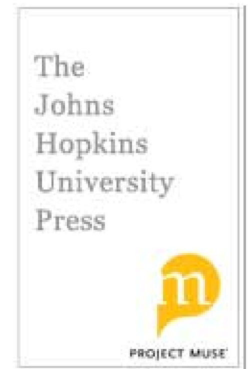
The Return of Christian Humanism: Chesterton, Eliot, Tolkien, and the Romance of History by Lee Oser (review)

Larry Brunner



Christianity & Literature, Volume 59, Number 2, Winter 2010, pp. 365-369 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/738882/summary

[This content has been declared free to read by the pubisher during the COVID-19 pandemic.]

Oser contrasted Arnold and Pater to launch his argument. Their differences serve well to end these remarks. He finds in Arnold's criticism the ideas about human nature and commonly shared ethical values that are, in his view, needed to qualify the Victorian as an eminent Aristotelian. He finds in Pater a retreat to solitary aesthetic consciousness that set an anti-Aristotelian paradigm for modernist writers. But that scheme does not play out so neatly in the collected works of either writer. In the Preface to his 1853 collection, Arnold, at his most Aristotelian, explained why he omitted *Empedocles on Etna*, the long title poem of an earlier volume: it failed to deliver on his own philosophical demands. Indeed, in his poetry Arnold keeps returning the theme of his age's, and his own, inability to articulate precisely the socially shared values that Oser seeks.

Where imaginative literature is concerned, I think we are more likely to find them most closely approximated in Pater—not in *The Renaissance* (1873), arguably the founding text of the Aesthetic Movement, but in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). Dismissed by Oser as one of Pater's "Imaginary Portraits," *Marius* is better viewed as a novel of development whose protagonist, rather than abandoning his aesthetic sense, integrates it into a maturing moral consciousness. The body plays a key role: Marius parts company with the Stoic Aurelius in that "the philosophic emperor was a despiser of the body" (Ch. XVIII); Marius, "the humbler follower of the bodily eye" (Ch. XIV), strives "to live in the concrete" (Ch X). The entire novel traces Marius's quest for a community where moral ideals can be found in a form accessible to the eye. He successively discards the "unseen celestial city" of Aurelius and his tutor the rhetorician Fronto, the ideal republic of Plato, or the neo-Platonist Apuleius's "fantastic visions" (Ch. XX) of a vague intermediary realm. Though he does not formally become a member, Marius is able to see his ideals realized among the Christians who gather at Cecilia's house, where beauty and morality are concretely embodied in community life. At last, despite himself, Marius performs a supremely moral act of self-sacrifice to save the life of his friend Cornelius. In Pater's novel—and in varying degrees among the modernist masters—relations between ethics and aesthetic are charged with paradox and complexity. Its clear and distinct conceptualizations notwithstanding, Oser's book leaves our questions about them far from closed.

Joseph Sendry
Catholic University

The Return of Christian Humanism: Chesterton, Eliot, Tolkien, and the Romance of History. By Lee Oser. University of Missouri Press, 2007. ISBN 9780-8262-1775-2. Pp. xi + 190. $37.50.

The clash between dogmatic relativism in the modern tradition and a reviving Christian humanism is the broad focus of this study, embracing "critics, philosophers,

and theologians," and presented "to compare the fruits of Christian humanism with those of its rivals, both secular and religious" (publisher's notice). This sounds like a very large enterprise—it is. Lee Oser offers a survey of materials drawn from no less than 199 titles in his Works Cited list, to play out in about 155 pages of text. Oser, Associate Professor of English at the College of Holy Cross, and author of *T. S. Eliot and American Poetry* and *The Ethics of Modernism: Moral Ideas in Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett*, assumes his readership can tap, as he apparently does, a vast recall knowledge of an immense field of scholarship. One appreciates the implicit compliment, but the task of bridging idea to idea in this impressive book is sometimes daunting. Oser is adept at intercrossing several concepts at once to weave a complex tapestry, but the process can sometimes produce loose ends, sudden transitions, and too-rapid turns of thought.

Oser's study invites, as George H. Ford said of reading Carlyle, "a mixture of admiration and exasperation." There is much here to admire—the book is thoughtful and full of credible (if not always argued) assertions; most often, it offers exhortation instead of argument. Its intended readership is clearly the Christian scholar, the basic readership of *Christianity and Literature*. Oser's straightforward Catholic allegiances are presented carefully, gracefully, and reasonably. If at times hurried, even sketchy, the book is nevertheless stimulating, energetic, and thought-provoking, with occasional sparkles of acerbic wit. Oser's enthusiasm is contagious; he is difficult to resist. If the reader, however, is not deep in criticism, philosophy, and theology simultaneously, Oser's ambition to grasp and examine so much in such an abbreviated scope can be off-putting as well as daunting.

