

## Some Epigrams

by Fred Chappell

### Malgré Lui

Jerry earns his bread writing polemics  
Against the footnote race of academics.  
*Pompous*, he calls them, *ineffectual*  
*Officious pedants*, and so forth. Why  
Does he so complain and vilify?  
—Don't breathe this secret to a living soul:  
Jerry's a latent intellectual.

### Agriculture

You've planted seven wealthy husbands  
While the bodies were still warm.  
You own, Chloe, what I'd call  
A profit-making farm.

### Televangelist

He claims that he'll reign equally  
With Jesus in eternity.  
But it's not like him to be willing  
To give a partner equal billing.

### The Epigramatist

Mankind perishes. The world goes dark.  
He racks his brains for a tart remark.

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Soviet youth need now, he suggested, is . . . parachute towers. Before World War II there was at least one such tower in every town; now they are few and far between. He went on to tell of a young man whose "decadent" life-style changed drastically after he signed up with an amateur parachute-jumping group.

The essays in the current *Pravda* range from one about a successful Soviet émigré artist now living in New York, who has suddenly (or maybe not so suddenly?) become a frenzied Soviet patriot, to one on Hungary with a very meaningful passage which called the patriotic Hungarian premier Imre Nagy—hanged by the Soviets in 1956—a right-wing extremist. The essay's message is transparently clear: don't make a grave mistake, comrades, Gorbachev's *perestroika* in Moscow is very different from the one attempted in Budapest in 1956.

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Meager as it is, *Pravda* doesn't allocate much space to news from abroad. Called "international information," such

news is usually strewn across pages four and five and divided into two sections—news from the brotherly (communist) countries, and reports from the enemy (capitalist) camp, with an occasional piece on the Third World, such as a laudatory article on the life of Indira Gandhi. In the way news from abroad is presented—what is omitted, emphasized, or distorted—I detected absolutely *no* change from December 1987 to the present. The nature of the reports on the enemy camp is encapsulated in a Soviet joke about two old women standing in a kerosene line. "I can't bear it any longer, waiting for three hours to buy a gallon of kerosene!" one says. "Yes, but still, we're lucky," the other responds, "at least our government supplies us with the kerosene. Who does it for the people in the capitalist countries?"

The objective of the articles on, say, joblessness in Rome, or drug wars in Munich, or terrorist rampages in Paris, is to convince the Soviet people that no matter how hard their life might be, life in the West is incomparably worse. These longer pieces are intertwined with shorter ones bashing the usual rotten pack—South Korea, South Africa, Paraguay, Chile, and Israel—or vehemently defending the great Panamanian patriot Noriega against American warmongers.

The articles on the brotherly camp are less emotionally charged. Among the reports on a new cow-milking technology developed in East Germany, a Soviet-Bulgarian collaboration on porcelain making, a new subway extension in Budapest, and a Soviet opera production in Havana, there is a piece on the exhibition in Beijing of Soviet holograms, depicting, in three dimensions, Lenin's personal belongings. This last report has better positioning than the others, signaling Gorbachev's present priority of renewing brotherly relations with Beijing.

"Brotherly relations" and new Moscow "peace initiatives" are stock phrases in *Pravda*. Nowhere in its pages can one find reports on the Soviets' latest drastic increase of military pressure on Northern Europeans, particularly Sweden and Norway; or on their recent unprecedented build-up on the Red Sea islands of Perim, Dhalak Kabir, and Socotra off Southern Yemen, with more than 40,000 Soviet troops deployed there; or on a transformation of Da Nang airfield and Cam Ranh Bay naval base in Vietnam into probably the two largest Soviet military facilities abroad; or on the current astonishing number of mishaps with different kinds of American missiles, as well as the *Challenger* (mishaps which SDI Head Lt. General Daniel Graham characterized as having one chance in a million of being coincidences); or on a chain of mysterious deaths—in plane and car crashes and assassinations—of numerous European scientists associated with SDI research. If General Graham's observation is correct, we might presume that under *glasnost* the KGB first chief directorate responsible for external operations is anything but pulling back.

A friend of mine, a scientist from Moscow now living in the West, put it quite succinctly. "You know," he said, "it might sound paradoxical, but living *in* the Soviet Union, I didn't fully comprehend the beast it is. In a way, it was like living inside a tiger's belly—it stank awfully, you couldn't move, but you didn't see the teeth. Now I am outside, and I can see them all; I can see the whole beast." Reading *Pravda* I can, too.

