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# Lee Oser. The Return of Christian Humanism: Chesterton, Eliot, Tolkien and the Romance of History

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have taken little time and pleasure in, even as we specialize in late Victorian or Modernist literature. This book, with its fine, lucid writing, its unembarrassed passion for neglected poets, brought me back to my graduate student days, when so much was new, so much to be discovered. For those sensations, I am grateful. ✱

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Lee Oser. *The Return of Christian Humanism: Chesterton, Eliot, Tolkien, and the Romance of History*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007. 208p.

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In *The Return of Christian Humanism: Chesterton, Eliot, Tolkien, and the Romance of History*, Lee Oser, a professor of literature at Holy Cross College, follows Chesterton's lead in taking on the heretics, decadents, and aesthetes within the postmodernist critical establishment, extolling Chesterton, Eliot, and Tolkien as defenders of reason and romance and vilifying influential late twentieth-century critics such as Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler, whose alleged attacks on the liberal humanist tradition Oser sees as having eroded not only literary scholarship but indeed the very underpinnings of democratic society. In his preface Oser asserts, "Without scruple or debate, our schools condone the blindest intellectual prejudice of the twentieth century, and maybe the key to its horrors, the idea that religion is the enemy of art and culture" (ix). But Chesterton, Eliot, and Tolkien, having written during a period when "the institutional arrangements of our own time were visible," Oser observes, "give us the chance for renewal and renaissance.... They were embattled but not wholly isolated figures, major writers in English who understood their art as an effort to keep the sacred wellsprings of culture open" (x). Oser—like Chesterton: a novelist, apologist, and critic combined—clearly understands his own art similarly, and this book as his own effort to keep these wellsprings open.

Oser situates liberal humanism in the cultural traditions inherited from Greece, Rome, and Catholic Europe and examines how those traditions were affected by developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, culminating in Matthew Arnold. Arnold, says Oser, was a "liminal" figure, arriving at "the end of the tradition of Renaissance humanism that runs from Erasmus through Swift and Pope; and he wrote the prologue to the Christian humanism that begins anew with Chesterton" (12). Arnold's humanism is in the Renaissance tradition, Oser explains, because it is Aristotelian in nature, pivoting on the question, "*What are the grounds of human flourishing?*" Arnold also marks an end of the medieval and

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Renaissance fusion of faith and art, however; in his attempt to replace religion, which he saw as outmoded by science, with poetry, he "estranged both the Christian and the aesthete, who found him neither inspiring nor credible. He was too heretical for one and too earnest for the other" (14). Oser identifies the 1873 publication of aesthete Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* as the beginning of the late Victorian backlash against Arnold that would remain in force through the much of twentieth century. (T.S. Eliot and Terry Eagleton are referenced as two prominent critics of Arnoldian humanism.) Even so, Oser writes, "the end of the nineteenth century did not witness the entire collapse of humanism, but it was a period touched by considerable anxiety in intellectual circles." Oser cites the decline of empire, the continuing conflicts between science and faith, the flamboyant decadence exemplified by Oscar Wilde, the ability of the new press to create rapid shifts in public opinion, along with social instability generated by the rise of the working classes, as contributing factors to this *fin de siècle* anxiety that set the stage for the advent of Chesterton: "Somehow out of this smoke and fog emerged the most gifted defender of Christian humanism since Erasmus. I speak, of course, of Chesterton" (18).

Chapter 2 of Oser's book is devoted to Chesterton, and the degree of Oser's devotion is made clear immediately with such large claims as this: "The career of Chesterton stands as a victory for humankind. It represents the last major victory over cosmic despair, which menaces our own period in the form of anti-humanism" (21). It is not clear, however, why Oser considers Chesterton's the "last major victory" over despair, since the following two chapters present Eliot and Tolkien as comrades-in-arms with Chesterton in the battle against despair. But Chesterton's victory, according to Oser, lay in his "rebuilding of humanistic confidence on the orthodox planks of the Apostle's Creed" (26). What most attracted Chesterton to orthodoxy was its ability to harmonize reason with romance, common sense with mysticism, and it was orthodoxy that enabled Chesterton to achieve a "synthesis of faith and reason" that occupied "a middle ground between two dogmatic epistemologies": the "godless scientism" of Bertrand Russell and the "occult mysticism" of William Butler Yeats.

