

Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

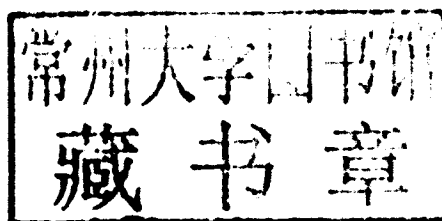
105

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 105

Michelle Lee
Project Editor



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Preface

Poetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, PC offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by PC supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, PC is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a PC volume.

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Each PC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips, 32-69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*. Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 34-51. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

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Fred Chappell

1936-

(Full name Fred Davis Chappell) American poet, novelist, short story writer, and essayist.

INTRODUCTION

A prolific and highly accomplished poet and storyteller, Chappell is known for dark psychological novels in the Southern Gothic style and most especially for his poetry, which features vivid descriptions of his native Appalachia, an extensive knowledge of the classics, and a gently humorous approach to his subject matter.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Chappell was born on May 28, 1936, in the small mill town of Canton, in western North Carolina, to James Taylor and Anne Davis Chappell. Both his parents were teachers; however, his father left teaching to tend the family farm, supplementing his income with a job as a furniture retailer. From 1957 through 1964, Chappell worked at various jobs—as the general manager of a supply company, as the credit manager of a furniture company, and as a proofreader for Duke University Press—until he completed his education, earning a B.A. in 1961 and an M.A. in 1964, both from Duke University. Chappell then accepted a teaching position at Duke, where he served as professor of English for forty years until his retirement in 2004. In 1959, he married Susan Nichols, with whom he had a son, Heath. Chappell has earned a number of fellowships and awards, among them the Woodrow Wilson fellowship, a Rockefeller Foundation grant (1966), the National Institute and American Academy award in literature (1968), the Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Cup (1972, 1978, and 1979), the Bollingen Prize in Poetry (1985), the T. S. Eliot Prize (1993), and the Aiken Taylor Award in Poetry (1996). He served as Poet Laureate of North Carolina from 1997-2002. He continues to write and publish poetry and short stories.

MAJOR WORKS

In the 1960s, early in his literary career, Chappell produced novels that were dark, even grotesque, and filled with madness and violence—in keeping with the conventions of the Southern Gothic genre. In 1971, he

issued his first volume of poetry, *The World between the Eyes*, characterized by lengthy descriptions of the way of life he enjoyed as a child in a small mountain town. He then produced a series of books that would later be collected in the highly-acclaimed 1981 volume *Midquest*, which was structured around the essential elements of earth, wind, fire, and water. Individually, the volumes are *River* (1975), *Bloodfire* (1978), *Wind Mountain* (1979), and *Earthsleep* (1980). The collected version features multiple poetic voices and perspectives as well as a variety of verse forms. In 1984, Chappell departed from his usual poetic technique and produced *Castle Tzingal*, a verse narrative set in medieval times. The work combines elements of suspense, grotesquerie, and humor in the form of a revenge tragedy. *First and Last Words* was published in 1989 and features the poet/narrator's appraisals of various literary figures and their works down through the ages. In 1993, Chappell published *C: Poems*, a satirical collection of one hundred poems and riddles, many based on the classics. Chappell's most recent collections of poetry are *Spring Garden: New and Selected Poems* (1995), centering on a day in a garden; *Family Gathering: Poems* (2000), inspired by a family reunion; the aptly named *Backsass* (2004), containing sarcastic and witty poems on various aspects of modern life; and *Shadow Box* (2009), featuring the poem-within-a-poem, hailed by reviewers as a new poetic form.

In addition to his poetry, Chappell has produced nine novels, two collections of essays, and three collections of short stories; the most recent, *Ancestors and Others: New and Selected Stories*, was published in 2009.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critical discussion of Chappell's work typically involves an assumed dichotomy between his early life in a rural mountain town and his later career at a top university—both of which inform his poetry as well as his prose. Michael McFee refers to Chappell's "split literary personality," characterized by 'Ole Fred,' the drinking, joking, and cussing narrator of *Midquest* versus Professor Chappell, "deeply and widely read, profoundly learned: a genuine scholar." Dabney Stuart has also studied the ways that Chappell "suggests the disparity of the two environments" and the manner in which structure "involves the paradigmatic polarization of rural and urban" in his work. Stuart cautions,

however, against oversimplification, acknowledging that Chappell's work "is not as sharply bifurcated between the rural and the intellectual" as Stuart's introduction to *The Fred Chappell Reader* seems to imply. George Ho-vis contends that the "preoccupation with the farming life Chappell chose to leave," informs the poet's entire oeuvre, but it is *Midquest* that most clearly displays "the themes of exile from his Appalachian past and the struggle to reforge, through poetry, a unity with that past." John Lang believes that Chappell has achieved that unity, as the poet's "enormous range of allusions ties his individual Appalachian voices to many of the most significant features of the Western literary, philosophical, and religious traditions."

