‘a large mouth shown to a dentist’: G.K. Chesterton, T.S. Eliot and Parody

T.S. Eliot and G.K. Chesterton rarely had a good word to say about one another’s stylistics. In a 1927 review, Eliot complained, rather extravagantly, that ‘I have always found Mr. Chesterton’s style exasperating to the last point of endurance’. Chesterton responded with ‘An Apology for Buffoons’ (1928), an essay in which he expressed a comparable antipathy towards Eliot’s ‘severe and classic’ style of verse, misquoting a line from ‘Preludes’ (1917) in the process. Eliot addressed this infraction in a private message, in which he bad-temperedly informed Chesterton that ‘as a humble versifier […] I prefer my verse to be quoted correctly, if at all’. Eliot’s irritation extends beyond insufficiently scrupulous citation. In 1925, Chesterton had published ‘To a Modern Poet’, an acerbic parody of ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ (1917), in which, alluding to Eliot’s celebrated opening lines, Chesterton sarcastically conceded that ‘[n]ow you mention it, / Of course, the sky / is like a large mouth / shown to a dentist’.

This paper examines the complex dynamic that arose over the next decade between the large mouth of the pioneering exponent of modernist verse, and the dissenting figure heckling from the side-lines, tooth-extractor in hand. Counter-intuitively, I argue that Chesterton’s consistent parodic engagement with Eliot helped to foster an increasing sympathy between the pair, and that this convergence was encouraged by the dynamic of parody, which invariably inscribes similarity even as it strains to establish difference. This process culminated in Chesterton’s final radio broadcast in 1936, in which he declaimed a parody of ‘The Hollow Men’ (1925). I contend that Chesterton’s engagement with ‘The Hollow Men’ was central to the pair’s rapprochement, since the attentive close-reading necessary to produce effective parody leads Chesterton to recognise Eliot’s poem as a subtly self-parodic commentary on his own textual legacy.