

A Cultural Cincinnatus

by David R. Slavitt

First and Last Words

by Fred Chappell

Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press; 57 pp., \$13.95 cloth; \$6.95 paper

There are passages, even whole poems in Fred Chappell's new collection for which there are clearly precedents in, or one might say kinships to, the work of other poets. The urbane chattiness of "Subject Matter," for instance, makes no bones about it.

It is nice to imagine how Auden would open a poem about the *Farbenlehre* with a genial phrase:
"The mistaken Faust put down his prism . . ." — something like that, but defter; would find an *ism* rhyme pleasant and refreshing, and with polished ease would set the situation, drop in an intriguing fact or two, keeping in mind his aim to civilize our anxious century.

There are other notes and timbres, though. "Bee" recalls the elegiac John Crowe Ransom. "The Garden" is redolent of Wallace Stevens in its elegantly meditative whimsicality. There are traces—there always have been—of Allen Tate, and there are other voices, too, some of which I may have missed. One can take notice of such gestures, admire their parlor-trick dexterity, and leave it at that. But I think that would be to miss part of the point of Chappell's extraordinary new volume.

Bemused imitation, more or less helpless, is predictable behavior in a promising novice. Indeed, that's mostly how a novice learns the tricks of his trade as, by trial and error, he discovers his own character and voice. Chappell, however, is an accomplished master. There can't be a dozen poets now writing in English to compare with him for technical facility, breadth of culture, and emotional range. If Fred Chappell

is playing around this way, it must be serious play. Surely, whatever he does, he does now not merely on impulse but with deliberation.

These performances in various keys, these nods, friendly, pious, or polite, in the direction of various literary forebears serve to extend the range of Chappell's established voice, to insist on the richness of the choices he faces among competing cultural and stylistic possibilities of life in America, of his life in North Carolina at the close of the millennium. He signs himself, as he always has, ever since *The World Between the Eyes*, as a man of the country, a man whose diction can sometimes verge on back-roads quaintness ("to olden," meaning "to age," is not a verb many contemporary poets have used). He is proud to show that he comes from farming people. The assertion, then, in these poems—as natural to them as breathing or laughter—of cosmopolitan high culture is no mere embellishment but a part of their purpose, an aesthetic and even political comment that seems to me to conform to Tate's model and that of the other Fugitives. Their ideal was a kind of cultural Cincinnatus, the amateur, the man of the country whose connection with learning, in no way trendy, was the very opposite of what the city slickers banter about at their cocktail parties. If a man's house is his castle, it can also be his university and his club.

The bookishness of this book arises, I should imagine, from Chappell's realization that city dwellers tend to be overstimulated and therefore deprived of the tranquility that is an important part of intellectual life. One must have time to read and to reread, which used to be all there was to do before those dish antennas started sprouting up among the outbuildings of farms. Chappell's title, *First and Last Words*, refers to his nine prologue and nine epilogue poems, all of which are meditations either on texts (Job, the *Oresteia*, *Beowulf*, *The Wind in the Willows*, or the Constitution of the United States) or writers (Goethe, Tolstoy, Tacitus, Livy, Einstein, Kant). He is claiming these books and writers, as well as explaining and commenting upon them—as one might explain and comment on the lives of interesting neighbors.

The middle section, "Entr'acte," is

a garland of short poems that aren't bookish except insofar as they arise from the cultivated ground of Chappell's mind and sensibility. If he had not already established himself as an uncannily accurate reporter of country scenes, "Bee" would make his reputation:

The house is changed where death has come,
as the rose is changed
by the visit of the bee and his freight of pollen.
The house is opened to the mercies of strangers to whom the dead father is presented like a delectable veal, for whom the linens are unearthed and spread to air, the whiskies decanted.

Survivors gossip their last respects:
a bumble of voices in the living room
like the drowse of music around the white hive busy in the sunny field.

In the breathless upstairs bedroom
one lost bee
crawls the pane behind the glass curtain,
searching to enter that field and all its clovers.

What sets such pieces—fine as they are—is their placement between the prologues and epilogues, the bookish poems that range in tone and time to invoke and re-enliven the culture's resources. "Patience," a prologue to *The Georgics*, opens with a vision of rural life:

The farmers and their animals
have sculpted the world
To a shape like some smooth monumental family group,
The father mountains and the mother clouds, their progeny meadows
Stationed about them, as if posing for a photograph
To be taken from a silver orbiter spaceship by beings
Like angelic horses, who return

to their home world
With pleasant report: *Leave
Earth alone, it is at peace.*

But he goes on immediately to say:

Always the Poet knew it wasn't
that way.

