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THIS SIDE OF SUNDAY: THEOLOGICAL FICTION IN LIGHT OF G.K. CHESTERTON'S *THE MAN WHO WAS THURSDAY*

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As borne out again by the recent phenomenon of William P. Young's *The Shack*, the mix of narrative and theology has long had a wide audience and, for good or ill, a pervasive theological influence.¹ It might be argued that Christians are wrong to look to novels for their theology and that novelists should mind their own business, but in recent decades especially it has proven well worth asking not only to what *extent* narrative can be a *vehicle* for theology but also whether it has a certain *appropriateness* to its subject matter that makes it an important theological *mode*. It seems self evident that if fiction can be theological, when it does theology it should not be given a pass from either criticism, praise, or a fair hearing because it is *just a story*. Therefore, with openness to the narrative mode ought to come an analysis of its theological content which is as rigorous as any other theology *and* is directed with a literate awareness of the mode's unique limitations and advantages. As both an exploration of and an exercise in such analysis this paper takes one of last century's finer examples of theology in fiction in order to extract guidance from what it does well.

Consider G.K. Chesterton's 1908 novel, *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare*.² As an explanation of his conversion to Christianity or apologetics set in fiction, it avoids overstating its own argument on one hand and spiralling into mere narcissism on the other. As theology in the narrative mode, painting landscapes and probing minutiae within a storied context, instead of undermining dogmatics or supplanting Scripture, *it partners vitally with the former and faithfully serves the latter*. Accessible yet sophisticated, appropriately reserved and bold, it is a winsome witness and a constructive example for the relation of theology and the arts.

¹ 'With 3.8 million copies of his Christian novel "The Shack" in print, Young is being hailed as a theological innovator, his book the "Pilgrim's Progress" of the 21st century.' Lisa Miller, 'Belief Watch: A Close Encounter With God', *Newsweek*, Sept. 8, 2008. <<http://www.newsweek.com/id/156370>>.

² First publication, Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1908.

STORIED THEOLOGY

Shortly after his conversion to Christianity around the turn of the 20th century, the young Chesterton confronted the leading thinkers of his time in a series of essays entitled *Heretics*. In it he wrote: 'Life may sometimes legitimately appear as a book of science. Life may sometimes appear, and with a much greater legitimacy, as a book of metaphysics. But life is always a novel.'³ It is thus not surprising that when readers of *Heretics* challenged him to state his own philosophy in positive terms, *two volumes emerged in one year: Orthodoxy*, an intellectual defence of his conversion, and *Thursday*, a fictional re-creation of the experience. While Étienne Gilson called *Orthodoxy* 'the best apologetic the century had yet produced', Kent Hill has suggested that Chesterton was an even more effective apologist in his fiction'.⁴ Though self-defacing in regard to his own art, Chesterton likely thought *Thursday* the more fitting expression of his new-found faith precisely because of its nature as an *adventure story*—free from 'imprisonment in abstraction'.⁵

Chesterton made no secret of the fact that the fables of his youth had a significant hand in leading him to the Christian faith. Once converted, it became clear that these were not only important to him as a medium for his message but as part of the message itself. For him it seems that doctrinal statements, while holding a crucial purpose of their own, lost something vital if totally divorced from persons and settings and situations. In *Orthodoxy* he wrote: 'A man may well be less convinced of a philosophy from four books, than from one book, one battle, one landscape, and one old friend.'⁶ As a companion piece, *Thursday* reads as his attempt to provide a battle, landscape and friend to do what *Orthodoxy* alone did not.

Though it would be possible to simply extract and itemize theological positions represented in the novel, I would like keep them embedded in plot and character commentary as much as time will allow before cycling back to highlight theological contributions in order to note boundaries and gains of the narrative mode in which they are displayed.

³ G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (New York: Dodo Press, 2006), p. 89.

⁴ The Gilson quote is borrowed from Kent R. Hill, 'The Sweet Grace of Reason: The Apologetics of G.K. Chesterton', in *The Riddle of Joy: G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis*, ed. by Michael H. Macdonald and Andrew A. Tadie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 227, 229.

⁵ Frank M. Drollinger, 'Paradox and Sanity in *The Man Who Was Thursday*', *The Chesterton Review* 31 (2005), 123. See G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996), pp. 8-58. In a later novel, Gabriel Gale doubts aloud 'whether any truth can be told except in parable'. G.K. Chesterton, *The Poet and the Lunatics* (Cornwall, UK: Stratus Books, 2001), p. 87.

⁶ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 212.