Although Chesterton was not the first to argue for a middle ground between scientism and mysticism, Oser admits, his triumph consisted in "approach[ing] these ideas with ordinary people in mind." Chesterton took advantage of the Edwardian "enthusiasm for the field of debate," a field that extended from the public lecture halls to the pages of the daily newspapers, and in this field "cultivated the Christian soil that was lying fallow" (22). And like so many previous commentators on Chesterton's criticism, Oser locates its power in its deliberate provocation of its

readers: "There is a sense in Chesterton's work that he is accusing his countrymen of sloth, the capital sin of accidia, a type of depression understood by Christian writers as lethargy, apathy and virtues left to drift. That is not bad way of describing England in the 1890s" (23). That is to say, decadent England, and Oser accounts for Chesterton's passionate opposition to the decadents by portraying him as a renegade aesthete: "Chesterton reacted with a fierce apostasy against the aesthetic movement." Oser then quotes Chesterton's criticism of the *carpe diem* philosophy of the aesthetes and comments, "By isolating discrete moments in the flux of time, Pater attained a frozen perfection. But he robbed man of the continuity through time where his nature achieves its fullest expression. For Chesterton, our existence 'is a story'" (24). Chesterton's view of life as a narrative is one he shares with Oser, who further observes:

Chesterton's appeal to narrative is philosophically profound; at the same time, it reminds us that he is a novelist.... Pater wrote a veiled genre of autobiography that he called "imaginary portraits"—finely woven reveries of impressions, memories, and desires. Chesterton wrote novels whose acrobatic heroes piece together their lives through moral acts which restore friendship and community. (24)

The relationship Oser sketches here between narrative, ethics, friendship, and community, is of course Aristotelian in origin, and is illustrated here with an examination of Chesterton's novel *The Flying Inn*. Oser concludes that Chesterton's protagonists "retain a physical wholeness of viewpoint that is increasingly rare. It is only the whole man who knows what ails the aesthetes, the therapists, and the governing class" (35). This atypical viewpoint, coupled with Chesterton's love of Gothic architecture, leads Oser to address the question, "Was Chesterton's mind medieval?" (a charge commonly leveled at him by "progressives" both in his own day and in ours). Oser's response:

His medievalism operates in his belief in the unifying force of Christendom, in his sympathy for popular superstition, in his curious mingling of real piety and worldly wisdom. His economic theory of distributism does not fit the world we live in—the possible exception of Vermont. But generally, Chesterton's thinking is molded and tempered by a humanistic liberalism that engages modernity. (30)

Oser's own thinking is equally molded by humanistic liberalism and equally eager to engage modernity (or perhaps post-modernity in Oser's case), and it is just such an engagement that constitutes Chapter 6 of the book, "Artificial Taste."

Oser sees modernist cultural relativism as inimical to liberal humanism and to scholarship. Chapter 6 opens with a direct attack on recent trends in academia: "Over the past decades, a dogmatically relativist type of modernism has pushed

Christian humanism effectively out of the academy. At the same time, the study of literature has much declined" (85). Oser here conflates dogmatic modernist relativism with multiculturalism, engaging in some Chestertonian punning when he takes multiculturalism to mean "encompassing a multitude of cults": "there are larger and irrational forces at play, in the form of burgeoning cults." Among these Oser lists the cults of feminism, neo-Marxism, anti-humanism, technology, wellness, environmentalism, and the cult of the media, all of which, he argues, "hinges [sic], in the end, on unspoken religious beliefs. And if we acknowledge those beliefs, then the thesis of this chapter will not seem incendiary or absurd: a bias against Christianity has separated literary studies from the tradition and closed off the avenues to renewal" (85). Oser's assertion that his thesis is neither incendiary nor absurd depends on his audience, however: readers who pick up the book out of an interest in Christian humanism, Chesterton, or Tolkien are likely to be predisposed to accept it outright, but readers who happen to be familiar with the work of either Harold Bloom or Helen Vendler might well find it incendiary and, if not absurd, at least questionable on several points.

