

## CROWN PRINCE OF TOPSY-TURVYDOM

G. K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton, Vol 37: The Illustrated London News, 1935 – 1936*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012.

In the most recent installment of the Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton (1874 – 1936), the editors have compiled, in their entirety, his weekly columns for the *Illustrated London News*, during the years of 1935 and 1936. Having been penned at the end of his life, one finds here arguably Chesterton's most mature work in the medium best suited to his mode of expression.

Throughout his corpus and in a variety of literary media (essays, tracts, pamphlets, books, novels, plays, and poetry), G. K. Chesterton brought his powers to bear on questions and ideas of the most profound import. He was, as testified to by his famed abstraction and forgetfulness, a man utterly consumed by his thoughts, and in all of his writings we encounter a number of these same thoughts clothed in varied raiment. So, while he did find some success in plays (e.g., *Magic* and *The Judgment of Dr. Johnson*) and in fiction (e.g., The Fr. Brown stories and *The Man Who was Thursday*), many are of the mind that, given his aims, the essay is the medium best suited to his purposes and the one in which he communicates best.

Chesterton lifted his pen for love of his Lord, his country, and the inheritance of Western Civilization which he succinctly termed “sanity.” He understood his peculiar place in the kingdom as a defender of the religious, social, and political orthodoxy within whose confines he happily discovered himself to be situated as a young man. And so he wielded his pen as something of a poetical pugilist, fending off a host of social maladies, ideological

intrusions, and malevolent “isms” which beset England and the West in his day.

To this end, Chesterton employed his celebrated tactic of “topsy-turvydom” to demonstrate for his readers the inner logic of the ideas with which society was toying. In many of his essays, Chesterton proceeds along a similar path. First, he introduces a novel idea being bandied about by his contemporaries, be they socialists, capitalists, politicians, or churchmen. Taking the proponents thereof on their own terms, Chesterton then leads his reader through the steps he envisions as consequent upon the embracing of such an idea; if followed to their term, one inevitably finds himself either enslaved or in an asylum. While attempting, in a manner of speaking, to give a reverential exposition by ascribing the best of motives to his adversaries, Chesterton dealt ruthlessly with the ideas that threatened the stability, sanity, and sanctity of the social order.

In the spirit of “topsy-turvydom,” he often follows this logical progression with a delightful reversal, and by inverting the principles of his interlocutor (taking them to mean precisely the opposite of their intention), Chesterton shows how, on these terms, the idea is far more palatable and constructive. Having first reduced the argument to its inherent incoherence, he then flips it on its head so as further to lay it waste.

**I**n this collection, we see topsy-turvydom applied to modern novelties ranging from what is seemingly most inconsequential (e. g. automobile traffic) to what is of most pressing importance (e. g. the New Humanism). For illustrative purposes, one example must suffice to spell out the trajectory of his characteristic mode of argumentation.

In his article entitled “Our Indifference to Wonders” (alternately, “On Telephones” in the collection *As I Was Saying*), Chesterton observes the uncritically confident faith in progress that is endemic among politicians, scientists, and writers of his day. This particular train of thought took its departure from the following chance

phrase in a daily paper: “The time will come when communicating with the remote stars will seem to us as ordinary as answering the telephone.” Chesterton uses this seemingly neutral tid-bit as the springboard for reflections on the ill-conceived principles of progress.

In his opening salvo, Chesterton turns this logic on its head:

I answer, by way of a beginning: ‘Yes; that is what I object to.’ Now if you could say to me: ‘The time will come when answering the telephone will seem to us as extraordinary as communicating with the remote stars . . .’, then I should admit that you were a real, hearty, hopeful, encouraging progressive.

In so doing, he sets the tone for a short critique on the teleology of progress. Progress is a transitive, that is, a teleological phenomenon. It is directed to an end, which constitutes a further perfection. Now for Chesterton, the idea that communing with the stars should become so commonplace that one might equally fail to appreciate telephone conversations and close encounters of the third kind does not present an improvement or perfection of any sort. Precisely the opposite logic yields, on his reading, a genuine improvement—the appreciation of even the smallest things in a cosmic embrace of gratitude.

Chesterton further argues that though inventions and appliances are hailed as “the miracles of man, and the marvels of science, and the wonders of the new world,” they are not treated in this way. This contradiction in theory and practice results in what he calls “a rapidity in things going stale; a rush downhill to the flat and dreary world of the prosaic; a haste of marvelous things to lose their marvelous character; a deluge of wonders to destroy wonder.”

So while technological progress may represent the improvement of *machinery*, for Chesterton it does not necessarily bring about the improvement of *man*, whose nature the technology ought



FRANK JOHNSTON - C FLIGHT MACHINE CRACKED ON HANGAR B

ultimately to serve. Viewed under this light, the improvements so universally acclaimed fail to qualify as true progress, for “man is the creature that progress professes to improve.”

In so saying, Chesterton is not condemning technology as such, but rather the lack of appreciation with which one often finds it coupled:

I am not objecting to the statement that the science of the modern world is wonderful; I am only objecting to the modern world because it does not wonder at it.

One finds in this volume any number of essays in which Chesterton employs a similar tactic. Through the use of irony, paradox, quips, and cracks, he is able to expose successfully the

glaring contradictions and subtle confusions that infected the ideas of so many of his contemporaries. In his characteristic style—by viewing the world from an ostensibly inverted vantage point, through the reversal of its principles—Chesterton managed to maintain his sanity and share his wisdom, compassed about as he was by a world gone mad.

*Gregory Maria Pine entered the Order of Preachers in 2010.*