

on the book's first page, but rather a reading into some of the classic works of the West a very modern, and not very novel, idea of freedom. His cultural sublime in the end occupies a place just as well served by "autonomy" or a similar term, and does not add much substance to the analysis. *The Western Theory of Tradition* adopts wholesale the modern view of freedom as "undetermined," which has meant that the individual rejects tradition wholesale. The reason for Budick's neglect of "traditionality" becomes clear when seen in this light. Were he to examine the relationship between the works he studies and the larger culture, he would have to confront the fact that these works have been interpreted in strikingly different ways than what he proposes, and that the standard interpretation of the "Western tradition" has adopted a view of freedom divergent from his own.

The Western Theory of Tradition therefore argues a legitimate thesis and presents often astute interpretations of some classic works of the West, yet Budick ultimately cannot connect the two. On the Burkean view of freedom, an individual is free precisely because he is determined: bound to a place by ancestry and birth, to a political tradition and a culture by inheritance, to a religion by piety. Budick ignores this understanding of freedom and, more importantly, does not explain when or how this understanding of tradition was supplanted by his notion of the "cultural sublime." While Budick is clearly well versed in the Western tradition, the contributors to that tradition would not likely recognize themselves in his interpretation.

Conversations About the Highest Things

JAMES P. MCGLONE

Schall on Chesterton, by James V.

Schall, *Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000.*
xiv + 243 pp.

IF G.K. CHESTERTON is persistently ignored by much of the contemporary intellectual world, he has, I think, no one to blame but himself. After all, he insisted he was nothing but a journalist who wrote for his time, and he did not give a hoot for posterity's opinion of his work. He wrote to catch the daily reader's attention, and that meant making him laugh at the world around him. As a result, critics thought him frivolous, too entertaining, too much fun, gifted, no doubt, but a comic actor often found playing the front end of that performing horse Shaw called the Chesterbelloc. Indeed, his friend, Frank Swinnerton, remembered his laughing so much at a debate that he gave himself hiccups for the rest of the evening.¹ L.A.G. Strong said that the average Protestant Englishman had the picture of Chesterton as "an obese and hearty figure banging a pewter pot upon a table and bellowing a paean in praise of beer and the Pope: and they abstain."²

Chesterton himself left no doubt that he credited his Catholic convictions with preserving him from being that which he most dreaded—a child of his time. Inevitably, his faith placed him in an intellectual position that required him to spend

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his literary talents aggressively attacking the winning side of contemporary debate. Ronald Knox noted that Chesterton praised small nations in an imperially-minded Britain, defended private property against Shaw's socialist dream, promoted small shops in the face of the growth of chain stores, defended marriage and the home while feminists fought for divorce and a place in the work place.³ And yet, in spite of his defense of old things, he appeared to be much younger than the people he debated.

Hugh Kenner said that "he was too wise to explain the obvious, he drew pictures of it, and his pictures, like those of God with whom the artist is often audaciously compared, took on life."⁴ Their value, said Kenner "is ultimately moral: the value of any parable."⁵ And Chesterton's moral position was a Roman Catholic convert's view of life. Perhaps, underneath all of the clever attempts to justify the fashionable dismissal of G.K. Chesterton, is the fear that his "Orthodoxy," the name of his most famous book, may very well have been a brilliant grasp of a perennial truth.

It is refreshing to take up Father James V. Schall's collection of essays inspired by his careful reading of Chesterton's works. His professional and confessional background makes him a particularly subtle yet sympathetic critic of Chesterton's evaluation of the world around him.

Early in this set of encounters with the personality and thought of G.K. Chesterton, Schall recalls finding his Georgetown Professor, Father Martin C. D'Arcy, S.J., "sitting in the haustus room over a cup of tea and engag[ing] in most stimulating conversation with him." Schall admires Boswell's *Life of Johnson* for the same reason: because it demonstrates that "real conversations about the highest things never really end, which is why we find earnest young men staying up most of the night arguing about God, sex, religion, the things that are

most worth arguing about."

