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"Take Away the Supernatural and What Remains is the Unnatural": Power, Secularization, and G.K. Chesterton's Villains

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**“Take Away the Supernatural and What Remains is the Unnatural”:
Power, Secularization, and G.K. Chesterton’s Villains**

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“Take Away the Supernatural and What Remains is the Unnatural”: Power, Secularization, and G.K. Chesterton’s Villains

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In his 1905 book, *Heretics*, G.K. Chesterton claims that the spiritual is inextricably linked to the whole of human life: “Take away the Nicene Creed and similar things, and you do some strange wrong to the sellers of sausages. Take away the strange beauty of the saints, and what has remained to us is the far stranger ugliness of Wandsworth. Take away the supernatural, and what remains is the unnatural” (99). This is a theologically loaded statement. It demonstrates Chesterton’s intuitive sense of the gratuity of being and puts Chesterton in company with the nouvelle theologians. Rather than join the neo-Thomist hypothesis of some state of pure nature which might have existed separate from the order of grace, Chesterton recognizes that through the Creation and the Incarnation the supernatural both undergirds all of existence and provides the natural order with an end beyond itself. Taken positively, Chesterton’s claim about the supernatural and the unnatural means that the universe is bursting at the seams with the divine; humdrum objects such as lamp posts, pillar boxes, and coat tails can sweep the unsuspecting viewer up into an ecstatic experience of transcendence in the blink of an eye. Indeed, Chesterton’s heroes are constantly caught up in these bursts of illumination. However, his claim is phrased as a warning. Any attempt to do away with or suppress the supernatural leads not to the natural but rather to

distortion and perversion, the unnatural. It is this negative denial that I want to focus on because it provides a helpful way of reading many of Chesterton’s villains.

Wielding a conception of power which denies given limits, the malefactors in many of Chesterton’s novels attempt to re-create cultural spaces free from traditional religious practices and beliefs, and these projects always end in unnatural suppressions of human freedom. Thus, in *The Ball and the Cross* the English society which will not allow Maclan and Turnbull to argue about theology suffers Professor Lucifer to jail innocent citizens. Likewise, in *The Flying Inn* Lord Ivywood attempts to recreate British society in his own image and in the process makes alcohol illegal and begins to establish polygamy as an acceptable social practice.

Beyond creating cultural spaces which are inimical to human flourishing, in their denial of the supernatural Chesterton’s villains do violence to their own humanity. By the end of *Manalive*, Dr. Warner appears a walking corpse, whose long dead spirit cannot begin to respond to the life which Innocent deals out of his revolver. In *The Flying Inn* Ivywood’s Nietzschean assertion of the will drives him insane. His intention to make the world over again leads ultimately to his own imbecility. Likewise, Professor Lucifer’s satanic nature is clearly revealed at the end of *The Ball and the Cross*, and in this he

appears the prototypical Chesterton antagonist. Full rejection of the supernatural is finally nothing more than an embrace of the demonic.

Now, I want to organize this exploration into Chesterton's villains around Romano Guardini's reflections about modernity, power, and culture in his seminal work *The End of the Modern World*. Romano Guardini (1885-1968) was a German priest, theologian, philosopher, and social critic. If you haven't read Guardini before, you might think of him as a kind of European Wendell Berry; he shares many of Berry's concerns regarding technology and power as they bear upon questions of nature, culture, and what it means to be human. In *The End of the Modern World* published in 1950, Guardini argues that power is at the root of the dissolution of the modern world. Modern man saw a radical growth in his ability to manipulate both himself and the world, according to Guardini. This increase in power has led to radical redefinitions of man, nature, and culture. The modern world valued power as an indicator of "progress;" man's increasing control over himself and his environment signaled clear gains towards "security, usefulness, welfare and vigor" (82). Yet, Guardini claims, power itself proved too strong for the goods towards which it was supposedly directed. Thus, the twentieth century has seen an incredible development in "man's power over being," but this increase has not been accompanied by "the strong character needed for exercising this power" (82). We do not yet have "power over [our own] power" (90). Even more frightening, power, as it is currently understood, justifies itself as an impersonal necessity. We have agreed to a conception of power, defined as increasing technical control of ourselves and our world, as an unstoppable force independent of human will, and consequently outside the realm of human responsibility. In Guardini's words "the

conviction grows that power simply demands its own actualization" (83). For Guardini this conception of power is finally demonic.

Particularly, Guardini argues that in response to the kind of power wielded by the modern world, culture itself has become "non-cultural". Under the grip of objectified power, culture will cease to provide security and instead will be marked primarily by "danger" (89). The threats to safety which previously arose from the natural world now arise from within culture itself through the unrestrained expansion of power.

