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The Return of the Dead: Resurrecting Chappell's Family Gathering

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THE RETURN OF THE DEAD: RESURRECTING CHAPPELL'S FAMILY
GATHERING

by

Jonathan Moore

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Humanities
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Fred Chappell's virtually overlooked collection of poetry *Family Gathering* (2000), and how the poems operate within the mode of the grotesque. I argue that the poems illuminate both the southern grotesque and Roland Barthes's theory of photography's *Operator*, *Spectator*, and *Spectrum*. I address *Family Gathering* as a family photo album full of still shots, snapshots, and even selfies, which illumines how Chappell's use of the grotesque in this collection derives more from its original association with visual arts rather than only depicting the grotesque typically associated with characteristics deemed explicitly shocking or terrifying. I argue that reading Chappell's poems as photographs with grotesque qualities allows us to consider multiple ways Chappell draws on various definitions of the grotesque, informed by Barthes's theory of photography. Finally, I argue that the collection allows us to consider the grotesque as a spectrum that exists simultaneously alongside what we might call normal.

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CHAPTER I – The Return of the Dead: Resurrecting Chappell’s *Family Gathering*

Author of eighteen books of poetry, eleven novels, and several collections of short stories, Appalachian writer Fred Chappell is most often recognized for his fiction. Some of his most famous works include the novels *It is Time, Lord* (1963), *Dagon* (1968), and *I Am One of You Forever* (1985). Concerning Chappell’s poetry, his momentous *Midquest* (1981), a single poem consisting of a compilation of four separate collections (*River, Bloodfire, Wind Mountain, and Earthsleep*) and winner of the Bollingen Prize for poetry, has held the attention of most of Chappell’s critics since its publication. In contrast, one of Chappell’s more recent poetry collections, the relatively short *Family Gathering* (2000), has received virtually no attention from critics. *Family Gathering* features poems with titles such as “Uncle John,” “Uncle Einar,” “Cousin Ellie,” and other names that indicate an implied familial relationship, and even seem to recall familiar Appalachian characters who resonate throughout much of Chappell’s work. Perhaps dismissed because of their familiarity, which can be confused with redundancy, the poems in *Family Gathering* merit reconsideration due to the way they illuminate both the southern grotesque and Roland Barthes’s theory of photography’s *Operator, Spectator, and Spectrum* (Barthes 9). By using Barthes’ three practices he claims every photograph contains—the photographer, the photographed, and the observer of the photograph—I draw a parallel between Barthes’ three practices and the speaker, the subject of the poem, and the reader in *Family Gathering*’s poems.

This parallel allows for a reading that demonstrates how the poems function as and comment on photographs. For instance, their titles indicate a specific character that each poem then frames and captures through poetic imagery. The collection opens with

“Elizabeth Retreats,” which describes young Elizabeth’s boredom at this family gathering:

Seated, they become one with their chairs,
And when they stand the ceiling is too low;
The histories that call them to converse
Are as obscure as the Carthaginian wars
And elegiac as this evening’s afterglow.

Among them roams Elizabeth, age eight,
Priss-proud in her finery and bored
Bored bored. Grown-ups do nothing always but sit
And talk, and what do they ever talk about?
—Not of Elizabeth a single word. (1-10)

The first two lines in *Family Gathering* give distorted depictions of the family members, which resonate throughout the remainder of the collection. For instance, the speaker describes the family members as “one with their chairs” and so tall that “the ceiling is too low” for their monstrous proportions (1-2).

Along with these exaggerated depictions of family members, the speaker also hints at the potentiality of characters keeping their secret, perhaps less desirable, qualities in the dark. For instance, the speaker suggests that there are even two sides to Elizabeth, but that the “real Elizabeth” is kept in the dark:

Are you Elizabeth if no one says?
.....

...Very well—better to stay
Alone. Solitary, she can play
Her favorite role: the true Elizabeth.

She cuts the light, begins to pirouette,
Measuring a tune that pours her mind
Full of itself, a lilting minuet
That spins her ever faster than her feet.
Elizabeth is dancing, dancing blind,

Inside the porch inside a night so black
That it could swallow house and family
Like irritated Godzilla run amok.
Only this ritual can keep the monster back;
Her plaintive song must charm the enemy. (16, 38-50)

Though Elizabeth's dancing does not necessarily elicit anything that must be kept in the dark, the fact that the "real Elizabeth" is hidden from everyone else suggests that other characters might also possess secrets about themselves that they wish to hide as well. Elizabeth's literal distance from the family parallels her separateness from them in that she is one of the few—if not the only one—characters who do not exhibit exaggerated or shocking characteristics. In fact, it is Elizabeth's lone "ritual" that keeps the "monster back;" rather, keeps her away from the monsters inside the house (49). These depictions, such as amalgamations of human and inanimate objects or animals, exaggerated

proportions, and monster-like descriptions, set the stage for the collection's family members and their grotesque qualities.

Addressing *Family Gathering* as a family photo album full of still shots, snapshots, and even selfies illumines how Chappell's use of the grotesque in this collection derives more from its original association with visual arts rather than only depicting the grotesque typically associated with characteristics deemed explicitly shocking or terrifying. I think reading Chappell's poems as photographs with grotesque qualities allows us to consider multiple ways Chappell draws on various definitions of the grotesque, informed by Barthes's theory of photography.

