# The liberal Chesterton

By Ralph C. Wood in the May 6, 2008 issue

**G. K. Chesterton as Controversialist, Essayist, Novelist and Critic.** *By John D. Coates. Edwin Mellen Press, 206 pp., $109.95*

**Chesterton and Evil.** *By Mark Knight. Fordham University Press, 224 pp., $55.00.*

**Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: The Fantasy of the Real.** *By Alison Milbank. T & T Clark, 208 pp., $120.00.*

**G. K. Chesterton: Thinking Backward, Looking Forward.** *By Stephen R. L. Clark. Templeton Foundation Press, 256 pp., $29.95.*

It is often assumed that G. K. Chesterton was a reactionary, antimodern, illiberal writer. In a certain sense he was. He was an avowed advocate of nearly all things ancestral. He described tradition as “the democracy of the dead,” a proper granting of the franchise to the greatest of all majorities, the deceased. He admired most things medieval and scorned many things modern, including women’s suffrage, divorce and contraception. His main objection to dueling was not that it left someone dead but that it settled no arguments. He also blamed the Protestant Reformation for producing two of the chief curses of modernity: individualism and capitalism.

But it is a mistake to see Chesterton only as curmudgeonly scourge. Four recent books reveal the complexity of his thought and especially how he was shaped by the political liberalism of his youth. John D. Coates, perhaps the leading contemporary Chesterton scholar, even demonstrates that Chesterton would have gladly embraced the Marxist claim that literary and other cultural phenomena are often shaped by underlying political and economic realities. In one of his most astute exercises in cultural criticism, *The Victorian Age in Literature*, Chesterton argued that 19th-century English literary life was formed largely in response to the establishment’s effort to stave off radical social reform. Entrenched aristocrats joined the newly rich bourgeoisie, Chesterton complained, to prevent the masses from gaining any real power of self-determination.

Chesterton was also enthusiastic about modernity's defining event: the French Revolution. Chesterton hailed the democratic deliverance of common people from bondage, their elevation to a social and political liberty theretofore unknown. At last the world had recognized, in Chesterton's view, a fundamental teaching of the church that the church itself had often neglected. By way of a triple theological, political and visual pun—it occurs in his splendid book on his literary hero, Charles Dickens—Chesterton vividly stated the Christian premise undergirding democracy: "All men are equal as all pennies are equal, because the only value in any of them is that they bear the image of the King."

Robert Browning is among Chesterton's favorite poets, as Coates notes, because his work is imbued with the conviction that every person has a story worth telling, "that their perceptions, emotional biases, the angle from which they viewed the world, while certainly not of equal value, were, in some measure, at least potentially, glimpses of a part of the truth." Chesterton's sympathy with the poor and helpless against the rich and mighty also made him an opponent of the Boer War, an enemy of British imperialism and a strong advocate of Irish Home Rule—liberal stances all.

Chesterton proposed his own political program, called distributism, whereby the state would reallocate property rather than money, assuring everyone enough land for at least minimal self-sustenance. Though too cumbersome to be practicable, Chesterton's idea reveals his unremitting opposition to the amassing of both wealth and power. Here is but one among his many diatribes against wealth:

> The whole case for Christianity is that a man who is dependent upon the luxuries of life is a corrupt man, spiritually corrupt, politically corrupt, financially corrupt. There is one thing that Christ and all the Christian saints have said with a sort of savage monotony. They have said simply that to be rich is to be in peculiar danger of moral wreck.

He decried the division of high and low culture often created by such false wealth, believing that common people are capable of comprehending uncommon things. His Father Brown stories deliberately exploit the popularity of detective fiction. "I have no feeling for immortality," the young Chesterton confessed about his own devotion to journalism. "I don't care for anything except to be in the present stress of life as it is. I would rather live now and die, from an artistic point of view, than keep aloof and write things that will remain in the world hundreds of years after my death. . . . What I value in my own work is what I may succeed in striking out of others."

As a young man studying at the Slade School of Art in London, Chesterton discovered the recently invented techniques of the Impressionists, and they terrified him. They made him fear that life is nothing other or more than impressions and perceptions—indeed, that nothing is real except as we think it so. Over against his Christian conviction that, when rightly discerned, *everything* is a potential sign, Chesterton came to fear that *nothing* signifies at all. His crisis of faith may have contributed to his mental and physical breakdown in 1914.

In *Chesterton and Evil*, Mark Knight, a lecturer at Roehampton University in Surrey, acutely analyzes the nature of Chesterton's long struggle with nihilism—his fear that the universe has no final floor, that we are floating over an abyss, and thus that there is Nothing rather than Something. Knight rightly emphasizes Chesterton's recognition that Nietzschean nihilism is the true modern menace. It was Nietzsche who first taught that all virtues and values—indeed, the very distinction between good and evil—are but inventions of the strong imposed upon the weak.

