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# Larger than Legend: Saving Chesterton from the Chestertonians

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# Larger than Legend: Saving Chesterton from the Chestertonians

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Richard Linklater's bittersweet 2008 film *Me and Orson Welles* tells of an impressionable teenager who gets the chance to work with his idol, Orson Welles, in the famed Mercury Theater production of *Julius Caesar*, and in the process learns a great deal about the seductions of hero-worship. Unlike the Welles devotee in Linklater's movie, I never got to meet my hero, Gilbert Keith Chesterton (he died twelve years before I was born), but I did study under one of his *G. K.'s Weekly* staff members, Michael Sewell. By the time I met him, decades later, he was Brocard Sewell of the Carmelites of the Ancient Observance--an author, editor, and esteemed biographer of fin-de-siecle writers. Thanks to Sewell I read a list of eccentric English writers, including John Gray, Olive Custance, Montague Summers, and Cecil Chesterton. And through Cecil I encountered the brother in whose shadow Cecil lived.

Over four decades I have maintained an abiding interest in Chesterton, the gentle Catholic giant whose commanding breadth of interest, inexhaustible curiosity, and plenitude of mind and spirit make him an enduring inspiration. I have published on him, organized an academic conference on his life and thought, and written a radio play titled *GKC versus GBS: On Socialism, Sex, and Salvation*. The pleasures of Chesterton and Shaw are endless--intellectual adversaries whose exchanges over the decades were graced by civility and grand style. Chesterton delighted in mocking Shaw's Puritanism, teetotalism, and vegetarianism, and during one debate chided his fervid interlocutor for having distorted a claim, made by Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, on behalf of that most common and beloved of drinks: beer. Noting that "Belloc and I are not maintaining that beer is a glory, only that it is a normal habit and a natural right," Chesterton quipped, "We do not get excited about beer. It is Shaw who gets excited about beer. And it really seems a pity to get drunk on beer when you have not even drunk it." Through many such bantering exchanges Chesterton and Shaw remained respectful and affectionate friends, as the letter GBS wrote to GKC's widow, Frances, poignantly demonstrates: "It seems the most ridiculous thing in the world that I, eighteen years older than Gilbert, should be heartlessly surviving him," Shaw wrote. "The trumpets are sounding for him; and the slightest interruption must be intolerable."

Chesterton was thoroughly contemporary; he lived in his time and addressed it as an active, critical thinker. This is not to suggest that his thinking was without prejudice or blinders. Despite his prophetic denunciation of Hitler's persecution of the Jews, he was prey to the casual anti-Semitism endemic in Britain; his flirtations with the corporatist state disposed him, initially at least, to a sympathetic view of Mussolini; and his view of women was more courtly than enlightened. He opposed women's suffrage, arguing that women already ruled the world from the home. Yet when he died in 1936 his status as the Catholic of record seemed unassailable. His popularity in the public realm--Catholic and non-Catholic alike--easily surpassed that of many of the modern theological giants of the tradition, whether Karl Adam or Lord Acton. Despite his lack of formal training in the sacred disciplines, Chesterton seemed to be the

voice of Catholicism in the first half of the twentieth century--and this despite the fact that he did not convert from Anglicanism until he was forty-eight years old.

But things changed. By January 1959--the month Pope John XXIII announced his decision to hold an ecumenical council that would become Vatican II--Thomas Merton was noting in his diary, with a large dollop of acerbity, that Chesterton's reputation was on the wane. Chiding Chesterton for his "complacent windiness," Merton dismissed him as "badly dated," with a "voice [that] comes out of the fog between the last two wars." Chesterton, he complained,

evokes problems that stand to become, for him, a matter of words. And he always has a glib solution. With Chesterton everything is "of course," "quite obviously," etc. etc. And everything turns out to be "just plain common sense after all." And people have the stomach to listen and to like it! How can we be so mad?

Half a century later, people again have the stomach for Chesterton's style, and a Chesterton revival is well underway, especially among "orthodox" Catholics. Several biographies over recent decades chart the path. Dudley Barker's *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography* (1973), Michael Finch's *G. K. Chesterton* (1986), William Oddie's *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy: The Making of GKC 1874-1908* (2008), and Ian Ker's magisterial *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography* (2011) all signal renewed interest in a man who was a literary force of nature--raconteur, controversialist, columnist, cartoonist, novelist, short-story writer, poet, essayist, editor, biographer, and popular historian.

The revival has been a long time in the making. Merton was right to suggest that in 1959 Chesterton's sensibility and attitude were dismissed by many as so much dated triumphalism; and the next decade or so witnessed Chesterton's near-complete eclipse. Then, in 1974, an entrepreneurial priest of the Congregation of Saint Basil, Ian Boyd, who did his doctoral dissertation on Chesterton at the University of Aberdeen, founded--with a cohort of like-minded enthusiasts--the Chesterton Society at Spode House in England, which published a journal called the *Chesterton Review*.