In order to distinguish between the early grotesque as it deals with visual arts and the more modern grotesque associated with the shocking and bizarre, it is helpful to briefly observe the development of this term over time. In his book *Modern American Grotesque: Literature and Photography*, James Goodwin sheds light on some of the early uses of the term "grotesque," specifically during the Italian Renaissance, that refer to "contradicted standards of representation" in the visual arts, and that "qualities of deformity and aberration attached to the grotesque are to be differentiated from monstrosity and the utterly terrifying" in order to contextualize its original application (7). In fact, the early English usage of grotesque, which Goodwin traces as far back as the mid sixteenth century, connotes "fancy and the lightly humorous rather than with fear or the nightmarish" (8). Here, "fancy" works as a descriptor associated with decadence or excessiveness in visual representation, particularly art that "contradicted standards of representation" and "visual norms...defined by geometry" (7, 8). The grotesque's early use refers to visual representation that exceeds geometrical norms, inevitably allowing for

the term to connote a sense of monstrosity in reference to matters of proportions. When the term then becomes a descriptor of nonvisual expression, grotesque refers not only to objects of monstrous proportions, but also things that are in themselves monstrous.

Goodwin acknowledges that toward the end of the seventeenth century, attributes of the terrifying and monstrous become associated with the grotesque, as the term becomes a descriptor of verbal expression rather than just visual (8).

The poems in *Family Gathering* demonstrate the grotesque as a blurring between its description of visual and verbal arts by drawing on the grotesque's various historical definitions. Arthur Clayborough argues that the grotesque as it pertains to visual art during the Italian Renaissance and even during the English Age of Reason, exhibits "extravagance" and "rejects natural conditions of organization" (6). Extravagance, Philip Thomson notes in *The Grotesque*, is "a marked element" of the term, and that the grotesque possesses a quality of "extremeness" (22-23). Thomson sheds light on the timeline when the grotesque operates in a state of flux between referring to "a particular type of painting" and a "vulgar species of the comic, closely allied to the burlesque and to caricature" (13). While the early use of grotesque pertains to a decorative excess that deviates from "natural organization," one might see how its association with excess later translates as a verbal descriptor of characters that possess an excessiveness to the point of physical distortion (Clayborough 6). Though the grotesque distorts, such distortion still leaves a trace of the familiar, and it is an object or character's ability to retain familiarity along with distortion or excessiveness that renders it grotesque. Referring to a more general use of grotesque which emerges during the early eighteenth century, Clayborough associates the term with "ridiculous, distorted, unnatural...absurdity, a distortion of

nature” and even as a descriptor of “caricature” (8). The speaker in *Family Gathering* frames the characters as grotesque through describing their exaggerated, distorted physical features and/or personalities, or paranoia of having their appalling secrets (infidelity and financial struggles) revealed. For the purposes of this essay, I invoke the term “grotesque” to refer to the exaggerated physical features, personalities, and/or secrets of characters that the speaker illuminates throughout the collection.

For instance, in Chappell’s poem “Uncle Einar,” the speaker uses the lines “When Uncle Einar smokes his big cigar” at the beginning and end of stanzas that literally frame both the stanzas and the poem. Within the framing the speaker’s exaggerated and excessive characterization of Uncle Einar distorts Einar to the point of a caricature (e.g., “Uncle Einar’s loud proboscis”). While the speaker gives literal descriptions of Uncle Einar’s image such as how his “pink cheeks glow, his blue eyes glaze...the shining of his cranium;/ His nose smolders like red geranium” (2,4-5) the first and last lines of the stanza repeat the image of Uncle Einar smoking a big cigar:

When Uncle Einar smokes his big cigar,
His pink cheeks glow, his blue eyes glaze;
An expensive aromatic haze
Hallows the shining of his cranium;
His nose smolders like a red geranium.
His eyes roll heavenward where cherubim
Gambol the dove-gray smoke that pours from him,
And with a sound like forcing the Pearly Gates,
He opens his golden mouth and pontificates

To all his dim kinfolk less fortunate
Than he with his stocks and bonds and real estate.
They know they're in the presence of a star
When uncle Einar smokes his big cigar. (1-13)

The bookend of repetitive lines literally frames Uncle Einar as a big cigar-smoking man. While the cigar-smoking image that the speaker conveys to the reader is clear, the significance is what this image itself conveys, which the speaker gives between these bookend lines. The image indicates his economic status in the ninth line of the first stanza, the speaker declares that Uncle Einar, “opens his golden mouth and pontificates/ To all his dim kinfolk less fortunate/ Than he with stocks and bonds and real estate” (9-11). “Golden mouth” elicits Uncle Einar’s wealthy status, but the speaker’s use of a four-syllable word such as “pontificates” captures Uncle Einar as pretentious, condescending to his “dim kinfolk less fortunate/ Than he” about economic matters such as, “stocks and bonds and real estate” (10-11).

