



BOOK REVIEW:

*The Inklings, the Victorians, and the  
Moderns*

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Butynskyi, Christopher. *The Inklings, the Victorians, and the Moderns: Reconciling Tradition in the Modern Age*. Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2020. ISBN 978-1683932277.

“Reconciliation” is a popular term in the current era; it evokes justice and equality and movements that are deemed progressive. When applied to literature, it seems to insinuate that the past should either be changed to better suit the modern world or that certain writers should be left alone altogether. Christopher Butynskyi in *The Inklings, the Victorians, and the Moderns* offers a unique, and what many might perceive as counterintuitive, literary take on reconciling the past. Butynskyi suggests that one doesn’t have to choose between the Great Books of the Western World *or* contemporary literature, but that one can appreciate both while learning “what it means to discuss and dialogue in hope of reconciliation despite our perceived individualism and disunity” (vii). In this increasingly divided political era, his work is a refreshing, yet tactfully subtle, plea for harmony and mutual respect. It offers a way for academics and general readers alike to approach literature that contains problematic language or ideologies with which they disagree – since to act otherwise promotes bias and ignores a rich literary history.

Butynskyi argues that the tendency to value progressive, modern ideas – particularly since the turn of the twentieth century – has prevented conservative traditionalists from being recognized as intellectuals. Accordingly, his thesis is that the Inklings and their fellow 20<sup>th</sup>-century traditionalists were a legitimate intellectual group, a real movement with important contributions, that is too often dismissed due to the prevalence of scientism and secularism.

While this reviewer is fully aware of how contentious this viewpoint is today, that is precisely the point of Butynskiy's book: to argue that this group of thinkers has been wrongfully dismissed by modern humanities scholarship and deserves to be viewed as an important intellectual group. As Butynskiy states, "They were not simply zealots, auctioneers of religion, or polemicists, but intellectuals with a deep concern for the well-being of their fellow man" (4) – a concern which only intensified as a reaction to the unheeded consequences of progressivism. As the book's title suggests, the Inklings – J.R.R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Owen Barfield – are a key focus, but Butynskiy discusses a generous number of other traditional intellectuals as well – figures like G.K. Chesterton, Irving Babbitt, and T.S. Eliot, to name a few. Also, it's important to note that although many of those who identified as traditionalists were both religious and conservative, that was not always the case, as Butynskiy highlights. Nonetheless, each individual, regardless of their differences, was united by what the author calls "a common mind": a mind that, in reaction to progressivism, attempted to "reconcile tradition within the realities of their own age" (2, 4).

Their own age saw significant changes in scientific thought. The newfound emphasis on empirical knowledge resulted in the abandonment of religion and imagination – subjects that were central to the traditionalists in both their way of life and their writing. Moreover, the issue was greater than simply the fact that science was replacing these fundamental concepts. Indeed, a far more dangerous consequence of this change for several intellectuals – whose very core values were composed of the metaphysical – was the progressive assumption that to believe in such matters was *unintelligent*. Furthermore, the traditionalists valued permanence and consistency in a world that now thrived on change as the only constant. They believed that authority should not be of one's own creation. Man, simply put, was not God. Although not deities, humans (according to this group) were definitively not creatures to be treated objectively, with detachment, as the present age of scientific innovation saw them. Instead, humans were considered miraculous. To be clear, this group was not anti-science by any means, but they did not treat science as a new religion, either, as it seemed to become for much of the rest of the world. It is with this deep understanding of what characterizes the traditionalists that Butynskiy thoughtfully paves the way for this small yet stubborn group of rebels to finally receive their confirmation.

Although this book is not exclusively concerned with the traditionalists' writings, it is important, before proceeding to an overview of its contents, to stress – as Butynskiy does – the group's devotion to the classical liberal arts. They believed that it was illogical to base one's entire reality on the constantly changing here and now, and for them the classical liberal arts provided a way to connect the past to the present. Following suit, Butynskiy encourages readers to participate in the Great Conversation and "find value in the discussion between the past and the present" (6). As he writes, "My hope is that each chapter explains the perspective of the traditionalist with the intention of both sides finding common ground" (7). Ultimately, this work seeks to reconcile the relationship between traditionalists and progressives – moving away from the "trend of relegating tradition to a place without influence or voice if it shows any resistance to the new status quo" (11). That said, it's crucial to note that while Butynskiy provides a compelling case for the group's intellectual status,

based on their writing and influence, he refrains from engaging as much as one would like with post-1960s literary studies. His attempt at a rationale is akin to the traditionalist view that the “classical corpus addresses, even if adulterated by racism, colonialism, and the like, universal and fundamentally human concepts, such that any human could access the pearls of wisdom therein” (169) – a statement which unfortunately seems to skirt around the issue at hand and is likely to cause some discontent among certain readers. Let me suggest, however, is that Butynskyi is simply laying the groundwork, asking readers to humbly consider this group. As such, he seems to call for a sequel – another book that offers a more concrete way for readers to approach these writers today through post-1960s schools of thought and trends in literary criticism. But again, that is not *this* book.

