

EMILE CAMMAERTS

THE LAUGHING PROPHET

THE SEVEN VIRTUES & G.K. CHESTERTON



FOREWORD BY DALE AHLQUIST

G.K. CHESTERTON. 1924.



THE LAUGHING PROPHET

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G.K. CHESTERTON

by Emile Cammaerts

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TO
FRANCES CHESTERTON

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Foreword

BY DALE AHLQUIST

*“The first effect of not believing
in God is to believe in anything.”*

G.K. CHESTERTON ’s most famous quotation, right? Well, yes and no. Chesterton is certainly famous for saying it, but the trouble is that he never quite said it. The line above comes from Emile Cammaerts in this book, *The Laughing Prophet*. He is making a reference to ideas expressed by Chesterton in some Father Brown stories, ideas which even contain fragments of the famous quotation, but it may, in fact, be Cammaerts who actually said the most well known saying that Chesterton did not say.

Cammaerts (1878-1953) was a Belgian poet and playwright who settled in England in 1908 at the age of 30. He became an immediate admirer of Chesterton as a result of watching his

exchanges with Shaw, and soon thereafter became a personal friend. He recalled that his first impression of GKC was “the contrast between his amazingly quick mind and slow-moving body.” He translated several of Chesterton’s works into French, including a collection of Father Brown stories. He also wrote books about art and poetry, including a book about nonsense poetry, which was greatly admired by Chesterton. “Nonsense is the test of humour,” said Cammaerts, “as humour is the test of reason.” He became a professor of Belgian Studies at the University of London, and gained a great reputation for “interpreting Belgium to England.” Chesterton was a great lover of Belgium, having traveled through many of its lovely little towns and writing about them. He was also a great defender of Belgium, as it was Prussia’s unprovoked attack on that country that led to England’s entry into World War I. If Chesterton was unremitting in his criticism of Prussia it was because of what it had done to Belgium. No doubt Chesterton’s stance only deepened Cammaerts’ devotion to him.

His entire family drew close to Chesterton. Of his daughter Jeanne, Cammaerts said, “My little girl lost her heart to Chesterton.” GKC was her godfather, and as she grew up, she would often visit, sitting on the great man’s lap, as he told her stories and recited poetry, “in his voice which he only used when talking to small children and which, no doubt, they alone could understand.”

Cammaerts wrote his book on Chesterton in 1937, a year after GKC’s death. Its thesis is that Chesterton “made the Christian virtues shine with the sparkle of his wit.” He realizes that the title “Prophet” is in danger of sounding ponderous, so he gives due emphasis to the adjective “Laughing.” But the theme is virtue. Indeed, the subtitle is “The Seven Virtues and G.K. Chesterton.” Drawing on that sparkling wit of GKC,

Cammaerts expounds on Faith, Hope, Charity, Wisdom, Innocence, Justice, and Courage.

He was called brilliant, but he never wished to shine. His genuine humility prevented him from using the preacher's tone ...

He was far too modest ever to speak *ex cathedra*. His humour was part of this innate modesty. He liked to poke fun at his adversaries, but he liked still better to tell stories against himself. He always appeared on the public platform as if he had no justification whatever for being there, as if he had strayed in by chance from the street and had no knowledge of the subject under discussion. This attitude served him admirably in a debate but it was perfectly genuine.

Cammaerts says that the greatest of Chesterton's gifts was his charity. He was loved for his social amenity, and his hatreds were not of persons, but of opinions which were unsound or dishonest. Chesterton did not merely write about the virtues, he lived the virtues.

Since Cammaerts became friends with both Gilbert and Frances, he was also able to write about their marriage and how that marriage was a model of love. It led Cammaerts to observe:

Love is not merely mutual worship, it is also a contract, an alliance against common foes, a loan of confidence to be repaid in faithfulness, a promise of indulgence and toleration to be redeemed in kindness, a companionship strengthened by adversity. ... Understood this way, marriage becomes more valuable than romantic love. It rests on a store of common memories, on long years of collaboration, on joys and sorrows shared together, on the preservation and growth of a common ideal, of a common religion.

Cammaerts' book is unique in Chesterton literature because he combines Chesterton's writings, an analysis of his thinking, and personal, first hand stories that give a more revealing and complete presentation of the whole man—and perhaps the saint—in a way no other author ever did. I wish there were others of his contemporaries who had done the same thing. They

certainly had the opportunity to do so. And yet, something tells me that they only would have confirmed what Cammaerts wrote and what we ourselves read in Chesterton's own words: all the virtues mixed with abounding joy and wonder.

Although there are many insightful, eloquent and towering passages in *The Laughing Prophet* that capture Chesterton amazingly well, Cammaerts sums up his subject concisely and precisely in the chapter on Justice:

As a poet, a staunch radical, and a passionate traditionalist, Chesterton could not maintain a disinterested attitude when his deepest convictions were concerned. He was not detached, but very much "attached." He had given himself heart and soul to the defence of Orthodoxy and the civic rights of the poor. He loved a fight, and he fought all his life against overwhelming odds.

We continue the fight, and the odds haven't changed.



INTRODUCTION

The Ethics Of G. K. Chesterton

THE LATE G. K. CHESTERTON had many literary friends. Most of them are better qualified than myself to pay homage to his memory. My excuse for publishing this book is purely sentimental. After losing him, I sought comfort in re-reading some of his works. I had never realized before how natural his style was. To read him, under the stress of this recent sorrow, was to be with him again, to feel intensely and acutely his actual presence, to recognize at every moment his intonation and the deep chuckle of his laughter. As I turned the pages, he seemed to me to express himself with a fresh earnestness, a new urgency, as if he had wished to dispel some confusion, or to emphasize some principle of his belief to which I had not given sufficient attention. I understood him, during these days, as I never understood him before. I enjoyed at the

same time the excitement of his improvisation and the perfection of his finished work. This feeling might have been an illusion, but it was far too strong to be lightly dismissed, and the idea occurred to me that I might try and recapture, in the course of a few chapters, the broad outlines of the picture which had taken shape in my mind.



This picture is not particularly concerned with the circumstances of Chesterton's life which are described in his *Autobiography*. It is only indirectly concerned with an appreciation of his position in modern English literature and in the intellectual movement of his time. It deals almost entirely with his moral outlook, with his very clear and definite conception of good and evil, of man's rights and duties as an individual and as a citizen, in short, with his philosophy of life. For, as I waded through the sixty odd volumes in which he poured out his ideas during the last thirty-five years, I felt more and more convinced that, throughout the wide range of his interests, man's salvation stood foremost in his mind.

Being what he was, he could only express himself in his own language, and his language was full of epigrams, burlesque images, invective and intellectual sword-play. He was called brilliant, but he never wished to shine. His genuine humility prevented him from using the preacher's tone. He hurled against what he called the heresies and fads of his time all the missiles at his disposal. He emptied against them the quiver of his satire and the bulging bags of his humour. He was indeed brilliant, in the sense that he made the Christian virtues shine with the sparkle of his wit, and covered the corresponding vices with contumely. Having been himself an unbeliever in his youth, he remained in touch with the sceptics and agnostics among

whom he had lived, fighting them with their own weapons and ridiculing their new creeds as they had ridiculed conventional Victorian morality. It is doubtful whether he would have adopted other methods if he had not waged such a vanguard action. He lived in dread of gravity and pomposity, and only raised his tone to eloquence after dispelling all suspicion of spiritual pride and clearing the air with his laughter. He seemed to sense the danger of talking solemnly to people who had been driven into the desert of unbelief by a surfeit of solemn talk.

This mood can be traced to the end of the last century when, as a young man of twenty-five, he challenged Oscar Wilde's witty pessimism and the decadent fashions of the 'green carnation.' He alluded to these early fights in a dedication to E. C. Bentley written a few years later:¹

A cloud was on the mind of man and wailing went the weather,
Yea, a sick cloud upon the soul when we were boys together,
Science announced nonentity and art admired decay;
The world was old and ended; but you and I were gay.

• • •

Children we were—our forts of sand were even as weak as we,
High as they went we piled them up to break that bitter sea.
Fools as we were in motley, all jangling and absurd.
When all church bells were silent our caps and bells were heard.

After his recent experiences among the aesthetes of the Slade School, and in the somewhat cynic atmosphere of Fleet Street, the young champion of Christian orthodoxy could not possibly remain on the defensive, or reassert in stronger language the dogmas of the Church. He carried the fight into the enemy's camp, opposed the laughter of youth to the sarcasm of premature old age, joyful exuberance to bitter irony and healthy

¹ *Poems* (collected 1915)

humour to destructive criticism.

Like the wise fool of Shakespearian tragedy, he adopted motley, not merely as a disguise, but as a means of expression which allowed him to address the crowd of unbelievers which surrounded him. After deriding the gloomy decadents of 1900, he entered into friendly contest with the leaders of intellectual Socialism. While opposing the Fabians, during the next decade, he never lost the feeling that the Christian spirit could move even those who denied Christianity. His tolerance was not the result of a compromise; it sprang from the conviction that the only test of sincerity was to be found in people's lives, and that the practice of certain virtues was more urgently required than the observance of any ritual.

I came to England in 1908, just in time to witness the chivalrous contest between G. K. C., on the one side, and G. B. S., on the other. It was a clean and generous debate, in which each adversary, while holding his own ground, recognized the good faith of the other. In spite of philosophic and political differences, a common belief in social justice bridged the gulf which separated the two great writers. From the first the orthodox was proud of the 'heretic' as a foe even more than as a friend.²

Chesterton had prefaced his onslaught on Shavian philosophy by a vigorous defence of his opponent's earnestness. He protested against those who considered him as a 'capering humorist, a dazzling acrobat, a quick-change artist ... The whole force and triumph of Mr. Bernard Shaw lie in the fact that he is a very consistent man. So far from his power consisting in jumping through hoops or standing on his head, his power consists in holding his own fortress night and day. ... You may attack his principles as I do; but I do not know of any instance

² *Autobiography*

in which you can attack their application.’³ Both socialist and radical stood for intellectual honesty. They had at heart the same dislike of compromise and contempt for hypocrisy. This is perhaps the very reason for which they were often denounced as flippant.

Shaw’s mode of expression has exerted so much influence on his contemporaries that it may be considered as a good example of the style adopted by the enemies of conventional morality during the first years of this century. In an indirect way, H. G. Wells, in his novels and stories, had used similar methods. Laughter was the great weapon of the reformers in the battle they waged against the conservatives. It would be too much to say that Chesterton took a leaf out of their book. His language was entirely his own, and no direct connexion can be traced between his works and theirs. But it is at least possible that the satirical tone of their writings stimulated his spontaneous humour and prompted him to turn the tables against them and to show that the keenest ironist may cut a ridiculous figure when confronted with the wisdom of religious belief.



Another aspect of Chesterton’s early development which must be kept in mind, concerning his constant use of humour when dealing with the most serious subjects, is his connexion with journalism.

He started his literary career in Fleet Street and preserved in later years a deep loyalty to his profession. He called himself a journalist even when he unravelled the skein of Browning’s poetry or expounded the foundations of Thomist theology. He did so in all humility, but also in defiance of the conceit so

³ *Heretics*

common among specialists. In spite of his wide reading and of his unerring grasp of literary and philosophical problems, he claimed to speak for the man in the street or, as he would have put it, the man in Fleet Street. Distrusting the esoteric authority of experts, he contended that all theories affecting human life should be subjected to the plain man's criticism, to the judgement of common sense. He owed his first success to a series of essays published in the daily press—mostly in the *Daily News*—and retained throughout his life the urgent desire of talking to the crowd. The work undertaken first for 'bread and cheese' became later an expensive luxury. His weekly articles in the *Illustrated London News* did not entirely satisfy this craving for journalism. With the help of a few friends, he ran his own Weekly, largely at his own expense. In spite of all obstacles and adverse circumstances, he wished to go on writing 'his diary' at a time when his reputation would have allowed him to produce only important works on congenial subjects. One of his smaller books was called *A Shilling for my Thoughts*, and he was distressed when its price had to be raised. He would have wished to reduce the cost of his more ponderous volumes, in order to place them within reach of the poorest reader.

The first collection of *Daily News* articles appeared in 1908 under the title: *All Things Considered*. In a prefatory note, Chesterton apologized for the serious tone which circumstances often compelled him to adopt. This may seem strange considering that the volume deals, among other things, with cockney jokes, the comic attitude of a man running after his hat, limericks, and Christmas dinners. But it also deals with the vices of the party system, the dangers of anonymous journalism, the relationship between science and religion and the doctrine of progress. These are no doubt the questions upon which the writer wished to have been able to express himself

in a lighter vein. But he had no time to coin epigrams: 'It is so easy to be solemn, it is so hard to be frivolous.'

This remark must no doubt be taken with a grain of salt, but the gist of it remains true. Anybody who is in the least acquainted with modern journalism knows how difficult it is for a writer to vent his views, particularly unpopular views, unless he makes them palatable by disguising them in motley. It is not a matter of gilding the pill, or of attenuating the disagreeable truth which has to be told, but rather of making it so large and so bitter that its very appearance and taste may pass as an illusion. The fool in the Shakespearian tragedy does not mince matters, he emphasizes them and twists them into such queer shapes that his master's anger is turned into laughter. His frivolity is not the spontaneous outburst of a child, it is only achieved after some effort. It requires imagination and patience: 'This fellow's wise enough to play the fool.'

The element of haste must also be taken into account. Hurry is the very essence of journalism. A good journalist is not only a writer who can condense or dilute his thoughts as the case may be, into a few hundred words, but a writer who can achieve this, under the most unfavourable circumstances, in the shortest time. Chesterton tells us that his articles were handed 'in the moment before it was too late.' He was constantly running a race against time, and beating his own record. His profession drove him to develop his satirical gifts and increase the rate of his output. Even if he had not been born a humorist, he would have been obliged to assume a frivolous tone. Even if he had not been by nature an extraordinarily fruitful writer, he could not have succeeded as he did had he not written a great deal in a very short time.

It is scarcely necessary to remind the reader that physically Chesterton was not built to run races. Those who remember him

as a boy tell me that he was rather thin and loose-limbed, but when I met him, in his thirties, he had already acquired the large bulk to which he liked to refer good-humouredly. My first impression was the contrast between his amazingly quick mind and slow-moving body. It took him half a minute to take a few steps, but it did not take him a second to hit upon the conclusion of the most involved argument, and as he liked to talk while walking about the room, the result was nothing short of staggering. I had met before men who thought as they moved, slowly or quickly. I had never met a man who allied such intellectual agility with such physical clumsiness. He lived at the time in a flat, at the top of a large house facing Battersea Park. In the absence of a lift, he could not climb the stairs without resting on the forms placed on every other landing. In order not to waste time, the untiring journalist used these intervals to write his articles. The story goes that some of his *Tremendous Trifles*, started on the first floor, were almost finished when he reached his door.

By nature and by training, Chesterton belonged to the group of writers who delight in mass production, like Dickens, Balzac, and Hugo. He wrote a library of essays, literary, philosophical, and historical criticisms, poems, allegorical novels, detective stories, biographies and plays, without mentioning numerous prefaces, pamphlets, articles, and letters which have not yet been collected. We might say of him what he said of his literary father: 'This is the ultimately amazing thing about Dickens, the amount there is of him. He wrote, at the very least, sixteen thick important books packed full of original creation. And if you had burnt them all he could have written sixteen more, as a man writes idle letters to his friend.'⁴ Dickens wrote his novels hastily, by instalments; Balzac was working day and

⁴ Charles Dickens

night in order to pacify his creditors; Chesterton kept up the habit of rapid production of his early years, under more happy circumstances, because he had remained at heart a journalist. He had to express himself, to record his impressions, to vent his ideas, to register his experiences at home and abroad. One of his later volumes is called *All is Grist*. Every thought, every inspiration, every picture came to his mill, and his was a very large mill grinding very fine meal.



It is essential to dwell at some length upon these two obvious features of Chesterton's works—their apparent frivolity and their hasty production—before examining them more closely, because these features have been the source of some misunderstandings. Readers of good literature may be roughly divided into two categories, those who seek for beauty and those who seek for truth. The first are easily carried away by excellence of form, but easily discouraged by anything which may appear cursorily written. The second suffer frequently from over-earnestness and are apt to be shocked by any flippant image applied to a serious subject, especially when it concerns religion. The first have reproached Chesterton for being unequal and indulging in repetitions, the second have accused him of light-heartedness and even insincerity.

It is not enough, therefore, to explain that he was temperamentally a great producer and a great humorist, or to insist on the influence exerted upon him by journalism. Both criticisms must be faced with all their implications. We shall deal further with the question of sincerity which is the very foundation of Chesterton's moral attitude, but a word should be said here concerning the quality of his workmanship.

We might of course contend that this distinction between

form and matter is purely conventional, and that the spirit which prompts the writer cannot be ignored when we study his writings. We might quote the author of *All Things Considered* and declare with him that 'in the end it will not matter to us whether we wrote well or ill; whether we fought with flails or reeds. It will matter to us greatly on what side we fought.' He professed a great scorn for the pure aesthete and the worshipper of Art for Art's sake, and deliberately sacrificed facile success in order to achieve his aim, which was above all to convince his reader. We have already seen that his eagerness to deliver himself of the thoughts which oppressed his mind, the urgent quality of his inspiration, did not allow him sufficient leisure to be always as concise as he would have wished to be. His style does not maintain throughout the same originality as that of Meredith, for instance, or of Anatole France. You cannot pick up one of his sixty volumes, open it at random, and be sure to find a passage which is distinctly Chestertonian. It all depends on the subject, on the authors' particular mood. Most of his books, such as his essays and his literary and philosophical criticisms, show the same quality from beginning to end; others do not always reach the same standard of excellence.

It was not a question of haste; some of his finest work was written during his most crowded years. It was by no means the result of negligence, for if Chesterton despised the blind worshippers of form, he delighted in writing regular poetry and showed again and again in his literary criticisms how deeply conscious he was of the value of style. It might be suggested that if he felt always inclined to express himself, his inspiration occasionally failed to keep pace with his inclination. This is true of all prolific writers, of all the giants of literature, whether they are called Dickens or Balzac, Ruskin, or Carlyle. They cannot be appreciated piecemeal, they must be judged as a whole, with

all their qualities and all their defects. Their merit depends not only on the value of any individual work, but on the effort they made to describe the society of their time or to discover the most vital problems with which it was confronted. If it is true that some poets have established a well-deserved reputation on one or two slender volumes, it needs a pedant to contend that style must alone be considered in the estimation of literary value. There is indeed a particular quality in quantity, a quality of strength and exuberance which overshadows mere daintiness of expression and felicity of wording.

The flow of Chestertonian literature may be compared to a broad river interrupted with rapids and cataracts. One book prepares the next, one chapter helps the other, and the energy accumulated in the course of discursive pages bursts suddenly into foam. An interesting anthology might be selected from the writer's concluding lines, in which he seems to gather all his reserves of energy, all his poetical enthusiasm, as a parting farewell to a great subject:

'But this at least is part of what Dickens meant; that comradeship and serious joy are not interludes in our travel, but that rather our travels are interludes in comradeship and joy, which through God shall endure for ever. The inn does not point to the road; the road points to the inn. And all roads point at last to an ultimate inn, where we shall meet Dickens and all his characters; and when we drink again it shall be from the great flagons in the tavern at the end of the world.'⁵

Chesterton's books are full of such passages. The double twist referring to 'comradeship' and 'interludes,' and to the 'inn' and the 'road' is unmistakable. So is the final flourish of the last sentence, drooping towards the end in a deep salutation. The

⁵ *Charles Dickens*

most painstaking stylist could not achieve a finer blend of wit and poetry. Flaubert himself might have been proud of it. But Chesterton did not ponder over its cadences, he did not wake up at night to alter a word or add a comma. It came to him in the excitement of creative production, like the final chord of a Beethoven symphony. In spite of his love of logic, he was at heart a romanticist and, like all romanticists, he had to work himself up to reach his peroration. In this way his prose style may be compared with that of Dickens and Ruskin. It is only unequal in the sense that it varies in tone and volume; it cannot be adequately appreciated from a purely classical standard of uniform smoothness and perfection.

On the first page of the calendar compiled in 1911 by Mrs. Chesterton, appears the following extract from *Orthodoxy*: 'Mere sophistry is the thing that I happen to despise most of all things, and it is perhaps a wholesome fact that this is the thing of which I am generally accused.' It is significant that the author's wife should have chosen this epigraph for her book. For the whole value of Chesterton's teaching depends on the spirit which prompted it.

He never ceased to protest against the fallacy which associates a solemn tone with a pure soul and a sincere mind. Happiness and mirth were for him the surest signs of a good conscience; he distrusted gravity and hated spiritual pride. With Shakespeare, Molière and Dickens, he took the part of the blunt fool against the painted saint. We have already quoted his defence of Shaw in *Heretics*. He repeats it in *Orthodoxy*: 'The truth is that Mr. Shaw is cruelly hampered by the fact that he cannot tell any lie unless he thinks it is the truth. I find myself under the same intolerable bondage. I never in my life said anything merely because I thought it funny.' Which does not mean that, if he had anything to say, he did not prefer to say it in a funny way. That is exactly

the mistake Chesterton's critics were making. They talked of his brilliant 'fireworks' and of his 'delightful paradoxes' when he was delivering his soul to them. They treated him as a conjurer when he spoke with the earnestness of a prophet, when his juggling was as sacred to him as a prayer, as the juggling of the juggler of *Notre-Dame*. They said that he dazzled them when he tried to open their eyes, and that he deafened them when he tried to open their ears. They confused the act and its motive, the words and the intention which dictated them.

How far this misunderstanding was deliberate is somewhat difficult to determine. For reasons noted above, Chesterton could not have made himself heard unless he had adopted a frivolous tone, and no doubt some naive readers were misled into believing that he only meant to entertain them by his banter. But the conflict between the laughing prophet and his public went deeper than that. Had he expressed himself openly he would no doubt have been stoned or silenced—which would have been the same to him. Having assumed motley, he was allowed to speak. King Public could not show his anger without making a fool of himself. Being unwilling to hear, he laughed, but he laughed with a vengeance, for he ignored the deep meaning of the words and pointed to the jangling bells. Later, when in order to counter this move or for other reasons, the fireworks grew less frequent, the critics declared somewhat inconsistently that the jester had lost some of his wit. All pretexts served as a means of escape from a serious argument.

It must be acknowledged that to the majority of sceptics and materialists the argument was particularly embarrassing. Hitherto they had been confronted by the opposition of conservatives who endeavoured to justify their political privileges, while supporting the Church as a 'steadying influence in the State,' or they had been denounced as atheists by clerics who

based their arguments on dogmas and their authority on revelation. Their line of attack was obvious and they were not slow to take advantage of it. Like Shaw, they exposed the contradiction existing between the politics of the governing classes and the Christian principles which should have inspired them. Or, like Wells, they challenged all creeds founded on supernatural evidence and submitted all dogmas to the searching criticism of scientific investigation. It was a new experience for them to be faced by a strong democrat who founded his political views on the individual freedom of the poor, and by an orthodox Christian who exposed the hasty conclusions of pseudo-scientists and showed that the new dogmas of progress, determinism, and monism were far less reasonable and consistent than the ancient traditions of the Church. 'In dealing with the arrogant asserter of doubt,' wrote Chesterton in his preface to the *Book of Job*, 'it is not the right method to tell him to stop doubting. It is rather the right method to tell him to go on doubting ... until, at last, by some strange enlightenment, he may begin to doubt himself.' While a few advanced thinkers faced these arguments, the majority, feeling that the wind was taken out of their sails, preferred to turn the whole discussion into derision and to congratulate their new opponent on his skill in handling paradoxes.

The accusation of being a sophist may promptly be disposed of by a good logician. It is not so easy to show that you are not purposely paradoxical for, while sophisms are always contrary to reason, paradoxes may be either true or untrue. Chesterton was all the more sensitive on this point that the decadents of the nineteenth century, for whom he preserved a deep-rooted hostility, had been past masters in the art of witty cynicism. The comedies of Wilde and the talks of Whistler were full of this kind of warped worldly wisdom. A dandy would have asserted,

for instance, while assuming a blasé attitude, that 'life was much too important to be taken seriously,' which is nothing but a superficial and rather sinister jest. Chesterton contended that his paradoxes were of a very different kind. They expressed commonplace truisms, so evident that they could only be conveyed under some picturesque form or, as he put it, 'that they could not easily be stated in words without being guilty of seeming verbal contradiction,' such as: 'the man who finds most pleasure for himself is often the man who least hunts for it,' or 'the way to avoid death is not to have too much aversion to it.' The Gospel says, in still more challenging terms: 'the meek shall inherit the earth,' and 'whoever will lose his life, the same shall save it,' a deep religious truth which is at the same time 'an entirely practical and prosaic statement.' It all depends on the way you look at it.

The whole world is nothing but an apparent contradiction, and paradoxes are of the very essence of religion. Man is a beast and a god, he is at the same time mortal and immortal. The contradiction does not show that such statements are wrong, it merely shows that words cannot adequately express eternal truths, and that we have no other means of expressing them. Chesterton was never more sincere and earnest than when he was accused of flippancy, for his best aphorisms were coined in a mood of spiritual enthusiasm. Some of them ring as true as Pascal's *Pensées*, but many years may elapse before they are given the same veneration.



I am not concerned, in these introductory remarks, with expounding or defending Chesterton's opinions, but merely in showing that they were the genuine outcome of his moral doctrine. He had no objection to being called a journalist, for

he had the highest regard for the profession, and only regretted that it was so often lowered to the level of cheap publicity. But he resented the injustice of those who, while enjoying his jokes, refused to listen to his arguments. This mild mixture of praise and blame hurt him far more than any attack, however violent. He felt the humiliation of being applauded as an entertainer and ignored as a thinker. Although he would have shunned the word, he felt that he had a message to deliver, and he made it his business to deliver it in a thousand ways. The same ideas reappear in his criticisms, his poems, his novels, his biographies, even in his detective stories. They cannot be found in any particular volume, they are scattered through a whole library and assume the most varied forms. But they all turn round the same central light like moths round a candle, the light of a genuine and vivid faith.

This should be evident to the most superficial reader. We are confronted at every turn with statements like the following: 'Nothing is important except the fate of the soul, and literature is only redeemed from utter triviality ... by the fact that it describes ... some condition to which the human spirit can come.' Or: 'Nearly all the more awful and abstruse statements can be put in words of one syllable, from "A child is born" to "A soul is damned."' 'It is not so much a matter of punishment or recompense, in the next world, as a matter of daily experience in this one, for any true happiness is a premonition of immortality. If the lover, for instance, or the patriot have moments of ecstasy it is because they think of love or of the flag as eternal. Man cannot love mortal things. He can only love immortal things for an instant.' The latter sentence appeared in a collection of critical essays, *Heretics*; the two others were picked up by the compiler of the Calendar in an introduction to *The Old Curiosity Shop* and in *George*

Bernard Shaw.

‘Nothing is important except the fate of the soul.’ If these words were uttered in a sermon they might almost pass unnoticed. Written by an ‘advanced thinker,’ a fierce radical who challenged political and literary conventions, they appeared nothing short of startling. In another Dickens introduction we read: ‘Pessimism says that life is so short that it gives nobody a chance; religion says that life is so short that it gives everybody his final chance.’ Nothing is important except the use we make of that chance, and this depends entirely on our conception of moral values. All the questions which absorb public attention, international and national politics, economics, science, art, education, only matter in so far as they reflect our philosophy of life. This philosophy is the concern of everybody, not only of those who pass through Divinity and Greats, ‘but of those who pass through life and death.’ It is the most democratic thing in the world and there is no trifle ‘from buttons to kangaroos’ which does not play its part in it. This is why, no doubt, every ‘trifle’ must be ‘tremendous.’

Furthermore, this philosophy, or theology, or moral outlook must be definite. It is either religious or irreligious, there is no half-way house. Belief is logical and so is unbelief, but doubt is against reason. ‘The modern habit of saying “This is my opinion but I may be wrong” is entirely irrational,’ writes Chesterton in the introduction to the *Book of Job*. ‘If I say that it may be wrong, I say that it is not my opinion ... A cosmic philosophy is not constructed to fit a man; a cosmic philosophy is constructed to fit a cosmos.’

These ideas may not seem so strange to-day, but they caused a good deal of surprise twenty-five years ago. The reading public was then roughly divided into two groups: those who left religion out of account and those who took it for granted, leaving

to the theologians the solution of theological problems. The first were considerably surprised at finding one of the boldest thinkers of their time reasserting beliefs which they thought buried under the ruins of the dark ages of ignorance and superstition. The others were disturbed at being told that their loyalty to the Church was not limited to Sunday observances, but extended to every detail of their private and public life. They were all nonplussed by the versatility of a writer who introduced sermons into fantastic novels, such as *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and *The Man who was Thursday*, and scattered his most serious philosophical or literary essays with frivolous jokes and nonsensical remarks. His tone varied, but his thoughts appeared remarkably consistent. Morality, kicked out at the door, crept back through the window. The moths fluttered in all directions, but turned round the same light.



In order to understand Chesterton's zeal as a polemist, it must be remembered that he had been only recently converted to Orthodoxy. After leaving St. Paul's School, he was seriously affected by the agnosticism which prevailed among his friends who had gone to the Universities and the students whom he met at the Slade School where he spent a few months, before taking up journalism. For several years he read the works of Haeckel, Huxley, Schopenhauer, Tolstoy, Nietzsche, and cultivated all the 'isms' which attracted the younger generation. He mixed freely with the artists, the writers, and the revolutionists of London Bohemian circles, and only emerged from these wild experiences to discover that he had sought very far a truth which had been waiting for him at home. As he explained a few years later, in *Orthodoxy*, he was in the position of an English yachtsman who, owing to some slight miscalculation, discovered England

‘under the impression that it was a new island in the South Seas,’ and triumphantly planted the British flag ‘on that barbaric temple which turned out to be the Pavilion at Brighton.’ He built up his faith on the wreckage of the false creeds in which he had indulged and which had been found wanting. He came back to Christianity, like Parsifal to the Graal, after wandering through the magic gardens of a score of Klingsors. ‘Like all solemn little boys,’ he confessed, ‘I tried to be in advance of the age ... and I found that I was eighteen hundred years behind it. ... When I fancied that I stood alone, I was really in the ridiculous position of being backed up by all Christendom. ... I did try to found a heresy of my own; and when I had put the last touches to it, I discovered that it was Orthodoxy.’

These lines are particularly illuminating, not only because they justify Chesterton’s desire to be heard by the ‘advance guard’ of the generation to which he belonged, but also because they explain the striking freshness of his arguments. After his wanderings through a sea of illusions, England appeared to him in a new light, and he was able to look upon her solid shores with a new sense of wonder. He began to preach to sceptics and heretics, and he was admirably equipped to do so, having suffered from the same doubts and indulged in the same errors.

We cannot follow him in all his arguments, but we can at least sum up some of his conclusions. Nineteenth-century scepticism and materialism had already run their course when he began to write. It was enough for him to point out that they had run in a vicious circle. Free thought had no more questions to ask, ‘it had questioned itself. You cannot fancy a more sceptical world than that in which men doubt if there is a world.’ The man who cannot believe his senses and the man who cannot believe anything else are both in a very reasonable position, but their reason is without root and works in the void, they

have locked themselves up 'in two boxes, painted inside with the sun and stars; they are both unable to get out, the one into the health and happiness of heaven, the other into the health and happiness of the earth.' The sceptic denies reality and the materialist denies the soul. The test to be applied to them is not the test of reason but the test of sanity, their minds move in a perfect but narrow circle. 'The mark of madness is this combination between a logical completeness and a spiritual contraction.'⁶

Chesterton's main objection to determinism was that, when applied to human affairs, it must necessarily lead to fatalism. You cannot alter the course of things if it has been traced by the influence of heredity and of surroundings. 'The determinists come to bind, not to lose.' This inconsistency is particularly striking in the case of Marx's materialistic conception of history: 'The extreme Marxian politicians in England exhibit themselves as a small heroic minority trying vainly to induce the world to do what, according to their theory, the world always does.'

The worship of will, started by Nietzsche, in *Beyond Good and Evil* and popularized by Bernard Shaw, was the last intellectual fashion in those days. Chesterton used against it the same dialectical weapon. He showed that no action could be praised merely because it showed will, because that meant only that it was an action. 'By this praise of will you cannot really choose one course as better than another. And yet choosing one course as better than another is the very definition of the will you are praising.'

He had a curious way of killing—or at least hitting—two birds with one stone. Just as he had shut the sceptic and the

⁶ *Orthodoxy*

materialist in the same boxes, he imagined the apostle of action and the apostle of quietism, Nietzsche and Tolstoy, sitting side by side at the cross-roads: 'They are both helpless—one because he must not grasp anything, and the other because he must not let go of anything. The Tolstoyan's will is frozen by a Buddhist instinct that all special actions are evil. The Nietzschean's will is quite equally frozen by his view that all special actions are good. ... They stand at the cross-roads, and one hates all the roads and the other likes all the roads. The result is—well, some things are not hard to calculate. They stand at the cross-roads.'

This method of disposing in a few pages of his opponents' theories had no doubt certain drawbacks, it had also some advantages. One of them was that it allowed Chesterton to survey rapidly the field of battle and to discover the weak points in his enemies' strategy, the common fallacy which bound them together in spite of all differences. Just as, in the abstract world, monism—whether materialistic or idealistic—confronted dualism, so, in the moral world, fatalism or irresponsibility confronted the doctrine of free will, man's choice between good and evil.

There is nothing more characteristic of all modern theories and philosophies than the negation of a principle which has been the foundation of European morality. Being quite properly ignored by scientists, the problem of good and evil was shirked or evaded by most modern thinkers attuned to the *Zeitgeist* who endeavoured to substitute such concepts as enlightenment and ignorance, progress and reaction, efficiency and inefficiency, health and disease, for the old moral values. Even theologians showed an evident inclination to compromise. It had been bad form to mention the devil in the nineteenth century, it became good form in the twentieth to ignore him altogether. The reaction against the use made by the churches of the doctrine of

punishment and recompense was so pronounced that a veil was drawn on the eternal conflict dividing man's conscience. Those who still dared to speak of goodness spoke of it as of a passive quality, belonging to a well-ordered universe and to all civilized societies. It was associated, in a vague way, with nature itself and with the efforts man made to conquer it. Accidents happened, of course, mistakes were made; they were the result of weakness, not of bad intent. Most people, without distinction of creed or philosophy, believed that there was 'nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.'

Chesterton would have had a far easier task to fulfil if he had contented himself with reasserting the old virtues without denouncing the old vices, if he had expounded the positive side of Christian morality without mentioning the negative. In praising courage, loyalty, courtesy, brotherhood, public freedom, family life, he would have been backed by tradition, and brought comfort to most of his readers without offending them. The lesson taught by his 'Piece of Chalk' in *Tremendous Trifles* was well received. People were glad to hear that white was not the absence of colour 'but a shining affirmative thing,' that, in the same way, virtue was not the absence of vice, but a 'vivid and separate thing, like pain or a particular smell.' But they shrank from the thought that black also was a definite colour and that the active power of evil surrounded their lives and crept into their souls.

There is nothing more characteristic of the writer's courage and intellectual honesty than the way in which he challenged the almost unanimous opinion of his contemporaries in this matter, and asserted that the existence of evil was not only an indispensable part of orthodox philosophy, but a matter of daily experience.

We find, in *Tremendous Trifles*, a strange story called 'The

Diabolist,' in which Chesterton recalls the days he spent at the Slade School. At the time when he was 'discovering that he was not an atheist,' he made the acquaintance of a student who, while leading a dissipated life, was also fond of serious conversation. One evening, as they were walking to and fro in front of the school, close to a large fire which the gardeners had lit in the grounds, the man asked him why he was becoming orthodox. He answered that he had come to hate heresies more than crime, because they were a source of crime and a danger to morality. 'But why do you care for morality,' retorted his companion in a gentle voice. Chesterton pointed to the fire: 'Give me these few red sparks,' he answered, 'and I will deduce Christian morality. ... Once I thought, like you, that one's pleasure in a flying spark was a thing that could come and go with that spark. ... But now I know that the red fire is only the flower on a stalk of living habits which you cannot see. ... That flame flowered out of virtues, and it will fade with virtues. Seduce a woman, and that spark will be less bright. Shed blood, and that spark will be less red. Be really bad, and they will be to you like the spots on a wallpaper.' The diabolist did not deny this, but suggested that the 'expanding pleasure' of the ruin he had caused might provide compensations. He left his indignant companion with a parting shot: 'What you call evil I call good.'

This was, no doubt, an exceptional young man, but if diabolists are scarce, so are saints. The immense majority of men carry with them their virtues and their sins, and the latter are not less sinful for being often disguised as virtues. It does not need a long and searching self-introspection to discover the fact. Some new theologians 'admit divine sinlessness which they cannot see even in their dreams. But they essentially deny human sin, which they can see in the street. ...' If it be true that a man can feel exquisite happiness in inflicting pain, then the religious

philosopher can only draw one of two deductions: 'he must either deny the existence of God, as all Atheists do, or he must deny the present union between God and man, as all Christians do.' Speaking of the 'Modern Manichee,'⁷ the poet exclaims:

He says there is no sin, and all his sin
 Swells round him in a world made merciless;
 The midnight of his universe of shame
 Is the vast shadow of his shamelessness.

Here again, we see Chesterton taking the unpopular line by dissociating himself not only from the determinists, but also from the new school of theologians who, like the Rev. R. J. Campbell, were trying to reconcile modern thought and Christian dogmas in an atmosphere of benevolent mysticism. Mysticism was rather the fashion in literary circles at the beginning of the century. Maeterlinck and the symbolist poets, in their reaction against materialism, had created an atmosphere favourable to spiritual discussions. But Chesterton shunned such allies. While acknowledging religious mystery, he wished to keep close to solid reality and plain common sense. He knew that positive evil and original sin were the starting-point of his argument and that man's intentions were either black or white. He took life far too seriously to allow himself to be misled in a land of dreams, however pleasant, and to lose his bearings in a grey mist of illusions. He was a prophet before being a poet.



I did not choose the title of this book without some reluctance, for Chesterton hated solemnity. He has been compared with Ruskin and Carlyle, and this comparison is justified by the wide range of his writings and by the way he defended his

⁷ *New Poems*

views on religion and politics through his survey of historical and artistic or literary subjects. But he was far too modest ever to speak *ex cathedra*. His humour was part of this innate modesty. He liked to poke fun at his adversaries, but he liked still better to tell stories against himself. He always appeared on the public platform as if he had no justification whatever for being there, as if he had strayed in by chance from the street and had no knowledge of the subject under discussion. This attitude served him admirably in a debate, but it was perfectly genuine. He called seriousness a vice; had not Satan fallen 'by the force of gravity'?

Nevertheless he was a prophet in the true sense of the word, for he concerned himself, above all things, with 'the fate of the soul,' with human happiness and the philosophy which led to it.' As soon as he believed that he had discovered, or rather rediscovered, this philosophy, he sacrificed everything to the absorbing task of defending it.

Like Victor Hugo, he might have been an artist. His early connexion with the Slade School has already been mentioned. Some of his drawings illustrate his own books and those of his friends. The pictorial quality of his descriptions in his stories is unmistakable. He might certainly have written valuable art criticisms, as shown by his small book on Watts, and the references to painting and architecture scattered through his writings. Among many examples, the following lines may be singled out: 'The great English landscape painters have this salient distinction, that the weather is not the atmosphere of their pictures: it is the subject of their pictures. They paint portraits of the weather. The weather sat to Constable; the weather posed for Turner—and the deuce of a pose it was.' Then, without transition, he launches into the praise of grey, and extols the value of a dim sky as a background to rich colours: 'A bright blue sky

is necessarily the high light of the picture, and its brightness kills all the bright blue flowers. But, on a grey day, the larkspur looks like fallen heaven; the red daisies are really the lost red eyes of day, and the sunflower is the vice-regent of the sun.’⁸

Chesterton has explained, in his *Autobiography*, the reasons which brought him from the Slade School to Fleet Street. It seems probable that one of them—which he does not mention—was that he found the pen a better instrument than the brush for expressing the philosophy which he wished to share with others. He had in him all the qualities which go to make an artist, and appreciated a landscape more deeply than most prose writers of his generation, but he distrusted Nature-worship as he distrusted Art for Art’s sake. At a time when human brotherhood and freedom were in danger of being forgotten even by the most sincere democrats, he felt that he had no right to desert the town and bury himself in the peaceful and pleasant surroundings of the English countryside. He wished to rub shoulders with his fellow-men, to voice their sorrows and their joys, to remain a cockney among cockneys. When, towards 1910, he was finally ordered by his doctor to leave London, he only obeyed reluctantly and comforted himself with the thought that he might be in a better position to praise city life in Beaconsfield than in Battersea. He compared himself to the rustic ‘who believes that the streets of London are paved with gold and means to see it before he dies.’ He maintained seriously, in *Alarms and Discursions*, that ‘Nature-worship is more morally dangerous than the most vulgar man-worship of the cities; since it can easily be perverted into the worship of an impersonal mystery, callousness, or cruelty.’ He declared that ‘Thoreau would have been a jollier fellow if he had devoted himself to a

⁸ ‘The Glory of Grey’ (*Alarms and Discursions*)

greengrocer instead of to greens,' and that 'Swinburne would have been a better moralist if he had worshipped a fishmonger instead of worshipping the sea.' Ruskin himself, in spite of his efforts to get into touch with social problems, had preserved an aristocratic attitude and remained aloof from the homely life of the people. Art and nature are all very well in themselves, but it is bad for the soul to look on the portrait of a dead person more closely than on the face of a living friend, and to neglect the men who line the street for the trees which line the road.