The images of “Cadillac” and “cigar” literally act as a frame in which the speaker captures Uncle Einar, and simultaneously contribute to Einar’s excessive and exaggerated characterization as well. The speaker again uses bookend lines in the second stanza, except with “When Uncle Einar drives his Cadillac car” (14, 29), and ends the poem with “That’s Uncle Einar and his vast cigar” (48):

When Uncle Einar drives his Cadillac car
He rolls the window down so his cigar
Can have some elbow room and freshen up
For miles and miles around the drab landscape

That heretofore has had to be content
With raw fresh air wholly lacking the scent
Of Havana tobacco that smells like yellow roses
As it fumes beneath Uncle Einar's loud proboscis.
He rolls along at eighty miles an hour,
His tape deck blaring Sinatra at full power
Unless Aunt Wilma has accompanied
Her burnished husband for a Sunday ride:
For she insists on hymn tunes cranked up loud
To remind them both they owe it all to God.
You know you've seen the streaking of a star
When Uncle Einar drives his Cadillac car. (14-29)

These repeated lines reiterate Uncle Einar's pompousness that the speaker conveys, and simultaneously act as "limits" that are reinforced by Chappell's use of four and five-syllable words such as "geranium," "pontificates," "expatiates," and "multitudinous" (41, 33, 11, 7). Not only are we as readers supposed to understand that Uncle Einar is literally a cigar-smoking, Cadillac-driving man, but also that these indicators capture him as wealthy, arrogant, and inflated by material extravagance. That material extravagance parallels another characteristic of the grotesque during the English Age of Reason referring to decorative arts, which connotes "fantasy," "individual taste," "excessiveness," and the "preposterous" (Clayborough 6). Uncle Einar's "individual taste" for expensive Cadillacs and cigars contribute to his "excessive" lifestyle, which the speaker frames through exaggerated, even "preposterous" proportions and characteristics

(Clayborough 6). The various examples of the grotesque's development throughout history not only reveals the very fluid nature of the term itself, but Chappell's ability to draw on its fluidity as a means of imploring the grotesque in ways other than the traditional use of the grotesque in Southern literature.

Uncle Einar's exaggerated features are reiterated by his association with space or other celestial entities throughout the poem. These celestial associations imply that Uncle Einar's characterization exceeds normal proportions, exhibiting those of grotesque measurements. For instance, his eyes which "roll heavenward where cherubim/ Gambol the dove-gray smoke that pours from him/...forcing the Pearly Gates," portray an exaggerated image of Uncle Einar's smoke as being of such size and power that it impacts the "Pearly Gates" (6-8). The speaker also portrays and positions Uncle Einar as greater than his "less fortunate" and "groundling" family members by casting him as a "star" (12). The contrast between the literal positions of both Uncle Einar and the rest of the family coupled with the repetition of "When Uncle Einar" reiterates Uncle Einar's status compared to the rest of his family. The distance between Uncle Einar the "star" and the other "groundling" family members exaggerates Uncle Einar's arrogance to a point of caricatured proportions (12). This grotesque portrayal of Uncle Einar's exaggerated physical and personality characteristics frames Uncle Einar in a distorted, yet recognizable mode of caricature.

While a character does not singularly render a text grotesque, the abnormality that classifies a character as such serves as a physical manifestation of the grotesque within a work. Sarah Gleeson-White suggests that the grotesque is often implied by means of a character's physical distortion that "spectacularly appears on the body" and "invites the

classification of much southern literature as grotesque” (110). Referencing Alan Spiegel’s “A Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” Gleeson-White embraces Spiegel’s argument that, ““the grotesque, as it appears in Southern fiction, refers neither to the particular quality of a story[...] nor to its mood[...] nor to its mode of expression[...] The grotesque refers rather to a *type of character*”” (110). Characters embodying the grotesque in Chappell’s collection include Uncle Einar, Uncle John, the Traitor, and an unknown “you.” In “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” Flannery O’Connor notes that this abnormality manifest through the grotesque “embodies two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye” (42). The grotesque, then operates by shedding light on the hidden, typically that which is terrifying or repulsive, through physical manifestations or character traits.

Another aspect of the grotesque that resonates with *Family Gathering* is the intertwined relationship between the comic and the horrifying. Thomson explains that the grotesque operates as “a mixture in some way or other of *both* the comic and the terrifying (or the disgusting, repulsive, etc.) in a problematical (i.e. not readily resolvable) way” (21). While the comic does not necessarily constitute the main aspect of the grotesque, it does operate paradoxically on the conflict of “attraction/repulsion...which is basic to the grotesque” (Thomson 51). Operating on this paradox, the grotesque depends on the conflict between both the comic and the terrifying in order to communicate a sense of grotesqueness. In “Earn the Vomit: Employing the Grotesque in Contemporary Poetry” Anna Journey describes the conflict between attraction and repulsion as a “transgression” and “fluid movement between...compassion and disgust, humor and horror, materiality and mystery” (15). In *Family Gathering*, the comic and horrifying

converge in the poem “Photographer.” This fluid conflict of both the comic and the terrifying permeate much of what characterizes a great deal of Southern fiction as grotesque.

The literary tradition of Southern grotesque relates historically to the notion of the American South as a place both othered and alienated from what is considered normal/ acceptable. In their article “Appalachia and the South—Collective Memory, Identity, and Representation,” Larry Griffin and Ashley Thompson argue that the South operates as a “mirror reflecting in a starkly condensed, inescapable fashion the nation’s problems of racism, disunity/disintegration, or poverty” (297). By largely defining the South by these problems, the South becomes a scapegoat for the nation’s problems as a whole. While these problems are obviously not exclusive to the American South, many of these topics permeate the fiction of numerous Southern authors; Flannery O’Connor’s most famous quotes claims, “anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic” (40). O’Connor’s ironic insight here acknowledges the inaccuracy of this misconception yet reveals, to some extent, an essence of validity. Though not every piece of Southern prose or poetry constitutes the grotesque, perhaps the genre itself connotes expectations, misguided as they may be, of the grotesque. For instance, Thomas Maddox refers to the inextricable relationship between the grotesque and the South as a “southern aesthetic” (198). So while not all Southern works are necessarily grotesque, the grotesque contributes as a defining characteristic of the Southern literary genre, one which remains, if not alienated, certainly othered.