*The Inklings, the Victorians, and the Moderns* contains seven chapters, in addition to a through Introduction and a compelling Epilogue. The Introduction, “Instruments of Tradition in the March of Progress”, does not waste time providing dense chapter summaries, and, as a result, it reads like a truncated (though well-crafted) chapter in its own right. The first chapter, “Ink and Parchment: A Historiographical Review”, is essentially a comprehensive literature review that achieves three important tasks: it demonstrates how mainstream scholarship (journals that are not exclusively about members of this group, like *Tolkien Studies*) about this group of intellectuals is rare; it positions the difficult role that Butynskyi, like the traditionalists, occupies as a scholar writing “scholarship from a perspective that is often seen as counterintuitive to the current movements of the field” (19); it emphasizes that, despite its perceived rarity in academia, spiritual matters are an intrinsic part of particular disciplines, and, that in the humanities specifically, a “dialogue of what is human will always maintain relevance” (33). The subsequent chapter “Tradition: More than Custom and Convention” sets out the work of defining *tradition*, and in doing so, Butynskyi makes a strong case that a persistent misunderstanding of “tradition” has furthered the polemical arguments against traditionalists. Butynskyi notes, “The Modern Age claims to be relativistic and in search of truth; yet traditionalists are seen as antiquated, thus limiting the voices who are allowed to participate in the conversation”, when in contrast, traditionalists “left room for a narrative that sought an open dialogue between past and present” (41). Chapter Three, “G. K. Chesterton: Mouthpiece of Tradition”, outlines how influential Chesterton’s reactionary views were for this group of intellectuals – of chief importance was his strong aversion to the dehumanization that the Modern Age encouraged.

The latter chapters build upon this material as they illustrate how exactly this robust intellectual group came to be sidelined. Chapter Four, “Raising the Temple of Science: A New Marketplace”, traces the effects of scientism’s replacement of religion as the chief commodity, and in doing so, Butynskyi draws attention to a variety of influential figures like Charles Darwin, J.B.S. Haldane, and James Watson. The following chapter, “Fellowship of Tradition”, focuses specifically on the Inklings and how incompatible their zeal for myth, fantasy, and spirituality was with progressivism. Chapter Six, “The Broader Conspiracy”, is arguably one of the most important chapters in the book as it brings together six traditionalists – not all religious, though all humanists – into conversation with each other. As a result, one witnesses a variety of solutions for how to combat the consequences of progressivism, particularly on

education. For those in academia (what I imagine to be this work's primary audience), the attention to the role of higher education is especially insightful, and this chapter does an effective job of demonstrating how classical liberal arts are far from elitist as they return us all to what unites us: our humanity. The final chapter stems from the attention to curricula in the previous chapter and offers a necessary pedagogical message: cultivate a habit of reading wisely, with discernment and reflection, and do not be afraid – although modernity rejects it – to admit that “Not All Books Are Created Equal”. Lastly, the Epilogue, “Passing the Torch”, is a brief yet poignant summation of the work's overarching purpose: to petition that the “voice of tradition occupies a place at the table” (179).

Despite Christopher Butynskyi's atypical stance, *The Inklings, the Victorians, and the Moderns* is a convincing read that not only offers solid support for his argument but also makes a strong case that there is a problem in academia, both in our mission as teachers and in those whose scholarship we consider valuable. As previously mentioned, the intended audience does appear to be academic – or, perhaps, the serious traditionalist or liberal arts enthusiast (who, in either case, is probably, just as well, an academic). My praise throughout this review implies my high recommendation, and besides the previously addressed lack of engagement with dominant, critical discourse, the only weakness that I perceive in Butynskyi's work might actually be its greatest strength in disguise. By the work's end, I found myself asking, “Is the author *actually* a traditionalist?” It's both admirable and mildly frustrating that it's not made more apparent. Notwithstanding the latter, I return to my “tactfully subtle” comment in the opening paragraph and admit that Butynskyi's objectivity is a remarkable feat, and it's imperative to at least consider what he is proposing: “It is one thing to admit the extensive knowledge of the modern case,” he posits, “but it is another to recognize that there could be something deeper that modernity overlooked or ignored due to its focus on progress” (129).

*Biography:* Anelise Farris is an Assistant Professor of English at the College of Coastal Georgia. Her research interests include speculative fiction, folklore and mythology, and disability studies. When not reading or writing, she enjoys experimenting in the kitchen, binging horror movies, and spending time outdoors.