Chesterton wrote a number of historical books and essays. His *Short History of England*, his chapter on the Crusades in *The New Jerusalem*, and on the Renaissance in *The Resurrection of Rome*, the historical background of his *Chaucer*, his *Cobbett*, and his *St. Francis*, and his frequent digressions on the French Revolution, will be remembered by those who are familiar with his works. In spite of his high rate of production, he could be painstaking about detail, and had a striking power of generalisation. One sentence will be sufficient to illustrate this point; I have chosen it because it gives in a nutshell Chesterton's conception of the course of European history. He wrote in the first chapter of *The New Jerusalem*: 'The Labour problem is the attempt to have the democracy of Paris without the slavery of Rome.' It was possible for the Roman republic to develop its fine conception of citizenship and law because it rested on slave labour. The advent of Christianity and the gospel of human brotherhood, by making slavery morally unacceptable, led to a long struggle for social freedom which very nearly succeeded in the gradual emancipation of the serfs and the establishment of the Communes and corporations, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This movement was checked, on the Continent, after the Reformation, owing to the rivalries of centralized States and to the increased power of national princes

supported by a privileged aristocracy. The French Revolution, based on Roman traditions, was a violent attempt to realize the old ideal of Christian brotherhood and to apply the doctrine of the Rights of Man to political institutions. It was wrecked, in its turn, not so much by the defeat of Napoleon, as by the advent of industrialism and the rising of a new aristocracy whose power rested on money. The popular agitation of the last century and the labour movement which was its outcome aimed at restoring 'the democracy of Paris without the slavery of Rome.'

Some aspects of this broad interpretation of European history may be questioned, but it throws a new light on certain problems which have puzzled modern thinkers. It explains Chesterton's instinctive hostility towards class privileges, whether based on birth or wealth, his enthusiasm for medieval traditions and his curious sympathy for the fiercest Jacobins, such as Danton and Robespierre. For purely philosophical reasons, he should have opposed Rousseau, but for political and social reasons he almost loved him. His thirst for concrete results, his sympathy for the oppressed, his sense of reality were such that he felt closer to a reformer who did not share his religious creed than to a conservative who appeared to share it. He was deeply convinced that orthodoxy and democracy walked hand in hand, but had it been possible to part them, he would have preferred to work with an atheist democrat rather than with an orthodox aristocrat. The friendship between MacIan and Turnbull, in *The Ball and the Cross*, stands as one of his noblest creations. He was a prophet even before being a theologian.

The same insistence, not only on morality, but on practical morality, is noticeable in his literary criticism. His talent as a critic is as widely recognized as his genius as an essayist, but it is evident that his judgements were frequently influenced by

his sympathy or his antagonism towards the attitude of mind of the writer whose works he criticized. Further, this sympathy or antagonism was dictated quite as much by the personal philosophy of the author as by the effect which his works might exercise on the public. The moralist was always on his guard.

It is perhaps difficult to say exactly the reason which determined Chesterton to devote books, when he did, to Browning, Dickens, Blake, Chaucer, and Stevenson. He had such a greedy appetite for writing that he generally accepted such commissions when they came to him. It was the kind of work which he loved doing, not only because he was conscious of doing it well, but also because it needed doing. Most of these writers had received the tribute of admiration which they deserved, but they had often been admired for the wrong reason. Browning had been praised for his intellectual power because he was considered as 'difficult'; Dickens for his brilliancy because he was humorous; Blake for his esoterism and Chaucer for his candour. It was left to Chesterton to show that we owed them a much greater debt. Browning had expressed the 'hope in the imperfection of man and, more boldly, the hope in the imperfection of God'; Dickens was the voice of an optimistic democracy 'that encouraged anybody to be anything'; Blake had seen a mystic star through the cloud of rationalism; Chaucer reflected the supreme achievements of medieval civilization. It may be unfair to mention the name of Stevenson in this great company, but it is again typical of Chesterton's attitude of mind that he gives particular prominence to the novelist's escape from pessimism to the poetry of early childhood. While speaking of these writers, the critic was still expounding his creed, his belief in the union of reason and faith, in the essential goodness of the common people, in the mystic's vision, and in the glory of an age in which all worshippers crowded into the same Church.

So much for his sympathies. The case of Shaw, as already pointed out, was a peculiar one. He was a personal friend of Chesterton, who had the greatest respect for his character and his intellectual integrity. The two writers agreed in criticizing modern society, but utterly disagreed on almost all important philosophical questions. The book which Chesterton wrote in 1909 and revised sixteen years later, is a model of fair criticism. His attitude may be summed up in the following quotation: 'I have no particular objection to people who take the gilt off the gingerbread, ... but there are some objections to this task when it becomes a crusade and an obsession. One of them is this: that people who have really scraped the gilt off the gingerbread generally waste the rest of their lives in attempting to scrape the gilt off gigantic lumps of gold. Such has too often been the case with Shaw.' He can scrape the romance off British politics; he cannot scrape the romance off love or military valour, 'because it is all romance and three thousand miles thick.'

It is again characteristic of Chesterton that he could not preserve the same impartiality when he dealt with authors whose moral influence he deplored. His onslaught on Wilde and Zola was to a certain extent justified because the writers' philosophy—or absence of philosophy—actually marred their work. He was at least hasty in his wholesale condemnation of what he called Ibsen's desperate pessimism, and Maeterlinck's early plays deserved a better treatment than the one they received in *What's Wrong with the World*: 'Maeterlinck is as efficient in filling a man with strange spiritual tremors as Messrs. Crosse & Blackwell are in filling a man with jam. But it all depends on what you prefer to be filled with. Lord Rosebery, being a modern sceptic, probably prefers the spiritual tremors. I, being an orthodox Christian, prefer the jam.'

We may well wonder how an author gifted with such vivid

imagination and descriptive powers never used the most popular form of writing. It is indeed strange that this man who understood family life and the psychology of the people better than most of his contemporaries did not leave behind him one picture of modern England. It might be suggested that he was overwhelmed by his admiration for Dickens and that his natural modesty prevented him from walking in the footsteps of his master. But there is more reason to believe that he was too eager to vent his views to use a medium which might have veiled their meaning.

He wrote of course a good many stories, some of which reach the length of a short novel, but their character is mainly allegorical. *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, *The Man who was Thursday*, the twin heroes of *The Ball and the Cross*, Dalroy, Ivywood, and the host of the 'Flying Inn' move in a fantastic world equally remote from the kingdom of legend and from the domain of reality. They represent certain abstract ideas, certain virtues or certain vices, like the heroes of medieval morality plays. Urged to write stories by the prevalent taste for fiction, and unwilling to devote much time and attention to any work which did not bear directly on the task which he wished to fulfil, Chesterton created a special genre which can only be compared to some philosophical stories of the eighteenth century or satirical epics of the Renaissance. They are essays in disguise on the virtues of local tradition and patriotism, on the conflict between belief and disbelief, on civic freedom and kindred subjects. Although their author did not attach great importance to them, they stand among his most original creations. They were not written to entertain, but to educate, and it is to be doubted whether they would have achieved the same success if their true meaning had been understood from the first.

It may be objected that, if we have never met Adam Wayne

or MacIan, we have certainly met Father Brown, but Father Brown, or Father O'Connor, is only a smaller Chesterton. The innocent little priest moves in his world of crimes like the laughing prophet in his world of heresies. They are both helped in their work by a nimble wit, but their surest guide is their instinct. Virtue, we are told, 'is a vivid and separate thing like pain or a particular smell,' so is sin. Both Chesterton and Father Brown scent good and evil. We can almost watch the first frowning silently and the second indulging in one of his abstract meditations, while the air is cleared and the problem reaches a definite solution. Instinct or intuition succeed where the most searching critic or the keenest detective has failed. This belief is part and parcel of Chesterton's philosophy. It explains his intolerance towards certain forms of art and the way he sometimes cuts an argument short to jump to his conclusion. It is a dangerous method which can only be justified by results. In philosophy, or in science, intuition must necessarily be backed by knowledge and careful preparation, but it is the only way to achieve a discovery ... or a prophecy.



The prophetic touch, the desire to warn, to advise, and to convince, meets us at every turn in Chesterton's works. It explains his use of the essay, his references to history, his literary sympathies, even the peculiar form he gave to his stories. It does more than that, for behind the prophet stands the reformer. Chesterton spent several years of his active life in fighting against the party system, and the abuses of the modern press. He took part with his brother, Cecil, in *The Eye-Witness*, in a campaign which brought about the Marconi affair. He pursued the struggle, after his brother's death, in *The New Witness* and in *G. K.'s Weekly*, against State interference and prohibition.

He wrote a whole book—*The Outline of Sanity*—in defence of Distributism, which he opposed to Socialism. He stood for true democratic principles, the protection of individual freedom, small business, and small property, against the encroachments of capitalism and State control. From the first to the last days of his career, he attacked all fads and fashions which appeared to him to endanger his political and religious ideal, concerning himself with questions which would have seemed trivial to any one less directly—even anxiously—concerned with the moral welfare of England and Europe. His last book of essays includes chapters about traffic, the censor, shamelessness, modern girls, the telephone, the films, as well as discussions on education, fascism, bolshevism, and political creeds. Some of Chesterton's friends deplored that he should devote so much time and energy to journalism and politics, when he might have written more poems or philosophical essays. They regretted that by his ruthless attacks against certain institutions and certain politicians, he alienated the sympathies of a number of readers and reduced the range of his influence. But no writer was less concerned with his literary fame. He wrote spontaneously, on the impulse of the moment. His reaction to any stimulant, whether pleasant or unpleasant, was so strong that he could not refrain from expressing it. His home may have been in Beaconsfield, his heart remained in Fleet Street. He was too close to the people to dissociate himself from their interests, however futile they might appear. It seems as if he had grudged himself the quiet days spent in his library. He wished to answer every call from outside. Had he been less prepared to do so, he would no doubt have added some golden years to his active life and some golden books to his collected works, but he would have lost something of the bold carelessness with which he confronted all obstacles, he would not have been a laughing prophet.

He had the prophet's fertile eloquence, his burning zeal, and his sincere consistency. We should not claim a systematic doctrine from an author indulging in every kind of writing, from comic nonsense to theology, and should not be surprised if he were, from time to time, carried over the line of scrupulous truthfulness by his delight in sketching caricatures or coining epigrams. When considering Chesterton's collected works, we should at least expect to find a rich disorder, a change of moods, a clash of contradictions, similar to that which we find in the writings of the great Romanticists, such as Byron or Hugo. It is somewhat surprising to be confronted throughout with a perfectly logical attitude. Indeed we might say of Chesterton what he says of Shaw: 'You may attack his principles but you cannot attack their application.' He puts the Chesterton test to everything that happens in heaven or earth. The 'fortress' which he holds looks remarkably like a gothic church, with the company of heaven standing on guard round the porch, and the monsters of hell relegated to their proper place, among the gargoyles grinning on the roof.

It would be impossible to understand the doctrine of Chesterton without emphasizing this element of consistency, more particularly of moral consistency. Once brought to the faith through the criticism of the various heresies which attracted him in his youth, he takes his stand on Christian orthodoxy—that is to say, on the teaching of the Gospel as interpreted by Catholic philosophy. Man ceases to be a superior animal whose irresponsible actions are determined by circumstances, and becomes a superior being gifted with an immortal soul and a free will which gives him the faculty of choosing between good and evil, between those thoughts and actions which will preserve or destroy his communion with God and the saints. Chesterton's long fight against the hasty conclusions of sceptics,

materialists, and determinists was waged in defence of free will, which he considered as the very foundation of human ethics.

But men are bound together by social ties which lighten or darken their moral outlook. The whole trend of Christian civilization has been to adapt pre-Christian institutions to the social ideal inspired by the Gospel. Labour must be freed, marriage sanctified, property safeguarded; above all, the law must protect the weak against the strong, the poor against the rich. Centuries of experience show that this cannot be achieved through purely aristocratic or autocratic regimes. The only political system consistent with Christian morality is a vigilant democracy. Free will must exert itself in the nation as much as in the individual, and the Constitution should be the genuine expression of the joint will of an enlightened majority. Chesterton's interpretation of history tallies with this Christian conception of politics. This is not to say that he twists the facts to suit his theories, but that his theories exert some influence on his conception of the facts—which might be said of all historians who have indulged in general conclusions. The beneficent influence of the Church and of the monasteries in the Middle Ages is duly emphasized by him, as it was ignored or minimized by others. It is more surprising to discover that he extols the virtues of the French Revolution, in spite of its anti-clerical and anti-religious bias, and that he attributes many defects of modern English politics to the fact that this country was spared the violent changes brought about by the great social upheaval.

Nothing shows more clearly the almost ruthless consistency of the writer than this apparent contradiction. God was for him, as for St. Francis, the God of the poor. His opposition to Socialism rested far more on political than on philosophical grounds. He objected to State control because it restricted the freedom of the people, but he sided instinctively with any

independent democratic movement which, like the French Republic, asserted the Rights of Man and restored the dignity of Roman citizenship. He was never influenced by the fact that the Church had repeatedly allied herself to the governing classes in order to uphold her privileges, or that the people had denied God in their fierce struggle for liberty. He placed essentials first. No morality, whether political or religious, could be conceived or realized under conditions of political or economic bondage. Slavery was more blasphemous than Jacobinism and its mad worship of Reason. As a 'Catholic democrat,' Chesterton never allowed his Catholicism to interfere with his democracy, or his political conviction to come into conflict with his religious beliefs.

I hope to show, in the following chapters, that all Chesterton's ideas and all his tastes were dependent on these two cardinal principles: religious Orthodoxy and political Radicalism. In spite of their wide range, his essays afford no surprise to the reader. We foresee what the author will think on almost every debatable subject. The test never fails. We know beforehand that he will prefer tradition to modern progress, the cockney to the Nature-worshipper, the theatre to the film, beer to soda-water, tramps to dukes, donkeys to motor-cars, Browning to Swinburne, singing in chorus to singing in concerts, Dickens to Zola, old-fashioned courtesy to new-fashioned rudeness, Cobbett to Carlyle, fairy-tales to educational tracts, optimism to pessimism, the thirteenth century to the twentieth, Europe to Asia, France to Germany, and England to France.



There is another aspect of this consistency which is still more remarkable. It might be called unique, at least I know no other example of it in the history of modern literature. While perusing

Chesterton's books, before and after his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1922, the reader will find no fundamental differences between them. In a dedication to E. V. Lucas, published in 1929, the author apologizes for the imperfect character of some early essays and prefaces gathered together in *G. K. C. as M. C.*: 'Some of them were written long ago when some of my views, or at least the final deductions of my views, were not fully formulated, and they may contain elements, superficial in every sense, which would probably not be so presented now. On the whole, however, whenever I happen to come across one of these fortunately forgotten fragments from my stratified past, I may indeed shudder at their crudity of expression, but I am rather surprised to see how little my fundamental convictions have changed. For my final conviction, which was also a conversion, did not come to destroy but to fulfil.'

This surprise will be shared by those who remember similar conversions, particularly among French poets and novelists, which entirely transformed the writer's outlook, so that he devoted his old age to atoning for the sceptical or atheistic utterances of his youth and, according to the words of Saint Rémy, 'worshipped what he had burned and burned what he had worshipped.'

It would be entirely wrong to try and explain Chesterton's consistency before and after this great event by diminishing its importance. It was evidently a stupendous experience which filled him with awe. A glance at the poem which he wrote on the occasion⁹ would be enough to dispel any doubt on this point:

After one moment when I bowed my head
And the whole world turned over and came upright,
And I came out where the old road shone white,

⁹ 'The Convert'

I walked the ways and heard what all men said,
Forests of tongues, like autumn leaves unshed,
 Being not unlovable but strange and light;
 Old riddles and new creeds, not in despite,
But softly, as men smile about the dead.

He moves and speaks as in a dream, as if he were unable to resist the fierce impact of grace, a true neophyte, a child, nearly fifty years old, shivering under the blessing of a new baptism. It would be an impertinence, in the presence of such deep feeling, to question that Chesterton's conversion affected him to the very depth of his soul. But this does not imply that it changed his views or altered the principles of his morality.

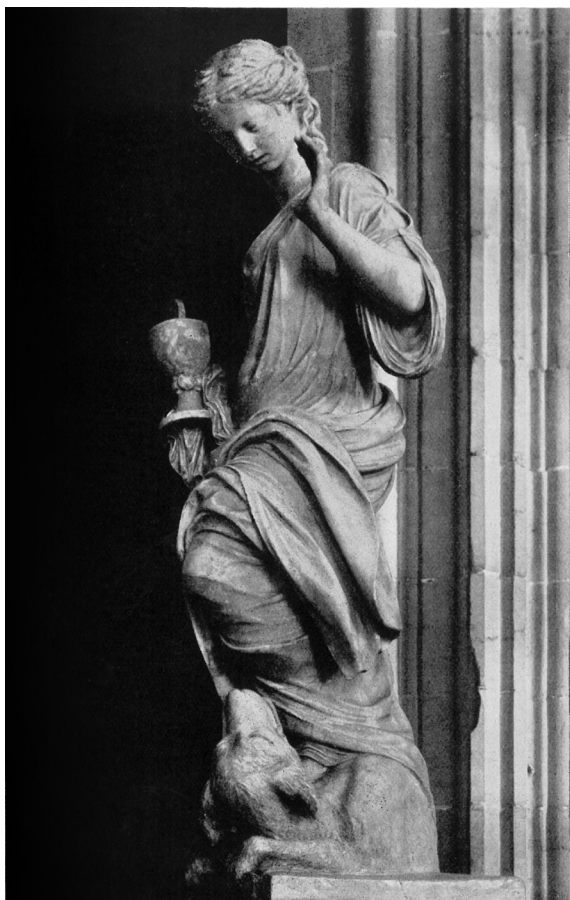
For the last twenty-five years he had believed in orthodoxy, in man's free will, in the spirit of good or evil which inspired human actions. He had spent most of his time in defending the Christian dogmas against the attacks of his contemporaries, and in tracing their influence in the works of the great writers of the past. He had extolled the theological and cardinal virtues established by the catholic tradition, and the homely pleasures of the common people which blossomed in their shade. He had fought hard to check the influence of materialism and greed upon the politics of his country, and to oppose moral and spiritual values to imperialistic and capitalistic ambitions. He might well say that his final conversion 'did not come to destroy but to fulfil.' Apart from superficial forms of expression, it is difficult to imagine the difference which this conversion might have made if it had come at an earlier date. He could not have expounded his faith with greater enthusiasm, or upheld his philosophy with keener intelligence. He said one day that he had passed 'from a smaller into a larger house.' He was not a stray traveller seeking a shelter against the weather. Some may call his first house narrow, the fact remains that it never

narrowed his outlook and prevented him from writing and speaking as a good Catholic. He moved from one house to the other with all his treasures and belongings, discarding nothing. Every one of his works found again its place on his shelves, and not one of them caused him a pang of regret.



The sub-title of this book requires an explanation and an apology. The picture left on my mind after re-reading Chesterton, under the circumstances related above, gave an extraordinary relief to moral values. Art, literature, fiction, even the high lights of humour, appeared in the background, behind the glorious company of Christian Virtues waging their eternal fight against the vices of civilization. It reminded me of an old allegorical poem written by Prudence in the tenth century, describing the battle waged by *Fides*, *Pudicitia*, *Patientia*, *Spes*, *Humilitas*, and several other militant Virgins against *Idolatry*, *Libido*, *Ira*, *Superbia*, and their fierce allies. It reminded me still more of the carvings adorning the porches of the French cathedrals and the walls of the Arena chapel in Padua, which are intimately connected with the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas and the ethics of Plato and Aristotle. Following this tradition, I have reduced the number of Virtues to seven—three theological and four cardinal, or natural—but I took the liberty, taken by Gothic sculptors, of substituting certain figures for others, Wisdom for Prudence, Innocence for Temperance, Courage for Fortitude, because they seemed to represent more closely Chesterton's moral attitude. To make matters worse, I have kept the theological and cardinal virtues in the illustration, in order to preserve its harmony and to give the reader the opportunity of looking at the complete series of the statues

carved by Dubroeucq, in the middle of the sixteenth century, for the church of Sainte Waudru, in Mons. I chose these works not only because they are little known even by art experts, but because the pure style of the Walloon Renaissance seemed to me to be more congenial to the atmosphere of Chesterton's essays than the more remote style of the Middle Ages. They carry the ancient Christian tradition into the modern world and bridge the gulf between what Carlyle called Past and Present. It seemed fit that I should associate the name of one of my own countrymen with this small book. Chesterton does not only belong to England. He belongs to all those who read the works he gave them. The only way they can express their gratitude is in showing that they appreciate the gift.



CHAPTER I

Faith

ONE OF THE CHARACTERISTICS which makes Chesterton's teaching so invaluable, at the present day, is that he is in the true sense of the word a missionary. He did not shut himself within the four walls of his church, whether Anglican or Catholic, contenting himself with preaching to the

converted. From first to last, his main concern was with the man in the street, without any distinction of class or creed. He spoke to him of his most sacred beliefs with complete frankness and familiarity. He made a point of writing his works in such a manner that any agnostic could read them with delight. He preserved throughout the deepest respect and consideration for his adversary's point of view. He was, if I may use the expression, a true intellectual sportsman, and fought as a polemist with the same courtesy with which he would have played a game. Indeed, his keener attacks were delivered with a kind of boyish playfulness; he hit hard, but did not mind in the least being hit. He never took advantage of his wider knowledge and of his keener wit, never assumed the superior attitude of the preacher or the patronizing tone of the professor. Even his sarcasm had in it a touch of conviviality. All his talks might almost be called table-talks.

It is possible to disagree with the most lovable man and even to agree with the most unlovable—although this is more difficult—but this element of personal sympathy cannot be overlooked when we consider Chesterton's influence on his contemporaries, particularly with regard to religious questions. Unless we realize the confidence he inspired in utter strangers, we lose not only the secret of his rapid success, but one of the main features of his moral position. In short, he was an ideal friend, the kind of friend whom you could meet after a year as if you had left him the day before. Love at first sight has been frequently described, friendship at first sight is a rarer experience. Why he awoke it sooner than any man I ever met, is a mystery as sacred as the purity of the human soul. Some features of his personality can only be hinted at here: his appearance which gave a feeling of moral strength and physical weakness, which stirred at the same time the impulse to admire and to protect;

his manner, which combined a schoolboy's jollity with a gentle and almost old-fashioned courtesy; the way he talked to any one, as to an intellectual equal, on almost any subject which chance brought forward, never leading the conversation, but rather following it; the way he listened, a rarer gift in a lecturer, interpreting his interlocutor's remarks so as to give them a deeper and often unexpected significance; above all, the way he behaved as a big, clumsy, forgetful child, always ready to attenuate the faults of others and to acknowledge his own.

It is true that he hated certain theories and institutions, and the people whom, rightly or wrongly, he connected with them, because he was convinced that they spread misery and humiliation in the land. He denounced them with generous indignation as a public man, but he never kept a grudge for a personal offence, and was a past master in discovering sympathetic features in individuals who belonged to the very class or race he professed to despise. When he could not praise, he remained silent. Sometimes the name of one of his bugbears, thrown into the conversation, provoked a curious growl which always ended in laughter, as if he thought the worst men he knew particularly funny, as if they showed their wickedness like a clown carries his red nose. A life's work had passed over him, the hard experience of journalism, literary and political quarrels, successes and defeats, without leaving a drop of bitterness in his soul. He was always anxious to go back on a harsh or hasty judgement, remarking that 'the man was not really so black as he was painted.'

I shall deal later with his conception of innocence and humility, but I must say here that this conception was the result of the consciousness of being what he was, a consciousness which he would have of course denied. He had at least one trait in common with the saints he praised, Joan of Arc, Francis,

Thomas Aquinas—a complete lack of spiritual pride. It was not that he practised what he preached; he happened to be what he preached, and even to look what he preached. It may have been coincidence, but it made his preaching far more convincing to those who knew him, even if they knew him only through his pictures and his books.



It was in this spirit that he conducted his first crusade against the pessimists and the decadents who loomed so large on the intellectual horizon in the late 'nineties, and that he tore their black clouds with the lightning strokes of his attacks.

He made good fun, in *Orthodoxy*, of the nonsense uttered by both optimists and pessimists, and suggested, as an explanation of their differences, the definition given him by a little girl: 'An optimist is a man who looks after your eyes, and a pessimist is a man who looks after your feet.' We had no right, he said, to examine this world, weighing advantages and disadvantages, as a man makes his arrangements for the holidays at a seaside resort: 'The world is not a lodging-house at Brighton, which we are to leave because it is miserable. It is the fortress of our family, with the flag flying on the turret, and the more miserable it is, the less we should leave it. The point is not that this world is too sad to love or too glad not to love; the point is that when you do love a thing, its gladness is a reason for loving it, and its sadness a reason for loving it more. ...' The obvious objection would have been that neither one nor the other is a reason for loving it at all, but it was seldom made, for it would have placed the objector in a painful position. A man may seem superior in upbraiding his fellow-men and suggesting that he is too good for this world, but when he is compelled to strike the flag, it looks remarkably as if the world were too good for him. The

whole debate was thus shifted from the ground of selfish likes and dislikes to that of loyalty or disloyalty. The right optimist is the universal patriot, the pessimist is 'the cosmic anti-patriot.'

Some weak-minded Ibsenites were in the habit, in those days, of surrounding suicide with a sort of poetical glamour. In the same terse style, Chesterton denounced the suicide as a traitor to his country, to the universe, to life itself: 'Not only is suicide a sin, it is the sin. It is the ultimate and absolute evil, the refusal to take an interest in existence; the refusal to take the oath of loyalty to life. The man who kills a man kills a man; the man who kills himself kills all men. ...'

There is only one kind of pessimist—the wrong kind. There are two kinds of optimists, as there are two kinds of patriots, the self-satisfied jingo who will condone any wrong his country might commit because he wishes her only to be strong, and the reformer who will denounce such wrong because he wishes her to be good: 'The more transcendental is your patriotism, the more practical are your politics.'

Chesterton takes up this theme again in the chapter which he devotes to Dickens's optimism. Answering Gissing and other critics, he admits that there is a kind of 'vulgar optimism' in Dickens, as when he pensions off Micawber and makes him a successful colonist; or when Dora, before dying, recommends David Copperfield to marry another woman. But there is also a right kind of optimism in Dickens which is more important and which has far-reaching effects. It is the optimism which prompts him to show how good most men can remain under the worst conditions: 'If we are to save the oppressed we must have two apparently antagonistic emotions in us at the same time. We must insist with violence upon his degradation; we must insist with the same violence upon his dignity. For if we relax by one inch the first assertion, men will say he does not

need saving. And if we relax by one inch the other assertion, men will say that he is not worth saving. The optimists will say that reform is needless. The pessimists will say that reform is hopeless.¹⁰ This is the reason why Dickens achieved certain social reforms while the great pessimistic novelists of the end of the last century failed to do so.



The optimist believes in the fundamental goodness of man and the universe, while the pessimist denies it. This question is, after all, a matter of faith. It cannot be solved one way or the other by records or statistics. The only possible test is the test of imagination. Dickens's optimism, for instance, rested on 'an incomparable hunger and pleasure for the vitality and variety, for the infinite eccentricity of existence.' This sentiment, that 'all is eccentric, though we do not know what is the centre ... ran through Dickens's brain and body like the mad blood of the elves.' Such is the basis of all philosophical gaiety. The merit of this world is not 'that it is orderly and explicable,' but that it is 'wild and unexplained.' Its merit is that 'none of us could have conceived such a thing, that we should have rejected the bare idea of it as miracle and unreason. It is the best of all impossible worlds.'

Whether Chesterton was right about Dickens is a debatable point, but it cannot be denied that he was right about Chesterton. His explanation of Dickens's joyful acceptance of life applies to a spiritual experience related in a chapter of *Orthodoxy* entitled 'The Ethics of Elfland,' referring to the fairy-tales which were told him in the nursery. Things did not appear to him as inevitable but as miraculous, and their mere repetition did not make them less strange. It is no use saying

¹⁰ *Charles Dickens*

that nothing happens when anything might happen. Fairy-tales do not engender this mood, they express it. 'They echo an almost pre-natal leap of interest and amazement.' They tell us that apples were golden 'only to repeat the forgotten moment when we found that they were green. They make rivers run with wine only to make us remember, for one wild moment, that they run with water.'

Such a magic world, looked at through the eyes of imagination, may be haunted by nightmares, but it is also haunted by pleasant dreams, and the pleasant dreams are more frequent than the nightmares and provide the happy ending. The miller's younger son always succeeds in the end in killing the giant or marrying the princess. Fairy-tales record innumerable victories achieved by poor little boys over witches and dragons. That is why they make such good and healthy reading, in spite of what some cranks may say to the contrary. They take the sting out of the worst terrors.

There is an essay, in *Tremendous Trifles*, in which Chesterton recalls the visit paid to him by a young man in a green tie who confessed that he did not believe in fairy-tales. The writer had just been reading one of Grimm's stories called 'The Dragon's Grandmother,' as a kind of antidote to a number of modern realistic and psychological novels which he had to review. For once, he lost his temper, and addressing the stranger, exclaimed: 'Who are you that you should not believe in fairy-tales? It is much easier to believe in Bluebeard than in you; a blue beard is a misfortune, but there are green ties which are sins. ... Look at these plain, homely words—the Dragon's Grandmother. ... That is rational almost to the verge of rationalism. If there was a dragon, he had a grandmother. But you—you had no grandmother! If you had had one she would have taught you to love fairy-tales. You had no father, you had no mother. ...

You cannot be!

In a later work, *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton drew the fine distinction which exists between 'imaginative' and 'imaginary.' Every artist feels that he is in touch with transcendental truths, 'that his images are shadows of things seen through the veil.' As all natural mystics, all creators of fairy-tales and mythologies, he knows that there is something there, and 'that the pursuit of Beauty is the way to find it.' But there is still a wider distinction to be made between the mythologies of Zeus and Odin and a religion such as Christianity. The latter possesses a complete architecture based on rational foundations and teaches a definite philosophy and morality. There is a vast difference between such a religious system and the attempts made by the creators of Greek and German mythologies to express their imaginative reactions to the world by brilliant and poetical symbols. They were, no doubt, sincere in the sense that all true artists are sincere. They believed in their gods as the artist believes in his vision. But their sincerity was as far remote from religious as from scientific truth. A pagan 'did not stand up and say: "I believe in Jupiter and Juno and Neptune" as a Christian recites the Creed. In Greece, religion and philosophy stood apart until, in the age of decadence, the Neo-Platonists attempted to rationalize their myths. The Church of Christ was actually the first that ever tried to combine Reason and Religion. There had never before been any such union of the Priests and Philosophers.'



This digression was necessary to explain the part which art and poetry played in Chesterton's religious development. He always insisted on the importance of Reason, and showed the

danger of freeing mysticism from all discipline. The wilder the aspiration, the stronger must be the rational dogma, keeping its vagaries within bounds. Compared with some modern mystics, he may therefore be called a rationalist, but he was certainly not led to Christianity by any reasonable process. From all we gather from his writings, he seems to have been a poet before being a prophet, and a lover of folklore before being a philosopher.

He disagreed with D. H. Lawrence on almost every point, but he would have said with him that the 'sense of wonder,' with all its imaginative and poetical implications, is at the base of all true religion. Unless you admire the world you cannot conceive its Creator, unless you feel the tragedy and comedy of human life, you cannot conceive the mystery of the human soul. Wonder leads to happiness and happiness to gratitude. As a boy, Chesterton did not only find that life was 'as precious as it was puzzling,' he also felt grateful 'though he hardly knew to whom.' 'We thank people for birthday presents of cigars and slippers, can I thank no one for the birthday present of birth?'

Most Romanticists complained that the freshness of their early impressions faded gradually with the passing of years. Byron and Wordsworth, among others, deplored that they could not 'see what they had seen' or 'be what they had been.' Chesterton belongs to the small band of writers on whom age made scarcely any impression. When forty-five, he published, under the title of 'A Second Childhood,'¹¹ a poem which shows that his early vision remained whole:

When all my days are ending,
And I have no song to sing,
I think I shall not be too old,
To stare at everything;
As I stared once at a nursery door

¹¹ *The Ballad of St. Barbara*

Or a tall tree and a swing.

Wherein God's ponderous mercy hangs

On all my sins and me.

Because He does not take away

The terror from the tree,

And stones still shine along the road

That are and cannot be. ...

I am not prepared to say whether Chesterton's faith preserved his sense of wonder or whether his poetical instinct preserved and confirmed his faith. With him the two things are inseparable. We are not dealing with a passing phase in a man's life, but with an essential element of his personality. He felt throughout that he never deserved the blessings he received, that he was not worthy of the joys and the sufferings he experienced. Although he never lost sight of the gulf separating good and evil intentions, as far as man's mind was concerned, he took the universe as a whole, with all its problems and contradictions, as a wonderful gift for which he could never be sufficiently thankful. When he looked at the stars he was not so much awed by the distance which separated him from them, as by their unutterable beauty, and by the magic gift he possessed to perceive their light. The more he pondered on religion, the more he 'rationalized his faith,' the more amazing God and His world became to him.

Strange crawling carpets of the grass,

Wide windows of the sky.

So in this perilous grace of God

With all my sins go I:

And things grow new though I grow old,

Though I grow old and die.



At the time when Chesterton was asserting his doctrine of optimism and acceptance, the intellectual world was divided between those who hailed scientific progress as the liberation of the human mind, and those who, unable to find any guidance in religious belief or comfort in pseudo-scientific philosophy, sought refuge in an atmosphere of morbid gloom. The latter were mostly people of artistic temperament who could not discover any goal for their vague aspirations. Science appeared to them sterile and art only remained, or at least a distorted form of art, feeding on itself and entirely cut off from the main preoccupations of the great mass of the people. Although Chesterton's attacks were directed mostly against this minority, he also concerned himself with the attitude of the worshippers of science and progress.

His criticisms are now mainly of historical interest, not because they were ill-founded, but because recent scientific developments have shown that the position of the materialists was untenable. Few serious scientists uphold to-day that a purely materialistic explanation of the universe can be satisfactory, and strict determinism, as it was understood by Herbert Spencer and Auguste Comte, has died a natural death. The fatalistic meaning attached in the nineteenth century to scientific 'laws' has vanished into thin air and there would be no originality in declaring, at present, as Chesterton did in 1908, that 'to mix science up with philosophy is only to produce a philosophy that has lost all its ideal value and a science that has lost all its practical value.' It has become almost a truism to point out that if the field of scientific inquiry in the physical world is infinite, it remains distinct from the spiritual world and cannot give any solution to such problems as the immortality of the soul and the choice between good and evil, with which it is not concerned. The only logical attitude was

that of the positivists, who refused to consider these problems, but as they happened to be the most urgent which man has to solve in his private and public life, this attitude was scarcely helpful.

As a poet and a theologian Chesterton was naturally more concerned with art and religion, especially in their moral aspects, than with scientific research, but he always rebuked those who accused him of attacking science, because, as he put it, 'he wanted it to be more scientific.' He acknowledged readily the philosophical value of pure knowledge. In one of his latest books, he stated that the mere pleasure of knowing, experienced by the ancient Greek astronomers and mathematicians, was one of the noblest ideals of the ancient world, and that the greatest men of science of to-day have inherited this desire for truth, quite apart from its usefulness. Some of the most important discoveries have been made in that philosophical spirit of disinterestedness, and it is doubtful whether they might have been made otherwise.

The conflict between science and religion only arises under certain definite circumstances. Where, for instance, religious prejudice prevents a student of nature or history from pursuing his work, or when pseudo-scientists hasten to draw from scientific hypothesis general conclusions which affect the conduct of human affairs. Most of the hypotheses which flourished in the nineteenth century having now been abandoned, the polemics which still raged thirty years ago have lost a great deal of their bitterness. As Chesterton pointed out in *As I was Saying*, 'no religious person, unless he is a religious maniac, has any particular reason to resist the advance of physical science, least of all the physical science of the new physicists.' Unhappily the converse truth cannot be stated so readily, and many people are still convinced, in spite of recent experiences,

that, quite apart from its search for knowledge, science has by itself a morally beneficent influence on human life. They cling to the old idea that modern discoveries are the allies of man in his 'fight against nature' and that human happiness depends on their progress. They forget that 'the harnessing of science to hellish engines of destruction has not grown better, because a great deal of blood has flowed under the bridges since old Huxley idealized the social use of science,' and that, 'in spite of the creation of new industries, technical discoveries have thrown, and are still throwing, millions of men out of employment.' They are apt to confuse pure science with applied science, and the machine with the knowledge which allowed its creation. The progress of industrialization is infinite, just as the field of man's knowledge of Nature is infinite, but it has no relation with human happiness; it is an instrument which can be used for good or evil, and which has been used, in fact, in recent years for a great deal of evil. Science which has prompted its development cannot teach us how to use it. We must turn for that to a philosophy which has been too long discarded and to a religion which has been too long neglected. Modern civilization has grown tremendously strong in the arm and correspondingly weak in the head. It may be compared to a child let loose in a laboratory.

In order to recover their religion, those who have unfortunately lost it must place themselves in a religious frame of mind. Before recapturing the spirit of ancient mythologies, they must reawaken their imaginative faculty which brightened their childhood and a sense of wonder which has often been stifled by 'education' and the experience of modern life. The machine is not only dangerous because it is a blind and pitiless servant, but also because it may become a master, and fashion the mind of those who use it. Writing in 1905, Chesterton pointed out

already, in *Heretics*, the superficial character of a 'motor-car civilization going its triumphal way, outstripping time, consuming space, seeing all and seeing nothing, roaring on at last to the capture of the solar system, only to find the sun cockney and the stars suburban.' At that time, writers of a scientific turn of mind, such as H. G. Wells, were prophesying that technical progress would disentangle the knots of past problems merely by more science and experiment. 'What they did not see is that we are always tying new knots and making new tangles, actually because of science and experiment. Progress is the mother of Problems.'

In later years, Chesterton referred to the same question in an essay on the telephone; 'We are incessantly told, he said, that the modern scientific appliances ... are the miracles of man, and the marvels of science, and the wonders of the new world.' The trouble is that these new wonders are apt to lose their glamour. The miracles of the old world, such as the song of birds, the rushing of water and the passing clouds, remain miracles to-day as they were centuries ago, for all those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, but the rapidity in the wonderful inventions which we witness to-day is 'a rapidity in things going stale—a rush downhill to the flat and dreary world of the prosaic; a haste of marvellous things to lose their marvellous character, a deluge of wonders to destroy wonder.' We use the machine mechanically—without realizing its meaning, and are soon bored or even irritated by it. This process of mechanization is also a process of vulgarization. It cannot possibly improve the nature of man. 'Improvement implies all that is commonly called education, and education implies enlargement and especially enlargement of the imagination. It implies exactly that imaginative intensity of appreciation which does not permit anything that might be

vivid or significant to become trivial or vulgar.¹²

The danger of science to-day, or rather of its application, is not so much that it attempts to supersede philosophy or religion in a vain attempt to direct man's destiny and the future of civilization, it is that it may dry up the very sources of this philosophy and religion by blunting the edge of man's admiration and appetite for the world. By constantly using marvellous instruments which he cannot understand, man may lose the sense of more familiar and simpler marvels. He may grow so much into the habit of dealing with magic which can be explained, without asking questions, that he may forget to recognize the everyday magic of this world and of the human soul, which can only be explained by God. A day might come when God's rebuke in the Book of Job is no longer heeded: 'Hath the rain a father? Out of whose womb came the ice? Hast thou sent the rain upon the desert where no man is, and upon the wilderness wherein there is no man?'

The progress of science in the nineteenth century formed a generation of ardent materialists and atheists, the progress of mechanization in the twentieth might form a generation of sceptics too tired to discriminate between horse and horsepower.



We have seen above that when he wrote his early book on Dickens, Chesterton felt strongly the strangeness of the Creation, and even the grotesque character of certain of its features. Like Dickens, he was fascinated by the comedy of life as much as by its beauty and tragedy. It was this feeling which prompted him to accept it so wholeheartedly and to oppose

¹² *As I was Saying*

the laughter of his optimism to the mournful fancies of the pessimists. It is rather remarkable that nearly thirty years later, in his study on St. Thomas Aquinas, he should discover in the thoughts of the great Schoolman the same 'elemental and primitive poetry,' 'that strangeness of things which is the light in all poetry, and indeed in all art,' and which is connected, 'with their otherness, or what is called their objectivity. ... The flower is a vision because it is only a vision. Or, if you will, it is a vision because it is not a dream. This is for the poet the strangeness of stones and trees and solid things; they are strange because they are solid.'

It may be that Chesterton was influenced when reading Aquinas by the memory of his own spiritual experiences. The fact that he is able to connect in this way the poetry of the thirteenth-century philosopher with that of the nineteenth-century novelist is nevertheless startling. If it shows nothing else, it shows that for Chesterton himself, all through his literary career, this belief in the objectivity of the world and its profound reality was the dominant note of his faith.

He has written fine commentaries on the life and the teaching of Christ and a most valuable book on St. Francis of Assisi, but one always feels that he is somewhat reluctant to achieve an easy success by appealing to his readers' sentiments where his faith is concerned. Knowing only too well the danger of emotionalism, he avoids any thought even remotely connected with the sentimental view of Christ. In *The Everlasting Man* he goes purposely out of his way to emphasize certain characteristics of the gospel story which are in flat contradiction to this view, such as the part played in it by Christ's exorcism, the sudden outbreaks of His wrath, the exacting character of His teaching, unrelated to the period and the country in which He lived. He declares that 'a man simply taking the words of the story as they

stand would form an impression ... full of mystery and possibly of inconsistency; but certainly not an impression of mildness.' By shirking these difficulties and insisting on the purely human aspect of Christ's character, we prepare the ground for those who are only too ready to think that He was only a man. The only means of restoring the balance is to get rid of all prejudices and to approach Christianity from outside. 'We must try to shake off the cloud of mere custom and see the thing as new, if only by seeing it as unnatural. Things that may well be familiar so long as familiarity breeds affection had much better become unfamiliar when familiarity breeds contempt.'

