motions of bending and pushing are carried outwards as if in fragments of mirror suspended from the hot blank sky. These his neighbours, they come with their furniture in vans and leave with the vans. They get together to sign futile petitions for better sewers and quicker fire protection but otherwise do not connect.[51]

Although the onomastics of the place names mentioned carries the customary associations with exoticism (Vista Crescent, Penn Villas), the facilities (sewerage, fire protection) are deficient.

Rabbit often feels that the neighbourhood is doubly poisoned: by the foul smell of the plumbing from below and by radiation from above. He also finds television aerials on the roofs to be a form of visual pollution, like in the following comparison of Penn Villas to Mt. Judge, where he grew up, when he realizes that despite medium-sized lots and a barbecue chimney next to each house, his neighbours seldom venture outdoors:

> In the snug brick neighbourhood of Rabbit's childhood you were always outdoors, hiding in hollowed-out bushes, scuffling in the gravel alleys,

[49] Ibid., p. 283.
[50] Ibid., p. 260.
[51] Ibid., p. 70.

> secure in the closeness of windows from at least one of which an adult was always watching. Here, there is a prairie sadness, a barren sky raked by slender aerials. A sky poisoned by radio waves. A desolate smell from underground.[52]

Obviously, he romanticizes his childhood and comparatively poorer Mt. Judge. One of the reasons for that is that his mother loomed so large when he was a small boy. Harry's memories may be related to the fact that she always believed that her half of the two-family brick house was a little crowded by her neighbours, their trees blocking the light to the Angstrom dwelling (as was demonstrated in the discussion of *Rabbit, Run*). Thus he would have been encouraged to play outdoors. In *Rabbit, Redux* her claustrophobia develops along with her Parkinson's disease. She tells Harry her dream in which the house next door has been demolished and an apartment building is being erected in its place, crowding her and taking up the air. When her son replies with a jocular "Mt. Judge isn't zoned for high rise",[53] he attempts to dispel her dark thoughts, but is clear that Rabbit's parents had lived a cramped life in a neighbourhood and a house which was far from idyllic. Her claustrophobia is a reflection of social limitation as much as it is a mental state imposed by her illness.

Alongside his idealization of Mt. Judge, Rabbit inherits from his parents a sense of socio-spatial identification which links up with their class-coded perception of the city. As said earlier, in *Rabbit, Run*, as a small-town boy he was mistrustful of city slums. Now, in the second Rabbit novel, Updike refocuses his protagonist's social observations, so that considering the same area as in the previous book he thinks of the relation between the city centre and suburbia.

> He can remember when Weiser with its five movie marquees and its medley of neon outlines appeared as gaudy as a carnival midway. People would stroll, children between them. Now the downtown looks deserted, sucked dry by suburban shopping centres and haunted by rapists.[54]

Such "zoned" perception of urban space is accompanied of with distrust of blacks and a measure of class resentment. This emerges in his first conversation with Jill when she refuses to answer some of his questions, which he takes for class superiority: "She is pulling rank. He is Penn Villas, she is Penn Park. Rich kids make all the trouble".[55] Even though Jill is not from

[52] Ibid., p. 57.
[53] Ibid., p. 171.
[54] Ibid., p. 119.
[55] Ibid., p. 114.

Brewer, she does come from a well-to-do family, so Rabbit's social matrix proves to be correct. What he refers to is social positioning in Brewer in relation to two adjacent neighbourhoods situated in two different boroughs: Penn Park and Penn Villas. The former is a "destination suburb" in West Brewer, its wealthiest part. The latter abuts on Penn Park, echoing a part of the name, but is across the borough line in Furnace Township, a rather poor part of the county, with understaffed local police, potholed road surface and sub-standard sewerage. When he returns home from work, Rabbit gets off the bus at Penn Park and walks down a street of mock Tudor mansions called Emberly Avenue, which changes, along with the quality of macadam, into Emberly Drive at the township line. The name of the street he lives on, Vista Crescent, may once have made sense, as there was:

> [A] softly sloped valley of red barns and fieldstone farmhouses, but more Penn Villas had been added and now the view from any window is as into a fragmented mirror, of houses like this, telephone wires and television aerials showing where the glass cracked. His house is faced with apple-green aluminium clapboards and is numbered 26.[56]

As Donald Greiner puts it, "[t]he downtown area is awful enough, but even worse is Rabbit's neighbourhood. It is not that the housing development is dangerous and decrepit but that it is plastic", Vista Crescent being "[s]terile, baked, and sad".[57] This impression of artificiality can be corroborated by the following description of the interior of the Angstrom house:

> The kitchen on one side, the living-room on the other are visible. The furniture that frames his life looks Martian in the morning light: an armchair covered in synthetic fabric enlivened by a silver thread, a sofa of airfoam slabs, a low table hacked to imitate an antique cobbler's bench, a piece of driftwood that is a lamp, nothing shaped directly for its purpose, gadgets designed to repel repair, nothing straight from a human hand, furniture Rabbit has lived among but has never known, made of substances he cannot name, that has aged as in a department store window, worn out without once conforming to his body.[58]

The appearance of pre-fabricated cheapness that both the neighbourhood and the house interior create accounts for some of the unnaturalness of the human relations in the book, the "Martian" element deriving from the initial historical image, that of the moon landing in 1969. Framed by this

[56] Ibid., p. 19.
[57] D.J. Greiner: *John Updike's Novels…*, p. 69.
[58] J. Updike: *Rabbit Redux…*, pp. 66—67.

synthetic setting, the novel explores experimental family relations while reflecting the broader patterns of the nineteen-sixties social upheaval.

In *Rabbit Redux* Harry not only returns, but he also is "reduced" in many ways. As he fumbles for what he imagines is suburban middle class normalcy, he sees components of this image come under massive onslaught of the turbulent decade. In response to the Vietnam War morass, the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, the late sixties saw the emergence in the mass media and social policy of the notion of "Middle America". As Richard Lemon's *The Troubled American* (1970), Donald Warren's *The Radical Center* (1976), Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg's *The Real Majority* (1970) and *The Male Dilemma*: *How to Survive the Sexual Revolution* (1974) by Anne Steinmann and David J. Fox attest, the Middle American appeared as the solution to the disintegrative tendencies in American culture. The Middle American was a white, heterosexual, middle class male who was treated as an unmarked norm. This tendency to obscure the fact that Middle America is racially and socially marked, and gendered, set the stage for a major discursive reshuffle. To many Middle Americans the new situation of no longer being able to take themselves as a norm was an unwelcome discovery. As Updike himself explains in his memoirs:

> My earliest sociological thought about myself had been that I was fortunate to be a boy and an American. Now the world was being told that American males — especially white, Protestant males who had done well under "the system" — were the root of evil. Law-abiding conformity had become the opposite of a refuge. The Vietnam era was no sunny picnic for me.[59]

In other words, what this "Middle American" like Updike faced was the necessity of redefining his self-image: instead of representing a God-fearing, law-abiding, respectable hardworking American Everyman, he had to begin to look on himself as standing for one race, one class and a specific gender. This is roughly Rabbit's predicament in *Rabbit Redux*.

Harry Angstrom is forced to reconsider his own social, sexual, cultural positioning as just that, a discursive and socio-political placement, not as a self-explanatory condition of membership in a silent majority;[60] confronted with the self-assertion of black people and women he has to acknowledge his own whiteness and masculinity. Put differently,

> Rabbit's story is the story of a shift in the status of white heterosexual masculinity away from its position as the self-evident (and invisible) standard

[59] J. Updike: *Self-Consciousnes. Memoirs*. London: Penguin 1989, p. 139.

[60] S. Robinson: *Marked Men*: *White Masculinity in Crisis*. New York: Columbia University Press 2000, p. 25.

> against which all other identities are measured and found to be "different". It is under cover of this self-evidence that white masculinity has hidden both its claims to universality and its anxieties about its place in a culture that increasingly understands identity as specific, embodied, and marked by gender and race. The unmarked becomes marked in Updike's novels, and Rabbit's engagement with the major historical and political forces of the late twentieth century demonstrates a wide range of reactions to and against this marking.[61]

As demonstrated in Steinmann and Fox's *The Male Dilemma*: *How to Survive the Sexual Revolution*, this sort of shift may result in claims of victimization of the Middle American by the new aspirant groups and the new welfare policy, but Updike pursues the theme rather in terms of Harry's general passivity.

Aged thirty-six, Rabbit is an emasculated man. Having bought a house at 26 Vista Crescent three years previously, when he was thirty-three years old, Christ's age at crucifixion, Harry had become exceedingly subdued. His running days seem to be over. Rabbit's reconciliation with Janice, the realization that maturity and responsibility are unavoidable as well as the purchase of property have rendered him bemused and quiescent. His disempowerment, plainly visible despite his acceptance of suburban routine as has been shown above, is mirrored by his wife's newfound zest for life — she has taken a job on her father's lot, she often works late, she is alive to social change around her. They seldom have sex, chiefly because Rabbit feels washed-out. Janice looks thriving in the atmosphere of women's liberation advances but also because she has turned the tables on her husband and taken a lover, Charlie Stavros, her co-worker at the lot. She finds Harry less attractive as he puts on weight. Watching him entering the bathroom

> [s]he sees his big white body, his spreading slack gut, his uncircumcised member hanging boneless as a rooster comb from its blond roots. She sees her flying athlete grounded, cuckolded. She sees a large white man a knife would slice like lard. The angelic cold strength of his leaving her, the anticlimax of his coming back and clinging, something in the combination that she cannot forgive, that justifies her.[62]

Janice's resentment derives from the obvious hurt of being twice abandoned by Rabbit, his affair with Ruth, but also from the fact that he has mysteriously and imperceptibly given up, the high school basketball star she fell in love with now has a beer belly. But there is another motif here as well

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[61] Ibid.

[62] J. Updike: *Rabbit Redux…*, pp. 35—36.

that Sally Robinson names "the novel's anxiety of blandness".[63] Rabbit has become bland; Janice is energized by her new life and needs a man who would share her vigour. Yet this sense of whiteness and white bodies as something bleached out, drained of life and repellent appears already in the opening paragraph of *Rabbit Redux*:

> Men emerge pale from the little printing plant at four sharp, ghosts for an instant, blinking, until the outdoor light overcomes the look of constant indoor light clinging to them … The sky is cloudless yet colourless, hovering blanched humidity, in the way of these Pennsylvania summers, good for nothing but to make green things grow. Men don't even tan; filmed by sweat, they turn yellow.[64]

A little later Harry is described as "somehow pale and sour", and when he and his father begin talk to talk several minutes later they talk of Rabbit's ill mother who has Parkinson's disease. Whiteness, paleness, blandness are connected with morbidity and death. Referred to as "the big Swede", Harry's complexion and hair colour consign him to the realm of enervation and sickness.

Thus when Janice moves in with her paramour, Rabbit is further debilitated and disempowered. In addition to grass mowing and other male household activities, he is now saddled with domestic duties of having to clean the house and prepare food for himself and his son, which he accepts placidly. He refuses to fight for his wife and lives in a kind of stupor. When he is introduced to Jill, a teenage fugitive whose father has died, and requested to take her in, he agrees as blandly as to many other things happening to him. According to Desmond McCarthy

> Rabbit responds to the collapse of his family by allowing an alternative household to take shape around him. He is coaxed into sheltering Jill, an eighteen-year-old runaway, who is in search of someone to replace her dead father. In Rabbit, she gets an insensitive lover instead. She becomes the focal point of this new community, serving inadequately as a surrogate wife and daughter to Harry and as a sister, mother, and perhaps lover to Nelson.[65]

The experimental composition of the household notwithstanding, both Updike's and Rabbit's sensibilities are conservative and what forms in the Angstrom house when Janice is missing is a substitute nuclear family. Therefore

[63] S. Robinson: *Marked Men*: *White Masculinity in Crisis*…, p. 36.

[64] J. Updike: *Rabbit Redux*…, p. 9.

[65] D. McCarthy: *Reconstructing the Family in Contemporary American Fiction*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing 1998, p. 27.

Rabbit is furious when he begins to suspect that Jill and Nelson may not just be friends and that by sleeping also with his son she violates the principle of minimum propriety. Although she offers to have oral sex with Harry, presumably preferring to have vaginal intercourse with Nelson, Harry insists on vaginal sex, not because he enjoys it with Jill but in order to reassert "the hierarchy and sexual economy of this 'alternative' household".[66] Rabbit does not mind being humiliated by Jill[67] as long as they can "reconstitute their family".[68] Even when Nelson is desperate not to allow Harry to abuse her, and threatens his father, Harry is determined to restore the power structure of a traditional family in his household. Arguably, "[i]n *Rabbit Redux* Updike provides what may be the most fully realized depiction of an alternative family in contemporary American fiction, but the result is a reification of the fears and prejudices of white, middle class America".[69] These fears are repeatedly shown as a neurotic nexus between social intercourse and sexuality. McCarthy terms Rabbit's sexuality "polymorphous",[70] both in the sense of the number of partners (there are Janice and Ruth in *Rabbit, Run*, though he reminisces and fantasizes about many more women; Janice, Jill and Peggy in *Rabbit Redux*; Janice and Thelma in *Rabbit Is Rich*; he is obsessed about Cindy Murkett and his putative daughter by Ruth; he sleeps with his daughter-in-law Pru in *Rabbit at Rest*) and forms of sexual satisfaction drawn from them. Yet he constantly thinks of the feelings of other people involved, and has frequent premonitions of punishment for his sins, for instance when in the first novel he thinks just before Becky's birth that because of his conduct either Janice or the baby will die, or in the second one when he anticipates some calamity as a visitation for the way his family lives, both instances pointing to Rabbit's Christian sensibility. What is more, for all his promiscuity, in *Rabbit Redux* Harry's social and cultural disempowerment is translated into sexual terms — with both Janice and Jill he occasionally suffers from impotence.

By the end of the novel, after Jill's death in the burning house, Rabbit realizes that he and Janice are ironically suitable for each other — his romping in *Rabbit, Run* led to Janice's drowning of Becky, her fling with Charlie Stavros in *Rabbit Redux* resulted in Jill's death. Thus two girls have been killed, in a way sacrificed, to test and eventually preserve the Angstrom family. In both cases the family is portrayed "as a deadening, constrictive, and unattractive environment",[71] one that is identified primarily in negative

[66] Ibid., p. 45.
[67] J. Updike: *Rabbit Redux…*, pp. 153—154.
[68] Ibid., p. 150.
[69] D. McCarthy: *Reconstructing the Family in Contemporary American Fiction…*, p. 28.
[70] Ibid., p. 41.
[71] Ibid., p. 53.

terms. In the first Rabbit novel, the reason why Harry did not eventually walk out on Janice may be attributed to the stigma of homosexuality which attached to men leaving their families in the 1950s,[72] the time when the book was composed.[73] Despite this, Updike implies, the family remains the only social structure which makes life bearable.

Catherine Jurca claims:

> After the 1950s the suburban family is the family in trauma. If the suburb and slum were once characterized by the profound differences between organization and disorganization, more recently their residents have been bound together in a sweeping "tangle of pathology." … [A]rticles in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Saturday Evening Post* had complained about the suburb in remarkably similar, and similarly hysterical terms. The commuter is an "absentee father" and the suburb a de facto "matriarchy". … Also in 1960 a team of psychologists coined the phrase "Disturbia" to highlight the "emotional problems" that plagued the residents of Bergen County in New Jersey, "a typical section of American suburbia." … Discontent … affects all family members and the relationships between them: lonely and depressed housewives, tense and depressed husbands, unruly and depressed children. People aren't simply sad; they are screwed up. In these accounts the white middle-class suburb is the hotbed of social and domestic pathology. … As a body of work, the suburban novel asserts … that … there is no such thing as a happy family. Divorce, desertion, adultery, illegitimacy, domestic violence, incest, mental illness, suicide, matricide: the term "dysfunctional" is hardly adequate to address the scope of its continuous failure.[74]

The drift and tone of such criticism harks back to the critical response to John Cheever's work. The vitriolic language derives in large measure from the obvious sociological importance of suburban novels, one senses that in criticizing the genre one is dealing with almost palpable socio-economic realities, an approach that tends to foreground social insight so much that aesthetic considerations are relegated to a subsidiary position. This is the case, for instance, of early Sinclair Lewis, Sloan Wilson or the Rabbit cycle.[75] Jurca asserts that frequently the impact of a suburban novel is measured by

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[72] Ibid., p. 35.

[73] Psychologist Barbara Ehrenreich in *The Hearts of Men* discusses the then belief that especially the birth of a baby may trigger off infantile behaviour that is likely to be of homosexual character as men in such circumstances are unable to meet the social expectations in the new role. Lionel Ovesey went so far as to postulate the term "pseudohomosexuality" to explain such cases.

[74] C. Jurca: *White Diaspora*: *The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2001, pp. 166—167.

[75] Ibid., p. 15.

the extent to which a given book is able to estrange its readers from the, apparently only deceptively, familiar environment.[76] The only popular suburban novel portraying happy families is Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972) which, in what is a perverse comment on visions of the nuclear family like Betty Friedan's in *The Feminine Mystique*, features households with robotic wives.[77] Only female automata can ensure familial bliss and be happy themselves. In *Rabbit Redux* there is a closure which is not so fantastic as in Levin's novel but as bitterly ironic — Janice's love affair is terminated, and her marriage to Harry saved, when his sister Mim, a Las Vegas call girl, seduces Charlie Stavros. Yet the immediate consequence is Harry's reversion to adolescence: he moves back in with his parents, acts like an older brother to his son Nelson and fantasizes about his sister having sex with his wife's lover.[78] In his only relatively mature impulse he has a fleeting realization that he has missed his chance to offer the dead Jill more than just shelter, never allowing her filial needs to emerge.

While the year 1969, in which *Rabbit Redux* is set, saw the coinage of the term "Middle American", so useful in analysing Updike's tetralogy, the previous year provided the backdrop for race riots in 168 American towns and cities, a crucial fact for the novel. Harry is frequently exposed to the presence of blacks, his social identity is increasingly involved in defining himself in opposition to them. On the bus home he muses:

> The bus has too many Negroes. Rabbit notices them more and more. They've been here all along, as a tiny kid he remembers streets in Brewer you held your breath walking through, though they never hurt you, just looked; but now they're noisier. Instead of bald-looking heads they're bushy.[79]

Although their Afro hairdos, speech and smell[80] are distasteful to him, he is also fascinated with their vitality. In a gesture of defiance, he puts an American flag decal on the rear window of his car. Recalling the recent moon landing, he imagines that while the country is reaching for the stars, the blacks are pulling it back down, taking over more and more of America the way they have already monopolized basketball, his erstwhile gate to stardom. On the other hand he likes Farnsworth and Buchanan, his co-workers at Verity Press, as well as appreciating entertainers like Bill Cosby. He is aware that they are usually underpaid and feels uneasy in their presence, perhaps because he senses his own privileged position.

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[76] Ibid., p. 161.
[77] Ibid., p. 167.
[78] D. McCarthy: *Reconstructing the Family in Contemporary American Fiction…*, p. 53.
[79] J. Updike: *Rabbit Redux…*, p. 16.
[80] Ibid., p. 36.

Rabbit's racial visibility, acquired in contact with blacks, and through his wife's perception of his body as racially marked (her lover, Charlie Stavros, is Greek; Harry refers to him as "spic"), is informed by a double figuration of traditional white entitlement and 1960s victimization, his body a locus of the mechanics of post-liberationist male white diminution and attempts to recover lost privilege. This discursive strategy is predicated on both repulsing and welcoming the protagonist's vulnerability,[81] Rabbit both accepts the new dispensation and bridles at it, his crisis maintained throughout the novel (and, as an epic of white Protestant masculinity, in the whole tetralogy). Following Donald Warren, Sally Robinson makes out a case for "Middle America" being primarily not a class-related concept, but one based on race, putting it bluntly: "'Middle Americans', as a discursive construct, thus enters political discourse as antiblack, anti-civil rights … the discourse around their 'discovery' as a group constructed them as first and last concerned with race".[82] The discourses about self-reliance, individualism and resentment of social assistance provided to minorities in the fledgling affirmative action programs of the 1960s, George Lipsitz argues, serve "as a cover for coordinated collective group interests" of the white middle-class majority, the rhetoric of white victimization obscuring "the disciplined, systemic, and collective *group* activity that has structured white identities in American history".[83] In Harry's case, in *Rabbit Redux*, some of these mechanisms are rendered as more complex and less racially coded, for instance, getting laid off at Verity Press is caused by offset technology replacing linotyping, a process in evidence in the entire world economy at the time. At the same time, it is Harry who loses his job while Buchanan, his black co-worker, keeps his, which saps further Harry's position as a privileged white man.

Thus if Harry Angstrom, as a Middle American, is defined primarily in negative terms as "unyoung, unpoor, unblack",[84] the first of these terms puts him *vis-à-vis* Nelson, who contests his father's position in the family, but mainly entangles him in a complex network of relations with Jill (familial; sexual; emotional; also more broadly social, revealed when Rabbit says to her contemptuously: "You rich kids playing at life make me sick, throwing rocks at the poor dumb cops protecting your daddy's loot"[85]), although this confrontation does not entirely overlap with Lemon's and Robinson's

[81] S. Robinson: *Marked Men*: *White Masculinity in Crisis*…, p. 26.

[82] Ibid., p. 30.

[83] G. Lipsitz: "The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the 'White' Problem in American Studies". *American Quarterly* September 1995, 47 (3), pp. 383—384.

[84] S. Robinson: *Marked Men*: *White Masculinity in Crisis*…, p. 28.

[85] J. Updike: *Rabbit Redux*…, p. 149.

other categories — he is older, but her family background is superior; besides, she stands for "the counterculture he despises".[86] Likewise, Rabbit's relation to Skeeter is complex. Skeeter is a Vietnam war veteran and a self-styled prophet, both disempowering his white antagonist, as, first, despite his approval of the war, Harry was too old to serve, which he is ashamed of (by contrast, Skeeter's credentials as an American are made to look more respectable than Harry's); second, Skeeter is highly articulate about black history and his claims to be a sort of black messiah. He is a crazed drug dealer who has jumped bail, both the involvement in drugs and the instance of disrespect for the law initially violating Harry's civic self-identity.

When Rabbit, at Jill's request, agrees to take Skeeter in, he transgresses against the suburban decorum, which he is reminded of first by his father ("Just that menagerie over there, the way you're keeping it, is a desecration. Have you heard from your neighbours what they think about it yet?"[87]), then by Showalter and Brumbach, neighbours performing the ritual cautionary conversation:

> 'Now some of us … were discussing, you know, the neighbourhood. Some of the kids have been telling us stories, you know, about what they see in your windows'. …
>
> 'The black fella you have living with you,' Showalter says smiling as if the snag in their conversation has been discovered, and all will be clear sailing now. …

Rabbit plays dumb, but he is eventually confronted with the fact that Brumbach's son has seen Skeeter and Jill having sex in the living room, one of the gravest offences, since a suburb, as has been discussed in Introduction, is chiefly evaluated in terms of its suitability as a place for rearing children. Additionally, a black man's presence in Penn Villas breaches the suburban code of racial homogeneity.

> 'We're trying to raise children in this neighbourhood'. …
>
> 'This is a decent white neighbourhood,' he says, hitting 'decent' weakly but gathering strength for, 'that's why we live here instead of across the river over in Brewer where they're letting 'em run wild'.[88]

In this way, the scene is set for a showdown, either Harry restores normalcy by removing the "desecration" or the community will take action.

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[86] S. Robinson: *Marked Men*: *White Masculinity in Crisis*…, p. 33.

[87] J. Updike: *Rabbit Redux*…, p. 206.

[88] Ibid., pp. 247—248.

The multiple drama enacted in the Angstrom house has a strong element of physical fascination. In contrast to Janice's contempt for the slackness of her husband's white body, Harry is attracted to Skeeter's blackness, the suppleness and vigour of his physique.

> The lustrous pallor of the tongue and palms and the soles of the feet, left out of the sun. Or a different kind of skin? White palms never tan either. The peculiar glinting lustre of his skin. The something so very finely turned and finished in the face, reflecting light at a dozen polished points: in comparison white faces are blobs: putty still drying. The curious greased grace of his gestures, rapid and watchful as a lizard's motions, free of mammalian fat. Skeeter in his house feels like a finely made electric toy; Harry wants to touch him but is afraid he will get a shock.[89]

Rabbit's fascination, verging on homoerotic, echoes his wife's appreciation of Charlie's olive complexion. Skeeter's animalistic vitality renders white people stodgy and lifeless, drying putty. Yet Harry's envy of Skeeter is not confined to biological desirability, "Updike also articulates a *cultural* appreciation of the black body as aesthetically more appealing than the white body".[90] The declining body of an adult white man, the archetypal Germanic "blond beast" of naturalist fiction of the late nineteenth century, fails to attract — Rabbit is made to compete with dark-skinned Stavros for Janice, and with Skeeter and his own son for Jill (Nelson is darker than his father, apparently taking after the Springers). White masculinity is progressively discredited and disempowered.[91] As Harry watches the black man move, masturbate, he feels energized in a way that is inaccessible to him without Skeeter's unwitting assistance. When Rabbit asks him about Vietnam, admitting he wishes he had been there, Skeeter sneers: "It was where you would have felt not so de-balled, right"?[92] To the end of the novel, Skeeter's vibrancy is irresistible to Harry who, against his better judgement, allows himself to be dragged along on Skeeter's quest.

