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Alan R. Blackstock, *The Rhetoric of Redemption: Chesterton, Ethical Criticism, and the Common Man.*

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Alan R. Blackstock. *The Rhetoric of Redemption: Chesterton, Ethical Criticism, and the Common Man.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012. 142 pp. ISBN 9781433119804.

Alan R. Blackstock, Associate Professor of English at Utah State University, has published his doctoral thesis, which by the nature of the project will appeal primarily to specialists whose interests overlap closely with his own. Promoting Chesterton as a model literary critic, the book's primary aim is to construct a rationale which validates 'responses to literature that readers had been taught to discount as unaesthetic or unrefined' (45), in a longer-term campaign hoping for 'nothing less than the redemption of literature from the clutches of modernist and aestheticist criticism' (4). For readers who find this ambition neither too idealistic nor too arcane, the book will be useful mainly as an assemblage of references to proponents of ethical criticism among nineteenth and twentieth century literary theorists.

For example, Blackstock makes reference to a definition of 'true criticism', offered by Hugh Blair in his early nineteenth century *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, as 'the standard of taste [which] is found in the sentiments that are natural and common to all men'; he also notes the -- perhaps optimistic -- implication that 'the judgment of true criticism, and the voice of the public, when once become unprejudiced and dispassionate, will ever coincide at last.'¹ Conceptually these assertions are interesting, and might have served as the grounds for a contentious and engaging argument. Here as elsewhere, however, the focus is not so much on analyzing key concepts of literary criticism in general, nor on elucidating Chesterton's work in particular, as much as it is on marshaling an array of thinkers who can defend the kind of work Chesterton did as a literary critic accessible to the common man.

Another characteristic passage follows this statement by Chesterton: 'literature, classic and enduring literature, does its best work . . . in balancing other and older

¹ Hugh Blair. "Lecture Three". *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. New York: G. C. & H. Carville, 1829. 27-37. Qtd in Blackstock Rhetoric 19.

ideas against the ideas to which we might for a moment be prone'². Chesterton's point here appears to be something like Lewis' prescription of reading old books as a remedy for chronological snobbery; however, Blackstock supplies the gloss, "Chesterton sees the paramount value of literature as its capacity to preserve and transmit a core of dogma from one age to the next" (5). This may be Blackstock's chief concern, but the comment reads less like a description of Chesterton than of Alasdair MacIntyre, from whose work the later chapters of *Rhetoric* draw heavily. Critics Lee Oser and Fritz Oehlschlaeger are also summoned to advocate the importance of virtue-informed literary criticism, against the likes of Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler. Like his comment on Chesterton the journalist, Blackstock's tactic here and throughout seems to be using 'whatever supporting material is most readily available' (50) in his 'ongoing battle with the decadents and aesthetes' (76).

In sum, where *The Rhetoric of Redemption* succeeds is in mustering the literary-critical troops to stand against whatever supercilious academics might marginalize a Chestertonian and Aristotelian-type criticism 'coming not from above but from within' (93). Likewise in the tradition of Aristotle, the project's end seems to be an assembly of allies in and around the citadel of Academe, who are roused by the battle cry, however incipiently sensed, that 'there must be something wrong with the theory'³.

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² G.K. Chesterton. *The Common Man*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1950. 22-24.

³ Wayne Booth. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980. 6. Qtd in Blackstock *Rhetoric* 98-99.