

The Body's Vest

by Jonathan Chaves

Shadow Box: Poems

by Fred Chappell

Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press; 96 pp., \$17.95



*Casting the body's vest aside,
My soul into the boughs does glide.*

—Andrew Marvell (1621-78),
"The Garden"

Browsing through the poetry section at Borders, I came upon a sole copy of a new book of poems by Fred Chappell, *Shadow Box*. I have been an admirer of Chappell's fiction for years, especially his novel *I Am One of You Forever* (1987), with its delightful, poignant, and sometimes hilarious reminiscences of a boyhood in the western mountains of North Carolina. I was aware of his poetry, too, although I had never delved seriously into it. The first thing I read, opening the volume at random, was this:

Buried in logic, what can you
find,
Shackled to flesh, what can you
see
About the madcap world be-
yond.
Of time's wild timeless mystery?

The poem is a "Duologue" between "*Spirit*" and "Mind," with the former's argument indicated in italics, and the latter's in regular print. Thus, this was a single poem consisting of two poems, one encased or embedded in the other.

Here, beyond question, is a milestone in American poetry. Although the Neo-Formalist movement has existed now for two or more decades—a desperately needed corrective to the formless, nihilistic blather passing for poetry in America—even this school has produced a great many works that, while formally polished, remain empty at their core. But in

Shadow Box, Chappell has at once done something utterly new—giving us perfectly formed poems that often have a second perfectly formed poem ensconced within, thus matching or surpassing the intellectual brilliance and virtuosic craftsmanship of some of the Neo-Formalists—while simultaneously reviving certain characteristics of traditional poetry long absent from American letters. These include, primarily, a grounding in sanity—right reason and moral wisdom, as well as a use of poetry to delve where modes of writing merely derived from logic cannot go, into the human soul, level upon level; and on top of all of this, the use of imagery to convey a perfect mutual reflection of man and nature, of self and other, of body and soul.

Notwithstanding the unquestionable originality of Chappell's work in this book, one is reminded of certain beacons of poetic history. It would be unfair to suggest that Chappell is in any sense imitating these; it is rather the case that certain key currents in literature, long buried, are resurfacing with fresh creativity in his writing. He might be seen as a modern Metaphysical. The theologically informed poems included in the fourth and fifth sections—the "Duologue" mentioned above, and the "Two Latin Hymns," among them—conjure George Herbert (1593-1633). Never since Herbert has poetry so successfully channeled the lifeblood of Christianity, dogma, liturgy, and the vibrant life of prayer and confession.

Herbert's "Confession" opens with an image that anticipates the "shadow box" of Chappell's book title:

O what a cunning guest
Is this same grief! Within my
heart I made
Closets; and in them many a
chest;
And, like a master in my
trade,
In those chests, boxes; in each
box, a till:
Yet grief knows all, and enters
when he will.

And Chappell, in his "Process," one

of the real masterpieces in the book, moves from "Secret" through "Confession" to "Absolution":

Confess: The secret that tears
your sleep, *shackles*
your spirit, and seals within it-
self, *as in*
a vault, its self-destroying proof,
denied
so often, is one you cannot keep
or silence.

Here, the text in regular type forms a rhyming poem within the nonrhyming poem: "The secret that tears your sleep, / and seals within itself, / its self-destroying proof, / is one you cannot keep." This itself is a perfect quatrain forming a kind of envoy—or counterenvoy—to the complete stanza. It is actually unfair to take this stanza out of the context of the full poem, but the latter is too long to quote here in its entirety. It suffices to note that both Herbert and Chappell, in their different modes, have captured the tormenting way in which self-delusion fails to block inner decay. Only confession will ultimately lead to absolution, and though we may not be surprised to find Herbert's devotion to truth in the 17th century, Chappell's in the year 2009—his hard-won poetic expression of true hope after despair—is beyond refreshing, almost miraculous:

Forget: *It has not buried your life,*
devoted
to defend *that which you most*
lived for; it struck
and yet *it could not break the core*
credo;
the tenets *of your heartfelt belief*
still stand.

In Chappell's more imagistic poems, another of the Metaphysicals, Marvell, is somehow evoked. Marvell, journeying along the razor's edge separating within from without, idea from entity, mind from sensual nature, in "The Garden" writes,

... [T]he mind, from pleasure
less,

Withdraws into its happiness:
The mind, that ocean where
each kind
Does straight its own resem-
blance find;
Yet it creates, transcending
these,
Far other worlds, and other seas;
Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green
shade.

