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- 1 Looking back on his move to the suburbs with his young family in "Moving Out," an article featured in the July 1960 issue of *Esquire*, John Cheever claimed that on the night before they left New York City he "jumped, in an exuberance of regret, out of a first-story window" (979).¹ If there was one writer whose work would embody the explosive growth of suburbia during the postwar era, it was Cheever—the celebrated "Ovid in Ossining," as a 1964 *Time* magazine cover story had proclaimed. And yet, his reminiscence is full of sweeping dismissals of suburban life: "My God, the suburbs! They encircled the city's boundaries like enemy territory and we thought of them as a loss of privacy, a cesspool of conformity and a life of indescribable dreariness in some split-level village where the place name appeared in the *New York Times* only when some bored housewife blew off her head with a shotgun" (977).
- 2 While his assiduous chronicling of the suburban cocktail party set effectively cemented Cheever in the public imagination, he had turned to the suburban milieu decades into his career, in the 1950s and 1960s—a crucial period during which, as his daughter Susan Cheever notes, he changed from "a talented, struggling writer" into "an acknowledged, established success" (153). Focusing on this phase of Cheever's writing—and with an eye on his stories' position within the shifting trajectory of the *New Yorker* magazine, where the majority of them were published during these years—this article will devote particular attention to what in his *Esquire* essay he calls the paradoxical "loss of privacy" in exclusive suburbia by examining his representation of suburban spaces which lack the comparatively liberating anonymity of the city. If this period has been aptly dubbed a significant "transitional moment" in Cheever's career (Wilhite 218), despite his turn to suburbia these stories intriguingly exhibit a residual urbanism in their repeated emphasis on voyeurism and flânerie. The following discussion, then, uses the term voyeurism in its expansive sense, suggesting the scopophilic gaze's

intrusion into ostensibly private spaces as well as the disclosure of material observed from a privileged vantage point often expressed through a detached yet penetrating narrative voice.

- 3 The contents of the two short story collections that Cheever had published in the 1950s—*The Enormous Radio and Other Stories* (1953) and *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories* (1958), his second and third overall—signal his work's transition from the city to the suburbs. While *The Enormous Radio* contains only a single story set largely within a suburb (the rest taking place in New York City or in various vacation resorts), all of the stories of *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill* are set in the fictional suburban enclave of Shady Hill. Cheever thus frames his *Shady Hill* collection around a central unifying device, one which has led some critics to refer to the volume as a suburban story cycle—or, as Scott Donaldson labels it, a “coherently constructed story sequence” (“Cheever's Shady Hill” 133)—the volume itself serving to establish, for better or worse, Cheever's reputation as the quintessential author of the suburban upper-middle class.
- 4 This shift in Cheever's work closely mirrors the growth of suburbia in the immediate postwar era. Between 1947 and 1953, the year the first *Shady Hill* stories were published in the *New Yorker*, the overall population of the U.S. increased by 11 percent, whereas the suburban population grew by a whopping 43 percent (Cohen 195). As his *Esquire* essay glibly demonstrates, Cheever himself was part of this mass migration to the suburbs, the writer and his family having moved in May 1951 from their New York City apartment to Scarborough, New York, in wealthy, suburban Westchester County. In “Moving Out,” Cheever looks back on this middle-class flight from the city:

I don't suppose there was a day, an hour, when the middle class got their marching orders but toward the end of the 1940's the middle class began to move. It was more of a push than a move and the energy behind the push was the changing economic character of the city. It would all be easier to describe if there had been edicts, proclamations and tables of statistics, but this vast population shift was forced by butcher's bills, tips, increased rental and tuition costs and demolitions. (977)
- 5 Cheever's relocation to the suburbs came of sheer economic necessity, like it did for many.² This exodus out of the city was not greeted cheerfully: “the sense was that we were being exiled, like so many thousands before us, by invincible economic pressures and sent out to a barren and provincial life where we would get fat, wear ill-fitting clothes and spend our evenings glued to the television set. What else can you do in the suburbs?” (978-79). Nevertheless, the suburbs would provide Cheever with a lasting subject and setting for his fiction, and in 1961 he would permanently move to Ossining, New York. In some respects, “Moving Out” becomes a conversion narrative of sorts, with Cheever ultimately confessing, “The truth is that I'm crazy about the suburbs and I don't care who knows it” (981).
- 6 Cheever's newfound concern with suburbia coincides with the direction of the *New Yorker* fiction of this postwar period. Launched in 1925, *The New Yorker* began its life as a humorous, unmistakably urban weekly. The publication of John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, which took up an entire issue in August 1946, is generally considered the beginning of a fundamental change for *The New Yorker*, a move away from what James Thurber called the “devil-may-care magazine of the 1920's” (146) and toward an ethos of “social awareness and responsibility” (Lee 16). *The New Yorker's* transformation during the postwar era, however, was just as deeply connected to its increasing interest in the suburban landscape, signifying both the rapid growth of the suburbs and its readers' participation in this middle-class migration.³ Cheever's fiction of these years stands as a

prime example of the midcentury 'New Yorker Short Story,' characterized by its upper-middle-class setting, slice-of-life approach, and understated, lightly ironic voice. If his work would come to be seen as a major part of *The New Yorker's* emerging suburban aesthetic, rather than simply following a trend, Cheever was in actuality ahead of the curve among its fiction contributors; indeed, as he was steadily turning his attention to the suburbs, his younger acolyte John Updike was still publishing Cheever-influenced urban vignettes like "Snowing in Greenwich Village" (1956) in the magazine.⁴