Nature now, however, has emerged once again into history from within the very depths of culture itself. Nature is rising up in that very form which subdued the wilderness—in the form of power itself. All the abysses of primeval ages yawn before man, all the wild choking growth of the long-dead forests press forward from this second wilderness, all the monsters of the desert wastes, all the horrors of the darkness are once more upon man. He stands again before chaos, a chaos more dreadful than the first because most men go their own complacent ways without seeing, because scientifically-educated gentlemen everywhere deliver their speeches as always, because the machines are running on schedule and because the authorities function as usual. (92)

Guardini's vision here seems at first to resonate more with Cormac McCarthy's dark visions of the world than with Chesterton's jovial "beer and skittles" personality. However, society presents a serious threat in much of Chesterton's fiction through its unrestricted exercise of power. In *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* the whole of London turns out against the defenders of one small street. In *The Flying Inn* Dalroy and Humphrey Pump

are constantly on the run with their illegal pub sign. And in *The Ball and the Cross* English society forces Maclan and Turnbull to flee to various wild places in order to conduct their duel. In each case, culture itself proves dangerous. The protagonists of each story struggle against a "civilized" order which is deadly to the human spirit. This gives many of Chesterton's novels something of a dystopian atmosphere.

However, unlike many dystopian novels, Chesterton provides both clear responsibility for the dystopian state of affairs and a program for resistance and victory. The fact of culpability in Chesterton's fiction mirrors Guardini's insistence that this new presence of danger within culture is not without authorship. Power always entails a responsible agent, he argues, even if the complex systems of modernity tend to obscure responsibility and promote power as autonomous and necessary. "There is no being without a master" according to Guardini; when man takes being out of the natural order and incorporates it into the realm of human freedom, he assumes responsibility for it. And it is here that I think Guardini provides important insight into Chesterton's antagonists. There is always a responsible party for the abuses of power in Chesterton's fiction. In the midst of his dystopian societies a central figure or figures stand as parents of the perverted order. Thus while the President of Nicaragua might admit at the beginning of *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* that the whole modern world is against his small country, in the action of the novel itself, it is Buck, Barker, and Wilson who are against Pump Street. Likewise, although there is a sense of international political movements and forces in *The Flying Inn*, Lord Ivywood sits at the center of these machinations, and it is his home and his person that the revolutionaries attack and whose defeat restores normal social order to England. Rather than

agree to an understanding of power as impersonal necessity, Chesterton provides villains who are clearly responsible for their abusive pursuit of power and the current state of their societies.

Chesterton's antagonists certainly subscribe to the modern definition of power as both necessarily progressive and unbounded by any limitations. Lord Ivywood from *The Flying Inn* demonstrates this conception of power and its consequences most clearly, so I will focus on him primarily in the argument that follows. The same case could be made though, I think, for many of Chesterton's other villains.

The Flying Inn is the tale of an Irish naval captain, Patrick Dalroy, and an English innkeeper, Humphrey Pump who save England by traveling round the countryside with a keg of rum and a wheel of cheese. Under the influence of his Turkish allies, Lord Ivywood effectively bans alcohol by first passing a bill which forbids the sale of alcohol without a proper pub sign and then destroying all the pub signs in England. All the pub signs that is, except one. Dalroy and Pump manage to save the sign of "The Old Ship," Pump's pub, and they tour the countryside covertly, displaying the pub sign wherever they stop and dispensing their wares. Dissatisfaction with the new legislation grows among the common people of England, and when Dalroy discovers that all the rich and privileged people are still drinking their spirits though they deny the poor man his beer, a revolution breaks forth which ends with a climactic battle and the defeat of Lord Ivywood and his allies.

Throughout the action of the novel, Ivywood grows increasingly fanatical in his quest for power and progress without boundary or restriction. His vision is ever more abstract and separate from the everyday world that his subjects and constituents live in. Midway through the novel he brags that his

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“adventures shall not be in the hedges and the gutters; but in the borders of the ever advancing brain” (255). This privileging of abstraction over concrete experience is typical of many of Chesterton’s villains. Indeed a basic typology of the abstract, sophisticated villain opposed to the fleshy, active hero is evident in much of Chesterton’s fiction. In *Manalive*, Innocent Smith wears green and wants merely to love the hedge and the lamppost that God has given him to guard, while Dr. Warner is “bland and bored,” writes on “The Probable Existence of Pain in the Lowest Organisms,” and possesses “the kind of brain that most men desire to analyze with a poker” (4). In *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, Adam Wayne’s red headed, sword carrying figure with “bold blue eyes,” contrasts violently with the “blank handsome face and bleak blue eyes” of James Barker; the bleak, handsome face of the man who dies “loaded with honors without having either amused or enlightened the mind of a single man” (10, 41). But Ivywood takes the rejection of the physical and the limitations that it entails to extremes, even by the standard of his fellow antagonists.

