

John Jay Chapman: An Appreciation

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Among the anecdotes that come down to us from men who knew John Jay Chapman in his youth are these. A classmate of his at the St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire, recalls Chapman's habit of passing his hands over a Latin textbook, as if warming them at a fire; his idea was that "the language would enter his system through the pores." The novelist Owen Wister recalls from the same epoch Chapman's strange distraction while at the game of cricket. Chapman would stand, sublimely oblivious to the ball that flew toward the wicket he guarded. Why? He was lost in prayer.¹

Captured here is Chapman's strange unworldliness, an abstraction that became, with him, a principle by which to live, though it was accompanied always by the conviction that duty to the other world is best fulfilled by intervention in the imperfect, fallen, games-playing world we actually inhabit. This way of taking hold on the present world, as from a position of Ideality, was in fact Chapman's great inheritance from his abolitionist forebears, among whom, most notably, was his grandmother, Maria Weston Chapman, an associate of William Lloyd Garrison.

Chapman writes in a memoir that lay unpublished at his death: "In Boston, antislavery continued to be taboo. Friendly relations were never re-established between the Garrisonians and the social life of Boston. The breach which began in 1829 lasted for a generation after the war." The reason was that the abolitionists "broke with ritual, with ceremony, with all the conventional pieties of religion, and they never thereafter had time

to improvise substitutes of their own” (14-15). This latter omission was, in Chapman’s view, a great good fortune, for he developed early on a contempt for convention and ceremony, and above all for institutions (in his later years this *echt* protestant contempt for institutional authority led him to assail the Roman Catholic Church). He was “an inward creature,” as he put it, “walking about in worlds unrealized” (22).² And as for “institutions of all kinds,” he has this to say: “A jail, a lunatic asylum, a summer school—community life of any sort, is a sanitarium. It says to me, ‘Good morning; have you used Pear’s soap? Now you may take ten minutes on the treadmill. It is such wholesome exercise.’ I cannot bear to pass a town high school” (22). The rather general and innocuous—in fact, conventionally eulogistic—word “community” is allowed, here, to assume a sinister air. In this sentence of Chapman’s about the town high school we might fancifully hear a word of admonition for us in the too civic-minded, too politely like-minded literary wing of the academy. And we may surely find in his example as a literary critic a bracing independence of mind that has its proper correlative, always, in a prose style as unforgettable and emphatically personal as it now is rare.

Chapman admired the Garrisonian abolitionists for their utter indifference to the treadmills and wholesome exercises of the respectable classes. He carried Emersonian self-reliance to its logical extension. Likely he regretted that the breach between the abolitionists and Boston society was ever healed at all. He wants the breach there. It is an index of the agitating disparity between the Ideal and the Actual, between the Real and the Apparent, and between the Eternal and the merely Temporal. After all, “society” has everything to do with ritual, convention, piety, and ceremony, everything to do with form. And in the abolitionists Chapman found men and women who had the antinomian informality, and also the perfect conviction, of Thoreau.

“It is a ridiculous demand,” Thoreau says in *Walden*, “which England and America make, that you shall speak so that they can understand you. Neither men nor toadstools grow so. As if that were important, and there were not enough to understand you without them. As if Nature could support but one order of understandings, could not sustain birds as well as quadrupeds, flying as well as creeping things, and hush and whoa, which Bright can understand, were the best English. As if there were safety in stupidity alone. I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be *extra-vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced” (346).

Chapman’s singular achievement was to have carried the high-strung, antinomian temper of Garrisonian abolitionism into the 1890s and beyond, an era during which it struck most Americans as quaint and embarrassing, and struck many as an evil absolutely to be shunned; and to have carried it as well into the practice of literary criticism, where it has scarcely been seen since, save in the work of (say) Yvor Winters. Louis Menand has suggested (in *The Metaphysical Club* [2000] and elsewhere) that one of the great (and, to his mind, fortunate) casualties of the American Civil War was precisely the utopian absolutism that made men willing to kill and die for an idea. What replaced that absolutism was the more worldly, contingent, and compromising philosophy of pragmatism. Men no longer wandered about “in worlds unrealized” to which they demanded the “realized” world somehow *must* be made to correspond. Though Chapman went through Harvard precisely when this new way of thinking was consolidating itself, and though he was a friend and correspondent of William James, as much as anyone the ameliorating architect of pragmatism, he could never be at ease in a world without, as James put it in *Pragmatism*, “Truth with a big T” (232).

That is why Chapman remains, in our own era of the uncertainty principle, a bracing study in letters. “It is an accident when I *do* right,” he once wrote to his second wife, “but I *am* right” (Howe 8).

We, in all our English Departments, still know far too little of Chapman; we certainly seldom assign him. I hope, in this appreciation, to help right that wrong, in howsoever slight a way. Chapman confined himself to no single genre, writing poetry, plays (many of them for children), criticism, political theory, and journalism, and producing translations of the Greek dramatists and of Dante (among others). For some years after his death there was no good selection of his writings available. Jacques Barzun’s *Selected Writings of John Jay Chapman* remedied the problem in 1957, though it has since gone out of print and is in any case a compact volume. *Unbought Spirit: A John Jay Chapman Reader*, edited by Richard Stone in 1998, is a good supplement to Barzun’s volume (Barzun, in fact, supplies the “Foreword”). But no comprehensive edition of Chapman has ever been undertaken. The most remarkable documents he left us are probably his letters, where the prose approaches an intense, difficult beauty that has few parallels in American literature. Mark Anthony DeWolfe Howe’s *John Jay Chapman and His Letters* (1937; never re-printed), with its tactful biographical commentary, will doubtless remain, for many years to come, the volume with which any reader should begin.

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Chapman was born on March 2, 1862, in New York City, the son of Wall Street stockbroker Henry Grafton Chapman and Eleanor Jay Chapman. On his mother’s side he was descended from U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Jay, and on his father’s, as I say, from Maria Weston Chapman. A certain habit of political agitation, an almost fanatical devotion to the idea of

liberty, and a scorching conscience were among his great inheritances from these ancestors. In 1876 Chapman entered the St. Paul's School mentioned above, though illness forced him to leave after two terms. Over the next few years he prepared himself privately to enter Harvard University, which he did in 1880. After graduating four years later, he toured Europe for a while, and met, among other notables, Tennyson, Henry James, and Robert Louis Stevenson. On his return to the United States he entered Harvard Law School and, during his time there, the incident that most vividly marks him took place.

Chapman had fallen in love with Minna Timmins, an Italian-American woman of great charm. And at a party in Cambridge he assaulted a man whom he imagined (without reason) to be his rival for her hand, Percival Lowell (the mathematician and astronomer, and a scion of the Boston Brahmin Lowells). His conscience so tormented him that, on returning to his rooms, he thrust his left hand into a coal-burning stove and held it there, searing it so badly as to leave the knuckles exposed. "This will not do," he remembers having said as he backed away from the fire. The hand had to be amputated. But after an enforced separation—on which the Timmins family insisted—he did in fact marry Minna in 1889. Something of his depth of feeling for her may be discerned in the following portrait, which he set down in an introduction to a volume of letters by his son Victor: "She had the man-minded seriousness of women in classic myths, the regular brown, heavy dark hair, and free gait of the temperament that lives in heroic thought and finds the world full of chimeras, of religious mysteries, sacrifice, purgation. This part of her nature was her home and refuge. Here dwelt the impersonal power that was never far from her. There have been few women like her; and most of them have existed only in the imagination of Aeschylus

and the poets” (Howe 71).

