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G. K. CHESTERTON

by

CHRISTOPHER HOLLIS

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Christopher Hollis is an author who has many points of sympathy with the subject of this essay, G. K. Chesterton. As a young man he knew Chesterton personally and, like Chesterton, Mr. Hollis is a Catholic, an active debater, and a writer who is well known for his discussion and criticism of ideas as they affect the welfare of society.

Mr. Hollis was a scholar both of Eton and Balliol College, Oxford. As a member of the Oxford University Debating Society, he toured Australia, New Zealand and the U.S.A. He has written books on Dryden and other literary subjects and became well known for his *The Breakdown of Money*, an analysis of economic problems which was published in the early 1930's. In the following years he was engaged in research work in this field at Notre Dame University, Indiana.

During the war he served with the R.A.F. and in 1943 *Death of a Gentleman*, consisting of a series of imaginary letters depicting an ideal, and perhaps his best-known book, was published. He is Conservative Member of Parliament for Devizes, Director of the publishing firm of Hollis and Carter, and well known as an essayist and broadcaster. He has also contributed an assessment of *Evelyn Waugh* to this series (No. 46).

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on Writers and Their Work

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GENERAL EDITOR
T. O. Beachcroft

GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON was born in London on 29 May 1874. He died at Beaconsfield on 14 June 1936.

G. K. CHESTERTON

from a bronze by MARIA PETRIE *in the National Portrait Gallery*

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G. K. CHESTERTON

GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON was born in Campden Hill in London on 29 May 1874. He was the son of a prosperous London auctioneer, whose name is still to be seen on auctioneer's bills on the London hoardings. His family were Liberal in politics and Unitarian in religion. Chesterton was sent to school at St. Paul's School. His career there was not outstanding in the conventional academic sense. He lacked the capacity to direct his attention to subjects that did not interest him. Physically he was a large and clumsy boy and in athletics he won no distinction whatsoever. But he, with a group of his friends, of whom the closest to Chesterton and the most distinguished in after-life was Mr. E. C. Bentley, the creator of the form of light verse known as 'the clerihew',[1] founded the Junior Debating Club. Chesterton's schoolboy life found its fullest expression in the life of that debating society, over which he presided, and in the friendship of his fellow-members.

After leaving school he did not go to the University, but went instead to the Slade School of Art. He had considerable powers as a caricaturist and draughtsman, as his later illustrations to Mr. E. C. Bentley's verses and to Mr. Hilaire Belloc's satirical novels were to show, but it was soon evident that his talents were primarily literary rather than artistic. He drifted out of art into a publisher's office and soon began, at first through casual contributions, to make a name for himself in free-lance journalism.

In 1899 the Conservative Government of the day, under the influence of its vigorous Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, had gone to war with the two small Dutch South African Republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. Opinion in the Liberal Party was divided on

[1] A form of comic biography in a quatrain verse. The lines rhyme and have a certain rhythmical form but do not scan. An example is :

What I like about Clive
Is that he's no longer alive.
There's a great deal to be said
For being dead.

that war. Some supported it as vigorously as did the Conservatives. Others were opposed, but even among the opponents opposition was for different reasons. There were the pacifists who were opposed to this war because they were opposed to all wars. But there were others—among whom was Chesterton—who were by no means generally pacifist, but who objected to this particular war as an unjust war. Chesterton's liberalism was always a liberalism of belief in small units. He hated imperialism and large units and the uniformity which imperialism's tyranny imposed upon people of different traditions. He was in violent reaction against the popular imperialism of the day, preached by Rudyard Kipling and Cecil Rhodes. Later, and in a more light-hearted mood, he was to write an extravaganza called *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, in which he imagines the growth of a passionate patriotism among the citizens of the various boroughs of London and the outbreak of war between them. Now in his youth, in a more serious mood, he championed the cause of the South African Republics. He was not content, like others, to argue that the British Empire was wrong to fight the South African Republics. He argued rather that the South African Republics were right to fight the British Empire. At the same time he had no sympathy with those who decried the virtue of patriotism. For the British Empire as such he cared little, but he championed as passionately the right of an Englishman to love England as of a South African to love South Africa.

