

EXCERPT FROM "JOHN CHEEVER'S BITTERSWEET ART"

The Enormous Radio and Other Stories includes some of Cheever's most famous and most frequently anthologized pieces, stories such as "Goodbye, My Brother," "Torch Song," and the title story. In critical discussion these tend to overshadow the other stories in the collection, specifically memorable and sophisticated character studies like "The Children" and "The Season of Divorce," and "Clancy in the Tower of Babel." The overwhelming majority of these are stories rooted in the everyday world, a world in which changes in fortune, shifting perceptions, and the vagaries of human emotion determine the trajectory of the characters' lives. Fantasy as a plot device and means of revealing the moral laxness of his characters is manifestly evident in only "The Enormous Radio."

Cheever introduces his target couple, Jim and Irene Westcott, by emphasizing their

statistical ordinariness, their position among the rank and file, mentioning along with their two children their entirely reasonable and utterly commonplace aspiration that they might someday “live in Westchester” (169). In this way he establishes the Westcotts as every-couple, stand-ins for all members of their class and generation. They appear untouched, unsullied by city life, and Cheever makes this point as well, describing Irene as having “a wide, fine forehead upon which nothing at all had been written,” and Jim as “earnest, vehement, and intentionally naïve” (169). The only feature of their married life that distinguishes them from classmates, friends, and neighbors is their shared interest in serious music. This is where the trouble begins.

When their old radio gives up the ghost, Jim purchases a new one that is delivered to the apartment the next day. Immediately we encounter an ungainly piece of equipment that squats among the living-room furniture like an

unwelcome guest. Its dials shimmer with a “malevolent green light,” and as Irene tries to adjust the volume the music surges out of the box with all the belligerence of a physical assault. We are told, “The violent forces that were snared in the ugly gumwood cabinet made her uneasy” (170). That evening, while waiting for Jim to return home, Irene sorts through the interference emanating from the machine and concludes that the radio is picking up electrically generated signals from surrounding apartments. Its “mistaken sensitivity to discord” wears her and she switches it off.

It is after a repairman makes some adjustments that the Westcotts begin to realize that their new radio can be tuned to eavesdrop on conversations taking place in other apartments in their building. At first they think they're listening to a radio play, but then recognize the voices of people they know. The fear that they can be overheard as well is allayed when Jim shouts into the speaker and

receives no response. Out of curiosity they settle in to listen, their interest in serious music momentarily forgotten, and remain riveted to the radio until midnight, when they switch it off and go to bed “weak with laughter” (174). Without knowing it they have made their pact with the devil.

Irene succumbs to the temptation the radio offers, the lure of a position of godlike authority, of knowing more about her neighbors than they could possibly know about her. The next morning after everyone has left she tunes in again and overhears a disturbing variety of human foibles being enacted all around her. The narrator tells us,

Irene’s life was nearly as simple and sheltered as it appeared to be, and the forthright and sometimes brutal language that came from the loudspeaker that morning astonished and troubled her. She continued to listen until her maid came in. Then she turned

off the radio quickly, since this insight, she realized, was a furtive one. (175)

The revelations offered by the radio color her perceptions of those around her in the crowded elevator. She regards people differently and looking at her friend across the lunch table, "wondered what her secrets were." She sits by the radio all that afternoon, and when Jim arrives home from work, he thinks she seems "sad and vague." That evening her rude behavior at a dinner party astonishes him. They walk home and after Jim has fallen asleep she returns to the living room and, like an addict giving in to her compulsion, once again switches on the radio.

By the next day the sordid activities of her neighbors have driven her nearly to distraction. She is now in the uneasy position of knowing far too much of what is transpiring all around her and is appalled by the extent to which these apparently virtuous people mask their depravity and greed and licentiousness

when they step out into the world. Jim finds her state of near hysteria affecting and agrees with her that they are indeed happy with their life together and nothing like the others, who are all "hypercritical or worried about money or dishonest" (179). He says he will get the radio fixed once and for all.