Chapman was admitted to the New York bar in 1888, the year before his marriage to Minna. But he never practiced law seriously, and, as his father had left him financially independent, he didn’t have to. Later, he described his flirtation with the law in a memoir that still has never been published in full: “As I worked in the office I writhed in pain—the entire length and breadth of my physical system. . . I got up and clutched the desk and prayed. . . I had my head bound with a cap of iron, and when I used to stop working the suspended agony came down like a cataract, and I went uptown trembling, crying” (Howe 63). His real aspirations were political and literary, and he soon became deeply involved in the City Reform Club of New York, agitating against, among other things, the corruption of Tammany Hall. Out of his work here came two books, *Causes and Consequences* (1898), an engaging study of politics, education, and government, and *Practical Agitation* (1900), a sort of handbook for reformers. During the same years he wrote some of the best literary and cultural criticism he was ever to publish—in fact, it is among the best ever published in America by anyone; and he edited a highly eccentric journal of commentary called *The Political Nursery*, of which thirty-six numbers were issued between March 1897 and January 1901. The journal carried above its mast-head this slogan: “The object of THE NURSERY is to tell the truth. There is no publication at present which seems to cover this exact field.” The journal printed editorials, poetry, book reviews, essays, and ranged widely in topic. Chapman never limited himself to the vagaries of New York City machine politics. In fact, as Melvin Bernstein puts it, “the politics of his native city had grown to include the politics of his country, of England, of France, and, indeed, of the world. The corrupt politician merged in his Abolition-haunted mind

with the lyncher of Negroes,” and also with the colonial bureaucrats who administered the lives of Filipinos, or Indians, or Congolese. “Chapman’s conscience,” Bernstein concludes, “had caught the cosmos, in which justice and love, the head and the heart, were locked in a gigantic, painful embrace; and its pain Chapman felt in the marrow of his bones” (34). Doubtless he did feel it. The years of political work told on his tightly-wound constitution. He suffered a nervous collapse in 1901, from which he did not recover fully for ten years.

Minna had died in 1897, shortly after the birth of their third son, and the next year Chapman married Elizabeth Chanler, with whom he would remain for the rest of his life, and who gave birth, in 1901, to his fourth son and last child. (Two sons would not survive him: one died by drowning in 1903, another was killed in France during World War I.) Though he traveled with some regularity in Europe, Chapman remained based in New York until his death in a Poughkeepsie hospital in 1933, with Elizabeth at his side.

Chapman’s essays bear relatively little resemblance to what now passes for literary criticism, at least as this is practiced in the academy. And yet we read his critical essays now as if on the day they first saw print. Nothing about them is dated. Chapman’s essay on Emerson, for example—published first in two installments in the *Atlantic Monthly* and later collected in *Emerson and Other Essays* (1898)—answers all the necessities. He is acutely sensitive to the effect, on the reader, of Emerson’s remarkable style. “There is no question,” writes Chapman in a paragraph that might well describe his own writing, “that the power to throw your sifter into a receptive mood by a pass or two which shall give you his virgin attention is necessary to any artist. Nobody has the knack of this more strongly than Emerson in his prose writings. By a phrase or a common remark he creates

an ideal atmosphere in which his thought has the directness of great poetry” (91-92). Any good reader will recognize in this her own experience of (say) the following passage in Emerson, which begins in platitude and ends in provocation: “Let us be poised, and wise, and our own, today. Let us treat men and women well: treat them as if they were real: perhaps they are” (479). Or of this passage, whose queer glamour is by no means distinct from its cruelty: “How shall a man escape from his ancestors, or draw off from his veins the black drop which he drew from his father’s or his mother’s life? It often appears in a family, as if all the qualities of the progenitors were potted in several jars,—some ruling quality in each son or daughter of the house,—and sometimes the unmixed temperament, the rank unmitigated elixir, the family vice, is drawn off in a separate individual, and the others are proportionally relieved” (946).

Chapman lays his finger precisely on the thing that connects the style to the thought, the medium to the message, as good literary critics do. He puts us in touch not merely with Emerson, but with *Emerson thinking*. “It is noticeable that in some of Emerson’s important lectures,” Chapman explains, “the logical scheme is more perfect than in his essays. The truth seems to be that in the process of working up and perfecting his writings, in revising and filing his sentences, the logical scheme became more and more obliterated. Another circumstance helped make his style fragmentary. He was by nature a man of inspirations and exalted moods. He was subject to ecstasies during which his mind worked with phenomenal brilliance. Throughout his works and in his diary we find constant reference to these moods, and to his own inability to control or recover them” (27). Surely Chapman is correct, here, in locating the key to Emerson’s saltatory style in this peculiar feature of his temperament. Of course, strong criticism, of

which this is a fine example, always shows us how style emanates from character—or, to borrow a phrase from Robert Frost, from the way a man generally “carries himself” in the world.

Chapman is also a first-rate reader of Emerson’s poetry, which fact alone sets him in elect company (Emerson’s poetry is far too seldom read, save for a few anthology pieces). Emerson, he points out, is “never merely conventional, and his poetry, like his prose, is homespun and sound.” He “writes our domestic dialect,” Chapman suggests in a letter composed while he was at work on the essay; all other American writers are “Britannia ware and French kid” (Howe 77). And yet Emerson’s ear, Chapman points out, “was defective: his rhymes are crude, and his verse is often lame and unmusical, a fault which can be countervailed by nothing but force, and force he lacks” (87). Chapman continues with a devastating quotation:

To say that his ear was defective is hardly strong enough. Passages are not uncommon which hurt the reader and unfit him to proceed; as, for example:

Thorough a thousand voices
Spoke the universal dame:
‘Who telleth one of my meanings
Is master of all I am,’

He himself has very well described the impression his verse is apt to make on a new reader when he says, ‘Poetry must not freeze, but flow.’ (87)

The voice hardly knows what to do with this quatrain. Four three-stress lines were never more uncertainly joined, though we critics have by now rather lost the habit of attending to such matters as the freeze and flow of a line of verse.