The missionary is more concerned with those who do not share his faith than with those who share it. He looks after the stray sheep. He does not spare his trouble, and will teach children to read in the hope that they might one day read their prayers. Chesterton never starts his argument from Revelation, he leads to it. He begins by spelling patiently the agnostic's alphabet. To prove that the gospel story is true he is not satisfied by showing that it is wonderful—for that is only another way of stating the same thing. He shows that no man could ever behave as Christ behaved or speak as He spoke, not merely in the supernatural features of His life and passion, but more particularly in their natural and most familiar aspects. To prove that the Christian religion is the only true religion, he does not content himself by showing the part which it played in Western civilization in protecting women and children, emancipating the poor, educating the ignorant, inspiring art and literature. He prefers to point out that it was accepted because it is the only key which fits the lock, the only religion which is at once simple and complex enough to satisfy human needs. 'The sanity of the world was restored ... by something which did indeed satisfy the two warring tendencies of the past; which had never been satisfied in full, and most

certainly not satisfied together. It met the mythological search for romance by being a story and the philosophical search for truth by being a true story. That is why the ideal figure had to be a historical character, as nobody ever felt even Adonis or Pan to be a historical character. ... But that is also why the historical character had to be the ideal figure ... why he was at once the sacrifice and the feast, why he could be shown under the emblems of the growing vine and the rising sun.'

Chesterton's argument in defence of the dogmas of the Church is equally characteristic. He shows the greatest respect for the attitude of the intelligent sceptics who maintain that, in a limited existence, bound by the chain of causation, it is difficult or even impossible to believe in a religion which allows so much freedom to God and man. Dogma appears to them too good to be true, the crystallization of human desires. Confronted with this objection, he frankly acknowledges that 'religion is revelation. In other words it is a vision, a vision received by faith; but it is a vision of reality. The faith consists of a conviction of its reality.' That is the difference between a vision and a daydream, between religion and mythology. While a daydream may come every day and may be different every day, 'a vision comes very rarely, possibly only once, once and for all.'

It is almost impossible to think that such a deeply religious writer, such an imaginative poet, should have had no experience to relate in this respect. But Chesterton was still more reluctant to speak on this subject than on the emotional appeal of Christianity. The only hint he gives us of such an experience, and it is a very veiled hint, occurs in the first chapter of *The New Jerusalem*. He stood in the corridor of the train which was taking him to Rome, in the first stage of his journey, and looked into the Italian hills, covered with trees, which appeared dark against the dawn. The world was still asleep and, save for

the music of the rocking train, 'there was no sound in all that grey and silver solitude. ... It is common, in such a case, to see some new signal or landmark; but in my experience it is rather the things already grown familiar that suddenly grow strange and significant. A million olives must have passed before I saw the first olive. ... For I remembered at last where I was going. ... It was as if I already saw against the clouds of daybreak that mountain which takes its title from the olive; and standing half visible upon it, a figure at which I did not look. ...'



We have seen above that a cheerful acceptance of the reality of the external world was the very foundation of Chesterton's orthodoxy. This optimistic doctrine might have been prompted by admiration and imagination, by the sense of wonder of childhood developed and stimulated by the 'ethics of Elfland,' but it was nevertheless the basis of a rational conviction. To say 'I believe in this flower' was almost the same thing as saying, 'I believe in God who created it.' It is not likely that he had studied closely the works of Aquinas at this early date. If he had, he would have referred to them in recording his experiences. The realization that what he expressed in 1908, as his personal philosophy, had already been said six centuries before by the founder of Christian philosophy, must have caused him a shock of surprise, not unmixed with pleasure, and we can well understand that he focused his attention on this point when he wrote his commentary on the life and works of the great Schoolman.¹³

The surprising fact about the Thomist doctrine is that it begins with the purely agnostic assertion that 'everything that is

¹³ This is confirmed in the *Autobiography* (p. 151): 'I should have been amazed to know how near in some ways was my "Anything" to the *Ens* of St. Thomas Aquinas.'

in the intellect has been in the senses.' Aquinas adopts almost the same starting-point as Huxley and the nineteenth-century agnostics. Against the Neo-Platonists of his time, he contends that the mind was not lit from within, but 'by five windows, that we call the windows of the senses.' Against ancient and modern heresies, he asserts that 'there is an Is,'—that is to say, that the external world is real, and that we are aware of its existence, and 'upon this sharp pinpoint of reality he rears by long logical process the whole cosmic system of Christendom.'¹⁴

The incompleteness or variability or imperfection of the world, as we observe it, does not show that it does not exist or that it fluctuates aimlessly, but only that what we see is not complete. 'Ice is melted into cold water and cold water is heated into hot water; it cannot be all there at once. But this does not make water unreal or even relative; it only means that its being is limited by being one thing at a time. But the fullness of being is everything that it can be.' Thomism cuts free from the notion favoured by most heretics, that because what we see does not satisfy us, or explain itself, it is not even what we see. 'The defect we see, in what is, is simply that it is not all that is. God is more actual even than Man; more actual even than Matter; for God with all His powers at every moment is immortally in action.'

There is nothing remarkable in the fact that a Catholic writer should devote a book to Aquinas at a time when the work started at Louvain by Cardinal Mercier is bearing fruit, and when Thomist studies have been revived all over the world. But it is indeed worthy of notice that, in developing his own philosophy, Chesterton should have been led to adopt the Thomist principle of acceptance as the fundamental principle of his own personal faith. We might place side by side a number of extracts

¹⁴ *St. Thomas Aquinas*

from *Orthodoxy* and corresponding passages from *St. Thomas Aquinas*, written twenty-five years later, and show that, if they do not completely coincide, they run at least on parallel lines; these lines are always on firm ground, avoiding the marshes of sensibility and the barren summits of emotional fanaticism.



Towards the end of his life, Chesterton wrote an article in answer to an American critic who had expressed a certain astonishment at the fact that, in this changeable world, he had preserved the ordinary ideas of an orthodox. 'I am ordinary,' he wrote in *The Thing*, 'in the correct sense of the word; which means the acceptance of an order; a Creator and a Creation, life and love as gifts permanently good, marriage and chivalry as laws rightly controlling them, and the rest of the normal traditions of our race and religion. ... It would be easy to gush about these things; but ... I hold this view not because it is sensibility, but because it is sense.'

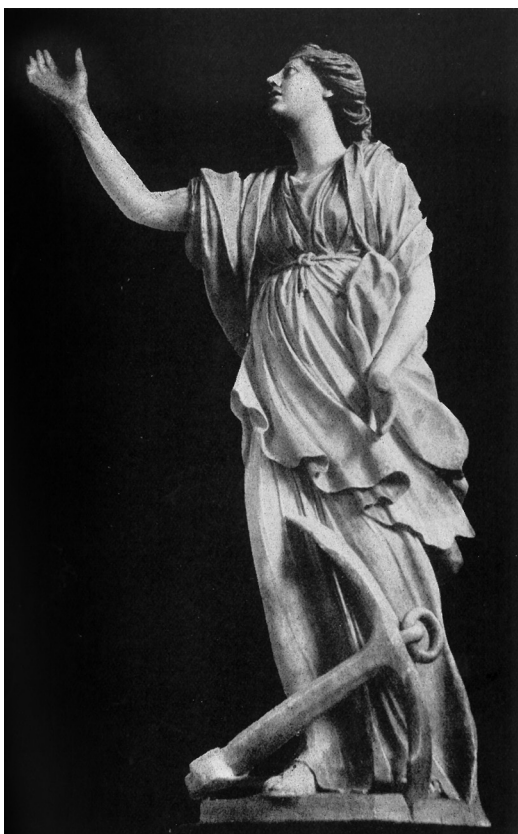
Nobody could call Chesterton either a conservative or a modernist. These words had no meaning in his philosophy; he saw no reason to preserve a thing because it existed or to adopt it because it was new. He had recognized reality, accepted it, and was for ever seeking it through the maze of history and the confusion of the modern world. He had sung many songs on the way, and learned and told many stories. One of these, the finest of all, he found to be true, as true as a stone on his road or a flower in his garden. It gave him 'the key which fitted the lock,' reconciled mythology and philosophy, imagination and reason, and explained hundreds of contradictions which had bewildered his mind. Seen through Christ and Christian inspiration, the world made sense, and assumed a calmer and

nobler beauty, tempered by sacred limitations. He was like a wanderer who had found his way home. He stood on a rock, not on shifting sand. Why should he alter his course, or change his mind because certain people chose to treat life and love like things subjected to passing fashions? He knew why he preferred marriage to free love, justice to lawlessness, charity to greed, frankness to hypocrisy, and a sense of responsibility to a careless fatalism. These things were linked up with a moral tradition two thousand years old and with healthy instincts as old as the world. At the risk of being called an 'obstinate orthodox,' he would not renounce them to follow the last craze of the last crowd. He had lived his faith, and it had proved as solid and as startling as a fact. Reality had become God, as God had become Reality.

One of the most passionate of his poems expresses in a few words this close association of realization and mysticism, of reason and imagination. He always insisted on the strangeness of the world; indeed it was this feeling of strangeness, of surprise which, according to him, allowed us to understand the purpose of a mysterious Creator behind the Creation. Man himself was the queerest of all beasts, so queer that he could not possibly be nothing but a beast. We could see Nature, and we could see Man, but we could not see ourselves from outside; we could not see our virtues and our sins as we could see a bird in the sky or a snake in the grass. It needs a great deal of brutal sincerity and humility to 'realize' oneself. In the 'Sword of Surprise'¹⁵ the poet prays God to sunder himself from his bones, till they stand 'stark and strange as do the trees,' and from his blood, so that it runs 'like branching buried floods that find the sea but never see the sun':

¹⁵ *The Ballad of St. Barbara*

Give me miraculous eyes to see my eyes,
Those rolling mirrors made alone in me,
Terrible crystal more incredible
Than all the things they see.
Sunder me from my soul, that I may see
The sins like streaming wounds, the life's brave beat.
Till I shall save myself, as I would save
A stranger in the street.



CHAPTER II

Hope

IN PRUDENCE'S OLD POEM, *Superbia*, mounted on a fiery steed, challenges the virtuous army and is finally conquered by *Humilitas*, thanks to the timely help of *Spes*, who hands her a sword at the critical moment. The allegory is not pointless, for Hope is not an independent virtue like her sisters. Alone she can achieve nothing; with them she can conquer the world. She is the indispensable helpmate of Faith and Charity who would

soon feel the stress of doubt and disappointment if she did not revive and strengthen them.

Chesterton's attitude was not contemplative. He was too much concerned with human happiness and too keen for a fight, to isolate himself from the world. Throughout his life, he struggled against scepticism and selfishness, and although he felt that he expressed the convictions of a silent majority, he knew that, among those who professed to enlighten public opinion and to influence the destinies of his country, he stood almost alone. He lived in an age of transition where orthodoxy was either scorned or held as an illusion. The whole drift of modernism was against him. It needed all his poetical genius and intellectual power to make himself heard at all, and if in recent years he derived some satisfaction from the progress of his philosophy in English, French, and American intellectual circles, this satisfaction was marred by the fluctuations of European politics and the failure of democracy to assert itself after the war against the rising tide of autocracy. The ground gained by Catholicism was lost by Liberalism, and Naziism and Bolshevism loomed larger and larger on the horizon. He was far too human not to suffer keenly from such disappointments. He might have lost something of the courage which launched his impetuous 'Wild Knight' upon the path of adventures, had not Hope stood by his side. It was no doubt a satisfaction to him to know that he was right, but he derived poor comfort from scoring point after point against his adversaries. A proud man might have rejoiced in these battles. He grieved more and more that they should be necessary, that he should be compelled to repeat the same warnings, the same arguments, to people blinded by prejudice or dazzled by illusion. He fought against odds and more than once his sword was broken by failing health. But the same humility which deprived him of spiritual pride

allowed him to receive the gift of Hope, and the old sword was no sooner shattered, than he found a new one in his hand.

Just as Faith came to him from the consciousness of Reality, Hope arose from the simple blessings of life: love, friendship, the joy derived from adventure, the humorous pageant of the world. He must often have prayed for strength and found his prayers answered, but he was not the man to speak about such matters. He drew a veil over this side of his spiritual life. If, however, he was remarkably reticent concerning the comfort which he received from God, he was quite explicit when he spoke of that which he received from life and love.



I suppose that the first impression which strangers had when they approached Chesterton, was that they had never met a man who showed them so much confidence. He shrank, of course, from shallow effusions as from all artificialities, and resented being lionized. When he could not possibly avoid these painful experiences without being rude, he took refuge in a kind of brooding passive resistance. Under ordinary circumstances, he established with the first newcomer relations of simple familiarity. He took his visitor's sincerity and sympathy for granted. Brotherhood was not for him a high-sounding word, a banner for religious and political clap-trap, but a genuine and irrepressible instinct which could only be checked by blatant indiscretion. He did his interlocutor the honour of agreeing or disagreeing with him without any regard for his social position or his education, and gave him credit for his good intentions. This shy cordiality, very different from the forced heartiness practised in certain circles, was the result of a genuine humility combined with an eager interest in human affairs and human nature. His openness was a sort of spiritual

hospitality. His door stood indeed open and the stranger was as welcome to his thoughts as to his table.

He distinguished himself from most intellectuals by the fact that he was not in the least afraid of being 'taken in.' At a time when a morbid terror of ridicule stifles our best impulses, when we shrink from any word, any gesture which might endanger our reputation for cleverness or clear-sightedness, he proclaimed that life could only be appreciated and enjoyed by those who took such risks gladly and boldly. 'The dupe will make himself happy in the traps that have been laid for him; he will roll in their nets and sleep. ... To be taken in everywhere is to see the inside of everything. ... With torches and trumpets, like a guest, the greenhorn is taken in by Life. And the sceptic is cast out.' Why should we be afraid of making fools of ourselves? 'If a man cannot make a fool of himself, we may be quite certain that the effort is superfluous.' For the greatest fool is not the man who blunders, but the man who misses his chance because he is afraid of blundering.

We should not only accept objective reality in philosophy, and the gifts of God in religion, we should also give ourselves, body and soul, to God and to the world. We are playing a poor game to-day because we are constantly haunted by unjustified criticisms and wrong suspicions. We think that we are cheated of the joy of living by moral restrictions, while these restrictions are the surest guarantee of our happiness, and that we are shorn of our social advantages by cunning intrigues, while the mere idea of such intrigues deprives these advantages of all real value. To be persecuted by the desire of getting on in life and of discovering at the same time its hidden snares, is the worst frame of mind in which men can approach it. We cannot have it both ways. Our gains are in proportion to our risks. We cannot be sure of succeeding even if we offer ourselves, forgetting all

ambition and selfishness, but we can be sure of failing if we attempt to win the game while keeping our stakes in safety. As Chesterton wrote in his 'Fantasia',¹⁶ we must learn to lose our heads and our hearts:

Is there not pardon for the brave
 And broad release above,
 Who lost their heads for liberty,
 Or lost their hearts for love?
 Or is the wise man wise indeed
 Whom larger thoughts keep whole?
 Who sees life equal like a chart,
 Made strong to play the saner part,
 And keep his head and keep his heart,
 And only lose his soul.



Such an attitude of mind must necessarily lead to Romanticism and, compared with most 'advanced thinkers' of his time, more particularly with G. B. Shaw, Chesterton was an incurable romantic as he was an obstinate optimist. He could not, like the Puritan, keep his God and the world in two separate compartments still less could he conceive that a wholesome appetite for life could ever be opposed to the most exalted mysticism. Like Rousseau and the romantic poets, he considered the Creation in the light of his religious ideal, but unlike Rousseau, he believed in original sin or at least in the symbolic truth of the Fall. There is good and evil in the world as there is right and wrong in the human soul, and no possible civilization can flourish without law and order. Chesterton's neo-romanticism must not be confused with the Nature-worship of D. H. Lawrence or the anarchism of Shelley.

¹⁶ *The Ballad of St. Barbara*

Its origin can be traced to Franciscan poetry and to the works of the Christian Renaissance. Nature is the mirror of God, but sometimes a distorted mirror; Man is the image of God, but this image is apt to take strange and cruel shapes. Love has not come only to loosen, but to bind. The glowing fire of enthusiasm and sensibility is cooled by reason. Chesterton forges his romantic iron into true tempered steel.

Nothing shows better this combination of Romanticism and Orthodoxy than his conception of love. The poems written before his marriage, in 1901, reflect all the characteristics of romantic poetry. On a 'Certain Evening'¹⁷ the world and the heavens went mad with joy:

But God Himself cried 'Holiday!'
And she gave me both her hands.

His lady is 'the highest life God made' and, like a true knight, he is prepared to fight any one who does not 'feel himself a crawling thing, a brute at the mere touch of her thin young hands.' It is the 'Unpardonable Sin.' Her figure rises above mankind, which seems nothing compared to her. The 'Hope of the Streets' is the hope of seeing her appear suddenly among the crowds of London, a hope

That 'mid those myriad heads one head find place,
With brown hair curled like breakers of the sea,
And two eyes set so strangely in the face
That all things else are nothing suddenly.

She is the most beatific of all 'beatific visions.' If the poet feels unworthy at seeing 'a dandelion grow,' if his conscience is struck at the sight of grass or of the smallest bird, what shall God not ask of him,

¹⁷ *The Wild Knight*

In the last time when all is told,
Who saw her stand before the hearth,
The firelight garbing her in gold?

The style is vivid and original, but we need not be versed in literature to recognize the inspiration. This blend of mysticism and passion may be found in the medieval romances, in Shakespeare, and in a number of English, French, and German poems of the last century. It has prompted the best and also the worst poetry ever written. The lady—or the gentleman, as the case may be—is endowed with all conceivable goodness and beauty. If the Creation is the mirror of God, the Beloved is the crown of Creation, embodying and concentrating all divine qualities, as far as they may be seen by human eyes and understood by the human mind.

As we turn the pages, we expect to find the usual reactions: The lady dies and is lamented by Lamartine—at least for a few months—she leaves Musset, she is left by Byron and Hugo. The history of romantic love poetry is the history of a series of tragic love affairs. There are a few exceptions, like that of Browning, but generally the ecstasy, justified or unjustified, true or false, is shortlived. The mirror of perfection lies shattered at the poet's feet and the mood of exultant happiness is followed by a mood of desperate melancholy and heartrending variations on the theme of 'Mutability.' Mankind is divided between those who break their hearts in trying to idealize an imperfect world and those who 'keep their hearts and their heads' for fear of making fools of themselves.

Chesterton's originality lies in the fact that he only loses his heart and his head in courtship to find them again in marriage. He launches boldly into the most dazzling adventure, but realizes all the time that there is a price to pay and a bond to keep. 'Keeping to one woman,' he writes in *Orthodoxy*, 'is

a small price for so much as seeing one woman.' To love is to give oneself and who can give with the idea of taking back his gift? How can love be free or a lover wish to be free? 'It is in the nature of love to bind itself and the institution of marriage merely paid the average man the compliment of taking him at his word. Modern sages offer to the lover ... the largest liberties and the fullest irresponsibility; ... they give him every liberty except the liberty to sell his liberty, which is the only one that he wants.'

Love is not merely mutual worship, it is also a contract, an alliance against common foes, a loan of confidence to be repaid in faithfulness, a promise of indulgence and toleration to be redeemed in kindness, a companionship strengthened by adversity. The poet's 'Marriage Song' rings with the lilt of a popular ballad:

Why should we reck of ill or well
While we two ride together?
The fires that over Sodom fell
Would be but sultry weather ...
Why should we reck of grin or groan
While we two ride together?
The triple thunders of the throne
Would be but stormy weather.
For us the last great fight shall roar,
Upon the ultimate plains,
And we shall turn and tell once more
Our love in English lanes.

These lines are extracted from the Poems collected in 1915. Seven years later, dedicating to his wife *The Ballad of St. Barbara*, Chesterton alluded to their twenty years' companionship and to their recent journey to Palestine:

Life is not void or stuff for scorners;
We have laughed loud and kept our love,
We have heard singers in tavern corners

And not forgotten the birds above:
 We have known smiters and sons of thunder
 And not unworthily walked with them,
 We have grown wiser and lost not wonder;
 And we have seen Jerusalem.

Understood in this way, marriage becomes more valuable than romantic love. It rests on a store of common memories, on long years of collaboration, on joys and sorrows shared together, on the preservation and growth of a common ideal, of a common religion. In the eyes of popular wisdom, it may be explained by the saying that 'two is company, three is none,' and in the eyes of mysticism by the words 'one flesh one soul.' Intellectually, a man may call himself a citizen of the world, but his nature is so limited that, if he wishes to feel any kinship with others, he is bound to narrow his circle to his own country, to his own town, to his own friends, to his own home. The feeling increases in proportion with these limitations. The religion of mankind is often a hard religion. It is more wholesome to love one man—or one woman—than to attempt, however sincerely, to love all men. Marriage may be a minimum, but it is a 'Great Minimum.'¹⁸

In a time of sceptic moths and cynic rusts.
 And fatted lives that of their sweetness tire.
 In a world of flying loves and fading lusts.
 It is something to be sure of a desire. ...

Lo, blessed our ears for they have heard,
 Yea, blessed our eyes for they have seen;
 Let thunder break on man and beast and bird
 And the lightning. It is something to have been.



¹⁸ *Poems*, 1915

There is another aspect of hope of which it is more difficult to speak. Hope is not only the comforter, it is also the guide of Faith, who leads her by the hand in dangerous places and helps her to surmount obstacles. She is at the very origin of all mythologies. Their last secret is not 'These things are,' but 'Why cannot these things be?' She lies at the root of all Christian philosophy in the acceptance of Reality and still more in Aquinas' bold assertion: 'Every existence, as such, is good.' She is heard through the paradoxes of the Gospel: 'Whoever will lose his life, the same shall save it.' Other virtues follow the measured steps of Reason; she alone can take these flying leaps in the dark and land on safer ground. It is not for nothing that Giotto gave her wings.

Nowhere is her influence more deeply felt than in moral questions and more particularly in the problem of the existence of evil. Dealing with this problem, in *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton suggests that it is easy enough to make a plan of life of which the background is black, as the pessimists do, and 'admit a spark or two of stardust more or less accidental.' It is equally easy to make another plan on white paper, as the Christian Scientists do, 'and explain away such dots or smudges as may be difficult to deny.' 'Lastly, it is easiest of all, perhaps, to say, as the dualists do, that life is like a chess-board in which black and white are equal. ... But every man feels in his heart that none of these three paper plans is like life; that none of these worlds is one in which he can live. ... These vague but healthy feelings ... would result in the idea that evil is in some way an exception, but an enormous exception. ... He does not think that everything is right, or that everything is wrong, or that everything is equally right and wrong. But he does think that right has a right to be right and therefore a right to be there; and wrong has no right to be wrong and therefore no right to

be there.' This, of course, is only a way of expressing in plain and clear language a truth which has already been expressed by the vivid vision suggested by the Gospel. We are nevertheless entitled to ask what are these 'vague and healthy feelings' which prompt us to discard the three theoretical plans and to adopt the Christian point of view. Observation and reason may help us to ignore extreme solutions, but they will be of little use if we attempt to determine whether there is more evil than good in the world, or vice versa. Faith herself remains powerless for, if you can believe in evil and goodness, you cannot 'believe' that either of them is the rule, or the exception which confirms the rule. Hope alone can take this leap. We can believe that right is right, but we can only hope that right will triumph in the end.

The same applies still more strongly to human salvation. A man can believe in immortality, but he can only hope to be saved. As a matter of fact, he could not 'believe' in his own salvation without endangering it. 'Of all horrible religions, the most horrible is the worship of the god within,' what some people call the Inner Light. We all know how it works: 'That Jones shall worship the god within him turns out ultimately to mean that Jones shall worship Jones.' It is one of the paradoxes of Christianity that we must not only be prepared to lose our life to save it, but that we must entertain a healthy doubt concerning our salvation in order to run the chance of achieving it. 'Self is the Gorgon, we are told in *Heretics*. ... Pride studies it for itself and is turned into stone.'

The relationship between Hope and Humility, in Prudence's poem, is worthy of notice. The disproportion between divine goodness and human weakness is so large that salvation seems far remote. Strangely enough it is only by realizing more and more this disproportion that man may hope to bridge the gulf. We fall if we rise in our own estimation, we rise if we recognize

our worthlessness. 'The meek shall inherit the earth.' The last will be first. Such is the promise—and the hope.



The more we read Chesterton, the more we are struck by his recurring power of refreshing the stalest subject by shedding on it the dew of his humour. The flowers which have lain for long in the dust of pomposity and mawkishness are revived by his laughter and show once more their morning colours. It needs a bold man even to mention true humility to-day, for we still live in the shadow of religious hypocrisy and Uriah Heap stands very close to us. In *The Defendant*, Chesterton gave the following definition of this much abused virtue: 'Humility is the luxurious art of reducing ourselves to a point, not to a small thing or a large one, but to a thing of no size at all, so that to it all the cosmic things are what they really are—of immeasurable stature.' This reference to geometrical abstractions which caused some merriment, in our schooldays, sweeps away at one blow the cobwebs of suspicion and the memories of a hundred dull sermons.

Before teaching us to understand again the full meaning of religious humility, which is so obvious that we have almost forgotten its meaning, Chesterton brings us back to earth, to the formidable importance of small and familiar things. His commentary of a line from Henry Vaughan, in *Alarms and Discursions*, is typical of this method:

Oh, holy hope and high humility.

The adjective 'high' is 'one of the gravest definitions of moral science.' We must always look up not only to God, but to men also, 'seeing more and more all that is towering and mysterious in the dignity and destiny of the lonely house of Adam.' This

thought came to the writer as he was sitting on a hill. The higher the climb, the more abrupt the ascent, the wider is the horizon which stretches at our feet. The valley rises towards us, with its fields, its trees, its towns and villages. It is not a low land, but a 'high plain.' We think that we are going to 'look down at the stars,' but as we reach the top we are really 'looking up at the cities.' 'So it may be hoped, until we die you and I will always look up rather than down at the labours and the habitations of our race; we will lift up our eyes to the valleys from whence cometh our help. ... It is good for our souls to behold from our crumbling turrets the tall plains of equality.'

This sounds a plea in defence of democratic principles, and indeed Chesterton's philosophy is always associated with his politics; but the main purpose of the essay is to show that unless we realize that we are nothing, and that the world around us is everything, we shall never enter the Kingdom of God. We can only raise ourselves by seeing more and more how small we are compared with the life which surrounds us. Against the pessimism of 'Ecclesiastes,' he declares,

There is one creed: 'neath no world-terror's wing
Apples forget to grow on apple-trees.
There is one thing is needful—everything—
The rest is vanity of vanities.

Several volumes could be filled with Chesterton's praise and defence of family habits, homely ritual, Christmas festivities, and the conviviality of the old English inn. It is typical of him that he cannot conjure the vision of afterlife without awaking such familiar scenes. He speaks of the 'tavern at the end of the world' where he will empty 'great flagons' with Dickens, of going to Paradise along the 'Rolling English road' by way of Kensal Green, of seeing 'in evening light the decent inn of Death.' In a more serious mood, he associates Heaven with

home. Even when he states that our 'peace is put in impossible things,' this peace takes the shape of a house, 'The House of Christmas':¹⁹

To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.



An ordinary man cannot spend his life despising himself, but he can improve himself by looking up at the 'higher plains,' and at the thousand simple things which surround him. He can avoid being and feeling superior and cultivate the art of being and feeling ordinary. Morality and democracy meet on the safe ground of small indulgences and venial sins. We should cultivate our imperfections in order to reach the higher perfection of humility. 'If there is one thing worse than the modern weakening of major morals, it is the modern strengthening of minor morals. Thus it is considered more withering to accuse a man of bad taste than of bad ethics.' A spot on his shirt front looks more ominous than a blot on his scutcheon. He will refuse a glass of wine but he will accept a bribe. He will never forget to take his bath, but he may easily forget to keep his promise.

If we cannot be perfect in all things, let us at least be decent in essential things, even at the risk of provoking ridicule. At one time of his life, Chesterton made it a habit of lying in bed and managed to do a good deal of his work in this comfortable

¹⁹ *Poems*, 1915

position. He wrote an essay on the subject, in which he envisaged the possibility of covering the ceiling of his room with drawings with the help of a huge pencil, the use of pails of paint and a large broom having obvious disadvantages. The article ends with a caution: 'If a healthy man lies in bed, let him do it without a rag of excuse; then he will get up a healthy man. If he does it for some secondary hygienic reason, ... he may get up a hypochondriac.'

Owing to his unpunctuality and forgetfulness, he had a number of entertaining travelling experiences. He wrote in *Tremendous Trifles* that 'the only way of catching a train is to miss the train before.' This remarkable discovery led him to wander through a deserted railway station 'as quiet and consoling as a cathedral.' While waiting for the next train, he explored the place, 'extracting chocolates from automatic machines,' obtaining in the same way 'cigarettes, toffee, scent, and other things which he disliked,' even 'weighing himself with sublime results,' filling his mind with the 'sense of the healthiness of popular things, of their essential antiquity and permanence.'

On another journey, he found himself locked up in a third-class railway carriage without a paper to read or a pencil with which to write. Faithful to his belief that everything is interesting, he proceeded to explore his pockets. He found in them, first, a large number of tram tickets, which means 'all that municipal patriotism which is the greatest hope of England'; then, a pocket-knife, which typifies 'one of the most primary of those practical origins upon which, as upon low, thick pillars, our human civilization reposes.' Just as he was thinking that the sharp blade stood for the symbol of the oldest of the needs of man, he extracted from his pocket a box of matches, and he saw 'fire which is stronger even than steel.' Later, came a piece of chalk, standing for all the art of the world; a coin, representing

the image of Caesar, government and order, and many other things of equal importance. The only thing which he could not find was, of course, his railway ticket.

I have dwelt at some length on this short essay because it illustrates Chesterton's method of dealing with small subjects in a large way. Like Ruskin, he could see 'something in everything' and was a master in the art of discovering significant symbols. He loved speaking of trivialities, but they were never trivial in his mind. He recognized human civilization in a knife, a box of matches, and a threepenny bit.

It was the same instinct for humble things which prompted him to speak at great length of food and drink, although he cared far more for their symbolic than for their actual value. They stood for companionship and hospitality. They were linked up with the most respectable traditions of mankind. Even before Christianity had given them a sacramental significance, they played a foremost part in human relationship. The mere act of offering or receiving food established a bond of friendship far closer and lasting than the most sentimental effusions. Chesterton detested drunkenness as sincerely as the most fanatic abstinent, but he defended the right of any sane man to enjoy his glass of beer when and where he liked to take it. He wrote many poems and essays in defence of the country inn, not to mention his long story *The Flying Inn*, but he never attempted to excuse secret or private drinking: 'If the local public-house could be as definite and isolated a place as the local post-office or the local railway-station, if all types of people passed through it for all kinds of refreshments, you would have the same safeguard against a man behaving in a disgusting way in a tavern that you have at present against his behaving in a disgusting way in a post-office; simply the presence of his ordinary sensible neighbours. ... If we made drinking open and

official, we might be taking one step towards making it careless.' For in this matter, as in the matter of lying in bed, indulgence, in order to be harmless, must be taken carelessly.

Food was associated, in Chesterton's mind, with a philosophical craving for solid and concrete things. He praised the kitchen garden and the orchard because they contained things to eat. In his essay on 'The Appetite of Earth,' he wrote that 'the test of true religion is ... that it is always trying to make men feel truths as facts ... always trying to make men, not merely admit the truth, but see, smell, handle, hear, and devour the truth.' That is why the Scriptures are full of living water and heavenly bread, mysterious manna, and dreadful wine. This sense of 'the solidity of things,' of the reality of the world and of religion, 'can only be uttered by the metaphor of eating.'

In the same book, *Alarms and Discursions*, there is an essay on cheese which may be compared with Lamb's well-known essay on roast pork. Food does not only stand for the brotherhood of man and the acceptance of concrete things, it reflects also, when it has not been adulterated by modern society, the infinite variety of the world. The writer wandered, on a lecture tour, through various counties of England and had the opportunity of comparing the 'noble Wensleydale cheese' of Yorkshire with the Cheshire cheese, and a series of other highly renowned and highly flavoured cheeses. He found them all excellent and all different; they varied from valley to valley, and their taste corresponded somehow to the aspect of the country and the character of the people. All good and national things bound up with popular life are varied; bad and artificial things only are uniform: 'You can get a whisky and soda at every outpost of the Empire, ... but you are not tasting or touching any environment, as in the cider of Devonshire or the grapes of the Rhine.'

Such passages gave Chesterton the reputation of being a

kind of English Gargantua, and some people imagined that his table was groaning under the weight of gigantic joints and formidable decanters. As a matter of fact, he was a very moderate eater and was far too absorbed in the conversation to appreciate his food as it deserved to be. Far from being an epicure, he must have reduced many of his hosts to despair by leaving on his plate a dainty bit, emptying his glass at the wrong moment, and thinking aloud when he ought to have concentrated his attention on more important matters. He always smoked cigars, but when he travelled was in the habit of buying them anywhere, preferably in the smallest and shabbiest shops. In short, he was careless and absent-minded in such matters as in other small things, and only emphasized their importance because he knew that a great number of his readers pretended to despise them.

He wrote somewhere that one of the gravest mistakes made in the nineteenth century was the confusion established between moral and spiritual things. People had the strange illusion that, as long as they preserved a detached and somewhat scornful attitude towards sex, food, and small comforts, they were on the right way to salvation. This prejudice was more or less connected with the popular notion, favoured by evolutionists, that man's purpose must be to behave as a superior animal, but 'man is always something better or something worse than an animal; and a mere argument from animal perfection never touches him at all.' Spiritual things are sometimes evil, material things often innocent.



Chesterton's humility did not only prompt him to devote a good deal of his time and attention to homely objects which most intellectuals professed to scorn, he also affected to speak lightly of sacred things which, according to the same prevalent

prejudice, should only be mentioned—if mentioned at all—with due solemnity. We have already examined some of the reasons which led him to assume a frivolous attitude at the beginning of his career. The most important was perhaps his desire to introduce jokes in everything he said and wrote, so that nobody might be induced to ‘sit at his feet.’ He rebuked those who treated him merely as a jester, but he shrank from the very thought of being considered as a spiritual light.

There is a page, in his *William Blake*, which caused great merriment in certain circles and great scandal in others. It is the page in which he indulges in a series of comparisons between certain drinks and certain philosophies and religions: ‘Wine might stand for genuine Catholicism, and ale for genuine Protestantism; for these at least are religions with comfort and strength in them. Clear cold Agnosticism would be clear cold water—an excellent thing if you can get it. Most modern ethical and idealistic movements might well be represented by soda water—which is a fuss about nothing. Mr. Bernard Shaw’s philosophy is exactly like black coffee—it awakens, but it does not really inspire. Modern hygienic materialism is very like cocoa; it would be impossible to express one’s contempt for it in stronger terms than that. ...’ There is no doubt that Chesterton took as much enjoyment in writing these lines as most of his readers in reading them, and I am not prepared to uphold that the feeling which inspired them was one of complete and abject humility. But there is that essential quality in good-humoured laughter that it takes all bitterness from the most stinging criticism. The jester looks up at the thing, even if it is a mad thing.

Chesterton’s attitude concerning family life was still more typical. We have spoken of the essential part which romantic love and the sacrament of marriage play in his philosophy. This does not prevent him from seeing the funny side of married

life, from asserting, for instance, that 'there is no hope for men who do not boast that their wives bully them,' or from writing elsewhere: 'I gravely doubt whether women ever were married by capture. I think they pretended to be; as they do still.' His mind never remained in a complacent mood about the things which were most sacred to him. He was prepared to forestall the critics: of course the wife pretends to be the victim of her husband, the more she does so the stronger she grows; and the husband pretends to be henpecked, the more he does so, the more he is spoilt. These complaints are family jokes which the naïve bachelor happens to take seriously. Even variability, instead of being, as modern novelists contend, a constant source of tragedy, becomes the surest guarantee of stability. No doubt, a woman is not to-day what she will be to-morrow; that is why marriage is so exciting: 'Variability is one of the virtues of woman. It obviates the crude requirements of polygamy. If you have one good wife, you are sure to have a spiritual harem.' Domestic life is full of surprises; mere love affairs are apt to be monotonous. Or again: 'One sun is splendid, six suns would be only vulgar. ... The poetry of love is in following the single woman ... the poetry of religion in worshipping the single star.'²⁰

People say that the family is a bad institution because it is not always congenial, but it would not be half so attractive if it were. 'It is wholesome because it contains so many divergencies. ... The men or women who ... revolt against the family are ... simply revolting against mankind. Aunt Elizabeth is unreasonable, like mankind. Papa is excitable, like mankind. Our younger brother is mischievous, like mankind. Grandpapa is stupid, like the world; he is old, like the world.'²¹ Laughter is not

²⁰ *Tremendous Trifles*

²¹ *Heretics*

only the best means of countering the sneers of the cynics, it is also the best means of restoring the balance of sanity in one's own mind. Lovers laugh at each other, the mother laughs at her child, the patriot laughs at his country. 'Laughter and love are everywhere.'



Answering a correspondent who had rebuked him on account of the flippant manner in which he had spoken of spiritualism, Chesterton justified himself by saying that there was 'a distinct philosophical advantage in using grotesque terms in a serious discussion.' An important subject is universal and the universe is full of comic things. If you disregard them, you are apt to go astray. 'It is the test of a responsible theory,' we are told in *All Things Considered*, 'whether it can take examples from pots and pans and boots and butter tubs. It is the test of a good philosophy whether you can defend it grotesquely. It is the test of a good religion whether you can joke about it.' Nothing can be serious without being grotesque, nothing can be dignified without being undignified. 'Why is it funny that a man should sit down suddenly in the street?' Nobody dreams of laughing at the sight of falling snow, falling roofs, falling thunderbolts. But man happens to be the image of God. 'Only man can be absurd, for only man can be dignified.' No writer was more insistent on human dignity, no writer made better fun of man. 'Man is born to be ridiculous, as can easily be seen if you look at him soon after he is born. ... The grotesqueness of drinking lies in the act of filling yourself like a bottle through a hole. ... All walking is a sort of balancing and there is always in the human being something of a quadruped walking on its hind legs.' Man cannot move without falling into some humorous cockpit, and laughter springs from the shocking contrast between his ideal image and

the ludicrous positions in which he may be placed through any accident such as sneezing or slipping on a banana peel.

So far Chesterton does not stand alone in the artistic world. He follows the great tradition of European caricature and humour which is as old as the tales of Chaucer and the sculptures of the Gothic cathedrals. His originality lies in the fact that he takes a special delight in turning the searchlight of humour not only upon mankind, but upon himself. He is not satisfied with glorifying trivial subjects and making merry with solemn subjects. If it is wholesome that all things and all men should be laughed at, then it is still more wholesome that Chesterton should be laughed at. Let other people take him seriously if they choose, and benefit from his wisdom, but God forbid that he should take himself seriously; if he ever did, his mind would be paralysed and stultified by self-consciousness and self-respect. We may find here and there in European literature a touch of this humorous humility, in Villon and Herrick, for instance, in Lamb and Stevenson, but Chesterton is undoubtedly the only writer who ever combined so much serious wisdom with so much comic self-derision.

He was the only man I ever met who could laugh at his own jokes without spoiling them. This was perhaps because they were directed just as often against himself as against other people. They never seemed to suggest: 'See how clever I am,' but rather, 'Fancy, how silly I can be.' The last one he told me was typical. A workshop had been installed close to his house and the noise it caused was distinctly disturbing. After an exchange of correspondence which had produced no satisfactory result, the author's secretary decided to call on the manager. She concluded her remarks with the words: 'You see, Mr. Chesterton cannot write,' to which the manager, referring to a previous letter, answered innocently: 'We were aware of that.'

It was, I believe, the same day that I learned how he had missed his train on his wedding-day, because he had insisted on stopping on his way to the station, in order to buy a revolver. The luggage having gone ahead and having already been placed in the van, the newly married couple were thus separated from their belongings at a most awkward moment. This reminded me of Chesterton's adventures in Belgium, recorded in *Tremendous Trifles*. How, having taken a tram to get out of Brussels, he was so absorbed in the political discussion in which his neighbours were engaged, that he missed his destination and found himself, as night was closing in, among deserted fields, miles away from the town, without any hope of getting back for dinner. How, on another occasion, he had left Malines in a toy train in the hope of getting to fairyland, and had spent some time among a chessboard of little fields which did not correspond with his nursery visions. Being surprised by rain, he walked back to the cross-roads to take his return train. After a long journey, however, he discovered that he had reached Lierre, instead of Malines. His dream was realized; being 'in the wrong town,' he was in 'the right place'; he had had his adventure. And he promptly celebrated the occasion by a poem written on an old envelope:

Can Man to Mount Olympus rise,
And fancy Primrose Hill the scene?
Can a man walk in Paradise
And think he is in Kensal Green?
And would I take you for Malines,
Not knowing the nobler thing you were?
Oh, Pearl of all the plain, and queen,
The lovely city of Lierre.

Chesterton left to others the painful task of recording their triumphs. He only recorded his failures and gloried over them.

In an age of efficiency, he declared that 'what was worth doing was worth doing badly.' He exulted in being called an 'amateur,' for amateur is only the French name for lover. When he played a game, croquet for instance, he took particular pleasure in his blunders, and proclaimed that 'his balls, impetuous and full of chivalry,' would not 'be confined within the pedantic boundaries of the mere croquet grounds.' He opposed the dauber to the painter, the bad musician to the finest composer. To go on doing things badly shows that you love these things, not for the selfish satisfaction you may derive in doing them well, but for the things themselves, for the unutterable virtue which is in them. It is better to miss a train or to catch the wrong one than to catch the right one, to lose a game than to win it, to ride in a hansom cab than in a four-wheeler, even if the cab collides with a bus, and if you have to crawl out from underneath 'in attitudes so undignified that they must add enormously ... to the pleasure of the people.' He made constant references to his size and to his weight. Speaking of G. B. Shaw's vegetarian theories, he imagined somewhere that all the animals which the dramatist had not eaten might show their gratefulness by taking part in his funeral. If this ever occurred, he would be ready to follow them in the shape of an elephant.



