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The Achievement of Fred Chappell

by James Everett Kibler

Dream Garden: The Poetic Vision of Fred Chappell.

Ed. Patrick Bizzaro. Baton Rouge: Louisiana

State UP, 1997. xv + 250 pp. \$30.00

I never truckled

I never pandered

I was born to be remaindered

—Fred Chappell, *“Epitaph for a Book of Poems”*

It is time someone asked why there are few recent major prizes for Fred Chappell, and why no Pulitzer for George Garrett, the author of the excellent foreword to this volume. Garrett, who has written over thirty books of truly distinguished fiction, poetry, and essays, is one of the most positive forces in contemporary literature. Both he and Chappell no doubt know the formula for such success, but this would involve foregoing artistic integrity and the long view, traits both authors have in abundance. Writers with the long view see beyond the fleeting fashion in order to grasp the bigger concerns that will not shift with changing political or social whims.

Mediocre talents or intellects can take the easy way to a reputation by attaching to clichés or creating works according to the popular formulas—in effect, by saying what the establishment wants said. This truckling and pandering gets mediocre books published, gets good (maybe even rave) reviews in the establishment book pages, gets prizes, maybe even the National Book Award or the Pulitzer; but the likelihood of these same works lasting into the next century is slim. If they do, it will not be owing to the reasons they get touted. When fads change, the volumes with nothing else to offer quickly become dated, and these works sink to the murky bottom, weighted with the anvils of boredom and banality. It is the “throw-

away” mentality at work in the present-moment-bound realm of ideas and art. Both Chappell and Garrett have written wisely on the star system of the northeastern publishing and reviewing establishment, and Garrett has dubbed the Pulitzer itself the “Pullet Surprise.” It is high time that the bogus pretentious is treated in Garrett’s fashion with the levity it deserves.

No, there has not been, or likely ever will be, a Pullet Surprise for either Chappell or Garrett. To see the great irony and injustice of this, one need only read *Dream Garden*. This work devoted to one of America’s greatest men of letters should put all the major awards committees and keepers of the various charmed doors to shame. This volume, long overdue, clearly reveals the folly of carefully manufactured establishment star-system reputations.

In 1983, the modest *Mississippi Quarterly* devoted a special issue to Chappell, as in 1971 it had devoted one to Shelby Foote. At these times, both writers of great merit were virtually unknown, laboring quietly and without acclaim to produce canons of work of the highest integrity. In the Chappell issue, Garrett again wrote an essay that mapped out Chappell’s strengths and called him “one of the best writers of my generation” and “one of the giants” of our time. When this issue of the *Quarterly* went to its fewer than 1,000 subscribers, it did not even make a blip on the national radar screen. So, finally, the world, fifteen years later, may be on its way to catching up to Garrett’s assessments and the *Mississippi Quarterly*. *Dream Garden* proves the fact most conclusively.

In this book, we learn how Chappell’s contemporaries, “such eminent figures as Robert Morgan, Kelly Cherry, Dabney Stuart, Henry Taylor, and David Slavitt, among others—read his poetry” and what they “value most about his poetic contributions.” There are fifteen essays here, fourteen on his poetry. The editor correctly states that a comparable volume could be done on Chappell’s fiction. One essay deals with the continuities of Chappell’s works—“an abiding concern with Ultimates, with faith and art, love and war”—in other words, the Universals, not the passing fancies—the universally relevant, not the time-bound and soon to be time-discarded. Another essayist calls this focus Chappell’s awareness of “the grander design.” The essay goes on to describe the growing archive of Chappell papers at Duke University, and gauges the value it will have for scholars who will at last attempt to take the measure of the man as writer and teacher. It is an incredibly rich archive.

The volume contains a new interview with Chappell in which he discusses his poetry; essays on Chappell’s spiritual concerns and the quest motif that links the sections of *Midquest* into one artistic whole; a chapter

on the idea of community as a unifying factor in *Midquest*; a helpful essay on the early poems, not as forerunners of *Midquest* but as high artistic achievements themselves; and a piece on the “consistency of style and approach” in his poetry. Another chapter speculates that Chappell is attempting to continue his four-part *Midquest* with a mirroring quartet of novels “into one mammoth work.” One essay deals with the way that the poetry, “its urbanity and erudition notwithstanding, nevertheless remains firmly rooted in the homeplace soil.” It goes on to investigate the complementary nature of the dual roles of “Ole Fred” the son of the farming mountain South and Professor Chappell man of letters, and reveals the Georgic center of the poetry, a yoking of the “homely and the worldly visions”—what the essay calls the “integrative vision.” It views the overriding spirit of the poetry to be that of the *Georgics*: “grudgingly hopeful realism.” The essay on *Castle Tzingal* interprets the poem as a commentary on the current states of poetry and a challenge to view poetry differently in an age “when all about us weep for the loss of audience.”

This excellent volume no doubt will, as its introduction states, “lay a foundation for future readers, who will want some place to start in studying and understanding his poetry decades from now, generations from now. They will want to know who read Chappell’s work . . . and how that work was read.” I would add that such a future seeker should also make use of the seven essays in the Chappell issue of the *Mississippi Quarterly* that more than fifteen years ago had sought to provide the same for the poetry and the fiction. The volume before us has its focus both on the now and the future, never forgetting “the greater concerns.” *Dream Garden* is an admirably conceived and fitting adjunct to the work of one of America’s very best living writers and, to repeat Garrett’s words, “one of the giants” of our time.