Obsessed by his vision of the future, by his desire for Progress with a capital P, Ivywood denies all limitation of any kind. In a debate with his cousin, a poet, about the value of exaggeration, Ivywood argues that “everything lives by turning into something else. Exaggeration is growth.” The poet replies:

“But exaggeration of what? [. . .] You can combine up to a certain point; you can distort up to a certain point; after that you lose the identity; and with that you lose everything. A Centaur is so much of a man with so much of a horse. The Centaur must not be hastily identified with the Horsey Man. And the Mermaid must be

maidenly; even if there is something fishy about her social conduct. [. . .] Don’t you see this prime fact of identity is the limit set on all living things? (253-54).

“No,” says Ivywood, “I deny that any limit is set upon living things” (254). This chilling assertion places Ivywood squarely within Guardini’s definition of modern man’s exercise of power. Guardini claims that based on non-human definitions of man and non-natural definitions of nature

“Man will [. . .] face an existence in which he will be free to further his lordship of creation, carrying it even to its last consequences. This mastery will be open to him because he has permitted himself utter freedom: the freedom to determine his own goals, to dissolve the immediate reality of things, to employ its elements for the execution of his own ends. These things he will do without any consideration for what has been thought inviolate or untouchable in nature. (73-74)

Ivywood exhibits exactly this kind of disregard for the natural in favor of his vision of progress. He dissolves whatever he likes in order to further “the execution of his own ends.”

Such denial of created limits is at its root a rejection of the supernatural. In refusing to acknowledge the givenness of the world, Ivywood denies God. His disavowal of createdness is necessarily a rejection of Divine authorship. Ivywood is quite explicit about this fact. When asked who Ivywood thinks he is that he can fundamentally alter the world so easily, he declares “The world was made badly, [. . .] and *I will make it over again*” (288). This terrible declaration reveals Ivywood’s Luciferian conception of power which is predicated upon a presumed equality with God.

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Lord Ivywood's denial of the supernatural, however, leads not to the natural order but to perversion and distortion. Denying the spiritual ends in unnatural suppressions of human freedom. Not only does Lord Ivywood deny men drinks, he agrees to the enslavement of captured prisoners, and begins to establish polygamy in England. Moreover, his denial of the supernatural leads to his own distortion. Midway through the novel, Ivywood's quest for political control leads him to break his word, the one honorable thing left to him. He emerges from this experience "the naked fanatic; [who] could feed on nothing but the future" (220). This power-hungry fanaticism drives Ivywood to imbecility. Unable to cope with his defeat at the end of the novel, Ivywood relapses into a solipsistic second childhood, unaware of the world around him. Our final vision of the superman consists of his playing with scraps of weed, oblivious to anyone and anything but himself.

Thus, Lord Ivywood provides a good model of the basic characteristics of Chesterton's villains. Their modern conception of power as control of being without moral or ontological limits entails a denial of the supernatural. This denial always results in unnatural suppressions of human freedom and dignity. *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, *The Ball and the Cross*, and *The Flying Inn* all chronicle their respective protagonists' attempts to heal these disordered societies through their combat with those responsible for the disorder.

The value of such a reading of Chesterton's malefactors is two-fold. First, it provides a vision which cuts through the rhetoric of the impersonal, inevitable, necessity of ever increasing power. Secondly, and more importantly, Chesterton's villains' denial of the supernatural reminds us in order to do battle with this disordered understanding of power, we must take up the flag of the

world, to use a phrase from *Orthodoxy*. We must reclaim an understanding which sees the world itself not as merely the natural site for an unlimited expansion of technical control but as a gift, a grace, which everywhere invites us into further participation. In a world gone mad on power, we need to re-read the landscape imaginatively, to offer a vision of limits and boundaries as freeing and enabling.

Chesterton provides a model for this kind of reading. His novels always celebrate the small, the local, the particular; he is the champion of limitation. "Art is limitation; the essence of every picture is the frame," he declares in *Orthodoxy* (45). Chesterton brings this love of limits and boundaries into the heart of the modern city, and becomes in many ways the poet of the Industrial City. Through the lens of the limited and particular, Chesterton is able to view the industrial world as enchanted and enchanting. In the poem "Modern Elfland" he argues that fairyland survives in the midst of the smog-filled streets of the Industrial Revolution. Where the speaker of the poem expects to find fairyland, he discovers instead that "lo, within that ancient place / Science had reared her iron crown / And the great cloud of steam went up, / That telleth where she takes a town" (233). Yet the speaker is still able to discover the strange magic of fairyland in this new, monstrous environment: "But cowed with smoke and starred with lamps / That strange land's light was still its own; / The word that witched the wood and hills / Spoke in the iron and the stone" (233). This is the kind of re-imagining of the world that Chesterton offers in response to the new wilderness of power in which we live. Reading the modern/post-modern, technological-industrial landscape as fantastic begins to re-appropriate the chaos of this new world by giving it a human measure. We must make a home for ourselves in this new landscape, and one of the best ways to do

this is through recognizing the value of limitation and investing that landscape with the mythic and the fairy. Set against villains who deny limits and the supernatural, Chesterton's heroes encourage us to this kind of reading of the world in which grace lives in the very heart of nature and everywhere the world of created things draws us up into the divine.

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