

On First Looking Into Chapman's Poems

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Of all the famous men and women of letters who have lived in the Hudson Valley or written about it, John Jay Chapman (1862–1933) is probably the least well known. Yet to those who have read his essays, both political and literary, and especially to those who have read his quirky, often brilliant letters, Chapman is a more interesting and rewarding writer than many, like Washington Irving, who are more famous. In 1938, in reviewing the first biography of him, the critic Edmund Wilson wrote, “Chapman was probably the best letter writer that we have ever had in this country.”¹ In 1957, in his introduction to a judiciously selected *Selected Writings*, Jacques Barzun saw him as a cultural critic in “an American tradition” that began with “Jefferson and Cooper” and ended with “Mencken and himself.”² More recently, in a fine study of American writers in the 1890s, Larzer Ziff compared him persuasively to Thoreau.³ Surely it is only a matter of time before he will be canonized in The Library of America series with a volume of his collected writings.

Throughout his life Chapman wrote verse, including songs, ballads, sonnets, and odes, some of which he published in a volume called *Songs and Poems* (1919). He also published translations and adaptations from Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Dante, and Ronsard. In addition, he published two volumes of plays in verse for children and three book-length verse dramas. Of the latter, Wilson thought *The Treason and Death of Benedict Arnold—A Play for Greek Theater* (1910) was “perhaps

the best," adding that it had "a certain personal interest—with its Coriolanian picture of a man of touchy pride and strong self-will driving through a perverse course of action. . . ."4 But in general he dismissed the verse by saying it

. . . is usually only effective when it approximates to the quality of his prose. There are a few exceptions to this, such as his fine translations from Dante; but the poet that there undoubtedly was in Chapman—perhaps some Puritan heritage had its blighting effect here—found expression chiefly in preaching. As a moralist, John Jay Chapman is a highly successful artist; and it is mainly as a moralist now that he will continue to hold our attention.⁵

It is difficult to quarrel with this judgment, which seems both fair-minded and perceptive. But in Chapman's defense it must be said that he was a master of what is now called formal verse, with an impeccable ear for the verse line. And for all the Victorian mannerisms that characterize their language, some of his better poems succeed in rising above mere verse, at least in certain passages. One has to make allowances for a style that was deliberately anachronistic; but once that allowance has been made, his archaic verb forms and pronouns cease to obtrude, receding into the literary conventions of the Romantic and Victorian poetry from which his own is clearly derived.

Derivative the style undeniably is, at times sounding vaguely like Coleridge or Wordsworth in their odes, at times more like Tennyson or Matthew Arnold. Yet Chapman himself scarcely mentions any of these in his letters, and never very favorably. He devoted three of his most impressive literary essays to Emerson, Whitman, and Browning, but there is no discernible trace of the first two in his verse, although Emerson's call for an American individualism registered over and over again in his prose. The case of Browning is somewhat different. Chapman discovered Browning in his junior year at Harvard (1883), as he wrote to a young woman friend:

I have had a revelation—Robert Browning. . . . I read him last night till daybreak—and cried. Can you believe it? It was as chastening to the spirit as a family quarrel. Really it is wicked to laugh at these things and immoral. . . .⁶

Apparently he was referring to the ironic psychological studies of men and women in Browning, especially in his famous dramatic monologues—a form Browning vir-

tually invented. Nothing like those figures or Browning's irony is to be found in Chapman, yet Melvin H. Bernstein, a recent academic biographer, sees a strong resemblance between the two:

Alike in many respects, Chapman embraced Browning for his doctrine. . . . Browning was an aristophile and an optimistic Christian; so was Chapman—and America [here Bernstein paraphrases Chapman] needed both the love of the best and a living sense of the regenerative mystery of God. . . .⁷

Bernstein also suggests that Chapman “imitated the prosody” of Browning’s “Cavalier Tunes” in his *Songs and Poems* of 1919.⁸ The first two songs in that volume do, in fact, echo Browning’s three short rollicking poems, but the remaining thirty-three have nothing at all of Browning’s voice or temperament in them. For all his admiration for the Victorian master, Chapman seems to have viewed him rather more critically than Bernstein is aware, as he makes plain in the following letter of 1916:

My brother used to say of the English, “They are all brutes—genius they have, and natural goodness . . . but if you forget that they’re brutes, you’ll run into it; even Browning and Tennyson are brutes.” Something true about this. I think it comes from insularity and lack of contact with neighbors.⁹

A more likely influence might have been certain poems of James Russell Lowell. Chapman wrote numerous odes, a favorite form of his, and Lowell’s fine “Ode Recited at the Harvard Commemoration” (1865) might have served as an unconscious model. Chapman had thought of writing an essay on Lowell; in a revealing letter of 1896 to his first wife Minna he wrote:

His poetry is nothing but a fine talent, a fine ear, a fine facility—too much morality and an incredible deftness at imitating everybody from Milton down. I cannot read his poems with comfort—but his early essays I still think the best things he ever did, witty, snappy, “smart” to a degree, and quite natural—they are the only things he ever did that were quite natural.¹⁰

The words could be applied with almost equal justice to Chapman’s own poems, none of which has the naturalness of his prose. He too was incredibly deft at imitating the styles that attracted him, and this is surely the reason that his words so often echo one or another of the poetic voices I have mentioned, without ever

quite resembling any one of them. So deft an imitator was he, in fact, that once as a sophomore at Harvard (1882)—in a story told by M. A. DeWolf Howe, author of the first and still indispensable biography—Chapman

brought to a meeting of a literary club, the now extinct “O.K.,” a paper of his own on a new Scandinavian poet, giving some account of the man and his work, and reading translations from his poems. The members of the club were much impressed, and Chapman himself agreed that he had produced an ideal O.K. paper, adding that he had invented the poet and all his verse only the night before.¹¹

More than a delightful sense of mischief, the story suggests ambition, a yearning for recognition, a desire to be taken seriously. All of these qualities are detectable in the high Victorian manner of the poems, especially in their tragic celebration of heroic action, as in this passage from “Taps at West Point”:

West Point! The Eagle of the West
Has searched the wilderness to find
A fitting spot to build a martial nest,
Some skyey shelter from the wind,
A refuge from the north—
Rock-bound, inviolate;—
And here upon the mountain ledge
Facing the Highland Gate,
He builds his eyrie and looks forth
Between black headlands streaked with rills,
And sees the winding river-edge
Die in the distance, pillared by the hills. . . .¹²

What is missing from the poems is the complexity of the man himself. In 1887, at the age of twenty-five, Chapman wilfully burned his left hand to punish himself for jealousy and severely beating another young man named Percival Lowell, in the mistaken belief that Lowell had made improper advances on Minna Timmins, the young woman who became Chapman’s first wife. (Lowell was later renowned as the astronomer who insisted that Mars was inhabited.) This incident—the second of three breakdowns he suffered—has been retold so many times that it has now become almost legendary, an emblem of Chapman’s passionate, contradictory nature. Equally legendary is the memorial service he held in 1911, in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, for a Negro who had been lynched (actually dragged from the local hospital and burned alive in his cot) the previous year. Neither of these two

extraordinary episodes, both of them so characteristic of the man, is celebrated in his poems.

At their best, however, the poems do reflect some of his deeper concerns, crystallizing them in the generalized, conventional language of a late Romantic style. But as Jacques Barzun pointed out in 1957,

Present-day readers who might want to like him because he is very much what they profess to admire—an individualist, a dissenter, an enemy to business mores as to all ‘other-directed’ behavior—will have a hard time swallowing his aristocratic levity and Romantic passion. They will be alienated by his violence. . . . Having the gift of passion, Chapman necessarily erred more than once in his expression of it, especially in his private life.¹³

One of the ways in which he “erred more than once” was in the anti-Semitism of his later years—a curious turnabout in a man who in 1897, at a time when he was passionately engaged in political reform, publishing a journal in close association with a Jewish colleague, once wrote:

There is a depth of human feeling in the Jew that no other race ever possessed. . . . David, for instance. . . and Absalon—and Jonathan. Compare the Greek—the Chinese, the Roman. These Jews are more human than any other men. It is the cause of the spread of their religion—for we are all adopted into Judah.¹⁴

In the twenties, according to biographer Howe, he “joined with those who shuddered at the ‘Jewish menace’.” Perhaps even more virulent was his growing antipathy to the Roman Catholic Church. Not only did he fight vehemently against the political rise of Alfred E. Smith, but in 1928 he also wrote a poem in twenty-eight stanzas called “The Roman Catholic Mind: Extract from My Secret Journal,” which was printed up in pamphlet form by a radio station and widely distributed. Written in stanzas of *ottava rima*—the stanza used by Byron in his great comic poem, *Don Juan*—Chapman’s poem reaches its climax in a diatribe against the old Protestant establishment of Boston (and Harvard) for what he regarded as its failure to resist the influence of the Roman Church:

The Bench, the Bar and Business; Politics,
The Press, the Clubs; Chapel and lecture-hall
Have all agreed that one must never mix
Religious questions with the vote. That's all!
Meanwhile One Hand holds up a crucifix
And thick as autumn leaves the ballots fall
While every voiceless voter finds some reason
For thinking frank discussion not in season.

Silence enslaves them—silence and cant
Of tolerance. 'Tis almost past believing;
And yet 'tis very simple, so I sha'n't
Expound in words too hard for your conceiving
What everybody knows:—The Protestant
Who braves the Roman Power can't make his living.
If *fear* be all Rome needs to keep her steady,
These Protestants are Catholics already.

Yes, Boston has been conquered and subdued.
Her monuments are meaningless;—her dome
That seems to shine in heaven's solitude,
Is but a symbol of the Church of Rome.
Gone is the race that once embattled stood
For Liberty—for conscience, hearth and home,
The stars and stripes wave on, o'er souls that quail.
Take heed, my country. 'Tis no fairy tale.¹⁵

It was both ironic and poignant that long before he wrote this, two of his sisters-in-law—his second wife's sister, Alida Beekman Chanler (Mrs. C. Temple Emmet), and their brother Winthrop Chanler's wife, Margaret Terry Chanler—had become converts to the Roman Church. He appears to have been very fond of both, especially Margaret, to whom he wrote many letters. Happily for him, his second wife, Elizabeth Chanler, remained a staunch Protestant. Some of the language he used in the nine "Sonnets to Elizabeth" he wrote while courting her reflects the almost religious passion he gave to everything he cared about, as can be seen from this one:

If all the love I send thee were made known
And all the world were called upon to note;
If every word I spoke were written down
And every line were printed that I wrote;

Nay, further,—if unholy curious eyes
Should ravin every corner of the scroll,
Probe undecypherable mysteries
And catalogue the contents of my soul;

And if each indiscriminate pillager
Were let to rummage to his heart's content,
The loving one to find his forage there,
The cynic to piece out his argument;

So but thy name untouchable remained,
That sack would leave the shrine all unprofaned.¹⁶

Chapman's religious fervor seems to have been at the root of a "nervous collapse" he suffered while at St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire. He was withdrawn from the school and later prepared by private tutors for Harvard, where, in 1883, he wrote "A Prayer," the opening lines of which suggest an inner conflict between doubt and a desire to act according to God's will:

O God, when the heart is warmest,
And the head clearest,
Give me to act:
To turn the purposes thou formest
Into fact.
O God, when what is dearest
Seems most dear,
And the path before lies straight,
With neither Chance nor Fate
In my career, –
Then let me act. The wicked gate
In sight, let me not wait, not wait. . . .¹⁷

Music evoked in him something akin to this religious passion. Twice in his life he tried to master the violin—the first time as an undergraduate, the second at the age of thirty-eight, while recovering from his third "nervous collapse." Two of his poems are celebrations of string quartets, from the better of which, "Chamber Music," I quote two stanzas:

The scattered sheets of music on the floor
Reflect a lustre from the yellow flame.
My sight dissolves. . . Lo, Haydn at the door
Enters like some stiff angel from his frame,
Bearing the bundle of his latest score
Which he distributes, smiling to the blessed four.