There is no gap in the moralists' philosophy. Hope is allied to Humility, and Humility is achieved through humour. All humorists are simple people. The same cannot be said of wits who may be filled with vanity. Chesterton was witty in the sense that he coined many epigrams, but he did so almost unconsciously, because as a stylist he could not help using a concise formula when it occurred to him. When we read, for instance, that 'the artistic temperament is a disease which afflicts amateurs,' we

are inclined to think that the author is in a satiric mood. Taken separately, the phrase sounds like some of the witticisms with which Wilde and Whistler used to sprinkle their conversation. It scarcely tallies with our philosopher's contention that the true amateur, in the etymological meaning of the word, is almost of greater social value than the expert. But if we place the words in their context, we find that they belong to an essay on the 'Wit of Whistler,' included in *Heretics*, which is nothing but a fierce attack on the aesthetes who are so obsessed by their art that they isolate themselves from the rest of the world. All really great artists were also ordinary men. 'To very great minds the things on which men agree are so immeasurably more important than the things on which they differ, that the latter, for all practical purposes, disappear. ... The first-rate great man is equal to other men, like Shakespeare. The second-rate great man is on his knees to other men, like Whitman. The third-rate great man is superior to other men, like Whistler.' The attack is not directed against the amateur, but against the aesthete.

Humour then, as distinct from wit, shelters us from pride. Of course, jokes are silly; it is their purpose to be so. Yokels, in the village inn, make some heavy jokes, so do schoolboys and soldiers. Wherever healthy men gather together, this mood of mockery creeps in. It may be sometimes oppressive and too personal, but, as long as it remains a mood, it brings man to his senses. We read in *Alarms and Discursions* that 'humour is meant, in a literal sense, to make game of man; to dethrone him from his official dignity and hunt him like game. It is meant to remind us human beings that we have things about us as ungainly and ludicrous as the nose of the elephant or the neck of the giraffe. If laughter does not touch a sort of fundamental folly, it does not do its duty in bringing us back to an enormous and original simplicity.' We are not all sublime, but we are all

grotesque, and it is good for men to concentrate on what they have in common. Pride is a solitary sin. Humility is a social virtue.



Most of the examples quoted above are taken from Chesterton's earlier works, because politicians, scientists, and artists were particularly inclined, in those days, to assume a superior attitude towards the common people. This tendency still prevailed in many quarters in recent years, but it was not so blatant as before. It had been considerably lessened by the trials of the war and the after-war period. Too many reputations had been wrecked, too many bubbles had been pricked to allow personal pride to assert itself to the same extent, and the laughing prophet was not offered so many opportunities of fighting it. But his outlook did not vary. To the last, he insisted on the virtue of laughter. He lost nothing of his philosophical optimism and of his unshakable confidence in man. If political events at home and abroad caused him some disappointments, or confirmed his apprehensions, he learned to consider them with a new sense of proportion, and he realized that a man cannot expect to witness the triumph of his ideals during his lifetime. His hope seemed to grow stronger as the issue of the long conflict in which he had been engaged became more remote. He could contemplate with serenity the failure or transformation of the philosophical doctrines and of the political system which he had fought in his youth. In the turmoil of a vaguer and vaguer scepticism, among the ruins of materialism and hasty scientific generalizations, Orthodoxy remained the only solid foundation of belief. Although the tide of public opinion was still rising against it, and new heresies grew in strength and number, Chesterton watched calmly the course of events.

He was still in the front line, but considered the battle from a new angle. He preserved his humour and his enthusiasm, but he lost a great deal of his impatience. The nearer he came to the goal of his life, the more he felt that he could afford to wait for results. He walked in the shadow of eternity.

We catch something of this new spirit in a preface which he wrote in 1926 for a play based on his first novel: *The Man who was Thursday*. He reminds us of the pessimism which oppressed Western Europe at the end of the last century. 'Our civilization may be breaking up ... but it is not merely closing; and therefore it is not a nightmare, like the narrow despair of the 'nineties. ... In so far as it is breaking up, it may let in a certain amount of daylight as well as a great deal of wind.'

When he was thirty-two, he had protested, in his *Dickens*, against the current idea that hope goes with youth. Speaking of Dickens's experiences in the blacking factory, he had written that 'the bitterness of boyish distresses does not lie in the fact that they are large; it lies in the fact that we do not know that they are small.' This knowledge can only come with age and experience. It is only when we are nearer to the eternal gate that we can learn to place our faith and our hope in eternal things. We remain as children before moral problems, but the accidents of life lose their symbolic value. Success or failure are relative terms, and the gulf which separates them is bridged by death:

'I fancy that hope is the last gift given to man and the only gift not given to youth. Youth is pre-eminently the period in which a man can be lyric, fanatical, poetic; but youth is the period in which a man can be hopeless. The end of every episode is the end of the world. But the power of hoping through everything, the knowledge that the soul survives its adventures, that great inspiration comes to the middle-aged; God has kept

that good wine until now. It is from the backs of the elderly gentlemen that the wings of the butterfly should burst. ... They have discovered their indestructibility. They are in their second and clearer childhood, and there is a meaning in the merriment of their eyes. They have seen the end of the End of the World.'

As far as Chesterton is concerned, this prophecy was fully confirmed. Sixteen years later he sang the splendid visions of this 'Second Childhood';

Men grow too old for love, my love,
Men grow too old for wine,
But I shall not grow too old to see
Unearthly daylight shine,
Changing my chamber's dust to snow
Till I doubt if it be mine.

For humility works in a thousand mysterious ways and there is a close connexion between knowing how imperfect we are, and trusting that God's perfections and mercies are much greater than our gravest faults. His eyes had always been merry, but the meaning of their merriment became more and more apparent as he grew older. From the point of view of Christian Orthodoxy, the world had seemed strange enough to him. How would it appear when he had reached the end of the journey? If Hope becomes larger and larger as we approach the goal, what shape will she take when we have reached it? If Joy and Laughter walked in her track in this world, what will become of them in the next?

When we study a personality we become more easily aware of the features of its character which we possess ourselves, and it is therefore natural that Chesterton should have insisted on the humour and practical optimism of all the literary heroes and saints he admired so much, from Dickens to Joan of Arc and from Browning to St. Francis. There is one page of

Orthodoxy—the last—which he alone could have written. It is the passage in which he declares that ‘Man is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial.’ Christianity alone can satisfy perfectly this ancestral instinct which has been warped by paganism or stifled by agnosticism. ‘We are perhaps permitted tragedy as a sort of merciful comedy: because the frantic energy of divine things would knock us down like a drunken farce. We can take our own tears more lightly than we could take the tremendous levities of the angels.’ Not of the angels only. ... And, opening again ‘the small book from which all Christianity came,’ Chesterton is haunted by the feeling that Christ ‘concealed something. He never concealed His tears. ... He never restrained His anger. ... Yet He concealed something. I say it with reverence; there was in that shattering personality a thread that must be called shyness. There was something that He hid from all men when He went up a mountain to pray. There was something that He covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show when He walked upon the earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth.’



CHAPTER III

Charity

I N ONE OF THE ESSAYS IN *Heretics*, Chesterton insists on the difference existing between Faith, Hope, and Charity and the four theological virtues. The cardinal virtues, or ‘virtues of grace,’ are purely of Christian origin and have been added by the Church to the pagan, or natural, virtues which had already

been praised in Athens and Rome. The first are gay, exuberant, and unreasonable, the second are austere and depend on the exercise of reason. Our whole life bristles with conflicts between justice and charity, for instance. It is not always easy to temper the one with the other, and to follow the promptings of one's heart while giving everybody his due. 'Faith means believing the incredible. Hope means hoping when things are hopeless. ... Charity means pardoning what is unpardonable, ... it is the power of defending what we know to be indefensible. ...' In other words, the three Christian virtues are interdependent. There can be no true hope, no true charity without faith. Faith alone can solve the paradox.

Chesterton agreed with the Socialists that charity, as it is usually understood to-day, 'charity to the deserving poor,' is not charity at all, but justice. If a rich man sacrifices part of his income to relieve the sufferings caused by social circumstances which have largely contributed to make him rich, he is merely fulfilling a social duty. If an employer shares his benefits with his employees, he is just to them, he is righteous, he is not charitable as man should be charitable to man. For it is not to the deserving that such charity should be given, but to the 'undeserving.'

A similar distinction is made, in *Charles Dickens*, between 'pity' and 'charity': 'The practical weakness of the vast mass of modern pity for the poor and the oppressed is precisely that it is merely pity. ... Men feel that the cruelty to the poor is a kind of cruelty to animals. They never feel that it is injustice to equals; nay, it is treachery to comrades.' Similar phrases were written by many social reformers of the period. But Chesterton differs from them in that, far from wishing to abolish the ancient virtue of Charity, he wishes to restore her in her full power and glory. Even if justice were fulfilled and if the deserving obtained

all they deserve, if social barriers were broken and inequalities reduced to a minimum, men would still have to practise charity not only towards the 'waifs and strays' or the 'down and outs,' the sick, the criminals, but towards their own family, their fellow-citizens, people like themselves. They would still have to excuse the inexcusable, to 'pardon the unpardonable,' to scorn worldly treasures and love their neighbours as themselves.

Confronted with the urgent necessity of alleviating, as promptly as possible, the sufferings caused by modern social conditions, the reformers quite naturally concentrated their efforts on obtaining concrete results. Their first aim was to reduce mortality, raise the standard of living, and improve the health of the nation. From this purely material point of view, they achieved considerable results, and, being most of them sceptics or agnostics, entertained the hope that men could acquire happiness once the physical evils which oppressed them had been removed. There was besides, among the Socialists, a strong reaction against the passive attitude fostered, particularly among the peasantry, by religious teaching. They contended that the hope of immortal life was only dangled before the eyes of the masses in order to induce them to accept the abuses from which they suffered. Labour leaders, in every country, scorned the hope of a heavenly paradise which deprived the people of the earthly paradise which they deserved.

Chesterton was one of the few democratic writers, at the beginning of the century, who preserved his sense of the importance of moral values. He agreed that drastic changes were urgently required and fully justified. Unlike the majority of Socialists, he did not even shrink from the prospect of a revolution, if violent measures should become necessary to obtain them. But he constantly warned his readers that the conflict between Capital and Labour, and even between the governing

classes and the people, was only part of the problem. As a democrat, he considered that the dignity and the freedom of the citizen, on the basis established by the French Revolution, were still of greater importance than his material welfare, and that the conquest of the second, however necessary, could not justify the sacrifice of the first. As a Christian, he declared that Charity was at the basis of all Christian civilization, and that, even under the most ideal conditions, her beneficent influence could not be dispensed with. The conventional charity, as it was understood and practised by the upper classes, might perhaps be spared, but the old Caritas would still burn in the heart of every man and woman. A society based on hygiene and strict justice and organized on purely scientific principles might be impossible to live in, and the rule of an aristocracy of experts might become quite as intolerable as the rule of an aristocracy of wealthy people. Saint Paul places Charity above all virtues: 'Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not Charity, it profiteth me nothing.' Chesterton strove all his life to defend this long-suffering, unfailing, humble virtue which had been degraded by her worshippers and scorned by her friends. He believed that the struggle which he witnessed was merely an episode in the long history of Christian civilization, and that no permanent result could be achieved against the fundamental principles of Christianity. These principles were at the root of the French Revolution and of the Socialist agitation of 1848. If they were ignored by the modern materialist, whether Marxist or Conservative, the results of the movement would be worse than the evil which it had set out to cure. The best intentions could not redeem a bad philosophy.

Making use, with apologies, of the well-known poem of Leigh Hunt, Chesterton imagined that Abou Ben Adhem ('may

his tribe decrease—by cautious birth-control and die in peace’) asked the recording angel to write him down as a lover of his fellow-men, on the ground that he had laboured for them, ‘taming the ragged Bedouin’ into service, uprooting vines to prevent drunkenness, and ‘numbering camels and counting wives’:²²

‘And count it a more fruitful work than theirs
Who lift a vain and visionary love
To your vague Allah in the skies above.’ ...
Gently replied the angel of the pen:
‘Labour in peace and love your fellow-men:
And love not God since men alone are dear,
Only fear God; for you have cause to fear.’



We touch here on one of the fundamental points of Chesterton’s philosophy which allows him to harmonize his religious faith with his political convictions. As a democrat, a radical of the old school, he loves man; as a Christian, he loves God in man. He never tires of saying that unless you care for your next-door neighbour, your faith is worthless, and unless you worship God your democratic principles cannot bear fruit.

We have all met one of these passionate idealists who cannot see the trees for the wood, and is so absorbed by his burning desire to help the world that he cannot help his family, his neighbours, and himself. The worship of Humanity, as Auguste Comte understood it, was only a heresy; as practised by some modern humanitarians, it becomes a cold and sometimes cruel kind of idolatry. There is always something cold and cruel in a godless religion, because it encourages spiritual pride and provokes a constant state of anger and irritation. The idealist asks of the world a perfection which the world

²² “*The Philanthropist*” in *The Ballad of St. Barbara*

does not possess. He endeavours to extract absolute values from relative facts. He never ceases from saddling individuals and institutions with the responsibility of unavoidable failures or incomplete results. The fiercest revolutionists are fanatics without the excuse of fanaticism. They attempt to convert Society to their irreligious creed and wax frantic because it does not answer their call.

Chesterton always said that it is impossible to love Mankind; it is only possible to love 'men,' and he loved them not as he imagined them, according to his own prejudices or preferences, but as they were standing around him, in his home, in the houses of his friends and in public places. Like his St. Francis, he 'deliberately did not see the wood for the trees,' he 'did not see the mob for the men. ... Whatever his taste in monsters, he never saw before him a many-headed beast.' He dealt not with abstractions, but nevertheless preserved the conception of Man as an entity, as 'the image of God multiplied but never monotonous.' Indeed Chesterton would have said that it is impossible to love men sensibly unless you believe in God. This is perhaps what Voltaire had at the back of his mind when he wrote that 'if God did not exist, we should invent Him.' A great deal of harm has been done by the idea that religion was essential to the maintenance of social order. There is, however, a special danger in political fanaticism. Man being what he is, it is better for him to ask infinite happiness from an infinite power than from an imperfect and transitory life. In other words, God can only be loved through men and man can only be loved through God. And Christianity differs mainly from other religions because it insists quite as much on the reality of both loves as on the necessity of their relationship, which is typified by the Incarnation.

Christians are accused of hypocrisy because they are seldom

able to practise what they preach, or at least what was preached to them in the Sermon on the Mount. But it is better to fail to reach the right goal than to succeed in reaching the wrong one. The contrast between the 'counsels of perfection' given by Christ, and the poor results obtained by the majority in attempting to follow them, is a stimulant to further efforts; it leaves room for hope and for the right kind of optimism; while the sudden realization that the door we succeeded in opening does not lead to a house, but to an empty gulf, shatters at one blow our universe and leaves us a prey to despair or revolt.



ØChesterton started from the principle that in order to be real a thing must be felt. He could not love Humanity because he could not feel Humanity as a whole. But he could feel a deeper sympathy for unknown people than most 'humanitarians'. 'The love of those we do not know is quite as eternal a sentiment as the love of those we do know,' he wrote in his *Browning*. 'In our friends the richness of life is proved to us by what we have gained; in the faces in the street, the richness of life is proved to us by a hint of what we have lost.' Such a thought is worthy of Walt Whitman or of a French 'unanimiste' poet. In all the essays, all the stories, we feel the same spontaneous instinct for companionship and comradeship, not applied to a limited circle, but extended according to the author's experiences. It is not theoretical, for the unknown faces are appreciated in relation with the familiar faces; it is not narrow, for it follows the lover of men wherever he goes, to Ireland, to America, or to the East. It is nevertheless limited, as all 'real' things must be limited.

From early childhood, Chesterton had always been impressed by the fact that things looked much more vivid and interesting when seen through a frame, like a landscape through a window, or a scene through the opening of a theatre. This observation was confirmed, and completed by the remark that no game can exist without rules, and no excitement derived from it, unless by the implicit acceptance of these rules. The earliest, most spontaneous, and universal games, such as stepping over every alternate stone on the pavement, have their essential character in common with bridge or chess. Now, what is true of games is true of life. Freedom, as such, is meaningless, as meaningless and barbaric as slavery. The highest civilization allows the citizen a maximum of independence within the widest limits. He is free to choose his wife—and bound by the institution of marriage; he is free to give—but not to take; to follow his own religion and philosophy—but not to prevent others from doing so. This gives to life a particular value, like that of a small landscape seen in the background of a primitive picture, in which every detail, every colour, shines with the brightness of a precious stone. As the size—and the freedom—increases, the intensity of colour, the precision of design diminishes. It would be perhaps inaccurate to say that a small panel is of greater artistic value than a large fresco, but there is no doubt concerning the difference of feeling they arouse in us. We admire great things, such as the sea, bright sunsets, mountain scenery, but we cherish small things, children, flowers, brooks, and birds. There is a scale in our affections which corresponds no doubt to our own limitations, in size, in memory, in perception. It is infinitely better to love one woman than to love women, to care for five friends than to care for five hundred, to live in a small house than to live in a large one, and to be loyal to one country, one civilization, one religion, than to attempt to be loyal to all countries, all civilizations, and all religions,

This truism has become almost a paradox in a world hypnotized by technical progress, rapid communications, and the dogma of emancipation, and it needed a paradoxical writer like Chesterton to help us to realize anew its full meaning and its various implications: the value of home life, the happiness derived from modest circumstances, the romance of small things, the danger of Imperialism, the delusion of Cosmopolis, and the heresy of Anarchism. In our affections and in our interests, we should start at the beginning and build our house on solid and real foundations; we should give up the dangerous enterprise of erecting crazy turrets in the air, before our roof is finished. We should not attempt loving Mankind before we have learnt to love men and to understand those nearest to us.

The same obvious remark applies to practically every department of human activity. Many writers have felt with Chesterton that modern civilization has grown superficial, and to a certain extent insincere, owing to our desire to embrace everything and to our habit of estimating values by quantity rather than by quality, by speed rather than by depth. We have lost our delight in workmanship through mass production, the excitement of discovery through well-organized travelling, a great deal of practical knowledge through bookish learning, our rational power through scepticism, and our faith through comparative religion. It was a painful confession to make, and few intellectuals had the courage to make it and to declare, against the prejudices of a self-satisfied generation, that unless we went back to first principles, our efforts would be fruitless.



It is in this light that we should consider Chesterton's criticisms of social reforms which have been so often misunder-

stood. Speaking of St. Francis's charity, he said that every man who approached him, was 'certain that Francis Bernardone was really interested in him, in his own inner individual life from the cradle to the grave, that he himself was being valued and taken seriously, and not merely added to the spoils of some social policy or to the names in some clerical documents.' You cannot appeal to the very soul of a man by giving gold, not even by giving any amount of time or attention, but only by giving respect and consideration, which is the foundation of true charity. A certain look or gesture will do more to save a man from despair than the most generous gifts to an organized institution, or the most conscientious efforts of a State official. When he declared in *What's Wrong with the World* that it was easier to write a cheque for a hospital than to interview the beggars who came to your door, Chesterton did not mean that hospitals were not necessary and did not need all the support we can give them. He simply stated that this was not the kind of charity which would redeem our civilization. When he constantly insisted that a good social organization could not alone satisfy the deepest instinct of man, he did not mean that the claims made by the Socialists were not justified and that some of the reforms they urged were not necessary. He merely meant that the State could not deal with certain matters in the same spirit as the individual. No official could be allowed to squander public money on the undeserving poor, or even to assume the risk of helping one beggar at the cost of being taken in by ten. Organization implied a certain amount of control and supervision; Charity, to remain true to herself, must be free and follow her inspiration. She alone can do the mad things which Justice should carefully avoid, such as running after the robber who has stolen your coat to offer him your cloak.

This attitude must necessarily be exasperating to those who, being in constant touch with physical sufferings, are bending all their energy to relieve them, and are far too busy saving people's lives to consider their susceptibilities. They feel that they are waging a desperate battle and are not inclined to discuss the means which they use to win it, as long as these means yield satisfactory results. They do not necessarily deny moral values, but material values must come first: no man can develop his mind if he is sick or starving. They object that social reform had to step in because Christian charity could no longer cope with the work. Is it wise or sensible to hanker after a past which is a long record of failures and disappointments?

Chesterton answered this objection in *What's Wrong with the World* when he contended that 'the great ideals of the past failed not by being outlived ... but by not being lived enough.' The failure was not caused by the ideal but by an inability to realize it. The same applies to the French Revolution. The wildest Jacobins cannot be made responsible for the fact that a new plutocracy arose on the ruins of the old aristocracy which they had destroyed.

Towards the end of the Middle Ages, social institutions moulded themselves more and more on Christian morality. In most countries of Western Europe the serfs were freed and allowed to cultivate their own farms, the cities had become almost independent and were defended by powerful corporations of workmen. In every town and in the countryside, lay and ecclesiastical fraternities devoted themselves to charitable works. The 'temple' was not yet 'finished,' but it was partly built. Had history developed on the same lines of political regionalism and local independence, and had religious unity been maintained, Europe might have realized a type of harmonious civilization comparable with the civilization of Athens in the

fourth century, or of Rome under the Republic. The end of the sixteenth century may be considered as the beginning of a long period of decadence: 'The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.'

Chesterton did not shut his eyes to the fact that, in a modern world suffering from overcrowding and from the inheritance of a century of intense industrialization, social improvements could no longer be left entirely to private initiative, but he maintained that they should be carried out in a democratic spirit, with due respect for the prejudices and conventions of the poor. He saw the danger of applying to one class of society regulations and restrictions which were not applied to the others, and of increasing indefinitely the power and influence of the State. He did not criticize the aims pursued by the reformers, but the methods which they used in pursuing them. Democracy was not for him merely the equalization of ranks or of fortunes, but the realization of the Christian ideal. In one of his earliest books he had written that Christianity was 'identical with democracy,' and, although experience led him to modify this bold statement, he remained faithful to the last to the conception which inspired it. Socialist writers, like Shaw and Wells, insisted on the idea of justice; with equal energy, Chesterton maintained that Charity was greater even than Justice.



His conception of democracy is intimately connected with his love of men, and he loved men without consideration of class or rank. His charity prompted him, no doubt, to care for the poor rather than for the rich, to show a great deal of indulgence for the first and some severity for the second. He did this, however, without any class-consciousness, prompted

by the instinct that sympathy should be given where it is most wanted. Intellectually he was naturally attracted, like Dickens, towards the vagabonds of modern society, who appeared to him far more interesting than the conventional products of a particular class or set. But he loved a man for his human qualities, that is to say for the qualities which he shared with the vast majority of his fellow-men. Had he written a morality play, Everyman or Anybody would have been his hero. In *What's Wrong with the World*, he imagines that he is looking through the window at the first passer-by. The Liberals may have swept the country, but he may not be a Liberal; the Bible may be read in every school, but he may not believe in the Bible. You would not lay any bet on his politics or his religion; but you would bet 'that he believes in wearing clothes, that he believes that courage is a fine thing or that parents have authority over their children.' There is a common fund of traditions which you will observe in any tavern. 'That is the real English law. ... The first man you see from the window, he is the King of England.'

He dwells on the same point in *Orthodoxy*: 'The essential things in men are the things which they have in common, not the things they hold separately.' It does not matter so much whether you play the organ, discover the North Pole, or attempt any other feat in which better-trained men excel. But it matters tremendously to the country whether you can bring up your family and exercise your political rights: 'The most important things must be left to ordinary men themselves—the mating of the sexes, the rearing of the young, the laws of the State'; those are the things which nobody can do for you. There are certain responsibilities which cannot be delegated to the most reliable expert, as for instance determining the guilt or innocence of a man suspected of a crime.

In *Tremendous Trifles*, he tells us how he was called upon to sit through a trial as a jurymen. It appeared to him odd that he should have been chosen to discharge this grave duty simply because he lived in Battersea and his name began with C. He wondered why 'at one official blow, Battersea' should be 'denuded of all its C's, and left to get on as best it could with the rest of the alphabet. A Cumberpatch is missing from one street—a Chyzolpop from another—three Chucktersfields from Chucktersfield House; the children are crying for an absent Cadgerboy.' The essay ends on a different note. It occurs to Chesterton to ask himself, while following the trial, why such an important function should be entrusted to twelve men chosen at random, while so many distinguished judges seem far better prepared to discharge it. Is it not because these judges and magistrates have grown so accustomed to the drama which is enacted before them that they may be unable to feel its dramatic importance? 'When our civilization wants a library catalogued, or the solar system discovered, or any trifle of that kind, it uses up its specialists. But when it wishes anything done which is really serious, it collects twelve of the ordinary men standing round. The same thing was done, if I remember right, by the Founder of Christianity.'



Chesterton does not only love Everyman. He trusts him, which is more than most reformers do. People, more particularly when they are poor, are supposed not to know what is good for them. If they are ignorant, they must be educated; if they are careless in their habits, they must be shown to be careful; if they like to spend their money on drink or ribbons, they must be taught to keep it for more useful things. Any luxury

should be denied to those who have scarcely the means to feed themselves. It is all very logical and reasonable, but it is not respectful. It is the way beasts should be treated, not adult men and women, not free citizens, 'Kings and queens of England.' It is agreed that children's whims should be occasionally indulged in, that they should be given games and recreations. Do not men deserve as much consideration as children? It is part of their privilege that they should 'play the fool' sometimes; it is part of their freedom that they should be occasionally careless and improvident. Happiness depends on small things as well as on 'indispensable' things. The most miserable tramp is happier than the best-fed convict, and a perfectly regulated society may easily become as oppressive as a prison.

Such ideas recur again and again in Chesterton's works. He insists on the poetry of life—even of life in the slums. All traditions are respectable, since they embody the opinions and feelings of past generations—the 'democracy of the dead.' But the traditions of the poor are eminently respectable, because they express aspirations which have been maintained among the most depressing surroundings and which have survived a long struggle against the relentless influence of industrialism. They preserve ideas and customs as old as Christianity which have disappeared elsewhere, and are to-day almost forgotten among the well-to-do. We understand them when they are recorded in history books, we despise them as 'strange and barbaric' when we meet them in the street.

Chesterton gives a few instances of this in *What's Wrong with the World*: 'Working men have a tradition that if one is talking about a vile thing, it is better to talk of it in coarse language; one is the less likely to be seduced into excusing it.' Mankind had the same traditions until the Puritans discovered that what you said did not matter, so long as you said it with long words and 'a long

face.' The same applies to popular jokes about personal appearance, which have been constantly practised by Shakespeare, Molière, and all great humorists—and to the luxury of standing drinks and accepting them, which is as old as Noah's vineyard. No practice has been so unfairly criticized as the way the poor love to surround death with ceremonial and to 'make a display about their bereavement.' They are right again. They know what we all used to know formerly that 'the way to lessen sorrow is to make a lot of it ... to permit people who must feel sad, at least to feel important.' All these things which the philanthropists criticize in the life of the poor are things which they themselves have lost, but which have been and are still felt by all great poets and artists. You cannot condemn them without condemning Shakespeare, Homer, Dante, and Dickens.

There is no greater mistake than to believe that a man's wisdom and common sense increase with his learning. We are grown so proud of the progress of our education that we have come to think that life can teach us nothing which we could not learn from books. This kind of prejudice leads us to despise the plain talk of working people, until we remember that our own nurse understood us far better than our teacher, and that an old gardener of our acquaintance gave us sounder advice on life and men than the cleverest people we have met. Had Chesterton been a novelist, he would have certainly been accused of 'idealizing' the slums. Like Dickens, he showed the 'other side of the picture,' the contrast between the weak pessimism of the rich and the cheerful optimism of the poor. His insistence is justified by the fact that the faintest smile looks more happy in the East of London than the loudest laughter in the West. 'The cheeriness of the poor is startling enough to be the foundation of a miracle play; and certainly is startling enough to be the foundation of a romance.'



People displaying so much courage, such inexhaustible patience, deserve far more respect and 'courtesy' than many rich people who waste their opportunities in idleness and senseless pleasures. To impose upon them different laws and regulations is not only rank injustice, but a betrayal of the most elementary principle of Christian charity. Any material advantage which they derive from this treatment is more than compensated for by the moral indignity inflicted upon them. Any system which disregards the private feelings of the poor or which discriminates between them and the rich can never bring with it any contentment; it can only provoke open revolt or a humiliating submission. Philanthropists should not wonder that, in spite of the material improvements which have taken place during the last generation, extremists should still exert a great influence. They have only themselves to blame for it. As long as man remains man, he will resent any undue interference in his private affairs far more bitterly than any privation. If he is compelled to reduce the number of his meals, he may still reduce it as he pleases, but if he may no longer manage his own affairs, he loses his self-respect, his reputation, all the traditional feelings which have kept him away from the workhouse.

Chesterton stood for the principles of the French Revolution and for the individual freedom of the citizen, but it must never be forgotten that his political convictions were the outcome of his orthodox faith. He made no distinction between public and private morality, politics and philosophy; he could not understand the sceptical attitude which led so many politicians towards opportunism. After severing his connexions with Liberalism when, according to him, 'it had ceased to be liberal,' he parted company with Socialism when it had become

Marxist. His criticisms were directed indiscriminately against any legislation which encroached upon individual freedom, but his individualism was based on moral, not on economic foundations.

He held no brief for private enterprise and modern finance, but fought unceasingly for the preservation of home life and free social intercourse, threatened alike by Capitalism and Communism. Indeed his main reproach against the Marxists was that, far from abolishing Capitalism, they adopted its methods. They had started by protesting against the abuses of a system which proclaimed itself individualistic, and prevented the citizen from exercising his rights by concentrating Capital in a few hands—and ended by building up an organization which deprived the citizen of individual freedom, and made him the servant of the State. ‘Communism,’ he wrote in one of his last essays, ‘is the child of Capitalism; and the son would still greatly resemble his father even if he had really killed him. Even if we had what is called the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, there would be the same mechanical monotony in dealing with the mob of Dictators as in dealing with the mob of wage-slaves.’²³ He directed similar attacks against the totalitarian State or any society in which there would be the ‘same sense of swarms of featureless human beings who were hardly human, swarms coming out of a hive whether to store or to sting.’ This warning, uttered in *Orthodoxy*, was only too clearly justified during the last years of the prophet’s life. The struggle for emancipation started in 1789 and resumed in 1848 had ended in enslavement; the old democracy had proclaimed the Rights of Man against the autocracy of the Dynasts, the new democracy had deliberately sacrificed them on the altar of State- or Race-worship.

²³ *As I was Saying*

If we keep in mind the definition given above of the democratic doctrine: 'that the most terribly important things,' in social life, 'must be left to ordinary men'—not to experts or officials, however learned or zealous—we will be able to appreciate the gulf which separates Chesterton's individualism from the main political tendency prevalent to-day, not only in autocratic countries, but even in those where some features of the old democratic spirit have been preserved. It has become a very debatable point whether Everyman will retain for long the right of choosing his mate, of directing the education of his children, or of controlling legislation through Parliament. The democratic ideal has been replaced by a kind of herd instinct and the spirit of the City by the 'spirit of the hive.' Man is turned into a Robot. 'I cannot believe,' wrote Chesterton towards the end of his life, 'that any human being is fundamentally happier for being finally lost in a crowd ... I think every man must desire more or less to figure as a figure and not merely as a moving landscape made of figures.'²⁴ For, among the many features which men have in common is a desire for self-expression, for doing things in their own way. The 'image of God' is not a pattern, like the pattern of a wallpaper, it is stranger than any creature in the Creation, and it is this very strangeness which brings it closer to the Creator.

This belief may not be popular just now, but it is backed by centuries of historical traditions, craftsmanship, art, and literature. It appears every day more evident that, where it is denied, religion is forgotten or persecuted. The decadence of democracy must bring about the decadence of Christianity.



²⁴ *As I was Saying*

The conflict between Chesterton and the social reformer was, at the same time, a conflict of philosophy and of mentality. They both practised charity, but each conceived it in a different way; they both wished to make man happier, but each looked at happiness from a different point of view. The charity of the philanthropist was based on the idea that the position of the poor was so desperate that everything should be sacrificed in order to save the race. He did not place himself in the situation of the slum dweller, because he could not imagine himself in such a situation without losing his self-respect. Having spent his life among comfortable if not luxurious surroundings, and accustomed to estimate men's value according to their income, it seemed to him unthinkable that any man or woman, under such circumstances, should still be able to preserve the delicacy of feeling and the susceptibilities of the upper classes. A poor man was for him the image of what he would himself become if he were suddenly plunged into destitution. He pitied him as he would have pitied himself, and no doubt strove to do for him what he would have wished others to do for himself.

Modern charity became more and more a problem which could only be solved, or at least partly solved, through the careful handling of statistics. The poor man ceased to be an individual, he became a unit in a crowd which had to be weighed and measured, controlled and inspected. The sacrifice of large sums of private and public money devoted to his relief led those who administered these sums to think that their right and duty was to take all measures which brought about any material improvement, whether these measures were welcome or not. The old idea that the poor were entirely responsible for their lot could no longer be defended, but it gave place to a new idea which is still widespread among philanthropists that 'the poor are their own worst enemies'—that is to say that, having been

placed in the dreadful situation they occupy, they are utterly incapable of taking those important decisions in life which it is the privilege of every free citizen to take. This conviction was strengthened by the appalling increase of insanity and by the high birth-rate among the unfit, compared with that among the middle classes, which threatened to lower the physical standard of the nation. It became more and more urgent to 'save' the poor (and more particularly their children), if possible with their agreement, but, if necessary, in spite of themselves.

This was the attitude of mind which provoked Chesterton's constant protests. He had not studied the poor according to scientific methods, but his philosophy and religion told him that if some of the reforms were necessary and justified, others infringed the limits beyond which no State interference could be exercised without jeopardizing democratic principles and challenging Christian morality. He refused to draw any distinction between the destitute and the rest of the nation and to consider them as an anonymous crowd. He approached this question, not from the outside, like the sociologists, but from the inside as Dickens and the best modern novelists had done before him. As an imaginative poet devoid of any vestige of pride, he had no difficulty in placing himself in the position of the poor, and what he saw and what he heard of them persuaded him that they preserved a number of invaluable traditions and individual characteristics which deserve not only respect, but admiration. It seemed to him that it was nothing short of an outrage to deny them the free exercise of their rights or to impose upon them special restrictions. When the apostles of prohibition and birth-control opposed his protests with ominous prophecies drawn from recent statistics, he launched against them much graver prophecies showing the future decay of democracy and the destruction of Christian civilization.

They counted the bodies which they wished to save; he retorted by counting the souls which would be lost if certain means were used to save the bodies. The conflict between the champions of physical and moral values is likely to be prolonged. When its history is written, it will be remembered that Chesterton was one of the first independent writers who uttered a cry of warning at a time when the best men in England and Europe had almost forgotten that there were two sides to the crucial problems which they were endeavouring to solve.

No doubt has ever been expressed concerning the sincerity which prompted this campaign. It was not likely to be popular or to increase the author's literary reputation. Glancing through the list of his works, we find that he wrote no less than six books, several pamphlets, and numberless articles on questions such as divorce, popular education, drink restrictions, and birth-control.



These two last questions may be taken as examples of the great energy with which the laughing prophet conducted his crusade. No verses of Chesterton are so well known as those which appeared in 1914, in *The Flying Inn*, published later under the title *Wine, Water, and Song*. We all remember the refrain of the great poem in which the story of the Flood is parodied:

But Noah he sinned, and we have sinned; on tipsy feet we trod,
Till a great big black teetotaller was sent to us for a rod,
And you can't get wine at a P.S.A., or chapel or Eisteddfod,
For the curse of water has come again because of the wrath of God,
And water is on the Bishop's board and the Higher Thinker's
shrine,
But I don't care where the water goes if it doesn't get into the wine.

We have not forgotten that it is not safe to give cakes to the

Patron of England 'unless you give him ale,' and to give him nuts 'unless you give him wine.' We treasure the memory of 'the rolling English road' made by 'the rolling English drunkard' which leads 'to Birmingham by way of Beachy Head,' and we still fancy ourselves

In the happy town of Roundabout
That makes the world go round.

But there was a more serious side to these outbursts, and Chesterton was very much in earnest when he defended the poor man's right to drink his glass of beer when and where he liked. Drink regulations appeared to him particularly humiliating because they controlled one of the cheapest indulgences of the working man and were so easily evaded by the well-to-do. To those who remarked that he attached too much importance to this question, he answered that such restrictions had a symbolic value. In one of his essays he remarked that if some autocrat were able to compel all citizens to make the same gesture every day, at an appointed time, the harm caused by such apparently trivial measure would be beyond estimation. He might have quoted the classical example of William Tell, who, by refusing to salute Gessler's hat, ultimately saved the independence of his country.

He retorted that it was not he, but the prohibitionists, vegetarians, and other 'fadists' who lacked a due sense of proportion. Modern moralists had grown very stern on minor points of hygiene and diet, but very lax on major questions of honesty and truthfulness. Their religion was made up of small observances, but disregarded first principles. While scorning the theological disputes of the 'Dark Ages,' and the intolerance of the Catholic Church, they pursued their propaganda with a fanatic zeal worthy of a better cause. The reproach which

Chesterton made to these reformers was that they shirked the main issue. They started at the wrong end. In their wish to obtain some concrete results, they denounced some evil caused by social conditions and attempted to suppress it, while maintaining the social conditions. People would not drink so much if their homes were less gloomy and miserable, or if they were able to meet in comfortable and spacious clubs instead of being 'boxed up' in a bar. The best way to check drunkenness would obviously be to improve housing conditions or to provide such clubs. It was cheaper and easier to close the bars. The prophet's forebodings were confirmed by the progress made by prohibition in England, after the war, and by its complete, if temporary, success in America. He had been right in foreseeing that drink restrictions might lead to the destruction of the Englishman's liberties, and that the last standard of freedom might be the sign of his 'Flying Inn.' The comedy of 1914 had become a tragedy in 1922, when he published his *Eugenics and Other Evils*.

His case against the prohibitionist was not so much based on the reform itself than on the attitude of mind which prompted it. If it were said that no drinker should be allowed more than a certain amount of beer or wine because the abuse of his right to drink might lead to offences against the law, and infringe upon the right of his neighbours to spend a peaceful evening, the danger would not be so great. 'But the whole ground of argument is now changed. For people do not consider what the drunkard does to others ... but what he does to himself. The argument is based on health; and it is said that the Government must safeguard the health of the community. And the moment that is said, there ceases to be a shadow of difference between beer ... tea, tobacco, and twenty other things.' If the hygienist is to control 'the health of the community, he must necessarily control all the habits of the citizens, and among the rest, their

habits in the matter of sex.’

What is becoming particularly dangerous to-day is that the very principle of liberty is being challenged. Freedom of thought has led men to question the principle of freedom. Scepticism, having destroyed all dogma, is destroying the very dogma which gave it the right to express itself. The autocrat of the old school recognized popular liberty even when he restricted it. When he did so, he assumed control of the conduct of foreign affairs or of public finances, but he generally left the citizen undisturbed in his own house, as long as he did not meddle in politics. The new autocrat strikes at the very centre of our private lives and violates the sanctuary of the human soul. ‘If a man’s personal health is a public concern, his most private acts are *more* public than his most public acts. ... The private citizen must have *less* to say about his bath or his bedroom window than about his vote or his bank account.’ ... A time may come when his opinion may still be wanted about foreign questions with which he is only remotely concerned, but when he will be denied to say what is good or bad for his child. ‘He will be consulted about the delicate diplomatic crisis created by the proposed marriage of the Emperor of China, and not allowed to marry as he pleases.’ When ‘health and the humours of daily life have passed into the domain of social discipline, ... when all law begins, so to speak, next to the skin or nearest the vitals—then indeed it will appear absurd that marriage and maternity should not be similarly ordered.’

Here again the prophecy was fulfilled. Sex restrictions in Germany followed drink restrictions in America, and the first measures coincided with religious persecutions against Catholics and Protestants. It appeared more and more evident that Christianity and Liberty must die or live together.



In this same book on Eugenics, Chesterton tells us that, as he was approaching the coast of America, he heard a young Scottish engineer sing a music-hall song which seemed to him to summarize the plight in which the modern working-classes find themselves to-day:

Father's got the sack from the water-works,
For smoking of his old cherry-briar;
Father's got the sack from the water-works
'Cos he might set the water-works on fire.

'Father' stands for the ancient tradition of family threatened by the zeal of modern legislators; the 'water-works' for the anonymous employer who may dismiss his employee for infringing any regulation which he wishes to impose upon him; the old cherry-briar, for the last 'household goods' which are also the 'household gods' of the poor, the last vestige of a sacred right of property; and the last line is a masterpiece of popular humour which must be left to speak for itself. 'Like the lovely single lines of the great poets, it is so full, so final, so perfect a picture of all the laws we pass and all the reasons we give for them ... that the pen falls even from the hands of the commentator.'

Like the general on the battlefield, the laughing prophet surveys the various points raised by his text. Where do we stand to-day? 'Property has not quite vanished; slavery has not quite arrived; marriage exists under difficulties, social regimentation exists under restraint, or rather under subterfuge.' He asks himself if the old forces will be able to resist the new, and admits candidly that they are placed 'under more than one heavy handicap.' The family feeling has ceased to be an ideal to become an obscure instinct, because the majority of the poorer classes have lost the Christian faith which fostered it. 'Religion is the

practical protection of an ideal which has to be popular and which has to be pugnacious.'

The abuse of individual freedom by the rich in economic matters has led to the sacrifice of the individual freedom of the poor. The neglect of the ancient *Caritas*, as St. Paul understood it, the love of man through God and of God through man, has brought about the rule of a new charity which has come to mean public health, under supervision. The children of Charity will be called charity children. 'The English will have destroyed England.'

It is possible that the great optimist darkened the picture, in true prophetic style, to stir our indignation. His vision is, at any rate, a healthy antidote against a number of modern Utopias drawn by writers dazzled by technical progress. Some pages ring with a scathing sarcasm and a burning anger which may wound certain susceptibilities. Chesterton was aware of this; 'I know,' he wrote, 'that many who set such machinery into motion do so from motives of sincere but confused compassion, and many more from a dull but not dishonourable medical or legal habit.' He begged his opponents to be patient 'with his impatience.' Had they not the support of the popular press, and of scientific opinion, while he and his friends were engaged on a 'thankless' task? 'Those we serve will never rule and those we pity will never rise.'

The defenders of medieval Charity may receive reinforcements from the most unexpected quarters. Chesterton was able to point out that the failure of prohibition in America was partly due to the fact that the experts themselves had to admit that the evil it produced was worse than the evil it attempted to cure. Had he lived long enough, he would perhaps have been able to show that the same conclusion would be reached with regard to birth-control, and that scientists would soon be far more alarmed by the rapid decrease of the population than

they had ever been by its sudden increase. A society deprived of religion and philosophy can only learn by experience.