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## Crackers & Roundheads by Clyde Wilson

*The Celt in all his variants from Builth to Ballyhoo,  
His mental processes are plain—one  
knows what he will do,  
And can logically predicate his finish  
by his start.*

—Kipling

**Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South** by Grady McWhiney, Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press.

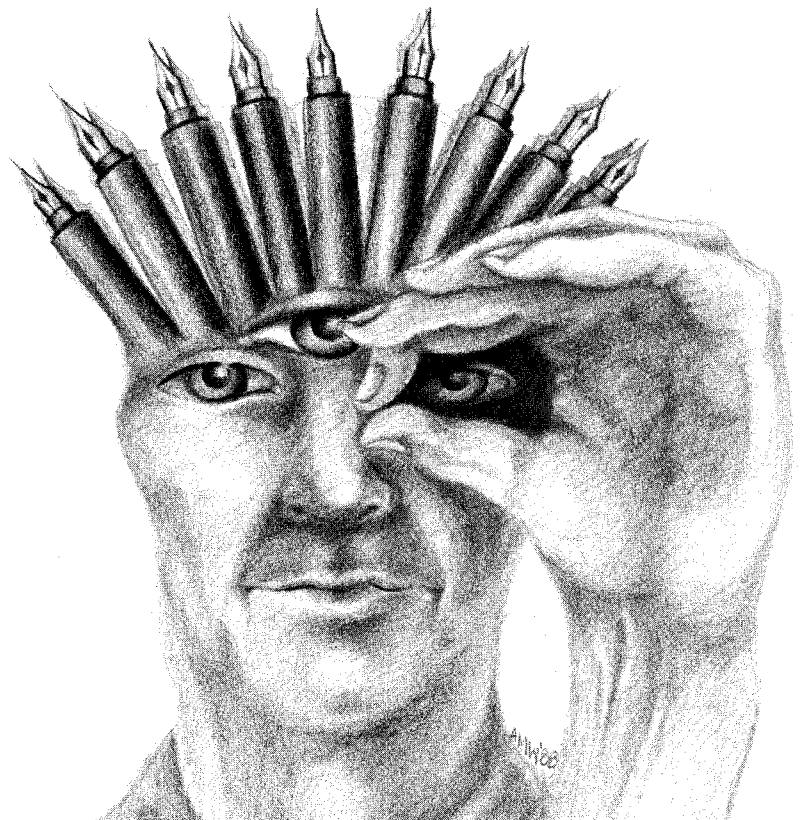
Despite all that has passed since, the Civil War is still at the center of American history. No one has ever doubted this in the South, where every native is a not-too-remote descendant of Confederate soldiers, or of slaves. In my native state (North Carolina) and my adopted state (South Carolina) the Civil War killed a quarter of the white men. There is nothing even remotely approaching this degree of sacrifice and devastation anywhere else in the American experience.

The late great Unpleasantness is not so direct a memory north of the Potomac and the Ohio, not to mention west of the Missouri. (In fact, one gets the impression that Pancho Villa, Trotsky, Gandhi, and Patrice Lumumba are more remembered and honored up there than Grant and the boys in blue. I hope not, but I fear so.) Nevertheless, the Civil War remains the critical core of American experience, not only because of its immense scale and revolutionary impact, but because it is the Gordian knot of our history.

The Civil War presents all of the major issues and fundamental conflicts of America in their starkest form: the meaning of the Constitution; the nature

of majority rule and consensus; the benefits and burdens of industrialization, modernization, and centralization; governmental authority versus individual liberty; the claims of innovation and tradition, social ideals and social reality; the position of the black minority in American society. (It even molds our international role, because every subsequent war and extraterritorial objective of the US has been defined psychically and rhetorically in imitation of the winning side in the Civil War.)

And despite the convention among ignorant and unthinking commentators that the war represented a simple struggle of good (freedom and Union) against evil (slavery and disunion), it does not present these issues in any conveniently simplistic manner. It presents them instead in tremendously complicated and ambivalent ways, which is why that experience will always remain of the most compelling interest to any American capable of historical imagination and understanding. (For instance, was Lincoln a liberator or a tyrant? Or possibly both? Was the South fighting for freedom or for slavery? Or possibly both? What relative proportions did benevolence, racism, and economic self-interest have in the opposition to slavery? Was John Brown a heroic revolutionary, a dangerous subversive, or merely a mental case? The



*Clyde Wilson is descended from long lines of Scotch-Irishmen on both sides.*