Rather than trump nihilism with a heavy-handed Christianity, Chesterton came to regard it as the most radical modern challenge to authentic faith. For if there is no triune and incarnate God, then life is indeed a house of mirrors, a world of continuous but meaningless flux, a phantasmagoria of masks and ghosts. Or else it is a brutal arena where the strong slaughter the weak. Chesterton answered Nietzsche by demonstrating that the will to power is the weakest of all things. It can only compel and coerce; it can neither welcome nor persuade. Hence Chesterton's insistence on identifying nihilism by its proper name: the demonic.

Knight shows how Chesterton came to penetrate the mystery of iniquity through the teachings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas. They convinced Chesterton that evil is a privation and a disordering of the good. It can destroy but never create. It is in the Father Brown stories, Knight argues, that Chesterton most successfully unmasks the impotence of evil. An inconspicuous and seemingly insignificant priest comprehends the contradictory character of wickedness not only because he has spent his life hearing others confess their wrongdoing, but also because he understands his own proclivity for sin. Over and again the priest detects a strangely hopeful paradox: "As the magnitude of evil increases," Knight declares, "its ontological status diminishes." Or as Father Brown himself confesses in the story "The Sign of the Broken Sword": "There is this [to say] about such evil, that it opens door after door in hell, and always into smaller and smaller chambers."

Nevertheless, Chesterton saw that there is no bright line dividing heroes and villains. Truth is rarely obvious and it's never uncomplicated. *The Man Who Was Thursday*, Chesterton's most accomplished novel, is premised on the mixed character of all good and all evil. A council consisting of seven anarchists named after the seven days of the week is plotting to create total havoc. But the seven anarchists turn out to be seven detectives in disguise. That the novel is susceptible of multiple interpretations indicates yet again that Chesterton is no mere antimodern propagandist. The book seems to suggest, moreover, that good and evil, though not at all equal, are so profoundly intertwined that one may inadvertently do the work of the other. The novel also hints that God will not spare even himself this awful admixture of bane and blessing. Rather than tearing out the weeds so that the wheat might thrive, God is working out his purposes within the limits of this human fray through human agency.

Chesterton came to this conviction, at least in part, by remembering the lessons that the English Romantics had taught him, especially Coleridge. From the Romantics he learned that humans do not remain utterly passive before the objective realities of the world. Knowledge is rooted in our sensate perception and discovery of what is already there, yet it also requires our imaginative engagement and creative involvement. Chesterton thus remains thoroughly modern in his embrace of the dialectical character of the mind-world relation:

> God did not give us a universe, but rather the materials of a universe. The world is not a picture, it is a palette. Most of us who can remember our childhood at all will agree that the best present that can be given to a child on his birthday is in all probability a paint-box. Many fathers know this; the Father of us knew it well. He gave man a paint-box. He gave him the crude materials of something; the crude materials of everything.

Chesterton found that his modernist aesthetics were strangely affirmed in the work of Thomas Aquinas. Divine grace often completes and perfects nature through the human arts. The Dominican theologian Gerald Vann puts the Thomistic premise well: "To man's ontological status as a mid-point between the worlds of matter and spirit there corresponds a mediating function: to incarnate—to give material expression to—spiritual reality and to spiritualize or humanize material reality. . . . *Ars perficit naturam*."

Alison Milbank, in her book on Chesterton and J. R. R. Tolkien, shows how both writers work in this aesthetic tradition—how, as inheritors of St. Thomas, they are both fully engaged with modernity. Chesterton was not terrorized by the prospect of inhabiting a Darwinian universe. On the contrary, he embraced its abiding otherness by way of fantasy, creating imaginative worlds that are altogether as astonishing as the products of nature itself.

“Man is the ape upside down,” declared Chesterton. As the superprimate who is also the subangel, our species is not only radically dependent but also uniquely free. “This freedom is most obviously present,” Milbank writes, “in the grotesque, which recombines the forms of nature and art to make something new and surprising.” Humans squandered their freedom not by perceiving and desiring too much, but by envisioning and creating too little. Finite and fallen imaginations cannot behold the surplus of light that pervades the entirety of created being.

Hence Chesterton’s literally fantastic attempts to hint and gesture at agencies so richly unknowable that they hint at God’s own inaccessibility. Hence also his repeated recourse to farce and mime and melodrama in order to break the shackles of a deadening physicalism that attributes everything to mechanical causes. “Similitudes drawn from things farthest away from God,” Milbank quotes Dionysus the Pseudo-Areopagite as saying, “form within us a truer estimate that God is above whatsoever we may say or think of Him.”

