

Susan Cheever

HOME BEFORE DARK

Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984. Pp. 243

Reviewed by Frank R. Cunningham

Two months before his death from cancer in June, 1982, John Cheever was awarded the National Medal for Literature. Composing his brief acceptance speech, he wrote in his journal, "What I am going to write is the last of what I have to say. I will say that literature is the only consciousness we possess . . . Literature has been the salvation of the damned, literature has inspired and guided lovers, routed despair and can perhaps . . . save the world" (p. 234). Susan Cheever's moving and well-written memoir of her father, *Home Before Dark*, will substantially benefit Cheever scholars, aside from the biographical revelations, through its relation of the author's sometimes harrowing family backgrounds to his frequent themes of personal loneliness and spiritual transcendence; its recounting of the successive stages in Cheever's development as a writer of fiction; and its vivid sketches of the New York, the *New Yorker*, and the Yaddo of Cheever's time.

Susan Cheever is particularly helpful in those sections of her memoir where her close knowledge of both her father and of his unpublished journals lends resonance to those of Cheever's fictions, like *Falconer*, "The Swimmer," "Angel of the Bridge," "O Youth and Beauty," and "Goodbye, My Brother," in which the poignant sense of abandonment and aloneness (and, at times, of spiritual transfiguration) that has fascinated critics is especially prevalent. For example, Neddy Merrill's utter desolation at the memorable conclusion of "The Swimmer" as he stood in front of what he imagined was his house after his odyssey across suburban swimming pools, "shouted, pounded on the door . . . and then, looking in at the windows, saw that the place was empty," is amplified by Susan Cheever's account of her father's complex sense of alienation from both his own father and his elder brother, and of the ill fortunes of that generation of the Cheever family. Her accounts of the historical Ezekiel Cheever and the fabulous exploits of some of the seventeenth-century Cheevers shed much light upon the mythic levels in such Cheever fictions as *The Wapshot Chronicle* and *Bullet Park*. Cheever's famed lyrical style in these works is linked by his daughter (herself a novelist) to his lifelong admiration of the "resonance of Bishop Thomas Cranmer's services in the old Book of Common Prayer," which she thinks "made a permanent impression on my father's style and on his view of the world" (p. 166). Susan Cheever is particularly enlightening on the last major novel, *Falconer*, and the contribution to her father's themes of power in human affairs of his teaching at Sing Sing Prison in the early 1970s, as revealed in this journal entry: "These bars are an incarnation . . . of our world's inability to produce a workable concept of justice and penance. Here are the bars, clangorous, needing paint, the facts of our sense of good and evil, arbitrary, vestigial, and cruel" (p. 171). Through her circumspect interweaving of the biographical background and major themes in the works, Ms. Cheever illuminates her father's sense of encroaching moral darkness in contemporary America, but that there still may be a grace period in the "ten minutes before dark" that loom before our *Bullet Parks*.

Aside from the biographical references to Cheever's inspiring fight for physical and spiritual renewal during his late illnesses (pp. 195-201), perhaps the most interesting biographical sections relating to Cheever's actual writing practice are those concerning his early apprentice days in New York in the 1930s, and the help afforded by Malcolm Cowley, Harold Ross, and e. e. cummings. Among previously unpublished photographs, especially valuable are Walker Evans's picture of Cheever's shabby rented room at 633 Hudson Street where the aspiring writer spent his first months in New York City, and a summer 1934 photo of Cheever at Yaddo, with such future luminaries as James T. Farrell and Muriel Rukeyser. We learn much of Cheever's unusually long and beneficial association with Mrs. Elizabeth Ames and Yaddo, where he composed many of the greatest stories, and four of the five novels. Ms. Cheever is particularly impressed with the manner in which her father repaid that debt, providing numerous opportunities for younger writers whose work he admired. Unusual among American writers in feeling little jealousy or rivalry with his colleagues in fiction, Cheever would often say, "Fiction is not a competitive sport" (p. 29).

There are amusing anecdotes of Cheever's gradual disenchantment with *New Yorker* fictional and fiscal policies in the 1960s, and of his early literary parties in New York during

the '30s; the general strength of the biography could have been enhanced by greater attention to the Italian stories and a more subtle understanding of Cheever's connection between appearances and moral realities. But Ms. Cheever's treatment of her father's artistic life is both respectful and illuminating. It deepens our understanding of a writer whose central artistic vision was "to celebrate a world that lies spread out around us like a bewildering and stupendous dream."

James Nagel, Ed.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY: THE WRITER IN CONTEXT

Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984. Pp. xvii + 246. \$27.50

Reviewed by Raymond S. Nelson

Ernest Hemingway: The Writer in Context is "a commemorative record of three days of informed and engaging conversation about Ernest Hemingway "which took place at Northeastern University in May of 1982" (p.x). The Hemingway Society and the John F. Kennedy Library cooperated with the University to make it a memorable event.

The book is divided into four parts, Personal Comments and Reminiscences, The Craft of Composition, Interpretations Biographical and Critical, and Relationships with Other Writers. The last two sections are about twice as long as the first two.

The first section contains reminiscences from Charles Scribner, Jr., about Hemingway's long association with Scribner's Publishing Company. Scribner praises Hemingway's loyalty to the company, particularly to his father and grandfather and, of course, Max Perkins. Patrick Hemingway shared his memories of sailing on the "Pilar" during the early days of World War II, and comments on how his father transmuted such materials to the fiction of *Islands in the Stream*. Some things—like the shark attack and the son catching a large fish—never happened, he says. They are purely fictional, whereas other things did happen essentially as told. And Tom Stoppard, British playwright, shares some of his reasons for liking Hemingway's writings so much. His central point is that Hemingway uses "The associative power of words rather than their 'meaning'" (p. 22) to gain his effects, effects that are achieved through the emotional impact of the words.

The second section (The Craft of Composition) begins with Robert Lewis's "The Making of *Death in the Afternoon*." Lewis summarizes the history of *Death in the Afternoon* from Hemingway's earliest thoughts about such a book through the sale at auction of the manuscript in 1958 to the University of Texas. Lewis concludes that *Death* is "layered, and really about him [Hemingway], his love affair with Spain and all that passed between them" (p. 39). Paul Smith seeks in "The Tenth Indian and the Thing Left Out" to thread two ideas together: (1) critical problems caused by the fact that there are three versions of the short story, "Ten Indians," and (2) the "theory of omission" which Hemingway offered as his basic approach to composition. Smith closes his essay with an appendix in which he reproduces the variant endings of the story.

The third section (Interpretations Biographical and Critical) begins with Max Westbrook's "Grace under Pressure: Hemingway and the Summer of 1920." He concludes on the basis of evidence in letters now available that Ernest Hemingway was evicted from the family cottage not so much as a result of his mother's caprice and selfishness (as Hemingway long told the tale) as the culmination of years of growing resentments. Westbrook further shows that Clarence Hemingway was the main figure in the decision to deny Walloon Lake Cottage to the son. Westbrook clears Grace Hall Hemingway of some misconceptions, but also clarifies some of the domestic forces which bred such contempt for middle-class pretensions in the mind of Hemingway. Millicent Bell's essay, "A Farewell to Arms: Pseudoautobiography and Personal Metaphor" is perhaps the least satisfactory in the collection. It is least clear in its purpose, and puzzling in many of its statements, as for example, "A Farewell to Arms . . . is autobiographical in a metaphoric way" (p. 122). Carol H. Smith in "Women and the Loss of