CHAPTER IV

Wisdom

LIKE ALL THE BEST THINGS in the world, philosophy needs no justification. It is an end in itself, but it aims, at the same time, at setting down certain principles. Some rules, some laws are good as far as they agree with these principles, and bad as far as they disagree with them. It is therefore

possible to foresee—supposing of course the principles to be right—whether such measures will bring about happiness or unhappiness, raise or lower the standard of public morality. All the ancient Utopias, from Plato to More, were based on this assumption. They were founded on a few simple ideas which could be elaborated *ad infinitum*, according to the wit or imagination of the philosopher. The future was always based on the past, the complex legislation on an elementary code of honour. It is only in recent times that we have learnt to build on hypothetical events and to deduct men's actions from the technical equipment they may, one day, possess. Without philosophy, or at least without belief, we are driven into rash actions and hasty reactions. We become the playthings of circumstances. We lack Saint Thomas's *Prudentia*, a far bolder quality than faint-hearted 'Prudence'; for we need not always be on the safe side in order to be on the side of wisdom. Father Brown was innocent and wise; he was anything but prudent.



It was my great ambition, twenty years ago, to reveal Chesterton's works to the French reading public. As a matter of fact, my intervention was scarcely required. Two of his books had already been translated, and as soon as I had to abandon the task, several distinguished writers took it up promptly and efficiently. I was still young enough to exaggerate the importance of my personal efforts and had set my heart on writing a French version of *Orthodoxy*. My proposals were, however, politely declined. French editors, at the time, looked askance at a title which was in itself a challenge to public opinion. One of them suggested, however, that I should translate *The Innocence of Father Brown* which had been published a few years before.

I remember my indignation at being asked for detective stories when I offered a philosophical confession which should have revolutionized modern thought. Lacking prudence or wisdom, I had to learn by experience, and *La Clairvoyance du Père Brown* proved to be a most valuable experience.

It taught me, among other things, that Chesterton's stories were as far remote from Conan Doyle's as Father Brown from Sherlock Holmes, or Flambeau from 'my dear Watson.' I was struck not only by the peculiar method used by the author to create his atmosphere, but by the philosophical meaning underlying the plot. The familiar game of discovering the criminal after all the more likely people had been suspected in turn, had become the least important feature of the story. Each picture was an allegory, an example of wisdom, and this wisdom depended not so much on the act of exercising one's reason on subtle inductions or deductions, as on the courage of following one's instinct. The little Father was not 'clever,' he was far-sighted. He did not solve the problem because he knew everything, but because he believed very firmly in a few things. He did not see because he crawled on the grass or on carpets with powerful lenses, but because he felt in his conscience that certain things were possible and others impossible. He did not follow the winding road with untiring steps, he took a short cut, disappeared for a time from the scene, and reappeared at the top of the hill dangling from his finger the golden key for which his companions had been hunting in the dust. He did not move relentlessly like a bloodhound, he rose like a skylark and surveyed the landscape from the clouds. If I could not translate *Orthodoxy*, I was at least able to translate the Orthodox. Brown was the type of the good Samaritan, of a true Christian philosopher roaming among strange and sinister adventures.

A subsequent volume was called *The Wisdom of Father Brown*. The little priest was as wise as he was innocent. Indeed, he could never have been so wise if he had not preserved his childlike attitude of mind. He shared the child's complete lack of prejudice, and his almost unfailing instinct which led him to trust goodness and shrink from evil. He did not reach his conclusions by elaborate calculations; they came upon him like a flash of lightning, which convulsed him with laughter at his own imbecility or sent him helter-skelter to prevent a tragedy. He never took things for granted. He suspected the comic policeman in the Christmas pantomime to be a true policeman; he discovered that the 'invisible man,' who brought messages and removed the corpse of his enemy, must be a postman shouldering his bag, the man whom nobody saw because everybody was accustomed to see him; he guessed that a clever thief might assume, at the same time, the disguise of an aristocratic gentleman dining at an exclusive club, and of a well-trained waiter removing the silver. On other occasions, he was guided by a sixth sense which told him that a false prophet, like Kalon, could not be so absorbed in his prayer to the sun not to hear the cry of terror aroused by the tragic death he had caused; and that a poet, like Quinton, could not cut his paper in such a 'wrong' shape, as the one upon which he wrote his confession of suicide. Every story was a new illustration of this quaint innocent wisdom, based on plain common sense and mystic divination.

Writing and reading detective stories was one of Chesterton's great hobbies. His appetite for this kind of literature was inexhaustible, and he was not in the least ashamed of it. I saw him once emerge from his study carrying an enormous pile of books which he proceeded to distribute among some of his younger relatives with the same delight with which he would have given away sweets to little children at a Christmas party.

He even wrote an essay on the subject of 'Shockers'²⁵ in which he gave remarkably sound advice to the authors engaged on exploiting this branch of literary industry. Shockers were for him a new form of adventure story. They might be as gory as the author wished to make them, but they should remain 'gay, innocent, and refreshing.' They might be taken seriously, but they should not take themselves seriously. The author should avoid including the 'dogmas of modern psychology' among his bag of tricks, or overloading his realistic atmosphere with elaborate descriptions of the underworld. The shocker should be light on his toes, like a good boxer, and keep on smiling even when it administered its most severe punches.

Chesterton was consistent with these views. There is not one of his stories in which one does not feel an undercurrent of humour and which does not produce also a peculiar thrill. This thrill is concerned far more with the 'conscience and the will' of the characters than with the ingenious means which they use to achieve their ends. 'There can never be quite so much excitement over the mechanical truth of how a man managed to do something difficult as over the mere fact that he wanted to do it.' Father Brown prefers therefore to remain 'innocent' or 'wise' in his quiet owlish way. Being on moral ground, he is able to take the short cut of intuition and to guess the truth before any of his companions. All the tales are not equally good, but they lead to the same conclusion; the story-writer never wrote a line which did not express his philosophy of life. It is impossible to lose oneself among these fantastic plots, for they all lead to the same goal; they are variations on the same theme. The innocent wisdom of Father Brown is the innocent wisdom of G. K. Chesterton.

²⁵ *As I was Saying*



However irrelevant it may appear at first sight, we may be justified in following Father Brown from the strange places in which he exercised his genius as a spiritual detective to the little room in which, having deposited his dripping umbrella in the hall, and lighted his briar pipe, he took a well-deserved rest after his adventures. Let us watch him during these long hours of reading and meditation which fortified him against the sight of human wickedness and misery.

We know already that he is neither a rationalist nor a mystic. He is not a rationalist, in the modern meaning of the word, because he does not subject his belief in Christianity to the unlimited criticism of reason. He is not a mystic, because he does not allow the individual 'vision' which is the source of his belief to lead him astray among fantastic heresies. He insists on looking up to heaven like the optimist, not down to his feet like the pessimist, but he insists also on standing on the firm ground of certain dogmas. These dogmas are for him so many aspects of the 'mystic vision' which have been tested by reason and found right, while those aspects which did not stand this test were found wrong, that is to say, heretical. The dogmas of the Church do not limit Orthodoxy like a wall around a prison ground, but like the seacoast around an island. They form a natural boundary separating land from water. They do not deny the existence of water, but they draw our attention to the fact that it is not of the same nature as land, a fact which we could not ignore with impunity.

The various questions arising from this orthodox attitude may be somewhat perplexing, but there is nothing perplexing in Father Brown's thoughts and actions. He deals with almost every problem submitted to him, in the same way. His insight,

fortified by long experience, leads him to form certain opinions. At one glance, he is able to eliminate from the field of possibilities a number of suppositions—even if they seem well founded on facts—and to form his own conclusions. But these conclusions must be tested by reason and observation. The facts—all the facts—must fit into the picture before it can be recognized as a solid reality. There is, almost invariably, one feature of the story which seems particularly difficult to explain: the discovery of the skull of the Earl of Glengyle, for instance, or the part played by Joan Stacey in the ‘Eye of Apollo.’ The realization of the truth—that is to say, the sudden discovery that this last feature fits into the picture—transforms the mystic’s conclusions into a certainty. In other words, the vision becomes a dogma. Such are the three elementary operations performed by Father Brown’s mind, confronted with the riddle of Israel Gow’s honour or Pauline Stacey’s death. They are exactly the same operations performed by Chesterton confronted with the riddle of human ethics.



Father Brown had an enormous advantage over Chesterton. His solution was never criticized. Flambeau’s submission might not have been quite as abject as Dr. Watson’s, it was nevertheless implicit. The little priest won almost every time, because there was no authority left to disqualify the winner. He was allowed the last word and the last argument, and nobody dreamed of picking a hole in it.

The case of Chesterton was different. He was repeatedly told that his conclusions were wrong because they did not take into account certain facts, that his old dogmas had been exploded by new scientific theories, that he wasted his energy in a vain

attempt to stem the irresistible tide of progress, and his dialectical power in defending preconceived ideas which had long been discarded by all 'thinking men.'

This last criticism must be examined, first because it strikes at the very root of all orthodox philosophy—and incidentally at the foundation of democracy.

The cardinal virtues are sometimes called the 'pagan virtues' on account of their origin. Plato's Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude, and Justice were adopted by Saint Ambrosius, Saint Thomas, and other theologians. But this adoption implied a remarkable adaptation. The Greek Prudence of the *Republic* is very different from the medieval *Prudentia*. It is based purely on knowledge and monopolized by a highly educated aristocracy of 'guardians' who are left in charge of the State. The City cannot be ruled by the 'ignorant' majority, such as carpenters, braziers, or agriculturists. It is 'the knowledge residing in its smallest class or section—that is to say, in the predominant and ruling body—which entitles a State, organized agreeably to nature, to be called wise as a whole.' *Prudentia's* wisdom, on the contrary, is not only founded on knowledge and reason, it is founded also on revelation. The vision has to be checked before becoming a dogma, but the vision comes first, and in this case it is entirely opposed to Plato's strong class-distinctions and his scorn of ignorant craftsmen. Indeed, it would be difficult to find two social conceptions more different than those expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, and in the Platonic well-known fable that the gods mixed gold in the composition of some men, silver in that of others, iron and brass in that of others. The Christian belief in the brotherhood of man does not allow such distinctions, and whatever compromises the Church may have been induced to make with the secular power, Christian philosophy has never recognized it.

Pagan and, we might add, modern wisdom, if based on pure knowledge, must inevitably lead to the rule of an intellectual aristocracy. Christian wisdom must inevitably lead to the ultimate triumph of democracy, because it recognizes that the features which men have in common, as sons of the same Father, are far more important than those which differentiate them. Once this fundamental principle is recognized, reason may exercise itself freely. It may even declare that, under certain circumstances, this ideal democratic State cannot be established, but it cannot possibly declare that it is not the ideal State.

Most broad-minded thinkers admit to-day that the poet has a right to follow his fancies and that the mystic may discover certain truths which are beyond the scope of a purely scientific philosophy. We find in the works of Bergson, for instance, and in those of Dr. Whitehead, eloquent pages extolling the services rendered to modern thought by some writers who were almost entirely guided by their imagination or religious inspiration. The main difficulty arises when we endeavour to define in intelligible terms the relationship between the rational and the poetical faculties. Few philosophers resist the natural tendency to divide the two fields of knowledge and to create between them an almost insuperable gulf, the scientist and rationalist remaining on the firm ground of ascertained facts, and the mystic roaming further and further away from him. This new form of enlightened dualism may lead to interesting developments, but it is powerless to solve the urgent ethical problems which confront us in our individual and social relationships.

Chesterton's invaluable contribution to modern thought was that he succeeded in restoring the bridge which linked together the two banks of human knowledge. The cardinal importance of reason is asserted throughout his works, from *Orthodoxy* to *Saint Thomas Aquinas*. But reason itself rests on an act of faith.

The true sceptic, if he is at all logical with himself, has ceased to believe in it. For him reason is destroyed by doubt, as for the fanatic, reason is destroyed by individual inspiration. We cannot start with a negation, we must first acknowledge the fact of existence before we attempt to discover its purpose, we must recognize the validity of logic, before we launch into any discussion. To see the light, we must first open our eyes to it and accept the testimony of our senses. There is no valid argument in favour of this elementary faith, as there is no argument in favour of Christian revelation. In his early book on Browning, Chesterton already said that one would make 'the deepest and blackest and most incurable mistake' if one imagined that the poet's optimism 'was founded on any arguments for optimism.' In his later work, *The Everlasting Man*, he declared, in the same way, that when all is said, 'religion is revelation.' Unless this initial step is taken, there can be no sanity in this world and no belief in the next. Within these limits, reason rests on faith, and may therefore be considered as a 'preconceived idea.'

The task of reason, as Saint Thomas understood it, was to test the intuition of faith, and to reconstruct the physical and spiritual world in the light of Christian revelation. It was only when this second operation of the mind had been successfully performed that the third could take place, and that truth could be founded on dogma. Faith offers us the key, knowledge offers us the lock, truth appears as soon as we notice that the key fits the lock.



If Chesterton had contented himself with being a poet and an essayist, he would no doubt have been still more popular than he was. People who did not share his views would have

given themselves up to the pleasure of enjoying his verses and style, his humour and brilliancy. It was because he insisted on expounding his philosophy of life and on challenging current opinions that he came into conflict with a large number of his contemporaries. On no question was this conflict more pronounced than on his defence of Christian dogmas.

The mere word was a stumbling-block not only to the agnostic who denied all dogmas, but also to the religious modernist who endeavoured to conciliate Christian teaching with the conclusions reached by popular science. To the first, Chesterton replied that, unless they embraced anarchy and denied all social rule, they were bound to be dogmatically honest or dogmatically decent. No moral code could be founded on doubt or negation. To the second, he objected that it had hitherto been impossible for science to investigate religious questions without becoming unscientific, without indulging in wide generalizations which could not be verified. Being told that his philosophy was in contradiction with certain acknowledged theories, such as evolution, determinism, and progress, he answered that these theories were far more 'dogmatic' than Christian dogmas, since they lacked the support of authority and tradition, and were already subjected to the criticism of modern scientists. There is a strange dogmatic instinct in man which cannot be eradicated, because it corresponds to a very urgent social need. If it is repressed in the right direction—that of religion—it will assert itself in the wrong one—that of politics or science. We are told to-day that it is wrong to do a thing because it is not hygienic, as we were told yesterday that it was wrong to do a thing because it was immoral. Although this kind of scientific philosophy denies the absolute and the eternal, it assumes the power of absolute and eternal principles by controlling human conscience. It declares, on the one hand, that truth is transitory

and subjected to constant revision, and proclaims, on the other, that it must be obeyed if the race is to be saved.

One of Chesterton's last essays, in *As I was Saying*, includes a shrewd analysis of the nineteenth-century scientific trend of thought. He begins by defending the Victorian philosophers against the reproach of hypocrisy. 'The men of whom Thomas Huxley was the greatest were, above all, controversialists, because they were above all moralists. They conducted their debates, even their abstract scientific debates, in the spirit of a general election. It was Darwin against Gladstone, just as it was Disraeli against Gladstone. ... They were so fond of having convictions that they came prematurely to conclusions. Having grown doubtful about the things on which conviction is most valuable, they then expected the speculative imagination to answer as promptly and practically as the conscience. The consequence is that they answered much too soon and then yielded to the temptation of all moralists, to veto any kind of answer to the answer.' Scientific hypotheses became laws, and these laws were soon codified.

The danger of applying scientific principles to the conduct of human affairs is not only that they change from generation to generation, according to the progress of research, but also that before they can be understood and adopted by the majority, they have lost a great deal of their scientific character. The theory of determinism, for instance, has led Taine and a number of critics of the same school to explain national characteristics through the influence of surroundings. Hence the common belief that Spaniards are lazy because their country is hot, Swiss fond of independence because it is mountainous, Scandinavians adventurous because it is cold, and so on. To which Chesterton retorted in *Tremendous Trifles*, that 'Spaniards have discovered more continents than Scandinavians because their hot climate

discouraged them from exertions,' that 'Dutchmen have fought for their freedom quite as bravely as Switzers because the Dutch have no mountains, and that the Mediterranean peoples have specially hated the sea, because they had the nicest sea to deal with, the easiest sea to manage.'

The same theory has been invoked by social reformers in order to attenuate the responsibility of criminals and the punishment inflicted upon them; but it has also been called upon by criminals to excuse and justify their crimes. It has led educationists to show more patience towards abnormal children, but it has also led perfectly normal children to reproach their mothers for giving them birth. In the same way, the theory of natural selection and the survival of the fittest, while stirring individual energy and private initiative, has become the gospel of the worst forms of capitalistic exploitation. Scientific theories are double-edged weapons. In order to reap the good they produce without reaping the evil, we must call upon Christian Charity, but charity is devoid of scientific foundations.

'Civilization,' writes Chesterton in *All Things Considered*, 'merely means the full authority of the human spirit over all externals. Barbarism means the worship of those externals in their crude and unconquered state.' The unrestricted influence of pseudo-scientific ideas would bring us back to the worship of blind natural forces. 'Determinism is simply the primal twilight of mankind; and some men seem to be returning to it.'



Standing between a dwindling minority of orthodox believers and an ever-increasing majority of sceptics or hardened agnostics, the modern prophet felt that it was more necessary to clear the ground of prevalent prejudices than to reassert,

however eloquently, his religious convictions. The latter method would have been far more congenial to him and would have brought him greater fame, but it would not have been so fruitful. Orthodoxy was hidden behind a cloud of misconceptions; this cloud must be dispelled. The old dogmas, based on faith and reason, were opposed by new dogmas resting on scientific generalizations; these new dogmas must be exposed before the old could be set again in their proper light. There was in Chesterton's zeal something of the zeal of a modern St. John the Baptist. He was quite prepared to leave to others the glamour of victory; he preferred to remove the stones which blocked their path. He delighted in spade-work. It suited his courage, his need of immediate action; it suited, above all, his humility.

In his riper years, Chesterton witnessed the collapse of a good many of those vague ideas which exerted so much influence during his youth. People soon discarded the notion that human actions could be explained away by a smattering of geography and economic history, and that neither the personal nor the intellectual and religious factor need be taken into account. We scarcely ever hear to-day of the development of the 'social organism' from a simple type to a highly specialized status. We have grown tired of comparisons and analogies which alter the picture to make it fit into the frame. No modern novelist would attempt to repeat Zola's bold experiment of applying Lombroso's theories to a modern family, and to solve the destiny of each of its members according to a psychological recipe. Many nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific ideas are now lost in confusion, and we are faced to-day by far more complex problems. We may perhaps still distinguish the roads which cross this new mysterious country, but they may lead anywhere or nowhere. They certainly do not appear to lead any longer to a haven of felicity, where everything will be

explained, and where the only rule of life will be to follow the rule of Nature. It was only by simplifying its terms unduly that scientific writers managed to solve the human equation. Now that these terms are restored to their proper complexity, we are left wandering ... and wondering.

Chesterton considered, however, that Orthodoxy could not come into its own unless certain conceptions connected with the evolution of man and the doctrines of progress had lost their grip on popular imagination. He was not concerned with the fact that evolution contradicted a literal interpretation of the story of the Creation, but with the attempts made by certain writers to trace the origins of man to a type of superior animal, and to describe his development as the integration of successive experiments leading him to a superior stage of civilization. This theory implied that no essential difference existed between humanity and the rest of nature, and that the progress achieved through the animal scale was pursued throughout history. It could not obviously fix a definite goal to human efforts, but it fostered the belief that mankind could not resist its own impulse and that this impulse was bound to produce some good. This strange attitude combining a kind of determinism with a vague self-satisfied optimism barred the way to any radical change of philosophical outlook and of social development.

Among all modern heresies, this was the most deeply rooted and the hardest to conquer. It rested, on one side, on a love of Nature, fostered by romantic poetry and, on the other, on a legitimate pride in human scientific and technical achievements. It suited, at the same time, the soft sentimentalist, with his fondness for animals, and the hard intellectual, with his keenness for new inventions and discoveries. Man was no longer ashamed of being a beast, especially if this beast was on the way of becoming a semi-god. He could, if he chose, make

a beast of himself, as long as he respected social conventions, but could no longer acknowledge that he was a mere worm crawling under God's heaven. The orthodox felt proud before animals and humble in church. The modernist felt humble before his dog and proud before his priest—if he had any. They could no longer understand each other; they had ceased to talk the same language.

Chesterton was stirred into writing his *Everlasting Man* by reading H. G. Wells's *Outline of History*. Dealing with pre-historic man, Mr. Wells had presented the modernist's view in the most intelligent and comprehensive way. In challenging some of his statements, the defender of Orthodoxy felt that he was not taking an unfair advantage over his opponents. The method which he used in order to explain his views on the problem is significant. Without criticizing Wells's facts or endeavouring to challenge his authorities through the testimony of rival authorities, he attempted to prove that, on the author's own showing, the hypothesis of the natural origin of man was far more difficult to accept than the idea of his divine origin.

From all available evidence, and more particularly from the pictures which he has left on the walls of some of his caves, primitive man appears to have possessed particularly human characteristics. Although we know very little about him, we know at least that he had a mind, reflecting nature as a mirror. Other things may resemble it, 'but the mirror is the only thing which contains them all. Man is the microcosm; man is the measure of all things; man is the image of God.' Those who look upon man as a natural product, as an ordinary animal, can only do so 'by making out a case, by artificially selecting a certain light and shade, by bringing into prominence the lesser or lower things.' The real man is much more extraordinary: 'If we imagine that an impersonal intelligence could have felt, from

the first, the general nature of the non-human world sufficiently to see that things would evolve in whatever way they did evolve, there would have been nothing whatever in all that natural world to prepare such a mind for such an unnatural novelty.' Such a mind, in witnessing man's activity, would experience a shock similar to that which we would receive if we saw a bird make little clay statues and 'stick them in front of its nest.'

Before this mystery of the birth and growth of man's soul, we are still like children opening their eyes to the world. 'There may be a broken trail of stones and bones faintly suggesting the development of the human body,' but we know nothing whatever about the human mind, 'how it grew, whether it grew, or what it is.' If we are apt to forget it, it is because we accept certain pseudo-scientific dogmas far more readily and far more blindly than our fathers ever accepted religious dogmas. It is because we assume that where there is a body, there must be a mind, and because we presume that mind and body must develop or 'evolve' on parallel lines. The wish is father to the thought in these scientific generalizations, as it is supposed to be in theological generalizations, with this difference that, in the first case, our senses and our reason are our only guides.



The prejudice of progress is at once weaker and stronger than the prejudice of the animal nature of man. It is weaker because it does not rest even on scientific presumptions and cannot resist the test of definition. But it is stronger because it is so widespread that it cannot be questioned without arousing suspicion concerning the sanity of the questioner. It is curiously concerned with the doctrine of original sin and flatters man's vanity by opposing Utopia to Eden. It is eminently

anti-traditional and agrees with the iconoclastic fervour of those who believe that the Present can only be built on the ruins of the Past. To the evil of the pride of race or nation has been added the greater evil of the pride of generation. We defend the passing fashions of our period as if they were one of our most sacred possessions, while every year tears them from our grasp; and we waste our energy in trying to keep 'abreast of things,' while things are all the time running away from us. We change our mind before having had the leisure to make it up, and our convictions are worn out faster than our clothes. The tyrant Progress urges us on, like a mad shepherd driving his flock and, while we run neither knowing why or where we go, our only comfort is to sneer at those who are unable to run as fast as we do.

'Nobody,' wrote Chesterton in *Heretics*, 'has any business to use the word "progress" unless he has a definite creed and a cast-iron code of morals. ... For progress by its very name indicates a direction; and the moment we are in the least doubtful about the direction, we become in the same degree doubtful about the progress. ... But it is precisely about the direction that we disagree.' We disagree about everything; autocracy and democracy, capitalism and socialism, free love and marriage; we have no common religion, no common philosophy, no common goal; and if we still preserve certain conventional notions about honesty, decency, and courtesy, it is merely as the disguised inheritance of a past which we despise and do our best to destroy.

Later, in *What's Wrong with the World*, Chesterton applied the same test of common sense to the idea that our present civilization is superior to past civilizations and that 'the modern man is the heir of all the ages, that he has got the good out of these successive human experiments.' What is the idea

which such a statement can convey to the mind? Does it really mean that the modern man possesses all the courage of the cave-dweller who 'killed a mammoth with a stone knife,' the artistic appreciation of the Athenian who witnessed Sophocles' tragedies, the civil virtues of the Roman citizen, the self-sacrifice of the Christian saint, the patriotism of the French revolutionist? 'Is it really true that you and I are two starry towers built up of all the most towering visions of the past? Have we really fulfilled all the great historic ideals one after another?' The only possible answer is 'to ask the reader to look at the modern man, as I have just looked at the modern man—in the looking-glass.'

In the same chapter, he strips the futurists' attitude of its glamour. We are always told of the boldness with which he attacks 'a hoary tyranny or an antiquated superstition,' but there is no more courage in attacking these antiquated things 'than in offering to fight one's grandmother.' It is not courage which prompts us to break up these undefended relics, but cowardice. We are genuinely afraid of the past, specially of the good in the past. 'The brain breaks down under the unbearable virtue of mankind. There have been so many flaming faiths that we cannot hold; so many harsh heroisms that we cannot imitate; so many great efforts ... which seem to us at once sublime and pathetic. The future is a refuge from the fierce competition of our forefathers. ... Men invent new ideals because they dare not attempt old ideals. They look forward with enthusiasm, because they are afraid to look back.'

The future is a blank page on which we may write our name as large as we like; the past is a library crowded with masterpieces. The new ideal may be so remote that we may not need to exert ourselves to reach it, or so changeable that we may alter it according to our achievements. The old ideals appear like magnificent monuments so huge, so ambitious, that they

had to be abandoned. It is easier to erect a bungalow and call it an 'ideal home' than to restore a Gothic cathedral. If we were indeed the heirs of the past—as we pretend to be—our first duty should be to fulfil the ideals which our fathers did not succeed in fulfilling. It is easier to call them wrong and contemplate the ruins. The nineteenth century was perhaps too inclined to worship heroes, we seem only too ready to disparage them.

The moderns are fond of saying that 'you can't put back the clock.' 'The obvious answer is: "You can." A clock, being a piece of human construction, can be restored by the human finger to any figure or hour.' As a matter of fact, the past is full of such restorations. All revolution, all renaissance is a restoration. 'The originality of Michael Angelo and Shakespeare began with the digging up of old verses and manuscripts; ... the great medieval revival was a memory of the Roman Empire ...; never was the past more venerated by men than it was by the French revolutionists. ... Man must always plant his fruit trees in a graveyard.'

Most people would object that the answer is beside the point, that when they speak of progress they do not consider art or religion or even politics, but the achievements of man in the field of knowledge and technique. They may not share the lofty ideals of the past, but their knowledge is wider, their habits are cleaner, and above all they possess a technical equipment which allows them to harness the forces of nature to their service and to work miracles. When they say that 'you can't put the clock back,' they mean that, even if it were desirable, it would be impossible to bring back Europe to a social condition similar to that of the Middle Ages, as Morris did in his *News from Nowhere*. Discoveries will still be made, machines invented, and new means used to keep from want and starvation the dense population of overcrowded industrial countries. They state their case in terms of infant mortality, increase of production,

travelling facilities, speed, and efficiency. Chesterton answers in terms of religion, art, and literature. Are they not entitled to retort that it would be better for men to sacrifice all this if, by so doing, they enjoyed greater comfort and happiness?

I have already alluded to Chesterton's attitude towards the industrial problem. He never shirked practical objections and took great trouble to discuss them. In spite of his outspokenness, he was never an extremist, and he had an instinctive distrust of fanaticism, in any shape or form. Although he denounced the abuse of mechanization, he did not incite the people to do away with it, like the Luddites, but wished only to regulate its use, and refused to adopt in this matter, as in any other matter, a fatalistic attitude. In *The Outline of Sanity*, he said that personally he did not consider that machinery was hostile to happiness, but if it were, it would not be 'more inevitable that all ploughing should be done by machinery than it is inevitable that a shop should do a roaring trade in Ludgate Hill by selling the instruments of Chinese tortures. ... If we can make men happier it does not matter if we make them poorer; it does not matter if we make them less productive; it does not matter if we make them less progressive. ...'

People say that a new institution 'has come to stay.' They also say, 'Uncle Humphrey has come to stay.' Certain uncles outstay their welcome and are very persistent visitors. Their summary ejection might bring about disastrous results and even a polite hint might be followed by severe losses. This is no reason why they should stay for ever. The same applies to a law, to a machine, to any human thing. 'As long as man can call his soul his own, he will be perfectly free to unmake things as he made them. A brave man may see a god in a tree or in a cloud, only a coward can see a god in an engine.'

As soon as we rid ourselves of such fatalistic superstitions,

we are at liberty to increase our technical equipment, or restrict it or do away with it, according to our wishes. No reformer can deny us the freedom to seek our happiness without denying his own name. The whole discussion turns round the meaning of the word. If human happiness means nothing but material comfort and the spirit of the hive, there is just a faint hope that modern progress may bring it about, although it has been hitherto particularly inefficient and has experienced some sensational set-backs, such as the excesses of nineteenth-century Capitalism, the World War and the plague of unemployment which followed it. But can one leave it at that? Can we conscientiously assume that the privacy of home, the spirit of citizenship, the joy of creation and self-expression, the enthusiasm stirred by art and poetry, the serenity given by religion and philosophy have ceased to be essential to human happiness? Has it really become irrelevant to mention Shakespeare and the Bible, in connexion with human civilization, and to point out that the ideal, suggested by such books, are as important to-day as they were at the time when they were written?

If we chose to forget some terrible accidents in the recent past and some dangerous threats in the near future, we may perhaps speak, with due modesty, of a certain progress in public health and in labour conditions, but as soon as we broach the question of human happiness we are releasing all the old ideals which are lying dormant in the human soul, and the little we have gained appears very small indeed in comparison with all we have lost.



What the modernists have been trying to do, for the last century, has been to build up a civilization without religion.

Being convinced that the failure of past ideals—and more particularly the failure of Christian medievalism—was due to these ideals, and not to the men who attempted to fulfil them, they proscribed them altogether, or at least they denied them any influence in the State. They adopted a practical philosophy which could not, of course, deal with first principles, and centred its attention on economic, medical, and legal problems. Their philosophy could not provide any common standard of conduct in private or social life. Thought grew wilder and wilder, while social discipline grew stricter and stricter. We seem likely to combine a kind of intellectual anarchy with a political autocracy, unless we lose the power of thinking altogether.

There is a distinct danger in doing things without reason. A mere number is not a sufficient justification for an effort. Devoid of first principles, we are compelled to act by precedent and constantly to try and beat our own records. We agree to increase our armaments, although we do not know whether our aim is war or peace, we build larger and larger ships, we fly and drive faster and further than we ever did before. Racing has become the most popular sport. This kind of progress by number extends to politics. 'Men have votes, so women must have votes,' the voting age is twenty-five, it must be reduced to twenty-one. It would, no doubt, be more democratic to reform the party-system or the country's political education, but such plans would raise serious questions, and no doubt provoke some opposition. It is at once simpler and more effective to provide the electorate with a figure which 'proves' that one candidate goes 'one better' than his opponent.

This kind of loose thinking has been greatly encouraged by a certain press which applies it to the most important and to the most trifling questions. Chesterton was so impressed by the deterioration of logic that he devoted a number of

his later essays to counter it. It was bad enough that people should have lost their faith, it might be worse still if they lost their wits. He began 'weeding the weaker or wilder ideas' out of the mind of his readers. It was for him 'a practical piece of gardening.'

There is, for instance, the pacifist's notion 'that not fighting, as such, would prevent somebody else from fighting, or from taking all he wanted without fighting.' He exposed the weakness of this notion, in *As I was Saying*, by trying to discover the ideas which led to it. The attitude of the Stoics, or that of the Christian saints, for instance, who refused to lift a finger to avoid the trial inflicted upon them. But neither the sage nor the saint 'was so silly as to suppose that there were not men in the world, wicked or resolute or fanatical or mechanically servile enough to do unpleasant things to them, while they were content to do nothing.' Non-resistance means sacrifice. It is logical to refuse to fight for anything if one is ready to give up everything; it is also logical to fight if one is not ready to give up anything; but it is absurd to trust that the safest way of preserving one's possessions is to declare beforehand that anybody will be welcome to them.

In *All is Grist*, there is another essay written in the same vein. It is particularly interesting from our point of view, because it shows the importance which Chesterton attached to the honest use of reason. Next to the inspired saint, the type of man he admired most was the sound logician. One of these men, William Johnson, of King's College, Cambridge, had died a few days before, and Chesterton paid him a glowing tribute. He was 'one of the last men who understood logic in its full and impartial sense. ... He was as incapable of intellectual injustice as of infanticide. ... If there had been any weed of weak logic in his own argument he would have torn it up with as much joy

as any weed in the garden of the enemy. For he liked that sort of weeding as an amusement and an art.' ...

From the quotation made above, it will appear that Chesterton experienced the same enjoyment when he indulged in his own 'practical gardening.' Some journalist had 'shaken the foundation of the British Empire' by raising the question whether a girl ought to smoke a cigar, and some unfortunate correspondent had suggested that it was 'illogical' to object to a girl smoking a cigar, if one did not object to a girl smoking a cigarette: 'He might just as well write: "You like the look of a horse; why won't you be logical and like the look of a hippopotamus?"' The only answer is, "Well, I don't"; and it is not illogical because it does not in any way invade the realm of logic. ... It is all a question of liking, and not in the least a question of logic.' What the man who urges us to be logical has at the back of his mind is a 'reason'; but his mind is too muddled to discover it and to express it. He thinks that it would be illogical for him to prevent the girl from smoking a cigar, because he has already agreed to all her other whims, being unable to resist them. Or he thinks that women should be allowed to do anything that men do, 'therefore' daughters should behave exactly as sons. These two last statements are equally logical because the reason is given; the first is absurd because a liking is not a reason.

This neglect of logic, so noticeable to-day, is the result of modern education which leads people either towards the field of scientific observation and experiment, or towards the garden of artistic imagination. The bridge linking up the two banks of the river has been allowed to fall in ruins. We lack logic because we lack first principles, and we have lost our dogmas because we have lost our philosophy, our religion.

It may appear strange that the image of a young girl smoking a large cigar should evoke the austere figure of St. Thomas

Aquinas. He appears on the next page: 'Is there not something to be said for those medieval Schoolmen and antiquated sages, who held that man is a rational animal? ... The modern experiment of first sneering at logic for not being a practical thing, and then timidly praising it for being a priggish thing, seems to have resulted in the general loss of it as a normal function of the mind.' And to complete his fanciful picture the laughing prophet gives us the popular type of the cold superhuman logician, of the monstrous intelligence which grasps the most mysterious problems and disentangles the most intricate questions: Sherlock Holmes himself, reclining in his armchair, lost in meditation.

The perfect detective, according to modern ideas, must remain cool and detached; he is bound not to like anything or anybody. Father Brown likes everything and everybody; he can even fly into a passion against others or against himself. But Father Brown is not only a logician; he happens also to be a mystic.



CHAPTER V

Innocence

WHILE THE CHRISTIAN VIRTUES—Faith, Hope, and Charity—are honoured everywhere in medieval art, the pagan virtues have been treated by painters and sculptors with much more freedom. In the cathedrals

of Paris, Amiens, and Chartres, for instance, there are nine of them, instead of four, and *Temperantia* and *Justitia* are not even mentioned. Neither, for the matter of that, is Innocence; her appearance in this chapter as a substitute to Temperance raises an interesting problem closely connected with Chesterton's ethics.

One of the first essays of his which I read was 'A Piece of Chalk,' and the impression it left on my mind is still as fresh to-day as it was more than twenty-five years ago. It is a characteristic masterpiece because it sums up in a few pages the finest qualities of the writer and of the moralist. The author, while staying at a Sussex village, goes out to sketch. He has with him a few sheets of brown paper and a few bright-coloured chalks, but when he settles to work, sitting on the top of a down, he perceives that he has forgotten his most 'essential and exquisite chalk.' He has all the colours of the rainbow, but he has no white. Now, white is as indispensable to those who sketch on brown paper, as black to those who sketch on white paper. Brown paper art reveals to us that white is a colour and not 'a mere absence of colour,' just as Christianity reveals that virtue is an active and positive thing, not a mere absence of vice. That is the first lesson. The second is more startling still. The author suddenly realizes that, while he is searching his pockets for the missing chalk, he is actually sitting on an 'immense warehouse of white chalk,' and that he has only to break a piece off the rock to obtain what he wants. South England is a 'piece of chalk,' an immense lump of Christian virtue. We walk on it, we sit on it, we are surrounded with it on all sides, but we seldom see it. Experience hides it from us; innocence reveals it to us.

All through his life, Chesterton adopted this positive, active attitude against the negative and passive attitude of pagan philosophy. He always contended that the best way of restraining our bad instincts was to stimulate our good ones. People

inspired by Faith and Charity and comforted by Hope should be kept so busy 'doing' that they should scarcely need to be told 'not to do.' Self-control is needed, of course, but it is only part of the Christian's equipment; it is a means to an end, a method of sound economy, not an end in itself. Plato said that a man can only be called temperate, that is to say 'master of himself,' if 'the good principle in his soul is master of the head,' but Plato's virtues are all directed towards mastering human passions, especially the passions of the weak and the poor. Temperance, like Prudence, remains the privilege of the few, of the wise guardians who rule over the Republic. The pagan sage urges men not to make fools of themselves, the Christian prophet urges them not to make beasts of themselves, for there is an element of positive evil in unrestrained passion. On the walls of the Arena Chapel, in Padua, Giotto does not show Temperance as pouring water into the wine—an image which could scarcely be sympathetic to the author of *Water and Wine*. His noble figure has a bridle over her lips and carries a sword bound to its sheath; her opposite vice is not Drunkenness, but Anger, a terrible female, her hair loose, tearing her dress in a fit of frenzy. On the porch of the French cathedrals, Temperance is replaced by Chastity, and Innocence, or at least Chesterton's conception of this virtue, may be considered as a kind of spiritual chastity. A soul untainted by sin will instinctively restrain its passions, or rather exercise them in the right direction. Innocence may be fierce in its indignation, violent in its love, but must remain a kind of instinctive and unconscious form of restraint.



Children make many mistakes, but they never fail to recognize the man or the woman who loves them—which is

more than most adults do. My little girl had lost her heart to Chesterton. The origin of this passionate feeling is somewhat obscure. It may date from the day when he witnessed her baptism in our parish church, although it is hardly to be believed that she was already conscious of it at that time. It fed on memories of his large hat which she had handled, of his heavy stick which she had been allowed to wave about, of his knees on to which she had crept and, of a particular tone in his voice which he only used when talking to small children and which, no doubt, they alone could understand. There were also deep pockets from which presents were extracted and placed slyly on the table when the child's head was turned away, and a contagious laughter which they had shared like a piece of festive cake. This feeling grew in spite of long and cruel months of separation. She was very faithful and he was very kind, and when they met again—even after she had learned to read his books—they picked up the threads of the conversation where they had left them, floating in the happy breeze of time. Jeanne made several efforts to retrieve her heart, but on every occasion she found it buried deeper and deeper in the vast breast of her great friend. On our last visit, he showed her his toy theatre. It was a wonderful affair which he had brought back from Spain during a recent journey, with bright scenery, electric lights, and brand new stories. But the stage itself was far more exciting than the plays. It had to be inspected from every angle. We twisted our necks and bent our backs to obtain a better view, but the two children of the party, although one was fifty years older than the other, went down on their knees at once, assuming the humble attitude which comes naturally to children before their toys, as it comes to men before their God. It is in this attitude that we shall always remember him, crouching eagerly in front of the diminutive stage, while the small electric

bulbs which brightened it, rose like so many suns over the barren yellow mountains and the vivid green valleys. He had seen these landscapes and crossed these streams, but this was better than Spain, it was better than the world. It was the world made miraculously small so that it stood comfortably on a table; a reality brought nearer to the eye and made dearer to the soul; a thing infinitely big and infinitely little. As I was watching him, some words of his came back into my mind, something about immortality and the next world, and I felt a pang of pain. I found these words, the same evening, in *Tremendous Trifles*: 'If I am ever in any other and better world, I hope that I shall have enough time to play with nothing but toy theatres. ...'

Chesterton has told us, in his *Autobiography*, that his earliest memory of life was brightened by a scene painted by his own father: a medieval castle in which a wonderful princess is imprisoned by a wicked king and towards which a young prince is approaching boldly, holding a golden key (no doubt the same key which fits the lock of knowledge). There is nothing wonderful in the fact that a man of sixty should remember the toys with which he played when he was six; it is more remarkable that he should still play with them in his house at that advanced age. But what is even more surprising is to discover that the same man should confess such a childlike fondness for toys at the age of thirty and should boldly unburden his heart on this intimate subject in the columns of a daily paper. If this 'tremendous trifle' stood alone, and, if we did not know the man, we might treat it as it was no doubt treated at the time, as a delightful fantasy, the use of a bold image to illustrate an obvious truth: that toys are far more important to children than the gravest of human affairs to grown-ups. But the essay, considered in the light of the autobiography and of the author's later experiences in life, can only have one meaning. A child's game is, spiritually speaking,

just as important as a man's work; a toy theatre is as valuable as life itself; and the best way, the most healthy and moral way, to look at the world is to look at it through the proscenium of a toy theatre. If you say with Jaques, 'All the world's a stage,' you may be tempted to fold your arms and to sit still while the tragedy unfolds itself, but if you say with Chesterton, 'the world is a toy theatre,' you are free to remove the villain, to paint the town red, to stop the performance and to revise the plot when and where you like. There is nothing fatalistic about a toy theatre.



It is always dangerous to quote aphorisms taken out of their text. If a man tells you that his greatest wish is to do nothing else in the next world but play with a toy, you may form a very poor opinion of what he has done or what he may still do in this one. There is the innocence of the village prophet, but there is also the innocence of the village idiot. If St. Francis had done nothing else but wander through the narrow white roads which surround Assisi, pretending to play the fiddle with two sticks, people might have laughed at him all through his life, as they had laughed at him on the morrow of his conversion. If brother Juniper had met every day the village boys whom he once induced to play see-saw with him, his admirers would soon have lost their faith in his saintliness. And, in the same way, if the laughing prophet had felt so entranced by the wonder of his toy theatre, so rapt up in its symbolic meaning, that he had neglected his work and the hopes and sufferings of his fellow-men, he would have left behind him a very different memory from the one he left.