Within the othered American South, Appalachia is no less susceptible to associations with the grotesque. Though most critics argue that Appalachia exists as its own cultural entity apart from the South, its geographical location complicates its identity as existing separately yet simultaneously as a part of the South. While the South itself is othered from the rest of America, Appalachia, mostly located in the American South, appears another step removed, almost as an othered other within the South. In fact, Griffin and Thompson point out examples of common Appalachian misconceptions that depict this region as “the most extreme version of popular southern stereotypes” or “the South’s South” (301). If the South is conceived as the grotesque representation of America, then Appalachia exists as the grotesque of the grotesque. While Appalachia exists within this collective notion of the South, it seems even further alienated or removed from the rest of America.

Chappell’s various strategies of incorporating the grotesque by alienating characters and consistently blending the fantastic with the normal. For instance, Edward Moore points out how *Dagon*’s main character, Peter Leland, falls into madness and, in his own mind at least, alienates himself from “his wife and ordinary persons” who then “become intruders” (377). Chappell’s commentary about fiction that incorporates the grotesque reveals his own assumption of how the grotesque functions as a means of exposing an underlying truth, and perhaps illumines his potential strategy of implementing the grotesque in his own works. In his essay “Six Propositions about Literature and History,” Chappell points out that fiction, unlike history, possesses the ability to “detail separateness of moments of time” (515). It is specifically the “willfully odd and grotesque detail” in fictional, rather than historical writings, which allows the

exposure of truth to occur (Chappell, "Six Propositions" 515). Similarly, in his essay "Taking Measure: Violent Intruders in William Hoffman's Short Fiction," Chappell argues that "Under the hoard of parvenu wealth sits this grotesque and abandoned old woman, the dirty secret at the heart of a false economy, hidden away out of shame...She is there to remind her son and daughter-in-law...who they really are; she is the truth they cannot forget but cannot admit" (411). Chappell reads this woman as an "abandoned" and "hidden," "dirty secret;" alienated because of the grotesque truth that she exposes ("Taking Measure" 411), which links her to the "dirty secrets" the poem "The Look" in *Family Gathering* addresses.

The poems in *Family Gathering*, which act as photographs by framing individual characters, do so in a way that alienates certain characters from the rest of the family members. The alienating of individual characters within an already grotesque context mirrors Appalachia's stereotype as "the South's South" (Griffin and Thompson 301). By "alienating," I mean that both the speaker's grotesque depictions of individual characters alienate them from the rest of the family characters, and the framing/capturing of specific characters requires a literal process of alienation by capturing certain characters through an isolated focus. Thus, the poems that focus specifically on a single character operate as a means of alienation in and of themselves. So while merely isolating the characters themselves does not necessarily constitute them as grotesque, the characters' grotesque depictions coupled with their individual framings reinforces this theme of alienation that recurs in most of Chappell's other works associated with the gothic or grotesque. Not only do these individually framed characters depict a grotesqueness, but their alienation

within the grotesque context of the rest of the family parallels the further alienation of Appalachia within the South.

It is important to emphasize that the grotesque in these poems is initially hidden and later revealed, as is the case with secrets, or are in some way highlighted through descriptions of exaggerated or excessive features. Either way, an *illumination* of the grotesque occurs through the speaker's presentation of the characters. This illumination process of the "grotesque may be employed as a means of presenting the world in a new light without falsifying it. i.e. that it may be a function of the grotesque to make us see the (real) world anew...though it be a strange and disturbing one, is nevertheless valid and realistic" (Thomson 17). The grotesque functions as a means of exposing truths: disturbing, yet no less true.

Like the grotesque's function of exposing truths, Barthes claims that photographs "never lie," in turn revealing a type of truth (87). James Goodwin notes that one root in "grotesque" refers to "a place of shade or semidarkness unearthed, brought to light;" (6) and that the term originally refers to "forms and themes" of visual arts (7). The grotesque then attempts to expose what is either in the dark, or the dark itself; thus, it relies on the process of exposure that depends on a contrast of light and dark, and is by its very nature photographic. The contrast of light/dark (normal/grotesque) does not deal with a matter of one being more true than the other; rather, one is more palatable than the other, yet the two are codependent and inextricable, and the total absence of one results in complete distortion of the other. For instance, total exposure or an overemphasis on highlights in a photograph results in complete whitespace, while complete darkness or an exaggeration of shadows renders just the opposite: either way, both depict extreme opposite ends of a

spectrum that are neither recognizable nor discernible and (re)presentation is lost. The presentation of the grotesque, then becomes a balancing act of lights and shades.

Chappell's poem "The Look" sheds light on two characters who possess a fear of having their grotesque secrets exposed.

It's impossible there could be
Any conceivable complicity
Between you and Cousin Mary Rose.