The preface points the book's general direction, asserting that a "cadre of specialists" has "ruled out the dialectic between religion and literature," and affirms that Chesterton, Eliot, and Tolkien offer "the chance for renewal and renaissance"; their art is "an effort to keep the sacred wellsprings of culture open" (x). The following chapter, "Between Two Worlds," presents a broad definition of humanism: "The argument of this book is that Christian humanism conserves the radical middle between secularism and theocracy. The one extreme is the perversion of state power, the other is the perversion of religious power" (5). Oser makes a straightforward admission of his own faith—"I profess to be a Christian" (5)—and observes that failing dialogue signals the collapse of humanism in the "radical middle." (A single paragraph in this chapter evokes Chesterton, Gladstone, Mill, Lewes, Comte, Stephen, Butler, Huxley, Dewey, Fourier, Saint-Simon, Voegelin, Adam Smith, and Frederick the Great: such swiftness is a bit dazzling.) Oser argues that Western man is overwhelmed by a sense of failure issuing in the "birth of the posthuman" (11). At the heart of true Christian humanism, in Oser's terms, is a generous and intelligent orthodox tolerance. Out of the late nineteenth century, "a period touched by considerable anxiety in intellectual circles" (18), Oser finds emerging his lead example of a Christian humanist, G. K. Chesterton, an orthodox voice raised against anti-humanism.

Agreeing with Chesterton's view that "the most practical and important thing about a man is still his view of the universe" (22), Oser lists Chesterton's opponents, his "heretics," as "Pater, Nietzsche, Wilde, Shaw, Kipling, Wells, Tolstoy, Whistler, and Yeats" (24)—a typically large sampling. Chesterton is linked with the radical middle by Oser in this assertion: "Chesterton's synthesis of faith and reason occupies a middle ground between two democratic epistemologies: godless scientism and occult mysticism" (26).

Eliot follows as another exemplar of Christian humanism. Eliot offers, in Oser's words, one of "the great conversion stories in the arts," rising "from Unitarian unbelief to Christian faith in the shadow of modern skepticism" (36). Oser finds a powerful contrast in Eliot with Chesterton: where Chesterton is "comical, democratic, and orthodox," Eliot is "ironic, aristocratic, and a priest of art" (39). Eliot is shown to be keenly focused on the "tragic flaw" of Western thought, the break between "orthodoxy and tradition ... thought and feeling" (43). In language that resonates with his view of Christian humanism as "the radical middle," Oser quotes Eliot's definition of humanism as a "meditating and corrective ingredient in a positive civilization founded on definite belief" (48). Nevertheless, where Chesterton is dynamic and hopeful, Eliot seems to doubt progress.

Tolkien is the last of three highlighted Christian humanists of the book's title. Tolkien does not share Eliot's modernist aesthetic, in part because his fiction presents a spiritual warfare which can be won. For him, "story first ... style second" (53). Where the modernist is "no friend to human nature," Oser asserts "the tale teller embraces human nature, sings to the heart, and humanizes the soul" (53). That art may record life is not to assert its identity with life, as Yeats does. Unlike Eliot's etherized patient, Tolkien is "full-bodied, robust" (55). Tolkien is "a romantic Catholic" (57) hero, along with Chesterton; of course, Eliot as High Church Anglican points in similar directions. Oser observes that "the romantic imagination is militant; the Catholic imagination is daring" (58); he could explore such implications at greater leisure. One sometimes longs for steady in-depth probing, a pause for reflection. Oser asserts that "*The Lord of the Rings* is an analogy for Christian humanism in the historically emerging sense that is the central concern of this book ... not so much an escape from modernity as a rejection of modern dehumanization" (65). Some illustrative quotes, some direct citation of the work, would not be amiss here.

The latter half of the book begins with a section titled "Gnostic Aestheticism." The modernist rejection of traditional values leads to postmodernist willful ignorance of the past. Beckett is the premier example of modernist attacks on traditional values and the concept of absolute truth. Oser has this interesting take on Beckett: "he is a writer of conscience, whose Augustinian rigor will touch the heart (and the funny bone) of many a melancholy churchman" (72)—cruel absurdity expressed in black humor. A gem from this section is Oser's telling observation that "benevolent secular universalism lacks the conviction to inspire the good will it professes ... this lack makes for a very sorry spectacle" (73). The antihumanist/

Gnostic understanding of Christian faith as myth rather than relationship is a crucial contrast here. A humanist, in a Christian context, can pursue truth, virtue, and beauty because they *exist*; to live in pursuit of these values is not absurd or meaningless. In a final revelatory comment, Oser notes "Beckett's stammering, paralytic drama is pointedly anti-Christian. More important, it suggests the anti-Christian origins of anti-art" (84). Without a story to tell, without meaning to reveal or explore, art turns inside to consume itself.

