Cheever's New Existential Man in *Falconer*

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Falconer, John Cheever's absorbing novel depicting the incarceration and the dramatic escape of its protagonist Ezekiel Farragut from Falconer prison, has aroused a considerable amount of critical attention and controversy ever since its publication in 1977. I would like to join that forum and propose an argument advancing a post-Camusian existential reading of the book.

"Farragut (fratricide, zip to ten, #734-508-32)," writes Cheever, "had been brought to this old iron place [Falconer] on a late summer's day. He wore no leg irons but was manacled to nine other men, four of them black and all of them younger than he."[1] Thus begin the corrosive yet ultimately redeeming adventures and misadventures of Cheever's heroin-addicted, identity-muddled, memory-dissociated protagonist--a college professor, forty-eight years of age, married, and the father of a schoolboy son--who was sentenced to prison for the murder of his brother Eben. During an argument, Cheever recounts, Eben had screamed at Zeke, "'[Father] wanted you to be killed. Mother told me. He had an abortionist came out to the house. Your own father wanted you to be killed.' Then," says Cheever, "Farragut struck his brother with a fire iron. The widow testified that Farragut had struck his brother eighteen to twenty times, but she was a liar, and Farragut thought the doctor who corroborated this lie contemptible" (198). In prison Farragut is assigned to cellblock F, where his methadone and placebo cure, his relationships with Tiny and Walton, the guards, and with the other prisoners there--namely, Ransome, Stone, Chicken Number Two, and Cuckold--and near where his sexual relationship with his best friend Jody all eventually, but not easily, lead him out of the lower depths of his dissociation and fragile identity to a sufficient degree of association and self-confidence to make his break, just as his lover and mentor Jody had done some months before him.

In my view, Farragut's escape from Falconer in the burial sack of his-just deceased friend Chicken Number Two, his subsequent blood-letting emergence from that sack after it has been taken outside the walls of Falconer, and his bumbling yet ever-improving progress immediately thereafter are Cheever's metaphor for Farragut's first unsteady yet spirited steps out of his long recoil from the absurd into a purgatorial testing ground, from which he soon launches himself into existential freedom. On that premise, then, I would argue that *Falconer* can be read as a pivotal work in the evolution of the existential person in modern literature, for its perspective on the human dilemma (and also the human potential) both derives from and takes issue with the assumptions and hypotheses advanced by Albert Camus in his classic essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and the novels he wrote as correlatives to it. In Cheever's Farragut we see a late-century, interestingly modified version of the Sisyphean hero--namely, a protagonist who fits the Camusian mold up to the

[1] John Cheever, *Falconer* (New York: Knopf, 1977) 4; all subsequent references are to this edition.

point of his having advanced from the brain-dead nonhero trapped in the absurd to the rebel and antihero awakened to and in recoil from the absurd, but who breaks out of that mold as he progresses from antihero to a considerably different kind of existential hero. In violation of the absolute integrity of Self that is the trademark of Camus's prototype, Cheever allows his existential initiate to depend on Other--indeed to find Other indispensable--in his recovery from an immobilizing recoil from the absurd. He also gives Farragut something practical to complement his Camusian "courage." He gives him "cunning," a special capacity which has the effect of reducing his Sisyphean vulnerability and increasing his potentiality for coming to terms with the absurd.

Victim that he has been for his entire life, Farragut is less the aggressive rebel relentlessly pushing the rock of absurdity, as he sets out to turn his life around, and more the seemingly passive yet cunning and opportunistic interceptor of benefits and coincidences that come his way. Farragut, in short, is an updated version of his Camusian prototype, one whose character is in key with a late-century, contemporary view of the existential hero. By drawing from Other rather than away from it, Farragut compromises some of the principles of his mid-century prototype and either makes things work to his advantage or allows them to do so as he moves ever closer to launching himself onto the rain-washed street of existential vitality in the last scene of the novel. His final existential awakening--his triumphant annunciation of Self--then, is viewed by Cheever as the direct result of a positive and complex involvement with Other. My point is that Farragut's joyful discovery of the Self--"Rejoice, he thought, rejoice" (211)--could never have been achieved without his interaction with the absurd, that in Falconer prison Farragut displays a deference to the absurd that ultimately has the effect of equipping him to take sovereignty over it and to be free of its lies, illusions, and perversities forever. As Cheever himself said in an interview with John Firth, "All my work deals with confinement in one shape or another, and the struggle toward freedom. Do I mean freedom? Only as a metaphor . . . a sense of boundlessness, the possibility of rejoicing!"[2]

Distant relatives though Sisyphus and Farragut may be, two strains of their kinship can be readily identified. Camus and Cheever both view their protagonists as "victims" and the universe as "absurd." They tend to agree, then, that a man's declaration of independence from the meaningless world in which he finds himself and his adoption of the Self as his only authentic source of identity constitute the only self-respecting way for him to live his life. As Camus's Sisyphus himself states it, "Thus I draw from the absurd three consequences, which are my revolt, my freedom, and my passion."[3] Built into that concept is a contemptuous renunciation of conventions and institutions and their preposterous claims to being the repository of "essence." There is no preexisting essence. There is only the essence one generates from his own existence. In Cheever's thought-provoking symbolism throughout *Falconer* these conventions and institutions are metaphorized as birds of prey--falcons, which are trained by the falconers of society to victimize human beings rather than to order and enrich their lives.

