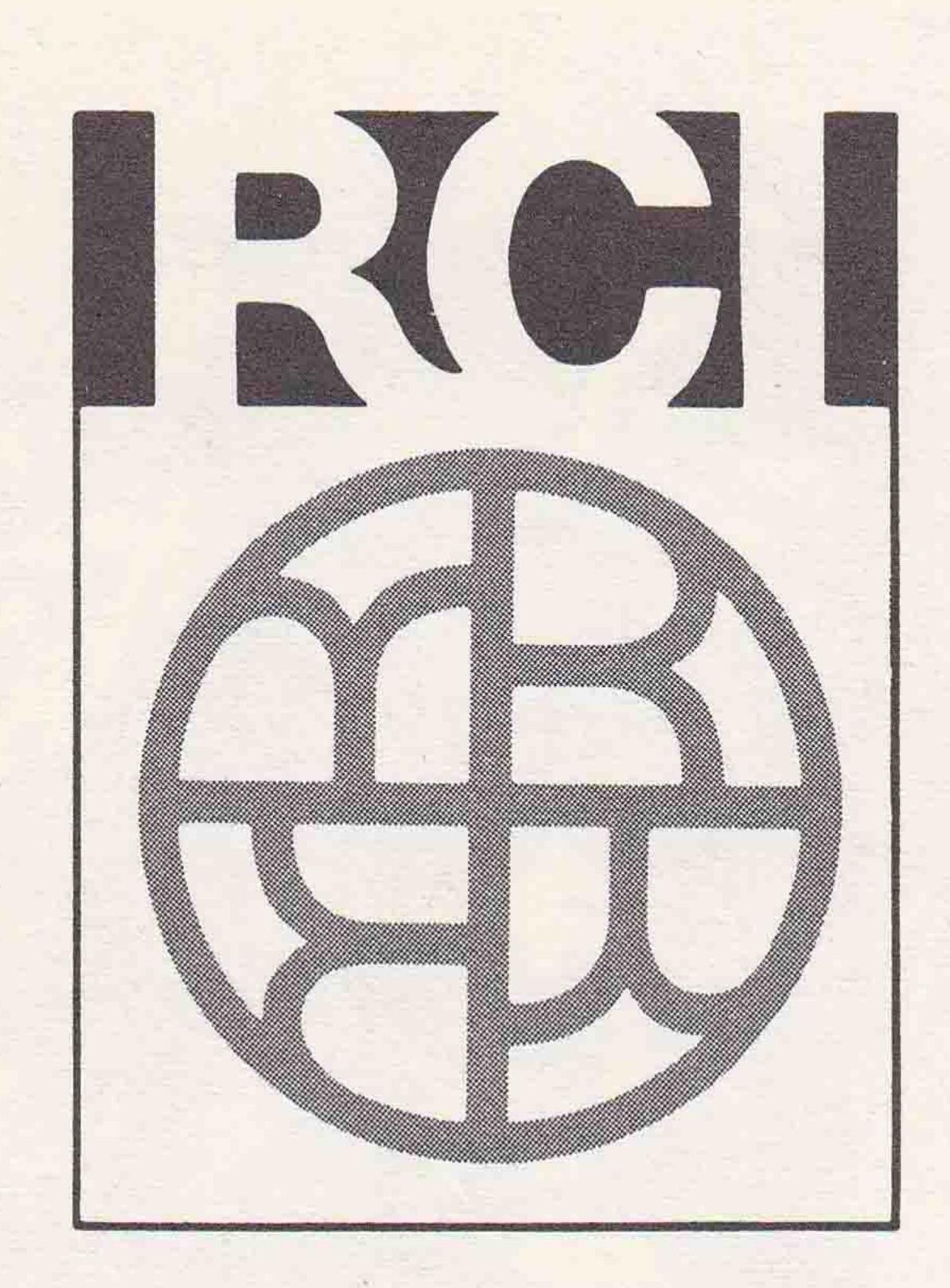
## The Literary Season of Venom and Muddle in America



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One of the charms of John Cheever's early work lies in the humane breadth of its sympathies. In a novel like *The Wapshot Chronicle*, or a story like "A Vision of the World," Cheever communicates a good-humored affection for the human comedy that lifts his writing above the narrow passions and animosities of so much fiction in the twentieth century. Cheever's is a minor talent, but

ragut, scion of an old Yankee family that has run down to poverty and craziness, loves and hates his father: Farragut knows that his father sought to have him done away with by an abortionist. Because of this and other Oedipal wounds, as well as exposure to civilization and certain of its discontents (he has had a bad time in "a war," found the bonds of marriage a bit too tight, learned that his

to escape. He conceals himself in the sack meant for the corpse of a friend, and is carried out. From this womb/tomb, he emerges, symbolically cutting himself free, a new man. The book ends on a note of hope.