'A TALE OF EMPTIED HELLS'

Set in Britain around the turn of the century, *The Man Who Was Thursday* is about a secret council of seven anarchists, each aliased according to the days of the week, which is infiltrated by a philosopher-poet turned undercover detective named Gabriel Syme, who usurps terrorist Lucian Gregory's posting to the council and becomes the man code-named Thursday. Perplexed by both the absurdity and wonder of existence, Syme sets out to investigate a murderous scheme and ends up unravelling some of life's deepest mysteries. Readers have long noted the story's wildly autobiographical element and deeper meaning, spurred in part by its dedicatory poem to Chesterton's childhood friend: 'This is a tale of those old fears, even of those emptied hells, / And none but you shall understand the true thing that it tells.'⁷ Highly evocative of his own life journey, Chesterton's main character is *caught up with a fellowship of anarchists and detectives in a harrowing pursuit* of Nature personified, only to get around front and finally see the fleeting face of God. This occurs by way of a baffling series of twists and turns which lead to the re-figuring of each character in light of the reconciliation of the police chief and the Anarchist Council President, Sunday.

Along the way, each time an anarchist is unmasked the novel hints at a corresponding philosophy that Chesterton himself had searched and found wanting. *Through them Chesterton presents both an appreciation for and an underlying challenge to the ideologies of his time.* In trademark irenic polemic, *each character brings something important to the pursuit* of Sunday, and yet each unravels along the way; receives a truer garment at the creation feast; and stands confronted by the same climactic words of Christ.

Monday comes close to the kind of person Chesterton saw himself becoming at his darkest moment. Vigilant in asking questions and initiating the book's final barrage, Monday is ever the solipsist—decidedly resistant in the presence of answers from elsewhere. Exposed for his 'inhuman veracity', he is given a black and white costume at the creation feast; the dress of the abstract philosopher.⁸ While *his ferocious questioning gives the detectives' quest its vitality*, it is his strident pessimism which

⁷ G.K. Chesterton, *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare*, ed. Martin Gardner (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), pp. 25-30.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 254-5. See also G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), p. 136.

keeps him at odds with Sunday.⁹ Like Kafka's Joseph K., he succumbs to doubt and despair.

Tuesday is a simple-minded man who tries not to think of ultimate realities for the same reason that he does not 'stare at the sun at noonday'.¹⁰ He is Chesterton's 'man on the street', but *he too is counted among the philosophers* because, for all its simplicity, his indifference 'is a point of view'.¹¹ This view is not without merit, as Chesterton wrote later: 'We must have a certain simplicity to repicture the childhood of the world.'¹² Caught up in the common quest, Tuesday is ultimately able to sum up the detective's philosophical quandaries most poignantly, saying: 'I wish I knew why I was hurt so much.'¹³ However, like Mr. Verloc in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, he is plagued by 'a philosophical unbelief in the effectiveness of every human effort'.¹⁴

Wednesday is another pessimist – more Oscar Wilde than Franz Kafka – whose doubt has led him into decadence and whose shifting persona leads Gabriel Syme to feel like he is locked in an impressionist painting with 'that final skepticism which can find no floor to the universe'.¹⁵ Exposing Wednesday's Wildean facade allows Chesterton to *convey gratitude as the route to joy*, while exposing unrestrained hedonism as rooted in despair.¹⁶

The other side of the same coin, *Friday*, thinks the world insane and collapses under the ironic self-indictment.¹⁷ In the face of Sunday's hope, the Nietzschean nihilist retains 'the last and the worst doubts' admitting 'not a creed, [but] a doubt. . . . I do not believe that you really have a face. I have not faith enough to believe in matter'.¹⁸ It is interesting that this is the first ally Thursday makes in his quest, thus *enabling him to frame the quest as a dilemma between essential nihilism and ultimate hope*.

⁹ See Gary Wills, 'The Man Who Was Thursday', in *G.K. Chesterton: A Half Century of Views*, ed. by D.J. Conlon (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 338.

¹⁰ Chesterton, *Thursday*, pp. 96, 243.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 243 (emphasis mine).

¹² Chesterton, *Everlasting Man*, p. 101.

¹³ Chesterton, *Thursday*, p. 260.

¹⁴ Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 12.

¹⁵ Chesterton, *Thursday*, p. 190.

¹⁶ 'We should thank God for beer and burgundy by not drinking too much of them.' Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 90.