"Artificial Taste" is a consequence of bad art, inhuman art, as Oser argues in a following chapter. Some critics of high repute come in for vigorous disparagement here. Echoing Auden, Oser finds "Bloom ruined a fine tenor voice for effects that brought down the house. He never could resist the high note of his own resentments" (91). He quotes Bloom's cavalier dismissal of Eliot: "His verse is (mostly) weak; his prose is wholly tendentious" (91). Bloom is presented as a leading voice in the attempt to overstate the influence of Christian orthodoxy in order to purge it from culture: "Bloom intimates that Christianity is dead to thinking people, and that art is a finer form of religion" (92). Oser's response is that in the mystery of great art is found a permanent voice for the common human good. Helen Vendler also is targeted with Bloom as one who "speaks for the soul's liberation from human nature and God, the soul's discovery of its supremacy to the created order" (100). For such critics, art must assert human godhead, recognizing that we are, in Yeats's terms, "self-created." That such critical concepts are poisonous to true human nature does not escape Oser's notice; of Bloom and Vendler, he notes "The future ... has already denied them; no wonder they are indignant" (101).

The chapter titled "The Canon and Literacy Form" is stimulating, even exciting, in its delicious opinionated bluntness. Some samples: "the art of poetry continues its recession from public consciousness ... it will not matter that Milton was a genius whose work is good for your brain. The establishment is liberated from the regime of Milton, just as it is liberated from reason, nature, and the God of the Christians" (142). Oser refers with feeling to "the abject coarseness of what is now following our ultra-sophisticated post-modernism, descending on reader's heads like Yahoo excrement ... " (148). This sarcastic observation follows: "It is obvious that our forward-thinking universities have made orthodoxy taboo. And now our elite students are generally ignorant of Christianity. The entire tradition ... is therefore largely incomprehensible to them" (148). Abstractions are here solidified into edgy trenchant observations.

The final chapter, "The Romance of History," offers obvious assertions of Catholic tradition and thought. Perhaps Oser protests too much as he assures us that "I want to emphasize that the romance of history is not a triumphalist appeal to Rome or an unqualified plea for central authority" (154). This might pass without special notice, except that the facing page observes "As Eliot suggests, Rome is open to many readings, classical and modern, irenic and imperial. But within the broad arrangements of global Christianity ... the existence of a biblical spiritual capital is

needed for coordination and dialogue" (155). Oser then moves to his close, noting that Christian humanism's charge is to "defend the radical middle, where genuine tolerance may be found" (159). Orthodoxy exposes the "hypocrisy and intolerance" of anti-Christian elitism, while revealing the "Christian elite" as also hypocritical and intolerant. (May one assume the "religious right" is meant here?) Intolerance in the previous chapter is defined as "the success of humanitarianism over common sense" (146), a nice formula for political correctness.

Oser sometimes presents ideas he finds of interest without sufficient illustration, and the rush of ongoing concepts can at times be tough going. But despite this sort of frustration, Oser's book is eminently recommendable, in part because it offers many directions to ponder. The book's weakness is a function of its overall strength. Oser's winning closing comment evokes the general tone of his admirable conviction: "If I don't blush at the charge of being practical when I should be religious, it is because I cannot be practical at all without being religious" (165).

Larry Brunner
Hardin-Simmons University

Sanctifying the World: The Augustinian Life and Mind of Christopher Dawson. By Bradley J. Birzer. Front Royal: Christendom Press, 2007. ISBN 0-931888-86-7. Pp. xvi + 316. $30.00.

Bradley J. Birzer's *Sanctifying the World* may currently be the best single volume on Catholic historian Christopher Dawson's life and worldview. It combines the biographical insight of Christina Scott's *A Historian and His World* (Sheed and Ward, 1984) with the critical and intellectual context offered by studies such as John J. Mulloy's *Christianity and the Challenge of History* (Christendom Press, 1995), the Wethersfield Institute's *Christianity and Western Civilization: Christopher Dawson's Insight* (Ignatius Press, 1995), and Adam Schwartz's chapter on Dawson in his *The Third Spring* (Catholic University of America Press, 2005). Because of Dawson's almost debilitating shyness and because for most of his career he wrote as an independent scholar, it has been tempting for some to treat Dawson as if he avoided intellectual and cultural conflict. Birzer takes pains to show that this was hardly the case. In particular, Birzer advances the available scholarship on Dawson by placing the historian and critic in two broad fields of disagreement: 1) the Catholic neo-Augustinian reaction to the more prevalent Catholic neo-Thomism, a reaction typically associated with the French *ressourcement* of Maurice Blondel, Henri de Lubac, and Charles Péguy; and 2) conservative social criticism opposed to the Bloomsbury Group with its radical sexual experimentation, as well as to a liberalism that assumed the purity of mass capitalism and of the planed society. As to the latter, Birzer refutes with sufficient evidence the tired charge that Dawson was a fascist.