These unpopular views he poured forth throughout the war, first in the columns of a small weekly paper run by himself and his friends, called *The Speaker*, and then in those of one of the large London Liberal daily papers, the *Daily News*.

At the same time he was making his first attacks on the world as a poet. In 1900 he produced his first two books of poems, *Greybeards at Play* and *The White Knight*. In reaction against the dominant imperialism of the age, he

was also in reaction against its pessimism. He imagines an unborn child dreaming what a wonderful adventure it would be to find his way into a world covered with green hair and warmed by a gigantic ball of fire and his splendour of delight, when, stepping through the door of birth, he found himself indeed in such a magic world.

Healthy and attractive as it was as a reaction against prevailing pessimism, there was perhaps something a trifle superficial in the too exuberant optimism of the young Chesterton of this period. There was force in the mockery of the Irish critic, Professor Kettle, who complained that it was really absurd in face of all the squalors and tragedies of life—the suicide and the slums—to exclaim merely 'How jolly it all is!' Though he had not yet reached the full maturity of his thought, Chesterton was prepared to meet this challenge. In 1903 John Morley, who was then editing the 'English Men of Letters' Series, commissioned Chesterton to write the volume on Robert Browning. The manuscript, when it was delivered, proved to be very different from the objective accurate record which the editor had expected. Chesterton, with a prodigious memory but a constitutional contempt for accuracy that he carried often to unpardonable lengths, quoted Browning copiously, but he quoted him always from memory and often with verbal inaccuracy. Instead of describing Browning's works, he preferred to discuss his views—and sometimes, to tell the truth, Browning was little more than a peg on which to hang the discussion of his own views. To the challenge of superficial optimism, he replied that Browning had taught us how to find good in what was apparently unmixed evil. Browning, he said, 'walked into the foulest of thieves' kitchens and accused men publicly of virtue'.

From his earliest boyhood, from the days of the Junior Debating Club, Chesterton had always loved an argument, and his articles in the *Daily News* and elsewhere, which were by this time one of the major excitements of English

journalism, were more often than not in the form of argument and criticism of one or other of the established leaders of popular thought of the day. Couched in the paradoxical form in which his mind naturally ran, Chesterton challenged alike the inequalities of life in Edwardian England which the Conservatives defended and the socialistic drift towards ever larger units and more and more regulation, which so many of the moderns accepted as progress. In 1905 he collected these controversial opinions into a book called *Heretics*, in which he took to task one after another all these leaders of popular thought—Rudyard Kipling, George Moore, Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Joseph McCabe the rationalist—and showed how in his opinion they were all mistaken. This brilliant and amusing book provoked the obvious question—uttered, as it happened, by Mr. G. S. Street—'Heretics from what?' 'If all these other thinkers are wrong, who is right? What is Mr. Chesterton's orthodoxy from which he blames them for diverging?' Always ready to respond to a challenge of such a sort, Chesterton in 1908 wrote *Orthodoxy*, in which for the first time he explicitly accepted the Christian position and gave his reasons for accepting it.

Until the coming of Chesterton, the defenders of orthodoxy had tended to defend it with arguments that were not only serious but also solemn, and, in most people's eyes at any rate, the weapon of laughter was a weapon of which the sceptic had almost a monopoly. It was the first of Chesterton's achievements that he turned the laugh against the sceptic, but even more important than his annexation of laughter to orthodoxy was his annexation of reason. He entirely accepted the rationalists' contention that the Christian religion must be judged by reason, but argued that reason was the friend and not the enemy of that religion.

