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**Matthew Beaumont and Matthew Ingleby (eds.), *G. K. Chesterton, London and Modernity*, hardcover, 245 pages, London: Bloomsbury 2013. ISBN: 978-1780937069; £60**

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This collection makes a vivid case for the manifold ways that G. K. Chesterton's fictional and non-fictional output repurposed the 'everyday matter' (lamp-posts, bricks, water-towers) and everyday matters (train journeys, grocery shopping, automobile rides, playing with children) of urban modernity (11). A colourful and diverting group of essays emphasises how a Chestertonian literary project was bound up with the creative imperative to play with the 'apparent banality' of urban life at the turn of the twentieth century (4).

Chesterton's peculiarly skewed way of invoking London's human form is summed up in characteristically epigrammatic yet buoyant terms in the preface to *Tremendous Trifles* (a collection of short imaginative pieces originally published in *The Daily News*). Despite addressing ostensibly trivial topics, these sketches are intended to function rather like exempla or models for an athletic mode of looking. The eye should never be allowed to 'rest' upon the object in a way that leads to epistemological sedimentation or inertia: 'Let us exercise the eye until it learns to see the startling facts that run across the landscape as plain as a painted fence.[...] Let us learn to write essays on a stray cat or a coloured cloud' (vi).

One of these 'trifles', 'The Angry Street: A Bad Dream', relates a sequence of events which appears indelibly etched in the author's youthful consciousness. This story explores the nightmarish consequences which can result from the chronic neglect of those aspects of the urban scene which are written off as trivial and beyond the concerns of the spectator. The victim of this vision is an antediluvian City worker who the narrator meets in a quick-lunch restaurant 'where men take their food so fast that it has none of the qualities of food' (242). The 'sanguine-faced' but edgy figure

explains how he took the same route home from work for forty years but that one day a familiar street suddenly 'reared up' on him like an over-encumbered beast (243): 'The lamp-posts and the whole look of the perspective was the same; only it was tilted upwards like a lid' (245). The street finally turns upon its user and punishes his perceptual complacency and lack of care for the human possibilities embedded in 'things called inanimate' (248).

A reconfiguration of the everyday is a 'connected thread of motive' that weaves through Chesterton's fiction as it does through *Trifles* (v). There are several articles here which make this through line explicit but that also testify to the heterogeneous and versatile images of city that these operations can produce. For example, in a fine opening chapter Michael Hurley reflects upon Chesterton's capacity to accentuate the 'innocent darkness' of the metropolis rather than despairing about the presence of an endless urban and suburban desert made up of boring 'brown houses' (25). In Chapter 9, Colin Cavendish Jones similarly understands Chesterton's de- (or is it re-) familiarisation of the everyday as a form of estrangement or *ostranenie* which can transform mundane districts into elemental avatars ('Clapham' is splendidly refigured as 'Thunderclapham') (189).

That said, in Chapter 8, Michael Shallcross reminds us that these effects of estrangement are not only set in train through aestheticised and abstracted appreciation of the city but also through ludic games and childlike diversions. Father Brown is a 'wise fool' who induces theatrical escapades and opens up (proto-Bakhtinian) carnivalesque fictional spaces where outbursts of unofficial iconoclasm are temporarily valorised (168). London's 'happenstance' structure is the ideal arena for these festive capers because it has been shaped by desires which confound the intentions of late-century devisers of 'architectural rationalization and social authoritarianism' (169, 171).

In Chapter 7 Matthew Ingleby shows that even the morally discomfiting figure of the house-breaker can be enlisted into this motley outfit as the 'agent' as well as the 'enemy' of social justice (150). This essay is noteworthy because it begins to trace the sheer complexity and weirdness of the Chestertonian critique of bourgeois domestic economy.

A preoccupation with remoulding the cityscape and transposing social identities—tramps become policemen, policemen become tramps, etc.—draws Chesterton into a striking affiliation with Charlie Chaplin's early filmic experiments. This book does not pick up on filmic resonances, and further scholarship might look more closely at Chesterton's engagement with this new art form. Chaplin counters the downbeat image of Hooligan-ridden south London in *Easy Street* (1917), a film that is doubtless inspired by the district of Walworth where Chaplin was born (East Street/Easy Street). The 'Little Tramp' (Chaplin) takes on a role as policeman and then overcomes a bullying rogue who is plaguing the local community by using a twisted lamppost to gas this seemingly insurmountable foe.

*G. K. Chesterton, London and Modernity* certainly succeeds in introducing a number of forking paths that enrich Chestertonian commentary which has too often been funnelled into a narrow 'spiritual trajectory' (8). But Mark Knight also highlights that spirituality can be folded back into a 'sacramental reading' that secures a

plurivocal interpretation of the secular city through 'analogical language and symbolism' (63).

Nick Freeman's study links Chesterton's mystical rendering of the city with Arthur Machen's revival of the 'wonder of God's creation in the London suburbs' (82). Perhaps more could have been said here about the way that a more positive outlook is held in check by abject odium in novels like *The Hill of Dreams* (1907). Machen's Lucian seeks aesthetic manumission from the bondage of London's grim materiality rather than finding delight in its grimness. This entropic vision seems to align Machen more closely with the pessimistic 'mean streets' of George Gissing, Arthur Morrison or James Thompson rather than with the ebullient playscapes of Chesterton. On the other hand, Freeman convincingly argues that Chesterton's and Machen's works were shaped by the same literary communalities and trends.

In Chapter 6, Merrick Burrow picks up on this concern with networks by exploring the way that the eccentricities of Chesterton's fictional register trace the 'moral ambiguity and pathologized sexuality' of the nineties, while also defusing the destabilising 'queerness' of these circles in the same stroke (114). Matthew Beaumont's rich piece explores how works like *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904) harness the potential of mediaeval romance to spur the occupation of abandoned regions of the metropolis that the modern imagination has carelessly left to go to waste (95).

The eccentric and contradictory nature of Chesterton's tales is reflected through articles that often profitably counterpoint one another in this collection. For example, Beaumont and Hurley are both keen to draw out the ingenuity of the author's verbal, rhetorical and analogical form, whereas in Chapter 2, Lynne Hapgood is wary of overloading the productive significance of 'verbal games, diverting delights or provocative puzzles' (39). In 'The Ballad of the White Horse' she finds a transparent and perhaps more enduring plot where the disharmonies of modern experience are smoothed out.

Nevertheless, paradoxes and puns do appear to be inseparable from Chesterton's rendering of urban modernity. It therefore seems fitting that the author has the last laugh in the final chapter of this book. Matthew Taunton's discussion of Chesterton's distributist outlook goes against the grain of articles which have mainly emphasised his robust affection for the city. Taunton explores a political project that was wary of the city's modern infrastructure but embraced an idealised vision of agrarian peasant smallholdings. Chesterton is difficult to pin down; his own literary engagement with the city repeatedly upsets the critical applecart, but this collection does not shy away from these contradictions.

An Afterword by Julian Wolfreys explains how Chesterton stakes his claim to the 'unremarkable' terrain of the city and in so doing privileges the 'apperception of difference' (229, 231). These articles suggest that this sensitivity to the accidental and contingent aspects of urban life ensures that there is still much to be remarked upon in the Chestertonian oeuvre. Rather than demanding a narrow theoretical and positivistic treatment, his works encourage the critic to 'run across the landscape' and begin essaying on lampposts, stray cats and coloured clouds (even if we end up feeling a bit silly while we're going about it).

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