Total
War throughout the globe,
justice and injustice
Confounded, every sort of
knavery, the plow
Disused unhonored, the farmer
conscripted and his scythe
Straitly misshapen to make
a cruel sword.

And later, he makes his point with more
animus:

Such slaughter, they say,
manures the fields of Utopia.
So that the plowman in a
sleepier century
Turns up the bones of a
legendary Diomedes
And marvels that the land used
to nourish those giants
Who have now become the
subsoil in which the Capitol
Is footed: where the soft-handed
senators daylong
Argue the townsman's ancient
case against the farmer:
*He is behind the times, he will
never understand.*

The decisions there brought
back to the homestead in
the form of taxes
And soldiers, who look with
envious eyes upon this life
They flee at, guzzling the
murky raw-edged
country wine.

But nothing changes. The war
grinds over the world and all
its politics, the soldiers marry
the farmers' daughters
And tell their plowman sons
about the fight at the
Scaean Gate,
And the other sanguine
braveries the dust has eaten.
Sundown still draws the
chickens to their purring
roost,
The cow to the milking stall,
the farmer to his porch
to watch
Whether the soaring
constellations promise rain.

There is an abundance here, of extraordinary work, but beyond the individually excellent poems, there is that model in Fred Chappell's mind and on these pages, of what kind of life to aspire to, what it means to be "A Man of Letters in the Modern World." The phrase is one Tate used as a title for a collection of essays, and is appropriate because Chappell's model may be somewhat modernized and improved from Tate's version, but is akin to it. (One of these new poems is "Afternoons with Allen," a prologue to Tate's *The Fathers*.)

Rilke and Roethke have both told us that for poetry we must change our lives. Chappell, in his quiet way, makes a more profound suggestion—that poetry may also be a way of saving our lives. If there could be justice, charm, generosity, wisdom, decency, pity, and taste all working together—as they are here, in miraculous abundance—we would have every reason to hope.

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The Ethos of Freedom

by E. Christian Kopff

**Trials of Character: The Eloquence
of Ciceronian Ethos**

by James M. May
Chapel Hill: The University of
North Carolina Press

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“That’s just rhetoric!” So we dismiss statements we have little respect for. Readers of Tacitus’ *Dialogue on Orators* will remember that the Roman historians thought that eloquence is a sign of a free state. There was a time when the speeches of Burke and Canning, of Daniel Webster and Abraham Lincoln were studied in school and sat in stately volumes on the bookshelves of educated readers. What would Tacitus think of the state of public speaking today?

As William Butler Yeats made his own *persona* a key element in his poetry, so the great Roman orator Cicero (103-43 B.C.) molded an *ethos* that developed over time and yet provided a basis for persuasion and

great literature. As with Yeats, the *persona* was based on reality. In *Trials of Character*, Professor James M. May provides students with the first thorough investigation into the interaction of fact and fancy in Cicero’s life and works that produced some of the most brilliant speeches ever delivered. Since Cicero’s carefully wrought *persona* was rooted in his changing status as he climbed the Roman ladder of success to the top, May’s book often amounts to a biography of Cicero from the perspective of his literary art. May’s painstaking analyses of important orations make it clear that a literary technique often associated with literary modernism was used by a master craftsman in the ancient world to create not “rhetoric,” but passion and persuasion.

Cicero lived in a society where enormous prestige belonged to the powerful, who were not afraid to flaunt it. In his early speeches Cicero developed rhetorical strategies premised on his real position as an underdog standing up to powerful and dangerous leaders.

May blames Cicero because in the glory days after he became consul he emphasized *ethos* to the exclusion of clear narrative and proper presentation of evidence. May seems to forget that by that time, Cicero no longer spoke alone for a client, but as one of a number of distinguished advocates. Each speech concentrated on the special skill of the orator, and while narrative and proof were allotted to other speakers, Cicero was typically asked to speak last and concentrate on character and emotion. That he was given this position so often indicates that Cicero’s use of *ethos* was recognized in his own day as brilliant and original. It would have made no sense for him to repeat the work of earlier speakers.

The passages from Cicero’s speeches are given in the translation found in the Loeb Classical Library, with the Latin reserved for the notes in the back, to help make the book accessible to more readers. When May deals with Latin that is not Cicero’s, problems arise. In quoting the famous first simile of Vergil’s *Aeneid*, May translates *Furor arma ministrat* (1.149) as “fury ministers to arms,” but the phrase means “Fury supplies the arms.” (See *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, *ministro*, 3.) A few similar slips make one wish that