The universe, he argued, manifestly did not explain itself. It could be understood only as the creation of something beyond itself. Man had this strange double nature. Even when he did that which he knew to be wrong, he was able

to recognize that there was a right which was opposed to this wrong. He was to that extent in constant conflict with himself, and such a conflict could only be explained if we understood that he was now something different from what he was made to be—if we understood and accepted, that is to say, the Christian doctrine of the Fall. Original sin was the sole firm ground of optimism. If man, as he is, was all that man could be, there was no alternative to despair. But if man had fallen and had been redeemed, then there was a sure basis for Christian hope. Christianity, he argued, was not the alternative and the antagonist of other faiths. On the contrary, it offered to Man all that the other faiths and philosophies could offer but also offered something more as well. He wrote :

> That a good man may have his back to the wall is no more than we knew already ; but that God could have his back to the wall is a boast for all insurgents for ever. Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt that omnipotence made God incomplete. Christianity alone has felt that God, to be wholly God, must have been a rebel as well as a king. Alone of all creeds, Christianity has added courage to the virtues of the Creator. For the only courage worth calling courage must necessarily mean that the soul passes a breaking point—and does not break. In this indeed I approach a matter more dark and awful than it is easy to discuss ; and I apologize in advance if any of my phrases fall wrong or seem irreverent touching a matter which the greatest saints and thinkers have justly feared to approach. But in that terrific tale of the Passion there is a distinct emotional suggestion that the author of all things (in some unthinkable way) went not only through agony, but through doubt. It is written, ' Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God '. No ; but the Lord thy God may tempt Himself ; and it seems as if this was what happened in Gethsemane. In a garden Satan tempted man : and in a garden God tempted God. He passed in some superhuman manner through our human horror of pessimism. When the world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven, it was not at the crucifixion, but at the cry from the Cross : the cry which confessed that God was

> forsaken of God. And now let the revolutionists choose a creed from all the creeds and a god from all the gods of inevitable recurrence and of unalterable power. They will not find another god who has himself been in revolt. Nay, (the matter grows too difficult for human speech) but let atheists themselves choose a god. They will find only one divinity who ever uttered their isolation ; only one religion in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist.

During all these years books and articles were pouring out from his pen with bewildering rapidity. In literary biography he followed up his study of Browning with a study of Dickens. He used his experience as an art-student to add to these studies of G. F. Watts and Blake. He wrote a criticism of the man with whom throughout his lifetime he remained in unending friendly controversy, Bernard Shaw. In all, Chesterton wrote eight literary biographies—on G. F. Watts, Robert Browning, Dickens, Bernard Shaw, William Blake, Cobbett, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Chaucer. We may add St. Thomas Aquinas to that if we wish to call that a literary biography. In addition, he was continually throwing at the world his passing literary judgements in works as various as his volume on the *Victorian Age in Literature* for the Home University Library or his articles which appeared in the central page of the *Illustrated London News* every week for almost the last quarter of a century of his life. As was only to be expected of a writer so uncritically fertile, his literary judgements varied in merit. He had no talent at all—as he himself was the first to confess—for what is sometimes called pure literary criticism—for arguments about form and manner. His whole interest was in ideas. As a consequence, the least successful of his biographies, as is generally agreed, are those on Watts and Stevenson, where his subject threw down no clear dogmatic challenge to the ideas of his age. Blake also was a failure because Chesterton's weapon was reason and he could not be at home with one who despised reason. On the other hand, Browning, written when Chesterton was still a young