Why then does she gaze at you
With a look that must imply
She knows you know she surely knows?

Her briefest glance has the quality
Of chilling perspicuity,
Discovering all your sexual woes,

You tight financial anxiety,
Your marital infidelity—
All the secrets you'd never disclose

To another breathing entity.
But her knowingness is merely a pose
That lends importance to Mary Rose,

Because she *couldn't* know...Could she? (1-16)

“The Look” also exemplifies the anxiety of one who becomes consciously aware that he or she lies under the lens of observation, specifically a camera, in that it displays a level of anxiety exhibited by a character’s self and image awareness, and even obliquely alludes to Barthes’ chapter “The Look.” Barthes argues that there is a level of consciousness that accompanies one who is aware of his or her being photographed, and that this awareness is inextricably connected to one’s “pose” (11). Barthes claims, “I pose, I know I am posing...this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality: what I am, apart from any effigy. What I want...is that my (mobile image)...should always coincide with my (profound) “self”; but it is the contrary...“myself” never coincides with my image” (11-12). In other words, once one is consciously aware that he or she is being photographed, he or she desires to strike a pose that most accurately aligns with a self he or she wishes to project; with this awareness comes anxiety. The anxiety produced by one’s awareness then leads to one’s pose; a pose that intends to conceal something grotesque, but true, which we can observe in Chappell’s “The Look.”

The poem uses a third-person speaker who speaks directly to an unknown “you,” who fears “the look” from Mary Rose, and exhibits anxiety that he or she feels Mary Rose discerns between the pose and the truth the pose intends to conceal. Though this look overwhelmingly points to Mary Rose’s “gaze,” Chappell’s poem allows for three different interpretations that align with the “looks” of Barthes’ *Operator*, *Spectator*, and *Spectrum* (4). First, “look” refers to the gaze that Mary Rose gives to the unknown you, and thereby to his or her anxiety associated with Mary Rose’s possible perception of his

or her “self,” the self with “marital infidelity” and “financial problems” (Barthes 12). The question, “Could she?” at the end of the poem reveals the anxiety the unknown you internalizes about Mary Rose’s ability to perceive these secrets through her look. This first “look” also echoes Barthes’ argument in “The Look,” in that the unknown you looks at Mary Rose, and interprets her “look” as “seeing” him or her (111). Barthes notes, “the photograph has this power...looking me *straight in the eye*...The photographic look has something paradoxical about it...in a café, a young boy came in alone...and occasionally his eyes rested on me; I then had the certainty that he was *looking at* me without however being sure that he was *seeing* me: an inconceivable distortion” (111). Like Barthes’ distinction between looking and seeing, Mary Rose is the one photographed, while the unknown you becomes the *spectator*, and interprets Mary Rose’s “look” as a “knowingness” that penetrates his or her self. In the poem, our unknown you “distorts” Mary Rose’s “look” and anxiously mistakes her mere “looking” for “seeing,” rather seeing into his or herself (111). The anxiety from the unknown “you” suggests that he or she fears a discovery of what his or her pose attempts to conceal: a more accurate yet grotesque self.

A second interpretation of “look” refers to the “pose” that our unknown “you” fears that Mary Rose discerns from his or her concealed truth. Rather than project his or her true, grotesque self through the image, the unknown you attempts to hide this self by positing an image that suggests he or she is the opposite of the actual “self” (Barthes 12). So, while our character is not necessarily trying to project his or her true self through his or her pose, the image under scrutiny certainly does not “coincide” with his or her true image (12). Thus, our unknown you’s anxiety exemplifies a consciousness that occurs

under the camera's eye: once photographed, this awareness produces the *spectrum's* (he who is photographed) anxiety of how he or she is perceived.

Just as the unknown "you" recognizes that he is under Mary Rose's gaze, a third interpretation suggests that Mary Rose consciously recognizes that she is under the view of the unknown you, and that her pose contains a "performative" nature (Shusterman 67). Mary Rose then becomes consciously aware that she is under a gaze or "lens," and this knowledge prompts Mary Rose to strike "merely a pose," which she constructs from her awareness of being viewed. In a reverse manner Mary Rose, who acted as the *Operator* in one reading of "The Look" now becomes the *spectrum* (Chappell 14). In both cases, the unknown "you" and Mary Rose both exhibit anxiety of transparency, in which both characters have urgency to project a pose in attempts to conceal an undesired grotesque self, which becomes visible.

The relationship between speaker, reader, and subject matter in *Family Gathering's* poems mirrors that of the trifold relationship of photographer, viewer, and subject photographed Barthes suggests every photograph contains. Barthes muses on the process of photography, specifically the nature of photographs, and suggests that photographs break down into three distinct operations that simultaneously capture a past moment, attest to what was, and in doing so present a truth of inevitable and future death. Specifically, Barthes claims:

...a photograph can be the object of three practices (or of three emotions, or of three intentions): to do, to undergo, to look. The *Operator* is the photographer. The *Spectator* is ourselves, all of us who glance through collections of photographs—in magazines and newspapers, in books,

albums, archives...And the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any *eidolon* emitted by the object, which I should like to call the *Spectrum* of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to 'spectacle' and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead. (Barthes 9)

Essentially, a photograph's composition consists of these three "practices," and is inextricable from all of them. For instance, the *Operator* (photographer) captures the *Spectrum/spectacle* (what is photographed), which is then viewed by the *Spectator* (anyone who views the photograph) (9). In capturing an image, the photograph freezes the "spectacle" but what is captured is a past moment that no longer exists no matter how recent a past, and the image is "dead" because it has no future, it can no longer progress forward, and becomes trapped in what Barthes calls "stasis" (89). Photographic portraits then, showcase "the return of the dead," because the image displayed is a past portrayal of one captured in a specific place in time that no longer exists (9). Nonetheless, the image captured attests to a truth of what was. In *Family Gathering*, the poems attest to a reality in which the grotesque functions alongside the normative.