Kate M. Cooper employs French critical theory in her analysis of *Castle Tzingal*, an unusual poem for Chappell as it is set in neither of the poet's two worlds, but rather in the court of a mad king determined to assert total control over the subjects of his mythical kingdom. Other familiar dichotomies appear in the poem, however, between harmony and discord, "nature and culture, language and desire, poetry and power" which the critic contends "point not only to the problematic of its own writing, but also to the questions of production inherent to every literary undertaking." Cooper suggests that the work "may be read as a clue to the understanding of southern culture and literature" at the same time that it "also speaks with uncanny explicitness to the issues of contemporary French theory." Peter Makuck points out that despite the impressive range of diction, forms, voice, and subject matter within Chappell's body of work, there are a number of continuities that exist over the course of his career as a poet. Henry Taylor also finds "a consistency of style and approach" in Chappell's poetry. As an example, Taylor points to the speaker in "The World between the Eyes" from Chappell's poetry collection of the same name, "who, in various guises and at various ages, continues to be the means of perception throughout much of Chappell's poetry." The primary speaker in *Midquest*, "Ole Fred," has received a great deal of critical attention as a stand-in for Chappell himself, particularly since the poet and his poetic persona share the same birthday—their thirty-fifth—which Chappell considers the midpoint of life. Lang refers to the volume as a "semiautobiographical epic," and Patrick Bizzaro, noting that the narrators most often used in *Midquest* are either Ole Fred or 'I,' questions Chappell's insistence that neither of them "is identical to the author." Bizzaro claims that in studying Chappell's poetry, "readers might rightly feel that their educations have betrayed them," since their training in point of view is "inadequate to the task" of separating author from narrator. According to Bizzaro, "in all of Chappell's works the line separating Chappell as author from the narrators of his essays,

poems, and stories is so thin—at times nearly invisible"—that regardless of the genre, critics as well as readers have considered Chappell's work autobiographical.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

The World between the Eyes 1971
River 1975
The Man Twice Married to Fire 1977
Bloodfire 1978
Awakening to Music 1979
Wind Mountain 1979
Earthsleep 1980
Driftlake: A Lieder Cycle 1981
**Midquest* 1981
Castle Tzingal 1984
Source 1986
First and Last Words 1989
C: Poems 1993
Spring Garden: New and Selected Poems 1995
Family Gathering: Poems 2000
Backsack: Poems 2004
Shadow Box 2009

Other Major Works

It Is Time, Lord (novel) 1963
The Inkling (novel) 1965
Dagon (novel) 1968
The Gaudy Place (novel) 1972
Moments of Light (short stories) 1980
I Am One of You Forever (novel) 1985
The Fred Chappell Reader (poetry, novels, and short stories) 1987
Brighten the Corner Where You Are (novel) 1989
More Shapes than One (short stories) 1991
Plow Naked: Selected Writings on Poetry (essays) 1993
Farewell, I'm Bound to Leave You (short stories) 1996
A Way of Happening: Observations of Contemporary Poetry (essays) 1998
Look Back All the Green Valley (novel) 1999
Ancestors and Others: New and Selected Stories (short stories) 2009

*Includes *River*, *Bloodfire*, *Wind Mountain*, and *Earthsleep*.

CRITICISM

Dabney Stuart (essay date 1987)

SOURCE: Stuart, Dabney. "What's Artichokes?": An Introduction to the Work of Fred Chappell." In *The Fred Chappell Reader*, pp. xi-xx. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987.

[In the following essay—written as an introduction to a collection of excerpts from Chappell's major works—Stuart discusses the place of Chappell's rural upbringing and of his Eastern education on his poetry and prose.]