As one makes one's way into Falconer, one's first impression is that even these lurid happenings and worn-out Freudian

## Those Genial Murderes

by Dain A. Trafton

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at his best he reflects something of the great English comic tradition stretching from Chaucer to Shakespeare to Fielding to Thackeray and Trollope. Cheever's latest novel, Falconer, however, reveals that his good humor and humane sympathy have metamorphosed of late into something much less attractive. Affection was tempered by intelligent judgment in Cheever's early work, as in the work of Fielding or Trollope. Falconer evades judgment; it asks us to respond to its characters not with true sympathy but with an embrace of mindless acceptance. The novel expresses the revulsion against applying firm moral and intellectual standards that is one of the most dangerous characteristics of our time.

To use a term of which Cheever seems fond, *Falconer* can be described as unmistakably "post-Freudian." Zeke Far-

Dr. Trafton, currently immersed in the Italian Renaissance, views contemporary cant with benevolence.

wife is a Lesbian, and seen through the pretenses of the professors at the university where he teaches), Farragut becomes a heroin addict. Revenge on his father and the world comes when he attacks his brother Eben, who represents the traditions of family and society: during a family quarrel Farragut strikes Eben with a fire iron; Eben falls against the fireplace and dies. Whether Eben's death results directly from Farragut's blow or from hitting the fireplace remains unclear. Nevertheless Farragut's complicity, at least in some degree, cannot be denied. Convicted of murder, he ends up in Falconer Prison, where he speedily frees himself from the past: he gets rid of his drug habit, turns to homosexuality, and broadens himself by living among the downtrodden in a brutal prison rather than among blue bloods and intellectuals on Cape Cod and in Venice. Finally, after having rather perfunctorily reviewed in memory his act of violence against his brother, Farragut deems himself worthy

patterns have been endowed with a kind of charm by Cheever's power of sympathy and good humor. What might have been an overheated, tendentious tract—an indictment of war, a celebration of drugs, an exposé of prison brutality, a gay liberation manifesto—is remarkably devoid of animosity. A detached, essentially comic, tone prevails throughout. The charm of this tone, however, hides something rotten; it provides a seductive wrapping for a fruit that has gone bad. Falconer deals with some instances of real evil, with stupidity, cruelty, and violence that has serious, even tragic, consequences, but the novel's detached tone effectively softens our judgment, encourages us to view with tolerance what we should condemn. Thus, the heartless egoism and perversity of Farragut's wife is presented unemotionally as just another aspect of human behavior; she is not to be blamed. Similarly, prison guards can be sadistic, sometimes terrifyingly so, but we are not to think of them as bad fellows.

Nothing in the book, in fact, invites a strong judgment, for *Falconer's* tone does not reflect the humane intelligence of the great English tradition, but rather derives from a fundamental antagonism to all judgments about good and evil. Cheever is not telling us that we must love men in spite of their sins; his message is that we must not condemn them because there is not real guilt. In the "post-Freudian" world of *Falconer*, good and evil, sin and guilt, have disappeared. Only neuroses and "hang-ups" remain, and the aim of life is simply to rid oneself of these as expeditiously as possible.

Nowhere is the insidiousness of this message and the charm that cloaks it more apparent than in Cheever's handling of Farragut's relations with his brother. Farragut believes that Eben has tried

to kill him twice—once by enticing him to swim in a shark-infested rip tide, and once by pushing him out a window—but the novel portrays these events ambiguously, and Farragut's suspicions may result from his own neuroses. In any case, he makes no effort to learn the truth. On the contrary, he refrains from even thinking about the incidents, and treats his brother as if nothing had happened. In spite of this, and in spite of the fact that he has no other reason for attacking his brother except for the anger that he feels and what Eben stands for, Farragut never evinces any guilt or regret for what he has done. Superficially, it is true, Farragut goes through a great deal before he makes his escape from prison, but the sum of his sufferings never amounts to a convincing process of psych-

ological regeneration. Farragut's rebirth is too easy; he never goes through a long and painful confrontation with his own evil, but rather slips into a new self as slickly as an accomplished writer like Cheever turns a phrase.

Only the most callous or the most naive of readers will be able to participate in the mindless triumph sounded in the book's last sentences, as Cheever describes Farragut walking away from his successful escape: "He held his head high, his back straight, and walked along nicely. Rejoice, he thought, rejoice." How can we rejoice at the escape of a man who has killed his brother and never regretted it? How can we rejoice when one of our talented writers surrenders to "post-Freudian" cant?