One assertion that readers who share Oser's assumptions about modern culture would be predisposed to accept, while others might well find incendiary, appears in the second paragraph of Chapter 2:

On the spiritual frontier, the vaguely Christian West is looking increasingly gnostic—the richest cults pull their floats in that direction. Technology, feminism, postmodernism, and the youth media tend to suppress the guidance of nature and reason. Literature, on the other hand, cannot wholly abandon the conditions of its birth. There is such civilized pleasure in opening a good book. It is a sensual and intellectual act that militates, like Chaucer's pilgrims themselves, against gnostic alienation. But many recent critics are gnostic in spirit; agents of the times, they have done almost everything in their unconscious and irrational power to lay the literary tradition to rest. (86)

Gnosticism, let us remember, originally referred to the beliefs of early Christian sects deemed heretical by the established church, sects whose teachings derived from either private revelation, non-canonical scriptures, or some combination of the two. Eventually the meaning expanded to include any sort of religious beliefs that departed too far from Catholic or Protestant orthodoxy, and it is in this sense that Chesterton uses the term in discussing Blake (although many of Blake's religious ideas bore affinities with some early Gnostic doctrines). But Oser and other present-day Roman Catholic commentators on literature and culture employ the term more loosely to describe not only ideas but attitudes that contradict Catholic orthodoxy or liberal humanism as Oser has defined it. Here, however,

Oser seems to be using “gnostic” as a synonym for “solipsistic”; thus gnostic critics would be those who advance a private, idiosyncratic view of literature and culture that not only divorces them from both nature and reason but also undermines the possibility of the communal experience of literature that perpetuates and is itself perpetuated by tradition and culture. But while Harold Bloom might not balk at being labeled as a gnostic, since he has written extensively on the relationship between gnosticism, literature, and criticism, others such as Helen Vendler might find such a characterization incendiary; and I find it questionable, if not absurd.

Oser bases his indictment of Bloom and Vendler on their attacks on T.S. Eliot, whom Oser lionizes earlier in the book as one of the three great hopes for the return of Christian humanism. (It should be noted that Oser previously published a well-reviewed critical analysis of Eliot’s work; so just as Chesterton did with Dickens, Browning; and Shaw, he is here employing the opportunity to defend one of his favorite writers against what he sees as misguided and misleading criticisms of his work.) Oser quotes a few “venomous” passages from essays by Bloom and Vendler in which the critics “skewer” Eliot and Matthew Arnold (86-93), and then indulges in a bit of skewering of his own. In comparing Bloom’s and Vendler’s attacks on Eliot, and thus implicitly on the entire liberal humanist tradition, Oser lampoons both: “Harold Bloom played opposite the diva’s [Vendler’s] glass-shattering soprano in that celebrated mock-opera of the late twentieth century, ‘The Triumph of Decadence,’ where everyone is madly in love with himself” (91). While the imagery and idea here are reminiscent of Chesterton’s caricatures of the decadents of his own day, the wit is markedly more acerbic than Chesterton’s: Chesterton’s skewering of his opponents (at least in his early writing) tended to be far more gentle in tone, though no less deadly.

After toppling Vendler and Bloom from their “bad eminence,” Oser returns to Walter Pater, noting that Bloom considers himself a “Liberal who ‘particularly loved’ Pater, who likewise turns all criticism into self-portraiture” (95). In his earlier chapter on Chesterton, Oser criticized Pater as having “robbed man of the continuity through time where his nature achieves its fullest expression” (24). Here, however, he sees in Pater “a kind of slender and beautiful bridge, a crumbling remnant of the high culture that Bloom and Vendler accidentally dynamited” (95). But Bloom resembles Pater, Oser contends, only that in both cases, “traditional loves and loyalties bow to the subjective glories of the self.” Ultimately, for Oser, the critical works of both Bloom and Vendler represent “prime examples of gnostic aestheticism” in their self-absorption and their repudiation of reason and nature. Oser quotes Bloom as writing (in *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Creative Minds*), that “Gnosticism has been indistinguishable from imaginary genius.... it is