But even were his sensibility not so nuanced and receptive as to be “hurt” by a halting meter, and even were he not gifted with a knack for apt quotation, Chapman’s essay on Emerson would be indispensable, if only because it so tellingly links both the style and the thought of that great writer to the history of the period in which he wrote. His is a literary criticism always inflected by a more or less “historical” concern. “Let us remember the world upon which the young Emerson’s eyes opened,” Chapman explains. “The South was a plantation. The North crooked the hinges of the knee where thrift might follow fawning.” “This time of humiliation,” he continues, “when there was no free speech, no literature, little manliness, no reality, no simplicity, no accomplishment, was the era of American brag. We flattered the foreigner and we boasted of ourselves. We were over-sensitive, insolent, and cringing.” And “underneath everything lay a feeling of unrest, an instinct—‘this country cannot permanently endure half slave and half free’—which was the truth, but which could not be uttered” (9). Such was the temper of the nation from the Missouri Compromise (1820) to 1861, when war offered its terrible release. In this context Emerson’s mercurial, experimental style was itself a revolution. “Open his works at a hazard,” says Chapman. “You hear a man talking” (32)—a rare thing in antebellum America, with its well-nigh totalitarian drift, seized, as it was, by what used to be called The Slaveocracy. Chapman’s Emerson is insurgent, a hater of tyranny of all kinds, but a hater most of what Chapman calls “the tyranny of democracy” (4). “The merit of Emerson was that he felt the

atmospheric pressure” of all the timidity and cowardice and temporizing of the antebellum years without ever quite knowing its reason: “He felt he was a cabined, cribbed, confined creature, although every man about him was celebrating Liberty and Democracy, and every day was Fourth of July. He taxes language to its limits in order to express his revolt.” Chapman sums it all up with *éclat*: Emerson, he says, teaches us “that every man will write well in proportion as he has contempt for the public” (103). Something of Chapman’s own situation in the 1890s, when he wrote this essay, enters into this, because, as he suggests, “much of what Emerson wrote about the United States in 1850 is true of the United States to-day. It would be hard to find a civilized people who are more timid, more cowed in spirit, more illiberal than we are” (103). The great advances toward real liberty made, however awkwardly, between 1865 and 1876—most especially during Grant’s first administration—had been in full retreat since the Reconstruction was destroyed by the Revolution of 1876-1877 that placed Hayes in the White House. Chapman’s essay on Emerson is, among many other things, an effort to evoke a radical, clarifying spirit that seemed to have passed utterly from the American scene.

So much for Emerson’s strengths. Chapman apprehends so perfectly his weaknesses as to disconcert (and also preempt) the most debunking of contemporary adversarial critics. Nothing escapes him, as when he speaks tellingly of “a certain lack of historic sense” in all that Emerson wrote. “The ethical assumption that all men are exactly alike permeates his work,” says Chapman. “In his mind, Socrates, Marco Polo, and General Jackson stand surrounded by the same atmosphere, or rather stand as mere naked characters surrounded by no atmosphere at all. He is probably the last great writer who will fling about classic anecdotes as if they were club gossip”

(43). As for the habit of abstraction that early on mitigated Emerson's commitment to abolition, Chapman says: "Not pity for the slave, but indignation at the violation of the Moral Law by Daniel Webster, was at the bottom of Emerson's anger. His abolitionism was secondary to his main mission, his main enthusiasm" (52). Harsh words in their way, but they must be said.

Many readers of Emerson have noted a strangely inhuman chill at the heart of his writings, but none has expressed the problem so well as Chapman. "Human sentiment," he says, "was known to Emerson mainly in the form of pain. His nature shunned it; he cast it off as quickly as possible. There is a word or two in the essay on Love which seems to show that the inner and diaphanous core of this seraph had once, but not for long, been shot with blood: he recalls only the pain of it." Emerson, he concludes, "makes us clutch about us to catch hold, if we somehow may, of the hand of a man" (71). The problem appears to have been that "the sensuous and ready contact with nature which more carnal people enjoy was unknown" to Emerson: "His eyes saw nothing; his ears heard nothing. He believed that men traveled for distraction and to kill time. The most vulgar plutocrat could not be blinder to beauty nor bring home less from Athens than this cultivated man" (77-78). Even more devastating is the following: "If an inhabitant of another planet should visit the earth," Chapman asserts, "he would receive, on the whole, a truer notion of human life by attending an Italian opera than he would by reading Emerson's volumes. He would learn from the Italian opera that there were two sexes; and this, after all, is probably the fact with which the education of such a stranger ought to begin" (83). Whereupon Chapman continues:

In a review of Emerson's personal character and opinions, we are thus led to see that his philosophy, which finds no room for the emotions, is a faithful exponent of his own and of the New England temperament, which distrusts and dreads the emotions. Regarded as a sole guide to life for a young person of strong conscience and undeveloped affections, his works might conceivably be even harmful because of their unexampled power of purely intellectual stimulation. (83)

Criticism seldom has the courage to say, at least to the purposes Chapman has in view here, that a great writer's works might possibly be "harmful." To say so credits literary writing with real power, and it does this in such a way as always to indicate that the critic himself is susceptible to that power. By comparison to what Chapman gives us, the cynicism of so much literary criticism of the last thirty years—criticism that often delights in showing that the monumental writers of the past had feet of clay—seems almost to proceed from weakness, if not from insensibility. The wary condescension many of our better "Roundhead" critics, so to speak, display toward literature has more to do with an abiding suspicion that great writing might have real power over *someone* than with the conviction that it has had power over *them*. "I scarcely know," writes Chapman in an essay on *Hamlet*, "what it is that puts the critic above the author, and provides him with his historic and invulnerable complacency; but I think it is due to leisure and the cheapness of writing materials" (Barzun 33). The charge is as contemporary as today's news, and we ought to heed it, lest our complacencies grow invulnerable.

A fitting coda to any short review of Chapman's literary criticism is the

following passage, which occurs in an 1891 letter to Mrs. James T. Fields, wife of the Boston publisher. It must be taken whole.

I hate sonnets because they are the most literary of all the forms of verse—even our best English poets are on their best literary behavior in the sonnet—their best foreign manner gloved and scented. Shakespeare’s sonnets stand by themselves. They have the charm of his poetry, his songs and madrigals—and it is his own. They don’t pretend to be sonnets. They don’t follow the traditions of sonnets and they don’t smell like sonnets. Michael Angelo being an Italian was at home, so to speak, in the sonnet and wasn’t obliged to imitate anyone in particular—(for an Englishman to write a sonnet is as if he should try to say his prayers in French) and Michael Angelo was constantly taken up only with the endeavor to say the thing—he was not giving sops to literary tradition. He was like a powerful man packing a carpet bag—when he has too many things to go in. You can see the veins swell on his forehead as he grips the edges and tries to make it close. Half the time he takes everything out again on the floor and makes a new arrangement—with the shaving brush at the bottom—and then he is so uncertain which is best that he allows both readings to stand. But they have thought in ’em. There is not a fraud nor a paper stuffing nor a filigree ornament in the volume—and O, how can we ever be grateful enough for this! Here is a man that writes poetry as good as prose. [The language of his sonnets] is colloquial and simple—anything but literary. (Howe 85)

Into this one paragraph Chapman condenses a highly suggestive history of

the short poem in English in the age of Shakespeare. Astutely (if impatiently) Chapman scouts what would later be called the Petrarchan or—somewhat more grandly—the “golden” style in English verse, as we find it, say, in the sonnets of Spenser and Sidney. He understands how utterly “secondary” that poetry can often be, even at its best, what with its continental and Latinate affectations, and with its often stultifying conventionality—and all this at precisely the time when English lyric poetry was, in its other phases, attaining an astonishing colloquial vigor (in Donne), a purity and simplicity of diction (in Herbert and Jonson), a brilliantly expressive facility with structure (again, in Herbert), an unrivaled grace and poise (in Jonson again), and a complexity in thought and argument (alike in Shakespeare, Greville, Donne, and Herbert) which was never really to be matched again. And if that weren’t enough, Chapman whimsically outlines just how difficult it can be, even for a poet native to the form, to “pack” a sonnet; it is a very tight valise. One can’t mistake the easy familiarity of Chapman’s account of Michelangelo at work (the swelling of the veins in the forehead, the shaving brush); he came by this naturally, having himself translated the sonnets—or, to take up his metaphor, having himself unpacked and repacked them for a transatlantic journey into his own American English. This intimacy with the sonnet in its native context probably accounts for Chapman’s feeling that the form wears so badly in English. In fact, sonnets in English seem to have struck his ear like a phony accent.

