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Michael Shallcross, *Rethinking G.K. Chesterton and Literary Modernism: Parody, Performance, and Popular Culture*

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Rethinking G.K. Chesterton and Literary Modernism: Parody, Performance, and Popular Culture by Michael Shallcross

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Michael Shallcross's *Rethinking G.K. Chesterton and Literary Modernism: Parody, Performance, and Popular Culture* (2018), the eighth volume to be published in Routledge's Literary Texts and the Popular Marketplace series, comes as a welcome addition to the critical literature that interrogates the supposed great divide of the early twentieth century. Chesterton's popularity and association with mass culture means that he has remained a marginal figure—a footnote or punchline—in scholarship on literary modernism. As Shallcross notes, this study might at first appear a "wild goose chase": "After all, the majority of critics who have given the matter any consideration have concluded that no meaningful correspondence existed" between Chesterton and modernism (1). Shallcross's often surprising study carefully and wittily—much like Chesterton's detective hero Father Brown—tracks down those correspondences. Comprising six chapters and an introduction detailing Chesterton's "confrontation [with modernism] across almost half a century of British culture" (16), the volume shows that Chesterton was a person of immense significance in the development and self-definition of literary modernism.

The book opens with an account of Chesterton's early friendship with Edmund Clerihew Bentley, which at first seems an unlikely subject given that Bentley is also not known as a modernist. But as Shallcross argues, drawing on comprehensive archival and biographical research, their friendship set the template for "the vacillation between opposition and identification, antipathy and affinity, that consistently characterised Chesterton's later responses to the dominant thought of the age" (19). Critically tracking this vacillation, Shallcross imagines a portmanteau creature, the Chesterbentley (riffing on the Chesterbelloc, George Bernard Shaw's original). Onto the back of this pantomime-horse figure, Shallcross packs a detailed argument about Chesterton's intellectual, literary, and personal development through the 1890s and early 1900s. This is then followed, in chapter 2, by a reading of Chesterton's use of travesty and burlesque, especially of his own person and dress, to negotiate Edwardian literary culture. These chapters, though

perhaps more modernist-adjacent than modernist, effectively set up the book's later arguments (and jokes) about the playfulness, duality, and identification inherent to Chesterton's confrontation with modernism.

Readers of this journal might be most interested in chapters 3–6, which cover Chesterton's direct engagement with literary modernism and the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, focusing in particular on the central players in Shallcross's carnivalesque drama of high-low cross-pollination: Lewis, Pound, and Eliot. We see Chesterton parodying, pillorying, and satirizing these figures, both reading and writing in modernist (or modernish) modes. Shallcross also shows the ways in which modernist writers dialogically reflected and refracted Chesterton in print (a major framework here is Bakhtin). Though as Shallcross admits, Chesterton's most direct influence in the 1910s might have been to inspire "reconstructing the very walls of exclusivity that he had sought to demolish," the avant-gardes of this period also often performed in his signature modes and genres: "whether in the buffooneries of Bloomsbury, the practical jokes of Italian Futurism, or the range of textual comedians conceived by the young Eliot and Lewis" (104). Lewis and Eliot emerge in particular as pseudo-Chestertons, "both modernists *and* Thursdayites" (104), through close readings of Eliot's poems "Humoresque," "Suite Clownesque," and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and Lewis's unpublished detective novel *Mrs. Dukes' Million* ("a burlesque shadow text to the high-modernist totem; an abject repository for Lewis's verbal waste products" [139]). It is in this way that Shallcross contributes to the complex picture of early twentieth-century literary culture, which no longer resembles a great divide so much as a crowded theater. The early "histrionic contest for cultural authority" between Lewis/Pound/Eliot and Chesterton, which raged in printed essays, short stories, and poems, as well as unpublished works and private letters, emerges through the 1930s into an "unlikely salvaging of mutual understanding, subsequently lost to a critical audience more invested in underlining the opposition than in negotiating the complication" (16).

The book's subtitle is "Parody, Performance, and Popular Culture," and through his readings in these later chapters, Shallcross offers an energizing intervention into critical scholarship on satire and parody as productive, rather than destructive or merely imitative, modes. Shallcross draws on Julia Kristeva's thinking about abjection to frame his discussion of Chesterton's relations with modernism as contamination/boundary-crossing. The abject joins the anti-modern, the carnivalesque, and the parodic as "another productive context through which to navigate the boundaries both erected and traversed by the factions under discussion" (167). In cataloging the ways in which parody and satire circulated as major discursive modes during this period—and the ways in which Chesterton provided direct influence and impetus for modernists'

uptake of them—what we see finally is a modernist culture more textually diverse, and far sillier, than it is generally given credit for.

Shallcross focuses, by and large, on the Men of 1914 (and, briefly, Virginia Woolf) as most fully representative of the strawmen Chesterton was seeking to expose. While it is perhaps beyond the purview of Shallcross's book, it might be a fruitful line for future scholars to pursue Chesterton's engagements with women modernists and the ways that his work contests and/or confirms the middlebrow (a term that does not feature prominently in the book). If I were to venture a downside to the book, it is that the chapters are quite long. In making his arguments, Shallcross assembles such an array of allusions, sources, jokes, and double entendres, drawn from archival sources and from very close analysis of his subjects' oeuvres, that the central thread of an individual chapter can momentarily be eclipsed by the dazzle of its local readings. But the book's pointed title remains instructive if readers ever get dizzy. Throughout, the book encourages its readers to reconsider—and to really think about—Chesterton as a writer who, through the affordances of parody and his investment in the popular, was by necessity interested in and engaged with what later came to be defined as literary modernism.

Endnotes

1 Michael Shallcross, *Rethinking G.K. Chesterton and Literary Modernism: Parody, Performance, and Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 308 pages.