¹⁷ Chesterton, *Thursday*, p. 212.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

While place is provided for a Kafka, Conrad, Wilde and Nietzsche in Chesterton's quest, it is telling that none are left to themselves, and none is his main character. Instead, they are prodded along by *Thursday*, who *wonders* out loud: 'Bad is so bad, that we cannot but think good an accident; good is so good, that we feel certain that evil could be explained.'¹⁹

This might have mounted to some kind of over-optimistic apologetic project, except that *in contrast to the pessimism of the others the novel gives us Saturday, the optimistic doctor* representing one of Chesterton's favourite targets for debate; those enraptured by the myth of progress.²⁰ The strength of Saturday's levity might have made him a candidate to be Chesterton's hero, except that this novel was essentially a theodicy, and held no high ground for humanist naiveté.²¹ Well placed as Saturday's hope might be—at the centre of his being—it blinds him to the inherent problems of the human condition. Thus, when it finally comes time to hear the novel's climactic revelation, Saturday has tragically drifted from nightmare into a daydream without sharing Thursday's awakening.²² Though this *comes by way of revelation and is no mere inner enlightenment*, it is nonetheless significant that *the driving character in Chesterton's quest is a poet-philosopher*.²³

ON 'THIS GRANTING OF A REAL ROMANCE TO THE WORLD'

By the end of the story, the anarchists have all been unmasked and the detectives are wildly chasing the enigmatic Sunday. At the final confrontation, Sunday answers as if they are Job before God: 'What am I? . . . you will have found out the truth of the last tree and the topmost cloud before the truth about me Since the beginning of the world all men have hunted me like a wolf—kings and sages, and poets and law-givers, all the churches, and all the philosophies. But I have never been caught yet.'²⁴ Later undaunted but at wit's end from having followed him so fiercely, when finally the detectives are taken in by Sunday they pummel him again with questions of his identity. This time the answer comes back: 'I am the Sabbath I am the peace of God.'²⁵ True to form, *in his intellectual honesty Chesterton depicts his characters as being thrown by this state-*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

²⁰ Elsewhere he wrote: 'I propose not to . . . consider your business a triumphant progress merely because you're always finding out that you were wrong.' G.K. Chesterton, *Manalive* (New York: Dodo Press, 2006), p. 120.

²¹ Chesterton, *Thursday*, p. 239.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 260-3.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 80, 224.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 224-5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

ment into a tailspin of theodicy.²⁶ When the man who might have been Thursday, Lucian Gregory, accuses Sunday of remaining aloof and thus declares him irrelevant to the peril and suffering of the human race, the answer that comes back is the only overt Scripture reference in the novel: 'Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?'²⁷

Blacking out at the words of Christ, Gabriel Syme drifts from nightmare to the wakefulness of the book's closing pages, and readers are left where they began, except now with a call to courage under the hopeful prospect that brought to the end of oneself with Christ one might truly live. It is a narrative apologia that avoids trite downplaying of the difficulties of this world and it is a *theodicy that, rather than bending over backwards with apologies, depicts life in light of Christ as 'a venture of the first order'*, to borrow a phrase from Barth.²⁸ Chesterton would later put it this way, in *The Everlasting Man*:

The more deeply we think of the matter the more we shall conclude that, if there be indeed a God, his creation could hardly have reached any other culmination than this granting of a real romance to the world. Otherwise the two sides of the human mind could never have touched at all; and the brain of man would have remained cloven and double; one lobe of it dreaming impossible dreams and the other repeating invariable calculations. The picture-makers would have remained forever painting the portrait of nobody. The sages would have remained for ever adding up numerals that came to nothing. It was that abyss that nothing but an incarnation could cover.²⁹

SKETCHING BOUNDARIES AND MARKING GAINS

Having outlined the theological overtones of *The Man Who Was Thursday*, we turn now to an exploration of boundaries it exposes and artfully skirts, with the aim of drawing out some of the examples it sets for theological fiction. Comparison with some well-known interlocutors will serve to highlight these points, but should not be taken as wholesale critiques.

The first question that might be asked is whether an apologia such as this simply too subjective to carry its theological weight. Critics of John Henry Newman's *Apologia* were quick to attribute his Catholic conversion to 'faulty premises logically carried out, to various psychological factors more or less determining his conclusions, or to both'.³⁰ Bishop

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., cf. Mark 10:38.

²⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), p. 204.

²⁹ Chesterton, *Everlasting Man*, p. 248.