But the best of this remarkable letter is still to come:

Do you know I really believe that there’s a great deal of humbug talked about workmanship and form in poetry. These things are results—the shimmer and gleam that come from saying things well.

They are not entities. They are no more things in themselves than the relation between two lights is a thing in itself, and anyone who sets to work to put good form on his poetry is like the man in the story who wanted good architecture put on to his house. These Aldriches who think style is the *means* of saying things well! How false is a philosophy of composition which admits that there is such a thing as beauty—as an end to be reached—and yet this simple proposition seems like a paradox—what better proof could we have of how thoroughly the plagiarists have overcrawled the world? ‘Use beauty-wash!’ they cry—patent Italian sonnet-varnish—the only thing that has stood the test of time. Use the celebrated ‘Milton finish’ for odes, epics and epitaphs—cures lame feet and rhumatism. Use the Petrarch burnisher—porcelain-lined, it secures fame. Use Shakespolio, Wordsworthene, and Racine—they never vary and are *Reliable*’—Is it a wonder a man will not arrive anywhere if he spends all his life getting forward and backward over his style? (Howe 85-86)

Seldom has the folly of abstracting “form” from meaning, or beauty from truth, been so forcefully expressed. The topic occasions a wicked satire of the off-the-shelf gentility, and the superficial polish, of American verse in the years between the end of Reconstruction and the turn of the century—a gentility which Chapman rightly associates with the genteel editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Thomas Bailey Aldrich. (Chapman wonderfully achieves, here—and effortlessly, to boot—what Ezra Pound tried so often, and so inadequately, to achieve in his letters and essays of the 1910s, and also in *Lustra*.) The parody of American advertising jargon with which the letter concludes is used to make a definite point. American poetry, by the end of

the nineteenth century, had been assimilated to the culture of commerce and business, with the result that it, too, took on something of the timidity and unacknowledged dishonesty of that culture. Our poetry had become a well-adjusted sub-department of the literary “Ideological State Apparatus,” to use the ponderous Althusserian term.⁴ It was a Rotarian sort of poetry, a poetry written to please, and above all never to startle or offend. In any case, it was the characteristic expression of an era that hardly knew what to do with the “lame feet and rhytmatism” of so unkempt and original a writer as Emily Dickinson (she always “varied,” and she wasn’t “reliable”).

In a revealing essay of the period, titled “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business,” William Dean Howells writes: “At present business is the only human solidarity; we are all bound together with that chain, whatever intentions and tastes and principles separate us.” Human solidarity is all well and good, but what if it is the solidarity of being bound by a chain? The metaphor is not especially appealing, suggesting, as it does, constraint and bondage rather than the affectionate attractions of community. And what of those separate “intentions and tastes and principles” that promise to undermine this solidarity? Howells does not clarify these differences; he leaves the reader to wonder how comfortably they are accommodated within the larger solidarity of commerce. The artist, Howells says later in the essay, must “have a low rank among practical people; and he will be regarded by the great mass of Americans as perhaps a little off, a little funny, a little soft! Perhaps not; and yet I would rather not have a consensus of public opinion on the question; I think I am more comfortable without it” (4-6). Howells is not really aggrieved. But an uneasiness is nonetheless evident when he concedes: “I feel quite sure that in writing of the Man of Letters as a Man of Business I shall attract far more readers than I shall in writing of him as

an Artist. Besides, as an artist he has been done a great deal already; and a commercial state like ours has really more concern with him as a business man” (4). What better commentary on these developments than Chapman’s letter to Mrs. Fields? In a few sentences, he tells us most of what we need to know about the status of the artist “in a commercial state like ours,” and about the work of poetry in an age of Taylorised mechanical reproduction. Chapman’s letters are full of literary criticism of the sort we find here—brilliant, provocative, inspired, and for the most part un-amenable to the conventions of the published essay. They should be required reading in any English Department.

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By all accounts the best of Chapman’s books is *William Lloyd Garrison*. “The idea of the book,” he wrote to his mother on Christmas Day, 1911, as he began work on it, “is to put something into the hands of the young person which will be an introduction to the whole subject. I intend the volume not so much as the end and summary, but as the opening up of a field of historical research” (Howe 222). The book appeared first in 1913, and then again, in a second edition, in 1921, by which time the events of World War I had thrown its subject into a new light, so far as Chapman was concerned. “The flames of the Great War,” he explained in a preface to the 1921 edition, have “passed through us,” with the result that we have a “keener, more religious, and more dramatic understanding of our Anti-slavery period than we possessed prior to 1914.” The “tidal revulsion” of war had swept over all Europe and America, leaving “the tin cans and dead dogs of humanity” exposed to view (4). In the light of this awful revelation, he believed, Americans could look again at the epoch in their own history most marked, as Melvin Bernstein suggests, in his study of Chapman, by the “superiority

of money over people”—the epoch during which the Slave Power (as Chapman calls it) reached its apogee. As Emerson himself once said of that dark hour, in his “Ode Inscribed to William Ellery Channing”: Things were in the saddle, and rode men.

This is as good a point as any to examine Chapman’s prose style more closely, because nowhere is it better than in *William Lloyd Garrison*. Take the following passage, for example, which occurs in the “Introduction” to the book, and which requires, for its understanding, quotation at length.

