an heir was the biological manifestation of a thoroughgoing lack of generosity in his soul. Conversely, Mr. Knightley is the very paragon of fruitfulness: not only are the strawberry beds, fields, and woodlots of Donwell Abbey abounding in produce, but their lord will also marry and, we have every hope to expect, perpetuate his line to the good of his extended family and, indeed, the entire village community of Highbury. It is true that Jane Austen had a deeply natural view of human thriving; she was in no way alienated from her femininity or from her human nature. Yet in the mirror of her novels, we do not see the warped and twisted Darwinian cosmos, but the bountiful, beautiful, and ordered nature of Dr. Johnson, Aristotle, and the Psalms.  


Literature: The Font of Humanism

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In the first chapter of his biography of St. Thomas Aquinas, G. K. Chesterton compares the Common Doctor with St. Francis of Assisi, asserting that “these saints were, in the most exact sense of the term, Humanists; because they were insisting on the importance of the human being in the theological scheme of things.” Of course, as a Christian humanist himself, Chesterton insisted on the same, as did, in different ways, T. S. Eliot and J. R. R. Tolkien. Independently the three labored to save humanism from the positivism of Comte, the liberalism of Matthew Arnold, and the aestheticism of Walter Pater, not through philosophy or rhetoric, but through literature, the medium in which, according to Lee Oser, “imagination mediates between God and man.”

In The Return of Christian Humanism: Chesterton, Eliot, Tolkien, and the Romance of History, Oser, associate professor of English at the College of the Holy Cross, offers a passionate, piquant, and wide-ranging articulation of Christian humanism in Chesterton’s sense that “conserves the radical middle between secularism and theoc-
racy.” For Oser the tradition of Christian humanism rests upon a moral foundation of reason and human nature that affirms “the orthodox planks of the Apostles’ Creed.” Through literary exegesis and philosophical inquiry, Oser challenges the reign of the postmodern academy with a robust humanism that enlivens the soul from the source of Christian tradition.

In three successive chapters that form the foundation of the book, Oser presents Chesterton, Eliot, and Tolkien as the twentieth century’s principal exponents of Christian humanism. According to Oser, Chesterton sought “to make ordinary people aware that common sense, if it was going to survive the twentieth century, needed a religious foundation.” But the writings of the Apostle of Common Sense are more than simple Christian apologetics; rather, Oser describes his work as a “romance of history” that “turns on his realization that Christian theology defines European culture against its rivals.” However, Oser cautions against reading Chesterton as a reactionary: “Ches-terton’s thinking is molded and tempered by a humanistic liberalism that engages modernity,” and therefore he “is not reducible to one camp.”

Eliot was a very different type of Christian humanist from Chesterton, although they both traveled tortuous paths to realize that “it is religion that makes the best life possible for man.” Eliot’s greatest contribution to Christian humanism followed his baptism, when he “was able to connect his modernist aesthetic to Augustinian theology.” Examining Eliot’s approach to orthodoxy, morals, and democracy, Oser concludes that Eliot, a “great mind exhausted by its own divisions,” is “a theocrat, though he wants a humanistic theocracy that maximizes freedom in accordance with his own somber worldview.”

Oser presents the tale-telling Tolkien as the foil to the modernist: whereas the latter “is no friend to human nature,” the former “embraces human nature, sings to the heart, and humanizes the soul.” For this reason Tolkien has been dismissed by modernist and postmodernist critics, a mistake that Oser endeavors to correct. In Chestertonian fashion, “Tolkien aims to unite myth to reason and nature” in a manner that “is not so much an escape from modernity as a rejection of modern dehumanization.” Therefore, “The Lord of the Rings is an apology for Christian humanism,” since “it relates truth to goodness to beauty, in an analogue of Christian myth that tells the story of man in the created order.”

Oser proposes the works of these three men against the “benevolent secular universalism” of today’s postmodernism. Anti-humanist at root, postmodernism was born from the literature of Beckett, who “concluded modernism by waging total war on Western culture” through the philosophy of Schopenhauer, “the anti-Apollonian oracle of old Europe’s slow suicide,” whose “gnostic aestheticism undoes all humanistic values.” With the adoption of Schopenhauer’s gnosticism, the iconoclast Beckett sought to dismantle “the Christian cosmos piece by piece.” After Beckett, contemporary literary critics imbibed this gnosticism that seeks the destruction of all religious and metaphysical foundations in the name of multiculturalism and antiformalism, with the essence of antiformalism receiving a chapter of protracted analysis in the book. Oser identifies Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom as the deans of this movement; following them “lesser talents quickly learned the trick of demolition, which was simply a matter . . . of putting me first.” Bloom himself split the literary tradition between Christians and gnostics, but in siding with the latter “Bloom had it wrong: gnosticism is not ‘the religion of literature.’ Unlike the great books, it is parasitical on orthodoxy and
possibly always has been.” As a result such anti-Christian work unwittingly highlights “the reason, nature, and history through which Christianity gives literature life.”