pragmatically the religion of literature,” and concludes from this, “Here we in fact uncover the truth of Bloom’s splitting the tradition into Catholic and Protestant authors: it is really a split between Christians and Gnostics” (99). It is not at all clear to this reader, however, how “we” can uncover such a truth from the quoted passage, so Oser must be assuming that his readers are familiar with more of Bloom’s work than is represented here. This again raises the question of audience: is Oser writing for Christian readers interested in Chesterton, Eliot, and Tolkien, or for academicians under the spell of Bloom and Vendler? If the former, then Oser’s readers will likely accept his characterizations of these prominent critics without question, and the quotations he has selected as representative of their work; if the latter, such unquestioning acceptance is highly unlikely.

For Oser then proceeds to color Vendler as anti-Christian based on equally fragmentary quotations, writing, “Vendler proceeds from a dogmatic assertion: ‘Selves come with a history: souls are independent of time and space’” (99). Oser makes an enormous logical leap here in taking this to mean, “If poetry must do without history, that rules out Homer, Virgil, Dante, the *Beowulf* poet, Chaucer, the Gawain poet, Spenser, Shakespeare, Dryden, Johnson, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, Whitman, C. Rossetti, Dickinson, Hardy, Frost, Eliot, Marianne Moore, Auden, and Wilbur, to name a few” (99-100). It is at this point that I find Oser’s argument absurd. Vendler never claimed that “poetry must do without history,” at least not in the quoted passage, where she is merely drawing a distinction between “souls” and “selves” (a distinction which cannot be understood, as in the Bloom quote, without a knowledge of the rest of Vendler’s work). Nor, to my knowledge, does Vendler anywhere else assert or suggest that “poetry must do without history.” In fact, in *Poems, Poets, Poetry*, which I use as a textbook in my Studies in Poetry class, Vendler advises poets who wish to create credible lyric speakers that “The single most successful way is to give your speaker not only a present but a past, and often not just a yesterday, but the day before that, and the year before that, and five years before that. (See Wordsworth’s ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey’ for a stunning lengthy version of this process)” (177). In the same book Vendler devotes an entire chapter to “History and Regionality,” beginning with the remark, “Poetry is always interested in time and space.... It is also interested in time specified—in history” (241). Therefore Oser is either unfamiliar with the larger body of Vendler’s work, or has deliberately distorted it to suit his polemical purposes (a question equally applicable to some of Chesterton’s attacks on his opponents). Oser delivers his *coup de grâce* to Bloom and Vendler as follows:

Where, one asks, are these critics coming from? A cynic might say their behavior is predictable. Having been rewarded for their anti-Christian posture over the years, they

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have learned to express that position in what is heretically its purest form. Freed from the tradition of the great poet-critics from Dryden to Eliot, poetry according to Bloom and Vendler speaks for the soul's liberation from human nature and from God, the soul's discovery of its supremacy to the created order.

Here Oser most succinctly expresses his definition of Gnosticism—"the soul's discovery of its supremacy to the created order"—but it remains questionable whether such a view of literature accurately characterizes the criticism of either Bloom or Vendler, without a more thorough examination of their work as a whole.

Chapter 6 of *The Return of Christian Humanism* concludes with a reference to Eliot's comment in a 1933 lecture that "we are still in Arnold's period" and the suggestion that "By way of Chesterton, Eliot was able to connect Arnoldian liberal humanism to the spiritual decay of the academy" (101). And even Bloom and Vendler, Oser admits, "may owe something of their literary faith to Arnold, but they denied what is most lasting in this thought: his sense of tradition, his true pragmatism, his appeal to reason and nature." Thus while Oser's characterizations of contemporary academic culture and the critics who most prominently represent it may be distorted and overly shrill in places, the book as a whole convincingly identifies these most lasting elements of Arnold's thought as accounting for the durability of Oser's chosen subjects. ✱