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## CONFINEMENT AND ESCAPE IN JOHN CHEEVER'S *BULLET PARK*

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In attempting to define what John Cheever's *Bullet Park* is "about," many critics have interpreted the novel as an allegory about the forces of good and evil.<sup>1</sup> For several reasons, however, no single unified reading of *Bullet Park* from this allegorical perspective has emerged. First, Cheever's main characters—Paul Hammer, Eliot Nailles, and Eliot's son, Tony—do not function as unqualified figures of good and evil; the latter two, especially, display both admirable and unadmirable traits. Second, the seemingly disjointed structure of the book resists an allegorical reading, as does the frequent operation of chance throughout the plot. Third, Cheever's treatment of his setting, like that of his characters, is also highly ambivalent; as its title suggests, *Bullet Park* carries both good and bad news about the suburbs. In short, these qualities make it difficult to read *Bullet Park* as an allegory about the forces of good and evil, for they circumvent one of the typical hallmarks of allegory: namely, a consistent correspondence between the literal and the abstract.

This note offers an alternative reading of *Bullet Park*, based on the premise that the novel is not primarily an allegory about good and evil but, instead, a dramatization of the problems associated with solipsism, confinement, and escape. In particular, this analysis will demonstrate that Hammer, Nailles, and Tony are initially confined by their individual brands of solipsism and that they manage to escape from this confinement with various degrees of success as the novel progresses. In addition to providing insight into the major characters, the perspective of confinement and escape also clarifies Cheever's ambivalent treatment of the suburban setting and suggests thematic similarities between *Bullet Park* and other of Cheever's works. Support for this view comes not only from the text itself but also from a 1977 interview in which Cheever discussed his use of suburbia as a metaphor:

All my work deals with confinement in one shape or another, and the struggle toward freedom. Do I mean freedom? Only as a metaphor for...a sense of boundlessness, the possibility of rejoicing. I've used three symbols for confinement in my books [including] the world of affluent suburbia....<sup>2</sup>

As the narrator suggests early on in *Bullet Park*, the setting “seems in some way to be at the heart of the matter.”<sup>3</sup> Specifically, each character’s response to the suburban setting provides an index to the degree and nature of his self-confinement.

Much of Paul Hammer’s story presents the case history of a spiritual disease: his “cafard,” “a form of despair,” “the classical *bête noire*,” whose effects he can ease only by living in yellow rooms (p. 174). Despite the twisted complexity of his psychosis, Hammer pursues his quest for the perfect yellow room with a remarkably singleminded consistency. Hammer’s move to Bullet Park and his subsequent decision to kill Tony Nailles seem, at first, largely unmotivated and determined by chance, but there is a method to his madness that becomes clearer when one recalls a few other solipsistic characters from Cheever’s short fiction. Like Neddy Merrill (“The Swimmer”), Charlie Mallory (“The Geometry of Love”), Blake (“The Five-Forty-Eight”), and Lawton (“The Sorrows of Gin”), Hammer ultimately remains imprisoned by his attempts to impose his narrow vision on himself and on others. His fatal flaw lies not so much in the destructiveness of his vision as in his solipsism: he misinterprets chance as fate and pursues it like a monomaniac. Recalling Hawthorne, Cheever creates in Hammer a man who, like Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter*, embodies a deadly combination of rationalism and spiritual myopia. Ironically, although the major symptom of Hammer’s malaise is its uncontrollability, he remains confined by his fanatical need for order and control and his desire to “awaken the world” (p. 245). Only superficially is Hammer a prince of anarchy and evil. In reality, he is too weighted down by his own spiritual illness to act upon and release those destructive forces.

Tony Nailles provides an interesting complement to Hammer. If his would-be assassin is trapped by cynicism, Tony is trapped, at least initially, by a different form of solipsism: namely, his extreme idealism. By retreating to his bed for 22 days straight, Tony attempts to escape from suburbia simply by refusing to live in the world. But his unnamed illness can be cured neither by this denial of reality nor by the empiricism embodied in the three doctors who come, like secular magi, to his bedside. Tony is redeemed only by the “place cheers” and “love cheers” of his mentor, the Swami Rutuola, which enable him to return to the physical world and at the same time to transcend it through his imagination. When one recalls protagonists such as Moses Wapshot (“The Death of Justina”) and Johnny Hake (“The Housebreaker of Shady Hill”), it becomes clear that Cheever’s most successful characters are those who, like the Swami and his disciple Tony, manage to integrate the spiritual and the mundane. The Swami Rutuola’s unassuming way of life especially reflects this balance, as does his

physical appearance: "The face was slender and one of the eyes was injured and cast....This eye, immovable, was raised to heaven in a permanent attitude of religious hysteria. The other eye was lively, bright and communicative" (p. 130). Even his name suggests the rituals by which he invokes both the worldly and the mystical.

Eliot Nailles's response to suburbia provides more subtle clues to his shortcomings. His fairly straightforward acceptance of suburban life (p. 66) is deceptively appealing because it is comfortably grounded in normality. His judgment, however, limited as it is to observable facts, falls short of being a coherent vision. As he himself admits, he's just "never understood," just "doesn't get," the less obvious nuances beneath the surface of suburban life. If Hammer suggests a character like Chillingworth, Eliot suggests a character like Dimmesdale, one whose solipsism takes the form of a refusal to see his own and others' guilt.