*The child is father to the man, we say. Let me then
praise my father, even salute him: for he stood there
without any ulterior motive, furtively gazing into
heaven: he didn't make a song about it, didn't dream
of writing it up as a poem to be praised and admired—
just stood there and gaped!*

—John Stewart Collis

In *Poison Pen*, his recent compendium of cultural and literary satire, novelist and poet George Garrett, faintly disguised, calls Fred Chappell the John-Boy Walton of American poetry. It's a facetious remark, of course, but there's enough truth in it to afford an unexpected entrance to Fred Chappell's work. Chappell was born May 28, 1936, and grew up on a farm in Canton, near Asheville, North Carolina, but his family poems in *Midquest* give a tougher, less whimsical access to the kind of hardscrabble farm life popularized in Earl Hamner's television series.

Midquest's narrator, "Ole Fred"—composed of Chappell's attitudes, memories, and experiences, but not identical with the author—celebrates his thirty-fifth birthday in four groups of poems, one series each for the elements once believed to have been the components of all matter—earth, air, fire, and water. He begins the second poem of the volume by quoting Dante—"Midway in this life I came to a darksome wood"—establishing another classical basis for what follows. I will come back to this, but the focus for now is Ole Fred's family, which populates the volume via monologue and dialogue (with Fred as a boy), centering its down-home humor, grit, and independence.

His grandparents and parents are the principals, sharply individualized, economically rendered, living at harmonious odds with each other in hard times, honoring each other's idiosyncrasies, complementing strength with weakness, weakness with strength. The mother's account of her unique courtship—J. T., who taught at the same schoolhouse, borrowed her slip to use in his class experiments with electricity, flying it past her

window like Ben Franklin's kite—acts as a screen memory that helps her not dwell too closely on how difficult life actually was. Her real code word is "hard." Fred's father, for whom money is scarce and a burden simultaneously ("Thinking of nothing but money makes me sick") burns a dollar bill to assert his freedom, and in another instance makes up for his son a beguiling tale in which he itemizes the contents of the layers of a hurricane. For the grandmother it's the disintegration of the family that is worrisome. Noting Fred's "bookishness," she fears he'll grow up to be a lawyer, becoming "second-generation-respectable." She also believes he can never cut loose from his roots altogether; she says to him,

"Not all the money in this world can wash true-poor
True rich. Fatback just won't change to artichokes."

"What's artichokes?"

"Pray Jesus you'll never know.
For if you do it'll be a sign you've grown
Away from what you are. . . ."

Another central character, though not family, is Virgil Campbell, who runs a general store and generally keeps the community from hunkering too morosely on its problems. His first name echoes his literary predecessor, but one of the pitfalls Chappell successfully skirts is solemnity, and his guide through the difficulties of daily life navigates by means of humor. "Campbell," he writes in the introduction to *Midquest*, "is supposed to give to the whole its specifically regional, its Appalachian, context." In "Dead Soldiers," instead of recalling disaster and loss, the focus is on Campbell's shooting his emptied jars of whiskey as they float from the basement of his store on floodwater. Eventually the bridge just upriver starts to sway and groan, so he takes a shot at it as it falls, becoming known as the man who killed the bridge.

There is, of course, more to such procedures than fun. Humor's relationship to survival and sanity is a matter for celebration on any account. To this Chappell adds, as a premise on which his "character" poems rest, the understanding of the psyche's way of turning its attention aside from events of disaster and grief to scenes and activities obliquely attached to them. Too direct a memory numbs; the indirect route makes us able to continue the trip. It's a compromise struck between facing reality head on and trying to evade it altogether, and is one reason this aspect of Chappell's work, though affectionate and open, is bracingly unsentimental (which helps, incidentally, to distinguish him further as a storyteller from John-Boy Walton).

The focus on rural character and situation I have approached through *Midquest* extends, unsurprisingly, into Chappell's prose as well. A cluster of four stories

in *Moments of Light* could be considered as stages in the declension of the life of Mark Vance from the coherencies of rural experience to the debilitation of the city. Though he is not uniformly happy as a boy on the farm—indeed, one observes in his inattention and lack of will the seeds of later problems—he is nonetheless in an environment that requires certain contributions from him necessary to survival. If he doesn't get water to his father at work in the long sun, for instance, the man's labor will be more tortuous; if he's not responsible with his ignorance about items such as blasting caps, his life is at risk. He is also surrounded by people who care about him, and who seek to help him grow into a productive place among the family and its traditions.