- 7 Cheever's early suburban stories "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" and "The Cure" not only illustrate *The New Yorker's* gradual development into a publication for newly transplanted suburbanites, but also attest to how Cheever led the charge in the fictional representation of suburbia during a tumultuous period for the magazine. Cheever's work of this formative phase therefore functions as its own kind of cultural history documenting the influx of the middle class into the suburbs and the codification of the suburban lifestyle while also reflecting suburbia's formal articulation within the cultural imaginary of mass-market magazine fiction. This demographic shift to the suburbs is particularly evident in the way his alienated characters voyeuristically survey and navigate through the suburban landscape, often carrying along with them the echoes of their expatriation from the city.

Voyeurism and Middle-Class Precarity in "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill"

- 8 The title story of *The Housebreaker of Shady Hill and Other Stories*, originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1956, provides a window onto Cheever's conflicted treatment of suburbia, especially in how its suburban terrain is mediated by the narrative lens of the exiled urbanite at its center. It begins by introducing its protagonist and narrator as an urban émigré formerly from New York City:

My name is Johnny Hake. I'm thirty-six years old, stand five feet eleven in my socks, weigh one hundred and forty-two pounds stripped, and am, so to speak, naked at the moment and talking into the dark. I was conceived in the Hotel St. Regis, born in the Presbyterian Hospital, raised on Sutton Place, christened and confirmed in St. Bartholomew's, and I drilled with the Knickerbocker Greys, played football and baseball in Central Park, learned to chin myself on the framework of East Side apartment-house canopies, and met my wife (Christina Lewis) at one of those big cotillions at the Waldorf. I served four years in the Navy, have four kids now, and live in a *banlieue* called Shady Hill. We have a nice house with a garden and a place outside for cooking meat, and on summer nights, sitting there with the kids and looking into the front of Christina's dress as she bends over to salt the steaks, or just gazing at the lights in heaven, I am as thrilled as I am thrilled by more hardy and dangerous pursuits, and I guess this is what is meant by the pain and sweetness of life. (253)

- 9 In the story's opening paragraph, the particulars of Johnny Hake's life are systematically laid out through corresponding New York locales; Hake's biography is essentially sketched out by urban geography. The location of these landmarks in Manhattan's East Side and their rather affluent connotations will come to underscore Hake's sudden financial difficulties after his migration to the suburbs. Compared to Cheever's own move out of the city, then, Hake's is not so much dictated by economic necessity as it is by the lure of the suburbs for new families, suburbia being a great place, as Hake claims, if you "have children to raise" (258), a standard contention which

Kenneth T. Jackson associates with the fear of the growing racial diversity of cities (289-90).⁵

10 It has been suggested that the voyeuristic preoccupations of “The Housebreaker of Shady Hill” are enacted, or foreshadowed, by the reader encountering Hake’s introduction; as Keith Wilhite notes, “we find ourselves thrust into a confrontational engagement with a man who, at least figuratively speaking, stands before us naked” (223-24). The details of Hake’s life are set out methodically, scientifically: it is not just a portrait of Johnny Hake, but the representation of an entire class. In referring to such bestselling books as Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), Catherine Jurca observes that popular postwar authors had “adopted quasi-sociological techniques, particularly in fiction dealing with the suburbs,” their work tending to utilize “the statistic tone of social science” to depict and critique suburban life (84-85). Jurca goes on to add that “the situation of ‘serious’ fiction is quite different,” citing Cheever’s work, and principally his *Shady Hill* collection, as an example of a strand of writing which resists “defining a typical suburbanite,” his protagonists seeming “almost monotonous because each is so glaringly unique” (102 n. 2). Yet as the opening of this story shows, Cheever was not averse to identifying his characters with a specific social class or type, as part of a mass of people, even if they will shed their mundane trappings throughout the course of their respective narratives.

11 Just as “Housebreaker” begins by having its “naked” antihero bare all for the reader, the story’s penchant for voyeurism extends to Hake’s critical assessment of his wife, Christina, who is portrayed still more stereotypically, more tightly bound to the codes and rituals of Shady Hill. In a gesture which serves to expose her as much as his act of “looking into the front of Christina’s dress as she bends over to salt the steaks,” Hake presents his wife satirically:

Now Christina is the kind of woman who, when she is asked by the alumnae secretary of her college to describe her status, gets dizzy thinking about the variety of her activities and interests. And what, on a given day, stretching a point here and there, does she have to do? Drive me to the train. Have the skis repaired. Book a tennis court. Buy the wine and groceries for the monthly dinner of the Société Gastronomique du Westchester Nord. Look up some definitions in Larousse. Attend a League of Women Voters symposium on sewers. Go to a full-dress lunch for Bobsie Neil’s aunt. Weed the garden. Iron a uniform for the part-time maid. Type two and a half pages of her paper on the early novels of Henry James. Empty the wastebaskets. Help Tabitha prepare the children’s supper. Give Ronnie some batting practice. Put her hair in pin curls. Get the cook. Meet the train. Bathe. Dress. Greet her guests in French at half past seven. Say *bon soir* at eleven. Lie in my arms until twelve. Eureka! You might say that she is prideful, but I think only that she is a woman enjoying herself in a country that is prosperous and young. (263)

12 As Hake here discloses, Christina’s identity is marked by an excessively routinized schedule which divulges both her trivial habits as well as her mechanical devotion to routine. In *Suburbia*, an early study of suburban ideology published in 1958, the same year as Cheever’s *Shady Hill* collection, the political scientist Robert C. Wood maintains that the “use of time in the suburbs” consists of “an implacable array of schedules which seem to testify to the suburbanite’s inability to live as an individual” (6). “There are no longer any options,” Wood explains, “but instead unbreakable patterns for the day, the week, the year, and the generation” (6). This is precisely how Christina’s day-to-day life is structured, according to Hake’s exposé, though the very responsibilities guiding her are deemed frivolous and utterly inconsequential.

- 13 With Hake unveiling his wife's most trifling activities, the story's derisive treatment of Christina exemplifies how, as one critic has remarked, "Cheever sometimes offers an easy target for feminist criticism" (Kane 112). This is not at all uncharacteristic of the *New Yorker* fiction of the period; as Mary Corey argues, the magazine's literary representation of suburban women during this time often disparagingly stressed their "indolence, materialism, and lack of imagination" (175). Yet by the 1950s, Corey notes, *The New Yorker* would "come to possess a certain cachet" for the upper-middle class, and particularly women, who had by then comprised the greater part of the magazine's readership (179). Perhaps indicative of female readers' refusal to identify with their fictional counterparts, this is highly emblematic of what Betty Friedan referred to as the proliferation of the "feminine monster" figure in the mass-circulation magazines of the postwar years (120), Cheever's almost painfully revealing portrait of Christina Hake conforming to this prevalent stereotype of the era.
- 14 While Christina is pigeonholed as the conventional suburban housewife in "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill," Johnny Hake's acts of transgression allow Cheever to complicate the conception of the "typical suburbanite." After losing his job at the beginning of the story, Hake decides not to tell his family about his financial woes and, on one desperate night, sneaks into his neighbors' house—the wealthy Warburtons who, as Cheever writes, "are always spending money, and that's what you talk about with them" (255)—where he steals Carl Warburton's wallet. Hake is not caught, and although he proceeds to suffer a crisis of conscience for days afterward, at another house he attempts a second burglary that is quickly aborted. On the way to a third house on a following night, it starts to rain and the deluge triggers an epiphany whereupon Hake heads home and renounces his brief life of crime. Through what at first seems like a tidy contrivance of the plot, Hake subsequently gets his job back and receives an advance on his salary. But even when making restitution, Hake is compelled to repeat his transgressions. In an ironic inverse of his earlier misdeed, he revisits the scene of the crime, returning the money to the Warburtons by breaking into their home once again and secretly dropping off the wallet. Spotted by a policeman as he walks away from the house, Hake masks his offense through the performance of suburban banality, informing him that he is just walking his dog and leaving "whistling merrily in the dark" (269) as the story comes to a close.⁶
- 15 If, as Robert Beuka suggests, Cheever highlights "the tenuous class position of his protagonists to examine larger issues facing the American middle class" (70), Johnny Hake's story is an archetypal Cheever narrative in this regard, Hake's clandestine impropriety and financial anxieties pointing to his precarious status within Shady Hill. Hake is one of a long line of Cheever characters who act both as participants and voyeuristic observers in the domain of the well-to-do, these protagonists remaining simultaneously a part of and apart from their suburban milieu. In the story, Hake provides a running commentary on this environment and his uncertain place within it, his most extensive musings on Shady Hill curiously appearing just after he commits the theft:

Shady Hill, as I say, a *banlieue* and open to criticism by city planners, adventurers, and lyric poets, but if you work in the city and have children to raise, I can't think of a better place. My neighbors are rich, it is true, but riches in this case mean leisure, and they use their time wisely. They travel around the world, listen to good music, and given a choice of paper books at an airport, will pick Thucydides, and

sometimes Aquinas. Urged to build bomb shelters, they plant trees and roses, and their gardens are splendid and bright. (258)

