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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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G.K. Chesterton Teaches the Millennial College Student

Drucella M. Crutchfield

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Suicide, the second leading cause of death among college students, (“Young . . .”) hyper-tech violent entertainment, and a pragmatic search for truth bears witness to this millennial generation’s voice converging with G.K. Chesterton’s own search for eternal truths. Apparently, in his earlier poems Chesterton also wrangles with the validity of his own life. In “Thou Shalt Not Kill,” he plunges into morbid thoughts before the voice of reason releases him from the death hound:

I had grown weary of him; of his breath
And hands and features I was sick to death . . .
But ere I struck, my soul’s grey deserts through
A voice cried, ‘Know at least what thing you do’ . . .
Then I cast down the knife upon the ground
And saw that mean man for one moment crowned
. . .
The man that I had sought to slay was I.
 (“Thou Shalt Not Kill” lines 1-2, 7-8, 15, 16 and 18)

While Chesterton does overcome the agony of despair and despondency, he clearly maintains a romance with the intrigue of death by the blade.

According to Christopher Derrick, who describes C.S. Lewis and Chesterton as “fat men whom I used to meet casually,” Chesterton had a “clearly pathological thing about fighting and bloodshed and the sword.” Derrick goes on to portray this phenomenon as “a strange thing in a Christian writer,” revealing that Chesterton less likely used “dueling as a metaphor for the spiritual combat” and more likely “freely indulged” in his love and excitement of “the idea of actual swordsmanship, actual bloodshed, and killing . . .” (8). Just so, today’s student (even one of the Christian variety) finds strange entertainment and excitement in the digital world of violence, maiming and killing everything and everyone from outer planetary aliens to

the local pimps, pushers, and cops. Like his contemporary counterpart who keeps his X-Box® handy for quick action, Chesterton himself, described by Derrick as “the gentlest of men,” also kept “‘a vast collection of swords and daggers and rapiers’ in his house; and when dictating to a secretary, it was his practice to stride about with one of these, stabbing and spearing at the cushions” (7).

Despondent, anorexic, self-mutilating and often suicidal, this millennial generation cries out for unflinching love. Even while being overly fed, overly entertained, and overly protected, they cry out with a desire for life that Chesterton aptly describes in Saint Thomas Aquinas, as “the universal human hunger and even fury for Life”(113). Living in a post-modern society, their “fury for Life” demands reason and experience, something their “helicopter” parents often fail to offer. For others coming from homes that boast of single parent, same-sex parents, grandmother only, aunt, uncle, or sometimes just someone’s boyfriend or girlfriend as being the “concerned care-giver,” these self-seekers cry out much like Chesterton does in Heretics:

Whether the future excellence lies in more law or less law, in more liberty or less liberty; whether property will be finally concentrated or finally cut up; whether sexual passion will reach its sanest in an almost virgin intellectualism or in a full animal freedom; whether we should love everybody with Tolstoy, or spare nobody with Nietzsche;— these are the things about which we are actually fighting most. (36-37)

Our students today seek that same “future excellence.” They are sick and tired—tired of hurting and twisted social norms, tired of learning to live in failed

relationships that leave them feeling like part of the divided property, tired of trying to live up to steroid-buffed athletes and tan-toned models. They haunt the offices of their professors as purveyors of wisdom and nurturers of intelligent, reasonable humanity. Herein lies the opportunity—a useful tool provided by Chesterton himself to reach this challenged and challenging generation.

Classical literature, more often than not, remains an anomaly among the typical college student today; even so are the student's academic skills problematic in the writing genres. For the question, "What book have you read recently?" common answers abound: "If it's not on the internet, I don't read it," or "I don't read books, but I watch movies that come from books!" And of writing—"If it's not in an e-mail or instant messaging, I don't write." For these unbelievable challenges, the teacher of both literature and argumentative writing finds purpose in teaching G.K. Chesterton. Not only does Chesterton's work provide the scarlet thread of Christian truths that weaves unity throughout his works and furnishes the only real answer for these emotionally and spiritually faltering college students, but his poetry, fiction, fantasy, essays, and arguments stir up their analytical and rhetorical skills.

This scarlet thread imparts to the millennial student answers to academic and spiritual satisfaction, and it also acts as a signifier for "all that is best" in Chesterton. In his essay, "The Legendary Chesterton,"¹ the Rev. Ian Boyd, speaks of "the two apparently contradictory legends . . . the aggressive champion and apologist for Catholicism [or] . . . the relaxed Edwardian figure," and he challenges Chesterton critics to "rescue all that is best in each of the competing legends." Boyd continues, "Chesterton is, after all, a single human being as well as a single writer" (62-63). This "single human being . . . single writer" supplies delightfully kind and contradictorily argumentative models for most genres of literary writing and provides volatile, passionate, and sometimes humble rhetoric in the form of classical literature most suitable for sharpening the critical thinking skills of young minds while also empowering a vehicle of directional healing for the lost and hungry soul.