The conclusion of the essay on 'The Toy Theatre' dispels at once any misapprehension. If its author expresses the pious

wish to play in the next world, it is because, as he tells us, he could only occasionally play in this one. He could not even finish his 'St. George and the Dragon,' over which he had 'burned the midnight oil.' The scenery itself was not completed; two wings of the Sultan's palace were never painted, and he had not 'discovered a workable way of getting up the curtain.'

I do not wish to draw hasty conclusions from this statement, and I have far too great a respect for historical accuracy not to record here a piece of evidence which might contradict it. Jeanne tells me that there was a more recent attempt to produce 'St. George and the Dragon' in Beaconsfield. On this occasion, the author painted no less than six dragons of different sizes, which grew larger and larger as the drama approached its climax. Only the monster's gaping mouth could finally be seen on the stage, and there is perhaps a symbolical meaning in the fact that, being short of colours, Chesterton had to use the same paint for the dragon's tongue and St. George's cross.

We can safely presume, however, that the number of hours devoted to these productions was strictly limited, and that the great man spent far less time over his games than the busiest politicians on the golf links or racecourse.



As a true Englishman, Chesterton attached, however, a great importance to his hobbies—whether they were concerned with toy theatres, nonsense poetry, or the reading of innumerable detective stories. He felt, no doubt, that they kept him strong and cheerful. As long as he could reduce the world drama to the dimensions of a toy drama, he was not overwhelmed by its senseless cruelty. As long as his poetry kept the lilt of a ballad and something of the imagery of 'Alice,' he was sure that it

would never be tainted with morbidity. As long as he could enjoy the thrill of wild adventure, he knew that he could endure the shock of pain and disappointment. Without being conscious of it, he cultivated his innocence, surrounding himself with the glamour of fairy tales, nursery songs, and boyish fiction. Had he wished to keep his soul young, he could not have acted more wisely or found any method which suited him better. But he was far too genuinely childlike to strive for childlikeness, and although aware of the result, did not know himself how he achieved it or why others did not achieve it also.

When he was in the right mood, he could quote poetry indefinitely, interrupting the most familiar talk with the rolling lines of romantic or modern verse. Although he said that he had no ear for music, he had a most delicate ear for rhythm, and, the cadence nearly always provoked in him a sort of exhilaration. He often branched off from serious to humorous verse. I remember meeting him shortly after I had published a small book on English nonsense poetry. He rewarded me with a stream of quotations not only from the great classics such as Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, but from a number of modern authors who followed their tradition. He told me that I knew everything about nonsense, which was a gross exaggeration. I had approached this grave subject from the outside, as a literary curiosity. He sat enthroned in the very centre of the kingdom which I had endeavoured to explore. He appeared to me as the spirit of Christmas appeared to Scrooge.

Nonsense is the test of humour, as humour is the test of reason. Let no man open a book signed by Chesterton if he no longer enjoys his nursery rhymes. Unless 'he becomes again a little child' he will not see the seven virtues. All the poet's best friends, E. C. Bentley and Belloc among them, loved and wrote nonsense. The word is written across the pages of his first

book which bears the characteristic title, *Greybeards at Play*. A strange title for a book written at the age of twenty-six in the overcharged *fin de siècle* atmosphere:

Old happiness is grey as we
 And we may still outstrip her;
 If we be slippered pantaloons
 O let us hunt the slipper!

• • •

Far, far behind are morbid hours
 And lonely hearts that bleed;
 Far, far behind us are the days
 When we were old indeed.

The sense of grotesque topsy-turvydom reappears in the most unlikely places all through Chesterton's books. It springs at you, like a jack-in-the-box in the midst of his most serious philosophical or political arguments. When these works have become classics, I hope that some patient scholar will be able one day to tell us how many times the author makes the cow jump over the moon; it will prove a most exciting Grand National. For the present, I can only remind the reader that the first verse of Chesterton's most popular poem, 'The Donkey,' sings of a time 'when fishes flew and forests walked—and figs grew upon thorn' and of the remarkable discovery made by the dog Quoodle in *The Flying Inn*:

And Quoodle here discloses
 All things that Quoodle can:
 They haven't got no noses
 They haven't got no noses
 And goodness only knowses
 The Noselessness of Man.

I suppose that 'A Certain Evening'²⁶ was the happiest evening of his life. It is also one of his best love poems. It ends with the line: 'And she gave me both her hands'; but the beginning shows that the world had gone mad, not with madness which might be reasonable, but with joy which is nonsense.

The sea had climbed the mountain peaks
And shouted to the stars
To come to play: and down they came
Splashing in happy wars.

The pine grew apples for a whim,
The cart-horse built a nest;
The oxen flew, the flowers sang,
The sun rose in the west.

The spirit which inspired these lines is unmistakable. It is the spirit which prompts a boy to turn a somersault before leaving for a holiday and which made Brother Juniper dance at the mere thought of Heaven.



It must have been about fifteen years ago—we were both well over forty-five—when our friendship was strengthened by a strange incident. The Chestertons had not yet left 'Overroads,' the first house they occupied in Beaconsfield, but they had bought a piece of land across the road and built a hall which became later the library and dining-room of their new house. This hall was then used as a kind of glorified nursery where the children who came on regular visits could romp freely, during the winter months. It proved also invaluable for private theatricals, and a small platform had been erected at one end, separated from the rest of the room by a curtain. A number of

²⁶ *The Wild Knight*

the Chesterton nephews and nieces happened to be there when I arrived, and I was given the choice between a quiet talk in the house and a game of hide-and-seek in the hall. I chose, of course, the second alternative, and the children crowded behind a screen, while the grown-ups sought anxiously for a hiding-place. With a confident smile, G. K. draped himself in one of the window curtains which concealed his features without hiding his form, while I crept into the narrow space left between the platform and the floor. He was soon discovered, but a long and exciting time elapsed before I was compelled to emerge, half stifled and covered with dust, from the deep recess which sheltered me. I was overwhelmed by my friend's congratulations. He made it evident that I had risen in his esteem. He told me, laying his hand on my shoulder, that he 'would never have thought of that.' I had passed the crucial test. I had preferred a game of hide-and-seek to a serious discussion, and fulfilled the children's expectations by spoiling my clothes. I had played the fool and flung my self-respect to the wind before strangers. Many years later, he remembered the incident and asked me whether I should still be able to repeat my performance. I shall always retain an affection for that platform.

'Uncle Gilbert' was to scores of youngsters—most of them now grown-up men and women—the hero he was to my small daughter. They have preserved his letters and the poems which he dedicated to them on some great occasion. When they are published, they will give further proof of what Chesterton was to children and what children were to him, the bond of innocence which linked them together and abolished time and age. A foretaste of these intimate effusions might be found in a preface written in 1909 for a book of nursery rhymes by Margaret Arndt, the mother of one of Chesterton's god-daughters. The preface is in the form of a letter addressed to little

Barbara Arndt, in Germany, full of allusions to German toys and Christmas trees and to the 'Heinzelmännchen with red caps which you and I used to draw for each other.' It tells us that the 'jolly old gentleman who undoubtedly comes down the chimney on Christmas Eve' is also called Santa Claus in England: 'We have a man of our own, called Father Christmas. I acted him once at a children's party. But he is much too fat to go down the chimney.' How many times did he act the part?

One of the rhymes begins with the words:

Birthday Baby, one year old,
Would you like a throne of gold?

which is 'so nice and sudden.' Barbara is not to believe that her mother has a throne of gold on the premises. She is a poet, and 'poets seldom have such things.' 'But it is quite true that when little things like you and me are one year old we are so nice that people would give us anything. The great question is, Barbara, can we keep as nice as that? I have my doubts, but we might try. And what fun it would be if we could really keep it up; and when you are dying at ninety-seven and I at a hundred and twenty-seven, there was still a golden throne going somewhere. I do not know, dear Barbara, but I am sure your mother knows all about it.' The letter is signed 'Your helpless Godfather.'²⁷



This may be called sentimentalism by those who have never lived close to children. People who know all about heredity may tell us that babies are born tainted by the sins of their fathers, that they look at their mothers with a distrustful frown

²⁷ G. K. C. as M.C.

and wave away their bottle with the tired gesture of an old beau throwing down his cigar. But people who know something about children will answer that any child, undisturbed by any internal pain, will smile as naturally at his mother as he will blink at the sun, and that, instead of resenting the tedious monotony of the food proffered to him, he will swallow it with renewed avidity on every occasion. All these hasty scientific generalizations are built up on abnormal, that is to say, on exceptional cases. The solid fact remains that, by all tests available, the immense majority of small children are much more sincere and confident than the majority of grown-ups, and it is the recognition of this genuine attitude towards life which causes so much delight in the unsophisticated mind. The baby may be as temperamental as his father—he generally is more—he may be more greedy, more selfish, but we may safely presume that he will not suspect those who approach him of wishing to ‘get the better of him,’ or that he really wishes to have less food when he clamours for more, or that he longs to be clean while protesting against the soap getting into his eyes. Neither must we surmise when he proceeds to eat the soap that it is in order to induce us to follow his example, with the premeditated intention of poisoning us. Although there may be a poisoner among his ancestors, the baby gives us the impression of doing things in a straightforward way. There are neither crooked stiles nor crooked miles in his world. The baptism may have a good deal to wash away; it is a wise precaution against the future. But the spots are not yet very apparent and the water does not turn black in the font. It is perhaps because, at this early stage, the germs of evil are scarcely developed, but it looks more as if the germs of goodness were already so striking that little room is left for anything else. Such is the happy state of innocence upon which the most hardened sinner cannot look without

a smile. To a dispassionate observer it seems that our main problem might be solved if we could end our life in the gracious state in which we began it. That is why Uncle Gilbert asks his godchild to keep it up, so that her journey should not be 'from the cradle to the grave,' but from the wooden high chair to the golden throne.

Chesterton does not sentimentalize over innocence. It is one of those subjects, like love and mysticism, upon which he is remarkably reticent. He seems to think that if it is his duty to defend his opinions, he is at liberty to conceal his most sacred feelings. He does not even philosophize about this mysterious virtue. He does not allude to 'clouds of glory' with Wordsworth, or to 'pre-natal dreams' with Shelley. He does not worship the baby as an angel come down to earth, like Swinburne or Hugo. He does not teach us the 'art of being a grandfather' or godfather; he teaches us the art of remaining grandchild or godchild. He does not lament over a lost wonder, a lost innocence; he preserves them. He does not look down at the child, like the educationist; he does not look up at the child, like the romanticist; he takes the child by the hand, and the cloak of years falls from his shoulders. He talks to him as an equal, wanders through the same dreams, the same landscapes, and runs the same adventures. He is not the exile of fairyland, he is its oldest inhabitant.

Most poets tell us that they have lost their way to the happy country of their youth through disillusion or lassitude. There was a time when they trusted everybody; but their confidence has been betrayed, their friends have deserted them, the woman they worshipped has left her temple, the public has despised their songs. The history of literature is filled with such lamentations, and some of them are no doubt inspired by genuine tragedies. Accidents will happen; the child-man has to learn

that there are no roses without thorns, that pretty bees sting when roughly handled, and that flowers of dancing flames are burning flowers. He has even to learn that cruelty is a very active agent in human life, and that some people take a strange delight in tormenting not only their enemies, but those they love, and even themselves. To such wounds, innocence can only oppose the joy of being alive in a magic world and the thrill of adventure; but habit and repetition fade the brightest miracles, and familiarity breeds contempt. The ball may rebound again and again, but each bound is lower than the last, and a time comes when there is no resilience left, when innocence is dead.

The method used by Chesterton to avoid the same fate, although unconscious, is characteristic. He calls upon his humility and upon his faith to save him from despair. He proclaims that he deserves whatever harm life may inflict upon him. Who is he to grumble against fate? He is not the world's creditor. It is for him to pay his debt in work and suffering. He refuses to 'be on his guard' and to avoid making a fool of himself. He will lose his head and lose his heart, but he will 'keep his soul.' Who says that the sun is less bright because he rises every morning and that the spring leaves lose their freshness because they return every year? Who says that we cannot enjoy our summer because winter comes, or that life is less worth living because it ends in death? The universe is not a piece of clockwork; its mechanical aspect is a mere appearance, an over-simplified appearance. The universe seems to us mechanical, not because it is dead, but because it is very much alive, like a child kicking his legs rhythmically. 'Because children have abounding vitality,' we read in *Orthodoxy*, 'they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong

enough to exult in monotony. ... It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.'

Such passages give us some idea of the wealth of Chesterton's nature. Each rebuff from life is met with a fresh smile. If he is disappointed, he cultivates the art of being taken in, and deliberately runs the risk of a new disillusion—or of a new victory. If repetition shrouds the first miracle, he makes of repetition itself a greater miracle. Life and death are bound up with it. 'Man may stand on the earth generation after generation, and yet each birth be his positively last appearance.' There is nothing particularly Christian in this attitude, but there is an amazing strength which springs from genuine innocence. One positive answer after another repels the negation of experience. Confidence is infinite, imagination untrammelled, wonder inexhaustible.

Compare, for instance, Chesterton's reaction to the lassitude provoked by the mechanical explanation of the universe to that of one of the greatest poets of his generation. In one of his *Assorted Articles*, D. H. Lawrence regrets that the moon no longer appears to him as it did: 'The crescent at evening still startles the soul with its delicate flashing. But the mind works automatically and says: "Ah, she is in her first quarter. She is all there, in spite of the fact that we only see this slim blade. The earth's shadow is over her." And, willy-nilly, the intrusion of the mental processes dims the brilliance, the magic of the first apperception.' The poet recognizes that it is only the 'assumption of knowledge' that breeds contempt, but he declares nevertheless that it must lead first to disappointment and finally to boredom. In other words, he confesses that his imagination cannot adapt itself to the scientific knowledge he has acquired. 'But what essential difference is there,' Chesterton would ask, 'between a superficial observation of the moon and

all the knowledge accumulated by modern observations? And if wonder and magic can resist the first, why could they not resist the second?' The wonder which created the man in the moon, carrying his bundle, and Diana's swift-footed nymphs sending their arrows of light through the wood, springs from a thousand things which remain unaltered by science. The moon shines as brightly for us as for Shakespeare's lovers, the night breeze blows as softly. Whatever poets or scientists may say, its light will still spread over white clouds and mysterious fields. As long as our soul preserves its innocence, as long as we are able to see and to hear, no disappointment, no knowledge can prevent us from kicking the ball higher and higher, as soon as it falls to the ground until it reaches the stars and becomes, no doubt, a star itself, the fixed star of our faith. 'It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon.' We begin with the fairy-tales of the nursery and the mythologies of paganism, and we end with the legends of Christianity. Jack the Giant-Killer leads to Perseus, and Perseus to St. George and the Knights of the Grail.



The misunderstanding arises from the confusion between innocence and ignorance, a confusion made by sceptics and pessimists who presume that every kind of knowledge and experience must lead to disappointment. They are begging the question. Ignorance may be an excellent thing if it is the absence of the wrong kind of knowledge, but it is not a moral virtue. It may just as well expose us to evil as preserve us from it. Innocence is the absence of the burden of sin, which does not mean necessarily sinlessness. It is the faculty of preserving

the child's sincerity, its confidence and admiration, untainted by experience. It is a kind of spiritual nakedness which allows a man to walk through life without shame, without fear, and to remain himself whatever trial or success may come to him. Far from resting on ignorance, it brings with it a very keen sense of reality. Only the pure in heart can present to the world a clear mirror, undimmed by rancour, remorse, or prejudice. The 'pure fool' succeeds where the wisest magicians had failed. He gains by experience instead of losing by it. It is only after passing through Kundry's garden that Parsifal realizes Amfortas's suffering.

In a humbler way, innocence is intimately bound up with a realistic view of the world. No scientific observer can achieve any result if he does not rid himself of all preconceived notions; the first thing a student has to learn is to be thoroughly honest with himself. Through the naked eye, the microscope, or the telescope, he must record what he sees, not what he knows or thinks ought to be there. He ought to forget for the time all the books he has read on the subject. The same applies to literature, for neither accuracy nor originality can be achieved without innocence. I remember the delight with which Chesterton received the following answer from a little girl who had gone to the seaside for the first time, and had been asked how it looked: 'Like a field of cauliflowers.' Had she remembered her school anthologies, she might have suggested a waving meadow, or a herd of galloping horses, but being born in Beaconsfield, and having apparently a good eye for lines and colours, she chose the nearest simile at hand, which happened also to be one of the best she could find, suggesting, at one and the same time, the white foam of the breakers and the sweeping lines of the green waves. It was a truly poetic vision, a fresh contribution to the hundred metaphors suggested by the sea to man's imagination.

Innocence is as indispensable to man's intellectual and poetical development as to his moral character. If he loses it, his life is clogged by the dregs of experience and bookishness, he cannot act straight and think straight; he cannot even see straight. The main problem which confronts us to-day in education is not so much the necessity of fighting ignorance than the much more urgent necessity of preserving and fortifying innocence. 'The chief object of education,' wrote Chesterton in *All Things Considered*, 'should be to restore simplicity. If you like to put it so, the chief object of education is not to learn things but to unlearn things; to unlearn 'all the weariness and wickedness of the world and to get back, into that state of exhilaration we all instinctively celebrate when we write by preference of children and of boys.' If he were in control, he 'would insist that people should have as much simplicity as would enable them to see things suddenly and to see things as they are.'

Happily we have not yet reached the ominous days when, according to Aldous Huxley, children will be 'conditioned' to the status to which they are destined by the rulers of the future republic, and where all sense of wonder will be knocked out of them by electric shocks. But we have already reached a stage when the whole drift of centralization, nationalization, and mechanization threatens to reduce the majority of workmen to a position in which they will have no scope for their initiative, and very little freedom in their private life. The only barrier we may at present oppose to the grinding influence of modern industrialism—whether it takes the form of Capitalism or Communism—is an education which develops and fortifies the pupil's imagination and teaches him to become a man without allowing him to forget that he is a child.

The grave mistake made by many modern educationists is that they fondly imagine that the mere imparting of knowledge

is a sufficient antidote against the depressing influence of modern society, and that mathematics, natural sciences, and the composition of 'précis' have in them a kind of mysterious moral virtue. Religion has no place in secular education, so that the whole weight of teaching is thrown on the purely intellectual side. Dogmas are forbidden, but prejudices are encouraged. Even if they were not, there would be no escape from them, for science cannot be adapted for school consumption without becoming to a certain extent unscientific. Religious dogmas, when simplified, lose nothing of their essential value. Even a small child can understand when he is told that he has a Father in Heaven, while he cannot possibly grasp the full meaning and implication of a word like 'heredity,' and will give it a wrong and rather sinister interpretation. Instead of protecting him against the depressing influence of life, such pseudo-scientific notions prepare him to accept it without reluctance. Scientific fatalism is the surest ally of industrialism and brings us back to the spirit of the hive and the horrors of the 'insect play.'

It would be a great mistake, on the other hand, to associate Chesterton's views with those of the group of educationists who wish to abolish all authority, all instruction from elementary schools and believe that it is enough, in order to solve the problem, to awaken the child's dormant faculties and to give them free play. In *What's Wrong with the World*, he states plainly that the process must not only come from inside, but also from outside. There are a number of things which you cannot 'draw out' from a pupil, but that you must 'put in him,' and the English language is one of them. The whole art of education is to build new things on the foundation of the old ones, to remove a certain amount of ignorance without destroying innocence. This art can only be practised with success if we are able to deal with first principles, if we are able to satisfy, at the same time,

the child's curiosity and his admiration for and confidence in the universe, to feed his imagination as we feed his intelligence, to give him elementary notions of citizenship and religion as we give him elementary notions of natural sciences, so that, when he becomes a man, he possesses already some idea of the meaning of life and society, and of the part he is called upon to play in the world.



This idea, however, may be a dangerous idea: it may lead to trouble in a world which is organized to suppress such simplicity of mind. Innocence does not only imply straight vision, it often implies a straight fight. It tears up the veil of hypocrisy, it breaks through compromise, it is by nature explosive. You may be innocent as a toothless baby, but you may also be innocent as Joan of Arc. Perfectly simple and candid people have an awkward habit of following their first impulse and acting on the spur of the moment. Now all Chesterton's heroes are holy innocents, but they are at the same time extremely active. The Napoleon of Notting Hill starts a civil war, the mystic MacIan has a perfect monomania for duelling. Captain Dalroy is equally inflammable and unmanageable. On several occasions, the meek little Father Brown might have run into trouble if his creator had not protected him against the police by cutting short his story. All these quixotic persons are 'wild knights' on the war-path. Through comedy and tragedy, they tilt at the windmills and the giants of the modern world with the splendid courage of Alfred, the hero of the 'Ballad of the White Horse.' Their innocence is only equalled by their recklessness. They ignore the most elementary precautions and never condescend to dodge an obstacle. They are unhindered by any afterthought and never weigh their

chances of success against their chances of failure. Indeed, the more these chances are against them the more eagerly they fling themselves into the fray. They are all champions of Chesterton's ideas, fighting for faith, tradition, and freedom, but they are also children defending their dearest possessions with the passionate simplicity of children. Their philosophy rings in Adam Wayne's last speech: 'To each man one soul only is given; to each soul only is given a little power—the power at some moment to out-grow and swallow up the stars. ... Men live, rejoicing from age to age in something fresher than progress—in the fact that with every baby a new sun and a new moon are made. ... To each one goodness and happiness come with the youth and violence of lightning, as momentary and as pure. And the doom of failure that lies on human systems does not in real fact affect them any more than the worms of the inevitable grave affect a children's game in a meadow.' The game or the fight are here, the victory or defeat are elsewhere.

It is worthy of notice that these early stories of Chesterton were founded on dreams. The sub-title of *The Man who was Thursday* was 'A Nightmare.' The dedication of *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* to Hilaire Belloc shows that the whole epic story struck the poet as a vision:

Far from your sunny upland set
I saw the dream; the streets I trod,
The lit straight streets shot out and met
The starry streets that point to God.
This legend of an epic hour
A child I dreamed, and dream it still.
Under the great grey water-tower
That strikes the stars on Campden Hill.

Dreams are always simpler than life. Their beauty lies in their vividness, not in their light and shade. They do not alter

with the dreamer's age; they may grow less or more frequent, brighter or darker, but they remain childlike. There is always a kind of elementary and primitive quality about them. They are literally too good to be true, and the same may be said of their heroes which appear and disappear in a flash like characters in a pantomime. There is always something abrupt and stiff in their demeanour; they move by jerks, like living puppets. A good dream cannot make a good realistic novel, but neither can a good realistic novel make a good dream. The standards are different.

When we try and remember *The Ball and the Cross*, *The Flying Inn*, and even a play like *Magic*, we cannot recollect the whole story and we lose sight of all but the most important characters. What remains deeply printed in our mind is a series of coloured pictures—the picture-dreams of innocence unencumbered by the paraphernalia of reality. It is not even true to say that their heroes are children. It would be more accurate to say that they seem to spring from the imagination of a child of genius. Chesterton is always original, in his style, his dialectic, his imagery, but he is nowhere more original than in this exceptional faculty of daydreaming or of dream-writing. It was so natural with him that he imagined at a time that most of his contemporaries possessed the same gift. 'To the quietest human being,' he wrote in *The Defendant*, 'sitting in the quietest house, there will sometimes come a sudden and unmeaning hunger for the possibilities or impossibilities of things; he will abruptly wonder whether the teapot may not suddenly begin to pour out honey or sea water, the clock to point out all the hours of the day at once, the candle to burn green or crimson, the door to open upon a lake or a potato field instead of a London street.' The allusion to the potato field is unmistakable. Chesterton himself was 'the quietest human being,' and in this sense we

might add that no man was so quiet as he. Most adults have lost such vision. They may remember them or reconstruct them, they are seldom visited by them after school-leaving age.



Innocence does not depend necessarily on religion. Religion may be considered as a great storehouse of innocence, but some people are born so rich that they manage to pass through life without replenishing their stores. Chesterton would certainly have remained a child even if he had never become an orthodox. Had he not been a Christian, he would still have been a moralist. His dreams have the simplicity of Fra Angelico's pictures. The good characters are most lovable and the bad ones are detestable. Dalroy may grow somewhat boisterous, under the effect of rum, but there is not a touch of evil in his whole constitution. The Master in *The Ball and the Cross* is called pointedly Professor Lucifer, and we had better leave it at that. The moralist has parted the sheep from the goats. As in the medieval picture, there is no subtle nuance between good and evil, and the devil is always painted black. As a critic, Chesterton recognized that men could be bad from good motives and good from bad motives, and that some people stand dangerously close to the dividing-line. But as a creator he always drew this line very firmly and avoided any possible confusion. 'Many people have wondered,' he wrote, 'why it is that children's stories are so full of moralizing. The reason is perfectly simple: it is that children like moralizing more than anything else, and eat it up as if it were so much jam. The reason why we who are grown up dislike moralizing is equally clear: it is that we have discovered how much perversion and hypocrisy can be mixed with it.' When we are innocent such experience runs over us like

water off a duck's back. It reaches our reason without affecting our hearts. We may speak about it, but when we sing or when we dream, we still look at the world as we looked at it in our early youth. We see it white or black, we never see it grey.

Chesterton's simplicity is not only revealed in his characters; it explains, to a certain extent, his predilection for certain writers such as Blake, Browning, and Dickens. The latter is not a novelist in the modern meaning of the word: 'It was not the aim of Dickens to show the effect of time and circumstances upon a character; it was not even his aim to show the influence of a character on time and circumstances.' Speaking later of Dickens's failure in attempting to describe Dombey's conversion, the critic adds: 'He could only make his characters probable if he was allowed to make them impossible. Give him licence to say and do anything, and he could create beings as vivid as our own aunts and uncles. Keep him to likelihood and he could not tell the plainest tale so as to make it seem likely. The story of *Pickwick* is credible, although it is not possible. The story of *Florence Dombey* is incredible although it is true.'²⁸

It is always safe to go to Chesterton if we want to understand Dickens, and it is also useful to go to Dickens, and more particularly to Chesterton's views on Dickens, if we wish to understand Chesterton. Such intellectual kinship is unique in the history of literature. We have already suggested that it may have hampered Chesterton's development as a novelist. It must be added that the only kind of novel he could have written, had he given scope to his genius in that direction, would have been in the manner of Dickens, only more so, because he was still more innocent than his master. There is almost as much difference between the Napoleon of Notting Hill and young

²⁸ *Charles Dickens*

Martin Chuzzlewit as between Martin and Tom Jones. It is not easy for the poet to walk hand in hand with the observer and the analyst; it is still more difficult for the moralist to do so.



The childlike spirit is an imaginative spirit, and imagination is usually linked up with a love of liberty—that is to say, with a desire for change and adventure. The boy begins by following his hero through the pages of his fairy-tales, scaling magic mountains and crossing mysterious oceans. He ends by escaping from home or school and running to sea. This is the origin of great discoveries, and of the foundation of vast Empires; it is also the origin of many failures and disappointments.

Strangely enough, Chesterton always opposed this romantic description of the dawn of life. He did not share the poet's desire to grow wings and fly away to far-off lands 'where orange groves are blossoming.' He felt that there was enough romance in his own country, in his own home, to satisfy his craving for adventure, and that escape was, in some way, a confession of defeat. To use his own words, in *All is Grist*, he 'always conceived liberty as something that works,' not outwards, but 'inwards.' He maintained 'that the child does not desire ... to fall out of the window, or even to fly through the air or to be drowned in the sea,' and that when he wished 'to go to other places, they were still *places*' like Robinson Crusoe's or Stevenson's island. The adventure is not so much founded on the voyage, but on its results, on the necessity of dwelling in a small land and of making the most of one's opportunities and of the few implements available. The same applies to the romance of Noah's Ark in which the strangest assortment of creatures is locked up, like compact stores in a box. The child is not in love with the

infinite which frightens him, but with the limits which give him a feeling of security. The thrill of danger is merely a preparation for the greater thrill which follows it. His imagination is not so much engaged in running out of bounds, as in creating new boundaries: 'The nurse and the governess have never told him that it is his moral duty to step on alternate paving-stones, in order to exult in a challenge which he has offered to himself. I played that kind of game all over the mats and boards and carpets of the house; and, at the risk of being detained during His Majesty's pleasure, I will admit that I often play it still. In that sense I have constantly tried to cut down the actual space at my disposal; to divide and subdivide, into those happy prisons, the house in which I was quite free to run wild.'

The passage ends with a plea in favour of small property and a characteristic confession: 'if anybody chooses to say that I have founded all my social philosophy on the antics of a baby, I am quite satisfied to bow and smile.' Innocence therefore is our safe guide, but innocence does not mean irresponsibility. We can only be happy within limits. Our universe is a room, a house, or an island. The 'ethics of Elfland' teach us not only that every joy must be paid for, but that this payment is an essential condition of joy. Such discipline is everywhere apparent in the mysterious restrictions imposed upon the heroes of fairy-tales. 'A box is opened, and all evils fly out. A lamp is lit, and love flies away. A flower is plucked, and human lives are forfeited. An apple is eaten, and the hope of God is gone.'

Chesterton explains in his *Orthodoxy* why he could not join the young men of his time in revolting against moral laws, even when he did not yet understand them. He realized instinctively that such rules are in the nature of things. Man was too imperfect and the world too wonderful to make unrestricted freedom possible. 'Men might fast forty days for the sake of hearing a

blackbird sing. Men might go through fire to find a cowslip.'

Modern psychologists insist on the necessity for every child to exercise his freedom and attribute most human defects to the artificial 'repression' of natural instincts, but the child is not an anarchist, and would soon be bored with the infinite. If you do not give him limits, he will invent them. His own nursery games are the prelude of his school games. He does not wish to lose himself in the world, he wishes to carry the whole world in his pocket. He loves small things which he can warm in his hand. He manufactures a pocket edition of the universe, a few stones, plants, and beetles, and gathers together the simplest tools of man, a knife or a piece of string. He is always getting ready for an imaginary journey; and he enjoys his preparations so much that he forgets to start.

This love of limitation which leads us to accept religious and social laws develops in us the instinct of property. The child treasures his possessions. He need not be told to keep them, he must be told, on certain occasions, to share them or to give them away, and such teaching is not always readily accepted. This same feeling which prompts him to bring the whole world within his compass, to reduce the scale of the map in proportion to his own size, to cultivate a corner of his father's garden, to make things small so that they should be more lovely and more lovable, stimulates his possessive tendencies. He will weave a romance around the poorest toys and pour over his belongings the golden light of imagination. Things are not beautiful or precious by themselves, they are ten times more beautiful and more precious because he knows them, because he has lived with them, because he belongs to them, and because they belong to him.

These are the two aspects of freedom which are the foundation of Chesterton's political and economic creed; the freedom

to move within limits and the freedom to own the small space enclosed within these limits and everything it contains. Small-holding should be the man's ideal as it is the child's ideal. A boy will not ask for more room than he can possibly dispose of, but he will insist that nobody else intrudes. Once 'king of the castle,' he will not wish to run away from it, as long as he is left free to deal with it as he likes. The two essential conditions of man's happiness are restricted possessions and unrestricted liberties concerning these possessions. Freedom and property are interdependent; freedom is the first condition of Christian citizenship; property is the first condition of freedom.



If it is easy to trace to childhood the origin of Chesterton's economic doctrine of Distributism, it is easier still to trace to the same origin the need for spiritual discipline which contributed so much to his final conversion to Roman Catholicism. He declared in his *Autobiography* that the best answer he could give to those who asked him why he had taken this step was: 'To get rid of my sins.' I do not wish to discuss here whether he could not have achieved this end in the Church to which he belonged. I am far more concerned with the fact that he was able to adopt *literally* the doctrines of Penance and divine Absolution, and that he connected this new birth of the soul, given by confession, with the 'indescribable and indestructible certitude' that the first years of his life were 'the beginning of something worthy,' and that the 'strange daylight' which he saw, when he was five years old, shining on the steep roads of Campden Hill, 'was something more than the common light of day.'

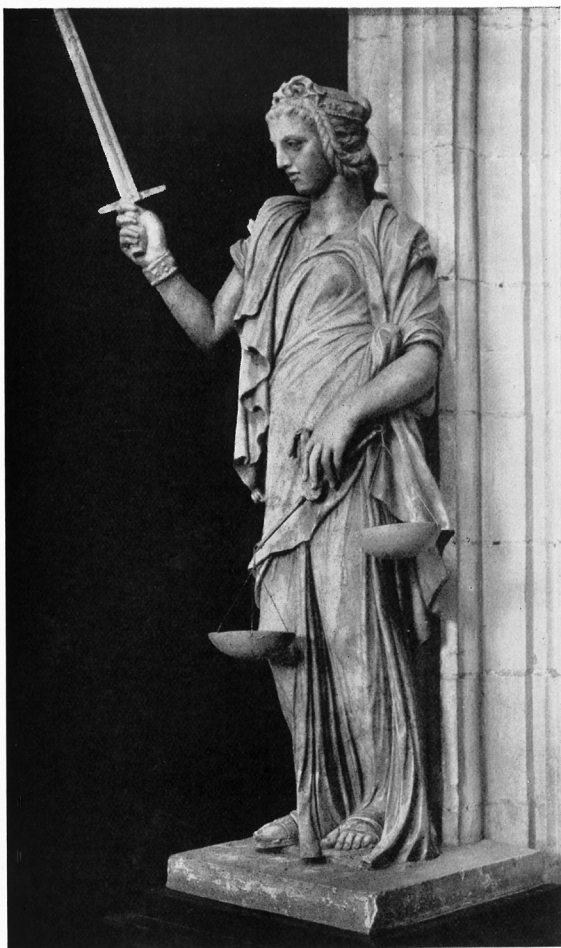
Some of Chesterton's friends have no doubt smiled at the thought that this great, good man whose worst sin was perhaps

to neglect his health and to ignore how invaluable it was to those who loved him and to the cause he defended, should have been so oppressed by remorse that he should have felt such a pressing need of unburdening his soul in the confessional. Standards of virtue are essentially variable, and Chesterton's standard was his own. He wrote somewhere that 'brave men are all vertebrates: they have their softness on the surface and their toughness in the middle.' If he had preserved his childhood's sense of wonder, he had also preserved his childhood's exacting conscience. He was easy-going as a boy, but he was also scrupulous as a boy. People were deceived by the superficial 'softness,' by his sympathy and indulgence. Few suspected that spiritual 'toughness' which hardened him against the smallest flaw, the slightest insincerity which he discovered in his soul. Reading his *Autobiography*, I remembered the impression I had of our first meeting. He made me feel small. This had nothing to do with his intellectual power and his bubbling humour. I had met before scores of men with whom I should never have dared to compare myself. What struck me far more was his deep humility and spiritual strength. It lay carefully hidden behind his table talk, as it is hidden, in the autobiography, behind a flow of pleasant anecdotes, but its piercing light shone through the screen.

I am quite aware that Chesterton had other reasons for taking the decision which he took in 1922, but it is all the more significant that the first answer which came to his mind when he wished to explain it, was concerned with the desire to get rid of his sins and to 'step out again into that dawn of his own beginning and look with new eyes' upon the world. He did not only value his early innocence, but he wished to preserve it and to renew it whenever he thought that it had been tarnished by life. Although millions of men believed and believe still that,

when they leave the confessional, they become a 'new experiment of the Creator' as they were when they were five years old, the number of those who remember as vividly as he did 'the white light at the worthy beginning of the life of a man' is strictly limited. They may feel refreshed and comforted and strengthened against new temptations, but can they still see the Crystal Palace 'as if it were really made of crystal'?²⁹

²⁹ *Autobiography*



CHAPTER VI

Justice

A GAIN AND AGAIN THE IMAGE of another prophet, whose influence was strongly felt in the last century, intrudes upon one's thoughts. In his praise of medieval art and institutions, his contempt for Capitalism and modern

industrial methods, his religious earnestness, his passionate desire for improving social conditions and in the paramount importance he gives to moral values, Ruskin may be considered as the forerunner of Chesterton. Both prophets subordinate Art for Art's sake to their conception of right and wrong, and modern technique to Christian traditions. What is more significant, both declare that the doctrine of progress in mere efficiency is leading the modern world straight to the abyss. Both wish to put on the brake and to build up gradually a new society based on Christian principles.

There is, however, a very strong contrast between them, a contrast which would have provoked Chesterton's opposition to Ruskin in the nineteenth century, as it provoked his opposition to Bernard Shaw in the twentieth. By education and temperament, Ruskin was a puritan. He could not reconcile normal human instincts with his artistic and social idealism. He kept the flesh and the spirit in two separate compartments and was out of touch with the festive spirit of the people. It cannot be said that he lacked humour altogether, but he lacked that vast and tolerant geniality which is the foundation of humour. He certainly lacked a sense of proportion, and this defect, combined with an inveterate artistic dogmatism, was the main cause of the reaction which followed his death. His blindness to Rembrandt is a case in point, his violent denunciation of the Flemish and Dutch genre painters, more particularly of Teniers and Jan Steen, is another. A drinking scene sinned against Victorian prudishness; it was denounced as 'obscene' and 'devilish.' No artistic treatment could redeem such 'disgusting subjects.'

The difference between these two great men might perhaps be summed up by saying that Chesterton was always a Catholic—even when he was an Anglo-Catholic—and that Ruskin was a prejudiced and somewhat fanatical Protestant.

But the gulf was deeper than that. It was in their temperament as well as in their beliefs. Chesterton spoke seldom of Ruskin, but he manifested a strong dislike of his Nature-worship. Rightly or wrongly, he reacted against any kind of intellectual aristocracy. For him the people came first; it is no doubt the reason why he transferred his allegiance to William Morris. In *As I was Saying*, he pointed out that 'the great achievement of William Morris was ... that he nearly convinced a whole generation that the nineteenth century was not normal. ... He was the one nineteenth-century man who really saw through the nineteenth century.' Ruskin and Carlyle might have shared this honour, but the first was suspect of aestheticism and the second could not be forgiven for popularizing hero-worship.

As a poet, a staunch radical, and a passionate traditionalist, Chesterton could not maintain a disinterested attitude when his deepest convictions were concerned. He was not detached, but very much 'attached.' He had given himself heart and soul to the defence of the Orthodoxy and of the civic rights of the poor. He loved a fight, and he fought all his life against overwhelming odds. Under the circumstances, it would be wrong to expect from him, in all circumstances, a cool and well-balanced appreciation of facts and theories. He never pretended to be a historian or a specialist. He never sat on the throne of judgement, weighing carefully rights and wrongs. He combined an ardent faith in the goodness of his cause with a deep humility concerning the means he used to support it. He was sure of Orthodoxy and equally sure of Democracy, but he was never sure of himself.

He has been frequently taxed with partiality, and he was certainly partial to the things he loved. He would never have understood them so well if he had not been so. When we deal with certain questions, sympathy is an essential condition of

knowledge, and sympathy inevitably breeds antipathy. Even in a restricted field, like art and literature, it is impossible to discover a critic equally conversant with all periods and countries. Where the conflict of civilizations and religions is concerned, such a feat is above human power. A choice becomes inevitable; we cannot be just to one of the ideals which govern the world if we wish to be just to all. There are limits to our faculty of appreciating these ideals, as there are limits to our faculty of appreciating, in all fairness, individual actions. Justice is not only tempered by Charity; it is also influenced by Faith.

Some critics have asked from Chesterton what no believer could have given them. It is true that he felt a strong dislike for Eastern customs and religions, and denounced such symbols as the 'ball' and the 'crescent' as the irreconcilable enemies of the Cross. It is also true that, in his early essays, he showed little patience towards the patronizing methods of philanthropists, and that, at a later stage, he denounced with some violence the attempts made by social reformers to interfere with the private lives of the poor. The explanation is obvious. He was at heart a Westerner, steeped in the history and traditions of Christian civilization. He was also a democrat, not only in theory, but in practice, possessing a deep sense of the fundamental equality of man, and a burning resentment against any attack on his dignity and independence. He might have been a better student of comparative religion, if he had not been orthodox, and a more impartial critic of modern methods, if he had not believed in the Rights of Man. But he never pretended to be either of these things. He had strong opinions and he expressed them honestly and fearlessly. He loved Christ as a child loves his father, and he loved man as a brother. It may be logical to question such love, but it is not logical to ask those who possess it and are moved by it to show the same enthusiasm for other religions or political

creeds. We may reject every kind of faith as unsound, but we cannot accept them all as equally acceptable. We may refuse a hearing to all believers, but we cannot ask a believer to speak as if he did not believe. Complete intellectual impartiality, in such matters, can only be achieved through scepticism.

I have dwelt at some length on this aspect of Chesterton's personality, because I know by experience that it is one of the obstacles which prevents a certain number of his readers from valuing him as he deserves to be valued. The scientific spirit is perhaps the last ideal which is shared by most thinking people and which saves the modern world from the curse of utilitarianism. Everything is being subjected to the acid test of this disinterested desire for truth, and any writer who fails to satisfy this test is considered as superficial or, at any rate, hasty in his judgement. This is no doubt the reason why so many people instinctively distrust the voice of poets or prophets, especially when it is openly and frankly poetical or prophetic. The nobility of this search for truth is not in question; Chesterton recognized it more than once. But we are compelled to ask ourselves whether it is within the scope of science to answer the most urgent problems which besiege human conscience. Even if we could solve the riddle—which we cannot—should we discover where life leads us? Even if we knew the mysterious destiny of man, should we know how to achieve it? The remarkable progress made by science during the last century has not brought us a step nearer to these ultimate issues. But there is an obscure instinct in man, based on faith, which prompts him from time to time to alter the course of events, to manifest strong hatred and strong predilections, to point out one way and disregard the other. Those who possess this instinct to an exceptional degree are not necessarily saints or philosophers. They are often vague dreamers who live in the clouds, or men of action who

are carried away by urgent impulses. We should not gather subserviently every word they utter as if it were infallible, but neither should we shut our ears to their voice, because it is louder than others. Nor should we forget that such voice needs strong language to be heard above the storm. Every prophecy sounds injudicious.