³⁰ Martin J. Svaglic, 'Editor's Introduction', in John Henry Cardinal Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua: Being a History of His Religious Opinions*, ed. Martin

Wilberforce held that ‘Newman’s “defection” was due to the “peculiarities of the individual”. His mind was eminently subjective and, though honest, had no engrossing affection for abstract truth.’³¹ Though any apologetics is susceptible to this, the genre does bear the advantage of having to wear its heart on its sleeve, making its author’s premises and experiences a part of the work, and perhaps more immediately accessible to theological scrutiny. However, *this should be no license for irresponsible self-narrative passing as theology*. Though the subjectivism may be more disguised, this concern is not diminished by the employment of fantasy. On this front, it has been well noted that Chesterton ‘would have had little patience with [any author’s] egotistical tendency to say that the only subject for fiction was their own consciousness and its sensations.’³² This is more than a concern over posture, but has bearings on content as well. Whereas Alan Friedman explains that Conrad and Kafka’s stories ‘centered (in effect, “zeroed in”) on the self’, Chesterton’s story counter-poses that this is precisely why their nightmares ended the way they did.³³

There is a caution to be heeded here in overtly Christian fiction as well. Talk as they might about bowing at the feet of God and joining with the saints in the heavenly city or the real world, the overwhelming force of the plot and story-telling in the ever-popular *Pilgrim’s Progress* and its grandchild *The Shack* leans toward a solipsist individualism. Each story offers a picture of Christian life in which the protagonist weaves his way alone through struggles, foes and even friends toward a privatized encounter with God. In the most recent of these it is seen just how blatant and deeply ingrained Bunyan’s latent individualism has become in the evangelical consciousness. God’s self-revelation is tailored to the isolated protagonist to such an extent that the Father is a woman wearing the most nostalgic perfume, Jesus is instantly likable, the Spirit distracts attention even from Jesus, and God is extolled as servant only to be described ‘more truly’ as ‘my servant’.³⁴ Although not immune to these concerns, Chesterton’s narrated apologetics evaded isolationism and subjectivity by catching

J. Svaglic (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. xlviii.

³¹ Ibid., p. 1.

³² Alzina Stone Dale, *The Outline of Sanity: A Life of G.K. Chesterton* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 116.

³³ Alan Friedman, ‘The Novel’, in *The Twentieth Century Mind I, 1900-1918: History, Ideas, and Literature in Britain*, ed. by C.B. Cox and A.E. Dyson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 415.

³⁴ William P. Young, *The Shack* (Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007), pp. 82, 85, 87, 237, emphasis mine. For more examples and explanations of this see pages 83, 89, 93-94, 113, 175, and 198. For an indication of the problems of an engorged *prometheity* of this kind see Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of*

its main character up with a fellowship of jostling pursuants in a common quest, enabling him to present both an appreciation for and a challenge to the contributions of each. This in such a way that could keep their discourse alive without the implied polemic of simple rejection that comes so easily with labelling views, naming problems, and moving on. Readers are brought along as his protagonist is antagonized at every turn and rather than ending *in* himself comes to the end of himself at the feet of another.

A second potential peril of theological fiction is that it may overstate itself, usurping Scriptural language and tradition with a presumptuous confidence in its own re-mythologization. If demythologization re-reads 'texts in such a way that the narrative element is resolved into abstract moral, spiritual or philosophical concepts', then re-mythologization takes the liberty of translating those concepts into new and loosely related stories.³⁵ *The Man Who Was Thursday* could certainly be seen this way, except that the story is so fantastically bizarre and comedic it seems designed precisely to make the reader aware of its own limits. With the force of the fiction it gestures toward something better rather than reading like a new myth to supplant the old. Materially and stylistically, *The Man Who Was Thursday* points to the church and Scripture with an appropriate self-reserve, thus lending theological credence to what it *does* say, compelling readers further, and serving rather than undermining dogmatics.

For all that might be and has been said about C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia* and J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the question has to be asked the legacy of these myths was to serve or supplant the gospel they echo. In Lewis case, it can be argued that the nod to Christ is strong and artful enough to have achieved its goal as imaginative witness, and in Tolkien's that the theological overtones are reserved enough to make the myth prod forward rather than curve in on itself. When it comes to our most recent interlocutor, *The Shack*, the anti-theological rhetoric not only disguises the fact that the book is actually a work of theology but steers readers away from further reflection.³⁶ To be fair, *The Shack's* apparent aim is

Faith According to Luther, trans. by M. Chernio (New York: Harper, 1967), pp. 95-115.

³⁵ Brian Horne, 'Theology in the Narrative Mode', in *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. by Peter Byrne and Leslie Houlden (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 960.