16 Hake's sunny if resolutely defensive views of Shady Hill arise at a critical moment of transgression. Though Hake states that he "can't think of a better place" than this *banlieue*, Shady Hill is just as likely to be rendered in the story as the site of endless backyard barbecues and tedious dinner parties.⁷ The town is presented as exclusively upper-middle class and typical of a postwar suburbia described by Jackson as "relatively homogeneous socioeconomically" (99), Shady Hill defined by an exclusionary socioeconomic system which offers its residents a deceptive sense of security. Early in the story, Sheila Warburton expresses concern over her husband's return from a train station near "a terrible slum," worriedly stating that "he carries thousands of dollars on him, and I'm so afraid he'll be *victimized*" (256). Unaware that they will soon be burglarized by one of their own, Shady Hill's exclusivity leads the Warburtons to erroneously believe that they can safely keep their doors unlocked at night. In accordance with its socioeconomic standing, Beuka asserts that for Cheever, "the suburban landscape [is] a symbolic field inscribed with the markers of social status" (69)—and, indeed, when breaking into the Warburtons' home, Hake crosses a front hall composed of "black-and-white marble from the old Ritz" (255)—these class markers becoming especially stifling as Hake's own fortunes begin to dwindle. Hake's defense of his neighbors and his conflation of their social class with cultural refinement therefore reflects the push-pull dynamic of his relationship with suburbia; he is immersed in the mores of Shady Hill even as he regularly violates them in the narrative.

17 It is not too great a leap from Johnny Hake's canny observations of Shady Hill society to Cheever's own acute assessments of suburban life. This is vividly apparent in a suggestive letter Cheever wrote following his move to Westchester:

After a year of observation it is astonishing to find how many of the people in this neighborhood are precisely what they appear to be. Of course if you look hard enough—and I do—you can find a drunken woman lying on a terrace, but she never seems to count for much anymore. One warm night last week I walked down these shady streets and saw, through a window, a man in his shirt sleeves rehearsing a business speech to his wife who was knitting. I often long for the windows of New York where foxglove sometimes grow and where women iron in their underwear. I have been riding and it turns out that there are miles and miles of wonderful trail in the neighborhood... (*Letters* 155)

18 In this account, it is the suburbs' potential for voyeurism which provides Cheever with an important connection to his years in New York, as he comes to associate the suburban environment with the city in its amenability to this scopophilic gaze.⁸ This tendency to be voyeuristic is frequently exhibited in Cheever's early suburban fiction, which features spatial boundaries that are repeatedly trespassed. In "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill," Hake not only enters the Warburtons' house, but sneaks into their bedroom—while its "doors stood open" (257)—to commit his theft. Moreover, another story in the *Shady Hill* collection, "O Youth and Beauty!" (1953), contains an evocative passage in which Cheever turns away from the central characters and muses upon their surroundings as if strolling through a street in Shady Hill:

On Alewives Lane sprinklers continue to play after dark. You can smell the water. The air seems as fragrant as it is dark—it is a delicious element to walk through—and most of the windows on Alewives Lane are open to it. You can see Mr. and Mrs. Bearden, as you pass, looking at their television. Joe Lockwood, the young lawyer

who lives on the corner, is practicing a speech to the jury before his wife. "I intend to show you," he says, "that a man of probity, a man whose reputation for honesty and reliability..." He waves his bare arms as he speaks. His wife goes on knitting. (215)

- 19 The earlier letter's observations are thus reproduced in this story as it details the private activities seen through the open windows of Alewives Lane; the reader, by way of the omniscient narrator, has become a Peeping Tom. These windows have been willfully left open, just as the front doors are left unlocked in "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill." While Cheever does not strictly associate voyeurism with such aspects of suburban terrain, its unique manifestation in his stories of suburbia stems from certain specific socio-historical conditions. As Willhite argues, the postwar suburban development of the late 1940s and 1950s served to redefine notions of the public and the private, so that in the suburbs of Cheever's fiction "residents can never quite discern which spaces are truly private spaces" (222). Cheever's homogeneous Shady Hill is sufficiently exclusive to keep out undesirables, and so wealthy neighbors like the Warburtons can fret about the slum surrounding the train station while still leaving their doors unlatched at night within the limits of this insular suburb. At the same time, genuinely public spaces are effaced within the suburban landscape. Consequently, when Hake is seen walking near the Warburtons' house once "the last lights in the neighborhood had been put out," he is greeted by a policeman who asks him, "what are you doing out at this time of night, Mr. Hake?" (269), as if he had broken a local curfew—this housebreaker more susceptible to detection when out in the open in Shady Hill than when creeping into his neighbors' bedroom.

"The Cure" and the Peeping Tom's Intrusive Gaze

- 20 Cheever's "The Cure"—a major work, if under-examined in comparison to "Housebreaker"—depicts a similarly fragile suburban community whose private spaces are encroached upon. This tale of suburban desperation was published in *The New Yorker* in 1952, just one year after Cheever's move to Westchester, and stands as the most markedly suburban in setting among those included in the *Enormous Radio* collection. The story revolves around a narrator whose wife has recently left him, taking with her their three children. Left alone in his now empty house, he proceeds to chronicle this despondent period and his attempts to "cure" himself—to avoid being "tempted to resume a relationship that had been so miserable" (157)—even as the story's ending will see him reunited with his wife, the narrator declaring "we've been happy ever since" (164) in its ambiguous conclusion.
- 21 As with his Shady Hill stories, in "The Cure" Cheever constructs a psychological portrait of suburban existence, one which stresses the affective experience of suburbia. Like Christina Hake's in "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill," the narrator's routine is scheduled to the minute, all part of his self-imposed cure: "The first months will be like a cure, I thought, and I scheduled my time with this in mind. I took the eight-ten train into town in the morning and returned on the six-thirty. I knew enough to avoid the empty house in the summer dusk, and I drove directly from the station parking lot to a good restaurant called Orpheo's" (157). As the narrator seeks refuge in his New York office during the day, the quick snapshots of the story's unnamed suburb are of its isolated and isolating locales, such as the restaurant he frequents and a drive-in theater: "I'd drink a couple of Martinis and eat a steak. Afterward I'd drive over to the