I have far too much respect for the memory of Chesterton to praise indiscriminately every line he wrote in what he called his 'cartload of books,' but I hope that a time will come when his work will be appreciated as a whole, and when critics will give up examining some of his writings in the light of the latest conclusions of learned economists and historians. It is possible to compare Chesterton with Carlyle and Ruskin; or with his contemporaries, Shaw and Wells, or with men of a younger generation like D. H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, or T. S. Eliot; it is useless to compare him with trained scientists. No writer who allows free play to his poetical faculties and to his imagination could pass such a test. It is as absurd to ask him to do so as it would be to ask a naturalist or a statistician to write plays and poems.

Even when the two schools of thought meet on the same ground, as in history or sociology, they remain to a certain extent independent of each other. We are told, for instance, that Carlyle's *French Revolution* is no longer sound history, but I doubt if it ever was. The inaccuracies it contains are not so much due to the author's imperfect knowledge of the period as to his personality. The book may not give a perfectly faithful description of the revolution, but it gives an extraordinary vivid vision of it, and we would be infinitely the poorer if it had not

been written, or if Carlyle had not had the courage to rewrite it after it was burned. The same answer applies to most of the criticisms directed against Well's *Outline of History*, Shaw's views on economics, or Chesterton's defence of medievalism and private property. Every one of these writers has preconceived opinions, and devotes most of his attention to the facts which support them. He has a corresponding tendency to ignore or to minimize the facts which might disprove them. His work must be appreciated not so much for its scientific as for its theoretical value. He is not out to discover the truth; he is out to confirm the truth which he thinks he has already discovered. This attitude is unscientific, but it is nevertheless legitimate if the author is able to throw a new light on the subject of his disquisition.

Let us take as an example this question of the French Revolution. Its importance in Chesterton's historical conception has already been explained.³⁰ He was educated as a Unitarian, and was steeped from childhood in the traditions of English radicalism. He became a lover of man before becoming a lover of God, and his democratic instincts were fully developed before his conversion to Orthodoxy. From that moment, Christianity and the French Revolution were the two pillars of his philosophy, the Rights of Man appeared to him as the civic expression of his religious creed; liberty, equality, and fraternity answered the call of Faith, Hope, and Charity. He never wavered from this position. He went even further; he considered the French Revolution as the fulfilment of the democratic development of medievalism, the revival of the ideal of the old guilds and Communes, crushed by monarchy and aristocracy. It was as if mankind had picked up, in the eighteenth century, the threads broken in the sixteenth, during

³⁰ See Introduction

the devastating storm of the Reformation and the religious wars which followed it. Such conceptions must appear, on the face of it, most acceptable to any Christian and to any democrat; they are, nevertheless, open to serious objections.

A number of modern thinkers, more particularly the American Humanists, such as Irving Babbitt and Elmer Moore, in their efforts to restore ethics, have recently denounced Rousseauism as the origin of the confusion which prevails in the modern world. Rousseau's vague theism, his worship of Nature, his belief in the natural goodness of man, amounting to a denial of original sin, are all opposed to Orthodoxy. They inspired the wild dreams of the Jacobins and the ruthless policy of Robespierre. They were the origin of a series of popular movements which advocated liberty without discipline and clamoured for the citizen's rights without insisting on his duties. Chesterton realized the difficulty. In one of his last essays he wrote: 'The nuisance of the nineteenth century was that it tried to combine the common sense of the fellowship that men have in common, which is all perfectly sound and true, with an artificial expectation of Utopia; an entirely new notion that everything that was bad yesterday, and worse to-day, will inevitably be right to-morrow.' Was this notion 'entirely new,' and could not its origin be discovered in the heresy of man's natural goodness and in the romantic confusion between God and Nature? Chesterton, who adopted Belloc's view of Robespierre, would no doubt have answered that the religious feelings which inspired some of the Jacobin leaders reacted against the scepticism prevailing among the aristocracy, and that somehow the faith of the *Vicaire Savoyard* was not so despicable as his critics made it. It is one of those problems which cannot be solved objectively. Whatever answer you give to it, you may always be suspected of partiality. A wise historian will leave it open, but

it is precisely what the prophet cannot do, since he is bound to reach a conclusion and to deduce from it a rule of conduct.



It is in the same light that we must consider what Chesterton has to say about the most popular religious fashions and philosophies of his time. We must not go to him if we are anxious to obtain any information about Buddhism, Islam, Christian Science, the pessimism of Schopenhauer, the superman of Nietzsche, and the pacifism of Tolstoy. The only thing he can show us is the reaction which such religions or theories provoke in a sincere orthodox, and this reaction is nothing if not abrupt. He calls the Schopenhauer 'Will to live' a 'phrase invented by Prussian professors who would like to exist and can't.' He asks, in *George Bernard Shaw*, 'why we should worry about the superman,' since the ape never worried about us: 'We cannot be expected to have any regard for a great creature if he does not conform to our standards. ... If the superman is more manly than men are, of course they will ultimately deify him, even if they happen to kill him first. But if he is simply more supermanly, they may be quite indifferent to him.' I have already quoted the passage, in *Orthodoxy*, where he shows Nietzsche and Tolstoy 'sitting at the cross-roads,' because the first will take all the roads and because the second refuses to take any of them. To these two great thinkers who exerted such a fascination on the pre-war generations, Chesterton opposed the simple figure of Saint Joan. She did not hesitate, 'she chose a path and went down it like a thunderbolt.' Yet she had in her 'all that was true either in Tolstoy or Nietzsche,' the pleasure in plain things and the reverence for the poor, on the one side, the pride and yearning for strength and courage, on the other. 'Joan

had all that; and with this difference that she did not praise fighting, but fought. ... Tolstoy only praised the peasant, she was the peasant. Nietzsche only praised the warrior; she was the warrior. She beat them both at their own antagonistic ideals; she was more gentle than the one, more violent than the other. Yet she was a perfectly practical person who did something, while they are wild speculators who do nothing.³¹ Shaw no doubt remembered these lines when he wrote his great play.

The method followed by Chesterton is almost always the same. He compares the ideal opposed to Christianity to another aspect of Christianity, and shows that the old philosophy is at the same time bigger and finer than the new one. The Nietzscheite scorned the Christian's meekness, Chesterton gives him a taste of his fierceness. The Tolstoian wished to extend a logical and equally distributed love to all mankind, he gives him a hint of Christian charity. 'Christ did not love humanity; He never said that He loved humanity; He loved men.'

While Chesterton respects the sincere agnostic who has lost his faith, and shows consideration for the philosopher who only preserves some part of it, he rejects summarily such 'fads' as Spiritualism and Christian science which appear to him either morbid or blatant. The orthodox may be compared with the farmer who has to deal with real facts, a good or a bad crop, virtue and sin; the Christian scientist is the salesman who must indulge in a false optimism in order to increase his sales: 'To say that there was no such thing as a headache was part of the same mentality as saying that there would be no such thing as a slump; it was of the very essence of that mythology and genealogy that the wish was father to the thought.'³²

³¹ *Orthodoxy*

³² *All is Grist*

Such sentences detached from their context have given rise to the legend that Chesterton was not always in earnest and said many things merely for the sake of coining an epigram, or throwing into the debate a staggering paradox. This is putting the cart before the horse. With him it was the conviction which provoked violent language, not the language which originated the conviction. His voice may sound strange in a world where the most intelligent people profess a tolerant scepticism, avoiding sweeping statements, and shunning all enthusiasm. Such people have no difficulty in keeping cool, they have nothing to defend. From the day when he entered the mansions of Orthodoxy, Chesterton realized that he had come into the 'right place'; he fought against any danger which threatened it, or any obstacle which prevented others from joining him. He could not have been tolerant without betraying his principles, he could not have been moderate without watering his wine. He felt not only that certain things were right and others wrong, but also that certain things were innocent and others dangerous, and he opposed the latter with the single-mindedness of an old crusader or of a French revolutionist.

Those sword-thrusts which flash so frequently through Chesterton's writings were aimed at an enemy, but the enemy was almost invariably an idea, a principle. He combined a love for the ordinary people with a worship for chivalry. All his heroes behave like true knights, they are as generous as they are brave, without fear and without reproach. They never hate their opponent, they hate the things which he defends. They never scorn him when he is defeated, they stretch their hands to him. Hypocrisy is the only unforgivable sin. It is not his warped idealism which damns Ivywood, but his lie. The sincere atheist, Turnbull, is the best friend of the sincere orthodox, MacIan. Their ever-postponed duel is conducted with a punctiliousness

which outdoes the most refined traditions of chivalric romance. Don Quixote has come back to stay and finds himself in good company.



Chesterton may not have been invariably right in his judgments, but no prophet was more in earnest than this laughing prophet. No man was more logical and consistent than this weaver of fantastic and grotesque stories. When he wrote *The Flying Inn*, for instance, his defence of popular tradition might have appeared disproportionate to the attacks made upon them by the social reformers. Subsequent events in the United States showed to what excess the prohibitionist campaign could lead. Besides, the drink question was only one aspect of a tendency which affected a large number of persons belonging to the 'ruling classes.' In those days, Buddhism and Islam obtained a hold on our imagination; theosophy linked up India with the West. A number of agnostics, who could not abide even the mildest forms of Christianity, sat at the feet of Mrs. Besant. Eastern art exerted a direct influence on the Impressionists, and Omar Khayyám was compared favourably with Shelley or Milton. This was the heyday of the Anglo-Japanese alliance, and the rapid modernization of Japan was hailed as a miracle. The war has dispelled a good deal of this fashionable Orientalism, so that we may have a certain difficulty in realizing nowadays the importance of the movement. *The Flying Inn* is not merely a satire against prohibition; it is a good-humoured but emphatic protest against the views of people who, after renouncing the religion and customs of their fathers, adopted Eastern creeds and fashions. The signpost of the 'Old Ship' stood for the standard of Europe.

It was Chesterton's method to lead from a small thing to a great principle, to begin with comedy and to end in tragedy. It allowed him to avoid the preacher's tone which he dreaded as much for himself as for his audience. He was nothing but a jester joking about a 'piece of chalk' or a flying signpost; let others theorize on Christian virtue and Christian traditions.

His philosophy is not obscure, but the modern reader may have some difficulty in understanding it, because it works differently from that of most modern writers. When told that he was dogmatic, he retorted that his dogmas were at any rate more logical and more reasonable than those of his opponents, that it was, for instance, easier to believe in the birth of Christ than in the birth of the superman, in the beauty of the thirteenth century than in the beauty of Utopia—but this argument did not always clear the air. For some people might have objected, and did in fact object, that they believed neither in Christianity, nor in the superman, nor in the blessings of progress. Others might have declared that they felt more attracted towards a scientific hypothesis which did not affect their conduct than towards a religious dogma which determined their morals. The proper way to approach Chesterton is to recognize, once and for all, that he is orthodox and to grant him his orthodoxy, for the sake of argument, while keeping our own convictions. We must not expect from him a perfectly connected rational exposition of his views, but what we can expect from him is a perfectly connected and rational defence of his opinions, and a searching criticism of the opinions of his adversaries.

It is true that he recorded the story of his conversion in *Orthodoxy* and in his *Autobiography*, but his story, invaluable as it is, does not affect those who have not undergone similar experiences. It is a personal adventure which has no general application. When all is said, religion cannot be reached

by a purely rational process. Every believer, like every lover, must take his courage in both hands and leap in the dark, like Chesterton's 'modern Scrooge' does in his dream. He cannot prove that he is right in leaping, before he has reached his goal, and it is only when his feet are firmly planted on the rock of his faith that his voice can carry conviction. Then it is that the test comes and that the orthodox, for the sake of argument, may end by agreeing that Orthodoxy stands above argument. We must grant divine Justice and the hand which holds the scale; it is only when we see that the scales are even that we realize that we were right.

There is no great originality in believing in the Christian tradition, in the sacred character of marriage, of family life, of small property, of citizenship and patriotism, but there is great originality in defending such beliefs with new arguments adapted to the restless mind of a modern democracy.

The failure of most of the defenders of Orthodoxy, in the nineteenth century, was mainly due to their lack of imagination. They insisted on the 'meek and mild' character of Christianity, at a time when the masses were groaning under the oppression of Capitalism. They dwelt on the virtue of sacrifice and voluntary renouncement, when most people had nothing left to sacrifice and nothing worth renouncing. They exhorted their flock to wait patiently for their reward in another world, when they could not even obtain their due in this one. By doing so, they played into the hands of their adversaries, who denounced them as the supporters of the rich and called their religion a dope. Their appeal to peace and charity broke against the sword of Justice.

In his *Everlasting Man*, Chesterton recalls those 'out-breaks of wrath, like storms above our atmosphere,' which 'do not seem to break out exactly where we should expect them,' the terrible

lament over Jerusalem, and more particularly Christ's activity as an exorcist. 'There is nothing meek and mild ... about the tone of the voice that says: "Hold thy peace and come out of him."' It is much more like the tone of a very businesslike lion-tamer or a strong-minded doctor dealing with a homicidal maniac.³³ Many years before, in *Orthodoxy*, he had already dwelt on the terrible words referring to the camel and the needle's eye: 'I know that the most modern manufacturer has been recently occupied in trying to produce an abnormally large needle. I know that the most recent biologists have been chiefly anxious to discover a very small camel. But if we diminish the camel to his smallest, or open the eye of the needle to its largest ... Christ's words must at the very least mean this—that rich men are not very likely to be morally trustworthy.'

I do not, for one moment, suggest that Chesterton is the only Christian writer who reacts against the old counsels of patience and submission which were poured out for so many years from so many pulpits on so many congregations. In his *Autobiography* he quotes a number of churchmen, both Anglican and Catholic, who shared his views on the subject and with whom he was closely associated. But, among laymen, he was one of the first who followed this policy and who remained faithful to it. The only early writers who may be compared to him are Lamennais and Léon Bloy, but Lamennais left the Church, and Bloy was perhaps too temperamental and personal in his attacks to be always convincing.



Chesterton wrote a poem on 'Righteous Indignation'³³ in which he imagines that when Adam was chased from Paradise,

³³ *Poems*, 1915

he turned back and begged God for a flower, but no flower came.

For only comfort or contempt,
For jest or great reward,
Over the walls of Paradise,
The dumb shut doors of Paradise,
God flung the flaming sword.

It burns the hand that holds it
More than the skull it scars;
It doubles like a snake and stings.
Yet he in whose hand it swings
He is the most masterful of things,
A scorner of the stars.

It is with this sword in his hand that he waged his war against plutocracy, according to the fierce and intolerant spirit of the Gospel. The poor had been told to forget and forgive their social wrongs in the name of Christ. He told them to fight for their rights. The rich had been thanked for giving up part of their luxury to public charities. He denounced them for not giving their all.

It is difficult to say which was the greatest virtue, according to his philosophy, but there is no doubt concerning the greatest sin. Avarice is the curse of the modern world; it is all the more to be dreaded that it is the perversion of a noble quality. 'A thrifty man,' we are told in *As I was Saying*, 'may turn into a miser, but in turning into a miser he is ceasing to be a thrifty man. ... A miser is a man who is intercepted and misled in his pursuit of thrift and betrayed into turning to the pursuit of money. Madness of that sort always haunts the life of man, as a possible temptation and perversion. Idolatry is always a danger to the soul, and idolatry is the worship of the instrument.' The modern tyrant is not 'the man mad on sex, like Nero, or mad on

statecraft, like Louis XI, he is simply the man mad on money.' His madness has not even the mean justification of a crazy love of gold coins, the glitter of guineas is nothing to him. He is content 'with the crackle of notes, but far more often with the mere repetition of noughts in a ledger, all as like each other as eggs to eggs.' ... The old miser at least collected coins, the American millionaire collects noughts, and 'the man who collects noughts collects nothing.' The moderately rich have their temptations, but they are still human. They 'include all kinds of people—even good people. But among the Very Rich you will never find a really generous man, even by accident. They may give their money away, they will never give themselves away; they are egoistic, secretive, dry as old bones. To be smart enough to get all that money you must be dull enough to want it.'

Chesterton was far too human not to recognize a good man when he happened to meet him. As a matter of fact, he counted several rich men—shall I say, moderately rich men—among his friends. His attitude was exactly the reverse of that of the conventional defenders of Orthodoxy. While the latter acknowledged social injustice but invoked the Gospel as a reason for tolerance and patience, he felt more inclined to make allowances for personal reasons, but insisted that, in the eyes of Christianity, the position of the wealthy classes was untenable. His social intolerance was the result of his religious zeal, his tolerance was the outcome of his genial temperament.

His partiality to the poor was even more pronounced than his hostility to the rich. In this respect, his social philosophy was a literal interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount. Conventional charity appeared to him nothing short of blasphemous. It was an outrage to the doctrine of moral equality. Appeal based on physical sufferings stirred his indignation more than cynical selfishness. They were equally humiliating

to those who gave and to those who received. 'All the despair about the poor,' he wrote in *Charles Dickens*, 'and the cold and repugnant pity for them, has been largely due to the vague sense that they have literally relapsed into the state of the lower animals.' He hated the idea that people, merely because they were destitute, should depend on the caprice of a millionaire or be shepherded and controlled by State officials. The condescending tone of the benefactor and the patronizing attitude of the social reformer were equally abhorrent to him. The poor must be helped because they possess the same rights as ordinary human beings, not because they have been suffering grievous wrongs.

I remember a talk we had, many years ago, on Baudelaire, whose pessimism was particularly distasteful to Chesterton. He had not read the *Poèmes en Prose*, and I took this opportunity of telling him of a story entitled '*Assomons les Pauvres*,' in which the poet recounts how, exasperated by the humility of a beggar who accosted him in a solitary street at night, he knocked him down and beat him soundly. Luckily, the man had enough strength and courage to retaliate, giving his aggressor a black eye and breaking several of his teeth. Baudelaire, delighted, shook him by the hand and explained that he could not possibly have helped him when he begged, but that now that a normal relationship had been re-established between them, he could ask him to share his purse: '*Monsieur, vous êtes mon égal! Veuillez me faire l'honneur de partager ma bourse*.' Chesterton enjoyed this fable, and remarked: 'I should not have thought that Baudelaire had so much sense.' I fondly hoped that this 'flower of goodness' might redeem in his mind a few 'flowers of evil.'

In a world devoted to the worship of wealth, Chesterton preserved a genuine veneration for the poor. He did not think

of the best means of controlling their carelessness, their 'irresponsibility'; he thought of the best means of preserving their traditionalism, their patience, their self-respect. If there was one question concerning which this most genial of men might have been called touchy, it was that of class distinction. It did not much matter to him whether the distinction was made between employer and employee, rich and poor, or the people and the army of officials who might control them. In one of his essays³⁴ he denounces almost in the same breath the well-to-do who speak of the 'lower classes' and the sociologists who speak of the 'workers.' There are 'workmen' or 'working men' whom you meet every day, and who are as good men, if not better men, than yourself. It is a pernicious habit to talk of them as of a 'vast grey horde of people, apparently all alike, like ants.' This dehumanizing way of dealing with the 'worker' 'is really quite as irritating to anybody with real popular sympathies as the ignorant contempt of the classes that are established and ought to be educated. And both fail upon the simple point that the most important thing about him is that he is a man; a particular sort of biped; and two of him are not a quadruped nor fifty of him a centipede.'

The French Revolution did not wage war in defence of a class or a herd, but in defence of the Rights of the individual against an oppressive State. Whether this State is called monarchic, capitalistic, socialistic, or communistic, the fight must be pursued as long as the oppression goes on.

This is the fundamental reason which led Chesterton to part company with Socialism in his youth and to oppose it ever since. He did not deny that the new organization might improve the material situation of the poor. He denied that it could

³⁴ *As I was Saying*

improve their moral situation, their freedom to exercise their rights as free citizens. While the materialists and determinists urged that no progress could be achieved if physical conditions were not altered, he answered that these alterations would be worse than useless if they led the poorer classes from one state of subjection to another. The reform would be vain if the means employed for achieving it jeopardized its results.

As an alternative to Socialism, G. K. C. upheld Distributism. He devoted a great deal of his time and activity, at the end of his life, to propounding the new system through his *Weekly*, which became the organ of the Distributist League. A number of his articles on the subject were published in his *Outline of Sanity*. The essential difference between Distributism, on the one hand, and Capitalism or Marxism, on the other, is that it does not take into account the trend of modern economic and financial development, but reacts strongly against it. Instead of upholding the concentration of Capital which led towards the constitution of larger trusts or towards State monopoly, and aiming at the organization of a highly specialized trade and industry, Distributism advocates small ownership all round. It stands for the small farmer against the big landowner, the small workshop against the big trust, the small shop against the multiple shop. It aims at the constitution of self-sufficient economic units, and offers a cure for depressed wages and unemployment in the revival of agriculture, the suppression of monopolies and the simplification of business transactions.

I need not say that such 'paradoxical' proposals were greeted with shouts of derision by the modernists of all shades. It was only too evident that, instead of building on 'reality,' that is to say, of following the current, the apostles of Distributism were 'looking backwards' and trying to resurrect things which had been for long consigned to the grave. If the revival of

Christianity and the 'Rights of Man' was considered by many as a 'noble ideal,' the revival of the principle of small ownership was denounced by almost every one as a social heresy. The system was undesirable, because it was obsolete; it was unpracticable, because it ran against the stream of progress.

What most critics did not see was that Chesterton's attitude, in spite of its boldness, was perfectly consistent. As an orthodox Christian, he could not be influenced by the argument of impracticability. He was compelled to hold that 'what Man has done, man can undo,' and to refuse to accept the 'far more mystical dogma: that Man cannot possibly do a thing because he has done it.' As a believer in the Rights of Man, he was bound to fight the centralization of capital which had deprived the citizen of his rights and reduced him to the condition of wage-earner. As a traditionalist, he could not possibly ignore the fact that, from the day of Athens and Rome, the ideal of 'one man one house' had remained 'the real vision and magnet of mankind.'

Against that vision all the successive regimes of feudalism, landlordism, aristocracy, and absolute monarchy had been broken; it was at least within the range of possibility that Capitalism and Socialism would share the same fate. For a time, 'the world may accept something more official and general, less human and intimate. But the world will be like a broken-hearted woman who makes a humdrum marriage because she may not make a happy one.'

Those who are still bound by a strictly determinist doctrine and deny free will altogether, will not be shaken in their conviction by these orthodox views. They will go on submitting to every event, in a fatalistic spirit, or 'pushing at the wheel' to help the car of progress to go forward, whether uphill or down dale. But those who have kept an open mind on such questions and who wonder why a sincere democrat like Chesterton indulged

in frequent attacks upon welfare centres, creches, popular education, and public charities, should pause before accusing him of injustice. He never denied that the evil which these institutions endeavour to remedy was intolerable. No socialist denounced it in more violent terms. Neither did he doubt the good intentions of individual social workers. The disease is only too glaring and the doctors are evidently anxious to cure it. What oppressed his mind was the thought that these doctors should have become the instruments of a system which reduced an increasing number of men, women, and children to a state of moral impotence. What stirred his opposition was that the measures taken to rescue the victims of the system were taken by the same authority which organized it, and to a great extent in the same spirit in which it was run. His grudge against the philanthropic capitalist of the Ford type was not that he was a philanthropist, but that he was a capitalist, and was therefore obliged to take back with the left hand what he gave with the right. His objection to the humanitarian State was not that it was humanitarian, but that it undertook the administration of laws which should not be needed in any well-organized State. He attacked the capitalist, he opposed the socialist, but his arch-enemy was neither the rich nor the social reformer. His arch-enemy was the anonymous machine which brought about a greater and greater concentration of wealth in a few hands and subjected the majority of industrial workers to a state of monotonous automatism, lowering human civilization to the level of the hive or of the ant-heap. There could be no conciliation possible between the 'slavery of Rome' and the Rights of Man, between the subjection of idolatry and the freedom of Christianity.

Chesterton's partiality to the poor led him to take their side in all circumstances. He did not only champion their interests; he defended their character and their manners. He never excused their vulgarity, he admired it, praising their jokes, their very rowdiness. Even the bank-holiday trippers received his blessing; they were so much more natural and human than the wealthy globe-trotters! He was provoked into answering not only the accusations of the rich, but also the apologies of the reformers who insisted on the influence of heredity and bad surroundings. He resented such plea for extenuating circumstances. There was no crime to extenuate. The only crime of the poor man in the eyes of the so-called educated was that he followed another code of manners. He did not wash so frequently and he behaved in his own way at table. It was his right, and no one was entitled to criticize him or to apologize for him. Chesterton had as little use for a democrat who hesitated to shake his comrade's grimy hand, as for a Christian who was more susceptible to the bad smell of dirty clothes than to the love of Lady Poverty. He belonged to the small minority of intellectuals who can not only talk about the poor, but who can also talk with the poor. 'I believe firmly in the value of vulgar notions,' he wrote in *All Things Considered*, 'especially of vulgar jokes. ... The men who made the joke saw something deep which they could not express except by something silly and emphatic.' Why do the people laugh at foreigners? Not because they are stupid and narrow-minded, but because 'it is funny to see the familiar image of God disguised behind the black beard of a Frenchman or the black face of a negro.' Why are mother-in-laws supposed to be intolerable? Because people realize quite rightly that 'it is much harder to be a nice mother-in-law than to be nice in any other conceivable relation of life.' Why are hen-pecked husbands laughed at? Because every

married man knows that 'even if he is head of the house,' he is only the 'figure-head.'

Chesterton boasted of being a cockney. He was in excellent company. Did not Chaucer and Spenser and Milton and Dryden live in London? Did not Dr. Johnson and Shakespeare come to London 'because they had had quite enough of the country'? To those who denounced the cheap tripper with his donkeys, his crowded char-à-bancs, and his exchanges of hats, he retorted with spirit that these amusements were not so bad as those of the over-educated. 'People are not more crowded on a char-à-banc than at a political At Home, or even an artistic soiree; and if the female trippers are overdressed, at least they are not overdressed and underdressed at the same time. It is better to ride a donkey than to be a donkey. It is better to deal with the cockney festival which asks men and women to change hats, than with the modern Utopia that wants them to change heads.'

It was an evil day when, 'somewhere about the middle of the nineteenth century,' somebody discovered that washing which had hitherto been considered as a pleasure and a luxury was 'a virtue in the rich and therefore a duty in the poor.' This discovery increased the self-satisfaction of the rich, who could fulfil this duty very easily, and their sense of superiority towards the poor, who were unable to fulfil it, at least with the same punctilious care. Why do we go on repeating that 'a public-school man is clean inside and out' or that 'cleanliness is next to godliness,' when we know perfectly well that 'while saints can afford to be dirty, seducers have to be clean'?

Chesterton's sympathy extended to street cries and to street musicians. The people who forbid them in front of their houses are committing an act of vandalism: 'Some of the old street cries of London are among the last links that we have with the

London of Shakespeare and the London of Chaucer. When I meet a man who utters one, I am so far from regarding him as a beggar; it is I who should be a beggar, and beg him to say it again.' Unable to use the same argument in defence of street singers, he took refuge in the law: 'The street singer is no more a mendicant than Madame Clara Butt, though the method (and the scale) of remuneration differs more or less.' We are tempted to add: and the quality of the singing. But my purpose is not to show that Chesterton's argument, in such matters, was always sound. He would have used any argument to protect a poverty-stricken man, for the sole reason that he was poverty-stricken. The sight of misery was perhaps the only thing which made him forget the rules of the game of dialectics. The poor could do no wrong because the dice were invariably loaded against them. He could not show too much partiality, for he could never succeed in restoring the balance, in righting the scales of human justice. For there is a natural tendency to 'stretch the Law' against the poor which must be resisted.

Chesterton wrote this essay on 'Street Cries' in answer to some criticisms which had been made in the Press against a judicial decision, stating that musicians playing in the street were not 'beggars.' The idea was, no doubt, that 'it would be a great convenience if the law that punishes beggars could be stretched to cover people who are certainly not beggars, but who may be as much of a botheration as beggars.' The writer of the article wished to use the mendicity laws in a matter unconnected with mendicity, because it would save trouble and prevent criticism. In such matters, Chesterton was a strict constitutionalist and insisted on a rational interpretation of the Law. He disliked the idea often expressed by foreigners that the English were not a logical race, and the way English politicians boasted of the results achieved by compromise and opportunism. 'Modern

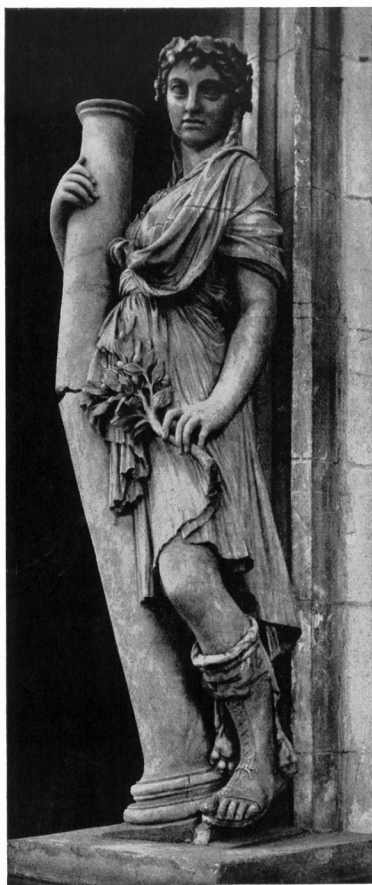
scientific civilization,' he wrote, 'was launched by logicians. It was only wrecked by practical men.'

A last example will show Chesterton's attitude towards the poor and his burning sense of the injustice from which they suffer not necessarily at the hands of the rich, but also at the hands of those who are supposed to protect them. It is an extreme case, and I choose it purposely because it is controversial.

In the conclusion of *What's Wrong with the World*, we are told that doctors had sent out an order that all little girls, in certain state schools, should have their hair cut short. The order applied only to the poor, firstly because no doctor would have dared to issue a similar order to the rich, and secondly because the hair of the daughters of the rich were presumed to be clean and to harbour no lice. The argument is apparently that the disease is more likely to be in the hair of the poor, because the poor are crowded together in close rooms, because their rent is so high and their wages so low that the mother is often compelled to do outside work, and because she cannot find the time to look after her children properly. Therefore, in her own interest and in that of her schoolfellows, the child's hair must go. Chesterton had just seen a little 'she-urchin' with gold-red hair toddling past, in front of his house, but the prophet's mind did not work in the same direction as that of the social reformer's. He reversed the engine of thought. Instead of starting from hygienic, he started from moral principles. Instead of beginning with the slavery of the slum, he began with the holiness of man and woman, their legitimate right to preserve this child's hair and to take pride in it. The result is widely different: because a girl should have long hair, her hair should be clean, she should have a free mother, she should not have a usurious landlord, there should be a redistribution of property, and if need be, a revolution: 'That little urchin with the gold-red hair, she shall

not be lopped and lamed and altered; her hair shall not be cut short like a convict's. No, all the kingdoms of the earth shall be hacked about and mutilated to suit her. The winds of the world shall be tempered to that lamb unshorn. All crowns that shall not fit her head shall be broken; all raiment and building that does not harmonize with her glory shall waste away. ... She is the human and sacred image; all around her the fabric of the world shall sway and split and fall; the pillars of society shall be shaken, and the roofs of ages come rushing down; and not one hair of her head shall be harmed.'

There may be some flaw in the argument, but there is no flaw in the steel of the 'sword of indignation,' in the clear ring of the voice which echoes: 'It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.' Nowhere does the prophet follow so closely in the footsteps of his Master than in his love for children and of the poor, and in his resentment of any 'offence' directed against them.



CHAPTER VII

Courage

MANY READERS WILL REMEMBER the beginning of one of Chesterton's best known essays, in *Tremendous Trifles*, in which he recalls a conversation which he had with a friend, on the eve of his departure for a journey abroad. His friend found him busy packing his luggage, in his

flat in Battersea, and asked him where he was going. The answer was: 'To Battersea.' It took the author some time to explain, and his questioner more time to understand that 'going abroad is only a roundabout way to go to England, and that the best road leading to Battersea may bring you there via Paris, Berlin, and Rome; in other words, that 'the only way to go to England is to go away from it,' in order to be able to see her from outside and to compare her with other countries.

During the last stage of his journey—that is to say, in the train from Dover to London—Chesterton met an American lady who had never been in England before, and who remarked that the ivy seemed to grow everywhere, covering the churches, burying the houses and the trees. She found it very picturesque and 'so comfortable.' The writer had just been reading a speech by Mr. Balfour—as he was then—in defence of the House of Lords. The speaker's main argument was that the House of Lords ought to be preserved, 'because it represented something in the nature of permanent public opinion in England, above the ebb and flow of parties.' Had any French statesman uttered such a plea, it could be taxed with insincerity, but the English politician is not bound by ruthless reality and brutal logic. 'The English love of believing that everything is as it should be, the English optimism combined with the strong English imagination, is too much for the obvious facts.' It is like the ivy which the lady found 'so beautifully soft and thick.' Let us therefore admire the ivy, and 'let us pray God in His mercy that it may not kill the tree.'

As a true-born Englishman, as a poet, Chesterton also liked the ivy, but as a realist, a democrat, and a good logician he preferred the oak. This 'riddle of the ivy,' this conflict between the charm of tradition and the stern facts of life, was ever present in his mind. When later, in *The Flying Inn*, he wished to

describe the worst type of English aristocrat, he called him Lord Ivywood:

But Ivywood, Lord Ivywood,
He rots the tree as ivy would,
He clings and crawls as ivy would
About the sacred tree.

He constantly opposed the French love of logic to the English love of compromise. As a radical, he felt that when 'people have got used to unreason, they can no longer be startled at injustice.' Opportunism, political elasticity may for a time yield favourable results; but they must ultimately weaken the public spirit of the nation. The same cleavage which exists in individual ethics should be maintained in social life. There is no conciliation possible between right and wrong, between sense and nonsense, between justice and injustice. No nation can live indefinitely on a system of concession and conciliation. Such a policy may appear wise and practical. It is more often the result of scepticism or cowardice. A proposal is either good or bad, it must be adopted or rejected, it cannot be indefinitely postponed, or applied half-heartedly. Political conscience should be as stern as individual conscience. The ivy must be mercilessly cut if it threatens the life of the tree, it cannot be allowed to grow under the pretext that it provides a picturesque ornament.

I have already alluded to the impatience with which Chesterton heard foreigners praising English statesmanship for its wariness in delaying important decisions and leaving to time the solution of burning problems. For him, an open mind was often an empty mind. The danger of half-way houses was that they became the refuge of humbugs. 'Most Englishmen,' he wrote, in *All Things Considered*, 'say that these anomalies do not matter; they are not ashamed of being illogical; they are proud of being illogical, ... they say it shows what practical people we

are. They are utterly wrong. ... Anomalies do matter very much, and do a great deal of harm. And this for a reason that any one acquainted with human nature can see for himself. All injustice begins in the mind. And anomalies accustom the mind to the idea of unreason and untruth.'

Even if it could be proved that a policy of compromise brings about favourable results, such a policy would remain wrong because no material benefit can compensate a moral loss, or, in other words, because human actions must be judged according to the principles which prompt them, not according to their success or failure. But Chesterton refused to admit that the greatness of England rested on her ability to solve her internal quarrels without reaching a definite solution. Against those who said that she had succeeded in establishing democracy without suffering from the excesses of violent revolutions, he maintained that many of her present defects, the prestige of her *nouveau riche*, for instance, or the decadence of her agriculture, were due to the fact that she had drifted from an aristocratic regime based on land property, into an aristocratic regime based on money. The French Revolution, by dividing the land among small-owners, by sweeping away every appearance of privilege, had given democracy some definite foundation which could not be entirely obliterated by the growth of plutocracy. The national tree could still be seen; its outlines might be hard or abrupt, but it could be recognized at one glance. Ivy, on the other hand, may hide anything; a tree, a rock—or a ruin.

Distrust of compromise was, no doubt, one of the reasons which brought Chesterton ultimately into the fold of the Roman Catholic Church. The Anglican community, in which he had lived so long, included, beside the Catholic group, a large number of people who entertained views which were anything but orthodox. Its leaders were therefore obliged again

and again to conciliate opposite views, not only on theological problems, but on such questions as divorce and eugenics, which affected the intimate life of their followers. When brought into contact with the protestant-minded Anglican, the high-church Anglican felt that the ideas and symbols which were closest to his mind and dearest to his heart were merely tolerated. We find in the *Autobiography* a characteristic reference to a discussion which took place, in Beaconsfield, when the question of a War Memorial was considered. There was a first clash between the partisans of a club and those of a religious monument. There was a second clash when it was decided that this monument should be a carved crucifix, erected by a subscription raised among the parishioners. These criticisms wounded Chesterton's deepest convictions: 'If any one wants to know my feelings about a point on which I touch rarely and with reluctance, the relations of the Church I left to the Church I joined, there is the answer as compact and concrete as a stone image. I do not want to be in a religion in which I am allowed to have a crucifix.' The crucifix cannot be a 'compromise, a concession to the weaker brethren.' It must be a 'blazon and a boast' in which all the co-religionists should glory. No spiritual ivy should be allowed to decorate it.



This love of well-defined limits and of clear situations is the foundation-stone of Chesterton's philosophy. It is the source of his strength, but also of certain of his short-comings. Again and again, we discover that the poet is being sacrificed to the polemist, and the thinker to the man of action. Furthermore, we feel that this combative attitude was not always congenial to him, that if he had only considered his own tastes, he might

have preferred to devote himself to literary and historical criticism rather than to launch campaign after campaign against the Boer War, political corruption, prohibition, eugenics, 'and other evils.' He was driven into fighting by his loyalty to his brother Cecil and to many personal friends. Sharing their views, he wished to share the risks which they took in defending them. He could not help experiencing the excitement of the struggle, but from time to time, at the most unexpected moments, the poetical temperament shines through the argument, and the scholar or the dreamer reasserts himself.

I shall only give one example of this curious turn of mind, because I heard it commented upon in two opposite ways. In *The Outline of Sanity*, Chesterton interrupts a long disquisition in praise of peasant life by a quotation from Virgil's *Georgics*: 'Happy were he who could know the causes of things,' and invokes this opinion as a proof that the peasant possesses more wisdom than the town-dweller. To a trained economist this argument appeared 'ridiculous,' while it looked 'delightful' to a classical scholar. The volume is full of such 'irrelevant' references. The advocate of sanity cannot dissociate the present from the past; politics and economics from art, literature, and religion. The philosopher dwarfs the pamphleteer. A less intelligent man might have written a more convincing book in favour of Distributism, but it would have been a less intelligent Distributism.

Efficient political leadership requires a certain amount of pride, and there was not an atom of pride in Chesterton's constitution. He did not lack confidence, but he lacked that touch of narrow fanaticism or personal assurance which is an indispensable condition to rapid success. Humour and humility are the boon companions of saintliness, but they are undesirable adjuncts to modern efficiency. People are more and more

drawn towards a political creed by the admiration they feel for its exponent. How could they admire a leader who did not admire himself? If Chesterton did not enlist more support it was obviously because his views ran against the tide of popular opinion, but it was also because he was far too genuine and sincere to indulge in self-advertisement.

Mr. Titterton speaks of the difficulties which G. K. C.'s friends experienced when they tried to persuade him to give his own name to his paper. He suggested, as an alternative, the *Sixpenny Slush*, and refused stubbornly to be 'a good selling proposition.' *G. K.'s Weekly* was a compromise—one of the few compromises to which he ever subjected himself. His picture soon disappeared from the cover: 'It's not a nice face,' he remarked; 'let's drop it.'³⁵ Later, the editor was confronted with the difficulty of collecting advertisements for a paper which openly upbraided modern advertising methods.



The sub-title of this book is 'Seven Virtues *and* G. K. Chesterton,' because his modesty must be spared, even now; but it is impossible to speak of intellectual courage without being personal. In this matter, he never preached, he merely practised; he never talked, he acted, and gave in all simplicity an almost unique example.

I know no writer of his generation who made fewer concessions to public opinion. The sternest puritan could not have possessed a keener sense of blunt integrity than this jovial humorist. No fanatic would have died for his God more cheerfully. He had preserved from his early years of Bohemian life a complete disregard for the impression he made or of the

³⁵ W.R. Titterton, *G.K. Chesterton*

criticisms he aroused. He did not delight in opposition, like Bernard Shaw, and he never went out of his way to provoke it. He never tired of explaining himself, or of dispelling the swarms of misunderstandings which surrounded him; but his resolution did not waver, and he followed his way unimpressed by success or defeat. His ultimate goal was elsewhere.

He wrote his books as the ploughman ploughs his field. Every page was a new furrow; when he had reached the end of it, he turned his horses' heads against the wind, and started another, indifferent to the weather, grateful for the birds which accompanied his track. He never paused to sing a song, he sang as he went along. His poetry preserved the perfect rhythm of his walk. He was often compelled to stop to remove the stones which obstructed the way. Each of his essays marks a new effort to prepare the ground for the rake and the seed. When he was too tired to go on with his ploughing, he sat under a hedge, at the top of the hill, and surveyed the landscape of his memory, and dreamed of Browning, and Dickens, and Cobbett, and Francis, and Thomas—of all those who, by deed or word, had helped him to keep his furrows straight. He never lingered by the riverside, he never listened to the echo of his own voice, he never saw the reflection of his face, or if he ever did, it was but to jeer at himself as he would not have jeered at a whining minstrel met by chance on the road. He was not without vanity, but he kept his vanity for small things, like detective stories and toy-theatres. He had indeed the supreme humility of playing at being vain. The best shepherd delights in carving the handle of his stick or making whistles for his children.

There is a fine disorder in his 'cartload of books,' but there is not a line of self-complacency. It is no doubt the reason why he never concerns himself with melancholy. His soul moves outwards, not inwards. The first article of his creed is that we

have no right to expect anything from life. There is no disappointment; every happiness is a wonder-gift, like the gift of a good fairy. The miracle of being alive is a sufficient compensation for the worse sorrow. There is a strange stoicism in this attitude of mind which has not been sufficiently appreciated. I should hesitate to call Chesterton austere, but when I think of his appreciation of art, of his delight in the music of poetry, of his keen analysis of difficult writers, like Blake and Browning, of his love of folklore and tradition, I cannot help feeling that he must have sacrificed again and again the work he would have liked to do for the work which needed doing.