This he does, but the wounds that the radio has opened will not be healed quickly, and that evening over dinner Jim confesses that he does indeed worry about money and he attacks his wife for her extravagance. She in turn cautions him that their discussion will be overheard, and this sends him into a rage. He questions her sudden conversion into a "convent girl" and flings at her a series of accusations, enumerating instances of her own greed and dishonesty and wickedness, asking among other questions, "and where was all your piety and your virtue when you went to that abortionist?" In the end, "disgraced and sickened," Irene stands beside the radio hoping for friendly human contact, but its

capacity for voyeurism has been successfully curtailed, and in a voice that is “suave and noncommittal” it simply reports the news and the weather.

“The Enormous Radio” follows a pattern that was to become familiar in Cheever’s writing, that of the fall from a state of grace or innocence to a state of knowledge, which for the Westcotts is a state of “catastrophic self-knowledge” (Meanor 53). Irene’s distress, brought on by the discovery that her neighbors are not the virtuous householders she imagined them to be, is purely hypocritical, given Jim’s denunciation of her behavior at the story’s close. How can she suffer sincere anguish, how can she be surprised by what is taking place around her, when, having indulged in her share of morally questionable acts, she is no better than the rest of them? The answer is that all her life she has deluded herself, projecting a semblance of probity for others to see, and then compounding her offense by happily accepting this illusion as the

truth. When the radio comes along and makes it possible for her to peer into the shallow hearts and dirty minds of her neighbors, she clutches fast to her arrogant conviction that she is doing so from a position of moral superiority. However, there is really nothing for her to hold on to, and when her husband reminds her of what she's done, out of greed and a malicious impulse, she helplessly watches herself, and Jim, who has condoned her conduct, slip into the moral abyss with the rest of humanity. The story, while in one sense a sophisticated critique of "a society in which technology and compartmentalized urban living are making human understanding and communication impossible" (Harmsel 408), is also about the shattering of illusions. One presumes that the marriage of Jim and Irene Westcott will never be the same. However, Cheever is also getting at a deeper and much more disturbing truth. The Westcotts always knew of their past transgressions and chose to ignore them. But when the radio exposes them

to truths previously hidden, to the true state of affairs, it is this “sickening” new awareness that they can no longer turn their backs on the terrible things they know about themselves that destroys their cozy vision of their life together. In the end the Westcotts are worse off than their neighbors, who will continue in their errant ways in a state of blind ignorance, believing themselves virtuous. The radio has made this impossible for the Westcotts.

The story represents as well one of Cheever’s initial forays into the metaphor-rich, multi-layered fictional technique for which he was to become famous. On a superficial level, “The Enormous Radio” can be read as a relatively simple tale of one couple’s moral downfall. However, if we regard the apartment building as the human psyche and the radio as an unexpected means of tapping the hidden depths of the unconscious mind, then the story takes on additional resonance. The radio is also very clearly a demonic presence in the “Eden” of the Westcott’s home, one that precipitates

their fall from innocence. And finally, as Henrietta Harmsel notes, a case can be made for interpreting the story as a criticism of the many ways in which technology invades and encroaches upon our lives, interfering with our attempts to communicate with one another and encouraging isolation by offering itself as a tempting surrogate for human contact.

The uncanny power of the radio to eavesdrop on conversations taking place in other parts of the building represents the story's fantastical element, and Cheever weaves it artfully into the narrative, never winking at his reader, never once holding out the possibility that it is a simple misunderstanding on the part of the Westcotts. The action appears to take place in a world that is recognizably our own, and yet when it becomes clear that the radio is in fact a conduit into other lives, that it violates peoples' privacy with terrifying ease, neither we nor the Westcotts question the technological gaffe that allows this to happen. At this point the

narrative slips almost imperceptibly out of the known universe and into a realm in which the impossible is acceptable and commonplace. One may be left wondering how Jim Westcott explained the problem to the repairman, but Cheever's art never falters. The understated authority with which he relates these magical events quiets our doubts, making it a simple matter for him to transport us to a place where reality gives way to fancy and the literal gives way to the metaphorical.