In his spellbinding little skits, dramatizing black history, racial and gender roles are recast. Rabbit is made to admit his social prejudice against the Penn Park people,[93] the better suburb in the vicinity, eventually Jill, starved of heroine Skeeter supplies her with, is made to play the role of a female slave in pre-Civil War America, sexually exploited by her white master (Skeeter in this role), while Harry becomes the passive black man,

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[89] Ibid., p. 217.
[90] S. Robinson: *Marked Men*: *White Masculinity in Crisis*…, p. 35.
[91] Ibid., p. 37.
[92] J. Updike: *Rabbit Redux*…, pp. 219.
[93] Ibid., p. 215—216.

meant to watch the white master have sex with his black slave woman. As Desmond McCarthy puts it, Skeeter's objective is to "transform Rabbit's numb response to his betrayal by Janice and Jill into the sexual disempowerment and emasculation that a fearful white society imposes upon African Americans."[94] Rabbit is made to taste the humiliation, but his reaction to it is one of lasting fascination — after the sex act, he wipes the black man's semen off Jill's body with his handkerchief. For weeks after this, he occasionally inhales the pungent smell of the handkerchief, his ultimate disempowerment.[95] The dismantling of the Middle American suburbanite is now complete: he has been laid off at work, with the prospect of losing the job permanently and having to retrain; his wife has deserted him for a "spic" lover; he takes a teenage lover who sleeps also with a black man; the black man shows him the meaning of social and sexual degradation; his son challenges his authority, also (probably) in sexual terms, by sleeping with his father's lover. Finally, his attempts at reconstructing the family fail, and his property goes, when the infuriated neighbours set fire to his house.

What is intriguing, most Updike critics are as critical of Rabbit as a character, as they are mild on Skeeter. Wayne Falke celebrates the latter's anguish as "holy"; for Joyce Markle he has messianic qualities (she sees even the burning of Harry's house as Skeeter's energizing influence); Robert Alter grants that Skeeter is a strained, contrived character but proceeds, inconsequently, to praise this artificial quality for "hypnotizing" and "dazing" Rabbit into an unusual mental alertness; Robert Detweiler concedes that viewed traditionally, Skeeter is not believable, but urges that we regard him as a product of a new rhetoric of excess.[96] Even more than in John Cheever's case, we are dealing here with a major instance of bias not only against the suburb, the middle class, the white race, but against the reality of Skeeter as a human being. Lambasting Harry Angstrom for immaturity; "hardness of the heart", as Pascal's epigraph in *Rabbit, Run* suggests; blandness; in other words, capable of incisive analysis of Rabbit as a character in socially and psychologically adequate terms, most critics fail to do the same with Skeeter. Skeeter's behaviour is most of the time appalling, he is a thoroughly destructive, sinister man, which may be the reason he is difficult to accept as a persuasive character. Reading redemptive, or even downright phoney meanings into Updike's character is doing *Rabbit Redux* a disservice by embroiling it in a kind of imbalance that is hardly useful — like Harry Angstrom, Skeeter needs to be interpreted as a fictional character in a real-

[94] D. McCarthy: *Reconstructing the Family in Contemporary American Fiction…*, p. 50.

[95] Ibid., pp. 255—257. The scenes in Harry's house originate from Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, published in 1968, thus a year before the book is set. Skeeter owns a paperback copy of the book: J. Updike: *Rabbit Redux…*, p. 263.

[96] McCarthy: *Reconstructing the Family in Contemporary American Fiction…*, pp. 47—48.

ist novel. The fact that he poses a threat to suburbia which most American intellectuals love to hate should not exempt him from criticism along the same lines as Rabbit. Otherwise, hypertrophied Skeeter becomes dehumanized in a gesture of reverse racism. The same applies to Sally Robinson's remark about Updike's attitude to his protagonist:

> While it is clear that Updike distances himself from the unheroic Rabbit, presenting him as a kind of case study in Middle American anxiety, there is little evidence to suggest that Updike identifies against his protagonist, and with the "others" who force recognition of Rabbit's markedness.[97]

What Robinson demands is that Updike identify with Skeeter, Jill, Janice, Stavros, Nelson (i.e., female, adolescent and coloured characters) against Rabbit. This is a demand for political correctness. However, some of these others, in terms of the novel, are not worth identifying with, and Skeeter is a case in point. Either we read all of these characters from the perspective of social plausibility and emotional maturity, or we allow each a measure of latitude in consequence of adopting the poetic of excess. If we adopt different criteria for assessing Rabbit and Skeeter, the upshot will be Middle America bashing on one hand and affirmative action literary criticism on the other.

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[97] S. Robinson: *Marked Men*: *White Masculinity in Crisis*…, p. 201.

Chapter Three

Snugness: *Rabbit Is Rich*

In *Rabbit Is Rich* (1981), the third Rabbit novel, as national narrative opens on the Carter presidency oil crisis and a resultant scene of rioting over petrol in Levittown,[98] the first package suburb in America, we see Harry Angstrom middle-aged and moderately wealthy, inhabiting what he himself perceives as a space of fulfilment: "Middle age is a wonderful country, all the things you thought would never happen are happening".[99] The revolution of the 1960s is dead and gone, along with Skeeter, its prophet in the previous novel, about whose death Rabbit is informed by an anonymous letter with a newspaper clipping — the black messiah was shot in his religious commune by the Philadelphia police.[100] The land around Brewer which used to be farmland is now being converted into more and more subdivisions and shopping malls, while fuel shortages make new suburbanites more inclined to consider purchase of a gas-efficient Japanese-made automobile, which benefits Harry, now part-owner (with his mother-in-law and wife), the chief sales representative, "king of the lot" at the successful Toyota dealership that used to belong to Fred Springer, his late father-in-law. As Rabbit in his new position has replaced basketball with golf, and is now a member of a country club, we watch "the social dance of an age",[101] a panorama of the late 1970s USA along with his own new-found contentment with life, achieved after the scurrying and religious speculation of *Rabbit, Run* and the stasis and social dilemmas in *Rabbit Redux*. The newspaper headlines which used to abound in the previous novel, recording

[98] J. Updike: *Rabbit Is Rich*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1981, p. 49.
[99] Ibid., p. 231.
[100] Ibid., pp. 30—32.
[101] D.J. Greiner: *John Updike's Novels…*, p. 84.

the upheaval of the 1960s through Harry's eyes as a Linotyper, are still frequently there in *Rabbit Is Rich* but now they are scanned selectively for news pertinent to his business life, or his prospective speculation in gold.[102] His favourite reading is now *Consumer Reports*.[103]

Materialism is the chief theme of *Rabbit Is Rich*, in sharp contrast to the first two novels. The abhorrence of entrapment in the material clutter of his early married life "serves as a physical extension of the societal obligations and responsibilities that he so resists … In both *Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit Redux* he is quite cavalier about financial matters".[104] He is so engrossed in his spiritual pursuits that he is indifferent even to the burning of his house at the end of *Rabbit Redux*, a redeeming feature of an otherwise callous and irresponsible character. Indeed, the first two Rabbit novels my be regarded as quite consistently anti-materialistic: Harry looks down on his crook of a father-in-law, even after accepting a job offer from him; he sneers at Jill's posh ways and despises Jill's rich mother, Mrs Aldridge; he allows Skeeter to bring out his contempt for the affluent inhabitants of Penn Park.[105]

The new Rabbit, contented that "[h]e is in his bed, his molars are in their crowns",[106] snug, has sold out to his father-in-law's system of values. This involves compromises, emblematised by a reference to his diminishing sense of God, but the compensation is material as well as domestic security,[107] the kind of family life in which he is being looked after by his wife and mother-in-law. Although he still believes, ingenuously, that "[t]here must be a good way to live",[108] he pays a price for his well-being as he goes on staying in the Springer house in the wake of the burning of his own. He realizes that for a time after the neighbours set fire to the house on Vista Crescent he needed "to hide behind the Springer name in the big stucco house" which has the enchanting quality of a fairy tale cottage, a touch signalling that Harry feels ensnared in the seductive comfort of his new upper middle class existence: "The house, 89 Joseph, always reminds Harry under its spreading trees with its thready lawn all around of the witch's house made out of candy, vanilla fudge for walls and licorice Necco wafers for the thick slate roof".[109] Despite its ample size, he feels cramped at 89 Joseph Street. Therefore he abandons his suburban routines — since he does not feel at home in the Springer resi-

[102] Ibid., pp. 85—86.

[103] J. Updike: *Rabbit Is Rich*…, pp. 59, 224, 308.

[104] G.J. Searles: *The Fiction of Phillip Roth and John Updike*. Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press 1985, p. 82.

[105] Ibid., p. 83.

[106] J. Updike: *Rabbit Is Rich*…, p. 86.

[107] M. O'Connell: *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma*: *Masculinity in the Rabbit Novels*…, p. 171.

[108] J. Updike: *Rabbit Is Rich*…, p. 138.

[109] Ibid., p. 38.

dence he no longer mows the lawn. Instead, it is Nelson, who takes after Janice even physically, who is portrayed weeding the garden and cutting the grass, whereas his father only encounters a road sign advertising sharpening of lawnmowers,[110] a token of his depleted position as house owner.

However, expense is no object in acquisition of property. His parents' row house had appreciated considerably and brought him a handsome sum of money, his Toyota dealership is flourishing. Rabbit enjoys the evenings and weekends spent at the Flying Eagle country club and wishes his parents had "got out from under"[111] to join a club like this. As he luxuriates in soaring, eagle fashion, into this comfortable position, he considers the complex stratification of the local country clubs: the Brewer Country Club for "the doctors and the Jews", the one his late father-in-law "had angled for admission to" for years; the Tulpehocken Club "for the old mill-owning families and their lawyers"; "for the peasantry several nine-hole public courses tucked around in the farmland".[112] He acquires a taste for consumption and comes to believe that "life can be lived selectively". In what is a striking contrast to his enjoyment of gardens in *Rabbit, Run* and his own lawn in *Rabbit Redux*, he now regards nature as "an elixir, a luxury that can be bought and fenced off and kept pure for the more fortunate",[113] a thought which occurs to him in his lakeside house.

Money changes the Angstroms, from rough, resentful teenagers without much class they have turned into mature suburbanites, especially Janice who has adopted a new smooth manner.[114] When they are discussing Nelson's prospective wife, who turns out to be of working class background, Rabbit surprises himself by saying: "A-*ha* … Blue collar. She's not marrying Nelson, she's marrying Springer Motors".[115] This process of gentrification they are undergoing is reflected in Brewer as a whole, the city is being upgraded and the middle class is returning to the city centre displacing the poor retired people.[116]

The Angstroms' entry into the upper middle class is conducted under the auspices of Fred Springer, that "caricature of stereotypical masculinity and materialism"[117] who put speedometers back on the used cars he sold and chased his female clerks. He exerts such power from beyond the grave that

[110] Ibid., p. 22.

[111] Ibid., p. 69.

[112] Ibid., p. 61. Like Trilling, Updike studies social reality in relation to money and foregrounds the manners of his protagonists as his primary subject.

[113] Ibid., p. 137.

[114] Ibid., p. 158.

[115] Ibid., p. 188.

[116] Ibid., p. 324.

[117] M. O'Connell: *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma*: *Masculinity in the Rabbit Novels…*, p. 171.

his wife, and to a lesser extent his daughter, never stop figuring out what course of action he would like to pursue in a given situation. Because Harry is now "king of the lot", Fred Springer's creation, named after him, and lives in his house, he negotiates his accession to the upper middle class as a process of protracted transaction with some capitalistic patriarchs as much as the American society at large.[118] These patriarchs include such characters as Fitzgerald's Gatsby, who throws open his wardrobe for Daisy to inspect, establishing a forceful link between wealth and sexual attraction, much as Rabbit spreading his Kruggerands on the bed for Janice to see; and in the Rabbit world, Tothero in *Rabbit, Run* and Webb Murkett in *Rabbit Is Rich*.

Murkett is a money whiz, and when he talks to Janice at the Flying Eagle it is "as one member of the lesser Brewer gentry to another, about that tireless subject of money".[119] With connotations of "a murky web", he is a sinister man who is professionally very successful, who marries a new, younger wife every couple of years and revitalizes himself by forcing his older children out of the house as he has them replaced by younger ones, thus reaffirming the nexus of wealth and sex as a patriarchal formula for life in a materialist society.[120] The Murketts live in a model upper-middle class suburb situated above the city (hence named "Brewer Heights", the story of Crestwood Heights in Introduction explains the principle), the vicinity appropriately landscaped:

> Brewer Heights is a development of two-acre lots off the highway to Maiden Springs, a good twenty minutes from Mt. Judge. The road sweeps down in stylish curves; the developer left trees, and six hours ago when they drove up this road each house was lit in its bower of unbulldozed woods like displays in the façade of a long gray department store.[121]

The pastoral convention preserved in the place names links up with markers of wealth (lot size, landscaping), yet the overall impression is that of superimposed commercial character and exhibitionism, a very important aspect of the Murketts' life. Their house has countless refinements, mostly of expensive kinds of wood. "When Webb and Cindy entertain, built-in speakers bathe downstairs rooms in a continuous sweetness of string music and spineless arrangements, of old show tunes or mollified rock classics, voiceless and seamless".[122] The smooth voiceless and style-less music, the kind

[118] Ibid., p. 181.

[119] J. Updike: *Rabbit Is Rich…*, p. 397.

[120] M. O'Connell: *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma*: *Masculinity in the Rabbit Novels…*, pp. 178 and 181.

[121] J. Updike: *Rabbit Is Rich…*, p. 309.

[122] Ibid., p. 283.

that supermarkets play to their shoppers has an artificial touch of a culture that endeavours to impress. Likewise, the well-appointed living room forms an upper-middle class catalogue of house interior fashion, down to reproductions of Wyeth (as discussed in the corresponding section of Introduction).

> The chair Peggy sits in is squared-off ponderous modern with a pale fabric thick as plywood; it matches another chair and a long sofa set around that kind of table with no overhang to the top they call a Parsons table, which is put together in alternating blocks of light and dark wood with a curly knotty grain such as they make golf club heads of. The entire deep space of the room, which Webb added on when he and Cindy acquired this house in the pace-setting development of Brewer Heights, gently brims with appointments chosen all to harmonize. Its tawny wallpaper has vertical threads of texture in it like the vertical folds of the slightly darker pull drapes, and reproductions of Wyeth watercolors lit by spots on track lighting overhead echo with scratchy strokes the same tints, and the same lighting reveals little sparkles, like mica on a beach, in the overlapping arcs of the rough-plastered ceiling. When Harry moves his head these sparkles in the ceiling change location, wave upon wave of hidden silver.[123]

The furniture is tasteful by the standards of the 1970s middle class, and conspicuously expensive. The design and materials convey a sense of the house owners' wealth, while the Wyeth watercolours betoken reasonable sophistication. Also the silver gleams in the ceiling are appropriate as they hint not only at Webb Murkett's general interest in money, but also his later advice to Rabbit to invest in gold and, subsequently, silver bullion.

Webb Murkett, admired by Rabbit, has a prurient interest in sex, not so much for its own sake but as an extension and confirmation of his economic superiority. When he buys a Polaroid SX-70 Land Camera producing instant pictures, he first likes it as a toy, but soon realizes that he is sexually aroused by the fact that it can document his sex with his nubile wife while it is still lasting, giving a double boost to his masculinity — the pleasure of coupling with his attractive wife is augmented by having an immediate record of the act.

Harry is admitted to this truth after two preliminary steps. In the first, he watches the design of the downstairs bathroom. Webb and Cindy's wealth and exhibitionism show in tiny enamelled dishes; a mirror with light bulbs like those in actors' dressing rooms; many scented objects. Yet it all makes Rabbit wonder whether the toilet is ever used by its owners "or is set up pri-

[123] Ibid., p. 290.

marily for guests. Certain mysterious artifacts in it … all seem put there, on the set of open shelves hung on two black dowels between the bathtub and the toilet, for exhibit more than use".[124] Step two takes place when the downstairs bathroom is plugged and Harry must use the upstairs one. As is customary in a suburban house, he is instructed how to reach the inner sanctum — the toilet in Webb and Cindy's bedroom: "At the head of the stairs, turn left, past the two closet doors with the slats".[125] Rabbit snoops around in their bedroom and in the bedside table drawer finds Polaroid snapshots of Webb and Cindy having sex, but mostly of Cindy in poses emphasizing that to the photographer she is a trophy wife, "a possession for swapping and gloating over (in pornographic shots)".[126] For the Murketts sexuality is an "arena in which the two partners can validate their economic status, a status they register by emulating the images provided by advertisements"[127] and other forms of popular visual culture (the impact of the mass media is explained in Harry's reflections at the Flying Eagle when he acts in accordance with models of behaviour of the rich known from television commercials).

Harry emulates Webb when, on the latter's advice, he purchases thirty golden Krugerrands and scatters them on the bed before making love to Janice. To explicate this kind of conjunction of wealth and sex Marshall Boswell employs Tom Wolfe's coinage — "plutography", modelled on pornography, meaning "writing of the rich".[128] Hence, "Rabbit's desire for Cindy qualifies as 'plutographic' in the sense that it is directed less at Cindy qua Cindy than at Webb and all he represents, financially, to Rabbit".[129] In the Krugerrand bedroom scene, after spreading the coins all over the bed, he declares that he is going to put them in Janice's "great big cunt" and actually attempts to insert one in her vagina, the coins "spill between her legs", "interest compounds as … he hunts with his tongue for her clitoris", his orgasm is a "payoff".[130] Eventually, after the Krugerrands are traded for silver bullion and then cash, the plutographic strand of the narrative resolves itself into the Angstroms' purchase of a house in Penn Park, the realization of Rabbit's suburban dream.

When Harry and Janice discuss the location of their prospective home they reject out of hand Penn Villas, where they had lived in *Rabbit Redux*, for reasons of personal trauma as well as economic status. He makes it clear in

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[124] Ibid., p. 284.

[125] Ibid., p. 302.

[126] M. O'Connell: *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma*: *Masculinity in the Rabbit Novels*…, p. 181.

[127] M. Boswell: *John Updike's Tetralogy*: *Mastered Irony in Motion*…, p. 146.

[128] Ibid., p. 145.

[129] Ibid., p. 146.

[130] J. Updike: *Rabbit Is Rich*…, pp. 217—219.

asking: "What about Penn Park though? With all those nice divorce lawyers and dermatologists? I've always kind of dreamed, ever since we used to play them in basketball, of living there".[131] Thus the idea of buying a house is a planned fulfilment of a long process of social climbing. For Harry the new house would also mean the possibility of the much coveted approximation to the Murketts' living standards. He considers a "house with at least stone facing on the front, and maybe a sunken living room, so we could entertain the Murketts in decent style".[132] Later he compromises, agreeing that the house need not have a sunken living room, any other room would do "where there's a carpeted step down or two, so you know you're in a modern home".[133] Such thoughts immediately set him off, in plutographic fashion, whispering "seductively" to Janice (he names Webb as his advisor) about withdrawing money from the bank in order to "[s]ock it into the down payment for a house", in response to which "[h]er cunt is moistening, its lips growing loose".[134] This rhetoric is maintained in the entire lovemaking scene, talk about profit arousing both the Angstroms: "Moist, she is so moist her cunt startles him, touching it, like a slug beneath a leaf in the garden. His prick undergoes such a bulbous throb it hurts. '… and this sunken living room with lights along the side where we can give parties.' "[135] Rabbit's arousal is connected with thoughts of spending and the social power this involves as well as dreams about Cindy in a continuing transaction with Webb Murkett's vision of middle class life.

The house they decide to buy is situated in an "overgrown, mature suburb",[136] and Rabbit's view of it focuses on the fact of it being "overgrown", old and "well-shaded". As he surveys the property he is attracted to the fertility of the grounds, analyzing what needs to be done in the garden. The house itself is relatively small and built in

> what is locally known as Penn Park Pretentious: a tall mock-Tudor with gables like spires and red-tiled roofs and clinker bricks sticking out at crazy melted angles, and a sort of neo-plantation manse of serene thin bricks the pale yellow of lemonade, with a glassed-in sunporch and on the other side a row of Palladian windows.[137]

The house, which used to be a gardener's cottage, has some trappings of affluence, the melange of styles being one, its location in a distant part of Penn

[131] Ibid., p. 352.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid., p. 353.
[134] Ibid., p. 354.
[135] Ibid., p. 356.
[136] Ibid., p. 451.
[137] Ibid.

Park being another. Their new mailing address is 14½ Franklin Drive, the low number indicative of comparative seclusion, and luxury.

> Harry has never lived at so low a number as 14½ before. He grew up with Pop and Mom and Mim at 303 Jackson Road … The apartment on Wilbur Street … was a high number, way up the hill, 447 … The ranch house in Penn Villas was 26 Vista Crescent, Ma Springer's was 89 Joseph.[138]

Under the circumstances Harry basks in the sense of well-being, familial and social, planning a number of jobs about the house and garden, clearly an attempt at turning away from the single-mindedness of his life as a bourgeois.

This shift in Rabbit's attitude to life at the end of the novel is partly an internalisation of Webb Murkett's lead, and partly a renegotiation of "gender-based polarities"[139] that takes place in many men's midlife. The process of developing manhood customarily involves organizing the realization of psychological and social objectives around a selectively constructed self. At midlife, a tendency appears to look back and reorient one's self along the lines of reclamation of what was abandoned and depreciated in the struggle to become a man.[140] Rabbit's renewed interest in gardening constitutes an attempt to exceed habitual middle class gender roles. Additionally, in getting a house of his own and vacating the patriarchal mansion at 89 Joseph Street he endeavours to put an end to the continuing oedipal rivalry with Nelson and allow his son to take over Fred Springer's role.

Rabbit's perception of his family is conveyed in an economic vocabulary. Although he considers his son a "loser", they both participate in a monetary myth: like King Midas (there are references to Midas in the money-changing scene and the plutographic lovemaking scene with the Krugerrands) Harry has a crimp in his ear that Nelson has inherited from him — clearly a reference to King Midas's donkey ears.[141]

The general economic metaphor of *Rabbit Is Rich* comprises the metaphor of children as debt. Through a previously established analogy between money and semen (in the Krugerrand scene), there is a frequent association of Nelson with debt,[142] a paternal vision of children shared by Ronnie Harrison and Webb Murkett. In a novel in which so much revolves around Fiscal Alternatives, a creepy place where Rabbit buys the Krugerrands and the

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[138] Ibid., p. 455.

[139] M. O'Connell: *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma*: *Masculinity in the Rabbit Novels*…, p. 178.

[140] Ibid.

[141] Ibid., p. 180.

[142] M. Boswell: *John Updike's Tetralogy*: *Mastered Irony in Motion*…, p. 147.

two subsequent exchanges take place, his view of other people is becoming thoroughly commercialized, for instance when he calls his wife "moneybags" and enjoys sex with her as "fucking money", while becoming a sort of prostitute himself as it is Janice's fortune that supports them.[143] This perception of sex as transaction is a repeated motif of the Rabbit cycle: Ruth, Harry's lover in *Rabbit, Run*, used to be a prostitute; Jill in *Rabbit Redux* pays with sex for shelter; in *Rabbit Is Rich* Cindy Murkett's desirability is as carnal as it is "an economic signifier" of the Murketts' social status.[144] The only woman with whom Harry establishes a non-transactional relationship is Thelma Harrison; the fact that at first he regards her as unattractive and that he sleeps with her in a way by accident frees him from his puerile, consumer culture induced view of sex: "His ending up with Thelma is a redeeming accident, then, for it forces him to accept his new sexual partner wholly on human, rather than financial, terms, something he has not done for some time now, even within the scope of his own marriage".[145] On the other hand, the wife-swapping incident in itself is a token of the moral decline that accompanies economic prosperity, "[t]he suggestion is that Updike's suburbanites are … freed by their wealth from moral responsibility".[146] His middle class characters' psychological capacity to create a new balanced pattern of human possibilities and obligations lags behind the financial means at their disposal.