³⁶ It is the thrust of the plot that accomplishes this most forcefully, but the dialogue provides examples of this as well. See Young, *The Shack*, pp. 91, 123, 192, 197. This posture was continued by the author in response to theological critiques of the book. That some critics (many of the foundationalist variety) gracelessly perpetuated Young's false dilemma does not justify it. See one example in Eric Young, "The Shack" Author Insists Bestseller "is a

to oppose foundationalist intellectualism in favour of a relationship with God that can be had by 'regular people'. Unfortunately, the story presents careful thought and daily relationship as a false dilemma and never escapes.³⁷ There are late encouragements of further learning and growth, but subtle or ambiguous caveats cannot rein in the rhetorical force of a story.³⁸ Conversely and quite creatively, via an unruly cast of characters Chesterton's *Thursday* gives place for both the persistent sceptic and the average person, un-awkwardly counted among the contributors and not kept at bay by way of rhetorical or elitist disregard. There is the omission of any female among the sleuths, however, and this is the novel's most glaring weakness, standing out strongly because it comes at the point of one of its greatest strengths.

A third problem raised by Chesterton's novel is that of natural theology. Whatever one's inclinations in this regard, it is noteworthy that if there is any natural theology going on in *The Man Who Was Thursday* it is not an ascent to God through reason but a guided descent with reason to its fitful end, where God in His mercy has stooped and is waiting to save. Even Karl Barth called this the closest thing there is to a point of contact, arguing that while God could not be *deduced* via self-negation, He had already condescended to meet us there. '[A]t the very point where we meet our end we are met by our Lord.'³⁹ That Chesterton's novel frames its final answer in the form of a question shows just how hesitant he was to dispense easy platitudes or brim with overconfidence in either the philosophical or the imaginative project (in this novel at least). That the nightmare's closing words are stolen from the lips of Christ shows where Chesterton thought people would find their way to wisdom. In a manner important for Christian theology, the definitive revelations of the novel come by way of revelation and not simply by inner or collective enlightenment, even though the good soil for such revelation seems to be a seeking community with room for the poet and the philosopher.

A final dilemma raised by the novel has to do with theodicy. One of the things that has made the fiction of Bunyan, Lewis, Tolkien, and Young so powerful for so many is that the very mode of narrative enabled

God Thing", *Christian Post Reporter*, October 27, 2008 <<http://www.christianpost.com/article/20081027/-the-shack-author-insists-bestseller-is-a-god-thing/index.html>>.

³⁷ Young, *The Shack*, pp. 89, 95, 181, 197-8, 201.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

³⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, p. 476. Thus Barth lamented that so many modern novels make readers ripe with longing for salvation but 'do not go beyond what is often a strikingly honest depiction of [humanity's] vileness.' Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, p. 594.

them to address the struggles of life in a way appropriate to the turbulent human drama in which theodicy is embedded. With varying degrees of theological acuteness each of their novels adeptly met questions face to face from within the messiness of situations and characters rather than from the safe distance of propositions. By no means should fiction and autobiography have the monopoly on this corner of theology, but they certainly merit a place, and so should neither shy away from making theological claims nor from bearing literary-theological critique. The fiction genre offers no immunity from the concern of remaining aloof, of course: A fantasy story can lose its grip on reality just as easily as a cold hard platitude.⁴⁰ In this regard Chesterton's novel is a theodicy in which the very real life dilemmas of gratitude and hedonism, nihilism and hope, wonder and suffering, and optimism and pessimism are not only discussed, but *conveyed* and *played out* for the reader intelligently and emotionally, without succumbing to either superficiality or sentimentality.

CONCLUSION

On the heels of his own conversion and the turn of the 20th century, in *Orthodoxy* and *The Man Who Was Thursday* Chesterton presented his case for Christianity with intellectual honesty in the terms of an unfolding theodicy neither trite nor indecisive. A hundred years later, the novel merits attention at least equal to that which has been given its literary companion. By its mode as a compelling narrative *The Man Who Was Thursday* does not assert a series of propositions nor back into a corner by way of defensive caveats but thrusts to the fore a compelling Christian rendering of existence as a *venture requiring courage*. As a whimsical apologetics, it avoids overstating its own argument on one hand and spiralling into mere narcissism on the other. As a defence of the faith it refrains from offering natural theology or apologetic proof and contents itself with being a careful servant in the work of theology. As storied Christian theology, its medium is appropriate to its message—which is not reducible to abstractions but is an unfolding plan of redemption. With an accessibility that doesn't sacrifice theological sophistication and an artfulness that remains faithful to that which it points, it is a winsome witness to Christ and a fine example for readers and writers of theological fiction.

⁴⁰ Not to belabour the point, but *The Shack* arguably fails in this regard as well. The fantasy is constructed to carry platitudes into the mess through dialogue and to work everything out in an isolated and illusory paradise where the one in pain is given experiences that are not available in real life. See Young, *The Shack*, pp. 170, 173.