It is this denial of evil which confines Eliot Nailles and which he must overcome. And, significantly, this need is stated in terms of a spiritual landscape:

Nailles thought of pain and suffering as a principality, lying somewhere beyond the legitimate borders of western Europe. The government would be feudal and the country mountainous but it would never lie on his itinerary and would be unknown to his travel agent. (p. 50)

The connection between Nailles's environment and his lack of awareness of evil is also suggested in the following passage:

Nailles felt, like some child on a hill, that purpose and order underlay the roofs, trees, river and streets that composed the landscape. There was some obvious purpose in his loving Nellie and the light of morning but what was the purpose, the message, the lesson to be learned from his stricken son? (p. 60)

As these passages indicate, Nailles is confined by his nostalgic view of life, which delimits both his emotions and his expression of them.

Nailles's inability to find a middle ground between losing control of his emotions and suppressing them is illustrated by several exchanges between him and others. At several points he lashes out violently: he throws his family's television set out on the sidewalk (pp. 75-76); has an "extremely shabby scene" with his wife, provoked by another man's suspicions about his own spouse (p. 112); and nearly cracks Tony's skull with a golf club when the boy speaks disparagingly about his father's job (p. 118). Yet, Nailles curtails his emotions during equally crucial situations when they would be an asset. Picking

up Tony from the police station after an incident at school, "his first impulse was to embrace the young man but he restrained himself" (p. 87). Likewise, he says nothing when Hammer suggests that Nailles kill his beloved, aging dog. Most seriously, while Nailles does love his family immensely, that love expresses itself as statically as his "picture postcard" vision of pain, "like some limitless discharge of a clear amber fluid that would surround them, like the contents of an aspic" (p. 25). Cheever's central message concerns the need for this love to be tested:

Conscientious men live like citizens of some rainy border country, familiar with a dozen national anthems, their passports fat with visas, but they will be incapable of love and allegiance until they break the law. (p. 235)

*Bullet Park's* final line adds a disturbing dimension to Eliot Nailles's story: "Tony went back to school on Monday and Nailles—drugged—went off to work and everything was wonderful, wonderful, wonderful as it had been" (p. 245).<sup>4</sup> Were it not for this jarring note, *Bullet Park* might leave the reader with a sense of affirmation as simple and strong as Cheever's description of the novel:

I kept thinking of William Tell: that this was a man who loved his son and was able to protect him or, as a matter of fact, save him. And I wanted to describe a love that could be implemented, that existed in other than dramatic terms.<sup>5</sup>

Nailles's continued addiction to tranquilizers suggests, however, that he does not completely break free of his confinement. In this sense, one is reminded of characters like Francis Weed ("The Country Husband") and the narrator of "A Vision of the World," characters who overcome dehumanizing elements in the suburban environment but who still remain dependent on relatively fragile protective devices.

But one must grant Nailles this: when he rescues Tony, he does translate his idealism into an act of love and will. He breaks through the "clear amber fluid" and, along with Tony, is reborn into the world of the rain that drenches them as they leave Christ's Church. If Nailles triumphs, then it is not because he sustains his illusions; it is because he sets them aside long enough to demonstrate his love. In light of the violent yet fragile world that Cheever's suburbanites occupy, such an achievement is no minor one. As Cheever puts it, the essence of *Bullet Park* "is simply Nailles's love for Tony. Anything else is all in the nature of a variation."<sup>6</sup>

To summarize, a reading of *Bullet Park* from the perspective of Cheever's concern with solipsism, confinement, and escape clarifies several points about the novel's setting, structure, and theme. Suburbia is an eminently appropriate setting for a writer who wants to evoke an environment endowed with both desirable and undesirable qualities. Like men looking through different sides of the same prism, Hammer, Tony, and Eliot all pursue self-deceptive illusions in their attempts to escape certain inescapable features of their complex suburban world: Hammer by ignoring its positive qualities, Tony by withdrawing from it, and Eliot by ignoring its flaws. This multiplicity is reinforced by the novel's structure: the work is not "broken-backed," as Benjamin DeMott argues, but is instead fragmented according to the angle of vision, or side of the prism, that the narrator is showing us.<sup>7</sup> In all three characters, Cheever dramatizes the inevitable need to temper idealism—a potential form of escape—with realism, the inherent confinement of living in the world. As in much of his other fiction, he suggests that man's capacity to sustain a personal vision is at once his most dangerous and his most promising quality, a source of potential confinement or liberation, depending on the nature of that vision and the use to which it is put.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For representative critical views, see Eugene Chesnick, "The Domesticated Stroke of John Cheever," *NEQ* 44 (1971), 531-552; Samuel Coale, *John Cheever* (New York, 1977); Peter Collier, "Fable for Our Time," *Progressive*, July 1979, pp. 33-34; John Gardner, "Witchcraft in *Bullet Park*," *New York Times Book Review*, 24 Oct. 1971, pp. 2, 24; and Lynne Waldeland, *John Cheever* (Boston, 1979).

<sup>2</sup>John Firth, "Talking with John Cheever," *Saturday Review*, 2 April 1977, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup>*Bullet Park* (New York, 1969), p. 3. Subsequent quotations are cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>4</sup>Hardly any commentator on *Bullet Park* has failed to point out the irony in this sentence. One reviewer also aligns it with King Lear's litany of "nevers" ("The Portable Abyss," *Time*, 25 April 1969, p. 109).

<sup>5</sup>Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "Talk with John Cheever," *New York Times Book Review*, 27 April 1969, p. 44.

<sup>6</sup>Lehmann-Haupt, p. 44.

**BULLET PARK**

<sup>7</sup>DeMott, "A Grand Gatherum of Some Late Twentieth Century Weirdos," *New York Times Book Review*, 27 April 1969, pp. 40-41.