Harry's sexuality in *Rabbit Is Rich* is dominated by his "near obsession with anal penetration",[147] and in general the language of social and interpersonal relations he and Nelson use is sexualized. In that respect, however, they both echo Skeeter's rhetoric in *Rabbit Redux* — for all three of them both personal and national life consists in who "fucks" and who "is fucked". The affair with Thelma Harrison changes Harry's attitude, not only does he unexpectedly enjoy anal sex with her, he finds himself recovering some of his earlier confidence as a white male. He still is a Middle American beset by ascendant minorities, he is portrayed as having very exciting sex with his sleeping wife — an indication of his "minoritized, less than fully entitled, positionality".[148] His wife's newly empowered feminism enervates him, but the menace (and attraction) of black masculinity, looming in *Rabbit Redux*, has been largely assimilated to reinvigorate the Middle American. Harry no longer comes into daily contact with blacks, the way he did in the previous novel, mostly on the buses. He occasionally sees them in

[143] Ibid., p. 144.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid., p. 181.
[146] G.J. Searles: *The Fiction of Phillip Roth and John Updike…*, p. 84.
[147] S. Robinson: *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis…*, p. 42.
[148] Ibid., p. 43.

street, more often, though, he sees them watching him as he drives by, a successful white manager in his well-assembled air-conditioned automobile. He then notes the presence in some downtown areas of "[d]ark youths thinking in languages of their own",[149] juvenile Hispanics. When they enter the ethnic scene of Brewer, the problem of black-and-white confrontation, so acute in *Rabbit Redux* and in 1960s America at large, is defused and needs to be reformulated as the racial question is no longer dichotomous.

The blandness that used to stand for emasculation in the previous novel is now a condition he approves of: "[h]e likes having money to float in, a big bland good guy is how he sees himself".[150] His perception of blackness, mediated by consumer culture, allows him to appreciate the music of the Bee Gees, "white men who have this wonderful thing of making themselves sound like black women"[151] and Donna Summer whose recordings often sound as if she were approaching an orgasm. Listening to disco music on the radio, however, he loses his certainty as to the singer's identity: "Maybe it wasn't her, just some other slim black chick".[152] Thus the Bee Gees' achievement, to Harry's mind, consists in their adoption of a voice which is racially and sexually alien, their success is that of assimilating the vitality and texture of black music. "But the actual black women, in the person of Donna Summer, are only wonderful if they stay within the gender and race parameters set up by the white male imagination. No gender or race bending for Donna".[153] The disturbing black presence of the 1960s and *Rabbit Redux* has been tamed and commodified into pop culture preferences.

Regeneration of white middle-class masculinity, then, is accomplished by assimilation into consumer culture of racial alterity, not only that of the American Negro population but also the Third World. The Vietnam morass, which provided the international background for the 1960s social convulsions in *Rabbit Redux*, gives way to the Teheran hostage crisis and the Caribbean trip in *Rabbit Is Rich*. The former aggravates the Vietnam trauma by making Middle America witness a threat to the country's national institutions (occupation of the US embassy, unsuccessful rescue operation), which is put in the larger context of the mid-1970s oil shortage and the latent conflict with the Arab world. Nelson, who gradually enters his father's social sphere, is impatient with "those freaky radical Arabs" and imagines a summary, John Rambo-like solution to the problem: "Drop a little tactical A-bomb on a minaret as a calling card".[154] This sort of thought in Nel-

[149] J. Updike: *Rabbit Is Rich…*, p. 33.
[150] Ibid., p. 6.
[151] Ibid., p. 33.
[152] Ibid., pp. 36—37.
[153] S. Robinson: *Marked Men*: *White Masculinity in Crisis…*, p. 41.
[154] J. Updike: *Rabbit Is Rich…*, p. 319.

son, obviously, makes Harry more tolerant in comparison, mellowing in his middle age, but it also augurs similar problems of white patriarchalism in the next generation.[155] Recovery of American supremacy, and white masculinity, in Teheran, is a ritual that is going to be re-enacted in other places.

The other Third World locus of regeneration is the Caribbean where Rabbit's sexual potency is restored through the spouse-swapping adventure with Thelma Harrison even as his ascendancy as a wealthy and white man in relation to the poor non-white population of the island is confirmed. "Harry, as the embodiment of America, has temporarily overcome an impending loss of manhood by re-erecting his bodily boundaries. Still penetrating, but not penetrated, Harry and his country can bask for another moment in the knowledge of safety and sovereignty".[156] On the island, like in Iran, the rich Americans are allowed to break their own rules. The spouse-swapping incident constitutes a part of the large project of restitution of white masculinity through money, and although Thelma breaks the economic allure of women like Cindy and Janice, she too is a thread in the fabric of Harry's world (through his friendship with Ronnie Harrison and the membership in the Flying Eagle).

The image of his recovery must have been much more welcome to the critical establishment than the portrayal of his ups and downs in the previous novel as *Rabbit Is Rich* received the Pulitzer Prize for Literature, the National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Book Award. Sally Robinson argues that the praise lavished on the novel was partly "fueled by relief that the trauma for Middle America represented in *Rabbit Redux* by the chronicler of the American middle class has given way to bliss".[157] Despite the general contempt of the intellectual elite for the suburb, the image of Harry as a nurturing, quiescent and contented dweller in Penn Park, a "mature suburb", was apparently more appealing to the readers and reviewers than the image of an embattled Rabbit. In the case of the critical establishment, this disparity between theoretical disapproval of suburbia and accolades *Rabbit Is Rich* met with may have been fed by the simple fact that the suburb is where most people in the USA live and at least on a subconscious level it is difficult to be consistently negative about one's own space of physical and cultural habitation, in many cases, the only form of life the critics know. Another explanation may be the "tension … between anti-suburban wits and suburbanite readers"[158] that John Dyer postulates as a mechanism regulating the reception of John Cheever's work. All in all, unless we agree that *Rabbit Is Rich* is so much better a novel than its predecessor, we will

[155] S. Robinson: *Marked Men*: *White Masculinity in Crisis…*, p. 47.

[156] Ibid., p. 46.

[157] Ibid., p. 39.

[158] J. Dyer: "John Cheever: Parody and the Suburban Aesthetic". http://xroads.virginia.edu

find the insistence on the acceptability of devotion to either country or city, but never to suburb,[159] the underlying principle in the response to suburban fiction, to be contrived. In other words, Updike's artistry may have merited all the eulogies the book received but the hypothesis of the critics' relief at having their dilemmas resolved for them by a literary image persuasive enough to enable them to retain their self-respect while showering praise is hard to discount.

[159] S. Donaldson: *The Suburban Myth…*, p. 23.

Chapter Four

The Moribund State: *Rabbit at Rest*

As William Pritchard argues, there is reason to discuss *Rabbit Is Rich* together with *Rabbit at Rest* (1990)

> inasmuch as the two books are continuous, stylistically and tonally, in ways that distinguish them from both *Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit Redux*. Their mood is comic-elegiac, their technique an extension of the 'documentary' realism seen in Updike's earlier fiction, and their treatment of American society and culture — no longer the heated, contested, and overtly dangerous society it was in *Rabbit Redux* — is resigned and accepting, if ironically so.[160]

With Harry Angstrom retiring from business and spending each winter with Janice in their condo in Florida, the last Rabbit novel more than the previous ones concentrates on observation and reflection. His social passivity connects with the conspicuous empowerment of women (Janice) and the baby boomers (Nelson) taking over in business.

With plenty of time on his hands, Rabbit cruises around Brewer observing its growth. What was once farmland beyond the city's northwestern outskirts is now being turned into real estate developments. Gentrification is in progress, though not of the highest degree.

> The streets curve, as they did in the Murketts' development, but the houses are more ordinary — ranch houses and split levels with sides of aluminum clapboards and fronts of brick varied by flagstone porchlets and unfunctional patches of masonry facing … Bark mulch abounds,

[160] W.H. Pritchard: *Updike*: *America's Man of Letters*…, p. 277.

> and matching porch furniture, and a tyrannical neatness absent in the older more blue-collar towns like Mt. Judge and West Brewer.[161]

Thus the new developments are more affluent than the neighbourhood Rabbit grew up in (Mt. Judge) but not as desirable as Brewer Heights where Webb and Cindy Murkett used to live. The new estates are meant for the young professionals who have supplanted the working class Brewerites of Harry's parents' generation. Generally, the countryside around Brewer is being suburbanised. Webb Murkett, the capitalist patriarch Rabbit used to admire, has taken a forth wife, again in her twenties, and moved south where he has bought and renovated a farmhouse.[162]

On one of the walks taken up on his doctors' orders after his first heart attack, Rabbit visits Wilbur Street where the Angstroms first moved after they got married. The semi-detached frame houses have been refurbished, painted bright colours that were once unthinkable. "Festive yuppie money has taken over"[163] and now a hillside location overlooking the town is valued. Instead of tailfinned Buicks and Chryslers of yore now fancy fast automobiles like Camaros and BMWs line the street.

Despite the changes, some things remain the same. When Judy, Rabbit's granddaughter, is preparing for the Independence Day parade it turns out that there are no coloured children in her class. Mt. Judge is still a town which does not attract minorities, a residual "Middle American" community. Another thing that strikes Rabbit as anachronistically unchanged is Thelma Harrison's living room.

> Thelma maintains a conventional décor. Stuffed flowered chairs with broad wooden arms, plush chocolate-brown sofa with needlepointed scatter pillows and yellowing lace antimacassars, varnished little knickknack stands and taborets, a footstool on which an old watermill is depicted, symmetrical lamps whose porcelain bases show English hunting dogs in gilded ovals, an oppressively patterned muddy neo-Colonial wallpaper, and on every flat surface, fringed runners and semi-precious glass and porcelain elves and parrots and framed photographs of babies and graduating sons and small plates and kettles of hammered copper and pewter, objects to dust around but never to rearrange.[164]

The kind of middle-class respectability displayed in this *décor*, what he calls "a tyrannical neatness" in a different context, arouses repugnance in Harry. It reminds him of the houses he used to visit in his adolescence,

[161] J. Updike: *Rabbit at Rest*. London: Penguin 1991, p. 192.
[162] Ibid., p. 204.
[163] Ibid., pp. 326—327.
[164] Ibid., pp. 195—196.

stuffy, stodgy, rigid. Considering Janice's indifferent homemaking, his and Janice's houses were always much more casual to the point of being messy (the description of the Wilbur Street apartment quoted in the discussion of *Rabbit, Run* is a case in point). Despite that, he sometimes felt constricted, "crowded". Thelma's living room is faintly redolent of Ma Springer's house, a place he found oppressive despite the years spent there after his and Janice's house at 26 Vista Crescent burned down. Harry's disgust is also evoked by the fact that the room's "hushed funereal fussiness"[165] puts him in mind of Thelma's lupus killing her, his own heart trouble as well as their long love affair.

Rabbit's growing resignation and acceptance of things as they are is contrasted with Janice's new attitude. She has enrolled at the Brewer extension of Penn State, taking classes in "The Laws of Real Property and Conveyancing", "Procedures of Mortgages and Financing".[166] She has become bossy and masculine, also in her dress ("Everything she wears these days has shoulders; even her cardigan has shoulders"[167]). Her interest in real estate introduces a note of mutual estrangement between them, exacerbated by the idea of listing their own house in Franklin Drive as part of the settlement of Nelson's cocaine debts. This sounds outrageous to Harry since, as he declares several times, he loves the house more than any other except his childhood home on Jackson Street. Updike's figurative language allows for two explanations of this feeling: first, the snugness and a sense of seclusion he experiences make for the ultimate safety of a rabbit burrow; second, the place fulfils his social ambitions.

> What Harry instantly loved about this house was its hiddenness: not so far from the traffic, it is yet not easy to find, on its macadamized dead end, tucked with its fractional number among the more pretentious homes of the Penn Park rich. He always resented these snobs and now is safe among them. Pulling into his dead-end driveway, working out back in his garden, watching TV in his den with its wavery lozenge-paned windows, Rabbit feels safe as in a burrow, where the hungry forces at loose in the world would never think to find him.[168]

The house at 14½ Franklin Drive is the only place Harry does not feel ambivalent about. When his daughter-in-law, who grew up in a steamfitter's family in Akron, Ohio, and spent her childhood in a succession of decrepit apartments, admires the large pretentious stucco mansion in Joseph Street,

[165] Ibid., p. 195.
[166] Ibid., p. 278.
[167] Ibid., p. 423.
[168] Ibid., pp. 422—423.

Rabbit replies: "We ought to be grateful. But it's hard, being grateful. It seems like from the start you're put here in a kind of fix, hungry and scared, and the only way out is no good either".[169] Thus on the one hand, he "dismisses gratitude as a difficult, indeed irrational, response to a basic human predicament for which, excepting death, there is no adequate protection — not Toyota dealerships, not property, not wealth, not family".[170] But in simpler social terms, which is what Pru has in mind, both her and Harry's dilemma consists in aspiring to the middle class and feeling insecure in it, dreaming of a house in the suburbs and yet not feeling at home in it once it is attained, unless the house is acquired without anybody's assistance, which is the case of the cottage on Franklin Drive.

Thus Janice's plan to sell the house strikes at the core of Rabbit's sense of social achievement as well as his more general outlook. It undermines his understanding of the world as he seems to be able to put himself in communication with nature and spiritual life best in his garden. This can be seen in a passage on the garden in spring:

> The magnolias and quince are in bloom, and the forsythia is out, its glad cool yellow calling from every yard like a sudden declaration of the secret sap that runs through everybody's lives. A red haze of budding fills the maples along the curbs and runs through the woods that still exist, here and there, ever more thinly, on the edge of developments old and new.[171]

His sensitivity to nature is part of the general restructuring of gender roles in the novel. Janice is right in noting Harry's "feminine side",[172] dialectically related to the rise of her own masculinity. In an echo of the social revolution presented in *Rabbit Redux*, when Nelson is assigned a black counsellor in the drug rehab centre, Rabbit feels that his fatherhood is called into question by the need to consult a professional. There is also a hint that he resents the therapist being black.[173]

Rabbit at Rest develops the theme of disempowerment of Middle America, of white heterosexual masculinity, the suburban silent majority, by the social/ethnic/sexual other. In Brewer, he notices the growing presence of the

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[169] Ibid., p. 174.

[170] C. Jurca: *White Diaspora*: *The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel*…, p. 162.

[171] J. Updike: *Rabbit at Rest*…, p. 181.

[172] Ibid., p. 363. Sally Robinson relates this aspect of the novel's rhetoric to Harry's preoccupation with his ailing body: "In order to represent Rabbit's descent into a claustrophobic embodiment, Updike must rely on metaphors of femininity. Rabbit's growing consciousness of his own embodiment, and the limitations that imposes, is represented as a feminization." S. Robinson: *Marked Men*: *White Masculinity in Crisis*…, p. 48.

[173] J. Updike: *Rabbit at Rest*…, p. 300.

Hispanics and blacks, the same applies to Florida but there, like in the case of Skeeter in *Rabbit Redux*, Harry is vaguely attracted to the black children playing basketball. It is significant that he experiences the fatal heart attack while practising shots with a black teenager, thus enacting his racial anxieties. Yet the blacks are inscribed in a larger context: "People of color (along with gay men and Jews) are everywhere [in *Rabbit at Rest* — K.K.-T.] waiting to take over".[174] Indeed, Jewish characters are omnipresent in the Florida sections of the novel, many of Harry's neighbours are Jews, so are his three golf partners. He resents his son's gay friends, at some point he even suspects Nelson himself of being homosexual.

It is Nelson who is responsible for cooking the books but the blow comes from the alien menace Rabbit obsesses about — the Japanese Toyota executive who "takes the franchise away from Springer Motors, *literally* 'disenfranchising' our Middle American white man".[175] Harry's attitude as a loyal citizen is contrasted with his son's irresponsibility. Although in his capacity as Chief Sales Representative Nelson sometimes refers to *Consumer Reports*, Rabbit notes that this magazine, alongside *Time*, has been superseded by *Racing Cars* and *Rolling Stone*.[176] In opposition to the "adult" spending guide, the "Me generation" cultivates its puerile hobbies.

Going to Florida in Part III of the novel allows Harry to play out his own irresponsibility as it follows the disclosure of his sleeping with Pru, "the last and most devastating rupture of Rabbit's familial bonds".[177] What McCarthy terms Harry's "polymorphous sexuality" constitutes his main breach of the middle class social and moral code as Janice's reaction to the disclosure makes clear. Echoing his sense of release in *Rabbit, Run*, he drives south, reflecting that: "After all that megalopolis, Virginia feels bucolically vacant".[178] On his first run south, he had wanted to "fall asleep by the Gulf of Mexico",[179] in a paradise of sunshine and sexual fantasy. Yet his destination now is concealed in the title of Part III. Part I is entitled "FL" for Florida, Part II "PA" for Pennsylvania and Part III "MI", although there is no mention of Michigan. The most likely meaning is "myocardial infarction" that Rabbit experiences towards the end of the narrative. Resident in what he had imagined to be a paradise three decades earlier, he is now ironically "a retiree decrepit before his time",[180] Florida combining the imagery of relentlessly suburban architecture, unbridled consumerism and death.

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[174] J. Clausen: "Native Fathers". *Kenyon Review* 1992, 14 (2), p. 47.
[175] S. Robinson: *Marked Men*: *White Masculinity in Crisis…*, p. 48.
[176] J. Updike: *Rabbit at Rest…*, p. 255.
[177] D. McCarthy: *Reconstructing the Family in Contemporary American Fiction…*, p. 55.
[178] J. Updike: *Rabbit at Rest…*, p. 442.
[179] J. Updike: *Rabbit, Run…*, p. 29.
[180] D. McCarthy: *Reconstructing the Family in Contemporary American Fiction…*, p. 56.

Explaining why he got lost driving, Nelson says that to him that roads in Florida are "like one big business strip".[181] When Harry drives along Route 41, he finds it "the most steadily depressing" of all the roads he has travelled on, its roadside enterprise catering mainly

> to illness and age. Arthritic Rehabilitation Center. Nursefinder, Inc. Cardiac Rehabilitation Center. Chiropractix. Legal Offices — Medicare and Malpractice Cases a Speciality. Hearing Aids and Contact Lenses. West Coast Knee Center. Universal Prosthetics. National Cremation Society. On the telephone wires, instead of the sparrows and starlings you see in Pennsylvania, lone hawks and buzzards sit.[182]

Farther on, the references to illness and death become more urgent as he spots franchise billboards that read "Easy Drugs. NU-View. Ameri-Life and Health. Starlite Motel. Jesus Christ is Lord".[183] Connotations of death are obvious in the name of the housing estate where the Angstroms own a condo — Valhalla Village. The address: 59 600 Pindo Palm Boulevard, the highest address number Harry has ever lived at, suggests that he is approaching the end of the road, in addition to implying a very large suburban area.

The connection between consumerism and death is articulated forcefully. Rabbit's high school basketball coach's words about never being able to ingest the right kind of food as you grow older resonate in his ears but he persists in eating the wrong food. There are plenty of scenes of Harry eating Planter's Peanut Bars, macadamia nuts, dry roasted cashews, eye-of-round steak, butter pecan ice cream, cheesecake topped with creamed fruit. The culmination of this strand of the narrative comes in the scene in Flamingo Lagoon where he buys a bag of what looks like peanuts or pistachio nuts from a dispenser but which turns out to be birdfood and which his granddaughter calls "[l]ittle brown things like rabbit turds".[184] As William Pritchard puts it, "[s]eldom has the poetry of 'bad' food been more convincingly detailed than in *Rabbit at Rest*".[185] Sally Robinson places Harry's diet in the broad context of consumerism:

> Consumer culture is out of control in *Rabbit at Rest*, producing a nation of bloated bodies and weak hearts. Updike uses Harry's compulsive eating as a metaphor that, paradoxically, works to materialize the consumerism of consumer culture. Like Harry's lover Thelma's lupus, the disease of

[181] J. Updike: *Rabbit at Rest…*, p. 109.
[182] Ibid., p. 29.
[183] Ibid., p. 30.
[184] Ibid., p. 104.
[185] W.H. Pritchard: *Updike*: *America's Man of Letters…*, p. 290.

> consumerism eating up American culture and American power is a kind of autoimmune disease.[186]

Updike's portrayal of 1980s consumerism foregrounds three forms of dangerous consumption: overeating (Harry), drug addiction (Nelson and his friends) and promiscuous sex in relation to AIDS (Lyle). The second and third of these practices are especially destructive of the social fabric, let alone business ethics as can be seen in Nelson's case, and white masculinity.[187] As far as Lyle is concerned, there is a reinforced connection between consumerism and death. Lyle, dying of AIDS, informs Rabbit that they have met before in Fiscal Alternatives on Weiser Street where Harry bought the Krugerrands, and then traded them for silver and gold bullion. This scene constituted one of the most representative "plutographic" images in *Rabbit Is Rich*. However, coupled with this emblem of consumerist excess is not only Lyle's condition but also the fact of Marcia's, Lyle's colleague in Fiscal Alternatives, suicidal death.[188]

Harry's ambivalence about materialism can be traced back to the times when he worked at Kroll's in the late 1950s. As a young man he believed in the basic rationality and morality of the capitalist economy until "the system just upped one summer and decided to close Kroll's down, just because shoppers had stopped coming in because the downtown had become frightening to white people".[189] This experience, marked as it is by juvenile naivety, records an important change in American civilization. The time when white middle class people begin to avoid the city centre (the 1950s) is also the time of massive suburbanization described in the Introduction. Not only does coming downtown become dangerous, it is no longer practical as the new subdivisions move further out of town, what is more, the shopping malls sprouting in the outer urban reaches drain away customers from traditional department stores. This process of rapid suburbanization undermines Harry's conception of how the American society works. He comes to realize that the system consists of provisional arrangements set up for profit. His initial response is resentment and disillusionment: "If Kroll's could go, the courthouse could go, the banks could go. When the money stopped, they could close down God Himself".[190] This early response provides one more explanation of Rabbit's tortured relation to the suburban way of life. Raised in an urban milieu, he finds the pressures of suburbia, and adulthood, hard to withstand. The theme of consumerism is deployed

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[186] S. Robinson: *Marked Men*: *White Masculinity in Crisis…*, p. 49.
[187] Ibid.
[188] J. Updike: *Rabbit at Rest…*, p. 215.
[189] Ibid., p. 461.
[190] Ibid., pp. 461—462.

differently. A belated arrival in Harry's life, money provides the obvious consolations yet he is constantly groping for ways to use it well. His personal culture and social background do not help, hence his "plutographic" period and gluttony. Woven into the fabric of suburban life, consumerism turns out to be a deadly power Rabbit has no inner resources to deal with.

Part Three

Richard Ford: On the Realty Frontier

Chapter One

Haddam as Home: *The Sportswriter*

While Richard Ford's other books are set in as diverse locales as the Mississippi Delta, Montana and Paris, the Frank Bascombe trilogy is firmly rooted in Haddam, New Jersey, *The Sportswriter*, the first novel in the cycle, taking the reader also to Michigan, New York and Florida. Because of the importance of places in his work, it is crucial to bear in mind the author's background. Born in Mississippi, he spent some of his childhood in his native state, later moving with his parents to Arkansas. It is no surprise then that Fred Hobson places Ford's autobiographical protagonist Frank Bascombe "in that line of reflective and somewhat paralyzed well-bred, well-mannered, and well-educated young southern white males who tell their stories in the first person and are moved by the need to connect".[1] Thus the New Jersey setting notwithstanding, Ford comes out as a Southern writer. After all, as Noel Polk and Matthew Guinn after him argue, "novels such as Faulkner's *A Fable* and Welty's *The Bride of the Innisfallen* retain a southern sensibility despite their nonsouthern settings".[2] However, Ford's style and technique differ substantially from the Southern tradition; his view of family, community, history and religion likewise depart from the regional canon. Despite his apparent affinity for Walker Percy, Matthew Guinn is undoubtedly right in asserting that "Ford has more in common with … John Updike than with any of his southern peers; the protagonist of his sportswriter novels is more akin to Rabbit Angstrom than to Warren's Jack

[1] F. Hobson: *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*. Athens: University of Georgia Press 1991, p. 55.

[2] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism*: *Fiction of the Contemporary South*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press 2000, p. 111.

Burden or Taylor's Phillip Carver".[3] No matter how solemnly Frank Bascombe disavows his southernness, the regional dynamics is there, informing his quest.