This collection of pieces taken mostly from the *Midwestern Chesterton News* is itself like a delightful conversation about the highest things with a master teacher introducing the reader to one of the great writers and thinkers of the twentieth century. Father Schall conveys his love for the full personality of his old acquaintance, G.K. Chesterton. He joins conversational forces with him, raising questions about free will and determinism, tolerance and intolerance, work and play, virtue and duty, even Wilde and Wilder, all the while quoting provocative paradoxes, and reflecting on his own deep knowledge of such thinkers as John Henry Newman, Josef Pieper, Plato, Aristotle, and Samuel Johnson. He raises the topic of a woman's place by citing *My Fair Lady*, "Why can't a woman be like a man." His wide range of interests is evident in serious moral discussions, and his obvious delight in the manner as well as the matter of the talk is reflected in his praise of group discussion. Schall is convinced that "all good teachers, even one that we have never met, lead us not to themselves but to the truth, to what is." And, if the search for "what is" takes you to Chesterton, Schall will be pleased that it was he who introduced you to him.

Schall is fascinated by the long friendship of Chesterton and Belloc. "So thoroughly did my mind jump with his," wrote Belloc, "so fully did his answer meet the question my own soul was always asking, that his conclusions, the things he found and communicated, his solutions of the great riddles, his stamp of certitude, were soon part of myself." The two men had what, according to Schall, is "characteristic of Christian friendship"; that is, they not only knew how to ask the proper questions, but also believed that "the nobility of the human condition is not merely that it can ask questions, but that it can know when its questions are answered."

Now, it may be possible to teach some-

one how to ask proper questions, but, in Belloc's descriptive phrase, Chesterton was "hungry for reality." That hunger made him avid for the world around him, avid for the whole truth. As Schall remarks, Chesterton "knew where things belonged." That passion for reality supplied him with the spiritual energy not only to discover things, but also to communicate them to anyone who might be listening. Chesterton did not advocate ideas so much as to relate to his audience what he knew and had reflected upon. In a lovely couple of sentences, Schall, quoting and reflecting on Belloc, captures the essence of Chesterton's public persona. "Side by side with and a product of that immense exuberance in happiness," wrote Belloc "not only of himself but of all around, of that vital rejoicing not only in man but in every other work of God and in God himself, the most conspicuous fruit was generosity." Schall concludes that "the affirmation that *all that is is worthy of praise*, not excluding oneself—this is what Belloc called in a felicitous phrase 'that intense exuberance in happiness.'"

Both Belloc and Chesterton knew that man was at liberty to refuse *what is*. Therein lies his dignity and his difficulty. If Chesterton had an enemy, it would be the person who denied Original Sin. He thought the proof of that doctrine could be found by merely going into any public place and opening our eyes. Even though he knew many of his compatriots would refuse to see the real world around them, Chesterton generously gave in conversation all the truth he possessed, for he knew, in the end, it was not given to him alone. He knew he must share it with his friends; in Yeats's happy phrase, "I must be talking to my friends." From their convivial gatherings, he and his friends scattered their truths abroad like sowers of seed in the fields. Nothing, said Chesterton, is "so delicate, so spiritual, so easy to lose and so difficult to regain as the humorous atmosphere of a social

clique. Frivolity is, in a sense, far more sacred than seriousness."

Since Father Schall wrote these essays over the last decade while teaching at Georgetown University, he must have noticed that the delicate pleasure of talk has suffered from the assaults mounted upon it by those one-way communication devices called Walkman, VCR, Television, and Stereophonic sound. Without criticizing these instruments of modern communication, it is nonetheless true that it is impossible to talk back to them. Students, surrounded by information brought to them by advertisers selling them products, respond to this infusion of sound and light by buying something, not by conversing with someone. The talk does not seek a reply, only a response. The talk's creators register the listener's presence by counting what they purchase. The content of the speech is meant to distract them, rather than to demand of them some indication of what they are thinking.