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[2] John Firth, "Talking with John Cheever," *Saturday Review* 2 April 1977: 22.

[3] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Knopf, 1969) 64; subsequent references are to this edition.

In effect, then, Farragut has been the victim of falconers long before he is taken to the prison of that name--indeed all the way back almost to his biological beginning. His father, we are told, had sought to have his birth aborted. That intention--its failure notwithstanding--is a signal to what is to follow. From that time on, Farragut is apparently somehow destined to be the victim of falconers. They make up the story of his life. His family are falconers: a maniacal and suicidal father, a zany mother, and a fratricidal brother--all of whom, he says, "dealt in contraband" otherwise known as "unlicensed spiritual, intellectual and erotic stimulants" (34). Matrimony, another institution, fails him also, married as he is to the bitchy and vain Marcia who, as a bisexual, is a part-time wife at best. Then there is the institution of professional ethics; we see it holding out a symbolic, perverse hand when Farragut's drug-addicted department chairman at the university invites him to shoot up with him before each of them goes off the teach his class. One could go on and on. The point is that Farragut, like Camus's Sisyphus, is confronted with the absurd, and most of his life is spent in a retreat and zombielike removal from it because he has no inkling of the positive but latent force of existential energy he possesses. He has no inkling of this, that is, until Jody comes into his life at the prison.

And this brings me to the main point of my argument. Cheever's existential man of the last quarter of the century, unlike Camus's prototype of midcentury, does not learn to cope independently by coping independently. He does not teach himself--after a contemptuous repudiation of his absurd world--what an authentic existential selfhood is. Cheever complicates, and in a way confounds, the formula when he sets his middle-aged initiate on course toward an existential awakening by allowing Other rather than Self to show him the way. Farragut was not the kind of man, his high levels of intelligence and imagination notwithstanding, who could find his own way onto the high road of existentialism, and I seriously doubt that Cheever thought that anyone could. As stated above, to turn to Other for help, however, was, in the earlier mainstream of existential hypothesizing, of course a betrayal of the Self, a capitulation to the absurd, and therefore a serious violation of one's existential integrity. But Cheever seems to be presenting his novel from a less doctrinaire perspective of the absurd and the possible existential answer to it that has been evolving in a post-Camusian world. He invests his Sisyphean rock-pusher with a view to the practical and to a willingness to make compromises. He reasons that independent rock-pushing is probably the best kind there is in theory, but that no man can be expected to live by a rock-pushing principle that he does not understand; nor will that man understand it until he has had some briefing on its complexities from a seasoned mentor or two.

Farragut gets separate briefings from his friend Jody in the prison and from the nameless fellow traveler at the bus stop outside the prison in the last scene of the novel. As two indispensable practical aids from Other, they are not however all that Farragut needs from Other before he is ready to take that existential walk alone in the rain. He also needs the help of a miracle. In Camus's conceptualized absurd world there are no miracles, of course. But in Cheever's unphilosophized absurd world just about anything can happen, including miracles. To be specific, the death of Chicken Number Two is not just an everyday kind of death. It is an existential "Good Friday" kind of death, for it miraculously opens the way for Farragut's own psychological death, purgation, and re-

birth. I am referring again to the miraculous presence of Chicken Number Two's burial sack, which, combined with Farragut's "cunning and courage," provides him with what turns out to be his rite of passage from a lifelong entrapment in falconry to a new life in existential freedom--put in other words, from the absurdity of Other to the authenticity of his essence-producing Self. Farragut's worthiness of a miracle is concisely expressed by Theo D'haen, who says, "He concerns himself with the fate of a fellow prisoner and eases the older man's dying hour. By this act of grace Farragut regains contact with the deepest wellsprings of his own humanity. When the old man's body is being removed for burial, Farragut takes his place and . . . is reborn into a new and brighter life." [4]