man, remains to this day a favourite, even though those who prefer Browning's verse to his arguments have continued to complain about it over nearly fifty years. Dickens's protest against the tyrannies of Victorian industrialism was exactly the protest which he himself was anxious to make. He wrote the book in 1906. Had he come to it a little later in life he might have felt irritated by Dickens's theological weakness, but, as it was, he wrote it just at the time of his life when his admiration for Dickens was most unqualified. Chaucer was a subject naturally suited to Chesterton's sympathy, but the trouble about writing a life of Chaucer is that we know so very little about him and our bricks have therefore to be made of such very scanty straw. Undoubtedly in many ways the most satisfactory of his biographies was that of Cobbett. For Chesterton's debt to Cobbett was immense. It was Cobbett who first loudly challenged the popular Reformation view of English history. It is true that Cobbett did it not through any positive belief in or understanding of the Catholic religion, to which indeed he never adhered, and what were to Chesterton the most important things in life were to Cobbett a closed book. Cobbett's interests were solely political and social—they were partly to discredit the landed aristocracy of his own day, and the Established Church, which battened on it through discrediting its origins. But it was from Cobbett that Mr. Belloc mainly learnt his view of English history, and Chesterton learnt it from Mr. Belloc. Cobbett was, it is true, a great exaggerator, indifferent to detailed fact, but Chesterton also had an artist's indifference to pedantry. And, if he admired Cobbett where he was like him, he admired him equally, by a law of compensation, where he was most unlike him. Chesterton, though an enemy of industrialism and a believer in 'the rude peasantry', was quite practically incompetent whether for agriculture or for any other manual task. But Cobbett was a practical farmer, and Chesterton had all the impractical man's envy and admiration for the practical man. So here

was a subject into which he really could enter with spirit and enthusiasm.

Among fantastic novels, he followed up *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* with *The Man who was Thursday*—a story of a mysterious society of anarchists named after the days of the week. One after another, every one of these anarchists after a series of amazing adventures is discovered to be—unknown to all the rest—really a detective, seeking to spy on and to protect his society against his colleagues. At last only one—Sunday—is left, and he symbolizes the vast forces of Nature, which society exists to tame—' huge, boisterous, full of vitality, dancing with a hundred legs, bright with the glare of the sun, and at first sight somewhat regardless of us and our desires ', as Chesterton himself put it, in an explanation written in later life.

In 1910 he followed up these novels with another fantasia, *The Ball and the Cross*. It is the story of two men : one a simple Catholic boy from the Highlands of Scotland, the other a sincere atheist. Completely opposed to one another in their philosophies, they both see no alternative but to fight their differences out. They travel over the world trying to find a place where they will be allowed to fight one another. Yet, whenever they try to stage their fight, somebody from the modern world of compromise and half-faith interferes to keep the peace between them and to compel them to move on to another battlefield.

The first of the ' Father Brown ' stories, *The Innocence of Father Brown*, appeared in 1911. It was followed by *The Wisdom of Father Brown* in 1914, by *The Incredulity of Father Brown* in 1926, and *The Secret of Father Brown* in 1927. All the Father Brown stories were collected into an omnibus volume in 1929, but even an omnibus volume could not kill that exuberant little priest, and Father Brown stories still continued to pour out from his pen and were published in the *Strand* and other magazines. They were collected in the final Father Brown volume—*The Scandal of Father Brown*—in 1935.

The original of Father Brown was Monsignor John O'Connor, a Yorkshire priest and a great friend of Chesterton, who in 1922 received him into the Catholic Church. Ever since Conan Doyle had published his Sherlock Holmes stories at the beginning of the century, the detective story had been—as indeed it still is—one of the most popular sorts of book on the English bookstall. Detective stories varied and vary in merit from lowest to highest—from the crudest murder or from a story which merely sets out a simple problem of 'Who Done it?' without any attempt at literary merit, upwards; but a very high proportion of England's leading men of letters over the last fifty years have tried their hand at a detective story at one time or the other. Chesterton's Father Brown certainly differed from the detectives of the unliterary writers in that it was the character and features of the detective—his round, smiling, baby-like face—which impressed itself on the public and won the books their popularity. Father Brown's detection differs from that of his rivals, the creations of other authors, in that it is, characteristically, always some psychological and often indeed some theological slip by which the criminal betrays himself, as when the murderer, disguised as a priest, is heard to say that there are some things above reason and Father Brown knows from his heresy that he is no true priest. Or many of the plots turn on characteristically Chestertonian criticisms of the modern world, as when a witness says that no one has been to a certain house and it turns out afterwards that the milkman and the postman have been there. The modern man, Chesterton thought, in the vast anonymity of our metropolitan life would easily not notice a milkman or a postman and not think of them as persons.