Chappell's poem "Uncle John" exemplifies an objectified subject once it/he/she is photographed. Through his objectification, Uncle John becomes a grotesque object existing in a state that eerily demonstrates both human animation and lifelessness (Thomson 35). Because Uncle John is the subject of the poem, he inevitably becomes objectified among other people even though other humans inhabit the poem, such as being "monument-like" which contrasts with the "excited children/ Playing" (Chappell 5-

6). Through this objectification, Uncle John's "monument-like" portrayal casts him as non-living, the representation of John further removed from his sense of self:

One may say of Uncle John he's *there*,
But not that "there" is changed by this cool fact.
He's not invisible, the way that air
And metaphysics are. He'll speak and act,
As other people do, and yet he's seen
But hardly noticed, like a nondescript
Monument amid excited children
Playing in the park at green twilight

The thought has been advanced that Uncle John
Should not be counted with the human race
But rather as a separate phenomenon. (1-11)

Not only is Uncle John depicted as nonhuman, but as a "nondescript monument," which suggests that he is an undiscernible, and even abstract non-human entity (Chappell 6-7). To quote Philip Thomson, it is the "Human-like, animated yet actually lifeless" that is "simultaneously comical and eerie" (35). Ironically, Uncle John's monument-like description characterizes him not only as inanimate, but an object that often memorializes the dead. Uncle John's simultaneous embodiment of a human and a lifeless monument render him grotesque, because his human existence actually appears more lifeless than alive.

Besides the inhuman descriptors that the speaker uses such as, “spook,” “specter,” “monument,” etc., we are given to understand that Uncle John exists separately from the “human race” (Chappell 10):

If you believe in spooks, then Uncle John
May fit your definition—unless you find
That he’s too incorporeal for one,
Making such slight impression on the mind
That he’d be snubbed by any proper ghost.
And yet I’ve wondered if that’s not his plan:
In mortal flesh he live as a specter lost
So when he dies he’ll come back as a man. (17-24)

Not only does the speaker claim that Uncle John “should not be counted with the human race” but that Uncle John merely exists as “an extensive quality of space” (10, 12). The speaker of the poem even uses Barthes choice word “specter,” and Uncle John, through being “captured” as such, ceases to exist as Uncle John the human, and becomes “Total Image,” or “specter” John (Barthes 14). Barthes declares, “I have become Total Image, which is to say, Death in person; other—the Other—do not dispossess me of myself, they turn me, ferociously, into an object” (14). This subject-to-object transformation produces a “micro-version of death” in which the subject, in this case Uncle John, “truly becomes a specter” by becoming the object under lens (Barthes 14). The rest of the family others Uncle John because they objectify him as “Death in person” (Barthes 14). However, Barthes’s “Death in person” paradox appears contradictory to his argument (14). Uncle John encapsulates the grotesque not only by existing as both the living and the dead, but

by inhabiting both of these states in a manner that fluctuates between both. Sarah Gleeson-White describes the grotesque body as one always “in flux, in a constant process of reformation” (110). Though Barthes argues that a photographic image retains the presentation of an image in “a strange stasis, the stasis of an *arrest*,” the grotesque image, static as the image itself may be, retains its essence of fluidity that constitutes the transgressive nature of the grotesque (Barthes 91). In other words, because the grotesque image does attest to an image of process; a process which *is/does* transgress normative boundaries, proportions, etc., a grotesque body inhabits a state of flux while simultaneously inhabiting a moment of stasis.

Chappell’s poem “The Traitor” exemplifies how the *Operator* and *Spectrum* exist separately, yet are both intertwined. This intertwined relationship exhibits what occurs when one takes a self-portrait, or selfie with a forward facing camera. By being both behind and under the lens of focus, the traitor, unlike the rest of the characters in *Family Gathering* possesses the ability to manipulate his own portrayal.

He sits apart,
The watcher weaving his cramped designs,
Writing in sharp lines
Portraits of a family
Who furnish, endlessly,
Matter for which he has small heart.

It is true that he betrays
Those whom he is obliged

To love if possible, to respect,
In any case?
And do they feel besieged,
Preferring cold neglect
To the ambivalent phrase
And unfair adjective
That slander the ways they live?

We all have faults,
So what? What need to point them out
With yellow mechanical pencil
Liming in simple stencil
Lines that flier and pout

With crossgrain mockery that never halts? (1-21)

“The Traitor’s” meta qualities suggests that the traitor, the subject made object of the poem, can quite possibly also be the speaker. The meta qualities of “The Traitor” act as a selfie and in turn, rob the poem of a sense of “Automatism,” or an unconscious production of subject matter (Wilson 55). While many critics suggest that the poems are narrated through the lens of Elizabeth, the eight-year-old girl whose poems “Elizabeth Retreats” and “Elizabeth in the Swing” bookend the collection, this poem suggests that it is actually he, the traitor, who “captures” the family members, and thus is the speaker.