Stony-brook Drive-In Theatre and sit through a double feature. All this—the Martinis and the steak and the movie—was intended to induce a kind of anesthesia, and it worked” (157). Suggesting the growing popularity of drive-in theaters across the country, Cheever’s tale reflects this contemporary trend while playing on its dialectical position within the public/private sphere, as drive-ins represented a communal form of leisure entertainment that also guaranteed a level of privacy for consumers.⁹ Even with the opportunity for such leisure pursuits, the environment described here is positively deadening, its geography rendered indeterminate, its time routinized and overscheduled—all of this contributing to the “anesthesia” of suburban life that the narrator hopes will cure him of this personal trauma.

- 22 If, like Shady Hill, the suburb of “The Cure” is one in which “most of the front doors were unlocked” (157), the tranquility of the neighborhood turns sinister with a disconcerting quiet in the dead of night. This is abruptly broken when the narrator hears “the Barstow’s dog bark, briefly, as if he had been waked by a nightmare”—the bark itself becoming part of the nighttime routine in the story—but this stops just as suddenly as it began, after which, the narrator notes, “everything was quiet again” (157). As in “The Housebreaker of Shady Hill,” suburban transgression occurs at three in the morning. Reading a book in his living room, the insomniac narrator notices a man watching him from outside his picture window. It is, as the narrator discovers, the neighborhood Peeping Tom, a man “whose intent was to watch me and to violate my privacy” (158). The narrator initially speculates that this Peeping Tom was “probably some cracked old man from the row of shanties by the railroad tracks” (158); again, as in “Housebreaker,” the culprit is assumed not to live among the well-to-do of the town. When hearing of the incident—the first of several—a police officer remarks that “the village, since its incorporation in 1916, had never had such a complaint registered,” speaking, the narrator observes, “as if I were deliberately trying to damage real-estate values” (160). The narrator would later realize, however, that the Peeping Tom is not a crazy old derelict but none other than Herbert Marston, a family man “who lives in the big yellow house on Blenhollow Road”; catching sight of Marston on the train platform looking “frightened and guilty” alongside his wife and daughter, the narrator mercifully decides not to confront him (160).
- 23 “The Housebreaker of Shady Hill,” then, may be read as a reworking of “The Cure” from the perspective of the trespasser, as both are concerned with the private spaces of suburbia and the potential for their infiltration. The two stories treat these offenders, these voyeurs, as part of the suburban landscape—even as part of the neighborhood community. For the narrator of “The Cure,” waiting for the possible arrival of the Peeping Tom becomes as much a staple of his nighttime routine as the book he is reading or the dog that is habitually barking: “When I heard the Barstow’s dog bark, I put down my book and watched the picture window to assure myself that the Peeping Tom was not coming or, if he should come, to see him before he saw me” (159). Despite his ominous presence in the story, the Peeping Tom is the member of the suburban community who stands out most prominently for the narrator during this low period, almost a surrogate for his wife; as the narrator states at the beginning, “her departure and his arrival seemed connected” (156). The narrator’s identification of the Peeping Tom shows how such voyeurism can cut both ways, for their roles are immediately reversed once he sees Marston on the train platform. As Cheever demonstrates, the act of trespassing through the permeable public/private borders of suburbia leaves the

trespasser as vulnerable as the trespassed, this suburban “loss of privacy” that he had diagnosed in “Moving Out” implicating everyone within its bounds.