In the university town where we later see him, however, he is cut off from such people and the land with which they share a covenant of nurture and increase. The result is a harrowing rootlessness. To feel how sharply Chappell suggests the disparity of the two environments one could compare the good-humored, brightly surprising introduction to sex Rosemary gives Mark (in "The Weather") with the dissolute, hollow visit he has with Norma in "The Thousand Ways."

One of the few black characters in Chappell's fiction, Stovebolt Johnson in "Blue Dive," acts as a central instance of civility, decorum, and balanced regard for both himself and other people. The dramatic structure again involves the paradigmatic polarization of rural and urban. This time, however, Chappell puts the big city dude—Locklear Hawkins, who runs the dive where Johnson seeks a job as a guitarist—in farm country, an inversion that enables him to have Johnson play with the homefield advantage. His ability to restrain his anger under considerable pressure is in part due to his being surrounded by people whose pace and habits he is familiar with and can therefore draw succor and support from. Chappell's phrase for a central quality of farmers is "inspired patience," an attribute that Johnson, though not a farmer, embodies.

Although over half of *Moments of Light* deals with other subjects, Chappell sets all of *I Am One of You Forever* on a farm. It is a series of stories, too, but they are loosely connected through form and characters to approximate a novel. Chappell's use of humorous exaggeration in many of the chapters is an obvious indication of the book's genial tone. *I Am One of You Forever* is also his most extensive dramatization of the values of a farm family's cohesion and support, which foster the mutual independence and growth of its members.

The various eccentric uncles who visit young Jess and his parents become involved in situations whose familiar American hyperbole (à la Paul Bunyan, Epaminondas, and Mark Twain) is, first of all, entertaining. It is also, I think, suggestive of one of the necessities in a

kind of life whose intimacy and death-defying routine are always simmering tensions that might eventually erupt in strife and disharmony. That necessity is the acceptance of idiosyncrasy and outright craziness. A farm family has to make room for its loonies, much as certain tribes of native Americans once did. Again, the issue is survival, and comic inventiveness plays a basic role.

One of the uncles out-Don Juans his namesake until his life is bogusly threatened; another's beard grows to incredible lengths; another, when he comes to visit, brings his coffin and sleeps in it. The pleasure of observing young Jess watch these men includes seeing him become alternately curious about and afraid of them, and, eventually, with his father's help, learning to incorporate them into his sense of life and its possibilities. Chappell complicates those possibilities by interpolating other considerations through occasional non-uncle chapters. The audience he desires, whatever else it may be, is not naive. Humor isn't escape, but accommodation; Chappell romanticizes neither it nor country life. Jess must confront, among other things, the loss of a close friend, the challenge of competition with other men, and the eternal need on a farm to rebuild what nature destroys and will destroy again. The following paragraph concludes "Overspill," a story about just such a destruction. Jess's mother has come home to find that the bridge built for her has been brought to nothing by a flood.

The tear on my mother's cheek got larger and larger. It detached from her face and became a shiny globe, widening outward like an inflating balloon. At first the tear floated in air between them, but as it expanded it took my mother and father into itself. I saw them suspended, separate but beginning to drift slowly toward one another. Then my mother looked past my father's shoulder, looked through the bright skin of the tear, at me. The tear enlarged until at last it took me in too. It was warm and salt. As soon as I got used to the strange light inside the tear, I began to swim clumsily toward my parents.

Jess's vision here reveals better than any commentary the complex centrality of family life as I have been discussing it in Fred Chappell's work. But if he was born and raised in rural western North Carolina, he went east to a fancy college, "deserting," he says, "manual for intellectual labor," and has made his living as a teacher of literature and writing for twenty-two years. It would be a shock similar to encountering a black hole in space if his fiction and poetry didn't reflect the part humane letters has played in his life, too.

Chappell has been around long enough, in fact, for apocryphal rumors to have sprouted. He is alleged to have started writing before he could talk, and in his early teens to have printed reams of science fiction stories under an undivulged pseudonym. Fortunately,

more dependable information is available about him as a poet in high school, and later during his checkered undergraduate career at Duke University. His "**Rimbaud Fire Letter to Jim Applewhite**" (in the *Bloodfire* section of *Midquest*) reveals, from an affectionately amused adult perspective, something of the intensity with which he immersed himself in his image of the feverish young *auteur*:

Four things I knew: Rimbaud was genius pure;
The colors of the vowels and verb tenses;
That civilization was going up in fire;
And how to derange every last one of my senses:
Kind of a handbook on how to be weird and silly.

