

# Gilbert K. Chesterton's London Letter

## Are You a Modern?

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THE following is prefixed by the editor of *Books and the Book World*:

"Of course I can excuse dear old Cholmondlegh," said Beaumont, as he helped us off with our coats. 'He has not the modern mind.'

"What is the modern mind?" asked Grant.

"Oh, it's enlightened you know and progressive—and faces the facts of life seriously.' At this moment another roar of laughter came from within.

"I only ask," said Basil, 'because of the last two friends of yours who had the modern mind, one thought it wrong to eat fishes and the other thought it right to eat men. I beg your pardon—this way, if I remember right.'

"Do you know," said Lord Beaumont, with a sort of feverish entertainment, as he trotted after us toward the interior, 'I can never quite make out which side you are on. Sometimes you seem so liberal and sometimes so reactionary. Are you a modern, Basil?'

"No," said Basil loudly and cheerfully, as he entered the crowded drawing room."

From *The Painful Fall of a Great Reputation*, a story in *The Club of Queer Trades*, by Gilbert K. Chesterton (1905).

NOW and then it is fortunately possible to review ten or twenty books by reviewing one. A good book of criticism, on current literature and philosophy, ought to do this work of interpretation; and the best book of criticism I have seen for some time has recently been written by Mr. Edward Moore and published by Messrs. George Allen & Unwin.

It is a singularly spirited and suggestive attempt to sketch out something of what modern men may really mean when they talk of, and even boast of, their modernity. For men always mean something, even when their words mean nothing.

It is true that the best part of the book might be called an attack on the title. Mr. Moore calls his book *We Moderns*. But he really might, with greater appropriateness, have called it *You Moderns*. Indeed there are passages of such vivacity, not to say viciousness, at the expense of current culture, that they might more properly appear under the title of *O You Moderns!*

### Varieties of Moderns.

In several places he drops into using the very word "modern" almost as depreciatingly as the Pope could use the word "modernist." And in one place at least he is driven to distinguish his own position by coining the phrase "neo-moderns," which is very nearly a piece of tautology; like talking of the Franco-French War or the Russo-Russian Revolution. But I do not complain of this; on the contrary, I commend it above all things; for Mr. Moore's complaint against current culture is, generally speaking, that it cannot rise to the height of something which he calls the tragic, but which might well be called the heroic.

The two monsters which the hero of the new modernism is most resolved to slay are the dragons of Decadence and of Realism; that is, the two things which have most recently and riotously boasted of being modern. Upon both of these questions the writer says pointed and penetrating

things; but they are scarcely points with which moderns will take pleasure in being penetrated.

### Unconventional, They Understand Nothing.

Take this admirable remark, for instance, about gallantry and the old convention of sex:

"But now distance and understanding have alike disappeared. The moderns, so obtuse have they become, see here no difficulty at all. . . . Nothing is any longer understood; but a convention means essentially that something is understood."

Mr. Moore does not mind being paradoxical and provocative; but he does not run away from his own wit, as the decadents often did. He can offer defence as well as defiance. Thus, when he says calmly of Pater's diction, "It is a style lacking, above all, in good taste," it will sound to some like impudence. But it is really intelligence; for it is followed by the phrase, so true about all aestheticism: "It very easily drops into absurdity; indeed it is always on the verge of absurdify."

### What a Christian Is.

Mr. Moore does indeed say, too much in the manner of those he mocks, that "Christianity is a dry bone"; but he seems to be sincerely puzzled because the old bone is still working miracles. In this matter, I think, he rather misses his own point about the great good called reality, which is so much larger than realism.

A Christian happens to mean a man who has discovered that Christianity is true, not that it is pretty or even practical. It may be a very strange discovery for a modern man to make; but some of us happen to have made it.

For those who think they have made it, it is a thing like the discovery that the earth is round. The fact may be put in poetry in a pleasing or unpleasing way; the round earth may be celebrated as a perfect sphere or satirised as a bubble. It may be, as I should myself prefer, at once enjoyed as a pudding and revered as a Christmas pudding. But if it is as round as a pudding, no poetic metaphor will make it as flat as a pancake.

The tradition (really a fairly old tradition) that it is round, may be lost in some period of prosaic ignorance which says it is flat. The Flat-Earthers may come into fashion, as promising leaders of the march of progress. Their party is small, perverse, unpopular and probably wrong; and that seems to be all that is required to make a modern minority promising and progressive.

### The Creed Includes the Critic.

They may give place in their turn to yet fresher and freer schools of thought, who suggest that the world is triangular, or that the world is cylindrical. But if it is round it is round, and fashions will not affect it; it will not become triangular because men in the eighteenth century are wearing three-cornered hats, nor turn to a cylinder because men in the nineteenth century model their hats on their chimneypots.

In this respect a fashion in heads means no more than a fashion in hats. And what really intelligent critics like Mr. Moore have to understand, once and for all, is that those of us who are convinced of the

Christian thesis assume it as something fundamental, including and producing both them and us.

This simple statement disposes of most of Mr. Moore's incidental criticisms. He suggests that a creed is a crutch; but what is the good of suggesting that, to those for whom the creed includes not only both legs but the earth they walk on? He says we must not return to the old dogmas but rather reach out to the new dogmas; but what is the sense of that, when we only mean by a dogma something which, if dismissed as old, will only reappear as new?

### The Truth About Sinning.

I will take only one case which briefly but broadly illustrates the whole matter. He complains that for us Equality only means Original Sin; and he debates whether it is the most dignified notion that men have a fellowship in frailty. I may say in passing that, though it is not dignified to sin, it is dignified to be able to sin, and in that dignity all men are equal.

But the point is this: that the fellowship in frailty is a fact, whether or no it is a dignity. The reality about the world unquestionably is that the men who have been really great have had weaknesses, and the men that have been really good have been conscious of weaknesses. And if you tell those who really understand and love mankind that the sinless superman, the artist beyond good and evil, is now at last going to appear, they will respect you as they would respect Fifth Monarchy Men staring at the sky for the signs of the Apocalypse, now at last going to appear. They will respect you as a provincial sect, and know that your fad will soon perish.

### When Half-Truths Go the Truth Arrives.

For there opens here the deeper answer to Mr. Moore's questions. These "new dogmas," when they last at all, always last as limitations. So the Apocalypse of the Puritans became a sealing-up and not a rending of seals.

These new half-truths are always traps, in which man plunges for adventure and remains for captivity. As I have pointed out, Mr. Moore himself is still congratulating himself on escaping from two of the very newest; the scientific novel and the perverted poem.

After a very short time Nietzsche would turn out to be as dingy and stingy a jailor as Zola or Wilde.

It is only those who have discovered the largest limitations who can enjoy the largest liberties. It is those who have discovered the round world, or at any rate the real world, who are free of all the fantastic potentialities which its shape really permits; the endless miracle plays and pantomimes that can be acted within that theatre.

If men do not accept the large limitations of God's creation, they only make small limitations of their own creation. They are perpetually building themselves prisons in every passing style of architecture; houses in the shape of their own heads or even of their own hats; and their progress consists in escaping from the prison they have themselves built; and beginning to build another.

G. K. CHESTERTON.

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