The Civil War,—that war with its years of interminable length, its battles of such successive and monstrous carnage, its dragged-out reiterations of horror and agony, and its even worse tortures of hope deferred,—hope all but extinct,—that war of which it is impossible to read even a summary without becoming so worn out by distress that you forget everything that went before in the country’s history and emerge, as it were, a new man at the close of your perusal;—that war was no accident. It was involved in every syllable which every inhabitant of America uttered or neglected to utter in regard to the slavery question between 1830 and 1860. The gathering and coming on of that war, its vaporous distillation from the breath of every man, its slow, inevitable formation in the sky, its retreats and apparent dispersals, its renewed visibilities—all of them governed by some inscrutable logic—and its final descent in lightning and deluge;—these matters make the history of the interval between 1830 and 1865. That history is all one galvanic throb, one course of human passion, one Nemesis, one deliverance. And with the assassination of Lincoln in 1865 there falls from on high the great, unifying stroke

that leaves the tragedy sublime. No poet ever invented such a scheme of curse, so all-involving, so remotely rising in an obscure past and holding an entire nation in its mysterious bondage—a scheme based on natural law, led forward and unfolded from mood to mood, from climax to climax, and plunging at the close into the depths of a fathomless pity. The action of the drama is upon such a scale that a quarter of the earth has to be devoted to it. Yet the argument is so trite that it will hardly bear statement. Perhaps the true way to view the whole matter is to regard it as the throwing off by healthy morality of a little piece of left-over wickedness—that bad heritage of antiquity, domestic slavery. The logical and awful steps by which the process went forward merely exhibit familiar, moral, and poetic truth. What else could they exhibit? (6-7)

The sentences arise—it seems hardly appropriate to say that they are built, so inevitable does the unfolding progress feel—out of an intricate series of parallel clauses and phrases, many of them so recursively embedded in the clauses that precede them as to make the extrication of any single one of them an act of vandalism. The reader must take the passage whole, or not at all. Two metaphors integrate and control the writing here: the metaphor of a storm, and the metaphor of a dramatic tragedy. The storm begins, imperceptibly, in the “vaporous distillation” of the breath of “every American”; no man, no woman, lives without giving vent to it; it involves us all. And out of this vapor, over the course of thirty-five years, condense “clouds” that “inevitably” darken the skies, until a “deluge” falls upon a nation “cursed” by its own wickedness. The war had, for Chapman, a moral necessity—even what must be called an Old Testament sort of necessity—

just as it had for Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address.⁵ And Lincoln becomes, in Chapman's vision, the Christ-like sacrifice finally demanded of a guilty nation from "on high," as by a final, purifying bolt of lightning. The Civil War can be *interpreted*—can be said not to have been "an accident," and to contain "poetic truth"—precisely because it has the unity, and the terrible, pity-inducing perfection, of dramatic tragedy. Sophocles could not have done it better. Notice how Chapman's tone varies in this passage, from hyperbole (the war was "involved in every syllable which every inhabitant of America uttered or neglected to utter in regard to the slavery question between 1830 and 1860") to an almost winking sort of understatement ("a little piece of left-over wickedness—that bad heritage of antiquity, domestic slavery"). He is most comfortable, as a prose writer, with exhortation and invective, but within that sphere he has real range and nuance, even in passages like the one before us here, which work at the absolute height of intensity. In this he resembles no one so much as Garrison himself. Later, in but one of many unforgettable paragraphs in the book, Chapman sketches out a portrait of the abolitionist that might well have been drawn from his own dressing-table mirror: "We must imagine Garrison," Chapman writes, "behind and underneath the machinery and in touch with all the forces at work, writing away at his terrible *Liberator*—fomenting, rebuking, retorting, supporting, expounding, thundering, scolding. The continuousness of Garrison is appalling, and fatigues even the retrospective imagination of posterity: he is like an all-night hotel: he is possessed: he is like something let loose. I dread the din of him" (51). Never in the history of American biography has an author been better matched with his subject than in Chapman's *William Lloyd Garrison*.

Still, one reads the book today for more than its fomenting, rebuking,

retorting, thundering, scolding, exhilarating, exhausting style. The contribution to American historiography is real and enduring. Consider, for example, what might be called the “Slave Power” theory of antebellum history. The Garrisonians spoke of an America in thrall to a conspiracy they called The Slave Power, or, alternatively, the Slaveocracy. Henry Wilson—an early member of the Republican Party, and later Vice-President of the United States under Grant—argues the thesis at length in his three-volume *Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America*, which any reader acquainted with it is apt to recall in reading Chapman’s infinitely more succinct and stimulating *Garrison*. By 1850, thinking men saw (Wilson says) “that there must be some malignant and potent agency at work, that could accomplish such results and give such a character to the nation’s history”:

They called it the Slave Power. Though it had no ‘local habitation,’ it had a ‘name’⁶ that was a growing terror and alarm. They saw that there existed a commanding power in the land, which made its influence everywhere felt, by which all other influences were greatly modified, and before which all other interests were compelled in greater or less degree to bend. It was as if *somewhere* some imperious autocrat or secret conclave held court or council, in which slavery’s every interest, necessity, and demand were considered and cared for, and from which were issued its stern and inexorable decrees. (188)

Imagined, here, is a kind of shadow government, rapaciously anti-republican and, though feudal in disposition, as efficiently bureaucratic in its methods as the British Foreign Office. It is an incipiently totalitarian sort of state, rising up in the midst of our American Shining City Upon a

Hill (as the Puritans, and Peggy Noonan,⁷ called it), and contained within that City always as a kind of potential nightmare state. The Slave Power is our national doppelgänger, our double, our Mr. Hyde. Everywhere men like Wilson looked, they saw traces of it. Like God for St. Augustine—only this time He is infernal—the center of the Slave Power was everywhere and its circumference nowhere. Early post-Reconstruction historians treated the Slave Power thesis with scorn; it hardly accorded with the by-then cherished claim that the South had fought not for slavery, and out of venal economic interest, but for something called “States’ Rights,” and out of *principle*. Chapman’s *Garrison* may be read as a full bore attack on this conservative school of American historiography, which was, at the time, centered at Columbia University, where the influential historian William Dunning taught, and which held the floor pretty much until the 1950s. Only lately has the “slave power” thesis again begun to be taken seriously, as in Leonard Richards’s brilliant *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860* (2000).

In any case, Chapman, a most able expositor of the “Slave Power” argument, has, without quite knowing it, laid the foundations for a powerful (and historically nuanced) theory of antebellum American literature. As has been often enough pointed out, that literature is everywhere shadowed by anxiety, anger, and gloom—shadowed by what Melville, in an essay on Hawthorne, called “the power of blackness.” Hawthorne’s story “Young Goodman Brown,” first published in 1835, draws deeply on these anxieties. Its New England is a dubious place—a place of two aspects, radically opposed: there is prosperous piety on the one hand (here is what meets the eye), but there is also the intimation of seething corruption on the other (here is what haunts the mind). This is an eminently American portrait of

an eminently American world, and the outlines of it are lately familiar to us from such popular films as Oliver Stone's *JFK* and *Nixon*, where a "secret conclave," as Henry Wilson might say, works behind the daylight show of our government; or familiar to us, for that matter, from a TV series like *The X-Files*. Writers in the post-World War II period—Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder and Thomas Pynchon all come to mind—would find the American serpent not in the Slave Power, but in the new National Security State, which built up and maintained, during decades of Cold War, a stupendous arsenal of thermonuclear weapons, and which, moreover, evolved what seemed to some a potentially "totalitarian" internal security bureaucracy. In Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, the "secret conclave" takes the form of what Pynchon simply calls "The Firm," and it is transnational in reach, and so intimate in its invasions as to have appropriated, for its dark purposes, the body of the novel's hero Tyrone Slothrop (who is descended, as it happens, from an old New England family of Puritans). Mailer, in *Armies of the Night*, speaks of America as "Corporation Land"—he, too, draws on the language of commerce—and locates the black heart of it all in the Pentagon. Chapman, inveighing against a Slave Power that had hijacked the machinery of republican government—or fulminating, in *Causes and Consequences*, against the "commercial interests" that, in the 1890s, were doing the same thing—belongs in this counter-cultural tradition. His *Garrison* is best read along a line that extends back to *The Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America*, *The Confidence Man*, and "Young Goodman Brown," and then forward to *Armies of the Night* and *Vineland*.