I don't want to veer toward biography here so much as to point at the fierce allegiance, however adolescent, to literature the poem recounts. It is one of three such letters in *Midquest*, written to other authors, that focus this allegiance, as well as a few of its particular objects: Rimbaud, Dante, and science fiction authors, especially Poe, H. P. Lovecraft, and H. G. Wells.

A cursory skimming of *Midquest* will show how pervasive Dante is, for instance. The conception of the book, as well as much of its overall structure, derives from *The Divine Comedy*. I've already mentioned the "darksome wood" beginnings of both poems, and Virgil Campbell's kinship to the Roman epic poet who guides Dante through hell to heaven. That *Midquest* lacks the inclusive theological system of Dante's trilogy is part of its meaning. It is, after all, written three-quarters of the way through an exhaustingly secular century, determined, it sometimes appears, to exceed past human horrors without the hope the church afforded in previous times. Chappell's poem, however, is no less serious in its scope and intention than *The Divine Comedy*; God and the Bible suffuse it. There are descents into hell ("**Cleaning the Well**"), rebirths ("**Bloodfire**," "**Fire Now Wakening on the River**"), frequent ponderings on flesh and spirit ("**Firewood**"), and no embarrassment accompanies the evocation of the spirits of the dead.

From this perspective even the discussion of literature in the playlet "**Hallowind**" (whose title, too, has religious implications) assumes an added spiritual dimension. Note this exchange between Ole Fred, Reynolds Price, and the personified rain:

FRED:

The most symbolic line there is,
And fullest of hard realities,
Is Shakespearean: "Exeunt omnes."

REYNOLDS:

Your poet's a foe to love and laughter.
Here's the line one gives one's life for:

"They all lived happily ever after."

THE RAIN:

What say we work us up some brio
And drown this silly wayward trio?
My favorite line is "Ex Nihilo."

From "Ex Nihilo," with its suggestion of the creation, to "exeunt omnes" covers much of the ground human beings travel. When the narrator prays at the close of the opening poem in *Earthsleep*, "Hello Destiny, I'm harmless Fred, / Treat me sweet Please," he isn't asking for a favorable literary reputation.

The Divine Comedy is to *Midquest* as Vergil to Dante, I think. This is the most important antecedent evident in the poem, though Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Byron's two comic epics, Browning's monologues, and Chekhov's tender, clear-eyed stories exert their acknowledged influences as well. Chappell cites others in his preface, adding that "some of the grand idols of my admiration—Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Rilke, Pound—did not show up, or appeared only in order to be made fun of."

It is in Chappell's early novels that those grand idols exert their power without the filter of distance and humor, more by their example of intoxicated, romantic sacrifice of everything for literature ("Be drunk with something," Baudelaire urged) than by any specific borrowing Chappell does. Thomas Mann and William Faulkner are among the more accessible pantries he raids for particular goodies, using shifting time perspectives and narration within narration in *It Is Time*, *Lord*, and, in *The Inkling* and *Dagon*, a sweaty determinism reminiscent of *The Sound and the Fury*. *The Gaudy Place*, a sprightlier, less hermetic book, has the multiple narrators of *As I Lay Dying*, as well as something of its mordant humor.

Still, taken together, Chappell's first four novels are very much his own; they receive a fine extended discussion by R. H. W. Dillard in *The Hollins Critic* (Volume X, Number 2). From the wider perspective of his later work, the first three of them constitute a little package of experiment and exorcism, a descent into the maelstrom it appears now to have been necessary to hazard and survive. They honor, as does all Chappell's output, the darker, inarticulate regions of human nature, the ineffable dreamwork done in those depths and the actual dreams that issue from them. They embody, however, as the work that follows them does not, the horrible possibility that the animal in us might indeed be severed from the articulation of mind and soul, and that human life might be reduced again to the mute, destructive servitude of the will. In these books the vision is unremittingly demonic, lacking the modest openness and broad curiosity, and the resulting humor, of the poetry and fiction that have followed them.