- 24 In “The Cure,” the Peeping Tom displays the same behavior suggested by the omniscient narrative voice of Cheever’s “O Youth and Beauty!” which subjects the open windows of Alewives Lane to its voyeuristic gaze. Cheever’s sharp observational sense (as well as its more unnerving incarnation, suburban voyeurism) is thus located at both the stylistic and the narratological level in his work. This motif—not merely voyeurism, but the very act of peeping—appears elsewhere in Cheever’s writing, including one of his most acclaimed New York stories, “The Enormous Radio” (1947). Using the fantastical conceit of a new radio that enables a married couple to overhear the private conversations, peccadillos, and everyday tragedies of fellow tenants in their apartment house, Cheever’s tale traces the wife’s increasing obsession with this radio’s invasive broadcasts. While the story is structured around this concept of a bizarre kind of aural voyeurism, when the husband scolds his spouse for her addiction to the radio’s transmissions he resorts to more familiar terms: “It’s indecent... It’s like looking in windows” (39), he insists, chiding his wife by invoking the figure of the Peeping Tom.¹⁰
- 25 This act of direct and intrusive observation, so imaginatively elicited in “The Enormous Radio,” is irrevocably complicated within the suburban setting. As the revelation of the Peeping Tom’s identity in “The Cure” makes plain, true anonymity is shown by Cheever to be practically impossible in suburbia. And if Johnny Hake is remarkably able to escape discovery as a suburban housebreaker, he is still prone to questioning by the police for walking the streets of Shady Hill at night; the suburbs are scarcely conducive to such urban wanderings. These observational inclinations likewise extend to Hake’s general point of view and function as narrator. As a transplanted New Yorker who never got the city out of his system, Hake tends to scrutinize suburban Shady Hill—its residents, its customs, even his own wife—at a critical distance, his observations characterized by irony and detachment, albeit along with a degree of ambivalent pride.
- 26 This trenchant, observational narrative voice is not only evident in Cheever’s suburban fiction. “The Enormous Radio” notably begins with a statistical rundown of the exceedingly average Westcotts, its opening distinguished by a pointedly flippant tone:
- Jim and Irene Westcott were the kind of people who seem to strike that satisfactory average of income, endeavor, and respectability that is reached by the statistical reports in college alumni bulletins. They were the parents of two young children, they had been married nine years, they lived on the twelfth floor of an apartment house near Sutton Place, they went to the theatre on an average of 10.3 times a year, and they hoped someday to live in Westchester. (33)
- 27 As in “The Housebreaker of Shady Hill,” this is a mock-sociological gesture—in which, yet again, the college alumni bulletin rears its head—one that sardonically outlines an ordinary upper-middle-class American couple. The satirical tenor of its authorial voice recurs throughout the narrative, the transmission of the Westcotts’ radio at one moment described as “a satisfactory burst of Caucasian music—the thump of bare feet in the dust and the rattle of coin jewelry” (35). The Westcotts are, in essence, the Hakes before their move to Shady Hill (they do, after all, aspire to live in Westchester) and Cheever’s tone here would be later echoed in Johnny Hake’s knowing, somewhat tongue-in-cheek narration after his turn to the suburban milieu.
- 28 If it has been noted that the trespasses of his characters allow Cheever to map out “the equivocal spaces of suburbia’s private geographies” (Wilhite 218), his protagonists’

voyeurism is also indicative of a strong flâneurish impulse. Indeed, this detached observational mode which pervades Cheever's short fiction is similar to that of the flâneur, for whom, as Walter Benjamin explains, "the joy of watching prevails over all" ("Paris" 41). Derived from his analysis of Charles Baudelaire and the Paris arcades of the nineteenth century, Benjamin depicts the flâneur as an urban figure "who goes botanizing on the asphalt," crossing the cityscape with a cold, dispassionate gaze that suggests "the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant" ("Paris" 19, 22). In building on Benjamin's reflections on the subject, Susan Sontag posits that the observational faculties of the flâneur are marked by both "curiosity" and "detachment" (55), lending the flâneur an air of critical distance—that of "a disengaged and cynical voyeur," as David Harvey puts it (14). It is this flâneurish gaze which is perceptible in Cheever's voyeurs and in his aloof but incisive narrative voice.

The Suburban Voyeur as Flâneur

- 29 Although Cheever's work has not typically been read in light of Benjamin's meditations on the flâneur, such a reading further clarifies the lingering urbanism in his dispatches from suburbia and brings out the limits and the distortions of suburban flânerie. Much as Benjamin asserts in his remarks on Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" (1840) that the urban flâneur "always remains in the middle of the crowd" ("Paris" 27), two stories from the *Enormous Radio* collection exemplify how Cheever also explicitly associates the urban environment with the phenomenon of the crowd, which is crucially absent in the suburbs. While the characters of his New York stories are not necessarily flâneurs in the Benjaminian sense, they are frequently thrust into busy crowds that alternately appear euphoric and oppressive—an inescapable part of the city's topography. Cheever calls attention to the chaos of the urban masses in "The Sutton Place Story" (1946), where a father in frantic search for his lost child sees the crowded streets "only in terms of mortal danger," bleakly observing that "the crowds and the green trees in Central Park looked profane" (74). Conversely, in "O City of Broken Dreams" (1948) an Indiana family visiting New York for the first time experiences the visceral thrill of the city's streets as "they drifted with the crowd for hours" (45)—the husband having "never seen so many beautiful women, so many pleasant young faces, promising an easy conquest" (44)—before a steep descent into disillusionment.
- 30 Whereas Cheever defines the city by these ever-present crowds, the terrain of the suburbs is heavily regulated and surveilled, confounding the practice of flânerie while nonetheless stimulating certain voyeuristic proclivities. Johnny Hake's "leisurely walk through neighborhood gardens and lawns," Wilhite points out, confirms that "street life in suburbia seems almost nonexistent" (224). Suburban streets designed for car traffic rather than foot traffic are largely deserted, devoid of crowds. It should not be surprising that the flâneur diverts his gaze elsewhere in the suburbs, looking into the private houses comprising the suburban block. But strolling around suburbia, the flâneur is conspicuous as a highly visible figure, especially within such an exclusive, tightly monitored community as Shady Hill. Lacking the anonymity granted Benjamin's urban flâneur, Cheever's suburban variant is circumscribed and inevitably corrupted.
- 31 It is significant that the voyeurs in Cheever's fiction that most closely resemble flâneurs can also be considered perverse distortions of the flâneur figure. Johnny Hake is both a

