

Something to Chew On: Rethinking G.K. Chesterton

Review Essay

Michael Shallcross. *Rethinking G.K. Chesterton and Literary Modernism: Parody, Performance, and Popular Culture*, Routledge, 2018, \$132 (hardcover), 296 pp.

In 2006, famous Yale professor Harold Bloom, who defied trendy scholarship by endorsing the Western canon, published a collection of essays about G.K. Chesterton. Written by twenty different scholars, the essays are preceded by an introduction in which Bloom proclaims his affection for Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) while also denouncing Chesterton's anti-Semitism. "By 1930," Bloom writes, "Chesterton was praising Mussolini, and he went on later to blame the Jews for Hitler's ascension to power" (GKC 2). This tactic, deriding Chesterton while affirming his powerful imagination, serves as a microcosm of the reactions Chesterton generated during his own lifetime. Such ambiguous, if not downright hostile, responses to Chesterton are key to *Rethinking G.K. Chesterton and Literary Modernism* (2018). Its author, Michael Shallcross, suggests that even Chesterton's anti-semitism is ambiguous, quoting a point made by Margaret Sanovan in 1977: "By the standards of the time his anti-Semitism was very mild—but why was it there at all?" (Shallcross 185). Her final question, of course, is imperative for any discussion about a famous Christian like Chesterton.

Though Shallcross never mentions Bloom's essay collection and says very little about Chesterton's Christianity, *Rethinking Chesterton* enables readers to take issue with Bloom's conclusion that "Chesterton cannot be cleansed of his Fascist leanings" (GKC 2).



RETHINKING G.K. CHESTERTON AND LITERARY MODERNISM

PARODY, PERFORMANCE, AND POPULAR CULTURE

Michael Shallcross



Acknowledging that Chesterton was influenced by the bigotry of both his brother Cecil and his friend Hilaire Belloc, Shallcross informs us that Chesterton repudiated Germany's "quite unproved [theory of] racial supremacy"—in 1914, no less: long before he explicitly denounced Hitler's treatment of Jews (Shallcross 195). Citing Chesterton's *Resurrection of Rome* (1930), which ends with a "warning against fascism," Shallcross suggests that, even though Chesterton's suspicions of capitalism initially drew him to Mussolini, his "democratic humanism ... ultimately preserved him from [Ezra] Pound's uncritical embrace of Fascism" (249–50). Nevertheless, Shallcross does not shy away from including Chesterton's more disturbing opinions, such as his argument that Jews in England should wear special clothing to distinguish them from the native British population. Those who seek to exonerate Chesterton, sanctifying him by ignoring or explaining away his anti-Semitism, are not that much different from his detractors: opposite sides of the same coin.

Shallcross carefully looks at both sides of the coin in his thoroughly researched work, and this is its greatest strength. Rather than arguing one way or the other, he provides superabundant data, allowing readers to see the complexity of the culture in which Chesterton was embedded and to which he was reacting. Right from the start, in fact, Shallcross distinguishes his book from extant scholarship, scholarship that all too often takes at face value denunciations made not only by Chesterton, but also about him. Avant-garde high modernists excoriated Chesterton's celebration of historical thinkers, believing that progress in both art and science repudiates the past, especially the Christian past. Influenced by Futurism, they preached not only that true art transcends the "hypnotic spell of mass culture," as Wyndham Lewis once put it (Shallcross 205), but also that great artists should not be held to the same ethical standards as the rest of society.

Modernist elitism reached its apogee, perhaps, when the sculptor Jacob Epstein successfully argued that he should be "exempted" from fighting in the Great War "on the grounds that he was an 'irreplaceable artist.'" In response, as Shawcross notes, "Chesterton lent his name to a newspaper campaign to conscript" Epstein (197), which outraged high modernists, who had been attacking Chesterton's "opposition to exclusivity" in the arts for years (116). Indeed, throughout his career, Chesterton energetically defended mass culture, writing essays with titles such as *A Defense of Slang*, *A Defense of Farce*, *A Defense of Nonsense*, *A Defense of Penny Dreadfuls*, and *An Apology for Buffoons*. In fact, Shallcross's book might be better named *The (Es)Chewing of G.K. Chesterton: Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot*, for the author spends almost as much time discussing the literary elite who eschewed Chesterton as he does focusing on Chesterton's chewing out of modernist elitism.

Chewing on Chesterton

Mastication metaphors seem appropriate for a celebrity whose oversized girth was as famous as his paradoxical *bon (bon) mots*. Chesterton himself often based metaphors on food and dietary consumption, as in his famous parody of Wordsworth in his “Sonnet to a Stilton Cheese.” Alluding to Wordsworth’s “Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour,” Chesterton wrote “Stilton, thou shouldst be living at this hour” (Shallcross 7). In the thick of Shallcross’s book, which quotes multiple Chesterton comments about cheese, I thought of a sandwich; indeed, Shallcross’s discussion of Chesterton seemed like bread encasing the meat and cheese of Lewis, Pound, and Eliot. However, rather than telling us what to think of various components of the sandwich, Shallcross encourages us to chew on them together in order to develop our own taste for the times. Appropriately, he quotes Wordsworth’s comment that the “great and original” writers must “create the taste by which [they are] to be relished” (72). And he shows that Lewis, Pound, and Eliot appealed to very different tastes than did Chesterton. Shallcross, in fact, garnishes his sandwich with some of their offensively mordant statements (*mordant*, of course, means *biting*):