I began this focus on education and influence by using the phrase "humane letters" instead of "literature" because Chappell's reading includes an abundance of stuff from a variety of areas. Beyond Vergil, whose *Georgics* are relevant to a farm boy turned author, his classical interests include Lucretius, Horace, Pliny, and Ovid. His historical fiction, much of it uncollected, reveals more than a nodding acquaintance with an astronomer, Sir William Herschel, a botanist, Carl Linnaeus, a vain geographer, Maupertuis, and composers such as Haydn, Offenbach, and Mozart. Apparently minor figures from American cultural and theological history turn up, too, as witness Thomas Morton, whose experiences with his Merrymounters underpin the Puritan explorations (kin also to Hawthorne) in *Dagon*.

This is a partial list, indicative of the breadth of Chappell's interests, but not of ease with which he carries his erudition. It is not paraded, but subsumed into appropriate situation, event, and character, alluded to quietly enough to alert an informed reader without putting off a less informed one. *Castle Tzingal* and *Source*, his two most recent collections of poems, are further cases in point.

In the former, a verse novel in voices—almost, indeed, a play without stage directions—Chappell plies together, amidst a diversity of forms similar to *Midquest*, a number of allusive threads. The context and plot are medieval, as is enough of the vocabulary ("grutch," "frore") to suggest the period: a deranged king murders and decapitates a traveling minstrel whose isolated head continues to sing, haunting the surviving members of the court. The consequent societal- and self-destruction is Biblical in its visitation of sin upon the sinner, and assumes that humankind has an operative conscience despite the modern overlays of this or that theoretical utopian salve. A background twine is the legend of Orpheus, to which Chappell gives a science-fiction twist. Instead of being borne down the river Hebrus, the singer's "comely head," hidden in "a grotesque undercellar," is "suspended in fluids beside a gurgling retort."

Source shows Chappell moving through various image clusters in the book's earlier sections to a culminating vision that is atomic, explicitly based in Lucretius' depiction of the universe in *De Rerum Natura*. Chappell's use of Lucretius' atomism ranges from the minute—frost seen as "emery," a fog dissolving solid objects "into spirit"—to the intergalactic: the stars, in a representative instance, are a "bright fishnet lifting from darkness those broken / many heroes we read the mind with." Between these extremes the volume's individual poems show the illusorily solid human species carrying out its daily heroism, its sweet music, its longing for rest, as well as its potentially sudden joining up with the eternal smithereens.

Though from the outset of his career Chappell has published poems in which he observes particular details in nature, he has not, to my mind, ever been a "Nature" poet. The poems in *Source* offer a fresh illustration of this point. They refer consistently to such items as Queen Anne's lace, the milking of cows, the slow spread of evening, and much else we associate with the term *nature*. All these details, however, are perceived as parts of an inclusive vision of human experience, current and historical. Of all theories of matter, atomism by definition dwells most insistently on the discrete, but it also views its particulars from a unifying perspective.

Which brings me to the basic oversimplification of this introduction. Fred Chappell's work is not as sharply bifurcated between the rural and the intellectual as the convenient shape of my remarks has so far implied. It is also significantly more varied in its subject matter than I've had space to suggest. The second of these deficiencies will be easily remedied by dipping into the deliciously thick right-hand side of the volume you are holding. As for the misleading division itself let me conclude with a couple of observations.

John Stewart Collis' words at the head of this essay suggest the first one. Fred Chappell the author who thinks is Fred Chappell the farm boy grown up, and what he thinks about is partly unified by that process. His grandmother's warning that he might grow away from himself wasn't an old woman's ignorant fear, but it appears equally true that Ole Fred has grown toward himself as well, as any plant grows away from its necessary root to flower. The fifty years this has taken (so far) is misleading if one conceives of it spatially—a "long" time. It is more helpful to say it is *one* time. Fred Chappell is one person, though unfinished; in *Midquest* Ole Fred refers to himself as "halfway halved and halfway blent." Similarly, his thought is rooted in that gaping child, who, as we all do, took everything in without thought. Chappell's tireless, wide-ranging intellectual curiosity, and the poetry and fiction that issue from it, are the attempt to understand wholly that "ulterior motive," however complex, that comes with consciousness. Intellect is vapid if it doesn't proceed from feeling; the feeling intellect in search of ecstasy keeps the twin hopes of recovery and synthesis alive, the future positive.

Finally, Fred Chappell concludes a recent essay about Vergil's idealized vision of the farmer in his bucolic poetry with a paragraph that could as well be, and I suspect is, about himself.

Most poets would make better lutenists than farmers. But even the most inept of us still feel close kinship with the man in the fields, with his life of ordered observation and inspired patience. That is the one life besides poetry and natural philosophy that still touches

an essential harmony of things, and when a civilization discards that way of life, it breaks the most fundamental covenant mankind can remember.