Because Barthes’ focus is on the photograph, various differences occur with his “three practices” when applied to Chappell’s poems. For instance, the *Operator*, which I

argue is the speaker for this collection of poems, then assumes both the role as *Operator* and *Spectrum* which does not occur with photographs and, is therefore inevitably tied to the anxiety of the *Spectrum*. In other words, the speaker is responsible for the duties of both the *Operator* and the *Spectrum* because he simultaneously captures the *Spectrum* (the subject matter of the poem), and has complete control over what the *Spectrum* portrays. Thus, the speaker is at all times behind and under the eye of the “camera.” While the *Operator* may not be what is being captured in the poem, the anxiety lies with the perception of what the poem posits, or quite possibly reader perception.

The speaker claims that the traitor “sits apart” (Chappell 1) from the rest of the family, and is creating unflattering portraits of the family members. Similarly, the speaker of the collection’s poems literally “sits apart,” but also captures the family members through Chappell’s poems. The frames in which the speaker presents the various family members are nothing less than a “mockery” (21). The speaker’s separation also parallels the separation between the *Operator* and the *Spectrum*; however, once the narrator references himself, he too, becomes an object under the lens, and in one way or another becomes part of the collection of poems. Though the traitor literally constructs the family members through drawings, his “sharp lines” and “unfair adjectives” mirror that of the poems’ witty lines and critical descriptions given through the speaker (3, 14). It is “The Traitor” that literally displays how the speaker becomes both the *Operator* and the *Spectrum*, because he presents this photographic portrait poem in which he becomes the object under observation.

Sitting apart from, and simultaneously framing the characters through, grotesque descriptions, the traitor (speaker) attempts to posit his own image as being discernibly

separate from the rest of the family's grotesqueness. By highlighting the grotesqueness of the other characters and attempting to capture his own image in contrast to their grotesque qualities, the speaker assumes the role as the "norm" as opposed to the "othered" family members. Essentially, the speaker highlights the more prevalent grotesqueness of other family members in order to overshadow his same underlying grotesque qualities, which the speaker hints at by admitting "We all have faults,/ So what?" (Chappell 16-17). The speaker's self-assumed role as the norm, who condescends to the rest of the family parallels Griffin and Thompson's notion that the rest of the nation projects their underlying grotesque qualities onto the South (297). The speaker's attempt to create this strategically posed selfie actually comes off as a façade, inherently undermining his attempt to project a normal image, and suggests that he, too, possesses a grotesqueness that he wishes to conceal. Eventually, the speaker does come to term with his grotesqueness that is illumined through a photograph of himself.

Finally, Chappell's poem "Photographer" shows that the speaker recognizes an otherness in his or her photograph that is familiar yet repulsive, and that he and other characters undergo a distortion in which their images appear strangely distorted. Barthes argues that a consciousness of one's self as "other" occurs when one is photographed, or when one becomes the object of a photograph. Specifically, Barthes claims, "the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity...it reminds us of its mythic heritage only by that faint uneasiness which seizes me when I look at 'myself' on a piece of paper" (12-13). Essentially, the speaker recognizes himself as "other" and experiences uneasiness (Barthes 12). The speaker declares:

Myself I won't describe except

To say I hope to God

I don't look anything like so odd,

With my eyes closed as if I slept

In deeply stupid unconsciousness.

She makes us look as scary

As old woodcuts in a bestiary—

But maybe, after all, that's us. (Chappell 17-24)

The speaker recognizes an “otherness” about the photograph, so much that the objects photographed appear to be created from a different medium such as, “woodcuts,” yet he recognizes in the last line that the image is “after all,” himself and his family (Chappell 23). This “scary uneasiness” is the speaker’s recognition of his own otherness produced by his viewing of himself in the photograph (Barthes 13). Rather than acknowledging the image as “scary,” it is the speaker’s recognition of himself that produces the uneasiness (Chappell 22). The speaker realizes that the photograph is not literally him, but an image of himself as an “other” to others. The photograph grants the speaker the capability of viewing himself as others view him, producing a “dissociation of consciousness from identity” (Barthes 12). He becomes consciously aware of his identity in conjunction to others. Yet, it is not just the dissociation of consciousness from identity that produces the speaker’s anxiety, but a realization that the grotesque image of himself is no less true than a more flattering photograph.

The speaker's bestial description suggests that his anxiety of the photograph's grotesqueness stems from a recognition of something familiar, yet distorted. What disturbs the speaker is not the distortion itself, but that the distortion still leaves a trace of the familiar. Ironically, the speaker compares the photograph to a woodcut, which unlike a photograph, is not merely representational. The speaker knows he is looking at a photograph of himself, yet there is something about the photograph that seems eerily foreign to himself. Significantly, the speaker's bestiary description recalls the earliest use of grotesque as a term that referred to paintings and murals that contained a "combination of human, animal and vegetable elements, intricately interwoven," and considered to be a "confusion of heterogenous elements" that "transgress against the laws of nature and proportion" (Thomson 12). It is this transgression of nature and proportion that the speaker finds disturbing; the image of himself that, for whatever reason, also resembles something beast-like. The speaker recognizes this transgression in the photograph, the blending of man and beast, and is "forced" to accept the image because it cannot "be refused or transformed;" it is an attestation of truth (Barthes 91). This image that resembles both himself and something animal-like transgresses normal boundaries leaving the speaker to confront its grotesqueness.