One manifestation of the dynamics is the fact that Frank wrote an essay called "Why I Live Where I Live", discussing "the need to find a place to work that is in most ways 'neutral' ",[4] which happens to be the title of Walker Percy's essay on the same subject. As far as this "neutrality" is concerned, Jeffrey Folks points out that "Frank's character is shaped by his family's misfortune, but also … by his own uncomfortable position on the margin of the American Dream".[5] His provincial Mississippi childhood is followed by schooling in a Gulf Coast military academy and subsequently in Michigan.[6] Both parents' premature deaths and his own emotional insecurity which ensues produce in Frank a sense of acute alienation compounded by a condition of apathy named "dreaminess" in the novel. According to Jeffrey Folks:

> The confusion and incoherence he feels results from the superficiality of his cultural roots; due to his transient and disjunctive family history and the national history of dramatic social change during his lifetime, Frank is alienated from home, family, and local culture. He is an apologetic and indifferent Southerner, and like many in his generation it is difficult to speak with any assurance of his "home". He lacks a historically grounded sense of identity based on local or regional connections.[7]

While Folks's explication of Frank's condition is generally accurate, he does not emphasize its existential causes, alongside cultural and social ones. Yet the narrative clearly links up Bascombe's "dreaminess" with Ralph's death, his divorce as well as with the onslaught of the middle age. As Catherine Jurca argues, in *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* "the equation of suburban affluence and anguish has been modified, by a white male character who brings to his reflections a heightened self-consciousness and a new,

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[3] Ibid. While it is not my intention to force a parallel between the Rabbit and the Bascombe novels, it is worth noting that geographical adjacency of Pennsylvania and New Jersey results in the two protagonists inhabiting overlapping territories: there are references to the Poconos, the location of the Angstroms' summer house, in *The Sportswriter* (page 14); a minor character's name is Fasnacht (on page 101), an echo of Peggy Fosnacht, Rabbit's lover in *Rabbit Redux*, obviously a common enough name in areas with large populations of German descent.

[4] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter*. New York: Vintage 1995, p. 40.

[5] J.J. Folks: "The Risks of Membership: Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*". *The Mississippi Quarterly* 1998, 52 (1), p. 73 ff.

[6] The social aspect of Frank Bascombe's alienation will be discussed later in this chapter.

[7] J.J. Folks: "The Risks of Membership: Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter…*," p. 73 ff.

often insufferable, sense of his discernment".[8] Frank Bascombe often celebrates the mundane, the local, the quotidian. Ford is able to convey his protagonist's rationality, balance of mind, decency as painstakingly developed virtues that deserve respect because of Frank's earnestness and assiduity in pursuing them.

When Trilling asserted in 1965 that modernist literature and the expansion of education disengaged the twentieth-century American from the values of earlier culture, inaugurating a discord between the individual and the community's grand narratives, he envisaged the consequence to be the rise of a subversive discourse on frame-breaking and "the cultivation of experience".[9] To some extent Frank Bascombe reflects the processes Trilling identifies yet Ford's project consists in a more complex response to them. His protagonist transcends self-pity and unbridled individualism to seek a workable *modus vivendi* in re-socialization through cultivation of the quotidian and immersion in mass culture.

Ford is careful to on the one hand present his protagonist as representative of large national processes (it is for this reason that Bascombe was born in 1945, unlike the author himself, who was born in 1944), on the other hand, to assert the plainness of his background.

> I was born into an ordinary, modern existence in 1945, an only child to decent parents of no irregular point of view, no particular sense of their *place* in history's continuum, just two people afloat on the world and expectant like most others in time, without a daunting conviction about their own consequence. This seems like a fine lineage to me still.[10]

This predilection for the ordinary accounts for Frank's attitude to the suburbs, New Jersey and Haddam. Yearning for solace to his pain and confusion, he turns to a way of life that is regimented and a landscape which is predictable. Although he is able to sneer at a Southerner "who couldn't stand the South and craved the suburbs as if they were the Athens of Pericles",[11] Frank's own position is much more complex. Describing a crepuscular suburban scene of a man reclining in his easy chair, drinking and reading in the company of someone loved or at least liked, he says: "It is for such dewy interludes that our suburbs were built. And entered cautiously,

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[8] C. Jurca: *White Diaspora. The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 169.

[9] D. Tallack: *Twentieth-Century America. The Intellectual and Culture Context*. London and New York: Longman 1991, p. 314; L. Trilling: *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning.* Harmondsworth: Penguin 1967, p. 12.

[10] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, p. 24.

[11] Ibid., p. 69.

they can serve us well no matter what our stations in life … It is a pastoral kind of longing, of course".[12] Matthew Guinn's reading of such passages in the novel is that they show Frank seeking "the commonplace reassurances of the suburbs".[13]

Haddam, New Jersey, where Frank Bascombe lives, appears to him ideal in that it is devoid of historical intricacy, it has no important place in national or even regional mythology. He chose New Jersey because he was looking for "a plain, unprepossessing and unexpectant landscape".[14] As for the town, its attraction is more elaborate:

> Settled in 1795 by a wool merchant from Long Island named Wallace Haddam, the town is a largely wooded community of twelve thousand souls set in the low and rolly hills of the New Jersey central section, east of the Delaware. It is on the train line midway between New York and Philadelphia, and for that reason it's not easy to say what we're a suburb of — commuters go both ways. Though as a result, a small-town, out-of-the-mainstream feeling exists here, as engrossed as any in New Hampshire, but retaining the best of what New Jersey offers: assurance that mystery is never longed for, nor meaningful mystery shunned.[15]

In one more assertion of the inferiority of the South *vis-à-vis* a place like New Jersey, Frank deflates the pretence of Southern cities: "A town like New Orleans defeats itself. It longs for a mystery it doesn't have and never will, if it ever did. New Orleans should take my advice and take after Haddam, where it is not at all hard for a literalist to contemplate the world".[16] Elsewhere he claims that New Orleans is like any other American city, except it has "a theme park in the middle", otherwise it simply "obfuscates all of its fundamental urbanness".[17] He has no use for New York, either, going to Gotham on business, he feels "heartsick and turmoiled and endangered", craving "something that is facades-only and non-literate — the cozy pseudo-colonial Square here in conventional Haddam".[18] Although Frank

[12] Ibid., p. 312.

[13] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 115.

[14] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, p. 39.

[15] Ibid., p. 48. The size of the community, its bosky character and the suburban location necessitating commuting correspond with the Crestwood Heights case study described in Introduction.

[16] Ibid. The term "literalist" is one of two terms he uses to categorize people, the other being "factualist". While the former implies willed simplicity, even ingenuousness, an attempt to avoid undue complexity, the latter term, used pejoratively, denotes people who are unable to see beyond the physical reality.

[17] H. Guagliardo: "A Conversation with Richard Ford". *Southern Review* 1998, 34 (3), p. 617.

[18] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, p. 31.

is evasive about his reasons, his predilection for simplicity is persuasively linked with his emotional and, perhaps, intellectual life. In another eulogy we read:

> Haddam in fact is as straightforward and plumb-literal as a fire hydrant, which more than anything else makes it the pleasant place it is. … None of us could stand it if every place were a grizzled Chicago or a bilgy Los Angeles — towns, like Gotham, of genuine woven intricacy. We all need our simple, unambiguous, even factitious townscapes like mine. Places without challenge or double-ranked complexity. Give me a little Anyplace, a grinning, toe-tapping Terre Haute or wide-eyed Bismarck, with stable property values, regular garbage pick-up, good drainage, ample parking, located not far from a major airport, and I'll beat the birds up singing every morning.[19]

Frank's sensibility then is orientated towards predictability and plainness that are impossible to find in locations with more dramatic scenery or fraught with historical meaning. Although he finds the New Jersey landscape desolate, Haddam, its essence, is perfect for what he perceives as the "invisibility" of its inhabitants, their lives, including their tragedies drifting past other people, failing to affect anyone.[20] However, superimposed on these meditations is Frank Bascombe's distinctly postmodern distrust of regional, or any localist, discourse, "an anti-essentialist conception of place, a notion of setting as empty of transcendent or definitive character".[21] He prefers not to delve into any complexities, to skim the tangible, yet the effort visible in his approach attests to Frank's problematic positioning in between the two ideologies: 1) renunciation of metanarratives and 2) the habit of making the connection — bursting his immanence — which occasionally surfaces so that he needs to forcibly suppress it. One of the tensions informing the text is the difference between the protagonist's eulogies of New Jersey suburban landscapes and Ford's (as a focalizer) subtle exposure of "the socio-economic realities that Frank omits from his narrative cartographies of postsouthern America",[22] which can be seen in his obliviousness of "other, less privileged loci", notably in his simplifications regarding the sociospatial position of Haddam's black community.

The town is prosperous. Many residents work in the nearby "corporate think tanks", there are many well-off retirees and the "faculty of De Tocqueville Academy" (Princeton University); expensive shops have "mullioned windows". As far as population is concerned,

[19] Ibid., pp. 103—104.

[20] Ibid., pp. 339—340.

[21] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 123.

[22] M. Bone: *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 2005, p. 100.

> [t]here is a small, monied New England émigré contingent, mostly commuters down to Philadelphia with summer houses on the Cape and on Lake Winnepesaukee. Also a smaller southern crowd — mostly Carolinians attached to the seminary — with their own places on Beaufort Island and Monteagle.[23]

Despite Frank's sympathies for the Democratic Party, he affects indifference to that fact the local authorities are Republican:

> Either they're tall, white-haired, razor-jawed old galoots from Yale with moist blue eyes and aromatic OSS backgrounds; or else retired chamber of commerce boosters, little guys raised in town, with their own circle of local friends, and a conservator's clear view about property values and private enterprise know-how.[24]

There are numerous top executives employed in "the world headquarters that dot the local landscape".[25] In addition,

> [e]ditors, publishers, *Time* and *Newsweek* writers, CIA agents, entertainment lawyers, business analysts, plus the presidents of a number of great corporations that mold opinion, all live along these curving roads or out in the country in big secluded houses, and take the train to Gotham or Philadelphia.[26]

Ford is careful not only to demonstrate that Haddam is upper middle class, but also that it is historically respectable — there are graves of three Declaration of Independence signers in the cemetery nearby. Frank's large, pre-war Tudor house "is kitty-cornered from a big Second Empire owned by a former Justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court", another indication of his success in attaining so attractive a dwelling. However, in embracing "literalism" and searching for mystery in the quotidian as his method of approach to Haddam, Frank fails "to recognize the capitalist sociospatial reality of the world around him",[27] an awareness that will only come to him in *Independence Day*.

The house at 19 Hoving Road, which once promised to set the Bascombes up "for a good life",[28] has remained, even after his divorce, comfortable,

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[23] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, p. 49.

[24] Ibid., p. 50. On the whole, however, he is a staunch, almost militant Democrat.

[25] Ibid., p. 343.

[26] Ibid., p. 50.

[27] M. Bone: *The Postsouthern Sense of Place…*, p. 102.

[28] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, p. 3. Like his protagonist, Ford sold his novel, *A Piece of My Heart*, to the movies and bought a house in New Jersey with the proceeds.

> full of magazine racks, faded orientals, creaky sills and the general residue of mid-life eclecticism — artifacts of a prior life and goals (many unmet), yet evidence that does not announce a life's real quality any more eloquently than a new Barca Lounger or a Kitchen Magician, no matter what you've heard.[29]

Frank's home betrays both his relatively careless housekeeping and his comfortable life. His Tudor, "a quirky, personalized house … is not a sign of a superior life, although it is impossible not to associate it here with the conviction of superior sensibilities".[30] Yet neither the house nor the various community groups (he points out he does not belong to any of the contingents described above) exhaust the meaning of his life in Haddam. He claims that what is at stake is "something fundamental that's not a matter of money, I don't think, but of a certain awareness: living in a place is one thing we all went to college to learn how to do properly, and now that we're adults and the time has arrived, we're holding on".[31] Thus what he is in search of, among other crucial things, is community and a code of middle class life which regulates relations to people and place. How this code is understood in the novel will be discussed on the basis of two characters and their homes: Walter Luckett and Vicki Arcenault.

Like Frank, Walter Luckett is a member of the Divorced Men's Club. Before committing suicide, he writes a farewell letter to Frank in which he mentions a novel he started writing. The opening passage reads: "Eddie Grimes waked up on Easter morning and heard the train whistle far away in a forgotten suburban station. His very first thought of the day was, 'You lose control by degrees' ".[32] After his death, Frank visits Walter's apartment and takes in its chill and despair. While trying to keep his composure and asserting that, like many things in his own life, the place is not at all bad, the visit elicits a cultural and social assessment.

> The windowless front has been decorated with aluminum strips made like Venetian blinds, with "The Catalina" painted in script across it and backed by a wan light. Exterior lights along the side-facing doors burn visibly to the street. It is a place for abject senior seminarians, confirmed bachelors and divorcees — people in transition — and it is not, I think, such a bad place. … Though it is not a place I'd be happy to end up, or even pass through as a way-station toward somewhere else in adult life. The Catalina would be too unpromising for those conditions. And it would certainly not be a place I'd choose to die.[33]

[29] Ibid., p. 57.
[30] C. Jurca: *White Diaspora…*, p. 170.
[31] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, p. 49.
[32] Ibid., p. 349.
[33] Ibid., pp. 330—331.

The dismal apartment provides no clue to Walter's suicide besides the life of desperation he apparently led that Frank had been aware of earlier. Much of this desperation derives from transience characterizing suburban life and the general inability to form meaningful relationships in a materialist society.

Vicki Arcenault is an emergency room nurse whom Frank dates and hopes to be able to love more than his dreaminess allows. Vicki is simple-minded, happy about life as it is. She comes from a working class family, popular culture consumerism defining her sensibilities. Her condominium was "furnished in a one-day whirlwind trip to the Miracle Furniture Mile in Paramus" where she "made all her own choices: pastel poof-drapes, sunburst mirror, bright area rugs with abstract designs, loveseat with a horse-an-buggy print, a maple mini-dining room suite, a China-black enamel coffee table, all brown appliances and a whopper Sony".[34] The choices are obviously not "her own", she has been conditioned by consumer culture and her social background to purchase the goods mentioned. With what sounds a little like condescension and a little like an attempt to make himself accept Vicki's simplicity he tries "to portray neutrally the tastes of the lower-middle class, without … campy celebration".[35] When he comes to visit Vicki's parents, he finds them living in a pretentious, tacky neighbourhood: "beachy rental bungalows", "a man-made peninsula", "pastel split-levels" — comfortable, eclectic, factitious. "Sherri-Lynn Woods, the area is named … though there are no woods in sight … All in all it is a vaguely nautical-feeling community, though all the houses down the street look Californiaish and casual".[36] The Arcenaults are devout Catholics which combines with their working class culture to produce a sense of almost Gothic excess in the "near life-size figure of Jesus-crucified" attached to the front wall beige siding: "Jesus in his suburban agony. Bloody eyes. Flimsy body. Feet already beginning to sag … He is painted a lighter shade of beige than the siding".[37] Vicki's father calls the neighbourhood "our little Garden of Eden" confirming Frank's impression of the family's basic simplicity, but he raises the important problem of migratory life and its influence on how people relate to where they live.

Elucidating the rhetoric of place in *The Sportswriter* Matthew Guinn invokes Fredric Jameson's concept of "aesthetic populism", in which emphasis is laid on "the middle-class Zeitgeist of progress, utility, and comfort",[38] not on local specificity. Therefore settings in the novel lack authenticity in the

[34] Ibid., p. 57.
[35] C. Jurca: *White Diaspora…*, p. 170.
[36] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, p. 243.
[37] Ibid.
[38] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism*: *Fiction of the Contemporary South…*, p. 120.

sense of regional style. Like the transient suburbanites, architecture in the novel is never indigenous, buildings derive from distant, often exotic sources. Frank's environment is "untraditional and commercial, despite its pretensions to venerable gentility. High and low architectural styles are mixed together disingenuously in a perfect display of the conflation … of aesthetic and commodity production".[39] The situation is made even more complex by Frank's social and aesthetic positioning.

In contrast to Fred Hobson's ambiguity about it — he points out Ford's protagonist's blue-collar background,[40] only to put him in the company of the patrician characters from Walker Percy's, Allen Tate's or Robert Penn Warren's novels[41] — Jeffrey Folks is right in emphasizing Frank Bascombe's problematic class identity. On the one hand, the section of Haddam where he lives is conspicuously upper-middle class, his sophistication as well as the fact that he has written a successful novel invest him with an aura of elite culture.[42] On the other hand, when he was married he felt uncomfortable in the company of his wife's rich parents and their friends; he "hated that still air of privilege and the hushed, nervous voices of Midwestern exclusivity".[43] In an oblique attempt at self-identification he describes his own way of speaking as "a frank, vaguely rural voice more or less like a used car salesman".[44] Jeffrey Folks notes "Frank's unusual degree of sympathy with subaltern figures — his willingness to cross social boundaries, to empathize with the excluded, and to submit the class assumptions of his suburban community to critical examination",[45] a tendency that can be seen for instance in his relationship with Vicki Arcenault. Suspended between the enjoyment of the good life, very much part of his quest, and the ambivalence about his engagement with the middle class, he plays down his relative professional success as well as discounting his personal problems.

The pull of affluence and suburban comfort is always offset by the longing for the quotidian and straightforward, a combination which sometimes works and sometimes proves to be painfully dissociative. On Easter evening Frank takes in his neighbourhood:

> The Deffeyes' sprinkler hisses, and up a few houses the Justice has set a badminton net onto his long lawn. An old Ford Woody sits in his

[39] Ibid., p. 121.
[40] F. Hobson: *The Southern Writer…*, p. 43.
[41] Ibid., p. 55.
[42] J.J. Folks: "The Risks of Membership: Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*"…, p. 73 ff.
[43] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, p. 66.
[44] Ibid., p. 11.
[45] J.J. Folks: "The Risks of Membership: Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*"…, p. 73 ff.

> drive. Somewhere near abouts I hear the sounds of light chatter-talk and glasses clinking in our cozy local backyard fashion — an Easter Egg hunt finished, the children asleep, the sound of a single swimmer diving in. But this is the day's extent. A private stay-home with the family till past dark. Wreaths are off all doors. The world once more a place we all know.[46]

Frank celebrates the suburb as such, with its regularity and innumerable small comforts, yet in reality he craves something more fundamental, a safeguard against loss and solitude.[47] What Folks views as Ford's protagonist's "unabashed sentimentality concerning love and family" as well as "his odes to pastoral suburbia"[48] demonstrate that his overriding concern consists in seeking solace. Remarking on Walter Luckett's inability to survive, Frank recalls the time after his own divorce, when he used to go to the local train station to watch people arrive from New York, be met and driven home. The meaning of this, Frank insists, was not to aggravate his condition, on the contrary:

> I found it one of the most hopeful and worthwhile things, after a time, when the train had gone and the station was empty again and the taxis had drifted back up to the center of town, I went home to bed almost always in rising spirits. To take pleasure in the consolation of others, even the small ones, is possible. And more than that: it sometimes becomes damn necessary when enough of the chips are down.[49]

Frank clings to whatever consolation he can derive from his way of life in Haddam. When his ex-wife asks him whether he is considering remarriage, he seems to catch a whiff of a swimming pool, "[t]he cool, aqueous suburban chlorine bouquet … a token of the suburbs I love".[50] This declaration is all the more poignant, as not much later Frank remarks, in relation to the members of the Divorced Men's Club, that "the suburbs are not a place where friendships flourish".[51] Thus, against all odds, he is determined to seek solace, however diffuse, in other people's happiness.

The image of suburbia as the terrain of "quiet desperation" appears now and then, for instance when he hears somebody crying in the cemetery nearby: "Early is the suburban hour for grieving — midway of a two mile run; a stop-off on the way to work or the 7—11. I have never seen a figure

[46] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, p. 314.
[47] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 125.
[48] J.J. Folks: "The Risks of Membership: Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*"…, p. 73 ff.
[49] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, p. 341.
[50] Ibid., p. 14.
[51] Ibid., p. 79.

there, yet each one sounds the same, a woman almost always, crying tears of loneliness and remorse".[52] What is more, in moments of clarity of vision, or maybe just sincerity, Frank becomes aware that "[l]ife-forever is a lie of the suburbs — its worst lie",[53] or, as Jeffrey Folks puts it, he "notes the deceptive optimism of the suburbs — not just the deception of a way of life that excludes the existential consciousness of mortality, but the everyday lie of middle-class culture itself, its promise of a bounteous and happy life that rests upon the assumption of an ever-expanding base of wealth and power".[54] The interrogation of middle-class life conducted in the novel comes from a number of minor characters either voicing their adversary, derisive views, like Mr Smallwood, a black taxi driver ("Surburban peoples, I'm tellin you. Houses full of guns, everybody mad all the time. Oughta cool out, if you ask me".[55]), or being entirely the product of suburbia, such as Paul, "Frank's delinquent, antisocial … son".[56] Likewise, on a half-hearted visit to church, he joins in hymn singing, the congregation forming an automatic, and at bottom unchristian, "chorus of confident, repentant suburbanites".[57]

If Frank's quest is largely about solace, the evidence of his needs is often seen in his attitude to landscape, commercial strips making up a more welcome background than trees and grass. Once, driving home through an uninhabited area, he begins to fear the emptiness around:

> My choice of routes home is not a wise one — the Parkway — where there is no consoling landscape, only pines and sad sedgy hummocks and distant power right-of-ways trailing skyward toward Lakehurst and soulful Fort Dix. An occasional Pontiac dealer's sign or a tennis bubble peeps above the conifers, but these are too meager and abstracted.[58]

Frank's search for consolation is bound up with his feeling at home only in the modern urban/suburban landscape. What he needs above all is the familiarity of place in its pan-American generic sense, its transparency and semiological clarity. As he explains elsewhere:

> Though I am not displeased by New Jersey. Far from it. Vice implies virtue to me, even in landscape, and virtue vice. An American would be crazy

[52] Ibid., p. 204.
[53] Ibid., p. 319.
[54] J.J. Folks: "The Risks of Membership: Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*"…, p. 73 ff.
[55] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, p. 165.
[56] J.J. Folks: "The Risks of Membership: Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*"…, p. 73 ff. In Paul's case, however, there is the additional factor of broken home.
[57] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, p. 238.
[58] Ibid., p. 298.

> to reject such a place, since it is the most diverting and readable of landscapes, and the language is always American.[59]

The insistence on New Jersey being "good enough" for him, Frank's attitude in the novel, reflects his will to accept the suburb as a way of life and mass culture as his form of consciousness, a perverse attitude for a former novelist to adopt. He declares his sincere wish to abandon the more imaginative impulses of his soul, to become a respectable Haddamite abiding by the town's code, the American middle-class code. It is in this frame of mind that he sometimes idealizes New Jersey, for instance the New Jersey Turnpike in a conversation with Vicki Arcenault, calling it "beautiful".[60] Vicki, however, refuses to be taken in; the Turnpike is notorious for the ugliness of the landscape that surrounds it.[61]

An important aspect of this need to belong and play by the rules is Frank and his wife's immersion in catalogues after Ralph's death. Ordering dozens of them, poring over the glossy pages for hours becomes their favourite pastime. In addition to assuaging the pain of the loss of their son, placing orders seems to fulfil the Bascombes' need to buy the best quality products and do what their neighbours do. Yet at bottom there is the compulsion to buy which in a consumer society constitutes the universal response to all life's woes.

> X and I came to believe, for a time, that satisfying all our purchasing needs from catalogs was the very way of life that suited us and our circumstances; that we were the kind of people for whom catalog-buying was better than going out into the world and wasting time in shopping malls, or going to New York, or even going out into the shady business streets of Haddam to find out what we needed. A lot of people we knew in town did the very same thing and believed that was where the best and most unusual merchandise came from.[62]

What Matthew Guinn describes as Frank Bascombe's "mail-order metaphysics",[63] his fumbling way to compensate for the absence of transcendence and distrust of religion, foregrounds the crisis of the earlier metanarratives: bourgeois realist, modernist, Christian. Obviously, Frank's sincerity in his protestations cannot be trusted. The consumer creed is not a viable alternative to religion or earlier cultural codes he is no

[59] Ibid., p. 52.
[60] Ibid., p. 177.
[61] M. Bone: *The Postsouthern Sense of Place…*, p. 103.
[62] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, pp. 195—196.
[63] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 132.

longer able to adhere to. Ford's protagonist is fully aware of its escapist character.

The reverence for the ordinary and purchasable, this "commodified quest",[64] reveals Frank's search for transcendence, a manifestation, Guinn argues, of "the postmodern individual's yearning for assurance beyond the self in an age suspicious of grand narratives".[65] That this hunger for meaning and mystery can only be slaked in consumerism is part and parcel of Jameson's logic of late capitalism. As Frank explains:

> It was that the life portrayed in these catalogs seemed irresistible. Something about my frame of mind made me love the abundance of the purely ordinary and pseudo-exotic (which always turns out ordinary if you go the distance and place your order). I loved the idea of merchandise, and I loved those ordinary good American faces pictured there … In me it fostered an odd assurance that some things outside my life were okay still; that the same men and women standing by the familiar brick fireplaces, or by the same comfortable canopy beds, holding these same shotguns or blow poles or boot warmers or boxes of kindling sticks could see a good day before their eyes right into perpetuity. Things were knowable, safe-and-sound. Everybody with exactly what they need or could get. A perfect illustration of how the literal can become the mildly mysterious.[66]

The harmony and peace of the catalogues, the recognizable and almost but not quite real world of glossy advertisements appeal to Frank's sensibilities the same way they appeal to anyone conditioned by mass culture to respond to them. In this adjacency of consolation and consumption, the self seeks transcendence in the flawless though/therefore obviously fake universe of catalogues whose relevance is determined by the process of re-cognition sublimated into desire. The term "irresistible" is important in the passage above. It connects up with Frank's recognizing his college love, Mindy Levinson, as one of the models in his catalogues. Like in the case of Rabbit Angstrom's desire for Cindy Murkett in *Rabbit Is Rich*, sexual attraction is troped here as desirability in relation to commodity value. Unlike Rabbit, whose craving and near-fulfilment is frustrated by external forces, Frank follows the stirrings of recognition and desire. He telephones Mindy to arrange a meeting but finds her painfully exclusivist and narrow-minded in her wealthy suburbanite's prejudice. The consumer world turns out to be self-referential — Mindy is precisely what she seems to be in the catalogue pictures: a smug, rich American housewife.