This same year, 1911, was chiefly notable in Chesterton's story for the appearance of his long ballad-poem, *The Ballad of the White Horse*—one of the two or three outstanding ballads in modern English literature. English poetry in this century has produced a number of ballad poems—or stories written in verse—written as if they were

to be recited by a narrator—as, for instance, the *Reynard the Fox* of John Masefield. Such a ballad needs movement and excitement and a high theme, and all these Chesterton brought to his *Ballad of the White Horse*. It is certainly one of the first and the most widely quoted of all such English ballads of this century.

On a number of hill-sides in the West Country are to be seen effigies of White Horses. Of these some are indeed modern and uninteresting imitations, but two, one at Edington in Wiltshire and one at Uffington in Berkshire, are of immemorial antiquity. Chesterton in his Ballad tells the story of the fight for the defence of England between the Christian King, Alfred, and the invading heathen Danes, of the battle of Ethandune, or Edington, Alfred's final victory, and of the acceptance of Christian baptism by Guthrum, the Danish King.

In the early stages of the war the prospects of victory are all on the Danish side. Our Lady appears to Alfred in a vision and says to him,

> I tell you naught for your comfort,
> Yea, naught for your desire,
> Save that the sky grows darker yet
> And the sea rises higher.

Alfred accepts this as good news. For now at least he can know that he follows the Christian cause for its own sake and not for any worldly advantage that he may hope to get out of it. Disguised as a harper, he goes to the Danish camp. On his way there he passes the White Horse and sees that the Danes have neglected to keep it scoured. In the Danish camp he finds the Danes, singing and telling stories to one another. Harold, one of the young chieftains, is boasting frantically of the loveliness of a life of victorious violence.

> For Rome was given to rule the world
> And got of it little joy—
> But we, but we shall enjoy the world
> The whole huge world a toy.

Great wine like blood from Burgundy,
Cloaks like the clouds from Tyre,
And marble like solid moonlight,
And gold like frozen fire.

Smells that a man might swill in a cup,
Stones that a man might eat,
And the great smooth women like ivory
That the Turks sell in the street.

He sang the song of the thief of the world
And the gods that love the thief,
And he yelled aloud at the cloister-yards
Where men go gathering grief.

But Elf, the old blind minstrel, takes the harp from him and sings his sadder song :

A boy must needs like bellowing
But the old ears of a careful king
Are glad of songs less rough . . .

There is always a thing forgotten
When all the world goes well ;
A thing forgotten, as long ago
When the gods forgot the mistletoe
And soundless as an arrow of snow
The arrow of anguish fell.

The thing on the blind side of the heart,
On the wrong side of the door,
The green plant groweth, menacing
Almighty lovers in the spring ;
There is always a forgotten thing
And love is not secure.

But it is from Guthrum, the great King himself, that there comes the most awful confession of nihilistic despair :

But the hour shall come after his youth
When a man shall know not tales but truth
And his heart shall fail thereat.

When he shall read what is written
So plain in clouds and clods,
When he shall hunger without hope
Even for evil gods.

Alfred, unknown and in his disguise, makes his answer. He asks :

What have the strong gods given ?
Where have the glad gods led?
When Guthrum sits on a hero's throne
And asks if he is dead ? . . .
You are more tired of victory
Than we are tired of shame.
That though you hunt the Christian man
Like a hare on the hill-side,
The hare has still more heart to run
Than you have heart to ride.

Christianity has taken up into itself the guardianship even of the ancient pagan things, of which the White Horse is a symbol. The new paganism cannot preserve even that from which it came.

Therefore your end is on you,
Is on you and your kings,
Not for a fire in Ely fen,
Not that your gods are nine or ten,
But because it is only Christian men
Guard even heathen things.

In the end the tide of battle turns. Alfred and the Christian cause gain the victory, and Guthrum accepts baptism.