Haydn is dead, you say? He dies no more
So long as these shall meet. A magic wand
Brings the old Master through the shadowy door,
And upright in the midst his soul doth stand,
While through the chords his sunny force doth pour.
Ah Haydn, hast thou truly ever lived before?¹⁸

Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Mozart, Schubert, and Wagner are the composers he mentions most feelingly in his letters—all but one of them German. But the reverence he felt for them was matched by the vehemence of his political outrage at the rise of German, and especially Prussian, power. During the late nineties, he published a journal dedicated to reform called *The Political Nursery*; the midsummer issue of 1898 included his poem on the death of Bismarck, from which these prophetic lines are taken:

The age is just beginning, yet we see
The fruits of hatred ripen hourly
And Germany's in bondage—muzzled press—
The private mind suppressed, while shade on shade
Is darkening o'er the intellectual sky.
And world-forgotten, outworn crimes and cries
With dungeon tongue accost the citizen
And send him trembling to his family. . . .¹⁹

His own hatred of German militarism ripened to a fierce intensity sixteen years later in the Great War, culminating in this passage from “Lines,” a poem celebrating Lafayette Day, 1918:

And even while we hold our holiday
The Allied ranks in fierce array
Press on the foe like huntsmen on the prey:
The Wild Boar of the North is brought to bay!
. . . .
The Teuton beast is lurching toward his lair.
The boar is sorely wounded; but beware!
Strike, when you strike, to kill! For in his eye
Cunning and hatred shine, a ghastly pair!²⁰

The Great War moved Chapman to write some of his strongest poems, beginning with “1914”:

Alas, too much we loved the glittering wares
That art and education had devised
To charm the leisure of philosophers;
The thought, the passion have been undersized
In Europe's over-educated brain;
And while the savants attitudinized,
Excess of learning made their yearning vain
Till Fate broke all the toys and cried,
*Begin again!*²¹

To blame the war on “undersized” thought and passion in “Europe’s over-educated brain” is hardly plausible as historical explanation, but Chapman was not alone in thinking prewar European culture decadent, and there were many like him, on both sides of the Atlantic, who welcomed the war at first, thinking it would purge Europe of that decadence.²² One may also see in this poem a reflection of Chapman’s characteristic ambivalence toward the culture to which he devoted so much of his life, both as traveler and translator—an ambivalence shared by many men of his class, including his friend William James and Theodore Roosevelt.

In August, the first month of the war, Chapman’s first-born son, Victor, enlisted in the Foreign Legion, transferring less than a year later to the American Aviation Corps, better known as the Lafayette Escadrille. Two years later, in June 1917, Victor was killed. Chapman’s reaction was characteristically a mixture of grief and pride. He wrote to a friend,

Victor’s death . . . became a sort of symbol of the emotion aroused by all the Americans’ aggregate work. This has changed the standing of the whole country in France. . . . The consolatory feature of it is that the individual has so much power—a few insuppressible individuals change the reputation of a hundred million.²³

This same attitude is celebrated in the following stanza from “Heroes”:

All that philosophy might guess
These children of the light
In one bright act of death compress,
Then vanish from our sight.²⁴

But his deeper feelings of grief came out in this fine Italian sonnet, addressed to Victor’s dog:

“To A Dog”

Past happiness dissolves. It fades away,
Ghost-like, in that dim attic of the mind
To which the dreams of childhood are consigned.
Here, withered garlands hang in slow decay,
And trophies glimmer in the dying ray
Of stars that once with heavenly glory shined.
But you, old friend, are you still left behind
To tell the nearness of life's yesterday?
Ah, boon companion of my vanished boy,
For you he lives; in every sylvan walk
He waits; and you expect him everywhere.
How would you stir, what cries, what bounds of joy,
If but his voice were heard in casual talk,
If but his footstep sounded on the stair!²⁵