Kate M. Cooper (essay date 1990)

SOURCE: Cooper, Kate M. "Reading Between the Lines: Fred Chappell's *Castle Tzingal*." In *Southern Literature and Literary Theory*, edited by Jefferson Humphries, pp. 88-108. Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1990.

[In the following essay, Cooper provides a detailed analysis of Chappell's *Castle Tzingal* through the lens of French critical theory.]

The remarks accompanying Fred Chappell's photograph in Mark Morrow's *Images of the Southern Writer* (University of Georgia Press, 1985) include a wry admission from the prize-winning poet/novelist: "There's something about a disembodied voice that gets me every time. I don't even dare answer the phone unless I know who it is. Salesmen call me up asking me to come look at condominiums or mountain chalets and I always agree to go. Of course, I never show up." Chappell's fetching confession countersigns the attitudes of several other writers depicted in Morrow's volume. When first approached about having a photographic portrait made, Walker Percy pithily but gently demurred: "Thanks, Mark, but I finally had to swear off getting my picture took. To feel foreign for several hours!" Eudora Welty's comment during her own photographic session is more resonant with Chappell's. After objecting to Morrow's choice of her home's hallway for the sitting, Welty finally conceded and settled herself in a chair that she used only when talking on the phone. She explained her opposition to the chair as a portrait site, saying that she associated it "with nothing but resignation and impatience." Reynolds Price's somewhat resolute stare at the camera shows a face half obscured by the shadows of lamp-light; the same light that both clarifies and darkens his facial features illuminates the metallic sheen of a small statue near the border of the photograph, a statue that Price salvaged from a going-out-of-business sale in New York. After glossing over topics as diverse as the formation of a writer's sensibility, his experiences as a teacher, the comparatively recent southern literary renaissance, and the role of religion in southern fiction, the acclaimed novelist set aside his worry beads and answered Morrow's question about his own personal religious involvement with a curious reflection: "I'm eastern North Carolina, but that's all."

Remarks such as these are anecdotally reassuring. A Columbia-trained physician and National Book Award winner who anticipates a sense of personal disorienta-

tion strong enough to make him beg off from a photo session, a venerable stateswoman of southern letters who prefers a straight-drive Oldsmobile and a crisp relation to the phone, a widely traveled Oxonian scholar who would choose to live no further than sixty-five miles from his home town in North Carolina—all of these descriptions breed the impressions of genteel xenophobia, Arcadian nostalgia, and "rootedness" so often associated with the personalities of the American South and its literature in the twentieth century. Without a doubt, the richly evocative, almost tangible linguistic forms that convey such memorable figures of fiction as Price's Rosacoke Mustian, Percy's Binx Bolling, or Chappell's Virgil Campbell seem to require a reading of homogeneous signification, the assimilation of a language and its purveyors with a comfortable, historically determined notion of place. The familiar content of southern literary production in the twentieth century—this textuality's persistent reflection upon the images of nature and upon the structures of family, race, and church—perhaps encourages the unquestioned mimetism and fulsome sense of community so often apparent in the criticism of southern literature. Just as an Italian reader may risk loss of critical distance when dealing with Dante, the southern reader may be especially vulnerable to the referential lure of much southern writing. But is it not even more absurd to seek dialectical possibilities between this seemingly referential literature and the rarefied sophistication of contemporary language theory?

When speaking of contemporary language theory, I am referring specifically to the conceptual influence that America has acknowledged in the writings of such French theorists as Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Lacan. Since the critical developments of these thinkers are so radically different in orientation, and since their thoughts affect such traditionally disparate disciplines as philosophy, semiotics, linguistics, literature, and psychoanalysis, it is impossible to establish strict homology or analogy between them. I allude to them here as a group only because of their shared focus upon language as a field of inquiry and because of their insistence upon the autonomy of language as both force and form. In approximate terms, all of these theorists emphasize the intransitive character of the linguistic medium, the power of words as signs to defer indefinitely or even to deny the representation of reality in a text. The critical practice of each of these thinkers thus posits textuality (literary or other) as its own object, and shows how linguistic representation invariably asserts its own impure agency, its simultaneous status as vehicle of and obstacle to meaning.