suburban flâneur and a slippery housebreaker. If Hake steals because he is broke and overdrawn at the bank, the act of housebreaking is also an outlet for his flâneurish compulsion—his constant need to keep tabs on, and keep up with, his well-heeled neighbors. Similarly, if more menacingly, Herbert Marston is both a longtime neighborhood resident—part of the social fabric of Shady Hill—and the neighborhood Peeping Tom. Marston represents the dark side of the flâneur as seen from the opposite angle—from the perspective of the story's narrator, who is the unwilling object of his gaze—the flâneur's "joy of watching" expressed as an unsettling voyeuristic drive integrated into a suburban landscape lined by oversized, exposed picture windows.

- 32 The closest Cheever gets to portraying a true flâneur-voyeur is in Neddy Merrill of "The Swimmer" (1964), who sets out to "reach his home by water" (603) and maneuvers through the swimming pools of suburban Bullet Park to arrive at his destination. Still, this seems more a parody of such flâneurish wanderings than the genuine experience. For Merrill, Bullet Park's streets are its swimming pools, and its crowds are the hung-over throngs of people aimlessly milling about suburban backyards. Characteristically, Cheever describes Merrill as an "explorer" observing "the hospitable customs and traditions of the natives" (604). Approaching suburbia with varying degrees of skepticism, affection, and bemusement, his protagonists in this way situate themselves as outsiders among the suburban "natives." The liminal position of these characters as simultaneous observers/participants in suburban society, Timothy Aubry argues, is doubled in Cheever's own ambiguous "narrative presence" (68). The narrative voice that propels these suburban tales is therefore the voice of an informed outsider—of a former city dweller who "can't think of a better place" than Shady Hill, as Johnny Hake declares, or is "crazy about the suburbs," as Cheever himself proclaimed, yet one who looks upon suburbia with a cynical urban eye.
- 33 Accordingly, if Cheever himself has been thought of as something of a suburban spy—as a sly infiltrator who aims to lay bare suburbia for readers—this important aspect of his work and self-image does not just begin with his move to Westchester and is not only related to this specific locale. In a journal entry written in 1948, a few years before Cheever left New York City, he emphasizes the class consciousness inherent in this role: "I was born into no true class, and it was my decision, early in life, to insinuate myself into the middle class, like a spy, so that I would have an advantageous position of attack" (*Journals* 16). Cheever's vision of himself as a middle-class spy interestingly corresponds to Benjamin's discussion of the flâneur's scopophilic gaze. Referring to this figure as "the observer of the marketplace," Benjamin calls the flâneur "a spy for the capitalists, on assignment in the realm of consumers" ("Arcades Project" [M5,6]).¹¹ Cheever's stories of the suburbs as well as of New York City retain the flâneur's attention to class and consumerism—from the Westcotts' radio and "the other appliances that surrounded them" (33) in "The Enormous Radio" to the Warburtons' conspicuous consumption in "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill"—even as Benjamin's flâneur sees marks of consumerism in the public arena of the Paris arcades while Cheever's voyeurs locate them squarely within the private domestic sphere and its preponderance of class signifiers. As his own efforts to "insinuate" himself into the middle class lead him, he notes, to occasionally take his "disguises too seriously" (*Journals* 16), this is redolent of Cheever's at times conflicted position toward class irrespective of setting—a contradictory attitude fuelling both his ambivalent narrative voice and his alienated outsider characters.

- 34 If, as Scott Donaldson affirms in his biography of Cheever, the publication of the *Shady Hill* collection established its author “overnight and always, as a chronicler of suburban life . . . who wrote those funny-sad stories about the suburbs for *The New Yorker*” (170), the persistence of the flâneur’s voyeuristic gaze in Cheever’s work of these years reflects a particularly urban phenomenon displaced to the suburban environment with often disturbing results. Rather than representing a complete break, then, this suggests the underlying continuity between Cheever’s New York stories and his suburban tales, with the latter still maintaining a decidedly urban sensibility. Peopled by New York City exiles, suburban flâneurs, and exurban commuters, Cheever’s suburbia is hardly disconnected from the city. In its view of the suburbs through a distinctly urban lens, its keen exploration of suburbia by means of the voyeur’s eye, and its wry commentary on the midcentury middle-class experience, Cheever’s fiction epitomizes the transitional nature of a transformative postwar period which saw the suburban *banlieue* rise in the shadow of the sprawling metropolis.
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NOTES