[64] Ibid., p. 129.

[65] Ibid.

[66] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, p. 196.

However, what Frank finds disappointing about Mindy draws a diametrically opposite assessment when he recalls his own married life even though he is aware that it was a life typical of middle-class people of his generation.

> I suppose our life was the generic one … X was a housewife and had babies, read books, played golf and had friends, while I wrote about sports … I was happy as a swallow. We went on vacations with our three children … We paid bills, shopped, went to movies, bought cars and cameras and insurance, cooked out, went to cocktail parties, visited schools, and romanced each other in the sweet cagey way of adults. I looked out my window, stood in my yard sunsets with a sense of solace and achievement, cleaned my gutters, eyed my shingles, put up storms, fertilized regularly, computed my equity, spoke to my neighbors in an interested voice — the normal applauseless life of us all.[67]

The inclusive "us", Trilling fashion, establishes not so much Frank's true remembered sense of belonging to the upper middle class — his self-consciousness would have precluded that — as a discursive situation which allows him to both articulate a nostalgia and interrogate it. In a gesture which, paradoxically, is not precarious, he airs his sentimental views on family and community while discounting some of the consequences of such approach in himself and others. As Catherine Jurca put it, (again like Trilling) he cultivates his "poignant ambivalence".[68] The catalogue of the suburban family man's daily activities cited above demonstrates a consciousness which combines Frank's earnest profession and rebuttal of some of the great intellectual systems of the late twentieth century. "He has rejected academe and the liberal myths that lie at its foundations, but his quest for mystery within the mundane — his aversion to factualism — refutes a purely rational and strictly unromantic view of the world as well".[69] (He does show his socio-political, not economic, liberalism, though, in repeated assertions of sympathy for the Democratic Party and aloofness from the Republicans). Some of the categories Ford uses in the novel, such as solace or redemption, may have Christian overtones, but he argues against relevance of religion in *The Sportswriter* in an interview with Kay Bonetti:

> And I certainly would hate for the book to be read as a book just about Christian redemption, because it's not a Christian book. The kind of redeeming that goes on in that book is entirely unreligious; it's really Frank figuring out ways to redeem his life based on nothing but the stuff of his life.[70]

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[67] Ibid., pp. 9—10.
[68] C. Jurca: *White Diaspora…*, p. 170.
[69] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 131.
[70] K. Bonetti: "An Interview with Richard Ford". *Missouri Review* 1987, 10 (2), p. 85.

When Frank leaves Haddam's First Presbyterian Church after a brief visit he feels that the uplifting effect will not last, that he was "saved" (his italics) only "*pro tempore*".[71] This is also the extent of the usefulness the other grand narratives to Frank, they apply for the time being only.

[71] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, p. 238.

Chapter Two

Haddam: Towards a Community: *Independence Day*

In *Independence Day* (1995), Frank Bascombe, now five years older, has changed his job. He has given up sportswriting, "in a career move of commercial proportions not seen in literature since Rabbit Angstrom assumed the mantle of Fred Springer's Toyota dealership",[72] and become a realtor. His perception of place in general and of Haddam specifically has come to be tinged with commercial considerations. When he recalls the time he and his wife arrived in Haddam and how they were plagued with "the uneasy immigrant sense",[73] convinced that everybody had been living there since time immemorial except the two of them, he realizes that they were mistaken: "This is total baloney, of course. Most people are late arrivals wherever they live, as selling real estate makes clear in fifteen minutes".[74] From the vantage point of his new profession he is able to rethink his conception of place. Although he impugned its essentialist view in the former novel, he now proceeds not only to deny any significance places might have but also to assert that in consequence man cannot relate to them, nonentities that they are.[75]

> It is another useful theme and exercise of the Existence Period, and a patent lesson of the realty profession, to cease sanctifying places … We may feel they *ought* to, *should* confer something — sanction, again — because of events that transpired there once … But they don't. Places never cooperate

[72] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 133.
[73] R. Ford: *Independence Day*. London: Harvill Press 1996, p. 27.
[74] Ibid., p. 28.
[75] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 132.

> by revering you back when you need it. In fact, they almost always let you down … Best just swallow back your tear, get accustomed to the minor sentimentals and shove off to whatever's next, not whatever was. Place means nothing.[76]

Once more, for a definitive rebuttal, he engages with his Southern heritage, in a passage which is pointedly put in parentheses:

> (Of course, having come first to life in a true *place*, and one as monotonously, lankly *itself* as the Mississippi Gulf Coast, I couldn't be truly surprised that a simple *setting* such as Haddam — willing to be so little itself — would seem, on second look, a great relief and damned easy to cozy up to).[77]

Whatever were Frank's reasons to "cozy up" to Haddam in *The Sportswriter* — his grief over Ralph's death, the dreaminess of middle age — his vision of the tension between Mississippi and New Jersey has assumed a different dimension. Matthew Guinn is right in claiming that "*Independence Day* verifies Frank's ambivalence to the South, confirming his evolution to a completely postmodern, and postsouthern, identity".[78] Frank's quest is no longer about being able to inhabit Haddam properly after Ralph's death, the dissolution of his marriage and the onset of "dreaminess". His intention now is domesticating the place to such an extent that it loses whatever mythological overlay it might have, stripping it of any emotional content so that it becomes indifferent and can be used like any other indifferent thing.

Finally, the logic of Frank's mental development leads him to embrace the equalizing effect of the commercial approach to place. He decides to bolster his "high-wire act of normalcy"[79] with selling real estate. As a "Residential Specialist" he strives to satisfy his clients' expectations of a suitable dwelling as the ultimate confirmation of their version of the good life, though nobody is able to specify what the good life means, including Frank. His attraction to selling property derives from its connection with mail-order catalogues, in both there is a delusional assumption that purchasable goods can effectively enhance life.

> In fact, real estate is an extension of Frank's penchant for the commodified mystery he once found in catalogs — a natural approach to the concept of place for a southerner of postregional inclination who firmly adheres to the consumer aesthetic. What is real estate, after all, but the reification of

[76] R. Ford: *Independence Day…*, pp. 151—152.
[77] Ibid., p. 93.
[78] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 132.
[79] R. Ford: *Independence Day…*, p. 94.

> place, the packaging of locale? If place holds no more value than the consumer goods it provides, and if community is hardly more than illusion, Frank's decision to buy and sell these entities is understandable.[80]

Commenting on Elinor Ann Walker's distinction between "location" and "locution" in *Independence Day*, Martyn Bone postulates that the interpenetration of these two concepts "may signal the extent to which land 'value' is produced, or performed, through what Frank himself calls 'realty lingo' — the rhetoric of capitalist land speculation".[81] Thus Frank's turning away from abstraction and a more "literal" approach to life results in his focusing on the commodity value of place.

The wandering stage of his life (Florida, France) allows Ford's protagonist to redefine his local identity not exclusively in terms of the individual versus place relationship, but rather to recast it in relation to community. He remembers his frame of mind on return from Europe in terms of this regeneration:

> Haddam. Where I landed not only with a new feeling of great purpose and a fury to suddenly *do* something serious for my own good and possibly even others', but also with a feeling of renewal I'd gone far to look for and that immediately translated into homey connectedness to Haddam itself, which felt at that celestial moment like my spiritual residence more than any place I'd ever been.[82]

This sense of Haddam as more than the place it seemed in *The Sportswriter* — a sophisticated and affluent New Jersey suburb — appears already in the opening passage where the narrative perspective adopted allows Ford to sing the town's praises while weaving other important elements into the textual fabric. "In Haddam, summer floats over tree-softened streets like a sweet lotion balm from a careless, languorous god, and the world falls in tune with its own mysterious anthems. Shaded lawns lie still and damp in the early a.m."[83] This celebratory passage, conveying an impression that "the town is an inherently well-ordered, even 'organic' community",[84] is followed by images of a "lone jogger", men sitting on stoops in the black neighbourhood, high school students dismissed after a "marriage enrichment class" and the local college band rehearsing for the 4th of July parade.

While in *The Sportswriter* Haddam came across essentially as a uniformly upper-middle class refuge for migrants like the Bascombes, and Detroit was presented as a working-class paradise of lackadaisical blacks

[80] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 134.
[81] M. Bone: "Richard Ford". *Mississippi Quarterly* 2003, 56 (4), p. 675 ff.
[82] R. Ford: *Independence Day…*, p. 93.
[83] Ibid., p. 3.
[84] M. Bone: *The Postsouthern Sense of Place…*, p. 120.

and "Polacks", *Independence Day* shows progressive awareness of class and race. When Frank discusses the maintenance work in his neighbourhood he juxtaposes the wealth and order of Hoving Road with the coloured immigrant crews doing the work: "We're repaving this summer … resodding the neutral ground, setting new curbs, using our proud new tax dollars — the workers all Cape Verdeans and wily Hondurans from poorer towns north of here".[85] This instance of race and class rhetoric forms a much larger pattern in the book's general view of community.

An important novelty of *Independence Day* in comparison to *The Sportswriter* is the appearance of a sense of menace, its main reason being crime invading the so-far-inviolate suburbs. When Clair Devane, a black real estate agent with whom Frank has had an affair, is murdered in a condominium she is showing, a new tone creeps into the narrative: "And so it is in Haddam, where all around, our summer swoon notwithstanding, there's a new sense of a wild world being just beyond our perimeter, an untallied apprehension among our residents".[86] Similar cases are reported, Frank himself is mugged near his house. For professional reasons, declining property values give him more cause for concern than others, so by way of allaying his fears, he, like other Haddamites, prefers to focus his thoughts on

> our new amenities [which — K.K.-T.] do what they civically can to ease our minds off worrying, convince us our worries aren't worries, or at least not ours alone but everyone's — no one's — and that staying the course, holding the line, riding the cyclical nature of things are what this country's all about, and thinking otherwise is to drive optimism into retreat, to be paranoid and in need of expensive "treatment" out of state.[87]

In addition to the new sense of threat and increased pressure, not just in Haddam, it characterizes all of the USA, Frank speaks more often than before in the first person plural. His new consciousness allows him particularly to see the relation between realty and the general state of the community. As he muses: "… it must mean *something* to a town, to the local *esprit*, for its values on the open market to fall. (Why else would real estate prices be an index to the national well-being?)"[88] His observations of the shifting trends in real estate and corresponding social processes drive him to note that communities are in fact little more than "lifestyle enclaves" (Robert Bellah's term) or, as Frank puts it, groups which are financially "compatible", belonging to the same tax bracket.

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[85] R. Ford: *Independence Day…*, p. 3.
[86] Ibid., p. 5.
[87] Ibid., pp. 4—5.
[88] Ibid., p. 5.

Social status conferred by dwellings in Haddam is determined by property value relative to the fact of being located either in the historic part of town (designated by the village council as "Haddam the Pleasant") or in the housing estates which proliferated during the 1980s building boom termed simply "the Haddam-area". The former includes such affluent neighbourhoods as the one below.

> Haddam out this woodsy way doesn't seem like a town in the throes of a price decline … The housing stock boasts plenty of big 19th-century Second Empires and bracketed villas … with cupolas and belvederes and oriels punctuating the basic architectural *lingua*, which is Greek with Federalist details, and post-Revolutionary stone houses with fanlights, columned entries and Roman-y flutings. These houses were all big-ticket items the day the last door got hung in 1830, and hardly any turn up on the market.[89]

The fancy houses Frank describes are viewed primarily in terms of their market value. He is warned by one of his colleagues not to put his soul in real estate, not to identify with places or people. Sententiously, the colleague puns on the name of their profession: "This is realty. *Reality*'s something else — that's when you're born and you die. This is the in-between stuff here".[90] Neither philosophical concepts of reality, nor the more traditional, perhaps sentimental regional ideas apply in this job. "Such … metaconcepts as 'place' and 'community', to the extent they mean anything, are contingent upon land speculation and development."[91] In addition, there is more than a hint of simple dishonesty involved, as Frank's employer's name is Schwindell suggesting fraud, hoax or swindle (German *Schwindel*).

For all this immersion in the ambiguities of the trade, Frank's new sense of community is revealed in his involvement in Wallace Hill, a respectable, well-to-do black neighbourhood. He buys two houses there, his primary motivation being an impulse to increase his involvement in community affairs and in this way pay back some of the moral debt he has incurred over more than a decade spent in Haddam.

> I'd probably contributed as little to the commonweal as it was possible for a busy man to contribute without being plain evil. This, though I'd lived in Haddam fifteen years, ridden the prosperity curve right through the roof, enjoyed its civic amenities, sent my kids to its schools, made frequent and regular use of the streets, curb cuts, sewers, water mains, police and fire, plus various other departments dedicated to my well-being.[92]

[89] Ibid., pp. 34—35.
[90] Ibid., p. 115.
[91] M. Bone: *The Postsouthern Sense of Place…*, p. 134.
[92] R. Ford: *Independence Day…*, pp. 25—26.

Civic motivation notwithstanding, he begins to consider real estate in the neighbourhood a shrewd investment and "think about diversifying [his — K.K.-T.] assets and stashing money away where it'd be hard to get at".[93] Although he sets about establishing friendly relationships with his tenants and his ambition is enlightened landlordship, there is a broader problem here. First, purchasing property in Wallace Hill is a self-serving act of a land speculator. Second, this move, Frank hopes, "will help prevent more predatory property speculators from drastically redeveloping the neighbourhood",[94] a strong temptation in that Wallace Hill lies in "Haddam the Pleasant", a choice investment location. Thus his position is complex, noble moral considerations mingling with long-term professional planning. Frank is explicit about Wallace Hill's anticipated future, again manifesting his instinct for landgrabbing.

> Eventually, of course, as in-town property becomes more valuable … all the families here will realize big profits and move away to Arizona or down South, where their ancestors were once property themselves, and the whole area will be gentrified by incoming whites and rich blacks, after which my small investment … will turn into a gold mine.[95]

In addition to residual "southern white paternalism",[96] what this passage approaches from another angle is the question of community. Despite the fact that Frank was initially attracted to a feeling of true local *esprit* in Wallace Hill, he now contemplates a prospect of his own participation in the community's refashioning. Behind this, there is the even more complex question of the modality of the black community anywhere in America in relation to the real estate market forces.[97]

As a "residential specialist", Frank realizes the extent to which capitalist land speculation has rendered the idea of community as well as "sense of place" contingent. For instance, when his step-brother Irv raises the problem of continuity as a community characteristic, he replies:

> I don't really think communities are continuous … I think of them … as isolated, contingent groups trying to improve on an illusion of perma-

[93] Ibid., p. 27.

[94] M. Bone: *The Postsouthern Sense of Place…*, p. 126.

[95] R. Ford: *Independence Day…*, p. 25.

[96] M. Bone: *The Postsouthern Sense of Place…*, p. 125. It is one of the postsouthern ironies of the novel that Frank Bascombe, born and bred in Mississippi, does not evince any attraction to the South while attributing a southern race mystique to black Haddamites.

[97] Since the present work engages with white suburban fiction, I shall not pursue the subject, yet one of the obvious problem areas is enforced racial homogeneity of the suburb as discussed in Introduction.

> nence, which they fully accept as an illusion … Buying power is the instrumentality. But continuity, if I understand it at all, doesn't really have much to do with it.[98]

It is not only the idea of continuity that he comes to distrust. There is scarcely anything about community that he finds authentic, the very concept seems to him untenable, "since all its hands-on implications are dubious",[99] if only because of the migrant character of American society. In Matthew Guinn's wording, Frank views the traditional, regional understanding of community as a notion whose elements are all enmeshed "in a sort of wide-ranging scheme of delusion".[100] Jerry Varsava, on the other hand, points out that "Bascombe's sobering analysis notwithstanding, his own small town in New Jersey seems to have a sense of community. Racial harmony and civic cooperation are in evidence, if in modest measure".[101] Varsava's reading of *Independence Day* suggests that the novel's protagonist espouses "small-town populism" (Christopher Lasch's term), combining local identity with moderate materialism and progressivist sympathies.[102]

When Frank and Paul, on their holiday trip, arrive in Cooperstown they have a taste of inauthenticity as discussed above. As they cruise in search of the Hall of Fame, and are swamped with a profusion of Deerslayer souvenirs, Independence Day regalia, all manner of tourist attractions, "suspicion lurks … that the town is just a replica (of a legitimate place), a period backdrop to the Hall of Fame … with nothing authentic (crime, despair, litter, the rapture) really going on no matter what civic illusion the city fathers maintain",[103] Baudrillard's simulacrum haunting Frank's imagination along with its innumerable cousins. The landscape on the trip is one "of almost unbelievable crassness",[104] and yet the only setting available for a provisional restitution of his relations with his son.

Two other towns, though, are portrayed with greater acerbity: Ridgefield and Deep River in Connecticut. The former, a richer version of Haddam, is an English style suburban hamlet complete with tree-lined lanes named Baldy, Toddy, Pudding, Scarlet Oak. An extreme example of "lifestyle enclave", it is populated by residents brought together by income level compatibility rather than forming a community.[105]

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[98] R. Ford: *Independence Day…*, p. 386.

[99] Ibid.

[100] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 133.

[101] J. Varsava: "The Quest for Community in American Postmodern Fiction". *International Fiction Review* 2003, 30 (1—2), p. 1 ff.

[102] Ibid.

[103] R. Ford: *Independence Day…*, p. 293.

[104] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 132.

[105] M. Bone: *The Postsouthern Sense of Place…*, pp. 128—129.

> A narrow, English high street emerges from the woodsy south end, leads through a hickory-shaded, lush-lawned, deep-pocketed mansion district of mixed architectural character, each mansion with big-time security in place, winds through a quaint, shingled, basically Tudor CBD of attached shops (rich realtors, a classic-car showroom, a Japanese deli, a fly-tiers shop, a wine & liquor, a Food For Thought Books). A walled war-memorial green lies just at village center, flanked by big Protestant churches and two more mansions converted to lawyers' offices.[106]

Realty experience allows Frank to construe Ridgefield's message as one of exclusivity (there is no tourist accommodation). He leaves the town disgusted, its rigidity rendering it "a piss-poor place to live".[107]

However, Deep River, where his ex-wife and children live, is even more of an intimidating fortress. Before reaching their house, The Knoll, Frank sees a road sign informing him that he is near a bird sanctuary which should be protected; soon afterwards he is stopped by a member of the local security force hired to watch out for non-resident drivers. The village, more than any other in the novel, speaks the language of privilege and wealth.

> Deep River … is the epitome of dozing, summery, southern New England ambivalence. A little green-shuttered, swept-sidewalk burg where just-us-regular-folks live in stolid acceptance of watered-down Congregationalist and Roman Catholic moderation; whereas down by the river there's the usual enclave of self-contented, pseudo-reclusive richies who've even erected humongous houses on bracken and basswood chases bordering the water, their backs resolutely turned to how the other half lives. Endowed law profs from New Haven, moneyed shysters from Hartford and Springfield, moneyed pensioners from Gotham, all cruise sunnily in to shop at Greta's Green Grocer, The Flower Basket, Edible Kingdom Meats and Liquid Time Liquors … then cruise sunnily back out, their Rovers heaped with good dog food, pancetta, mesquite, chard, fresh tulips and gin — all primed for evening cocktails, lamb shanks on the grill, an hour of happy schmoozing, then off to bed in the cool, fog-enticed river breeze.[108]

Frank does not like the place's artificial casualness and finds it disturbing that his children are living there. Part of his resentment is his dislike of Charley O'Dell, his ex-wife's new husband, though not because of his success or because he has married Ann. Charley appears to be a "literalist," ("literal-as-a-dictionary-architect") a man without a "subtext", simple in his approach to life. What Frank criticizes in Charley and people like him is

[106] R. Ford: *Independence Day…*, p. 196.
[107] Ibid., p. 197.
[108] Ibid., pp. 229—230.

"the capitalist fetishization of place"[109] whereby spatial power positions are established (The Knoll) from which to control social relations, even inside the family. Even their reclusive ways strike Frank as fake, not determined by temperament but lifestyle enclave economic compatibility imposing behaviour that is not individualized but generic, however small the generic group is.

Catherine Jurca points to a related aspect of Ford's protagonist's musings.

> According to Frank … the United States appears to have been founded on principles analogous to those that have in the twentieth century engendered private homeowner associations and gated communities. The personal autonomy once associated with house ownership is now exchanged for the security of property and person in the autonomous community — privately taxed, governed, protected, and, increasingly, barricaded — in which residents are protected from outsiders.[110]

Thus Deep River is not unique in guarding the privacy of its residents to such a degree. As Edward Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder demonstrate, residential communities with restricted access are as old as civilization, people in various times and places have tended to "fort up". Although in American cities this trend made itself felt on a large scale only in the late 1980s, "[g]ates are firmly within the suburban tradition: they enhance and harden the suburbanness of the suburbs, and they attempt to suburbanize the city".[111] On the other hand, it must be added that gating is not a necessary consequence of suburbanization, nor is it restricted to suburbia — urban neighbourhoods employ it as well.

Some of Frank's most important views on property and community are expressed in the fragments of the novel dealing with Joe and Phyllis Markham, a couple looking for a suitable dwelling in all of the north-eastern United States. When the Markhams are offered a house in "the Haddam area", Joe responds angrily that he does not "want to live in an area". He explains: "'The Boston area, the tristate area, the New York area, Nobody ever said the Vermont area, or the Aliquippa area,' Joe said. 'They just said the places'".[112] Joe resents Frank's "realty lingo" and insists on a traditional, romantic conception of man's relation to place, or, as Martyn Bone puts it, "retains a belief in authentic rural-agricultural property untainted by the

[109] M. Bone: *The Postsouthern Sense of Place…*, p. 129.

[110] C. Jurca: *White Diaspora…*, p. 171.

[111] E.J. Blakely, M. Gail Snyder: *Fortress America*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution 1997, p. 11.

[112] R. Ford: *Independence Day…*, p. 59.

commercial imperatives and language of real estate".[113] However, before the Markhams are able to find a new house and community they will fit in, they will have to rethink their own ideals, their reasons for leaving Vermont, their relation to each other; in Frank's words used before — they will have to stop idolizing places. "The Markhams say they won't compromise on their ideal. But they aren't compromising! They can't afford their ideal. And not buying what you can't afford's not compromise; it's reality speaking English".[114] What he wants them to understand is that the *reality* of their kind of quest is *realty*, not only in the sense of realizing their economic limitations but also in the sense that they have to stop looking for essentialist ideas which will satisfy their present expectations. Instead they should redefine their needs in such a way that they will be able to find satisfaction in a more modest place that neither imposes its own (historical, cultural) logic displacing the identity of man, or interfering with it, nor becomes a "trophy" dwelling. "In this talk with Phyllis, Frank adumbrates a spatial ontology and usable language for everyday life amid the capitalist reality of realty: a sense of self-placement that neither precludes one's self, nor fetishizes 'place' ".[115] The Markhams are already making a transition from their earlier bucolic myth to a more mature view of place, Frank goading them on in the direction of what he believes will benefit them.

After numerous viewings, some of the houses proving too expensive, some of them falling short of the buyers' expectations, the Markhams are finally taken to one of the houses in Wallace Hill. He wants them to "come down off the realty frontier" in the mental sense, to make a conscious decision instead of having one made for them and stop wandering at last.

> Though specifically my wish is that the Markhams would move into 46 Clio, ostensibly as a defensive holding action, but gradually get to know their neighbors, talk yard-to-yard, make friends, see the wisdom of bargaining for a break in the rent in exchange for minor upkeep responsibilities, join the PTA, give pottery and papermaking demonstrations at the block association mixers, become active in the ACLU or the Urban League, begin to calculate their enhanced positive cash flow against the dour financial imperatives of ownership in fashioning an improved quality of life, and eventually stay ten years.[116]

Thus what Frank envisages is that the Markhams will take his offer for the sake of regaining the initiative. The inventory of suburban occupations list-

[113] M. Bone: *The Postsouthern Sense of Place…*, p. 122.
[114] R. Ford: *Independence Day…*, p. 90.
[115] M. Bone: *The Postsouthern Sense of Place…*, p. 125.
[116] R. Ford: *Independence Day…*, pp. 415—416.

ed above is not meant to ensnare them forever but put them in a framework that will provide meaning, if only on a provisional basis. Once they realize a profit, they may as well depart again, wiser for the experience.