Initially the society was not seen as partisan; its vice-presidents included a liberal Canadian cardinal, George Flahiff, and the progressive U.S. public intellectual Garry Wills (author of one of the best books on Chesterton), and the journal's advisory board included such writers and critics as Hugh Kenner, Sheila Watson, and Marshall McLuhan. If the orientation was generally conservative, it was a broad conservatism, neither ideological nor narrowly Catholic in its appeal. In time, however, and especially after the election of John Paul II, the "official" Chestertonians became increasingly more assertive about GKC's place in the Catholic pantheon, extolling his special love for Poland--increasingly seen as the geographical and spiritual heart of Christian civilization in an age of godless barbarism--and trumpeting his thought as the ideal expression of John Paul's social and economic teaching. Aligning themselves with right-wing think tanks in the United States and abroad, they became increasingly negative about

postconciliar developments in the church. Today the Chesterton Review is published by the G. K. Chesterton Institute for Faith and Culture at Seton Hall University, and promotes a version of the Chestertonian vision that is traditionalist, if not downright reactionary.

Given GKC's radical love for the church, the affable intellectual pugilism that enabled him to demolish the arguments of his adversaries without a trace of personal contempt, his enviable ease with emissaries of the media, and his prominence not only in British society but throughout the world, it is easy to understand why many Catholics want to retrieve Chesterton from the battles of the past and ready him for the wars of today. But which wars? As noted, the Chesterton restoration is especially rife in the precincts of the theologically "orthodox." There is growing support for GKC's sainthood among powerful boosters--including Benedict XVI--who view him as the perfect British complement to the American television prodigy Fulton J. Sheen. Both men are model pillars for the architecture of a new, tradition-minded evangelization that is determined to resist secularization and committed to the recovery of lapsed Catholics, especially Catholics alienated by the reforms of Vatican II. Chesterton and Sheen fit the bill as media stars whose orthodoxy is considered beyond reproach.

What is it that makes Chesterton so appealing as a model for the new apologetics? In great measure the answer can be found in his confident epistemological realism. Things may not be what they appear to be, Chesterton averred, but they are what they are; when we distrust common sense, we dislodge the anchor that holds us to reality and readily become hostage to solipsism and antinomianism. His appeal can also be found in his repudiation of intellectual elitism, his profound belief in the democratic instincts of the ordinary person, and his corresponding disdain for the narrow cleverness of professional savants. Chesterton had little truck with those who created utopian systems, who misread dogma as constraint rather than creative limitation, or who preferred the novel to the traditional.

It's not difficult to see the attractiveness of Chesterton as a champion for Catholicism today. In a world where Christianity routinely faces derision, when its singular role in the shaping of Western civilization goes unacknowledged in the E.U. Charter, when its institutions and mores are increasingly proscribed, and when the authority of Peter is regularly devalued, Chesterton's modus operandi offers solace to a beleaguered body of the faithful, the holy remnant. But this is precisely where moderate Chestertonians like myself experience some unease; we flinch at the prospect of such a big-tent thinker--a writer possessed of a rare expansiveness of insight--recreated simply as Mr. Orthodoxy, both champion and captive of a cadre of rigorists who view themselves as sole gatekeepers to the Truth.

For these hounds of orthodoxy, Chesterton offers certitude in a time of disconcerting flux, stability in a time of chaos. In him they find reassurance that the essentials of the Christian tradition, the undiluted power of the gospel, and the saving function of the church can be communicated with amiable but passionate conviction--not because you need to persuade, but simply because what you say is true. They find in him the joy that comes with certainty. Journalist and evangelical polemicist Michael Coren views

Chesterton as the model Catholic journalist, "who wrote the truth of permanent things, of first things, of Catholic things." The British writer Joseph Pearce sees in him the supreme expositor of orthodoxy, one who influenced such prominent English converts as Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene. And the prolific Chesterton aficionado Dale Ahlquist acclaims him "the complete thinker":

Just as Chesterton warned that the popularization of Darwin would lead to a belief in mindless progressivism in politics, he warned early on that the popularization of Einstein would lead to an acceptance of relativism in philosophy.

Even an admirer of Chesterton, however, can see that this isn't complete thinking on Chesterton's part; it's partial, lazy thinking. He was a professional journalist who had not one but several daily deadlines, and his arguments sometimes suffered as a consequence. Chesterton could deflate the self-assured and the pompous with matchless facility; but he could also indulge in cheap caricaturing, deploy *reductio ad absurdum* arguments profligately, and play indulgently with paradox--in the process frequently confounding profundity with whimsy.

Ever the journalist, GKC was more interested in distilling the truth into his era's equivalent of a sound bite than in tentatively essaying its legitimacy. This is not to say he was incapable of an extended exploration of an idea, insight or thesis. His biographies of Blake, Dickens, Robert Browning, and others amply demonstrate his ability to weave a big tapestry--of work, life, and legacy--that introduces us afresh to figures we thought we already knew. But Chesterton's true metier, his genius really, was to probe, prod, and prognosticate. His analysis of the unchecked damage inflicted by market capitalism and Socialist statism looks impressively prophetic after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the global economic collapse that continues to afflict us. In *The Well and the Shallows* Chesterton makes clear the reasons for his detestation of capitalism: it undermines the family unit, corrupts domestic values, corrodes morality, usurps the right order of relationships by making the employer more important than the parent, and encourages "for commercial reasons, a parade of publicity and garish novelty, which is in its nature the death of all that was called dignity and modesty by our mothers and fathers."