In the years before the war he wrote among other works two more of his extravaganzas, *Manalive* and *The Flying Inn*. The second of these contains his famous drinking songs, afterwards collected in his *Wine, Water and Song*. He also, under the influence of Bernard Shaw, tried his hand at a play, *Magic*, but it was not a great success. But these years were mainly filled for him with journalism. He had by now made the friendship of Hilaire Belloc ; and Chesterton, his brother, Cecil, and Hilaire Belloc ran between them a paper

called *The New Witness*. The objects of this paper were two—first, to oppose alike the capitalist solution which would concentrate all property in the hands of rich men and the Socialist solution which would concentrate all property in the hands of the State and to argue that instead property should be as widely distributed as possible ; secondly, to denounce the system of party politics, to argue that the party game was really no more than a prearranged masquerade between the two front-benches, taking their turns at office ; and in particular to denounce political corruption and the system by which titles of honour were awarded in return for contributions to the party funds. The paper's attacks on political corruption led it in these years into a famous lawsuit in which Cecil Chesterton was prosecuted for criminal libel for allegations that he had made against certain ministers in the Liberal Government of that day in connexion with transactions in the shares of the Marconi Company, which the Government was then taking over. Cecil Chesterton was convicted, but only a nominal fine was imposed upon him.

Chesterton had always been the supporter of small nations against large, and the Gallic influence of Hilaire Belloc had taught him to look on Prussia as the evil genius of Europe. Lloyd George in these years had been introducing his schemes of compulsory state insurance for workers—schemes copied from those of Bismarck's Prussia—and *The New Witness* had led the opposition to those schemes on the argument that they were a step on the road to the return of slavery and of the Servile State—to use a phrase which Hilaire Belloc made the title of a book which he published in these years. Therefore Chesterton had no hesitation in supporting the Allied cause when war came in 1914.

In 1915 he published his first book of collected poems—poems of a wide variety, from the light satirical to the deeply devotional. The one that most caught the popular mood of the moment was his *Lepanto*, in which he told the tale of the battle of Christian Europe under Don John of

Austria against the Mohammedan menace. The Sultan boasts :

> We have set the seal of Solomon on all things under sun
> Of knowledge and of sorrow and endurance of things done.
> But a noise is in the mountains—in the mountains—and I know
> The voice that shook our palaces four hundred years ago.
> It is he that saith not ' Kismet ' ; it is he that knows not Fate :
> It is Richard, it is Raymond, it is Godfrey in the gate!
> It is he whose loss is laughter when he counts the wager worth.
> Put down your feet upon him, that our peace be on the earth !

Of course, Chesterton was —as he himself was always the first to insist—above all 'a roaring journalist'. Careful, polished, classical work was foreign to his nature—whether in prose or verse, and therefore, if we take his collected poems, we find that many pages are filled with verbal quips, that are at the best amusing and at the worst hardly perhaps worth preserving. But to say that his work is uneven is to say something that could as well be said of almost all poets. Of the rest there are the satirical poems of which the most famous is that on the late Lord Birkenhead, entitled *Anti-Christ, or the Reunion of Christendom.* Lord Birkenhead (then Mr. F. E. Smith) had made a speech on the Welsh Disestablishment Bill in which he had denounced it as ' a Bill which has shocked the conscience of every Christian community in Europe '. Chesterton thought this denunciation on Smith's lips to be quite insincere and he asked in bitter irony,

> In the mountain hamlets clothing
> Peaks beyond Caucasian pales
> Where Establishment means nothing
> And they never heard of Wales,
> Do they read it all in Hansard*
> With a crib to read it with,
> ' Welsh Tithes ; Dr. Clifford Answered '.*
> Really, Smith?

* *Hansard* is, of course, the name given to the official report of the debates of the House of Commons, and Dr. Clifford was a famous Nonconformist divine of the day, a great opponent of the Welsh Establishment.

It is all excellent, if most powerful, fooling. But in his serious narrative poems, such as *The Ballad of the White Horse* and *Lepanto*, to which we have already referred, there was no fooling. They were deeply sincere works. But they were essentially works to be recited, read aloud—not to say, shouted. I well remember how as undergraduates at Oxford a quarter of a century ago we used to shout out his poem of *The Secret People* about the English, who 'never have spoken yet', or the drinking songs from his *Wine, Water and Song*. It may well be pleaded that, if his verse was verse to be recited, so, too, was most of the great rhetorical verse of the Elizabethans. But it is certainly true that he did not make nor attempt to make the Wordsworthian appeal to the 'inward eye which is the bliss of solitude'.