Chappell, in "Once, Something,
Never," characterizes

a moment *something like a knot-
hole* in a wall
of pine, *within the striate grain* an
opening,
rupture *of the swift flow of days*
which sped
unhalted, *that gave a packet*
glimpse of happening
complete . . .

and speaks of "*the ever-yearning soul*"
that

. . . has fed
upon what was only a presenti-
ment
of something that was that never
was at all.

But just as "something" may at times
seem to point to nothing, what is ap-
parently nothing can point to some-
thing. The apparently trivial often
surprises us into an awareness of the
transcendent. This is the territory
where the masters of Chinese poet-
ry reign supreme. For example, T'ang
Dynasty poet Chang Chi (or Zhang Ji)
has a poem called "River," in which this
supreme image of transience, togeth-
er with such ephemeral adjuncts as
autumn light, flying birds, snowflakes,
clouds, and mists, somehow mirrors
the eternal. The following is my own
translation, from my book, *Cloud Gate
Song: The Verse of Tang Poet Zhang Ji*:

Shimmering, trembling at edge
of sandy wasteland;
Void and brilliant, entering dis-
tant sky.
The autumn light illuminates

forever,
And flocks of birds are bound-
less as they fly.
The river's force pulls clouds
across the vastness,
Its waves touch lightly snow-
flakes as they die.
Islets in the stream—hard to
discover:
Dark mists for ages of ages on
them lie.

American poets like Gary Snyder
and his followers have, of course, striv-
en to emulate Chinese nature poetry.
Chappell does not; and yet in such po-
ems as "Fireflies" or "Passage," he gives
us what almost seems the product of
an alchemist's beaker in which have
been mixed elements of the English
Metaphysicals and the Chinese poets.
The fireflies "spiral *when they aspire*,
with carefree ardor / busy, *to embrace*
a star that draws them thence." And
in "Passage," the reflected night sky is
momentarily disturbed by the passage
of a swimming muskrat:

Serenely *a muskrat noses through*

the lines
Of stars; *the cool reflective moon*
sways in
The water *that trembling languid-
ly* but once
Now settles . . .

The American poet does what the
Chinese poet would not do, perhaps
because he did not need to: He takes
us gently by the lapels, and insists that
we pay attention.

Something has happened in the
world this night
Of rare consequence for some
time to come,
Whether or not it alters the fi-
nal sum.

Something of rare consequence
for American poetry has happened in
this book. We are indebted to Fred
Chappell, one of our few master writ-
ers, for the gift.

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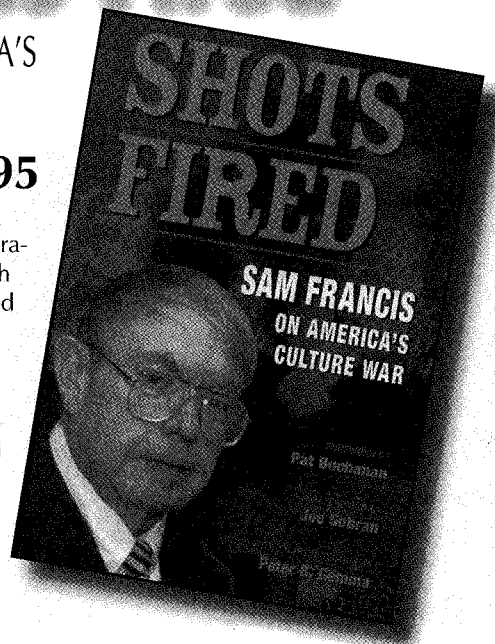
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Nestorius of Constantinople

by Daniel Larison

428 AD: An Ordinary Year at the End of the Roman Empire

by Giusto Traina

Princeton: Princeton University Press;
224 pp., \$24.95



In 428 AD [*sic*], Giusto Traina has written a brief and engaging overview of the Mediterranean and Near East in the early fifth century.