In the theory of American history implied by Chapman's, Mailer's, and Pynchon's writings, the nation has always harbored within it a totalitarian

tendency, which now emerges, and now is kept in check, but which is never vanquished. According to Chapman, what Garrison saw so clearly in 1830 was simply that “the Slave Power was a Moloch which controlled the politics of the North and which, in the nature of things, could stick at nothing while engaged in perpetuating that control” (7). (Readers of Ginsberg’s *Howl* will recall that Moloch is also the name there given to America’s Satanic alter-ego.) This Moloch worked not merely through the instruments of the Congress, the White House, and the Federal Judiciary—that is, through “gag rules” prohibiting the reading of anti-slavery petitions on the floor of the House, through executive enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Bill, and through the *Dred Scott* decision in the Supreme Court. Its power was also felt in what Chapman calls “a policy of silence”: no one could speak honestly about the nation’s affairs. It was, Chapman claims, as if a great “paving-stone” had been “placed on the mouth of a natural spring” (11). Americans could say nothing without resort to euphemism, circumlocution, and evasive gentility. “It is hard,” Chapman explains, “to imagine the falsetto condition of life in the Northern States in 1829—the lack of spontaneity and naturalness about everybody, so far as externals went” (13).

In Chapman’s view, the great pattern for this habit of obfuscation was the Constitution itself, in the very framing of which one can trace “a certain suppression of truth, a certain trampling of instinct.” “All the parties to that instrument,” writes Chapman, and with good reason, “thoroughly understood the iniquity of slavery and deplored it. All the parties were ashamed of slavery and yet felt obliged to perpetuate it. They wrapped up a twenty-years’ protection of the African slave trade in a colorless phrase,” whereupon Chapman quotes the document itself: “The migration

or importation of such persons as any of the states now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the year one thousand eight hundred and eight.” The point Chapman would make is plain: “The African slave trade is probably the most brutal organized crime in history. Our fathers did not dare to name it” (12). And their timidity, their reflexive self-censorship—a censorship so efficient as to deceive even the canniest American into thinking that he actually knew his own heart and mind—came to characterize the American personality. The “leaden touch of hypocrisy” radiated outward from the Constitution, which Chapman calls the “Ark of our Covenant,” until it embraced us all. “Our whole civilization, our social life, our religious feelings, our political ideas, had all become accommodated to cruelty, representative of tyranny” (12). No wonder Huckleberry Finn lights out for Indian Territory, though, doubtless, even there—among Cherokee dislocated 2,000 miles west by Andrew Jackson—he will not escape the debilitating oppression of his American “conscience.” Tyranny had been made internal to each of us, and to be “American” was to be unaware of precisely that fact.

Of course, the tyranny was never perfect. Through fissures in the crust that lay so uneasily over the volcano there occasionally emerged infernal flashes of light—again, as when, in “Young Goodman Brown,” readers were invited to suppose, even if only through allegory, that our New England, our original “America,” may well have been pervaded by a wickedness no one had the courage to name in open meeting. And Chapman’s *Garrison* certainly helps us understand the latent Gothicism, the sense of ever-present evil, that darkens the great writings of the American Renaissance. “Everyone ought to have been happy” in that period, he points out. “Had not the country emerged from the War of Revolution in the shape of a new

and glorious Birth of Time—a sample to all mankind? Had it not survived the dangers of the second war with Great Britain? And what then remained for us except to go forward victoriously and become a splendid, successful, vigorous, and benevolent people?” (9-10).⁸ And yet it was a fact, Chapman contends, that “during the decade following the Missouri Compromise,” which seemed to have settled the slavery question, “everyone in America fell sick”: all went forward “under the gradually descending fringe of a mist, an unwholesome-feeling cloud of oppression” (9). All Americans were Young Goodman Brown—cursed by guilt, by doubt, and by suspicion; and certain that *somewhere*, even at the very hearthside of our faith, we harbored evil. Lincoln himself could not escape the disease. “One of Lincoln’s chief interests in life,” writes Chapman, “from early manhood onward, lay in emancipation. This he could not say and remain in politics; nay, he could not think it and remain in politics. He could not quite know himself and yet remain in politics. The awful weight of a creed that was never quite true—the creed of the Constitution—pressed down upon the intellects of our public men. That was the dower and curse of slavery” (74). In short, every American may see himself in Huck Finn—that naive boy who, though he might *do* the right thing for a fugitive slave, yet never is able to *think* his way beyond the ideological horizons of what the Slave Power, and white supremacy, saw fit to allow: in the name of these institutions he willingly condemns himself to Hell, and means it.

And yet for Chapman the outcome is never really in doubt. Slavery, like all wickedness, is doomed, because it is contrary to what Chapman calls “the great creative force of the universe” (125). Here, Chapman stands alongside Emerson in the conviction that the universe is, at bottom, good—in the belief that physical law is reducible to moral law, and that the tendency of

moral law is inevitably to realize itself in practical action of the sort that Garrison's life exemplified. The angels always find their instrument. This faith that the order of things is in fact a moral order, and that anything out of harmony with it must in due course perish, most marks Chapman as a belated antebellum thinker, for his contemporaries had certainly abandoned it. The cool, cynical temper of the 1890s was unfriendly to the development of what William James sympathetically called, in *The Will to Believe*, the "hot young moralist." Chapman and Stephen Crane both came into their own in the 1890s, and in New York City. But it is impossible to imagine two souls, two temperaments, more unlike. Here is Crane's word, from "The Open Boat" (1898), a story in which one can recognize the new way of thinking:

When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples. Any visible expression of nature would surely be pelleted with his jeers. Then, if there be no tangible thing to hoot he feels, perhaps, the desire to confront a personification and indulge in pleas, bowed to one knee, and with hands supplicant, saying: 'Yes, but I love myself.' A high cold star on a winter's night is the word he feels that she says to him. Thereafter he knows the pathos of his situation. (44-45)

And here is Chapman's word in *Garrison*, in which the old way of thinking has its Indian summer:

During all this time the stars were fighting against slavery. They

fought behind clouds and darkly for two hundred years; and at last their influence began to develop visible symptoms of cure. A very small part of life or history is ever visible, and it is only by inference that we know what powers have been at work; but in 1829 it is plain that some terrible drug is in operation in America. Whether this hot liquid was born in the vitals of the slave we do not know. It seems to me that the origin of it must have been in the slave himself; and that it was mystically transmitted to the Abolitionist, in whom it appeared as pity. We know that the drops of this pity had a peculiar, stimulating power on the earth—a dynamic, critical power, a sort of prison-piercing faculty, which sent voltages of electrical shock through humanity. (125)

In this assertion that the stars were all along fighting against slavery, which, for Chapman as for Emerson, is no mere figure of speech; in this assertion, then, that the stars are neither high, nor cold, nor indifferent to human purposes, lies Chapman's great difference with the America of the post-Reconstruction years—an epoch which, by the light he casts, must strike us now as a time of unthinking infidelity. Crane could find in the Civil War little more than a means to stage, with knowing condescension, a crisis in his protagonist's adolescence; "courage" is for him an empty word. Chapman saw in the war nothing less than "a mirror of the soul," and a "thesaurus of moral illustration" (132). "Courage," he tells us, "came back with the war," and was "but a sample thread of a new kind of life which trusts generous feelings, relies upon the unseen, is in union with the unconscious operations of the spirit" (128).

