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## Review of Michael Shallcross, 'Rethinking G. K. Chesterton and Literary Modernism: Parody, Performance, and Popular Culture'

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Michael Shallcross, *Rethinking G. K. Chesterton and Literary Modernism: Parody, Performance, and Popular Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 2018. xii + 295 pp. ISBN 978-1-138-67873-6.

It is undoubtedly the case, as Brett H. Speakman observed in his 2017 review of Denis Conlon's *G. K. Chesterton: A Reappraisal* (2015) in this very journal, that there has been a marked increase in publications over the last decade devoted to that 'para'-Inkling (at least in the Wade Center's classification), G. K. Chesterton. Michael Shallcross's *Rethinking G. K. Chesterton* is another addition to this list, and one which is entirely aware of most of its recent predecessors (though, ironically, Conlon's similarly titled work does not appear in the bibliography). Shallcross's own full title belies his book's extensive reach: of the six main chapters, the first two are not centrally concerned with modernism at all, focusing instead on Chesterton's relationship with the best friend of his youth, Edmund Clarihew Bentley, and his 'Performance on the Edwardian Literary Stage', in a kind of double act with George Bernard Shaw. It is only in the remaining chapters, which proceed roughly chronologically through Chesterton's life,<sup>1</sup> that the Italian Futurist Filippo Marinetti and the British-American 'Men of 1914': Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis and T. S. Eliot, move centre-stage. A host of other modernist and non-modernist figures hover in the wings.

This brief overview might give the impression that the book is biographically inclined, but it is in fact something very different: a literary critical monograph that is concerned not primarily with people, but with texts and ideas. Its main purpose is to advance an argument rather than to provide historical information or weave a biographical narrative. Those looking for an easily accessible account of Chesterton in relation to the literary scene of the 1890s through to the 1930s should therefore look elsewhere; but those interested in a fascinating addition to the scholarly literature demolishing the 'Great Divide' theory of modernism vs. mass culture should definitely pick this book up.<sup>2</sup> Everyone knows that Chesterton was a man of paradox, but as Shallcross convincingly demonstrates, so were his literary friends and enemies, and the monograph traces the unexpected 'cross-pollinating dialogue between academic and folk' a.k.a. 'elitist/populist' a.k.a. 'avant-garde/reactionary' 'cultures' (14). This dialogue took place *within* individual writers as much as *between* them, and a definite strength of the book is the equal attention it gives to the self-contradictions and changing outlooks of Chesterton's opponents. There are no straw men in Shallcross's account, as there so often are in partisan or polemical treatments of much-loved but controversial figures such as Chesterton. Not just Chesterton's 'friend' Bentley, but his 'enemies' Pound and Lewis are considered in all their complexity. Their relationships or encounters with Chesterton are analysed under the sign of the 'cross' – Chesterton's beloved symbol of 'contrapuntal confrontation', conjunction in contradiction and combination of opposites (265). Bakhtin's much-worn framework of the 'carnavalesque' is rejuvenated in its application to this serio-comic literary give-and-take, bolstering and helping to bring together the many individual textual interpretations that form the bulk of the analysis.

The thrust of Shallcross's argument is strong and unwavering, and carries through continuously from beginning to end, from Chesterton's tortured engagement with the pessimistic scepticism of the Decadent 1890s to his surprising reconciliation in the 1930s with his greatest detractors, the spiritual heirs of the 'unhuman' and 'unmoral' tendencies of the nineteenth century (31), embodied for the young Chesterton in Schopenhauer and Wilde. A number of contrapuntal motifs structure this analysis: emblematically – the populist open

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<sup>1</sup> Although it should be noted that the argument draws on texts from across Chesterton's oeuvre without always pausing to reconcile their dates with the stage of Chesterton's career ostensibly under examination.

<sup>2</sup> The book is the latest in the 'Literary Texts and the Popular Marketplace' series edited by the noted scholar of 'middlebrow' literature, Kate Macdonald.

laugh juxtaposed with the detached mandarin smirk – and generically – satire with a moral purpose set against the ‘inexplicable brutality’ of pure nonsense (125). But the urge to make Chesterton stand for one and Bentley or Pound for the other side of these juxtapositions is frustrated at every point. Shallcross shows all of his protagonists teetering on the boundary; their texts, as much as their rituals of public self-presentation, enacting a kind of (self)‘adversarial dynamic’ (67). The ‘anti-modern’ Chesterton and the high modernists both emerge from this account as quintessential ‘parodists’, projecting ‘difference’ while inscribing ‘similarity’ with their ostensible ideological and aesthetic adversaries (5).

Shallcross’s argument is mostly persuasive, at times revelatory, with the occasional slyly inserted witticism that feels quite appropriate in a book dedicated to buffoonery in all its forms. But at times the argument runs far ahead of the evidence, and the (what one might call) wishful thinking involved in such flights of interpretation is the only substantial weakness in a book that is otherwise a model of scholarly sophistication. The desire to see ‘dialogue’ everywhere results occasionally in improbable attributions of influence, and assertions of the existence of motivations, allusions or intertextual and verbal echoes that seem rather far-fetched. A reader would be justified in asking whether the figure under consideration is likely to have been familiar with a particular text, or to have remembered the exact phrasing so many years down the line, or to have had certain things in mind when writing that just happen to fit so neatly into the proffered argument. Some potentially surprising connections, such as the identification of the Bailiff character in Wyndham Lewis’s *Childermass* with Chesterton, are genuinely critically enlightening, whatever their degree of plausibility. But others – such as (to take two reciprocal statements at random) the supposition that ‘Chesterton’s equivocal phrasing’ in ‘On the Prison of Jazz’ ‘echoes’ the narrator’s phrasing in Lewis’s unpublished (at the time) pot-boiler *Mrs. Dukes’ Million* (139), or that in *Time and Western Man* Lewis appropriates imagery ‘wholesale from [Chesterton’s] ‘The Paradise of Thieves’” (212), which itself had supposedly caricatured Lewis in the guise of one of its main characters – are more of a stretch. This hunt for conjunctions creates fascinating, sometimes downright vertiginous, chains of association; but the links in these chains do not always hold together, leaving the reader to wonder what exactly the connection between consecutive statements in a given paragraph might be.

Such lapses aside – and they mar the overall effect of the argument no more than the occasional typographical errors mar the book’s generally clean formatting – the monograph is a welcome contribution both to modernist studies broadly speaking and to the shelf of the Chestertonian in this new golden age of Chesterton criticism.

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