Traina, an ancient historian with a strong interest in classical Armenia, chose to survey the events of that year owing to its pivotal importance for the political and cultural history of Armenia, which was absorbed by Sasanian Persia and thereafter ceased to exist as an independent polity for four centuries. The year 428 is not a well-known date in traditional chronologies, so it does not carry the baggage attached to canonical dates of periodization. At a time when many historians have become much more interested in long-term trends and processes, Traina reminds the reader of the centrality of events to the study of any historical period.

One of Traina's objectives in this study is to demonstrate that the ancient Mediterranean world remained substantially united economically and culturally, despite the beginnings of political fragmentation in the Roman Empire. On the whole, he has succeeded, thanks to his synchronic approach and expansive coverage stretching from Mauretania to eastern Iran. By covering so much ground, Traina's chapters are necessarily vignettes, but they are generally well-drawn and insightful ones.

The book centers on the story of Nestorius, the headstrong and combative patriarch of Constantinople who traveled from Antioch to Constantinople in 428 to assume his new role. Several of the chapters trace his journey from the diocese of Oriens, which would later provide so many of Nestorius'

most loyal defenders, to the imperial city and his relationship with the young emperor, Theodosius II. The legacy of Nestorius' successors in Persia, and regions farther east, forms both the chronological and organizational end of Traina's survey, capping an overview of a mostly Roman Mediterranean world with a glimpse of the history of its non-Roman Eastern Christian inheritors. If anything, Traina understates the importance of Nestorius' ascension to the patriarchal throne by merely alluding to the centuries of doctrinal controversy in the Roman Empire that would result from the backlash against Nestorius, beginning in 428.

While the book breaks with the conventions of much late-antique historiography by focusing intently on the events of a single year rather than emphasizing strong cultural continuities over centuries, it does not view the fifth-century Roman world with a jaundiced "declinist" eye. Even though he anticipates the political dismemberment of the Western empire in his discussions of Goths and Vandals, Traina does not describe Italy and North Africa in the 420's as mere preludes to the barbarian kingdoms they would shortly become, but as the important parts of the Roman world that they still were. However, fifth-century Gaul is deemed a "trial run" for the Middle Ages, portrayed by Traina through the gradual fusion of Gothic and Gallo-Roman populations and cultures already beginning to take shape and the introduction of Pachomian monasticism to the southern shores of Gaul at Lérins and Saint-Victor. Drawing on the success late-antique studies have had in paying attention to marginal and non-Roman cultures, Traina presents a more complete picture of Sasanian Persia than many longer monographs on the ancient Mediterranean offer.

Strangely, where Traina falters most is in his treatments of Nestorius' own doctrine, the nature of religious identity in late antiquity, and the relationship between Church and state in Byzantium. These mistakes reinforce conventional misunderstandings of

Nestorius, late-antique Christianity, and the religious and political institutions that regulated them. While the absorption of the Armenian kingdom by Persia is the event that lent such significance to the year 428, Traina seems uninterested in the subsequent religious and cultural consequences of this dramatic political change.

Invariably, studies of Nestorius have been bound up with scholarship on his bitter rival, Cyril of Alexandria. Whether modern scholars have been sympathetic to Nestorius or largely critical, their interpretations have tended to fall into two broad categories: context and rehabilitation, on the one hand, and more orthodox, pro-Cyril accounts, on the other. What all these interpretations share, and what Traina's does not show, is considerable familiarity with both Nestorius' doctrine and the accusations leveled against it.

Traina's book also occasionally suffers from unfortunate anachronisms. Describing Egyptian Christianity's relationship to enduring pagan cults, Traina argues that Coptic Christians saw paganism as "essentially Greek culture and therefore foreign," and were thus "claiming a kind of national identity" by turning against it. Greek cults and Christianity were both equally non-Egyptian, but it is entirely misleading to think that late-antique Egyptians thought of a "national" identity in Traina's sense of the word. Indeed, it is no surprise that the Coptic word for pagan is *hellene*, because this was the meaning of the Greek word as it was used by the end of the fourth century, and it seems likely that the noun entered Coptic with that meaning attached to it. Elsewhere, Traina explains the partnership of Theodosius II and Nestorius by saying that "imperial conduct was already displaying the features of Byzantine caesaropapism," when it is now the general view of scholars that Byzantine emperors did not exercise such great authority over the Church as the word implies. On the contrary, there is now a consensus that the concept of caesaropapism is a pejorative, misleading one that does not correct-