Faithful acts of analogical imagination are not limited to apophatic discernments of who and what God is not. Milbank demonstrates that Chesterton agreed with Thomas (and with Aristotle before him) that everything has its own *entelechy*, an inherent aim and goal that pushes it toward completion and fulfillment within a larger—indeed, a final—telos. Because all “things [tend] to a greater end,” Chesterton declares in his splendid little book on St. Thomas subtitled *The Dumb Ox*,

> they are more real than we think them. If they seem to have a relative unreality (so to speak) it is because they are potential, not actual; they are unfulfilled, like packets of seeds or boxes of fireworks. They have it in them to be more real than they are. And there is an upper world of what the Schoolman called Fruition or Fulfillment, in which all this relative relativity becomes actuality; in which the trees burst into flower or the rockets into flame.

Not to discern the relation between the potential and the actual is to fall into twin and deadly errors: false activism or false fatalism. Stephen R. L. Clark, a professor of philosophy at the University of Liverpool, helps clarify these matters in *G*. *K*. *Chesterton*: *Thinking Backward*, *Looking Forward*. He explains, for example, why Chesterton was so adamantly opposed to Social Darwinism. Never the advocate of anything akin to creationism or even intelligent design, Chesterton nonetheless challenged the evolutionary hypothesis when Cecil Rhodes and Rudyard Kipling used it to defend imperialism. Such misapplied Darwinism, Chesterton rightly discerned, also enabled unbridled capitalists to justify their triumphs as being in accord with nature's allegedly irresistible privileging of the industrious over the laggard.

Ironically, a similarly false use of Darwin inspired certain kinds of socialists to engineer human nature so as to make it ever more "fit." Chesterton was among the first to discern the demonic implications of eugenics, when nearly all of the "enlightened" minds of his time eagerly embraced it.

Though he died just three years after Hitler came to power, Chesterton prophesied that the German dictator would install a massive eugenics regime. Whether the regnant Darwinians are heartless plutocrats or soulless bureaucrats, the result is much the same. "They will continue to drive small businessmen, smallholders, and eccentric scholars out of business," Clark declares, "or even out of sane society."

Sanity in the full sense of the word—*sanus*, health, wholeness—came increasingly to preoccupy Chesterton. During the two most creative decades of his career (1901-1921), he assumed that there was enough residual Christianity at work in the common people to ensure that they would use their freedom wisely and sanely. Their newfound liberty would enable their families, communities and institutions to flourish, provided that gigantic governments and corporations did not devour them. He feared, however, that capitalists and socialists alike were keeping the poverty-stricken in perpetual bondage, sealing them off from the freedoms and delights to be found in the life of towns and suburbs rather than tenements and slums.

Only during the last 15 years of his life (1921-1936) did Chesterton begin to worry that, in an increasingly secularized Britain, democratic freedom was disappearing alongside democratic Christianity. There was fearful truth, he admitted, in the vision of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor—the horrific prospect, namely, that people will finally demand security in fear of liberty. The socialist left insisted that the state protect everyone, without regard to merit or incentive, from economic and personal

failure. The capitalist right demanded that the state promote the acquisitive instinct, so that the wealthy few are able to cushion themselves with ever more comforts and conveniences.

Chesterton had hoped that the state would unite with the church to supply both the mighty and the lowly with an inspiring and restraining vision of the whole. Without such a teleological vision, Chesterton believed, there is no way to ask questions of final purpose, no reason to regard either natural or human life as an end rather than a means. Every civilization has failed, Chesterton observed, and there is no indication that ours is immortal because it is democratic. Democracy, he feared, may not be able to provide the political center that will keep things from falling apart.

Such a dire prospect was not totally disillusioning to Chesterton only because he remained a Christian. The church alone saved him from becoming an angry reactionary. To believe that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church is never to despair of the future. He had put the matter well in 1908, in what would become his most celebrated book, *Orthodoxy*: “The mass of men always look backward; and the only corner in which they in any sense look forward is the little Continent where Christ has His Church.” The community of Christ casts its eye on the future not only in eschatological expectation, but also in the conviction that the kingdom already dwells in our midst. It constantly pushes us forward into a revolutionary reordering of our desires. It alone has the power which is not weakness, the power to overcome alienation and thus to bring about reconciliation.

> The Christian Church can best be defined as an enormous private detective, correcting that official detective—the State. . . . The State, in all lands and ages, has created a machinery of punishment, more bloody and brutal in some places than others, but bloody and brutal everywhere. The Church is the only institution that ever attempted to create a machinery of pardon. The Church is the only thing that ever attempted by system to pursue and discover crimes, not in order to avenge, but in order to forgive them. The stake and the rack were merely the weaknesses of religion; its snobberies, its surrenders to the world. Its speciality—or, if you like, its oddity—was this merciless mercy; the unrelenting sleuthhound who seeks to save and not to slay.

Christianity is not only the largest thing in the world, as Chesterton liked to say; it is actually even larger than the cosmos itself. There is nothing in the heavens or on the

earth that is not stalked and shadowed by the “merciless mercy” of God.