Before the showing of the house at 46 Clio, Frank arrives much earlier to make the necessary preparations. It is an indication of his changed consciousness as well as his profession that we seldom see him in the novel engaged in household chores. On this occasion, in his capacity as realtor, he performs them all: mowing the grass, cutting back dead branches, removing the refuse, opening windows and doors, sweeping, running the taps, flushing the toilet.[117] When the Markhams decide to rent the house, he praises Joe for being "smart enough to quit asking places for what they can't provide, and begin to invent other options".[118] Although permanent solutions are not possible, it is possible to hope for a *pro tempore* sense of belonging, or as Frank says in another context, "the satisfactions of optional community involvement".[119] Before they start wandering again in "the capitalist geographies of postmodern America",[120] they should risk involvement in a suburban environment.

Ford situates his protagonist between three powerful discourses of place. One is the Southern Agrarian tradition which tends to connect place with a paternalist community, another is Eudora Welty's concept of *genius loci* (both account for Frank's sense of Mississippi being oppressively "itself", suggesting some sort of essentialist authority). The third is the economic perspective of real estate. "In postsouthern America, both the Agrarians' proprietary ideal *and* the Weltyan 'sense of place', with its debt to the pathetic fallacy of romantic pantheism, have been superseded by the capitalist fetishization of place as a commodity".[121] While refusing "to conflate self and place"[122] in accordance with regional sensibility, Frank does not entirely succumb to economic reductionism, either, striving "to negotiate a way *between* the pathetic fallacy and commodity fetishism, creating an opportunity to rework the theory and praxis of 'place' ".[123] Ford records his protagonist's growing awareness of the workings of realty, and behind it, of the socio-spatial agency of the capitalist economy. Stressing participation in life in the present and involvement in the community, he imparts to the Markhams his new-found wisdom — a belief in the quotidian, even if its benefits are bound to prove contin-

[117] Ibid., pp. 407—408.
[118] Ibid., p. 442.
[119] Ibid., p. 431.
[120] M. Bone: *The Postsouthern Sense of Place…*, p. 127.
[121] Ibid., pp. 124—125.
[122] Ibid., p. 119.
[123] Ibid., p. 124.

gent. Spiritual immanence combined with acceptance of the logic of capitalist real estate constitutes Frank's solution to his own and his clients' dilemmas.[124]

[124] J.J. Folks: "The Risks of Membership: Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*"…, p. 73 ff.

Chapter Three

The Mechanics of Locale Production: *The Lay of the Land*

In *The Lay of the Land* (2006), part three of the Frank Bascombe cycle, we find the protagonist in the same job, operating in the same area of New Jersey but his move from Haddam to Sea-Clift is accompanied by a number of significant shifts. At age fifty-five he is still involved in "perpetual becoming",[125] looking for "a recognizable and persuasive semblance of a character".[126] Residual southernness that he contended with in *Independence Day* has been successfully overcome,[127] the Permanent Period, the time of diminished dreams and readjustment, is upon him. Prostate cancer and the desertion of his second wife Sally make him realize that he has not realized his potential, and that "a smaller life made [him — K.K.-T.] happy".[128] He still on occasion eulogizes the power of a "suburban town … to anesthetize woe out of the feelable existence"[129] yet a new note is perceptible — a combination of cynicism and pugnacity. The former can be seen for instance when Frank describes a lawyer of his wife's acquaintance as a man who "had 'good connections,' which meant either the mob or the statehouse, whatever the difference might be".[130] The latter appears repeatedly in his political effusions.

Unlike the previous novel, which abounds in civic goodwill and ends with Frank feeling "the push, pull, the weave and sway of others",[131] *The*

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[125] R. Ford: *The Lay of the Land*. London: Bloomsbury 2007, p. 76.
[126] Ibid., p. 74; see also: M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 126.
[127] R. Ford: *The Lay of the Land…*, p. 183.
[128] Ibid., p. 521.
[129] Ibid., p. 238.
[130] Ibid., p. 717.
[131] R. Ford: *Independence Day…*, p. 451.

Lay of the Land is permeated with resentment and aggression. Set in the year 2000, the book reflects the partisanship of the close and indecisive presidential contest between George Bush, Jr. and Al Gore. On De Tocqueville Academy (Princeton University) campus there is a profusion of Gore placards and one supporting Bush, which, Franks explains, must "have been put up to preserve the endowment, since no one here would vote for Bush any more than they'd vote for a chimp".[132] "Fuck Bush" signs proliferate,[133] physicians (because of their financial success) are accused of being Republicans, just like Frank's ex-wife;[134] Republicans are the kind of people "who will sell you water in the desert".[135]

Conversely, he is soft on Clinton,[136] up to the point of drafting a letter to the president advising him how to sort out America's problems, particularly, how to deal with the "rogue state of Florida".[137] It is presumably in connection with the election again that he admits to hating a group of people from central Florida for providing a conservative explanation of why his car has been vandalized,[138] while the black boy responsible leaves Frank "unangrified, nonjudgmental"[139] — one of the numerous instances of political correctness in the novel. He defines himself as "a nigger-lovin', tax-and-spend, pro-health-care, abortion-rights, gay-rights, consumer-rights, tree-hugging liberal";[140] gets himself embroiled in a pub fight over his political views; elsewhere, he simply declares that everybody "of course would fare better with the Democrats".[141] His business partner, Mike Mahoney, a Tibetan, is either patronized in liberal jargon ("he's just as American as I am, only from farther east"[142]) or denigrated for being "like every other Republican: nervous about commitment; fearful of future regret; never saw a risk he wouldn't like somebody else to take".[143] In the same vein, Frank believes that Mike has acquired the conservative attitude to the community and perceives Haddam to be "a citadel he could inhabit and defend".[144] On the other hand, it is Mike who introduces his partner to the teaching of the Dalai

[132] R. Ford: *The Lay of the Land…*, p. 206.
[133] Ibid., p. 215.
[134] Ibid., pp. 218—219.
[135] Ibid., p. 715.
[136] Ibid., pp. 253—254.
[137] Ibid., p. 375.
[138] Ibid., p. 461.
[139] Ibid., p. 460.
[140] Ibid., p. 256.
[141] Ibid., p. 295.
[142] Ibid., p. 282.
[143] Ibid., p. 291.
[144] Ibid., p. 46.

Lama "and a famous tenet of the Middle Way"[145] on which Frank often ponders.

The satisfaction he derived from involvement in community affairs in *Independence Day*, particularly, the purchase and expensive maintenance of two rental houses in Wallace Hill, begins to dissipate. Frank still occasionally lauds the local flavour of some places in Haddam, for example, the Johnny Appleseed Bar is eulogized as a perfect exemplification of "a concept as balming to the ailing spirit as the 'cozy local watering hole,' where you're always expected, no questions asked … speak non sequiturs to a nonjudgmental bartender … savor the 'in but not all in,' 'out but not all out' zeitgeist".[146] On the whole, however, his involvement slackens: the two Wallace Hill houses are sold "in the late-nineties gentrification boom";[147] he is happy to resign his position on the Governor's Board of the Theological Institute. He continues to see Haddam doctors but that is for non-sentimental reasons since medical standards in town are related to the inhabitants' prosperity. Frank's view of the community departs from what Christopher Lasch names "small-town populism"[148] which he espoused in *Independence Day*, his cancer inclining him to regard place in terms of utility.

> Home's a musable concept if you're borne to one place, as I was (the syrup-aired southern coast), educated to another (the glaciated mid-continent), come full stop in a third — then spend years finding suitable "homes" for others. Home may only be where you've memorized the grid pattern, where you can pay with a check, where someone you've already met takes your blood pressure, palpates your liver, slips a digit here and there, measures the angstroms gone off your molars bit by bit — in other words, where your primary care-givers await, their pale gloves already pulled on.[149]

Thus medical considerations supersede more abstract views of the meaning of community. Furthermore, in his new-found scepticism, he claims that the effect of any community on the individual is to "suppress diversity, discourage individuality, punish exuberance and find suitable language to make it seem good for everyone and what's America all about".[150] Obviously, this new attitude ties in with his vision of the suburb.

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[145] Ibid., p. 277. Interest in the Dalai Lama links Frank Bascombe with Harry Angstrom. In what may be another reference, Ford uses the word "angstrom" early on in the novel (page 16). The word is rare enough to substantiate a conjecture that a connection with Updike's protagonist may not be accidental.

[146] Ibid., p. 250.

[147] Ibid., p. 15.

[148] J. Varsava: "The Quest for Community in American Postmodern Fiction…," p. 1 ff.

[149] R. Ford: *The Lay of the Land*…, p. 16.

[150] Ibid., p. 603.

First of all, in *The Lay of the Land*, like in Cheever's *The Wapshot Scandal* (the scene in which Betsey watches impassively her neighbour kill himself falling off the ladder), suburban life is shown to narrow down the spiritual scope of people's lives, especially numb them to the question of death.[151] This metaphysical impoverishment is accompanied by social inbreeding: "In-depth communication with smaller and smaller like-minded groups is the disease of the suburbs".[152] This in turn leads to exclusionary attitudes like that Frank adopted in his Haddam years:

> I voted for every moratorium, against every millage to extend services to the boondocks, supported every not-in-my-neighborhood ordinance. Infill and gentrification are what keep prices fat and are what's kept Haddam a nice place to live. If it becomes the New Jersey chapter of Colonial Williamsburg, with surrounding farmlands morphed into tract-house prairies, carpet outlets and bonsai nurseries, then I take (and did take) the short view, since the long view was forgone and since that's how people wanted it.[153]

"The short view" Frank takes involves both indifference to the spectre of suburbanization as well as the kind cynicism described by Cheever in *Oh What a Paradise It Seems* where environmental damage done to the wetlands converted to a shopping mall is accepted by the municipal town planning board since the general calculation is that most suburbanites move every couple of years so the present population is not likely to suffer the consequences. Thus the shortness of the view results also from the migrant way of life.

Frank's occupation allows him to look at places from the double perspective of a realtor and a man who abhors the more rapacious methods of land development. The two points of view can be seen on his drive with Mike:

> [T]he road … leaves the strip development for the peaceable town 'n country housing pattern New Jersey is famous for: deep two-acre lots with curbless frontage, on which are sited large but not ominous builder-design Capes, prairie contemporaries and Dutch-door ranches, with now and then and original eighteenth-century stone farmhouse spruced up with copper gutters and an attached greenhouse to look new. Yews, bantam cedars and mountain laurels that were scrubby in the seventies are still young-appearing … Kids' plastic gym sets and chain-link dog runs clutter

[151] Ibid., p. 3.

[152] Ibid., p. 211.

[153] Ibid., p. 43. Ford seems to concur with the vision of modern suburbs becoming places of historical and artistic interest (like Colonial Williamsburg) in the future, a view adumbrated in Introduction.

> many back lawns. Subarus and Horizons stand in new asphalt side drives … Everything's exactly as they pictured it when it was all a dream.

This homey atmosphere, however, in combination with the proximity of Mullica Creek poses a threat to the people and the landscape.

> Though you can be sure its [the local countryside's] pristine prettiness is giving current owners across the road restless nights for fear some enterpriser … will one day happen along, stop for a look-see, make a cell-phone call and in six months throw up a hundred minimansions that'll kick shit out of everybody's tax bills, fill the roads, jam the schools with new students who score eight million on their math and verbal, who steal the old residents' kids' places at Brown, and whose families won't speak to anybody because for religious reasons they don't have to. Town 'n country takes a hike.[154]

The image is sinister in both stages described: avaricious developers scouting out the land for housing estate sites, destroying out-of-the-way hamlets are followed by obnoxious upwardly-mobile minority residents. In consequence, the traditional housing pattern and local social set-up will be destroyed. Although Frank keeps away from this line of business, Mike seems to be tempted enter into a large-scale strip development project.

A related picture of the insidious influence of the suburb on the mind is conveyed in the description of a community of erstwhile flower children who have taken corporate jobs, gathered quite some moss and are imperceptibly turning conservative, a tendency discussed in Introduction, for instance in reference to William Whyte's *The Organization Man*.

> [S]table, compromise-with-dignity Gulick Road — winding streets, mature plantings, above-ground electric, architect-design "family rooms" retrofitted onto the older reasonable-sized Capes and ranches a year beyond their paint jobs … Yukons and Grand Cherokees sit in driveways. Older tree houses perch in many oaks and maples. New mullions have been added to old seventies picture windows and underground sprinklers laid in. It's the suburban sixties *grown out*, with many original owner-pioneers holding fast to the land and happy to be, their "new development" now become solidly *in-town*, with all the old rawness ironed out. It's now a "neighborhood", where your old Chesapeake, Tex, can take his nap in the street without being rumbled over by the bottled-water truck, where once-young families have become older … where fiscal year to fiscal year everybody's equity squeezes up as their political musings drift to the right (though it feels like the middle).[155]

[154] Ibid., pp. 47—48.
[155] Ibid., pp. 71—72.

Ford's narrative technique makes it possible for Frank to record social change, intimate his caustic assessment yet at the same time portray the scene as inevitable, as an American *cliché*. Gentrification is here combined with residual hippie casualness to produce an image of an almost Harper Lee-like cosiness. Frank suspends judgment as he feels he himself might have ended up in a suburb like the one along Gulick Road.

While the main thrust of *Independence Day* is establishing the protagonist's autonomy in his conceptions of place and community achieved primarily through viewing location in terms of capitalistic real estate, "in the discourse of the Reagan era",[156] *The Lay of the Land* graduates to stressing the factitiousness of places — a Clinton era approach, steeped in relativity. It is in this spirit, for instance, that on inspecting a house dilapidated beyond repair Frank opines that it "was a write-off to some rich tree-hugger conservationist who'd turn it into 'wetlands' and make himself feel virtuous".[157] Farming lands are turned into residential areas, houses give way to shopping centres, historic buildings are moved in the novel, contributing to the general theme of America as a man-made environment.

In one such image Frank has arranged for a house to be put on sleds and moved to another location. The neighbours are up in arms, one lady calls him a "gangster", he feels sorry for having violated "the street's sense of integrity" even though he fails to see how regular demolition and construction of a new house would have benefited anyone.[158] Elsewhere in the novel, Frank tells the story of the Ocean Vista Cemetery. It used to be the resting place of respectable New Jerseyites in the 1920s until it was discovered that one of graves contained the remains of a black person. In consequence, the families of the other deceased effected a removal and the cemetery was allowed to go weeds. Frank considers obtaining a zoning "variance and a deconsecration order", his further plans including "buying the ground … and turning it into a vernal park as a gesture of civic giving, while retaining development rights should the moment ever come".[159] Places can be transformed into anything the realtor needs, landscape is entirely a product of the capitalist economy. It is part of Ford's technique to tinge such scenes with his protagonist's philanthropic musings, thus making impossible the reduction of the character's motives to commercial interest. When in Illinois, Frank visits the house where his mother used to live and where he last saw her before her death. After a great deal of driving in the neighbourhood trying to find the place, he realizes that a shopping mall has been erected on the site. Like in the case of the Ocean Vista Cemetery, the old place has

[156] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 134.
[157] R. Ford: *The Lay of the Land…*, p. 126.
[158] Ibid., p. 605.
[159] Ibid., p. 657.

been wiped out to make way for redevelopment. As Martyn Bone, after Ford himself, puts it: "… place has been … 'rereferenced' as real estate",[160] rendering its more conventional meanings irrelevant.

One of the most important reasons why Frank moved out of Haddam was the new direction it was taking — it had begun to shed its suburban character and acquire some of the features of an independent town: "… new human waves were coming, commuting *into* Haddam instead of *out to* Gotham and Philly".[161] The consequences included the appearance of the homeless in the streets, doctors' appointments requiring ever more advance booking and the residents growing distant and cold towards each other.

> Haddam … stopped being a quiet and happy suburb, stopped being subordinate to any other place and became a *place to itself*, only without having a fixed municipal substance. It became a town of others, for others. You could say it lacked a soul, which would explain why somebody thinks it needs an interpretive center and why it seems like a good idea to celebrate a village past.[162]

In *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* Frank celebrated Haddam for its simplicity, its lack of historical intricacy. He deplored complex cities like New York or New Orleans, polysemic, demanding attention, obtruding themselves on the residents' minds, as he preferred to dwell on the "straightforward and plumb-literal"[163] character of Haddam, soothing and conforming to the mass culture aesthetic he then subscribed to. The town's new-found substance is thus repulsive to him, all the more so since it even lacks the sort of weight (cultural, historical) that makes a place's claim to significance well-founded.

Like Harry Angstrom, Frank Bascombe notes roadside signage when driving around New Jersey. Also like Updike's protagonist, especially in *Rabbit at Rest*, he focuses on this peculiar commercial-strip poetic combining consumerism and mass culture with billboard evangelism: "HUNGRY FOR CAPITAL. REGULAR BAPTIST CHURCH — MEET TRIUMPH AND DISASTER HEAD-ON. HOCKEY ALL NIGHT LONG. NJ IS HOSPITAL COUNTRY".[164] He reflects on the signs' messages representing the main preoccupations of "[a]ny right-thinking suburbanite",[165] once more asserting the relevance of mass culture for suburban life.

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[160] M. Bone: "Richard Ford"…, p. 675 ff.
[161] R. Ford: *The Lay of the Land*…, p. 129.
[162] Ibid.
[163] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter*…, p. 103.
[164] R. Ford: *The Lay of the Land*…, p. 279.
[165] Ibid.

The first important diagnosis of the homogeneity of American urban civilization, manifested in architecture and pervasively commercial public discourse, was formulated by Sinclair Lewis. In *Main Street* (1920) he has Carol Kennicott fulminate:

> The universal similarity — that is the physical expression of the philosophy of dull safety. Nine-tenths of the American towns are so alike that it is the completest boredom to wander from to another. Always, west of Pittsburgh, and often, east of it, there is the same lumber yard, the same railroad station, the same Ford garage, the same creamery, the same box-like houses and two-storey shops. The new, more conscious houses are alike in their very attempts at diversity; the same bungalows, the same square houses of stucco or tapestry brick. The shops show the same standardized, nationally advertised wares; the newspapers of sections three thousand miles apart have the same "syndicated features".[166]

The process of uniformization that Lewis discusses refers obviously to midwestern prairie towns yet the impression of sameness comes later to be associated with suburban America in general. Books as diverse as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* and Kerouac's "road" novels repeatedly invoke the image of enormous stretches of land covered with identical architecture. Ford refers to this tradition but is careful to deploy his rhetoric differently:

> Everything good is on the highway. In this instance, New Jersey Route 35, the wide mercantile pike up Barnegat Neck, whose distinct little beach municipalities — Sea-Clift, Seaside Park, Seaside Heights, Ortley Beach — pass my window, indistinguishable. For practical-legal reasons, each boro has its separate tax collector, deeds registry, zoning board, police, fire … Though I, a relative newcomer … experience these beach townlettes as one long, good place-by-an-ocean and sell houses gainfully in each.[167]

What used to cause Carol Kennicot's anguish or Humbert Humbert's sophisticated disgust inspires Frank Bascombe with professional satisfaction. As he has declared before, he wants life to be predictable and public services to be reliable in order that he can pursue his business. The New Jersey seashore towns' being so similar makes his job easier, part of the general landscape of Americans seeking comfort in the regularity of their occupations and domiciles, syndicated joys for standardized people.

Sea-Clift, Frank's place of residence after his leaving Haddam, is described as neither a suburb because of the beach and throngs of weekend visitors (although it does boast streets named after Greek sea gods filled

[166] S. Lewis: *Main Street*. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1985, pp. 249—250.

[167] R. Ford: *The Lay of the Land*…, p. 395.

with split-levels); nor a fishing village even though charter boats are a common sight at the local wharf; nor a resort town as the tourist season lasts less than half a year. Relying on what Harry Levin defined as a "negative formula", i.e. listing what a place lacks rather than focus on what it does have, what is implied is a certain distance from a putative ideal. However, Levin focuses on the trope in order to elucidate how the golden age could be mythicized as the opposite of the ordinary, lamentable, fallen present. Ford uses the device in a reverse manner so as to accentuate the mundane as desirable (he invokes the myth, though). It is easy to see, Frank explains,

> all that we *don't* offer: any buildings of historical significance (there are no large buildings at all); no birthplaces of famous inventors, astronauts or crooners. No Olmsted parks. No fall foliage season, no sister city in Italy or even Germany. No bookstores except one dirty one. Mark Twain, Helen Keller or Edmund Wilson never said or did anything memorable here. There's no Martin Luther King Boulevard, no stations on the Underground Railroad (or any railroad) and no golden era anyone can recollect.[168]

This negative list, however, is balanced with a number of now trivial now vital life-enhancing characteristics: little crime; moderate climate due to the Gulf Stream; smoking is allowed in the local restaurants; some New Jersey celebrities were born there; there is a Frank Sinatra festival; the town borders on a state park and has hardly any planning problems as it abuts on the ocean.

Familiar as Frank's perception of Sea-Clift may seem from his attitude to Haddam in *Independence Day*, it has shaded into a sedateness which may be attributed to both his age and disease. In what is a perceptible echo of the descriptions of suburban Easter morning in *The Sportswriter* and suburban *Independence Day* morning in the second Bascombe novel, in *The Lay of the Land* the protagonist reflects on Thanksgiving morning that "[a] beach town in off-season doldrums may seem to have blissfully reclaimed its truest self, breathing out the long-awaited sigh of winter".[169] He sees the local population fretting about the recent business slump, casting around for means of boosting the local family-based tourist services without resorting to inviting hi-tech industries or otherwise submitting to modernizing upheavals. The modesty of the residents' expectations is exactly what appealed to Frank eight years previously.

> I … moved here … because I admired Sea-Clift's *face* to the interested stranger — seasonal, insular, commuter-less, stable, aspirant within lim-

[168] Ibid., pp. 397—398.
[169] Ibid., p. 594.

> its. There was no space to grow *out* to, so my model pointed to in-fill and retrench, no so different from Haddam, but on a more human scale … To me, commerce with no likelihood of significant growth or sky-rocketing appreciation seems like a precious bounty, and the opposite of my years in Haddam, when *gasping increase* was the sacred article of faith no one dared mention for fear of the truth breeding doubt like an odorless gas that suffocates everybody.[170]

Unlike in the first two novels, where he gloried in boundless business growth opportunities, Frank has scaled down his expectations, treasuring stability more than expansion. This new approach, however, may just be caused by professional savvy as he seems to believe that the Sea-Cliftians have nothing to worry about. His advice is "keep the current inventory in good working order, rely on your fifties-style beach life and let population growth do its job the way it always has".[171] Still, he imagines it possible that one day somebody clever enough may come along to secure sufficient capital and obtain a zoning variance to fill in part of the bay for development. Like any other gain-driven socio-spatial change in the "capitalist geographies of postmodern America",[172] this one is also conceivable.

Frank's vision of community has become more acute while the size of his specific community has drastically dwindled. There used to be twenty houses on Poincinet Road, but fifteen have been wiped out by hurricanes. Because of that, and advancing beach erosion, the owners of four out of the five surviving houses regard themselves as little more than stewards of their property living "on the continent's fragile margin at nature's sufferance".[173] The assortment of neighbours renders the Poincinet Road residents a precarious community comprising a Japanese banker who never leaves his house except to go to work in Gotham; a petroleum engineer employed in oil exploration in Kazakhstan coming home once a month and a defamed former university professor sacked for "fudging insignificant quotes"[174] in a book. They represent various modalities of the suburban code, marked by profound internalization of the consequences of taking up their abode in so secluded a place.

> Our sense of belonging and fitting in, of making a claim and settling down is at best ephemeral. Though being ephemeral gives us pleasure, relieves us of stodgy house-holder officialdom and renders us free to be our own most current selves. No one would be shocked, for instance, to see a big

[170] Ibid., pp. 594—595.
[171] Ibid., p. 596.
[172] M. Bone: *The Postsouthern Sense of Place…*, p. 127.
[173] R. Ford: *The Lay of the Land…*, p. 306.
[174] Ibid., p. 309.

> blue-and-white United Van Lines truck back down the road and for any or all of us to pack it in without explanation. We'd think briefly on life's transience, but then we'd be glad.[175]

The contingency of self that Frank adhered to in the first two novels is in evidence again, helpful in dealing with suburban displacement. The only problem case in the neighbourhood is the Feenster couple.