Both his sense of personal loss and his compensatory faith in the value of heroic action were celebrated together in these two passages from one of his finest odes, “May, 1917”:

Alas, the spring! Ah, liquid light,
Your vistas of transparent green
Fall on my spirit like a blight.
The tapestries you hang on high
Are like a pageant to a sick man's eye,
Or sights in fever seen.
Behind your bowers and your blooms
Volcanic desolation looms;
Your life doth death express;
Each leaf proclaims a blackened waste,
Each bud, a wilderness.
And all your lisping notes are drowned
By one deep murmur underground
That tells us joy is fled . . .

Would that I had perished with the past!
Would I had shared the fate
Of those who heard the trumpet-call
And rode upon the blast,—
Who stopped not to debate,
Nor strove to save,
But giving life, gave all,
Casting their manhood as a man might cast
A rose upon a grave. . . .²⁶

This was followed by a much longer poem, "Ode on the Sailing of our Troops for France: Dedicated to President Wilson," published in *The North American Review*, in November 1917. As Howe reports, "A letter of gratitude from the President saying that he had read the Ode twice to his family—and all approved highly—was received with obvious satisfaction."²⁷ The poem ends with a ringing apostrophe, beginning with these lines:

Go, Western Warriors! Take the place
The ages have assigned you in a strife
Which to have died in were enough of life. . . .²⁸

Chapman concludes his only book of lyric verse with an epigrammatic epitaph:

"The Moral of History"
All is one issue, every skirmish tells,
And war is but the picture in the story;
The plot's below: from time to time upwells
 A scene of blood and glory,
That makes us understand the allegory,—
A lurid flash of verse,—and at its close
 Recurring, undescipherable prose.²⁹

Chapman was married to his second wife, Elizabeth Chanler, in 1898, and in 1905 they moved to Sylvania, a grand house and farm they built in Barrytown next to Rokeby, the Astor family house in which Elizabeth, one of the so-called Astor Orphans, had grown up. Before the marriage, the prospect of living as a well-off country squire had made him apprehensive. He had written Elizabeth,

The first thing you know we'll be drowned in possessions. . . . It is not easy to keep the keen vision which an empty stomach lends, if you have footmen. I fear the footman. I tremble before a man with hot water. . . . Let's keep the New Testament open before us. The losing of wrath is to be feared.³⁰

But it was there in Barrytown that he wrote most of his poems and plays, and there he died on November 4, 1933.

Notes

1. Edmund Wilson, *The Triple Thinkers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 133.
2. Jacques Barzun, ed., *The Selected Writings of John Jay Chapman* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Cudahy, 1957), xv.
3. Larzer Ziff, *The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 244.
4. Wilson, *The Triple Thinkers*, 151.
5. *Ibid.*, 152.
6. M. A. DeWolf Howe, *John Jay Chapman and His Letters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937), 33.
7. Melvin H. Bernstein, *John Jay Chapman* (New Haven: College and University Press, 1964), 95.
8. *Ibid.*, 95.
9. Howe, *Chapman and His Letters*, 322.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
12. John Jay Chapman, *Songs and Poems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1919), 42–45.
13. Barzun, *Selected Writings*, xiv.
14. Howe, *Chapman and His Letters*, 170.
15. *Ibid.*, 344.
16. *Ibid.*, 130–31.
17. *Ibid.*, 32.
18. Chapman, *Songs and Poems*, 23–25.
19. Howe, *Chapman and His Letters*, 135.
20. Chapman, *Songs and Poems*, 79–81.
21. *Ibid.*, 49.
22. See especially Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1991), 12–14 ff.
23. Howe, *Chapman and His Letters*, 323.
24. Chapman, *Songs and Poems*, 50–51.
25. *Ibid.*, 52.
26. *Ibid.*, 54–57.
27. Howe, *Chapman and His Letters*, 297.
28. Chapman, *Songs and Poems*, 58–67.
29. *Ibid.*, 86.
30. Wilson, *The Triple Thinkers*, 148.