But meanwhile the whole process is interestingly and ironically confounded by the glaring fact that Farragut, as I have just pointed out, has had to draw from Other in order to get sprung from Other. This assessment of Farragut's peculiarly evolving character is evidenced first in the manner in which he learned self-love. In Camus's terms, self-love is an absolute requirement for the achieving of an authentic existential selfhood.[5] But it is something Farragut could never either have intuited or taught to himself; he needed Jody to teach him. Existential self-love, it should be understood, is more a matter of self-possession than of narcissism. But for someone whose self-image is as fragile as Farragut's, it might be necessary to put him through a phase of narcissism before he can be expected to reach the final goal of self-possession.[6] With a long history of low self-esteem, Farragut at age forty-eight begins the journey to his existential awakening in a vacuum as it were and needs to learn how to be aggressive and seize love from another. He needs this in order to get a reasonably stable self-image established, and this is primarily what Jody's presence in his life at the prison accomplishes for him. He gives Farragut sufficient self-esteem to forge ahead to an authentic existential kind of self-love. That final goal is what Robert G. Collins expresses as a kind of self-actualizing self-love "in which the spirit is fulfilled in unison with the other, but [from which] it can separate afterward" and then proceed on its own independent way. [7]

Jody's instruction begins with his attempt to teach Farragut how to smile. "I love you, Chicken, but you don't know how to smile" (93), he tells Farragut and proceeds with a discourse in which the "smile" motif symbolizes an outlook on life of high expectancy--indeed of existential intensity. But it has to be a particular kind of smile--one that registers pleasure with oneself rather than with another. But Farragut doesn't catch on. He has a vague awareness of something important and different here, but he still has to look outside himself to find it. His problem is that he loves only Jody, not Jody and himself. Describing that

[4] Theo D'haen, "John Cheever and the Development of the American Novel," *Critical Essays on John Cheever*, ed. R.G. Collins (Boston: Hall, 1982) 277.

[5] An opposite view is advanced by Robert A. Morace who views Farragut as a traditional Christian hero; see "John Cheever," *Dictionary of Literary Biography: American Novelists Since World War II*, ed. Jeffrey Helterman (Detroit: Gale, 1978) 2: 97, 99.

[6] Farragut's low self-esteem is taken for granted by most readers certainly, but I have found one critic who argues that Cheever's apparent intention to create this impression of his protagonist fails. John Romano speaks of Farragut's "own grandiose image of himself,"his"unappealing pomposity and arrogance," and Cheever's failure "to know that Farragut is a prig." See "Redemption According to Cheever," *Commentary* 63.5 (1977): 67-68.

[7] Robert G. Collins, "From Subject to Object and Back Again: Individual Identity in John Cheever's Fiction," *Twentieth Century Literature* 28.1 (1982): 10.

exclusive dependence on Other for love, Cheever says, "Farragut lay on his cot. He wanted Jody. The longing began in his speechless genitals . . . then moved up to his viscera and from there to his heart, his soul, his mind, until his entire carcass was filled with longing" (99). Indeed, a "carcass" is about all that a body can be in existential terms if its object of longing and affection is exclusively Other rather than Self in combination with Other. As their affair goes on, however, Farragut does eventually catch on, but only (as I keep insisting) with the help of Other--in this instance, Jody. The point is, he has to find out what Jody's capacity for self-love is before he can activate and celebrate the same impulse in himself. And the only way he can understand Jody's capacity for self-love is to love Jody. But the fact is, Farragut balks at the first hint he gets that his love for Jody is actually a projection of his love for himself. "If love was a chain of resemblances," he reasons, "there was, since Jody was a man, the danger that Farragut might be in love with himself" (102-03). He views it as a "danger" because he has been conditioned to believe that self-love can be tolerated only in a woman, never in a man. "He had seen self-love [in a man] only once that he could remember," he says in the same passage, and to Farragut it had been repugnant.

But Farragut's meditation on the danger of self-love suddenly shifts to a time when Jody said to him after they had made love, "'Man, you're beautiful. I mean you're practically senile and there isn't much light in here, but you look very beautiful to me,'" a compliment which Farragut calls a "whore's line," yet one to which he admits he was "helplessly susceptible" (103-04). "It seemed," Farragut goes on, "that he had always known he was beautiful and had been waiting all his life to hear this," and a little later he ends his meditation on self-love by saying,'To love oneself would be . . . a delicious pursuit. How simple to love oneself!" (104).

For Farragut, however, it is not actually all that "simple," and after his meditation he returns for a while to his dubious position on the acceptability of self-love. He does make progress later on, however, when he says at the end of their affair, "He could kiss Jody passionately, but not tenderly" (122). That parting kiss was one that seized upon life but surrendered nothing in return--no tenderness, no actual giving, just a passionate taking. But this final emotional moment with Jody is clearly of such intensity that its sense of self-fulfillment and self-affection does not last. And it is in any case a brand of self-love viewed by Cheever as simply a temporary phase through which Farragut must pass to achieve the self-possession of an authentic, existential brand of self-love. For that, he needs help from Other again--this time to purge his ambivalent consciousness of its self-doubts.