Nick Feenster was a fireman in Bridgeport before becoming rich recycling cathode-ray tubes. Already as a millionaire, he won the Connecticut lottery and moved to Sea-Clift. The Feenster house at 5 Poincinet Road was

> a modern, white-painted, many-faceted, architect's dream/nightmare with metal-banistered miradors, copper roof, decks for every station of the sun, lofty, mirrored triple-panes open on the sea, imported blue Spanish tile flooring (heated), intercoms and TVs in the water closets, in-wall vacuums and sound system, solar panels, a burglar system that rings in Langley, built-in pecky cypress everythings.[176]

However, the Feensters had become disconnected from everything and everyone they used to know, ending with nothing to do and, unable to strike up new acquaintances, suspecting their neighbours of begrudging them their luck. Therefore they engage in repeated acts of defiance, violating the principle of good-neighbourliness: "They tried, their first summer, to change the road's name to Bridgeport Road, have it age-restricted and gated from the south end, where we all drive in";[177] then they tried to limit access to a stretch of the beach; finally they put up an expensive fence around their house, signs saying "DON'T EVEN THINK OF TURNING AROUND IN THIS DRIVEWAY. KEEP OUT! WE TOW! BELIEVE IT! PRIVATE PROPERTY!!! BEACH CLOSED DUE TO DANGEROUS RIPTIDE. BEWARE OF PIT BULL!",[178] and had motion-sensitive burglar lights installed in the yard. Their initiatives were all defeated, bringing them into conflict with the other residents, the surfer community, the fishing community, the local shop owners. Frank's attempts at over-the-fence small talk have been rebuffed.

The portrayal of the Feensters demonstrates a certain crisis in Frank's perception of the community. When their behaviour is interpreted by their neighbours, though, it must be remembered that both the critics are positioned on the margin of the suburban code (besides they both reflect their individual prejudices): the disgraced historian puts it down to their lack

[175] Ibid., p. 310.
[176] Ibid., p. 305.
[177] Ibid., p. 307.
[178] Ibid., p. 308.

of education and the fact of hailing from Connecticut (he himself graduated from Wesleyan University at Delaware, Ohio), whereas Terry Farlow, the petroleum engineer believes righteously that "conspicuous new wealth unaccompanied by any sense of personal accomplishment (salvaging cathode-ray tubes not qualifying as accomplishment) often unhinges even good people, wrecks their value system".[179] Yet, as has been said earlier, the delinquent couple exemplifies Frank's departure from the celebration of the community in the previous novel. On the other hand, the departure is not complete as Ford has the Feensters killed at the end of the novel, thus removing the offensive agent and restoring suburban equilibrium in this particular respect.

This restoration has some characteristics of southern paternalism discussed earlier. In all three novels Frank is surrounded by subaltern, usually ethnic, figures, patronizing them and voicing his self-conscious liberalism. While in *Independence Day* "Bascombe's evolving populism is subdued and informal, sharing with it a suspicion of materialism and the ideology of progress",[180] *The Lay of the Land* is much more articulate. For all Frank's talk about the contingency of community, he frequently asserts himself *vis-à-vis* the other: his Tibetan partner Lobsang Dhargey, alias Mike Mahoney or the black Lewis brothers to whom he sold his houses on Clio Street and who subsequently "made buckets of dough in the early nineties gentrifying beaten-up Negro housing in the Wallace Hill section of town and selling it to newcomer white Yuppies".[181] Thus Frank's notion of civic cooperation transcends the racial boundary — in this case his goodwill is credible as the Lewis brothers are enterprising builders thus sharing his social and professional values, although a measure of political correctness is also in evidence as demonstrated in the discussion of the black punk who damaged his car. Ford's protagonist's benevolence does not extend to the Feensters, the social other, but that is in keeping with his militant politics (also shown in the scene after his car was damaged where he displays a great deal of understanding of the juvenile black delinquent's behaviour while hardly restraining his fury at the white working-class Floridians venturing a racial slur by way of explanation of the incident's cause). This divisive logic fractures community cohesion celebrated in *Independence Day*.

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[179] Ibid., p. 311.

[180] J. Varsava: "The Quest for Community in American Postmodern Fiction…," p. 1 ff.

[181] R. Ford: *The Lay of the Land*…, p. 90.

Chapter Four

The Babbitt Connection

Published in 1922, on the threshold of a decade of heady economic expansion, Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* "remains today as the major documentation in literature of American business culture",[182] one of the most incisive studies of the country's middle class. Both the Harry Angstrom cycle, especially *Rabbit Is Rich*, and the Frank Bascombe trilogy rely on Lewis's novel in their portrayals of bourgeois life. Inquiring into their relationship helps to understand Updike's and Ford's work, respectively.

One of the epigraphs in *Rabbit Is Rich* is George Follansbee Babbitt's description of the Ideal Citizen: "At night he lights up a good cigar, and climbs into the little old 'bus, and maybe cusses the carburetor, and shoots out home. He mows the lawn, or sneaks in some practice putting, and then he's ready for dinner".[183] Rabbit Angstrom's golf, desultory household work, professional interest in automobiles are some of the obvious echoes of Lewis's satire; also Janice's job in the real estate business in *Rabbit at Rest* can be regarded as an oblique reference. Like George Babbitt, Harry has a vague yearning for something fulfilling in life,[184] in imitation of Babbitt's annual convention speech Rabbit tells rehearsed jokes at the Flying Eagle. Both are paunchy men the same age (forty six) who like to talk shop, follow the business news and generally subscribe to "the religion of capitalism or business".[185] Both have ambivalent attitudes to their families, especially to their sons. Harry Angstrom's success and rising confidence, like Babbitt's, link up with women as indices of wealth. Money is at the centre of their

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[182] S. Lewis: *Babbitt*. London: Penguin 1991. With an Afterword by Mark Schorer, p. 320.
[183] J. Updike: *Rabbit Is Rich…*, epigraph page.
[184] D.J. Greiner: *John Updike's Novels…*, p. 88.
[185] M. O'Connell: *Updike and the Patriarchal Dilemma…*, p. 166.

relationships, although in different paradigms: Babbitt values his wife for the money necessary to win and maintain her; Rabbit takes pride in Janice's suntan and the fact that she plays tennis regularly while valuing her for her family fortune that changed their life after Fred Springer's death. Both men find their wives' homemaking skills deficient.[186] Similarities extend to secondary characters: in *Babbitt* Paul shoots his wife, Zilla; in *Rabbit Is Rich* Nelson probably pushes his pregnant wife down the stairs, in consequence, she has her arm broken. In general, both Paul and Nelson resent their confining wives.

Updike echoes Lewis in portraying a man who becomes successful but must "sell his soul both in the marketplace and at home",[187] forfeiting his independence and giving up his dreams. The prize, domestic security, does not seem worthwhile. George Babbitt is aware that he did not do a single thing in life he wanted to do, Harry Angstrom becomes rich only to realize that his mental and physical, chiefly sexual, vigour has begun to decline. Finally, Babbitt's fishy real estate deals are reflected in Nelson's embezzlement.

Catherine Jurca claims that there are essential differences between the paradigms of entrapment in *Babbitt* and in the Rabbit cycle. "Babbitt's ambivalence toward his prosperity and his freedom to run and return without consequence are powerful testimonies to his general economic and social well-being." On the other hand, this kind of "mastery" is unavailable to Harry Angstrom, his fate is "martyrdom".[188] The differentiation between "mastery" and "martyrdom" is based on the discourses about the middle class in the 1920s and in the late twentieth century, respectively. The ascendancy of business culture in Lewis's book gives way to erosion through self-doubt and external menace in Updike's novels.

The connection between *Babbitt* and *The Sportswriter* is acknowledged by Ford. In some places, for example when Frank discusses the pathetic pranks of the Divorced Men's Club members, the connection is obvious if secondary: "Perfect Babbitts, really, all of us, even though to some extent we understood that".[189] They act childish and cultivate their belief in the ordinary as a safeguard against the terror of solitude and loss. There are frequent and more fundamental similarities between the two protagonists, which, however, are mediated differently by the two novelists; for instance, Frank's sentimentality does not draw any assessment of an external, moralizing voice. "The reader wants to believe that Ford is satirizing his character when Frank lapses into moments of unabashed Babbittry, yet Ford steadfastly refuses to indulge in the authorial condescension that Sinclair

[186] Ibid., p. 167.
[187] Ibid., p. 168.
[188] C. Jurca: *White Diaspora…*, p. 162.
[189] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, p. 80.

Lewis and William Dean Howells intruded upon their narratives".[190] The consequence of such technique is expanding the possibilities of the character type adumbrated by Lewis.

One possibility lies in articulate, self-conscious defence of the ordinary. Walter Luckett's death irritates Frank because it demonstrates Walter's inability to find sustenance in everyday life. As he explains to his ex-wife, Walter "should have helped himself … You can't be too conventional. That's what will save you".[191] Ford's skill here consists in extending Babbitt's conventionality up to a point where it is no longer a satirical character trait that can be condoned. Instead, it becomes the choice of a person who wants to stave off dissolution, loss, "dreaminess". What is thus introduced is a narrative method exploring a mental state of great complexity whose chief characteristic is an overarching sense of the contingency of self. "Like Babbitt, Frank is self-conscious and performative",[192] testing his own voice and gestures, trying to be convincing yet finding his personality elusive.[193]

In the tentativeness of his identity Frank shares some things not only with George Babbitt, but also with Harry Angstrom. The second epigraph to *Rabbit Is Rich*, a fragment of Wallace Stevens's poem "A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts" reads:

> The difficulty to think at the end of day,
> When the shapeless shadow covers the sun
> And nothing is left except light on your fur …[194]

What differs Frank from Harry Angstrom, and George Babbitt, is the extent of the awareness of the vacuity of his life, which he turns into a praise of the

[190] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 118.

[191] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, pp. 334—335.

[192] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 126.

[193] An interpretative line which I am not going to pursue has been suggested by Carl Elliott. He discusses the suburban house as a symbol of alienation in relation to Frank Bascombe's description of the anxiety of buying property. Frank believes that "the realty dreads" consist in closing some options in life as well as coming to the realization that one is not after all very different from the next fellow. According to Elliott, "In a society that values uniqueness and individuality, that says a fulfilled life is one in which you look inside yourself and discover your own particular values and talents, that valorizes the rule-breaking, anti-establishment, boundary-transgressing anti-hero, there is something terrifying about looking deep inside and discovering that you're no different from the guy next door. That your life is just an average life, and your story so ordinary it is not even worth telling. Anything that reminds of this fact, anything that betrays the illusion that you are really, deep-down, quite an extraordinary unique individual, is going to cut very close to the bone indeed. It is enough to make you think about an antidepressant." C. Elliott: "Pursued by Happiness and Beaten Senseless". *The Hastings Center Report* 2000, 30 (2), p. 7 ff.

[194] J. Updike: *Rabbit Is Rich…*, epigraph page.

quotidian as a decent man's only road to survival. However, the decency of one man is only part of the picture, Ford's objective is interrogating how middle class culture engages with the pervasive distrust and vulnerability of the contemporary self.

> These Babbitt-like qualities would result in nothing more than an updated portrait of the American bourgeois if they did not give way to substantial late-twentieth-century concerns. What is fundamentally at issue in *The Sportswriter* is not so much bourgeoisie as anomie, not conformity but the struggles of the decentered postmodern self. What lies beneath Frank's conventional exterior is a struggle to define that self with limited cultural materials. Absent historical, cultural, and psychological metanarratives, the self cannot be recovered through nonconformity, as in *Babbitt*, or by integration into the sort of historical myths Ford's southern modernist predecessors offered.[195]

There is more to it than Guinn suggests. Ford's narrative does not substitute post-modern psychology for middle-class conformism, neither does he oppose anomie to bourgeoisie. What he inquires into is *how* contemporary cultural discourses engage with the middle class *as* anomie. Or even more: what is involved in attempting to overcome the apparently unbridgeable gap between paralyzing uncertainty and conventionality as a means of re-integration, or, in John Barth's terms, replenishment.

It is clear even in Sinclair Lewis's novel that the middle-class self is precarious, that Babbitt rehearses his performances and socializes with the Chamber of Commerce men and lunches with the Rotarians because he is in the process of making himself culturally, psychologically as well as socially. The difference between Rabbit and Frank Bascombe on the one hand, and George Babbitt on the other is primarily one of the degree of self-awareness. However, when Harry Angstrom realizes that "[t]he other men in Rotary and Chamber turn out to be the guys he played ball with back then",[196] emphasis is put on social climbing, on "the nod he gets from the community". When Frank hears Joe Markham and Ted Houlihan "laugh like Rotarians",[197] Santa Claus in a Christmas season childrens' movie fashion, or during the Divorced Men's Club meetings, when the members try "to be as chatty and polite as Rotarians",[198] the references are markedly different. Ford emphasizes role-playing, his protagonist forever experimenting with attitudes and voice tones. In both Updike and Ford the role of the

[195] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 126.
[196] J. Updike: *Rabbit Is Rich…*, p. 6.
[197] R. Ford: *Independence Day…*, p. 74.
[198] R. Ford: *The Sportswriter…*, p. 79.

mass media is underlined in offering especially television viewers models of desirable behaviour. The Flying Eagle crew, for instance, often act as they have been instructed in beer commercials.

A psychological progression can be seen between *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*. In the former, on a visit to Gotham Frank goes to a chrysanthemum show and observing people reflects on the consolations of urban life, opportunities to act in ways which may allow one to assert oneself (but then to realize the provisional nature of such solutions and flee). "This must be how all suburbanites feel when the suburbs suddenly go queer and queasy on them; that things cannot continue to fall away forever, and it's high time for a new, quick age to dawn".[199] Thus he emphasizes the constructive tendency of the suburban mind to overcome adversity, unease, "dreaminess", even it involves doing something dishonest. Frank considers just that in his story on Herb Wallagher, planning to "turn that emblem of desolation into something better, even if it means putting a wrench to a fact or two".[200]

The novelty of Frank's attitude in *Independence Day* is that he graduates from dissecting his own uncertainties to looking at life from the perspective of himself in the community. His language in the novel abounds in do-good boosterism combining broader vision with self-interest, a combination George Babbitt was fond of contemplating. As Frank puts it: "In this way I could still pursue my original plan to do for others while looking after Number One, which seemed a good aspiration as I entered a part of life when I'd decided to expect less, hope for modest improvements and be willing to split the difference".[201] Part of this attitude is obviously related to Frank's middle age which teaches him moderation. Yet on the whole "[h]is new disposition — and the florid rhetoric with which he describes it — would seem to be Babbittry verified",[202] in addition to Frank's new vocation, identical with George Babbitt's.

According to Mark Schorer, Sinclair Lewis's world is based on "two observations: the standardization of manners in a business culture, and the stultification of morals under middle-class convention".[203] Maxwell Geismar goes further, he detects in Lewis's project a vulnerability and elusiveness, a portrayal of

> a middle class which is essentially without a home life, without children, without religion, and, finally, without an economic status to speak of:

[199] Ibid., p. 352.

[200] Ibid., p. 353.

[201] R. Ford: *Independence Day…*, p. 112.

[202] M. Guinn: *After Southern Modernism…*, p. 134.

[203] M. Schorer: "Sinclair Lewis and the Method of Half-Truths". In: *Sinclair Lewis. A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. M. Schorer. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1962, p. 49.

> a middle class which is without all the historical props of a middle class, and which, hardly established in power, has every appearance of dissolving — including the escape into a dream world of the middle class.[204]

Familiar critical readings of Babbitt as a character dwell on his being "completely decivilized", devoid of the awareness of the higher spiritual life: "… he has no manners, no coherent code of morals, no religion, no piety, no patriotism, no knowledge of truth and no love of beauty".[205] H.L. Mencken focuses on "the whole complex of Babbittry, Babbittism, Babbittismus", not only a character type, but a man who is entirely defined by

> what the folks about him will think of him. His politics is communal politics, mob politics, herd politics; his religion is a public rite wholly without subjective significance; his relations to his wife and his children are formalized and standardized; even his debaucheries are the orthodox debaucheries of a sound business man. The salient thing about him … is his complete lack of originality — and that is precisely the salient mark of every American of his class.[206]

These approaches to Babbitt as a generic character connect with Frank Bascombe as a late-twentieth century bourgeois and with realism as a means of narrating the middle class/ suburban experience.

In the last chapter called "Babbitt at the Abyss" of his important book *Literature Against Itself. Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (1979) Gerald Graff points out that although in the 1920s (for instance, in T.S. Eliot's exposition of Joyce's "mythical method") modernism pronounced realism no longer epistemologically adequate for narrating the urban experience, it retained realism in the description of settings.[207] Commenting on the rhetorical excesses of the fiction of the 1960s and 1970s, he argues for restoration of a "state of balance between unchecked fabulation and objective social realism",[208] otherwise literature degenerates into mere gaming, irrelevant and trivial.

The bourgeois individualist, Graff argues, aimed to subdue nature while preserving the social patterns of morality and achievement. In recent decades this character type is being supplanted by a type he calls "therapeutic man". This sort of man

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[204] M. Geismar: "The Land of Faery". In: *Sinclair Lewis. A Collection of Critical Essays…*, p. 138.

[205] W. Lippmann: "Sinclair Lewis". In: *Sinclair Lewis. A Collection of Critical Essays…*, p. 90.

[206] H.L. Mencken: "Portrait of an American Citizen". In: *Sinclair Lewis. A Collection of Critical Essays…*, p. 22.

[207] G. Graff: *Literature Against Itself*: *Literary Ideas in Modern Society*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press 1979, pp. 207 and 212.

[208] Ibid., p. 238.

> sees himself as engaged in a new kind of melodrama, a struggle for private "self-realization", unique "identity", and "meaningful" personal relations. "Role-playing" behaviour, disapproved of by therapeutic man when it is predetermined by bourgeois social forms, is viewed as a form of authentic liberation when dictated by spontaneous impulse. Moral sensitivity — seen as the antithesis of bourgeois insensitivity — comes to be measured by one's consciousness that one has "problems", that one is "vulnerable", and that one is willing to be open about them with others. One's very selfhood is understood as a problem, if not as a grievance, a condition of acute vulnerability defenceless against even the slightest disturbance and requiring permanent ministration and "caring". … A pathetic groping for "warmth" in the outer world tends to become the highest imaginable ideal of collective enterprise.[209]

It is clear that Frank Bascombe shares many of therapeutic man's characteristics. He is highly introspective and vulnerable, Graff's "warmth" and "caring" becoming "solace" and "consolation" in Ford's work. In *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day* he nurses his "dreaminess" which is replaced with contemplating his wife's desertion and the stridency of his self-righteous politics in *The Lay of the Land*. Also, there are scattered references in all three novels to role-playing Frank experiments with at various stages of his life.

Graff argues that some American books of the period indicated bring *Babbitt* "up to date for an age of consumerized alienation and self-consciousness". Discussing Barthelme's *Snow White*, he points out the protagonist's suitors' (whom he calls "self-estranged Babbitts") satisfaction when they were "simple bourgeois" and their anguish once they have become "complex bourgeois", hating their own complexity and worrying lest it should turn out "bad for business".[210] Some of the ironies of such attitudes are shared by Ford's protagonist.

Thus babbittry viewed as philistinism in combination with consumerism characterizes both Rabbit Angstrom and Frank Bascombe. Moral and intellectual self-limitation is likewise present in both yet the latter brings sophisticated introspection to his situation. On the whole, however, Updike's and Ford's portrayals of the suburban condition involve babbittry as a crucial component.

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[209] Ibid., pp. 222—223.

[210] Ibid., p. 226.

Conclusion

As was pointed out in Introduction, Lionel Trilling's discussion of reality foregrounded the onerous legacy of Parringtonian-Howellsian simplifications, a belief in a palpable, verifiable, immutable reality whose faithful and competent reflection constitutes the primary task of a serious artist. Such approach presupposed deprecatory treatment of more imaginative forms of literature viewed in terms of evasion of the writer's responsibility, a failure to rise to the challenge of sincere and adequate portrayal of life as it is. Trilling deplores the tendency to regard reality as opposite to mind as well as the insistence on the former's superiority. This visceral, "hard, resistant, unformed, impenetrable, and unpleasant"[1] reality dominates American intellectual life, he asserts, combining with a preference for naturalist squalor at the expense of true reality, that of ideas and artistic vision. The opposite of reality, he argues, is not mind but appearance, exemplified in bad, chaotic fiction striving merely to indiscriminately record instead of transforming crude fact into imaginative fiction.

John Cheever's work conforms to Trilling's concept of fiction in a number of ways. They share a belief that reality need not be opposed to mind and that realist literature can successfully incorporate elements of other traditions. Cheever's use of pastoral, black comedy and surrealism invigorates the rhetoric of his work, for instance in the Wapshot novels. In *Bullet Park* he goes further in the direction outlined by Trilling in the discussion of Hawthorne: although the novel has some structural faults, it introduces a resonant myth into what is essentially realist narrative. The same technique can be seen in such short stories as "The Swimmer", "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" and "O Youth and Beauty!"

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[1] L. Trilling: *The Liberal Imagination. Essays on Literature and Society.* Middlesex, England and Victoria, Australia: Penguin 1970, p. 26.

Another parallel is the social focus of Cheever's work — "the genteel and academic"[2] in Trilling corresponds with the upper middle class in Cheever, although their social paradigms differ. In *The Liberal Imagination* gentility is understood as a set of attitudes of the educated, progressive-minded city-dwellers who regard with disdain the majority of middle-class Americans. Cheever's universe is inhabited by upper middle class suburbanites, most of them holding non-academic and non-artistic jobs; many are presented as sympathetic characters. Thus claims to gentility are established at the level of living standards, not intellectual sophistication. Some Cheever characters are downright philistines like the Wrysons in the eponymous story, the Mayor in "The Death of Justina" or Mrs Selfredge and Mayor Simmons in "The Trouble of Marcie Flint".

The vision of reality in the Rabbit tetralogy derives from the tension between the narrating voice and the focalizer. The former, whose sensibility is that of a sophisticated commentator, is close to Trilling's "mind"; the latter, entangled in a crude struggle for self-definition, corresponds to the awkward and heavy reality (the kind criticized in Dreiser). Poised to enter the middle class, Harry Angstrom cannot but be concerned with the hard facts of domestic and social life. Janice's drinking and negligent housekeeping as well as Harry's sleazy love affair with Ruth in *Rabbit, Run*; the vulgarity of the plutographic passages in *Rabbit Is Rich* charting the protagonist's way up — all these elements smack of what is regrettable actuality in Trilling, and Cheever, yet what is part and parcel of any narrative of social climbing, an image whose aesthetic implications Trilling is not willing to consider. (This obviously contradicts the critic's praise of "manners" as the substance of the realist novel).

There is, however, an aspect of Updike's work which eludes Trilling's categories. In *Rabbit Redux*, the theatrical quality of Chapter Three ("Skeeter") corresponds to neither "mind" nor "reality" in *The Liberal Imagination*. The artificiality of the situation, its contrived fictiveness does not lend itself to analysis in Trilling's terms, even though the novel abounds in precise references to late-sixties social life.

The above distinctions are marginal in Richard Ford's work. Frank Bascombe's New Jersey is a classless land, his own sensibility a mixture of refined post-southern paternalism and plebeianism. Reality is no longer "an honorific word",[3] it has become an arena of the multiple processes of construction and refurbishment enacted by the forces of modern capitalism. In one way, though, Ford is close to Trilling — his reality is ideational. Unlike Updike's luxuriantly realist vision, or even Cheever's, which floats among

[2] Ibid., p. 17.
[3] Ibid., p. 217.

a variety of discourses, the Frank Bascombe cycle relies on some of the central conceptions of postmodernism: self and society in flux; life as parade of simulacra; the mass culture faith. Being factitious, reality is desentimentalized along with such of its components as place and community.

As was said in Introduction, Trilling's notion of liberalism is threefold, comprising a political concept, a mental and social attitude, and a form of literary criticism. Viewed in the political context, liberalism is marginal in Cheever's fiction. Updike's protagonist's attitudes are moderately conservative: he respects the law and politicians (in a symbolic scene Rabbit turns down the thermostat of his radiator when the President appeals to the nation to save energy during the 1970s oil crisis), he occasionally ventures racial slurs against Brewer blacks and Florida Jews, he resents the early forms of affirmative action. By contrast, Frank Bascombe's liberalism progresses from moderate in *The Sportswriter* to militant in *The Lay of the Land*. He patronizes a gallery of ethnic characters (his Tibetan partner Mike Mahoney, the Guatemalan crew refurbishing his beach rental houses, the Lewis brothers who bought the two Wallace Hill houses from him). In melodramatic declarations he asserts his adherence to the Democratic programme in general, and Al Gore's platform specifically, from ardent environmentalism to extensive welfare to progressive taxation while vilifying the Republicans and President Bush. Frank's particular concern for black American characters contrasts with his scorn for many non-ethnic whites, illustrating his firmly entrenched political correctness. Finally, community, celebrated in *Independence Day* for its therapeutic power as well as for contributing to the ideal of "middle" life, begins to be looked upon in terms of the suppressing effect it purportedly exerts on the individual. The cluster of houses on Poincinet Road is characterized by divisiveness rather than cohesion.