During the years of the 1914 war Chesterton had a very serious illness and physically he was throughout the rest of his life never quite the same man again. Yet that did not mean that his remaining twenty years were artistically unimportant. Very far from it. It is true that with his brother's death at the end of the war Gilbert Chesterton felt it as an obligation of honour to take on the editorship of the distributist paper and the problems of editorship occupied a great deal of his energy throughout the rest of his life. It is true, also, that—particularly after his reception into the Catholic Church in 1922—demands for lectures kept him continually on the move. Yet nevertheless those last twenty years of his life produced not only a number of detective stories and volumes of verse and essays. They also produced some of his most important biographies—*St Francis of Assisi*, *Cobbett*, *Robert Louis Stevenson*, and, above all, the last and the greatest of such studies, *St. Thomas Aquinas*.

Chesterton was, of course, no professional philosopher and no professional scholar. He always used to speak of himself with characteristic and exaggerated understatement as a casual and dilettante reader. It is true that he carried his dislike for pedantry to an extreme and was unpardonably

indifferent to accuracy. But in spite of this habitual carelessness his knowledge and memory were prodigious. Throughout his whole adult life, but in particular throughout the last half of it after his reception into the Catholic Church, problems of religion wholly overshadowed all other problems in his mind. Indeed, to him politics and literature and all the other activities of man were only of importance in so far as they could be made of service to the cause of religion. His reception into the Catholic Church, although it was to him immensely the most important event of his private life, had little effect on his literary development. For the religious problems which he had cared to discuss had always been the large questions of the being of God and Man and Christ rather than the precise details of the nature or residence of authority. Therefore there was little, if anything, in such an earlier work as *Orthodoxy*, written many years before his reception into the Catholic Church, which he would not have been willing to repeat at the end of his life.

Yet to attempt a biography of St. Thomas Aquinas did seem to many a challenge to fate. 'Francis of Assisi' they said, 'Yes. There is a man who has won the affection of all mankind. That is a natural subject for the popularizer. But would it not be wiser to leave Aquinas to the specialist?' The event proved the exact opposite. The remarkable revival of Thomism in modern Europe has indeed been the begetter of specialized works of scholarship of the greatest value. Yet there is a great danger in leaving a revival solely to the specialists—a danger that we shall not be allowed to see the wood for the trees. It was proved that Chesterton's general commentary was exactly what the general reader needed. Thomist scholars were the first and most generous in their praise. Professor Etienne Gilson, perhaps the most learned of living Thomists, said on reading this book, 'Chesterton makes one despair. I have been studying St. Thomas all my life and I could never have written such a book'.

Yet his *St. Thomas* is the last of Chesterton's connected books, published in 1933, three years before his death in 1936. Eight years before his *St. Thomas*, he had published what will perhaps remain the most central of his books, *The Everlasting Man*. *The Everlasting Man* is, as it were, a matured *Orthodoxy*. It falls into two parts. The first part is concerned to argue that, so far from Man being merely a cleverer sort of animal, he is different in kind from other animals. The second part is concerned to argue that, so far from Christ being merely a very good man, he is different in kind from other men.

The argument about the difference of men from animals he bases mainly on art. Whether there was or was not a special creation as a matter of biological history, he is not concerned to argue. But, he says, one of the few things that we know about the most primitive man was that he drew—he drew on the walls of his cave. This constitutes a difference in kind between man and the animals. For the animals do not draw at all. There was no gradual declension. It was not that Rembrandt drew well and the Caveman less well and the laughing jackass and the blue-faced baboon rather less well again. It was that Rembrandt and the Caveman both drew and the jackass and the hyena did not draw at all. The difference was a difference in kind.