This second agent of assistance comes, as I have said, in the miracle of Chicken Number Two's death. Miracle notwithstanding, Cheever has given us a signal much earlier to suggest its ultimate occurrence. In the love scenes just discussed, Jody repeatedly calls Farragut "Chicken," "a fitting soubriquet," observes George W. Hunt, "for one who will substitute himself for Chicken Number Two."[8] The point is, Farragut's temporary entombment in, and subsequent rebirth from, his dead friend's shroud as it were launches him into a

[8] George W. Hunt, *John Cheever: The Hobgoblin Company of Love* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1983) 216.

symbolic, stumbling walk through purgatory, a journeyman's bumbling progress in which he gradually strips away the doubts he has had about self-love as he encounters a night vision of symbolic sights that pertain to spiritual cleansing and subsequent existential mobility. The principle objects to which I am attributing symbolic meanings are seen surrealistically by Farragut first in states of disrepair and then later in top working order. For example, very early in his purgatorial journey he sees a three-legged washing machine and the husk of a wrecked car in a dump yard. Much later he sees the washing machine metamorphosed into efficiently operating washers (and driers) in a laundromat and the wrecked car into a smooth-running city bus, the same bus in fact that takes Farragut to the end of his journey through purgatory and to the starting line for his walk out onto the highway of existential self-consciousness and self-possession. Included also in this bizarre progress through purgatory is the ritual of the letting of blood. Farragut bleeds from cuts on his fingers and thigh made accidentally when he was cutting himself out of his burial bag with a razor blade. It is a significant ritual because of its existential implications. The point is, it is now Farragut's own blood that redeems him and initiates him into a new life, not the blood of Other. "His foot was wet with blood," he says, "but he didn't care" (206). Instead of bleeding to death he is walking in his own blood to a new life. Existence preceded essence.

And so end the early and intermediate phases of Farragut's symbolic existential progress through purgatory. The two images that link these earlier phases with the final phase are the electric heater and the sky-blue motorcycle helmet, both of which belong to the amiable stranger at the bus stop and which Farragut, offering a hand, picks up and carries aboard the bus. The electric heater with its golden bowl shaped like the sun anticipates the high voltage of existential illumination that Farragut is soon to plug his consciousness into. The sky-blue helmet repeats the blue sky motif of freedom that recurs throughout the novel and that in this instance symbolizes both a potential cycling mobility and a cerebral crown of highly self-conscious freedom that he is soon to wear, helmeted as he will be with a faultless "cunning and courage."

But Farragut is not ready for his existential crown and his self-actualizing walk in the rain quite yet. He is still dependent on Other--in this instance, the man at the bus stop who owns the heater and the helmet. Farragut is still dependent on Other because he is still haunted by his fear of falling, an obsession he has had to deal with ever since his deranged brother pushed him out of an upstairs window several years earlier. It takes his third helpmate from Other to relieve Farragut of his vertigo, a disorder which symbolically suggests his incapacity to achieve existential equilibrium. As they board the bus the amiable stranger pays both fares and then leads Farragut to the third seat on the left side by the window. "'Sit down here,'" he tells Farragut (210). Thus settled in this third seat on the left with his final mentor from Other, Farragut, almost at the end of his purgatorial journey, could perhaps see in his mind's eye the kindly ghosts of his first two mentors in the second and first seats directly ahead of his--Chicken Number Two and Jody, respectively--summoning him forward on the liberating (left) side and the trafficking (window) side of his consciousness to self-love, self-possession, and a rejoicing acknowledgment of his existential selfhood. Moments later, wearing his third mentor's coat to protect him from a possible overdose of existential energy and stimulation, Farragut steps off the

bus, now his own man--indeed, now his own falconer in pursuit of the only prey worth hunting and possessing: his existential selfhood.

Cheever says of his new existential man, "Stepping from the bus onto the street, he saw that he had lost his fear of falling. . . . He walked along nicely. Rejoice, he thought, rejoice." Disengaged from Other, he can now say what Camus's Sisyphus says: "Knowing whether or not man is free doesn't interest me. I can experience only my own freedom" (56). Yet implicit in that triumphant imperative to "rejoice" is Farragut's backward glance and wave of a hand of gratitude to his three mentors from Other whose presences were vital in the processes that took him from his recoil from the absurd to his existential awakening.

Cheever's existentialism, attuned as it is to contemporary life, modifies and complicates the prototype of modern existential man that evolved from Camus's doctrinaire assumptions and hypotheses on the absurd in the 1940s and 50s. Instead of defiantly rebelling against Other, Cheever's new existential man acknowledges the serviceability of Other to himself and to any other longtime bumbling victim of falconry in the modern world who has found the incentive at last to locate, identify, and enjoy a redeeming selfhood that has eluded him for the better part of a lifetime.