Lionel Trilling's definition of the novel as a genre that explores reality by studying manners is central to John Cheever's understanding of fiction. Cheever chronicles the minutiae of suburban life, customs relating to dressing, eating and drinking, gardening are the substance of his work, alongside quirks of character bred by routine. At the same time, patterns of larger social and national life are only sketched, historical events are seldom referred to. This is due to a certain homogeneity of Cheever's world — High Suburbia forms the background in his work, the majority of his upper middle class characters are content with things as they are. Hence there is little concern with social mobility, although the related ideas of ambition and snobbery occasionally become subjects of scrutiny. Lower middle class life (sections dealing with Maple Dell in the Shady Hill stories, Remsen Park in the Wapshot novels, Y- in "The Scarlet Moving Van") constitutes a fairly tame menace to his images of genteel WASP citadels such as St. Botolphs, Proxmire Manor or Bullet Park. Yet, like Trilling, Cheever believes that true

inquiry into reality begins in the social field and that manners, especially in his relatively static world, make men, thus deserving to be studied with great attention.

Likewise, Trilling's concept of the novel as the most significant cognitive tool of "the moral imagination"[4] appears to be close to Cheever. Moral righteousness postulated by the former as the most common emotional attitude of the middle class is softened by eccentricity in the Wapshot novels and allegorically dramatized in *Bullet Park*. However, Cheever's favourite method of mediating his exploration of what Trilling terms "human variety" is humour which tempers his social observation, resulting in a genial, indulgent tone of his prose.

Of the three novelists discussed in the present work, John Updike comes closest to the idea of fiction as investigation of manners. Furthermore, he brings to the panorama of Harry Angstrom's life a technique that extends Trilling's concept of the novel as essentially self-study of the middle-class: his working-class protagonist climbs slowly and laboriously, becoming rich only in the third novel, thus allowing detailed documentation of social processes narrated by a voice belonging to "the literate, reading, responsible middle class of people who are ourselves".[5] By thus contrasting the substance of Rabbit's life and the socio-narrative perspective, Updike is able to focus his cycle on the lower middle class in industrial Pennsylvania between the late 1950s and early 1990s without succumbing to the "doctrinaire affection"[6] for the presented social milieu (Steinbeck's and Dreiser's fault according to *The Liberal Imagination*). The reception of the tetralogy, especially the debate on the protagonist as an un/sympathetic character, demonstrates the effectiveness of such technique in exploring "the moral imagination".

Although the socio-narrative model of the Frank Bascombe cycle shares many characteristics with Trilling's formula for the realist novel, Ford positions his protagonist on the margin of the liberal intellectual community. His Southern working-class background exposes him to self-doubt in an affluent New Jersey suburb, his vision of society and himself in it marked by a number of ruptures. Thus dislocation proves to be a serious obstacle in pursuing the "classic intention" of realist fiction, i.e. the study of mores and manners. In *The Sportswriter* Frank's powers of observation are brought to bear on the intricacies of suburban life in an attempt to connect him with place. Unable to completely identify with the middle class, he is not given to Trilling's "moral indignation". In his quest for self-definition, Frank is well attuned to manifestations of "human variety", the novel balancing his psycho-drama with social observation.

[4] Ibid., p. 223.
[5] Ibid., p. 210.
[6] Ibid., p. 219.

Independence Day shifts focus in the direction of the community, Frank entering a network of social commitments and configurations. His professional and familial relations put him in touch with a large gallery of characters enabling a study of contemporary America along the lines of social stratification specified by Trilling. As Jeffery Folks put it, he risks membership,[7] a prerequisite not only for meaningful social intercourse but also narration thereof.

What used to be "the ladder of social observation"[8] for Trilling becomes a study of the modern capitalist society in *The Lay of the Land*, considerations of class rendered irrelevant in a space teeming with protean forms of enterprise, avarice and luck, all of them leading to money. Since the pace of change is so rapid, consciousness and personal culture are unable to catch up with the processes of financial accumulation, investment, expenditure and transference, nullifying the principle of manners making men. The only form of manners remaining is that connected with consumerism which, however, is devoid of class distinctions or otherwise socially marked. In a sense, Frank Bascombe's world retrogresses to a determinist vision that Trilling deprecated in early realism. If Ford's character does not consistently indulge in "moral indignation", it is because he lacks a social base from which to tilt at those transgressing against his code. This code, which Trilling ascribed to an entire "literate, reading, responsible middle class of people", has been fragmented along with the erosion of societal bonds by the incursion of consumerism. In this perspective, Frank's unwanted individualism is tinged with the pathos of "the last gentleman" (an echo of Walker Percy) endeavouring to salvage as much as possible from the anomie engulfing post-modern America.

Trilling's concept of adversary culture, in its late incarnation as "apolitical politics of alienation",[9] applies to the three novelists discussed in the present book in different ways. In so far as John Cheever can be regarded as a writer of modern alienation and angst, his books filled with subversive images of dipsomania, adultery and fraudulent practices of the local government, he answers Graff's description; even more so in his ostensibly apolitical attitude. Yet on the whole the emphasis on family and community, the cultivation of basic human decency and forgiveness as well as adherence to Christianity of most of his characters puts him in a class of writers whose objective is bemused reflection on and affirmative if ambivalent portrayal of a slice of life he was familiar with.

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[7] J.J. Folks: "The Risks of Membership: Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*". *The Mississippi Quarterly* 1998, 52 (1), p. 73 ff.

[8] L. Trilling: *The Liberal Imagination…*, p. 214.

[9] G. Graff: "American Criticism Left and Right". In: *Ideology and Classic American Literature*. Eds. S. Bercovitch, M. Jehlen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987, p. 97.

Updike's case in the Rabbit cycle is more complex. Neither the narrator nor the protagonist, whose attitudes differ, questions the values of the middle class. The question of alienation is posed seriously, though, in terms of Harry Angstrom's problematic purchase on the suburban code. His "polymorphous sexuality", or more broadly, his familial self, is at odds with his civic and professional self. Thus Updike attempts to negotiate the fissure described by Trilling in *Beyond Culture* as the detachment of the modern American from the intellectual and emotional patterns of traditional culture. Rabbit fails to meet some standards of the middle class, yet the sincerity of his aspirations is beyond doubt. Perhaps the only aspect of Updike's presented world which has transgressive, adversary character is sexuality which Trilling underestimated.

Much more than either the work of Cheever or Updike, Ford's trilogy is a study in alienation. Similarly, his partisan vision of the contemporary USA departs from Cheever's distance and Updike's portrayal of Rabbit's selective conservatism. Frank Bascombe is militant because the failure of all the grand narratives of the past leaves him powerless, sceptical and unable to establish workable relations with people (his dilemma corresponds with Trilling's in the 1950s when the latter's trust in society was shaken, which was exacerbated by the fact that he lacked systemic support to find meaning elsewhere). Airing his views, so frequently and so stridently, Ford's protagonist sets himself in opposition to many people he encounters, especially in *The Lay of the Land*. Adversarial *malgré lui*, Frank is a kind of character Trilling criticized in American fiction as morbid and amoral. What is paradoxical, Frank Bascombe, like Trilling, is outspoken in his liberal views.

In *A Gathering of Fugitives* Trilling expressed his distaste for a tendency in modern art to encourage people's neurotic impulses and induce depression. Ford has his protagonist put up plenty of resistance to such inclinations yet frequently Frank Bascombe indulges in self-pity and a sense of superiority that is as smug as it is tortured. The sincerity of his quest in the first two novels gives way to a kind of self-righteous emotional exhibitionism in the third.

The question of intellectual posturing in modern art was central to John Gardner's concept of moral fiction. He criticized both the evasion of moral issues in abstract art and the two misguided trends in post-modernism: false relativity and fashionable despair. Against these tendencies, the artist should always pursue Truth, Goodness and Beauty, protect everlasting values and humanity.

John Cheever's conception of art is "moral" along the same lines, he shares Gardner's belief in the importance of the three ideals. The false relativity afflicting contemporary culture is diagnosed as wrong on similar grounds (like Gardner, Cheever is serious about his religion), affectation

of ennui found likewise reprehensible. The quasi-religious language and imagery of the Wapshot novels, the mythology of *Bullet Park* correspond with the principles of "moral fiction". However, Cheever's compassion and humanity are devoid of Gardner's contentious prescriptiveness (what he called the "fascistic" quality of art), his fiction is suffused with benignity. Against perverse misanthropy, Cheever's characters live "happily, happily, happily, happily" ("The Worm in the Apple"); or, tragedy averted, "everything was as wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, as it had been" (*Bullet Park*), even if it should take drug addiction to retain so much serenity. Thus the writer mitigates the earnestness of his own version of "moral fiction" with understanding and benevolence.

Even though John Updike's art seems to invalidate Gardner's categories as too old-fashioned, what is more, provoked by *On Moral Fiction* the former pronounced the book's affirmation of life as naïve, there are levels at which the Rabbit novels yield new meanings when viewed through Gardnerian lenses. First of all, as indicated in the epigraph to *Rabbit, Run*, the tetralogy is concerned with questions of Christian morality. Updike, whose knowledge of theology is staggering, hints at one of the dilemmas of moral judgment, i.e. the dialectic of God's grace and human fallibility, which was sidestepped by Gardner in the formulation of his doctrine. Second, Rabbit's pursuit of "it" has some characteristics of Gardner's triple ideal, although the narrator's attitude is one of detached observation, revolving around the protagonist's mundane, often sexual concerns, rather than abstract intellectual pursuits.

The Frank Bascombe cycle manifests fully-fledged post-modern sensibility in its treatment of place, society and self. Emphasizing the contingency of culture and civilization, the trilogy renders Gardner's ideals irrelevant. Frank's objectives are more modest — he strives to survive, his quest is personal inasmuch as he finds the grand narratives of contemporary America defunct and his "dreaminess" impairs his relations with people (especially his first marriage). In varying proportions, the three novels demonstrate the connection between despair and present-day intellectual discourses which sanction it as a legitimate means of self-expression that Gardner lamented, although there is sincere drama in Frank's vision of himself and society.

Ford's protagonist is not one of Gardner's "nihilists, cynics, and merdistes", even though a measure of misanthropy (identified in *On Moral Fiction* as one of the characteristics of post-modern fiction) is in evidence. Frank's superiority, combined with his cultivation of distrust of some metanarratives, comes across as fake, especially, since it is counterpointed with his enthusiasm for other selected discourses such as Democratic liberalism and political correctness. Gardner's assertion that "[i]n the name of democracy, justice, and compassion, we abandon our right to believe, to debate, and

to hunt down truth"[10] describes with poignant accuracy Frank Bascombe's position in the trilogy, his pub tussle and general combativeness in *The Lay of the Land* demonstrating his abandonment of the pursuit of truth.

In another reference to *On Moral Fiction*, Ford's narrative reflects the "ancient abyss" of emptiness and despair, yet its attempts to "floor the abyss with art" are hamstrung by the absence of myths or incontrovertible values. Celebrating malleable self or the workings of capitalist economy does not suffice. Frank's two brushes with death in *The Lay of the Land* are not convincing as a portrayal of the "game played against chaos and death, against entropy".[11] As Gardner argued, dramatized events which constitute the structural framework of the literary text must tend "toward some meticulously qualified belief";[12] should either of the two elements, i.e. structure or belief be deficient, the result is idea without art or technique unaccompanied by substance.

The relations between "moral fiction" and realism are the cornerstone of Gardner's system. Despite his ambivalence about both technical and conceptual limitations of realism (it may hinder the writer's pursuit of Beauty and Goodness which sometimes require more imaginative forms of writing), he found it particularly suited to the exploration of Truth. For all their differences, truth in fiction is the goal of Cheever, Updike and Ford. Cheever's technique, in its emphasis on fable and myth, characters lending themselves to allegorical readings, is the closest of the three to Gardner's doctrine. Updike's closely observed world is one of factual accuracy, and as such, very serious about the documentary sense of "truth" (topography of Brewer, merchandise brand names, details of television shows, social and political events). Yet his investigation of Rabbit's intimate life, breaks away from Gardner's somewhat prudish formula. In terms of fidelity of documentation, Ford resembles Updike. However, the narrative technique in the trilogy as well as Frank's intellectual refinement put him in a very different class of fictive characters from Harry Angstrom. Instead of describing reality, Ford's novels foreground speculations about its structure, past and possible transformations (notably, landscape *vis-à-vis* realty). On the other hand, in spite of Frank's provisional, elusive self, the discourse of his psychological development follows some of the patterns of the realist tradition found, for instance, in Saul Bellow's work.

Generally, the figuration of suburbia in the work of Cheever, Updike and Ford engages not only with three distinctly different areas of realism, but also with the evolution of the suburb as such the between 1945—2005 and the development of the contemporary humanities. Thus John Cheever's

[10] J. Gardner: *On Moral Fiction…*, pp. 41—42.
[11] Ibid., p. 6.
[12] Ibid., p. 65.

rhetoric derives from the opposition between the organic New England village (St. Botolphs in the Wapshot novels, the town in *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*) and the post-Second World War Two subdivision (Talifer, Remsen Park in the Wapshot novels), yet his settings comprise also upper middle class suburbs such as Bullet Park in the eponymous novel, Proxmire Manor in the Wapshot novels, Shady Hill in the short stories which are occasionally contrasted with lower middle class suburbs (Maple Dell in the Shady Hill stories, Y- in "The Scarlet Moving Van"). The presented world is homogeneous in social terms — most of the characters are wealthy, though the level of their personal sophistication varies. The emphasis is firmly on the suburb as the characters are seldom portrayed at work in the city.

This relative flattening of social perspective results in a blurring of the realism of his texts. Tensions of urban life are relegated to the periphery; not entirely banished, they remain muffled reminders of the seriousness of life outside, taking the form of one of Cheever's favourite tropes — the-snake-in-the-garden pattern. By toying with the idea of elimination of strife and vice from the suburb, he refers to the social practice of zoning, but behind it, the old pastoral opposition of the pure countryside versus the corrupt city is invoked.

As social relevance is reduced, the characters' lives are portrayed in the context of regulatory frameworks such as middle class rituals of family and community life, Christianity, nature myths of Graeco-Roman provenance. Semi-ethnic sensibility combines with the suburban spatial structure to produce a fictive set-up tending towards comedy. The discourse of Cheever's work reflects the early stage of the development of the American suburb in that the social picture is restricted to the upper middle class, its life frequently enlarged to mythical proportions. In this way he contests the commonly accepted image of suburbia as a locus of conformism, dullness and materialism.

Social focus changes along with technique in John Updike's novels. As his protagonist is followed from his working-class background to prosperity, the narrative records meticulously the life and civilization in industrial Pennsylvania between the late 1950s and the early 1990s. Although symbols abound, Updike's method is realistic, documenting national history as well as Rabbit's ups and downs. In contrast to the gentility of Cheever's characters, Harry Angstrom's early life is sordid, his promiscuous sexuality receiving plenty of attention (another contrast with Cheever). Updike's socio-spatial vision is much broader. His characters are (mostly) upwardly mobile, their changes of employment and domicile rendered in an exuberantly realist fashion.

The urban scene in *Rabbit, Run* gives way to suburbia in *Rabbit Redux*; this change as well as new places of residence in *Rabbit Is Rich* and *Rabbit At*

Rest are studied as indications of the gentrification of Brewer and the Angstrom family. As has been said, there is a pronounced difference between the protagonist/focalizer's mentality and personal culture and that of the narrator, a sophisticated and articulate observer. Rabbit's social rise shown from this double perspective accentuates the rift between his responsible and conservative civic persona on the one hand and his transgressive sexuality on the other. Against this background, suburban identity, with its familial commitments and self-limitation, is tantamount to a maturity that Rabbit is never fully able to attain, even in *Rabbit at Rest* where imminent death fails to effect full conversion to the middle class code.

The changes in Brewer and, generally, the dynamics of gentrification, are as much in focus as Harry Angstrom. This perspective can be seen even in *Rabbit Remembered*, a *novella* in which it is Janice in her capacity as realtor who notes the city's red brick facades, excessive signage and overhead electric wires[13] as well as a transition in her (and her deceased husband's) lifetime of some residential districts from the industrial repetitiveness and drab colours when the houses were owned by working class German Americans to its current state, the houses painted in more festive colours, now that the residents come from more varied backgrounds.[14] In contrast to Cheever, whose depiction of the suburb is for the most part sympathetic, Updike's tetralogy is plotted around a character (Harry Angstrom) and a setting (suburbia) whose claims on the reader's sensibilities are more complex. By differentiating between the protagonist's and the narrator's angles of vision a nuanced, and thus realistically imagined picture is arrived at. Rabbit's quest for maturity defined in suburban terms is a selective project in which the allure of respectability and "snugness", the way the term is used in *Rabbit Is Rich*, is balanced against the ambivalence of consumerism and generally constrictive middle class mentality.

Cheever's emphasis on the community and its mythology as well as Updike's vision of a semi-picaresque character contending against family and vaguely comprehended social demands contrasts with Ford's portrayal of a solitary character in search of rootedness. The sense of belonging characterizing both Cheever's and Updike's fictive worlds assumes here the form of self-conscious attempts at identification with place. Frank Bascombe's experience of having lived in various parts of the USA, especially Mississippi and Michigan, renders his overtures to New Jersey tentative. In *The Sportswriter* his suburban faith counteracts the onslaught of midlife crisis, "dreaminess", family calamities (Ralph's death, divorce). Haddam's predictability and affluence soothe his mind, so does his devotion to mail

[13] J. Updike: *Licks of Love: Short Stories and a Sequel*. New York: Ballantine Books 2001, p. 206.

[14] Ibid., p. 197.

order catalogues. The therapeutic effect of the suburban code in this novel is achieved at the expense of individuality and existential profundity, "generic" life being a safeguard against dislocation and *Weltschmerz*, writing sports more in keeping with his determination "to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind" (William Wordsworth's phrase) than composing fiction (his previous occupation).

In *Independence Day* community gains in importance. As a "residential specialist", Frank becomes more aware of the social mechanisms operative in land development and realty, particularly the turnover rate resulting in pervasive transience. Consequently, communities come to be perceived as contingent, embedded in the logic of the capitalist economy. Frank's attempts to link with Haddam (Fred Hobson identifies this tendency as a carry-over from Bascombe's Southern past) and his receptivity to the ideas of civic involvement are combined with a vision of society as a field of contest where individual and corporate egoisms clash, reducing belonging to affordability. In this perspective, suburban neighbourhoods become little more than "lifestyle enclaves" where the residents are clustered exclusively on the basis of their income.

As he moves to Sea-Clift, the earnestness of Frank's civic impulse begins to dissolve. His new home is in a very small neighbourhood, its cohesion exceedingly tenuous. His view of society becomes progressively antagonistic, both his immediate neighbours the Feensters and the people encountered in various places around New Jersey are portrayed in situations of conflict. Atomized communities in *The Lay of the Land* are in a state of flux, zoning variances transform the landscape in unpredictable ways while people move frantically, upgrading their lives. A note of cynicism and despair appears, vented in political militancy. The suburb, which used to attract Frank with its promise of consolation, however provisional, has now degenerated into a stage set for the play of the market forces, where "residence" becomes a technical concept devoid of overtones of local identity or civic participation. New Jersey, and behind it all America, is thus presented primarily as a man-made environment, regulated by planning ingenuity and greed, a markedly different image from Cheever's patrician New England village or stratified yet mundane and liveable Pennsylvanian suburbia of Updike's tetralogy.

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Krzysztof Kowalczyk-Twarowski

„Ten przesmyk stanu średniego".
Literatura przedmieść Johna Cheevera, Johna Updike'a i Richarda Forda

Streszczenie

Niniejsza praca stanowi studium rozwoju literatury suburbiów w USA, od zaistnienia tego gatunku w latach czterdziestych dwudziestego wieku do początku wieku dwudziestego pierwszego. Twórczość omawianych pisarzy: Johna Cheevera, Johna Updike'a i Richarda Forda usytuowana jest na tle zmian społecznych tego okresu, szczególnie rozwoju amerykańskich miast. Ze względu na związki tej literatury z tradycją realistyczną badane są przejawy realizmu w dziełach wymienionych autorów, od mityzujących tendencji prozy Cheevera, przez „rokokowy" realizm Updike'a, do Forda postmodernistycznej wizji miejsca jako produktu kapitalistycznej gospodarki. W tym kontekście mieszczą się również refleksje na temat związków pomiędzy klasą średnią jako formacją świadomości a kulturą masową i konsumeryzmem.

Krytycznym i teoretycznoliterackim punktem odniesienia dla tych rozważań są koncepcje Lionela Trillinga i Johna Gardnera. W przypadku pierwszego z nich omawiane są: jego teoria powieści jako gatunku traktującego o stratyfikacji społecznej, jego rozumienie realizmu oscylujące pomiędzy prawdą wizji intelektualnej i prawdą wizji społecznej, a także wykładnia liberalizmu jako postawy badawczej, akcentującej synkretyzm i sceptycyzm. Jeśli chodzi o Johna Gardnera, to uwaga poświęcona jest jego koncepcji „literatury moralnej", a szczególnie konserwatywnej interpretacji kondycji literatury współczesnej. Postulując renesans potrójnego ideału Dobra, Piękna i Prawdy, próbuje on doprowadzić do integracji tego ideału z wrażliwością chrześcijańską.

Kwestią badaną w odniesieniu do trzech pisarzy wymienionych w tytule jest stosunek establishmentu intelektualnego, a szczególnie krytyki literackiej, do suburbiów. Tu ujawnia się pewne napięcie pomiędzy krytyką tej formy urbanistycznej jako wyjaławiającej duchowo i prowadzącej do filistynizmu połączonego z tendencją do nadmiernego konserwatyzmu z jednej strony, z drugiej zaś — faktem, iż większość Amerykanów, również elity artystyczne i naukowe, wychowała się i żyje na terenach podmiejskich. W odniesieniu do tej ambiwalencji omawiany jest stosunek Cheevera, Updike'a i Forda do suburbiów jako takich, a także estetyka ich utworów, wizja społeczeństwa oraz psychologia postaci.

Krzysztof Kowalczyk-Twarowski

„Die Enge des Mittelstandes".
Die Vorstadtliteratur von John Cheever, John Updike und Richard Ford

Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Arbeit ist eine Studie über die Entwicklung der Literatur von Suburbien in den USA von den Anfängen der literarischen Gattung in den 40er Jahren des 20.Jhs bis zum Anfang des 21.Jhs. Die Werke der hier genannten Schriftsteller: John Cheever, John Updike und Richard Ford betreffen die Gesellschaftsänderungen der damaligen Zeit und besonders die Entwicklung von nordamerikanischen Staaten. Da diese Literatur in realistischer Tradition tief eingewurzelt ist, werden hier hauptsächlich die Anzeichen des Realismus in den Werken von den genannten Autoren untersucht, von mythologisierten Tendenzen der Prosa von Cheever, über den „Rokokorealismus" von Updike bis zu postmodernistischer Vorstellung von dem Ort als einem Produkt der kapitalistischen Wirtschaft. Der Verfasser verfolgt auch die Wechselbeziehungen zwischen der Mittelklasse als einer bewussten Formation, der Massenkultur und dem Konsumerismus.

Ein kritischer und literaturtheoretischer Bezugspunkt für vorliegende Überlegungen sind die Konzeptionen von Lionel Trilling und John Gardner. Der Verfasser bespricht Trillings Theorie des Romans als einer über die gesellschaftliche Stratifikation handelnden literarischen Gattung. Lionel Trilling versteht den Realismus als etwas zwischen der Wahrheit von der intellektuellen Vorstellung und der Wahrheit der gesellschaftlicher Vorstellung. Der Liberalismus ist für ihn eine solche Forschungseinstellung, die besonders stark den Synkretismus und den Skeptizismus hervorhebt. Wenn es um John Gardner geht befasst sich der Verfasser mit seiner Idee der „moralischen Literatur" und besonders mit konservativer Beurteilung von dem Zustand der gegenwärtigen Literatur. Die Erneuerung des dreifachen Ideals von Gut, Schönheit und Wahrheit fordernd, versucht er das Ideal der christlichen Empfindlichkeit anzupassen.

Die drei oben genannten Schriftsteller werden auch hinsichtlich der Einstellung von dem intellektuellen Establishment und den Literaturkritikern zu Suburbien untersucht. Es wird hier eine gewisse Anspannung beobachtet zwischen der an den Suburbien geübten Kritik, dass diese Stadtplanungsform geistig auslaugt und zum übermäßigen Konservatismus führt, und der Tatsache, dass die meisten Amerikaner, darunter auch künstlerische und wissenschaftliche Eliten, in der Vorstadt aufgewachsen sind und dort bis heute leben. Diese Ambivalenz in Rücksicht nehmend bespricht der Verfasser die Einstellung der einzelnen Schriftsteller: Cheever, Updike und Ford zu Suburbien als solchen; er charakterisiert ihre Werke hinsichtlich deren Ästhetik, der Vorstellung von der Gesellschaft und der Psychologie der dort auftretenden Figuren.

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