And lest the socialists or Communists think they have their man, Chesterton thunders in his *Autobiography*:

I had early begun to doubt, and later to deny, the Socialist or any other assumption that involved a complete confidence in the state. I think I had begun to doubt it ever since I met the statesmen.

When it came to the church, however, this probing, prodding, and skeptical method--his calling into question the prevailing ideologies of his time--was never deployed. GKC could see no role for the committed Catholic dissenter, the institutional reformer. Translated to the ecclesial world, those very qualities that made him a perceptive critic of the corporate and political establishment, that ensured his

independence from the dominant aesthetic and philosophical theories of the salon and the academy, simply fell apart.

Marshalling Chesterton's formidable gift for exposing cant and intellectual shallowness, many of his current disciples claim him as the apologist par excellence for Rome's new evangelization. But this claim fails to acknowledge how far the ecclesiastical world Chesterton so eloquently represented--the official church world, that is, leaving out the silenced Catholic giants in philosophy, theology, patristics, and liturgy who would be rehabilitated after the Second Vatican Council--has given way to a different theological environment. The Pilgrim People of God has replaced the *societas perfectae*; the laity today does more than simply submit faithfully to the miter, and the secular order is less to be feared and more to be embraced--albeit cautiously--as the place of God's enduring love.

The Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor, drawing on Robert Wuthnow's distinction between "seekers" and "dwellers," describes the former as those who wrestle with "the enigmas that accompany a life of faith," and the latter, in contrast, as those who rest secure in the organic tradition that feeds them, at peace and in deep conversation with an authority they trust. The aching search for authenticity in our postromantic and postmodern world--an incontrovertible sign of a transformative cultural shift--doesn't fit the religious imagination and discourse of the dweller. A Catholicism that traffics in easy certainties, meanwhile, may not seem credible to the religious seeker.

To a moderate Chestertonian like me, the reclamation of Chesterton as a seeker rather than a dweller represents perhaps the only way to free him from the stranglehold of his present-day champions. There are excellent reasons for doing this. The Chesterton who wrestled with the insecurities and trials posed by conflicting worldviews, who understood viscerally the dread of nihilism and unreality, and who sought the mystery of being with a capacious thirst--this is the Chesterton who can appeal to a twenty-first-century Catholic. Chesterton, one should recall, was no stranger to despair. As a youth, and particularly as an art student at the Slade School of Art, he drank from the trough of contemporary pessimism and experienced, as he writes in his *Autobiography*,

a strong inward impulse to revolt; to dislodge this incubus or throw off this nightmare. But as I was still thinking the thing out by myself; with little help from philosophy and no real help from religion, I invented a rudimentary and makeshift mystical theory of my own. It was substantially this: that even mere existence, reduced to its most primary roots, was extraordinary enough to be exciting. Anything was magnificent as compared with nothing.

In other words, Chesterton allowed himself to explore possibilities outside the orthodoxies of his age and culture; in order to be truly orthodox he needed at one point in his life to be genuinely heterodox. The seeker in him saved him, and made possible the dweller.

Those drawn to Christianity in the twenty-first century, meanwhile, will find in Chesterton a figure of fascination--a towering Victorian polymath whose range of intellectual curiosity was as expansive as his girth, and a writer at once amusing and very serious. The opening paragraph of *Autobiography* speaks volumes of a man who wrote volumes; it speaks to that grand magnanimity of spirit that drew me to read him so many decades ago:

Bowing down in blind credulity, as is my custom, before mere authority and the tradition of the elders, superstitiously swallowing a story I could not test at the time by experiment of private judgment, I am firmly of opinion that I was born on the twenty-ninth of May, 1874, on Campden Hill, Kensington; and baptized according to the formularies of the Church of England in the little church of St. George opposite the large Waterworks Tower that dominated that ridge. I do not allege any significance in the relation of the two buildings; and indignantly deny that the church was chosen because it needed the whole water-power of west London to turn me into a Christian.

Playful, for sure, but ever earnest: these qualities attracted a wide audience among his contemporaries and continue to do so in our time. But the agreeable prose and warm persona would not be sufficient to command a perduring relevance by themselves. Similarly--and despite the stratagems of those who would now have him do battle on behalf of their assertive brand of theological conformity--one must note that as a Catholic apologist Chesterton is not timeless; indeed, his time came and went. As a Catholic thinker, however, a thinker for whom religion is constitutive of human meaning, and for whom the quest for God is a wondrous admixture of romance, myth, imagination, and reason--as this kind of thinker, Chesterton goes deeper and lasts longer. He is not about to fall back into obscurity.

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