Wyndham Lewis: “Chesterton’s journalism ‘can be dismissed as the unavoidable drivelling of an imbecile.’” (153)

Ezra Pound: “Chesterton is a ‘yahoo’ ... a ‘pandar to public imbecilities’... ‘a symbol for all the mob’s hatred of all art that aspires above mediocrity’” (157); he is “‘vile scum on the pond’ of British culture” . . . his “output ... the ‘burble’ of a ‘dunghill.’” (171)

T.S. Eliot: “I have always found Mr. Chesterton’s style exasperating to the last point of endurance.” (238)

These trenchant assessments, of course, subvert the goal of those who offer them. After all, if Chesterton is as imbecilic and unendurable as they say, why waste time denouncing him? Isn’t that comparable to famous painters disparaging inexpert technique in children’s drawings? These disparagements of Chesterton remind me of the most famous book by Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), which explores the desire of budding poets to escape the influence of their predecessors. Briefly mentioned by Shallcross, Bloom’s book invokes Freud’s concept of the Oedipal Complex in order to discuss the various ways authors unwittingly seek to “kill off” their literary fathers in order to highlight their own autonomous originality. In Chesterton’s case, however, it would seem that the “Men of 1914”—the moniker Wyndham Lewis gave to himself, Pound,

Eliot, and James Joyce—were quite self-conscious about their impulse to “kill” Chesterton’s influence. It is an impulse that Chesterton both understood and repudiated, having once said that “progress should be something else beside a continual parricide” (Shallcross 142). Chesterton’s insight perhaps resulted from anxiety over the influence of Oscar Wilde on his own style. As Shallcross puts it, “One is reminded of [Elizabeth] Sewell’s [1955] observation that Chesterton’s criticisms of Wilde appear to be directed at all ‘the points at which they seem most to resemble one another’” (208). Later, while exploring the rapprochement between Chesterton and Eliot, Shallcross quotes dialogue from Chesterton’s novel *The Ball and the Cross* (1909): “‘I must kill you now,’ said the fanatic, ‘Because I have begun to like you’” (240). Perhaps Harold Bloom, author of both *The Anxiety of Influence* and *G.K. Chesterton*, feels anxious about the fact that, he a self-proclaimed “Jewish literary critic,” had also “begun to like” Chesterton (GKC 2).

Shallcross explores how and why the Men of 1914 eventually began to like Chesterton as well. Partly due to their increasing disillusionment with Futurism, and partly due to Chesterton’s willingness to compliment his enemies in print, their rapprochement, Shallcross suggests, primarily reflects their similarities, as suggested by the alliterative subtitle to his book: *Parody, Performance, and Popular Culture*. Repeatedly employing the metaphor of mirrors and mirror-images, Shallcross suggests that the Men of 1914 mirror Chesterton in terms of their proclivity for parody and performance: though mirror opposites, they are all “incorrigible performers” who stage “their literary identities” by parodying others (7). To metaphorically illustrate their common skill at parody and performance, Shallcross repeatedly invokes Chesterton’s Father Brown story “The Queer Feet,” in which the thief Flambeau, embedded in an exclusive men’s club, successfully mimics the walking style of both subservient waiters and elite aristocrats. Though radically different, both of Flambeau’s performances parody people of his day. Similarly, while Chesterton imitated the style valued by working class people of his day, the Men of 1914 imitated the style of elite artists, but both were good at what they did.

The Gristle

Shallcross is at his best when he imitates the style of popular scholarship rather than the elitist jargon of the academy. The problem is not with his insight—I learned a great deal from the book—but with the prose, which is sometimes hard to sink one’s teeth into. For example, take this sentence (please!):

While this aporic closed circuit runs counter to Chesterton’s vision of the positive possibilities of nonsense as an ‘escape into a world where things are not fixed horribly in eternal appropriateness,’

the echoes of Bentley's deterministic fatalism and urge for withdrawal, as well as his own youthful solipsism (a delusion of 'being God'), that Chesterton discovered in Lewis's fictional and polemical work roused him to a critical engagement that ultimately enabled the pair to evade the apparent fixity of their animus. (245)

Like abundant gristle in deli-meat, such sentences slow down the consumption of an otherwise interesting sandwich. I would not recommend this book to people that hadn't already adjusted their palates to unusual tastes offered in the first several years of grad school.

Conclusion

At the same time, I found Shallcross delivering what I most value in high level scholarship: an impressive buffet of information that whets my appetite in new ways. Annoyed by the glut of books on C.S. Lewis that say nothing not already explored numerous times before, offering not much more than warmed-up leftovers, I found it a treat to indulge in a brand new combination of tastes. *Rethinking G.K. Chesterton and Literary Modernism* should be in every college and university library, available to anyone seeking a new way to understand not only Chesterton but also anxieties over his influence.

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Works Cited

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