In a 2005 conference, *Working with the New Millennial Student*, Anne Leavitt describes such students as those who "find it hard to engage in original thought processes; don't show initiative; [and] mentally are 'out of shape.'" What better way to prod these slumbering minds than to introduce Dickens through G.K. Chesterton's Charles Dickens. Chesterton shows the reader a masterful tapestry that weaves the boy Dickens and the man Dickens into his books from *Nicholas Nickleby* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* to *David Copperfield* and *Dombey and Son*. In his "Introduction" to this Chesterton work, Steven Marcus pegs it correctly:

For once Chesterton is not exaggerating, and this ability to gaze unwaveringly into human folly and misery and see its connection with ourselves is one of Dickens's greatest gifts to us . . . And Chesterton is correct to connect it at several points not only to the French Revolution and the radical humanitarianism of Dickens's time, but to Dickens's Christianity, his literal, his primitive Christianity. (xvi)

Moreover, as students are pointed to select passages not only from Chesterton's critical book of Dickens but also from Dickens's books themselves, these new millennial students will begin to identify with the conflicts and hold on to the truths discovered therein. And once they are saturated with these fundamental truths, their attention should be turned to the near end of Charles Dickens, where Chesterton helps the reader identify the real truth in life, which is "There are some men who are dreary because they do not believe in God; but there are many others who are dreary because they do not believe in the devil" (285). Chesterton, through his own life experiences, knew all too well that the only way to overcome the conflicts in this world is to recognize that evil truly does exist and can only be conquered through battle. He turns the credit for this truism all to Dickens, however, as he says, "This life of ours is a very enjoyable fight, but a very miserable truce. And it appears strange to me that so few critics of Dickens or of other romantic writers have noticed this philosophical meaning in the undiluted villain" (285). Amazingly unnoticed is Chesterton's subtle use of Scripture to point the reader to the "essential truth" in winning the battle: "For the full value of this life can only be got by fighting; the violent take it by storm," (285) paralleling Christ's own teaching: "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force" (Thompson: Matthew 11:12 KJV). Identification is a key element in learning as well as in healing; this generation who finds entertainment, release, and solution in fighting will quickly identify with these words of Dickens, Chesterton, and Christ.

From Dickens, one can encourage the students' bend to fantasy and understanding the fantastical through the once-more popular J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien cleverly ties Dickens and Chesterton together in thought and deed in The Tolkien Reader:

Of course, fairy-stories are not the only means of recovery, or prophylactic against loss. Humility is enough. And there is (especially for the humble) *Mooreeffoc*, or Chestertonian Fantasy. *Mooreeffoc* is a fantastic word, but it could be seen written up in every town in this land. It is Coffee-room, viewed from the inside through a glass door, as it was seen by Dickens on a dark London day; and it was

used by Chesterton to denote the queerness of things that have become trite, when they are seen suddenly from a new angle. (77-78)

But Tolkien does not stop there in regard and respect to Chesterton as his master in word and thought. Indeed, students delightfully discover that a notion they hold as contemporary because of the fast moving pace of their hyper cyber-world, Tolkien brings into play as an annoyance to the world of fantasy eagerly giving Chesterton credit for birthing the notion. As a model of such notion, Tolkien refers to electric streetlights that should “be excluded from the tale simply because they are bad lamps”; instead, he says that “out comes the big stick: ‘Electric lamps have come to stay.’” Tolkien describes the discoveries of the “Robot Age” as combining an “elaboration and ingenuity of means with ugliness and (often) with inferiority of result.” This “ugliness,” as a result, fosters new and better discovery. Tolkien supports his thoughts through a Chesterton nugget of wisdom: “Long ago, Chesterton truly remarked that, as soon as he heard that anything ‘had come to stay,’ he knew that it would be very soon replaced—indeed regarded as pitifully obsolete and shabby” (80).

Along with the rising popularity of Tolkien and MP3 players, the millennial students are oft heard saying, “Don’t buy it now; wait awhile. They’ll come out with a better version soon.” After all, one only needs to look to the continual forward numbering of any good software product. In their hurry-up-and-wait, fast-paced, instant gratification world, the students’ look at an early Tolkien reading with a conservative sprinkling of Chesterton can only encourage them in the idea that society really has not gone mad in its forward progress. Or as Chesterton states, “Progress, in the good sense, does not consist in looking for a direction in which one can go on indefinitely. For there is no such direction, unless it be in quite transcendental things, like the love of God. It would be far truer to say that true progress consists in looking for the place where we can stop” (Fancies versus Fads 193). Knowing that their iconic author of Lord of the Rings holds dear to Chestertonian philosophy tickles their curiosity as they prepare to read passages from The Everlasting Man.

To continue encouraging the student’s growth through mental weight-lifting exercises and as the flint for sparking original thought, one should try Chesterton’s The Everlasting Man. Using the “Introduction: The Plan of this Book,” the professor could help students prepare an outline of classical argument structure. Before young readers even get into the meat of the book, disagreement, conflict, and yet problem solving and resolution fight to become the ruling status of their millennial identification. Depending on whether they are insiders (with their millennial peers), “outliers” (those more life-challenged and desperate), or evangelicals (faith-based

values), finding Chesterton’s thesis will generate passive acceptance, draw confused looks, or spark volatile debate: “The point of this book, in other words, is that the next best thing to being really inside Christendom is to be really outside it. And a particular point of it is that the popular critics of Christianity are not really outside it” (9).