So, Father Schall has his work cut out for him. If he is to reach his students where they intellectually "hang out," he could have found no more effective companion in the task than Chesterton. Chesterton was a democrat, a man who began his conversation with the ordinary and the familiar, what everyone was reading that day in the press. His active mind thought its way through fad after fad, believing he was reaching ordinary people who were able and willing to follow the argument. Chesterton didn't expect to find truth in the dailies, not "the kind of truth that a man can feel an intelligent curiosity about—moral truth, truth that is disputed, truth that is in action and really affecting things." He saw it as his mission to engage in disputation with the world where he found it, and he brought with him his bubbling good nature, his love of ordinary people, his delight in turning common usage inside out.

Schall himself seems to take pleasure

in the thought that his task is like tilting at windmills. He knows that the entertaining meeting of minds requires leisure, a willingness to eschew the workaday world for a while for no other reason than to enjoy each other's company. The entire book might be said to be a demonstration about one way to go about it. He refuses to accept that modern man is too busy. Should his reader complain he cannot stay long, Schall is ready with another Chesterton paradox. "If one cannot have too much of a good thing," suggests Chesterton, "one cannot have too little." According to the Jesuit Father, that thought "affirms both the unlimitedness of the good and the truth that in the tiniest good we approach infinity."

Father Schall's efforts on behalf of the liberal arts puts one in mind of another such defense by Fordham's Father Gannon entitled *The Poor Old Liberal Arts*. The attitude that there is no practical application to such study can best be summed up in a pamphlet I saw some years ago, which asked a provocative question, "What happens to English majors?" The author's reasons for his perseverance are contained in two sentences. "The highest things exist in conversation. The Word was made flesh." Those short lines are worth the price of the book.

I can hear the reader objecting to the idea that a book communicates in a way fundamentally different from an electronic device. I cannot speak for Father Schall in this matter, although it is obvious in reading his essays that he is a lover of books, for he often takes time out from his subject to tell you who gave him or brought to his attention an important text. A book is like a love letter, a private conversation between, as the expression has it, "people on the same page." When you have enjoyed a good book, the first thing you want to do is talk about it to your friends who read books. Father Schall's quote from Thornton Wilder's *The Matchmaker* seems to me to sum it up.

"There comes a moment in everybody's life when he must decide whether he'll live among human beings or not—a fool among fools or a fool alone."

Schall on Chesterton is an excellent introduction to Chesterton's complex, entertaining, and extensive body of work. For the reader familiar with it, there is the pleasure of hearing an old friend's discourse, and even an old acquaintance will find new and charming facets of Chesterton's view of reality. For reality is at the core of these meditations. Chesterton saw the real world as a sign and symbol of something beyond man's unaided grasp. Man can only be like God if he chooses not to be himself a god. Chesterton discovered the heart of reality in babies, man's "own creative contribution to creation." They were "the sign and sacrament of personal freedom." Creation was sacred because it came from the hand of God. Reading its meaning was the engagement of his lifetime.

This is, of course, Schall's interrogation of Chesterton. If you want to talk to him yourself, the book has a helpful bibliography. Some might call the conversation impractical, even useless and foolish, but it is hard to believe anyone would not get a great deal of pleasure out of the time spent with Father Schall and G.K. Chesterton. It makes you wonder whether his Georgetown students recognize the good fortune they have had to have encountered great minds from the traditions of Western Civility with a man who has lived among them.

1. Frank Swinnerton, "A True Edwardian" (1938), in *G.K. Chesterton—A Half Century of Views*, ed. D. J. Conlon (New York, 1987), 30. This anthology itself demonstrates the literary stature of Chesterton. That so many of the twentieth century's important literary figures wrote critical evaluations of his work, not all of them flattering, attests to his having a growing reading public long after his passing from the scene.
2. "Chesterton's Drinking Songs" (1943), in *Ibid.*, 54.
3. "G.K. Chesterton: The Man and His Work" (1941), in *Ibid.*, 47.
4. "The Word and the World" (1948), in *Ibid.*, 89.
5. *Ibid.*, 94.