Other than the grotesqueness the photograph illuminates, the reminder of death also thrusts itself onto the speaker. Noting that his closed eyes resemble a deep unconsciousness, what becomes apparent for the speaker is how dead he appears in the photograph. The speaker recognizes, ironically, that the photograph of himself actually "produces Death while trying to preserve life," (Barthes 92) or that this fleeting captured image, a past moment, no longer exists and that he, too, will eventually be "what has

been” (93). This realization occurs almost immediately when the speaker notices his death-like appearance in his “closed eyes” (Chappell 20). The caesura that the stanza break creates acts as a pause that illumines the speaker’s moment of realization, and the poem then shifts from a comical tone to a subtle moment of shock or horror:

To say I hope to God

I don’t look anything like so odd,

With my eyes closed as if I slept

In deeply stupid unconsciousness. (18-21)

The speaker’s initial comical reaction to the photo then becomes a moment of horror when he realizes that the comical aspect of his image is how dead he looks. Resembling a death-like appearance, the speaker’s image then becomes a grotesque revelation that serves as a reminder, a physical artifact that points to his own inevitable death. For the speaker, this comic yet horrifying moment that occurs through viewing his own photographic image becomes a grotesque revelation of his own mortality.

In the poem the speaker experiences a disturbing revelation, and reluctantly realizes that the grotesque depictions of he and his family are appalling yet true. The speaker’s uneasiness reveals his anxiety of confronting the camera’s “truth,” that a photograph is “somehow a natural witness of ‘what has been’...a certain but fugitive testimony” (Barthes 93-94) since the photographer “avows” that, “the camera never lies...its images are true” (Barthes 9-10). Following the photographer’s “vow,” the speaker describes various family members through surreal and exaggerated imagery:

Aunt Marjorie has red eyes, big blue

Ears, and gaping holes for a nose.

And Uncle Einar's wildly cross-eyed,

And Uncle John's so dim

We'll always wonder if that's really him

Or a victim of subarctic frostbite. (Chappell 11-16)

The exaggerated physical features, "big blue/ Ears," "gaping holes for a nose," "wildly cross-eyed," and even "subarctic frostbite" caricature the speaker and his family members to the point that the speaker "wonders" if it is actually them. The caricatured images produce a sense of anxiety in the speaker, yet reassures himself that these grotesque creatures are his family and himself. The realization does not arrive as consolation, but as a reluctant acceptance of truth. The speaker accepts that "the camera never lies," and that this grotesque depiction is actually an authentic "testimony to what was" (Barthes 93). Because the grotesque images are no less true than more flattering photographs, both accurately attest to the images' depictions, and complicate the line between grotesque and normal.

I think this line between grotesque/normal is what we should consider. By applying various definitions of the grotesque to the poems in *Family Gathering*, one might observe how the term itself can slip between different meanings, and what constitutes something/someone as grotesque might actually be more subjective than not. Though the speaker gives scathing depictions of various characters, the next to last poem in the collection, "The Strain of Mercy" seems to provide at least some sense of redemption for the family members:

Aunt Agnes takes it all in stride:
Uncle Einar's boorishness,
Cousin Lilia's need to hide,
Cousin Willoughby's sordid mess
He thinks is a "bohemian life,"
Aunt Alicia's wandering wits,
What Uncle Lewis did to his wife,
The way that Uncle Nahum sits
In his creepy corner and calculates,
Aunt Wilma's plans for sweet revenge,
Cousin Hubert in dire straits,
The inevitable and dreaded change
Coming to young Elizabeth,
Cousin Ellie's hordes of mates,
Uncle Ozzie's fear of death.

She recognizes what we are,
Yet holds us in affection
As steadfast as the morning star,
As if our faults had no connection
With the persons we are within.
She doesn't pretend an ignorance
Of our dark collective sin;

She only believes that circumstance
Has gone against us every one,
That by blind forces we were driven.

We make a painful silent moan
At being so horribly forgiven. (1-27)

The collection overall is fairly damning for the characters—even young Elizabeth is doomed by “inevitable and dreaded change”—but I think the contrast of Aunt Agnes’s mercy sheds light on how these scathing depictions should be taken: “in stride” (1, 12). In other words, the speaker’s depictions are not meant to render the characters strictly grotesque, but rather to suggest that anyone/anything observed intently enough might exhibit something that comprises one of the grotesque’s various meanings. However, even this reading also suggests that there is something grotesque to be found in everything. The speaker is clear that Aunt Agnes does not “pretend to be ignorant” toward the family’s “dark sins,” but that she chooses not to dwell on them. If we are to take the position of Aunt Agnes, then the grotesque exists codependently alongside what we might call “normal.” Addressing the poems as photographs informed by Barthes’s theory allows us to consider how the grotesque is not necessarily separate from the norm itself, but operates codependently. In other words, the grotesque’s fluid definition provides a spectrum with various levels of palatability. Thus, what constitutes grotesque becomes dependent upon the viewer’s/reader’s subjectivity, in turn allowing us to consider that “maybe, after all, that’s us” (47).

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