Chesterton further muddies the waters for young thinkers with this idea: “When the world goes wrong, it proves rather that the Church is right. The Church is justified, not because her children do not sin, but because they do” (10). And then, just in case he has missed pushing the buttons of one of these three youthful groups, Chesterton adds,

It is the contention of these pages that while the best judge of Christianity is a Christian, the next best judge would be something more like a Confucian. The worst judge of all is the man now most ready with his judgments; the ill-educated Christian turning gradually into the ill-tempered agnostic, entangled in the end of a feud of which he never understood the beginning, blighted with a sort of hereditary boredom with he knows not what, and already weary of hearing what he has never heard. (11)

Once again, Chesterton’s fascination with dueling supplies him with the perfect metaphor. At this point, the student is usually reeling with curiosity, doubt, and yes, even anger. In some way, the student decides that Chesterton has abandoned the idea of mere mortals growing up to be the ideal Christian. However, Chesterton begins to redeem himself as he turns us back to the difficult journey of Christian living, “So also in the specially Christian case we have to react against the heavy bias of fatigue . . . for the fallen man it is often true that familiarity is fatigue” (17).

However, the real beauty of teaching as argument The Everlasting Man comes with the necessity of student response to the argument. Once the reader becomes immersed in “The Strangest Story in the World,” he or she usually tries to accept the challenge to have “in the true sense a superior mind . . . and to think . . . on three planes at once” (201). The student is faced with Chesterton’s powerful story of the Sacrificial Lamb as he relates to the reader the startling realization that the purveyor of all miracles, Christ, performed the “supremely supernatural act, of all his miraculous life, that he did not vanish” (208). Chesterton elaborates about the power of the gospel: “The grinding power of the plain words of the Gospel story is like the power of mill-stones; and those who can read them simply enough will feel as if rocks had been rolled upon them” (209). And finally, Chesterton gently leads the reader to discover a great salvation truth. “All the great groups that stood about the Cross represent in one way or

another the great historical truth of the time; that the world could not save itself" (210).

Joseph L. Martinez of the Christian Ministries Department of Trinity International University reminds us that no longer does the university student raised in church stay in church or stay connected with a ministry. This contributes to the idea that if the Church cannot keep its own children, then she will not attract those who were never her children. Therefore, Chesterton would think little of educators who take these new millennial students only to the point of grasping that scarlet thread of Christian redemption which he so masterfully weaves throughout all of his writing. What Chesterton would expect from us is to strengthen the weave with yet another thread of Chesterton's self-discovered realism check. One can find that in Heretics, where Chesterton describes the three mystic virtues as being "faith, hope, and charity" (156).

In Heretics, Chesterton uses the essay "Paganism and Mr. Lowes Dickinson" to relate to the reader "one broad fact about the relations of Christianity and Paganism, which is so simple that many will smile at it, but which is so important that all moderns forget it. The primary fact about Christianity and Paganism is that one came after the other" (156). While to the typical surface readers, this statement may appear somewhat simplistic, the newly-sharpened contemporary readers will begin to dig deeply into this truth to gain its fullness. They will have learned by now a simple Chestertonian truth: "The more simple an idea is, the more it is fertile in variations" (All Things Considered 206).

Chesterton uses chronology to speak of the real difference between Paganism and Christianity and that is the *virtues of grace*. One may differ with Chesterton as to the origination of the three mystical virtues; yet, Chesterton maintains that Christianity invented rather than adopted these virtues—faith, hope, and charity. The pagan virtues he speaks of as "justice and temperance are the sad virtues and ... the mystical virtues of faith, hope, and charity are the gay and exuberant virtues" (158). While Chesterton winds the reader's mind in and out of what he calls "all three practical, and ... all three paradoxical" (161), he nevertheless reminds the reader that "Whatever may be the meaning of faith, it must always mean a certainty about something we cannot prove" (162).

Chesterton offers a message of "hope" to the student of today, a scarlet ribbon of salvation woven gently throughout his works. Chesterton knows and understands this student; after all, he lived through the same types of despondency, and he questioned his way through the whole process of life:

Speller of the stones and weeds,
Skilled in Nature's crafts and creed,
Tell me what is in the heart
Of the smallest of the seeds.
("The Holy of Holies" lines 9-12)

And the answer he found then should be the one that we offer our students today:

God Almighty, and with Him
Cherubim and Seraphim,
Filling all eternity, —
Adonai Elohim. (Ibid lines 13-16)

Notes

¹Boyd, Ian, C.S.B. "The Legendary Chesterton." G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis: The Riddle of Joy. Macdonald, Michael H. and Andrew A. Tadie, Eds. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989.53-68.

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