But rather than rehash the common arguments for resurrecting the literary tradition, Oser instead seeks an ontological foundation for Christian humanism. After examining the implications of the metaphysics of Schopenhauer, Kant, and John Paul II, Oser sides with John Paul’s realism, but not for the reasons described in the Pope’s encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. Aware of deconstructivist repudiation, Oser acknowledges the limits of reason, but he deems it “indispensable to the good life.” Therefore, he gives an argument for rationality that “is practical, not conclusive”: “For reasons of health and sanity, we need to conserve a moral foundation in human nature,” which is brought about by reason that “mediates between nature and culture.” Readers may quarrel with his practical means or his realist end, but even in the twenty-first century realism remains fundamental to viable religious orthodoxy and to the Christian literary tradition.

Although philosophy plays a critical cultural role, ultimately for Oser “literature, benefiting from philosophy and theology, restores thought to feeling” in the postmodern world. Pragmatically building upon Aristotle’s conception of reason and nature and the orthodox theology of the Apostles’ Creed, Oser’s literature is romantic, but not in the fashion of the nineteenth century. His romanticism is Chesterton’s romance of history, which finds its source in “the mystery and the meaning of Rome.” Functioning as a common source, Rome “furnishes history with an organic form: a complex, living structure of thought that is emphatically not the cornerstone of ‘fortress Catholicism.’” Indeed, Oser maintains “that the romance of history is not a triumphalist appeal to Rome or an unqualified plea for central authority.” Rather, his romance of history turns on “its uncanny pragmatism” that engages the world by aiming “to strike a balance between the center and the margin, a balance that is humanistic in its respect for culture.”

Thus the Christian humanist “must defend the radical middle, where genuine tolerance may be found.” For Oser, religious orthodoxy, while mindful of its tendency to “hypocrisy and intolerance,” must push for its rightful place in the public square, for “at its best, orthodoxy is inspired, mystical, pragmatic, and organic,” and it “speaks to our most intimate moral awareness of each other and of God.”

The broad scope of this book, which probes deeply into the core of the Western literary and philosophical tradition, invites serious reflection and discussion from a wide audience. Proponents of the literary canon, formalist poetry, metaphysical realism, and the relation of literature to philosophy will draw ideas and inspiration from Oser’s well reasoned and vigorously argued account. His commentaries on Chesterton, Eliot, and Tolkien are perspicacious and invaluable, but, his account of religious orthodoxy’s role in literature is too focused on its informal dimension. In distancing himself from the charge of Roman triumphalism, Oser overlooks the positive and effective role that religious institutions, such as the Christian church including the papacy, can play in the rebirth of culture. The church’s orthodoxy, as Eliot recognized, ensures that the metaphysics from which literature flows remain sound. Moreover, the institution of the papacy, long the heart of Rome, has the power to inspire genuine cultural renewal, as it did in the Baroque era and as it attempts to in the contemporary pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Additionally, over-
emphasis on the pragmatic dimension of Rome and of the romance of history tends to forget the role of the Christian conception of grace that in primis makes cultural growth and human flourishing possible. Despite the criticism of postmoderns, grace cannot be swept into the sacristy if genuine Christian humanism is to remain viable. Even when addressing non-Christians, Christian humanism’s willing receptiveness of the supernatural opens itself to the truths of revelation and of the human religious experience, allowing it to speak intimately and truthfully to the whole person.

Oser, like Chesterton, the writer with whom he most strongly identifies, cannot be confined within a single camp. While clearly Aristotelian in his view of reason and nature, Oser’s propensity for myth and the romance of history has Platonic underpinnings, and his practical approach to realism follows that of atheist Thomas Nagle. (Oser dismisses in the first chapter the philosophy of pragmatism as expounded by William James as inadequate for humanism.) Moreover, although he is drawn to Rome and the writings of John Paul II, he praises the Reformation for paving the path to democracy and endorses F. H. Bradley’s defense of Protestantism. But while there is a great diversity of influences and tendencies, there is no division in Oser’s thought: steeped in literature and well-versed in philosophy, Oser writes fluently on thinkers as diverse as Luther and John Paul II, Matthew Arnold and Harold Bloom, Nietzsche and Augustine, always with an eye toward the cultural and philosophical implications of their ideas.

Oser’s book, eminently quotable, and simultaneously intelligent and passionate, impressively illustrates the essence and importance of Christian humanism: “It is literature that illuminates the need for Christianity, and not a weakness in Christianity that creates a need for literature.” In the final analysis, “by bringing its accumulated wisdom to the service of democratic modernity based on real freedom, [Christianity] can be the leading force for cultural renewal in the West.” So great is the promise of Christianity and its humanistic expression, and “that is just its practical value.”