A writer requires a great deal of decision to defend his opinions, especially if they happen to be unpopular, but he requires greater decision to give up a congenial task for which he is exceptionally gifted in order to undertake another task which does not demand the same kind of talent. If any man had a calling, as a poet and an essayist, it was G. K. Chesterton, but he never gave himself up to the pleasure of exercising it. Rightly or wrongly, he assumed the most absorbing responsibilities and incurred deliberately heavy financial risks, prompted by a sense of duty to his friends and to his cause. He was so devoid of personal pride, so innocently unconscious of his power, that he would have served his ideal in any capacity, and devoted his time to weeding a real field instead of weeding the field of modern bad logic, if he had believed that such work would have been more useful. Not for nothing did he admire monks and soldiers. He had their courage and their self-denial.



Mr. Titterton relates a conversation which he had, at Beaconsfield, with the laughing prophet, in the course of which

the latter told him of one of the 'greatest temptations' of his life. It must have been towards 1908, when his reputation had been established by his weekly articles in the *Daily News*. A lady called on him, telling him that he had a following and that this following would grow larger and larger if he struck the right note of optimism—and no other. But Chesterton had discovered by then that universal optimism was only part of the truth, that after the words: 'Thy will be done,' came the words: 'Deliver us from evil,' and he promptly said so in his next book. The lady called again, in great distress, and told the writer that he was losing his following. But he was glad, because he had 'abjured his heresy' and 'recovered his balance.' He confessed that he had become afraid of his admirers: 'I saw what Shaw's followers—nimble as he dodged them—had done to him. So, as I am not an expert dodger, I persuaded my followers to drop me. I dropped, very softly, on a rock.'

Chesterton might have become a spiritual leader at the cost of not stating the whole truth, but only half the truth. He might have stood alone, crowned with a halo of originality, in his own chapel, surrounded by his own congregation. Had he played such a part, he might have caused quite a 'sensation.' He deliberately chose to spoil his chances with his devotees and to merge into the crowd of a larger congregation. He tore up the insignias of leadership and enlisted as a private in the Catholic army; and he did this in a very characteristic way, by asserting the doctrine of original sin, and by facing a problem which has been too often evaded by modern churchmen—the problem of the existence of Evil.

I have already dwelt on this point in the introduction,³⁶ but at the risk of repeating myself, I must once more insist on the

³⁶ P. 25.

obstacles which confront any one who dares to acknowledge to-day such an obvious fact. The conflict of Good and Evil is not only opposed to modern agnosticism and scepticism, it is also opposed to the ideal which dominates the mind of a large number of sincere Christians. The latter associate this conflict with the idea of reward and punishment which they rightly consider as the origin of many abuses. Their most ardent wish is to rid Christianity of the terrors of Hell and to dwell only on the positive aspect of the Gospel. By doing so, they sever their faith from the hard facts of life and open themselves to the criticism of feeding the people on illusions. They are no longer capable of giving a sensible answer to the question which racks the conscience of most religious-minded men confronted with the injustices of this world, the waste caused by greed, neglect, and cruelty. In order to escape from the dangers of a crude belief, they drift into the greater danger of an evasive and unreasonable mysticism. By bringing once more Christianity into contact with stern realities Chesterton rendered an inappreciable service to religion, but he jeopardized, for the time, his popular reputation. Evil is the last image which an easy-going optimist is inclined to face. There were thousands of people who were only too ready to laugh with the young prophet, to drink with him, and to rejoice with him in the delight of companionship and the wonders of a carefree world. Few only were prepared to confess their sins with him and to repent with him in dust and ashes.

The main quality of Chesterton's attitude of mind is that he despised cleverness. The people who were first attracted towards him on account of his brilliancy were soon disappointed. They had followed his twinkling star of optimism and were ready to sit at his feet and giggle at every flash of wit or humour. But wit and humour were only his instruments, the bells, with

which he awoke the attention of his audience, like a kind of philosophical street-crier. They had no value in themselves and were discarded as soon as they had achieved their purpose. The last thing the laughing prophet wished was that laughter should drown his voice—that is to say, the moral lesson conveyed by his voice. As long as he noticed that his audience followed his argument, he let loose a rolling fire of jokes, but as soon as the fun became uproarious, he kept his tongue under strict discipline. He was not there to entertain his public, but to expound his views and to stir either sympathy or opposition. He listened most patiently to sincere criticism, but he did not listen patiently to the stifled exclamations of ladies and gentlemen who witnessed his lectures as a show of intellectual fireworks, and punctuated approvingly the bursting of every rocket. He wanted people to agree with him, if possible, or otherwise to disagree with him, but he did not want people to gape at him, and leave the hall with nothing in their mind but a few *bons mots* which they hastened to relate to their friends at their next luncheon-party. He was a purveyor of thoughts which should lead his audience to reflect on their individual and public duties and help them to work out their own salvation; he was not a purveyor of jokes which would help them to wile away the time and to blind themselves to the mortal danger which threatened their soul.

He thus escaped the temptation which lies in wait for any talker, any writer who possesses, even to a small extent, the gift of rousing public interest, the temptation of saying not only what he thinks right, but what he knows everybody would think 'clever.' This does not necessarily imply that the speaker should adapt himself to current opinions. On the contrary, following the modern fashion of despising conventions, even when founded on sound principles, he may go as far as he likes in his

destructive work, provided he remains original. Reputations nowadays depend on originality more than on anything else. There is a headlong race among painters, musicians, poets, playwrights, and even moralists, towards bolder and bolder things. Almost invariably, the boldest of all will find admirers for the sake of the apparent boldness of his work, quite apart from its intrinsic value.

Chesterton was one of the few writers who remained unaffected by this craze for novelty. This is the reason why he disappointed many people. They said that it was 'such a pity' that he meddled with politics and wished to 'unearth the dead bones of the Middle Ages.' 'He began so well,' some one said to me. 'I used to be one of his most faithful admirers. I would not have missed a word he wrote. But he could not keep it up. He could not keep abreast of things. His first notions of smashing heresies was really brilliant. But you cannot go on smashing heresies all your life.' Amiable sceptics are ready to follow any will-o'-the-wisp, but unwilling to stand the steady light of a particularly searching truth.



Another criticism which is frequently heard concerning Chesterton's later work is infinitely more respectable. Writers and scholars still form a kind of guild or corporation, one might almost call it an international corporation, bound together by the love of good writing, as the old artisans were bound together by the love of good masonry or good weaving. Such people take a particular pride in workmanship. They do not necessarily uphold the doctrine of Art for Art's sake, but they wish each member of their corporation to devote all his energies to producing the finest things he may be inspired to produce through

his individual temperament and his personal gifts. They would say, for instance, that a born poet should not write prose, or that a dramatist should not write novels. They do not ignore the importance of subject-matter, but they insist that the material should fit the tool, and that every member of the brotherhood should choose a field appropriate to his particular talent.

Such critics have already asked, and they will ask again, whether Chesterton would not have been a greater writer if he had been less preoccupied by his moral mission and its implications, whether it would not have been better for his literary reputation—the only one with which they are concerned—if he had confined his writings to a certain range of subjects which were particularly congenial to him. They will point out that the quality of his earlier essays, for instance, is finer than that of his later ones, and they will add that the reason may be found in their titles. We find in *Tremendous Trifles, Alarms and Discursions, All Things Considered* a far greater proportion of personal recollections and experiences, fantastic parables, literary criticisms, than in more recent collections. The style of the latter is just as vivid, but the subjects are less inspiring. It is obvious that Chesterton took more delight in writing about cockney jokes and lying in bed and eating cheese, than he could possibly take in writing about blondes, about films, or about behaviourism. It is equally obvious that he was better equipped by nature to speak on Browning and Dickens than to speak on Eugenics and Distributism. Is it not a matter for regret that, as he grew older, he devoted more and more of his time and energy to fighting passing fashions or planning the new Jerusalem?

I have already tried to answer this objection,³⁷ and urged that Chesterton's enormous output should be taken into account

³⁷ See *Introduction*, p.12-13.

when we endeavour to estimate the value of his literary work. He belongs to the small family of giants who are prompted by an irrepressible longing for creation to produce three or four books every year, and write almost as impulsively and naturally as they would walk or sing. Such writers do not wait for inspiration, neither do they spend much time on planning and meditation. No sooner is the idea on the anvil than their hammer strikes. Results must necessarily vary. The fastidious reader must not complain; he has a whole library to choose from, and many masterpieces are at hand.

It must be added that Chesterton occupied a particular position among his colleagues. He was, at the same time, a journalist and a theologian, a historian and a story-teller, expressing himself one day in the language of poetry and the next in that of economics. Even Mr. Wells did not display such all-embracing activity. Had Ruskin been a humorist, a comparison might be possible, or had Rabelais been a poet. ... The Colossus of Rhodes is supposed to have had one foot on each promontory which enclosed the port. With due reverence, we might say that Chesterton had one foot in heaven and the other in Fleet Street. We might imagine him dictating his weekly article to the *Illustrated London News* across the breakfast-table, discussing the next number of his *Weekly* during the afternoon, and spending the evening immersed in Aquinas's scholasticism.

These questions about quantity of production and perfection of workmanship are irrelevant concerning a man of such intellectual greatness. Any one who approached Chesterton must have understood at once that he moved in his own world and that he could only do his own work in his own way. His love of independence was not prompted by self-worship, far from it; it sprang from an absolute necessity. Freedom was as indispensable to him as food and drink. He reached his finest

conceptions in a roundabout way. He sketched and smoked while he talked; and God only knows what the world owes to his pencil and his cigar. This perfect logician was anything but logical in his movements. This lover of limits burst all the limits of a well-ordered day and all the chapters of a well-ordered book. He said that he had no ear for music, but he had the curious absent-mindedness of the composer, as if he sometimes heard a mysterious voice while listening to you, or even while talking himself. No corporation was large enough to hold him.



There is an aspect of Chesterton's courage which must be noticed here. He had an instinct for the supernatural and felt intensely the presence of a good or a bad spiritual influence. Of the former he tells us very little; it is a side of his life which he hides from the world through shyness or, more probably, through sheer humility. But of the latter we hear a great deal. We find in many of his stories an eerie touch, bringing us back to the legends and fairy-tales which he defended so brilliantly against the attacks of a narrow rationalism. He was a master at creating atmosphere, although he found a special delight in dispelling it with the wind of laughter or the light of logic. He frequently dwelt on the importance given by the Gospel to exorcism, and his Father Brown devotes most of his time and power to exorcizing evil spirits—the evil spirits of superstition.

When the little priest first appeared in his works, in 1911, Chesterton was still engaged in fighting materialism and scepticism, and he provided his hero with a series of adventures which showed that the materialist's reason could not reach the truth because it left out of account the imponderable, and was blinded by concrete evidence. But when the last stories were

written, a considerable change had occurred. The religious instinct, long placed under restraint, had reasserted itself in a thousand directions. People who had refused to believe in Orthodoxy, because it was supernatural, were now disinclined to believe in it because it was not supernatural enough. They had rejected the miracles, they now rejected the reason and the common sense which justified the miracles. Christianity was too wild for the old-fashioned scientist, it was far too tame for the new-fashioned Christian scientist. It was too spiritual for the materialist, but it was not spiritual enough for the Spiritualist. So that Father Brown became more and more engaged not so much in helping the detective as in exorcizing the magician, in exploding sham creeds, and in bursting the bubbles of false illusions. The orthodox mystic who had been faced with orthodox rationalism was now faced with heretic mysticism. Father Brown, who had been 'innocent' and 'wise,' turned 'incredulous.'

Almost every story in *The Incredulity of Father Brown* illustrates this point. In 'The Curse of the Golden Cross,' 'The Dagger with Wings,' 'The Oracle of the Dog,' the murderer's pursuers are waylaid in their search by false omens, curses, mysterious presentiments which hide the real facts behind a veil of morbid imagination. In every case, the priest has to tear the veil before truth is at last revealed. In the latter story, a great deal is made of the howling of a dog which coincides with his master's death. The pursuers are so impressed by this, that they forget the true meaning of the doggish protest: a stick had been thrown by the murderer into the sea, and being a sword-stick it had sunk. The dog howled not because he had had a premonition of his master's fate, but because he had been deprived of his toy. 'Because he could not talk,' exclaims the little Father, 'you made up his story for him and made him talk with the

tongues of men and angels. It's part of something I have noticed more and more in the modern world, appearing in all sorts of newspaper rumours and conversational catchwords: something that's arbitrary without being authoritative. ... It's drowning all your old rationalism and scepticism, it's coming in like a sea; and the name of it is superstition.' The first effect of not believing in God is to believe in anything; 'And a dog is an omen and a cat is a mystery, and a pig is a mascot and a beetle is a scarab, calling up all the menagerie of polytheism from Egypt and old India, ... and all because you are frightened of four words: "He was made Man." We can almost hear Chesterton's falsetto through this flood of ecclesiastical eloquence.

Father Brown had not changed his position, but the world had altered around him. He had defended the citadel of a rationalist religion against the worshippers of Reason. He was now compelled to defend it against religious cranks. Within one generation it had been shown that, if the religious instinct were not disciplined, there was no excess to which it would not run. Orthodoxy which was denounced, fifty years ago, as the refuge of cowardice, had become the stronghold of common sense. Christians had been accused of refusing to face reality; they were now facing more dangerous things. They were once denounced for wishing to keep Pandora's box under lock and key, and saw now their accusers run in all directions after the spirits which had been allowed to escape from it.



This book has been a long eulogy, and I will no doubt be criticized for allowing myself to be influenced by personal feelings. Such criticism is unavoidable, and I am ready to face it, although I might urge in self-defence that I know scores of

people who never met my friend but share my affection and my admiration for him. I should like to add that, when approaching certain problems, sympathy is perhaps more likely to help our understanding than the adherence to a rigid discrimination between qualities and defects.

There is, however, one defect in Chesterton which might, I think, have prevented many people from appreciating him as he deserves to be appreciated. If I mention it, it is because I hope to reduce it to its proper proportions. It is a very noble and lovable defect, and it is directly connected with the subject of this chapter, for it springs from an excess of courage.

It reveals itself notably in the essay entitled 'About the Censor.'³⁸ After reminding his readers of the revolt which took place, in his youth, against the arbitrary authority of the Censor of plays, Chesterton points out that a great change has taken place in public morals during the last thirty years. Formerly, the majority was traditional if not conventional, while a small minority revolted in the name of freedom. To-day the position is reversed; it is the majority which flouts the old moral standards and a small minority which defends them. A problem arises in face of this 'change of proportion.' Should the minority preserve the present 'one-sided truth' and fight a rearguard action, under the assumption that the 'fundamentals' have not yet been formally reversed, and in the fond hope that they will not be in the near future? Or should 'those who hold the old view of right ... realize that they stand alone' and deliberately take the offensive? 'After some sincere thought,' Chesterton expresses the opinion that 'this latter course is by far the better.' He thinks that if we assume that virtue, even Victorian virtue, is still the rule, we play into the hands 'of the sophists who defend vice': 'It is a rule

³⁸ *As I was Saying*

by which we carry all the unpopular emblems of power, while they enjoy all the practical fruits of victory. They can flout us, because they profess that there is nothing to conceal; and we cannot fight them, because we pretend that there is nothing to fight.' But, above all, it prevents us 'from pointing out the one solid, static, stupendous fact which is before all our eyes. ... that we have not only seen a modern materialist civilization rise, but we have seen it fall. We have seen industrial imperialism and individualism a *practical* failure. It is no longer a question of using the modern machinery; but of cutting loose from the wreck of it. ... England looks much more hopeful as a Pagan country calling for conversion than as a Christian country calling for compromise.'

There are a few occasions when the prophet's hatred of compromise—and it is indeed a prophetic trait—is carried too far. When his friends read such an argument, they know what he means. Above all, he does not mean that the English are really Pagans, in the sense that they worship pagan gods. Neither does he mean that we should destroy all machinery, neither does he proclaim the doom of civilization. In the light of scores of other passages, we can interpret this series of challenges packed in a few angry sentences, at the end of an article, when time and, no doubt, paper ran short: Civilization cannot flourish without religion. Without religion, men become the prey of their own instruments. They are driven by the blind material forces which they hoped to master, into a state of semi-slavery. They lose their sense of dignity because they no longer consider themselves as the sons of God.

But it is not so much on account of its conclusions that such a passage may disturb the unprepared reader. The main statement itself appears too sweeping to be true. How can we say that morality has declined to such an extent during the last

generation? Surely this is in some degree a matter of personal appreciation. Immorality has become more blatant; it is broadly advertised in a certain press and in certain films. There is more cynicism in the world, but there is also less hypocrisy. A defensive fight does not imply a compromise. It means the protection of the shrine against the tide, until the tide turns. It has been fought again and again with conspicuous success in the course of history, while many bold offensives have defeated their aim.

If there was one flaw in Chesterton's armour, it was that he wore an armour. He was, literally speaking, a loyal knight always ready to obey the rules of courtesy, but equally ready to fly at the enemy, on the least provocation. This studious scholar who spent most of his time sitting in his arm-chair, had the spirit of Roland and Galahad, and roamed through the world galloping on his charger, brandishing his sword, and shouting his warcry. 'The Wild Knight' is his first poem, and the epic of Alfred his longest one. Almost all his heroes, from Wayne to Dalroy, are giants accomplishing astonishing feats of strength and audacity; they go about uprooting trees like Orlando Furioso. Chesterton was proud of being called quixotic and took a boyish delight in weapons. To love meant for him to fight for one's love, whether woman or religion. He lived in the spirit of the crusades, tilting at modern fashions and modern creeds, as his ancestors had tilted against the crescent.

There is no subject on which he grew more eloquent than courage. On one page of the *Calendar* you read this epigram: 'There is no such thing as fighting on the winning side: one fights to find out which is the winning side.' On the next, appears a stirring disquisition on the words: 'He that will lose his life, the same shall save it'; 'A soldier, surrounded by enemies, if he is to cut his way out, needs to combine a strong desire for living with a strange carelessness about dying. He must not

merely cling to life, for then he will be a coward, and will not escape. He must not merely wait for death, for then he will be a suicide, and will not escape. He must seek his life in a spirit of furious indifference to it; he must desire life like water and drink death like wine.³⁹ Courage is finer than fearlessness; it is not the inhuman absence of fear, it is the human conquest of fear: 'I am afraid of him,' says the hero in *The Man who was Thursday*, 'therefore I swear by God that I will seek out this man whom I fear until I find him and strike him on the mouth. ... No man should leave in the universe anything of which he is afraid.'

Chesterton was in love with courage. He possessed many other medieval qualities, a deep faith, a burning charity, a reverence for simple and delicate workmanship, but he had made courage his own province. During his youth, modern sages practised the art of dodging problems and shirking issues. Chesterton's laughter broke through their solemn speeches. In a blundering and hesitating world, drifting from one patched-up peace into another, his clear logic cut like a sword. He was easily provoked. God knows that he had, to the end of his life, many good reasons to be so, but his combative spirit led him sometimes to exaggerate the very real evils against which he fought. In *The Flying Inn*, for instance, he considers that prohibition, vegetarianism, and an enthusiasm for Eastern art and religions were all part of a sinister attack of the crescent against the cross, and of a conspiracy against English freedom. Such apprehensions were certainly more justified twenty years ago than they could be to-day, but, even at that time, they seemed too remote to explain Ivywood's wickedness or Dalroy's heroism. The whole story, of course, is a tragi-comedy, and the

³⁹ *Orthodoxy*

comedy is among the best ever written. My grievance is against the tragedy: the noble lord's fanaticism and the noble lady's attraction for him.

If we turn to Chesterton's political writings, such as *What's Wrong with the World* and *Eugenics and Other Evils*, we are confronted here and there by a tendency to overstate his case, to take not his illusions but his fears for realities. However deplorable the present material condition of the industrial worker may be, it is not so deplorable as it was forty years ago. The benefits derived from unemployment relief, old age pension, and health insurance cannot be entirely ignored. Neither can we assimilate the moral situation of a modern labourer, in a constitutional country, with that of a Roman slave. It is true that no place is left for the tramps who are forbidden to sustain themselves by poaching and fishing, but is it fair to denounce modern society because it is unable to provide hunting-grounds for them? Can we say that their lot was more happy in medieval days because 'it seems impossible that enclosing and gamekeeping can have been so omnipresent and efficient as in a society full of maps and policemen'? No doubt. State interference becomes more and more objectionable to the free citizen, even in constitutional countries, but before declaring that such restrictions deprive him of his freedom, should we not compare his position with the subjects of totalitarian or communistic States in which every article of the social contract has been broken? The danger of such overstatements is that they blur the issue. If we are gradually drawn into the wrong direction, we should insist on altering our course, but we should also insist on the fact that it is not too late to alter it. In short, we should follow Chesterton's own advice in *Charles Dickens*; when talking of the poor, he declared that we should emphasize, at one and the same time, their misery and their dignity. Reform can only be achieved

if we maintain a sense of proportion between the evil we are fighting and the hope we have to conquer it.

It is not easy to explain how a writer who possessed such a subtle balance in most matters—and more particularly in his literary criticism—should lose it on certain occasions and expose himself to the reproach of prejudice. He had a very passionate nature and an overwhelming sense of humour. It may be that passion prevailed when humour deserted him, when he spoke of certain things which were closest to his heart, such as human suffering and humiliation, or the intimate aspects of his faith. He was, in ordinary circumstances, the most tolerant of men, the most patient debater. His impatience could only be roused when he suspected hypocrisy or injustice. On such occasions, the chivalric spirit asserted itself, and his courage prompted him to struggle for lost causes, alone against a thousand. He forgot the ultimate purpose of the fight for the fight itself. Like Roland, he would have sounded his horn too late and broken his sword on a rock in a last effort to challenge the enemy. He had a childlike and romantic love for great hopeless deeds, and preferred a noble defeat to a doubtful victory. If St. George fought to save the princess from the dragon, it suited him to picture the princess in desperate straits and to give the dragon colossal proportions. Faced with the challenge of modernism, he preferred to call it undiluted paganism than diluted Christianity. He believed sincerely that the uncompromising attitude he advised his followers to take was the most likely to yield results, but we cannot help suspecting that the decisions of the strategist were strongly influenced by the generous impulse of the knight-errant. While rejecting the attraction of Art for Art's sake, he could not always resist that of Courage for Courage's sake.



If I have dwelt at some length on this aspect of Chesterton's works, it is because it is the only serious reason which can be given for treating him as a 'paradoxical' writer. The reproach is both unfair and undeserved. It is based on the assumption that because the prophet, in most cases, disagreed with modern views, his opinions were determined by a spirit of contradiction, and that he chose to defend the most unpopular propositions merely to show the skill with which he could defend any proposition. Nothing is further from the truth. He was deeply and sincerely opposed to modernism because he was deeply and sincerely convinced that it was wrong. For him the vague and contradictory ideas which prevailed in his time were not only dangerous because they threatened Christian principles and civilization, but because they were philosophically unsound, and challenged the conclusions of experience, authority, and good logic. It was not he but the modernist who was 'paradoxical.'

If we survey the whole field of Chesterton's activity, the few errors of judgement which he may have made, from time to time, appear as exceptions which do not appreciably affect the main outlines of the picture. We may perfectly well disagree with certain aspects of his theology and praise him as one of the outstanding restorers of the true faith. We may criticize certain of his political views, but recognize nevertheless that he was one of the few political writers who succeeded in combining the claim of economic justice with that of individual freedom.

Whatever mistake he might have made, he never failed to be consistent, and it is therefore not on side-issues but on main issues that he stands or falls. These main issues, whether he deals with religion, philosophy, social questions, or literary

criticism, rest on tradition, and tradition is the central theme of all his teaching.

He seems, in his *Autobiography*, to apologize for entitling his first great work *Orthodoxy*; it was one of his happiest inspirations. It was a bold but perfectly legitimate challenge to the craze for novelty which prompted the cleverest writers of his time to seek truth in a hundred new directions, without taking into account the efforts made, during the last two thousand years, to adapt Christian principles to the social and intellectual tendencies of every period of European history. The modernists were divided into a number of different schools; their only common link was the conviction that Christianity had failed. The intellectual revolution which took place in England, during the last years of the nineteenth century, shook the very foundation of Victorian morality. Not only was religion criticized, it was denied as a useless or harmful illusion which had hitherto prevented the world from developing on natural lines, according to the dictates of science, based on reason and observation. To the old dogmas founded on faith were substituted new dogmas founded on hypotheses, most of which have already lost their prestige to-day. None of these new beliefs was so widespread as the belief in progress. The word sounds somewhat hollow to-day, and it is mostly used now by public orators in order to round off some precarious sentence, but there was a time when it roused genuine enthusiasm. The young men of Chesterton's generation were still carried away by visions of a happy future in which all political and social difficulties would be solved almost as conclusively as a mathematical problem. Their mind was crammed with general ideas and hasty comparisons which all amounted to the assertion that biological evolution figured historical evolution. In the same way as man had evolved from the original cell, the society of the Future would evolve from

the crude civilization of the Past. The notion of knowledge was mixed up with the principle of moral goodness; becoming learned meant necessarily becoming wiser and better. The strange idea had even been conceived that it would be possible to find out the mathematical formula of mankind's development, and the stranger idea that, when discovered, it could somehow or other be applied. Technical discoveries and inventions stimulated this burning zeal. Aeronautics were bound to bring about international peace and the downfall of tyrannies. Industry should soon free mankind from all painful labour. A new kind of Rousseauism obscured the clearest minds and received support from widespread generalizations concerning heredity and the influence of surroundings. Sin and evil were consequently disposed of. Progress was not only the destiny, but the fate of man. If it was somewhat slow to come, if its machinery had hitherto increased class distinctions and depressed the workman's conditions, the 'forces of reaction' were alone responsible. More education, more enlightenment, more inventions, new discoveries would soon bring about either the blessings of gradual reform or the greater blessings of social revolution. People differed regarding the method, but did not differ regarding the end to be achieved, and scarcely doubted that it could be achieved. The young men were convinced that they would live long enough to witness the Great Dawn. They witnessed the Great War instead.

Ten years before its outbreak, Chesterton had had the singular courage to question the value of the new philosophies and to proclaim his allegiance to Orthodoxy. It is necessary to recapture the spirit of the time to realize the full meaning of his challenge. What was at the back of the mind of all advanced thinkers and what brought them together was an implicit trust in things to come. They reached this conclusion by various

ways: some through scientific developments, others through the achievements of industry, others through the idealism which underlay Socialism and its claim for social justice. But if rich and poor, scientists and artists, agreed on one thing it was that time was on the side of man. Time indeed became a kind of religion and was constantly invoked as a conclusive argument. The value of things, even their moral value, was estimated according to the period at which they had appeared in the world. Even historians were affected; the Renaissance was a progress on the Middle Ages, the eighteenth century on the seventeenth, and necessarily the nineteenth on the eighteenth. It was generally agreed that the centralized State was an improvement on Regionalism, and that international Commercialism or Socialism would appease national rivalries. The political unit was growing from the city to the province, from the province to the State, from the State to the whole world.

The effect of all this vague ideology was to render people blind to the conflict which threatened more and more European peace, and deaf to any advice given in conservative quarters. Such advice was looked upon as interested, and it must be admitted that these suspicions were not entirely unjustified. It was only natural that landowners and the middle classes should call a halt and oppose, to the best of their ability, the movement which they witnessed. Their opinions were discredited before they were uttered, and the march—the March of Death—was resumed.

What made Chesterton's protest original was that it came not from a conservative, but from a radical-socialist, and that it was made not so much on political as on philosophical grounds. Many voices had been raised before in defence of religion, property, and family, but they had nearly always been raised by those who wished to preserve the old régime, with

its class distinctions and narrow conventions. The appearance of a reformer who denounced not only the old order, but also the new, was nothing short of startling. He agreed that it was blasphemous to associate religion with the defence of vested interests, but he did not agree that it was unreasonable to proclaim one's religion. He agreed that conventions were a poor substitute for morality, but he asserted, in the same breath, that it was essential to have a clear vision of right and wrong, and he added that such vision could only be found in the fundamental principles of Christianity. He agreed that a free man can only obey the dictates of his reason, but he stated, at the same time, that reason and faith were inseparable and that there could be no worse dogmas than the scientific dogmas which were generally accepted by the modernists. He agreed that sweeping changes were necessary, but he also said that the changes would be far more sweeping and far more effective if they were based on the experience of the past and not merely on the illusions of the future. He agreed in looking forward to happier times, but he insisted on being allowed to look backwards, and he found in doing so that the whole doctrine of progress was a sham and could only be justified by a misrepresentation of historical facts. Against it stood the whole weight of a tradition two thousand years old, which showed that religion, instead of being the source of all errors and crimes, had been the most powerful civilizing force in history. Against it stood the fact, which no scientist could explain away, that good and evil were at war in the heart of man and in the State, and the urgent necessity of supporting the one and fighting the other. Neither time nor space were philosophical arguments.

What was the aim of this headlong march? Man could never be satisfied with mere physical comfort and intellectual enlightenment. These increased his strength, but gave him no

direction how to apply his strength. Progress without guidance, without morality, without first principles, could only lead to destruction. Religion is the deepest instinct of man. If repressed, it will be turned either into morbid superstition or political fanaticism. Both lead to individual or social insanity. Christianity has never failed, it has not been tried and found wanting, 'it has been found difficult and left untried.'

Many writers claim that they prophesied the Great War: Chesterton did more. He prophesied that the world could only be wrecked or saved by its spiritual forces, and that as long as these mysterious forces were not placed again under intellectual discipline, it would drift aimlessly from one storm into another like a rudderless ship. Most conservative writers, in their weak attempts to stem the tide, had made concessions to the spirit of the time; they had worked for safety. Almost alone, Chesterton opposed it, not on the ground of expediency, but on the ground of reason and common sense. He found this colossal cloud of illusion and pierced it with a shaft of light. People talked of 'fireworks' and 'sky-rockets,' little suspecting that they were themselves plunged in the night.

The effect produced by books like *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy* can only be understood to-day by those who realize the atmosphere in which they were written. Through no conscious effort can a writer dissociate himself to such an extent from his surroundings. It was sheer inspiration and no doubt also that strange audacity, the first-fruits of Innocence.

Epilogue

The death of Chesterton was felt as an irretrievable loss by his friends and fellow-writers. The publication of the *Autobiography* which followed, in the autumn, spread among the public the feeling that England mourned him as one of her noblest sons. Indeed, the tone of certain articles which appeared on the occasion was almost too uncritical. We hear a great deal of the man's delightful character, of his fertile imagination, of his powerful style, but we hear very little of his philosophy, and of his politics. During his life, a number of people who wished to ignore his principles, limited their attention to his humour. After his death, those who feel reluctant to discuss his message are naturally inclined to praise his personality. This tendency, although worthy of respect, is not without danger. After drowning his voice with our laughter, we are now tempted to silence it with vain and sentimental regrets. This is not the kind of homage he would have appreciated. He posed neither as a jester nor as a saint, and he asked for nothing more than

to be taken at his face value. If he wrote untiringly, it was in the hope that his words would be read carefully and pondered over. He put his heart and soul in his work; the least we can do is to examine it in the same spirit of deep earnestness. It is too bold, too fearless to be appreciated piecemeal, like a collection of curios. We should approach it as we approach a Gothic cathedral. The rough carvings are there, grinning gargoyles, virgins and martyrs, the seven deadly sins and the seven virtues. They deal with matters of life and death, and would burn the hands of the dilettante who wished to finger them one by one. This at least we can do for the prophet who did so much for us, agree with him, or disagree with him. It is the minimum of respect and consideration he deserves. Let his tomb at least be free from the artificial flowers of 'paradox' and of the dark laurels of a false celebrity, so that we may read and re-read the words carved upon it: 'Nothing is important but the fate of the soul.'

I do not mean that Chesterton's opinions should be accepted or rejected as a whole. I mean that his attitude was far too decisive not to provoke a large measure of agreement or a large measure of opposition. It is true that he was sometimes wrong on side issues, but it is equally true that he was generally right on main issues, which is more than can be said of most modern prophets. Here is an excellent example at hand. I have already referred to his strange experiences while travelling in Belgium. In one of his 'tremendous trifles,' he has some very hard things to say about my native town: 'Brussels is Paris without this constant purification of pain. Its indecencies are not regrettable incidents in an everlasting revolution. It has none of the things which make good Frenchmen love Paris; it has only the things which make unspeakable Englishmen love it. It has the part which is cosmopolitan—and narrow; not the part which is Parisian—and universal. ...'

This essay was one of the first I read, and, knowing pre-war Brussels as I knew it, I realized at once what had happened. Chesterton had spent a few days in the town and had gathered his impressions on the central boulevards. He had drunk German or English beer in a cosmopolitan café, he had not drunk Brussels beer in a local 'estaminet.' He had not had time to wander at leisure through the old town and had not tasted the hospitality of a Belgian home. He had strolled through the picture galleries, but he had not knelt down in Saint Gudule. As I was able to discover later on, he had fallen into the common mistake of those who judge Paris or London or any other large town from the most objectionable people they contain, people who do not belong to any of them, but who are in the habit of choosing them alternately for their hunting-ground.

I might have closed the book in a fit of temper, as I dare say a good many people have closed Chesterton's books when they saw that he denounced rashly things which deserved more respect. Had I done so, I would have missed one of the most valuable impressions of my literary life, just as some art critic might miss the beauty of a picture because he cannot get over some slight error of perspective or anatomy.

The essay is called 'Humanity: an Interlude,' and tells us of the author's wanderings through the countryside near Brussels. Having lost his way in the darkness, he saw at last a 'light too near the earth to mean anything except the image of God': 'I came out on a clear space and a low, long cottage, the door of which was open, but was blocked by a big grey horse, who seemed to prefer to eat with his head inside the sitting-room. I got past him and found that he was being fed idly by a young man who was sitting down and drinking beer inside, and who saluted me with heavy, rustic courtesy, but in a strange tongue. The room was full of staring faces like owls, and these I traced

at length as belonging to about six small children.' The father was away, but the mother attended to the mysterious stranger's wants. 'We had to be kind to each other by signs. ... She pointed out my way with her finger; and I drew a picture to please the children: and as it was a picture of two men hitting each other with swords, it pleased them very much.'

Chesterton had seen many people during the day, and listened to an animated discussion, carried on in French, on Science, Progress, and Socialism, and the future destinies of mankind, but when he returned to Brussels, the picture of Humanity which remained printed in his mind had very little to do with these questions: 'I thought of a low and lonely house in the flats, behind a veil or film of slight trees, a man breaking the ground as men have broken it from the first morning, and a huge grey horse champing his food within a foot of a child's head, as in the stable where Christ was born.'

I wonder where these children are now, and if the sketch Chesterton drew for them has been preserved, among other family treasures, in the depths of a chest of drawers. Does any of them remember the large man, with his black ulster and broad-brimmed hat, who rested a few moments in their farm and smiled on them, and laughed with them, and gave them friendly looks and friendly chuckles, and some Belgian pennies, and who took away with him nothing less than the vision of Humanity?

And I wonder also where I should be myself if, for the sake of a casual remark, I had missed the deep meaning of this essay and of scores of others which brought me down from theory to reality and from a vague aestheticism to the normal course of human life.

Since this book begins on a personal note, it is perhaps fitting that it should end on another, and that I should say here

what I always intended to tell my friend, and never found the opportunity of telling him.

After wandering through various philosophies from a rank atheism to a vague mysticism, after spending many years tasting various brands of socialism, after trying to reconcile an all-absorbing love of nature and art with a far less absorbing love of man, I found in his work—not the solution of my difficulties, but the revelation that these difficulties were not nearly so difficult as I imagined them to be. Brought up on Comte and Spencer, I had escaped for comfort to the legendary romanticism of Wagner, to Symbolism, Ibsenism, and the morbid atmosphere of Russian novels. I had been drawn nearer home by Carlyle and Ruskin, and nearer Christianity by the study of medieval art in Italy. But I was still struggling among the mists of dilettantism and a network of contradictions. No real faith can rest on art; it is art which rests on faith. In my anxiety to fly away from convention and to seek for some original expression, I had placed the cart before the horse, or, to use Chesterton's own expression, I was standing on my head. He rendered me the immense service of restoring my balance and planting my feet if not on the rock, at least on healthy, solid earth. He opened my eyes to the colossal disproportion which exists between the finest individual philosophy and the big stream of tradition which carries with it the experience of generations, and the aspirations of centuries. He showed me that God was not only the God of Parsifal, or Tolstoy, not even the God of Giotto or Saint Francis, but the God of the first tramp I met on the road. Listening to him, I understood again what I had once understood in my childhood, that humanity is not made of heroes, but of common men and women, and that the best way of being original is to be commonplace. I realized at last that I had confused tradition with convention, and lost the precious

years of my youth following fleeting fancies, because I had been too proud and too foolish to learn the lesson which the first ploughman might have taught me if I had only watched him like Saul Kane watched Farmer Callow.



If this civilization of ours survives the present crisis, and if scholars are still found in the next century to study the works of the great writers, Chesterton will no doubt occupy a prominent position in their minds. Reconstructing his social background, they will remark that the industrial revolution had so deeply altered human relationships, at the beginning of the twentieth century, that people had lost all sense of proportion. They had been brought up to think that the town, for instance, was more important than the country, and the workshop than the farm. Instead of adapting their existence to the rhythm of the seasons, they had built up an artificial world in which they dwelt, cut off from nature, like prisoners in a model prison. Although these millions of men and women lived so close together that they had scarcely enough space to breathe, they were separated from each other by insuperable obstacles—the rich from the poor, the intellectual workers from the manual labourers, the governing classes from the bulk of the people. In this sophisticated atmosphere there were still a few artists and writers left who struggled to express some human ideal, but they were unable to break through the barriers which fenced in their lives, to come once more into contact with the land, and to connect their thoughts and aspirations with those of former generations. They built up systems, they followed fashions, they sought the abstract formula which should solve their riddle, and remained blind to the fact that humanity had never lived

and could never live on systems, fashions, and formulas, but only on tradition and experience. One man, they will say, stood almost alone among this confusion of heresies, one man whose genius was that he was unconscious of his genius, one man who was courageous and innocent enough to proclaim, in the face of this multi-headed monster of Progress, that the old faith was the only faith and the old way of living the normal way of living; one man whose conception of humanity was not based on those transitory things which surrounded him, on those discoveries which destroyed each other, on those machines which enslaved their slaves, but on the healthy conception of a happy fertile land where the farmers worked in their farms, and the artisans in their homes; one man who insisted that the father and the mother should remain at the head of their families and live in their own house, enjoying the full dignity of free citizenship; one man who contended that the standard of a civilization must not be judged by its efficiency in producing goods with the greatest speed and at the lowest cost, not even by statistics testifying of the health and comfort enjoyed by the people, but by the standard of morality and individual freedom, by the amount of independence left to every citizen to exercise his free will and his free initiative; one man who had the foresight to repeat, in the language of his generation, the age-long prophecy that the only way man can save his body is by endeavouring to save his soul, the only way any civilization can flourish is by practising its religion.

They will wonder how Chesterton, born in London, brought constantly into touch with the public through journalism and the lecture platform, could preserve throughout such an attitude of mind in spite of his surroundings and the overwhelming opposition of his contemporaries. Quoting his *Autobiography*, they will show that he was perfectly conscious of this strange

consistency at a time when his rivals and friends were hovering from one ideal to another in a restless search for novelty: 'I began by being what the pessimists called an optimist; I have ended by being what the optimists would very probably call a pessimist. And I have never in fact been either, and I have never really changed at all. ... The thing I endeavoured to say then is the same thing which I am trying to say now, and even the deepest revolution of religion has only confirmed me in the desire to say it. For indeed I never saw the two sides of this simple truth stated together anywhere, until I happened to open the Penny Catechism, and read the words: "The two sins against Hope are presumption and despair."'

Judged in the perspective of time, Chesterton will not be looked upon merely as a poet or a literary critic, or the author of political and religious books. He will stand foremost as a writer gifted with the prophetic faculty of seeing things as they are, according to the passing conditions prevailing in his time, and as they should be, according to the eternal values of religion and philosophy. He never twisted the facts to suit his ideal, but neither did he twist his ideal to suit the facts. Never did he admit for one moment that man was the passive victim of blind forces which could compel him to tread a path which he was unwilling to tread. No one, during these eventful years of the twentieth century, combined in such a degree an eager desire to alter the social conditions among which he lived, and the power to detach himself from these surroundings and to judge them from an independent point of view. He never altered, because the principles in which he believed were unalterable. But the same faith which gave him such confidence in these principles prompted him to state them in and out of season, without taking the least notice of the effect they might produce on his readers or his audience. It is only if we keep in mind these

two dominant features of his philosophy, the value of Christian tradition and of the exercise of free will, that we understand the reason which prompted him to continue his journalistic work and to keep in contact with the world. The conversion of a friend was more valuable to him than the finest poem.

It may seem presumptuous to speculate on such appreciations because they imply a series of events which it is at present impossible to foretell. Chesterton's future reputation depends, to a certain extent, on the future course of history. What mattered to him, before anything else, was that he should have played his part and given all his strength to the cause he defended. Having done his work, he could have sung his *Nunc dimittis*. And there would have been a great laughter through his singing, like the laughter of his 'last Hero.'⁴⁰

Know you what earth shall lose to-night, what rich uncounted
loans,
What heavy gold of tales untold you bury with my bones?

• • •

The skies I saw, the trees I saw after no eyes shall see,
To-night I die the death of God: the stars shall die with me:
One sound shall sunder all the spears and break the trumpet's
breath:
You never laughed in all your life as I shall laugh in death.

The laughter of the free man who only uses his freedom to bind himself to his love, and of the husbandman who only ploughs his field to give his corn away, and of the fighter 'who never loved his friends as he could love his foes,' and of the poet who scattered verses among children like Christmas crackers, and of the Christian who worshipped God in man and man in God, the laughter of the sane man who knew the narrow limits

⁴⁰ *Poems*, 1915

of freedom and property, the sanctity of home and marriage, the laughter of the good man who never laughed at weakness, and of the brave man who never showed his tears.

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