* * *

In the preface to his 1898 volume of social and political criticism, *Causes and Consequences*, Chapman makes a startling claim. “A normal and rounded development can only come from a use of faculties very different from that practised by the average American since the discovery of the cotton gin” (vii). The remark comes by way of introduction to a chapter on early childhood education—in fact, on kindergarten—and the relevance to that subject of the cotton gin is, in Chapman’s view, a matter to be taken seriously.

The cotton gin made cultivation of the crop on a large scale, and for export into a world market, immensely profitable. This development, in due course, led to the rise of the Slave Power, which batted the succubus of a wicked commerce, with its single appetite for cotton and its system of lifetime bond slavery, onto the whole body of the nation. The result was that by 1860 more than half of all export revenues derived from the crop. This astonishing expansion of economic power called up as its instrument a fully-elaborated doctrine of white supremacy, which led, as Chapman shows in *William Lloyd Garrison*, to the suppression of free speech and free press, and ultimately—such is the long reach of tyranny—to the extinction of free thought itself. Not even our minds were really private any longer (as *Huckleberry Finn* makes plain enough). Particular minds had become gears in the great machinery of what Chapman once called, in a related context, “organized hatred.” The Union Army, and Lincoln’s policies, crushed the Slave Power, but the forces of “commerce” were merely redirected by the catastrophe into new channels, there again, as Chapman believed, to “distort” human character (vii). “The growth and concentration of capital which the railroad and the telegraph made possible,” writes Chapman in 1898, “is the

salient fact in the history of the last quarter-century” (3). And a civilization “based upon commerce which is in all its parts corruptly managed,” as, in his view, ours was during the age of the Robber Barons, “will present a social life which is unintelligent and mediocre, made up of people afraid of each other, whose ideas are shopworn, whose manners are self-conscious” (64).

Immigration, which greatly accelerated during this period, did nothing to improve matters. “By a process of natural selection,” Chapman explains, “the self-seekers of Europe have for sixty years been poured into the hopper of our great mill. The Suabian and the Pole each drops his costume, his language, and his traditions as he goes in. They come out American business men; and in the second generation they resemble each other more closely in ideals, in aims, and in modes of thought than two brothers who had been bred to different trades in Europe.” In short, “America turns out only one kind of man. Listen to the conversation of any two men in a street car. They are talking about the price of something—building material, advertising, bonds, cigars” (59). In such a society, Chapman contends, “private opinion is a thing to be stamped out, like private law” (60). The whole tendency of American civilization, whether during the epoch of the Slave Power or that of the oil and railroad barons, ran counter to what Chapman calls “the aim of life”: namely, the “full development of individual character.” “In so far as individuals are developed,” he explains, “they differ from one another” (140). Or, to put the matter in other words, as he does in the essay on Emerson, “The only object which is really worthy of enthusiasm or which can permanently excite it [is] the character of a man.” “Personal liberty” is all, and “those who fought for it and those who enjoyed it are our heroes” (150).

According to Chapman, this private liberty is not merely compatible with

a social existence; it *requires* a social existence. “The complete development of every individual is necessary to our complete happiness,” Chapman explains in the essay on education. “And there is no reason why any one who has ever been to a dull dinner party should doubt this. Nay, history gives proof that solitude is dangerous. Man cannot sing, nor write, nor paint, nor reform, nor build, nor do anything except die, alone” (101). With the destruction of liberty of thought, social life is also destroyed; which explains why, in Chapman’s view, American letters and politics—even American dinner parties—have been soul-killing exercises in “affable reticence” since “the discovery of the cotton gin.” Commerce—whether in cotton, in the bodies of men and women that produce cotton, or in railroads and oil—alienates us. We neither know nor speak our own minds. In fact, we do not possess them.

For all these reasons, the ideas of the German educator Friedrich Froebel, as set out by Chapman in *Causes and Consequences*, are a revelation: “Unselfishness and intellectual development are one and the same thing,” and “there is no failure of intellect which cannot be expressed in terms of selfishness” (89). The theory on which commerce operated during the Gilded Age, Chapman reminds us, proceeded from the assumption—to which social Darwinism gave a specious scientific authority—that man is a selfish animal; the going metaphor was of a Hobbesian war of all against all. “The scientists look into a drop of water and see animals eating each other up. What they have not seen is that all this ferocity goes forward, subject to customs as rigid as a military code, and that it is this code which preserves the species,” not callous self-interest on the part of individual animals. “The ‘struggle for existence’ as it is commonly conceived would exterminate in short order any species that indulged in it” (111-12). Darwinians have lately

returned—with infinitely more sophistication than the “social Darwinians” ever possessed—to this problem of the evolution of altruism. But for Chapman it suffices simply to say, in concluding his essay on education, that “we need not attempt to adjust our ideas of man to the dogmas developed by the study of the lower animals” (112), and to imply that, in American life, at least since the invention of the cotton gin, commerce had adhered to exactly those dogmas: it had, at its worst, reduced men to mere bodies—to a kind of animal existence; and insofar as it did this, it had extinguished the light of the mind.

Chapman provides, in all this, a theory of tyranny—of its origins, its operations, and its results. In his *Garrison* and elsewhere Chapman sketches out a disturbing portrait of what would, in the twentieth century, overtake Europe, and also of what, he felt, had in fact been realized in the United States between 1830 and 1860, when the Slave Power stalked the halls of the Senate and held the President on a leash: Totalitarianism. He does this with greatest force in what is perhaps his best poem, “Bismarck,” a poem which is an anatomy of all those tendencies of modernity that threaten, again, the “only object really worthy of enthusiasm—the character of a man.” The occasion for the poem was the Chancellor’s death in 1898, and it was published first as a supplement to Chapman’s periodical, *The Political Nursery*, in the summer of that year. It begins:

At midnight, Death dismissed the chancellor
But left the soul of Bismarck on his face.
Titanic, in the peace and power of bronze,
With three red roses loosely in his grasp,
Lies the Constructor. His machinery

Revolving in the wheels of destiny
 Rolls onward over him. Alive, inspired,
 Vast, intricate, complete, unthinkable,
 Nice as a watch and strong as dynamite,
 An empire and a whirlwind, on it moves,
 While he that set it rolling lies so still. (46)