Though the questions provoked by these theoretical stances admit no certain answers, the implications for contemporary critical thought are innumerable. Der-

ridean inquiry, for example, is generally directed toward the historical and cultural significance of writing as that significance is inscribed within various texts. In brilliant readings of Plato and Freud, Nietzsche and Heidegger, Rousseau, Mallarmé and others, Derrida concentrates upon textual examples of the written sign and shows how these representations are both determined and determinative—how they respond to and define the western conceptual tradition.² Lacanian thought, on the other hand, is more distinctly concerned with the analytic experience and with linguistic phenomena in relation to the unconscious. Since Lacan's theory reformulates the structures of the unconscious elaborated by Freud, it accords less primacy to the status of the written sign than does Derridean thought. For Lacan, language plays a crucial role not only in the constitution of the human subject, but also in the larger set of human relations in which that subject exists.³ Yet, of the theorists mentioned, Blanchot is the one who most consistently points to the fundamental ambivalence of language as a dilemma of literature, writing, and reading. His fiction and theoretical writings relentlessly invoke the destructive force of language, the power of words to falsify or annihilate the truth that they attempt to name. His theory repeatedly exposes the fallacies of literary mimesis and obsessively questions the writer's control over whatever it is he is trying to say. According to Blanchot, the act of writing opens an empty space between the world and what is written, a void that always exceeds the writing which creates it. What he calls "*l'espace littéraire*," the literary space, is paradoxically the place of literature's impossibility: the space emerging yet always retreating from the writer's efforts to appropriate it with words.⁴

These synopses are extremely rough, at the same time partial and overly general. However, they are necessary within this study for two reasons. First, by juxtaposing them to the personal confidences of the writers cited at the beginning of this essay, I hope to stress the superficial eccentricity of a critical reading that proposes discursive coherences between a southern literary text and the questions of French modernism. To call any form of literature "southern" is to ascribe it to a certifiable American tradition and, on some level, to assume a teleological relation between that literature and the locus of its production. As suggested, the often familiar idiom and repeated thematic reflections of southern narrative and poetry perhaps hasten identification between this literature and the area where it was written. Even from a purely demographic perspective, the density of literary production in the southeastern United States during the past forty years argues favorably for generic labeling of the sort that the term "southern" connotes.⁵ But if the literature produced in this region is so clearly an evocation of place, is it not then highly questionable to

read it through a body of thought that radically problematizes literature's place? Here is where the surface eccentricity of the proposed reading lies.

My second motive for invoking contemporary French theory results from a more careful scrutiny of this eccentricity and a reordering of the questions it implies. Ultimately, to read a literary text merely as the mimetic expression of a geographical region is to consign each to the other and to ignore the specificity of both. Though such a critical practice may have a certain documentary utility, it fails to interrogate adequately the determinations of both literature and place, and thus encloses both in a static conceptual system. To immortalize William Faulkner as the apotheosis of southern literature is to say no more than that Faulkner wrote about the South and that the South of his period furnished him with the material of his opus. This kind of reading can account neither for the fact that Europe recognized him with greater enthusiasm and foresight than did America, nor for the fact that the South has been the site of America's most prolific (though erratic) literary production since the First World War.⁶ Since it takes stock neither of the "whys" of a writer's project nor of the conditions subtending a culture's specificity, critical homologizing of this sort can only impair the strength of its own assumptions.

My intention, then, is not to reject *a priori* the possibility of causal relations between the literary text and the region of its production. Instead, through a reading informed by contemporary French theory, I shall relocate the question of literature's place within the terms of the literary text itself. Another look at the comments cited at the beginning of this discussion confirms the validity of my approach. Ultimately, all the authors quoted are conveying an awareness of the dynamically complex tension between the sign (verbal, written, photographic) and the determinants of an individual's being and place, the tension between linguistic or photographic images and the larger systems of difference (historical, political, ritual, and so on) used to specify a region and the individual's role within it. Walker Percy's statement is illustrative: for the novelist, having his picture "took" is tantamount to being humanly alienated, made "to feel foreign," uprooted from the appurtenances and rights of a culture. Given the fact that his photographic session finally took place on the front porch of his home in Covington, Louisiana, it is safe to say that Percy's understanding of human alienation in this case has more to do with the violent effect of the camera image than with any sort of physical displacement.⁷ The "resignation and impatience" that Welty professes when at the mercy of the telephone betray a similar wary consciousness of the temporal and spatial differences arbitrarily imposed upon human existence by a cultural medium.