1. It is unclear what precipitated Cheever's fall through a window on Riverview Terrace in 1951, which nearly left him impaled on a sharp iron fence. Despite the way he presents the event in "Moving Out," Cheever doubted he had fallen or jumped, and later on at his most paranoid he would even suspect that he was pushed by the *New Yorker* fiction editor William Maxwell; see the biographies by Bailey (176) and Donaldson (118).
2. In *Crabgrass Frontier*, his detailed study of suburban development, Kenneth T. Jackson describes the housing market in the postwar years which, as a result of "mass-production techniques, government financing, high wages, and low interest rates," made it, as he notes, "quite simply cheaper to buy new housing in the suburbs than it was to reinvest in central city properties or to rent at the market price" (241).
3. During the postwar era, *The New Yorker's* readership was comprised more and more of affluent suburbanites, and despite the publication's name, by 1947 most *New Yorker* readers were living outside of New York City, many of them in the suburbs (Corey 179).
4. Cheever's work of this period, however, garnered some hostile reviews belittling his stories' suburban subject matter and their venue of publication. Most disdainfully, in a 1959 review of the *Shady Hill* collection published in the *Partisan Review*, Irving Howe referred to Cheever as a "toothless Thurber" who "connives in the cowardice of contemporary life" (131), disparaging the author's preoccupation with suburbia while denigrating his talent in comparison to a writer who represents an earlier golden era for the magazine. During these years, *The New Yorker* itself would come to be derided by some intellectuals as a middlebrow publication catering to a complacent bourgeois class. In an incendiary speech delivered in 1965 with Cheever in attendance, Norman Mailer denounced *The New Yorker* as an instrument of "an uppermiddleclass [looking] for a development of its taste" (qtd. in Bailey 368-69), an assessment inextricable from the postwar demographics of the magazine's readership.
5. The suggestion of the exclusionary practices in Cheever's fictional suburban communities—their "white flight" subtext—is subtle but strong; perhaps most memorable is one character's condemnation of Shady Hill in "The Country Husband" (1954): "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" (338).
6. Keith Wilhite, who has written most comprehensively on the ambiguous suburban geography of Shady Hill, relates the ending of "Housebreaker" to an incident that occurred to Cheever in Westchester, when the writer was arrested for vagrancy while walking down the street in his old working clothes—an act which "challenged the sumptuary codes for acceptable behavior" in suburbia (219).
7. Hake's insider/outsider position has been duly noted by critics. Examining the dialectical nature of Hake's "tonally ambiguous" voice, Timothy Aubry observes that it "allows him to speak praisingly of his community when he wants, in a convincing enough manner to facilitate his own integration. But it also allows him, even in the moment of praising Shady Hill, to preserve the possibility of ironic detachment ... to maintain some degree of individuality under and within the guise of convention" (80).
8. Biographer Blake Bailey remarks that Cheever's suburban promenades resemble "the nature of fieldwork" (184), his strolls through suburbia acting as fact-finding missions. Yet as this letter shows, these wanderings are also motivated by a strong scopophilic drive.
9. In contrast to the traditional movie theater, during the 1950s the drive-in theater market was booming; in 1952 alone, the year "The Cure" was published, nearly seven hundred drive-in theaters were built in the United States, compared to only sixty-five indoor theaters (Segrave 65).
10. The import of this motif of the Peeping Tom for Cheever is further illustrated by a 1957 journal entry where he recalls "the galling loneliness of my adolescence, from which I do not

seem to have completely escaped," which Cheever refers to as "the sense of the voyeur, the lonely, lonely boy with no role in life but to peer in at the lighted windows of other people's contentment and vitality" (*Journals*, 77). Reading the intimately confessional *Journals* themselves, of course, offers its own kind of voyeuristic experience.

11. As theorized by Benjamin, the flâneur allows for an interrogation of subjectivity, spectacle, and consumerism. If the flâneur has since become a historical figure, Susan Buck-Morss argues that "the perceptive attitude which he embodied saturates modern existence, specifically, the society of mass consumption"; as she explains, "in the flâneur, concretely, we recognize our own consumerist mode of being-in-the-world" (104-05).

ABSTRACTS

Les années 1950 marquent un moment transitoire significatif dans la carrière de John Cheever puisqu'il commence dès lors à s'intéresser à la représentation de la banlieue – une transformation que le magazine *The New Yorker*, qui publiait la majeure partie de ses textes, avait également opérée à la même période. Ce changement est évident dans des nouvelles comme "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill" et "The Cure", deux textes de « jeunesse » dans ce nouveau champ d'investigation où l'on sent le penchant de l'auteur pour le voyeurisme et la flânerie – tendances qui révèlent une vision conflictuelle de la banlieue et une sensibilité urbaine encore vive. En enquêtant et en naviguant à travers la banlieue, les personnages aliénés de Cheever font souvent écho à leur expatriation de la ville et illustrent les afflux des classes moyennes de la ville vers les banlieues. Le profond désir de flâner que l'on retrouve chez les personnages reflète, comme le montre cet article, un phénomène urbain qui est transféré dans un environnement périphérique – environnement dépourvu du pouvoir de l'anonymat propre à la ville tout en présentant le spectacle relatif à toute consommation.

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