Bismarck, of course, was the man who made Germany a nation, bringing “unity,” as Chapman goes on to say, “out of chaos, petty courts, / Princelings and potentates.” In fact, he made what was more—an “empire” (47). To be sure, his methods were as severe as they were effective; he exercised nearly total control over domestic and foreign policy after 1871, prohibiting the distribution of political literature unfriendly to his interests, or to the interests of his class. The result was a state whose vitality was the spiritual “death” of the men who comprised it. The state, Chapman writes, was “alive, inspired, vast, intricate, complete.” It was a kind of super-organism, with motives of its own, and the materials out of which it was built—the “fibres” out of which its fretwork was “twisted”—were “human strands.” (Here again Chapman anticipates Pynchon’s portrait of “The Firm,” Mailer’s portrait of “Corporation Land,” and Ginsberg’s of “Moloch.”) This new state “attracted” the loyalties of men “by vanity,” and it compelled their actions by “fear.” Everything at its disposal, writes Chapman—even the “souls” of men—this empire “used” like “electricity,” whether to “make roads,” to “build monuments,” or “to write verse” (for literature and art, too, were a part of the machinery). The state made war against Austria and France, and “killed what intellect it could not use.” “The age is just beginning,” Chapman concedes,

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. (47-48)

So it was in Germany under Bismarck; so it had been in the Confederacy, and indeed in America as a whole, when John C. Calhoun dominated the Senate, and when Daniel Webster gave his name to the Fugitive Slave Bill of 1850; and so would it be in the Germany of the Third Reich, which Chapman did not live to see. In Chapman we have one of the great voices against those forms of tyranny so peculiar to the modern era, the era that saw the rise of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, European colonialism, and of industrialism; and which also saw, of course, the advent of fascism, in which every one of these earlier currents might be said to have converged. And yet in Chapman, as I have suggested, there works also the conviction that the stars themselves are on the side of right: bleak and furious as his writings may sometimes be, they are never untouched by something of the splendor that attaches to the prophetic books of the Old Testament, which always say: The covenant *can* be redeemed.

Chapman is too seldom read, as I have said, but the reason for this is not far to seek. He is an impossible man to place, except perhaps as he has been placed here, in a line of compassionately apocalyptic American exponents

of liberty—liberty even to the point of anarchic idiosyncrasy—that includes, at one end, Emerson, Thoreau, and Garrison, and, at the other end, writers as diverse as W.E.B. Du Bois, Mailer, Ginsberg, James Baldwin, and Pynchon. As a literary critic, of course, he is simply one of the two or three best America ever produced.

Chapman's peculiar vehemence—which, it must be said, unbalanced him at times—found an unhappy outlet in his later years. He had always been suspicious of the Catholic Church, a suspicion attributable, at least in part, to his Huguenot ancestry, and in part as well to his abolitionist antecedents (the abolitionists had often been strongly anti-Catholic). But beginning in the 1910s, and continuing until the end of his life, Chapman undertook a bitter campaign against the Church's influence, which he regarded as undemocratic. The animosity of his remarks against the Church, together with a certain crankish aspect they sometimes display, remind the reader now of nothing so much as Ezra Pound in his fulminations against usury. That Chapman was off his balance in making these remarks is perhaps evident from the tentativeness that occasionally qualifies them—a tentativeness perfectly absent from his more confident pronouncements against what he took for wickedness.

Consider the following, from a letter of 1925: "I suppose that my Protestant inheritance makes me think that the Roman Catholic Church is the most serious and everlasting professional destroyer of private opinion and open talk, and so I rush to open the subject on that side—as being the side I best understand. But truly—it is the decay in the American brain that is the real danger" (Howe 407). "I suppose," "the side I best understand," "but truly": these qualifying phrases do not sort well with the extravagance of the main charge, here—that "the Roman Catholic Church is the most serious

and everlasting professional destroyer of private opinion and open talk.” Chapman was not a man accustomed to the art of compromise. And his worrying contempt ultimately led him to write a sonnet titled “Cape Cod, Rome, and Jerusalem”—a poem not merely anti-Catholic, but anti-Semitic as well—which, it seems, only the *National Courier*, the official journal of the Ku Klux Klan, saw fit to print; for there, indeed, it was published. The fever-pitch nerve that led Chapman to thrust his left-hand into the fire in his Harvard days, and that sent him into a years-long fit of agitated (and incapacitating) depression in middle-life, had deranged even the better angels of his nature. It is perfectly American.

But we do well to remember, here, Chapman’s own admonition in *William Lloyd Garrison*, that steadfast book written against every current in American life that found its bastard issue in the Klan: “I confess that I had rather stand out for posterity in a hideous silhouette, as having been wrong on every question of my time, than be erased into a cipher by my biographer. But biographers do not feel in this way toward their heroes. Each one feels that he has undertaken to do his best by his patron. Therefore they stand the man under a north light in a photographer’s attic, suggest his attitude, and thus take the picture;—whereas, in real life, the man was standing on the balcony of a burning building which the next moment collapsed, and in it he was crushed beyond semblance of humanity” (6). No proper survey of Chapman’s work should “suggest his attitude” in this flattering way. He must be taken, like Garrison himself, “all on fire”; and if he was wrong on two or three of the questions of his time, as what writer is not, he was right on nearly every other.

Notes

- 1 John Jay Chapman and Mark A. DeWolfe Howe, *John Jay Chapman and His Letters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin company, 1937): 21. Hereafter cited as “Howe.” Chapman, born in New York City in 1862, died in 1933 in Poughkeepsie.
- 2 Chapman adapts a phrase from the “Intimations Ode,” where Wordsworth speaks of
 ...those obstinate questionings
 Of sense and outward things,
 Fallings from us, vanishings;
 Blank misgivings of a Creature
 Moving about in worlds not realised ... (206)
- 3 America logged in more than 1,700 lynchings between 1885 and 1894, scores of which featured, as prelude, public torture, mutilation, and flesh-incinerating festivals. As Chapman was writing, the lynching terror neared its height, though of course it would continue for many a decade more.
- 4 Louis Althusser coins the phrase in *Lenin and Philosophy*.
- 5 “The Almighty has His own purposes. ‘Woe unto the world because of offenses for it must needs be that offenses come but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.’ If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which having continued through His appointed time He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether’” (Delbanco 321).
- 6 Wilson takes his phrasing from Theseus’s great speech in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (5.i.17).
- 7 As a speechwriter for President Ronald Reagan.
- 8 I find the greatest expression of this orgy of national self-satisfaction in William Cullen Bryant’s poem “The Ages” (1821)—that great document of our inaptly named “Era of Good Feelings.”

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Synopsis**John Jay Chapman: An Appreciation**

Mark Richardson

In this essay I offer a general overview of the writings and life of John Jay Chapman (1862-1933). My claims are that Chapman is among the best literary critics ever to have emerged in America and, moreover, that his work is itself a signal contribution to American literature, well worth study on its own merits. I discuss at length his remarkable essay on Ralph Waldo Emerson and his biography of the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Among my contentions is that Chapman carried into the post-Reconstruction years the fervor and idealism associated with the antebellum writers of the American Renaissance, and that he has one of the most remarkable prose styles of any American essayist. I also situate him relative to a host of other American writers, from Hawthorne to Norman Mailer.