But man with his art was also different in kind in a deeper sense. To him alone there were things more valuable than immediate victory and success, and long before the coming of Christ he found this foreshadowing of the teaching of Christ at the dawn of things in the great poetry of Homer.

> But in this one great human relevation of antiquity there is another element of great historical importance; which has hardly I think been given its proper place in history. The poet has so conceived the poem that his sympathies apparently, and those of his reader certainly, are on the side of the vanquished rather than of the victor. And this is a sentiment which increases in the poetical tradition even as the poetical origin itself recedes. Achilles had some status as a sort of demigod in pagan

times ; but he disappears altogether in later times. But Hector grows greater as the ages pass ; and it is his name that is the name of a Knight of the Round Table and his sword that legend puts into the hand of Roland, laying about him with the weapon of the defeated Hector in the last ruin and splendour of his own defeat. The name anticipates all the defeats through which our race and religion were to pass ; that survival of a hundred defeats that is its triumph. . . .

The tale of the end of Troy shall have no ending ; for it is lifted up for ever into living echoes, immortal as our hopelessness and our hope. Troy standing was a small thing that may have stood nameless for ages. But Troy falling has been caught up in a flame and suspended in an immortal instant of annihilation ; and because it was destroyed with fire the fire shall never be destroyed. And as with the city so with the hero ; traced in archaic lines in that primeval twilight is found the first figure of the Knight. There is a prophetic coincidence in his title ; we have spoken of the word chivalry and how it seems to mingle the horseman with the horse. It is almost anticipated ages before in the thunder of the Homeric hexameter, and that long leaping word with which the *Iliad* ends. It is that very unity for which we can find no name but the holy centaur of chivalry. But there are other reasons for giving in this glimpse of antiquity the flame upon the sacred town. The sanctity of such towns ran like a fire round the coasts and islands of the northern Mediterranean ; the high-fenced hamlet for which heroes died. From the smallness of the city came the greatness of the citizen. Hellas with her hundred statues produced nothing statelier than that walking statue; the ideal of the self-commanding man. Hellas of the hundred statues was one legend and literature ; and all that labyrinth of little walled nations resounded with the lament of Troy.

So, too, with Christ. His argument follows the familiar dichotomy of ' aut Deus aut malus homo '. It is idle, he argues, to say that Christ was merely a good man who said some wise things about ethics or economics. For, far stronger than the evidence for his ethical or economic teaching is the evidence that He made certain astonishing

claims, which cannot of their nature have been the claims merely of a great ethical teacher. Either these words are words of a deranged man or they are the words of Almighty God. There is no third choice.

> Certainly it is not for us to blame anybody who should find that first wild whisper merely impious and insane. On the contrary, stumbling on that rock of scandal is the first step. Stark staring incredulity is a far more loyal tribute to that truth than a modernist metaphysic that would make it out merely a matter of degree. It were better to rend our robes with a great cry against blasphemy, like Caiaphas in the judgement, or to lay hold of the man as a maniac possessed of devils like the kinsmen and the crowd, rather than to stand stupidly debating fine shades of pantheism in the presence of so catastrophic a claim. There is more of the wisdom that is one with surprise in any simple person, full of the sensitiveness of simplicity, who should expect the grass to wither and the birds to drop dead out of the air, when a strolling carpenter's apprentice said calmly and almost carelessly, like one looking over his shoulder: 'Before Abraham was, I am'.

Psychologists sometimes tell us that his art is often a compensation to the artist. So far from expressing himself in his art in the straightforward sense of writing of these things which he does in his practical life, on the contrary in his art he gives expression to those needs of his spirit—to that side of life—of which his conduct starves him. Timid men put on paper and put into fiction the brave things that they are unable to do in real life. The quarrelsome, sighing subconsciously, it may be, for a tranquillity that they never allow themselves to know, write in their verse, 'I strove with none, for none was worth my strife'. In this sense there was a good deal of compensation in Chesterton's art. Abnormally clumsy even as a boy, in manhood growing to a corpulence that soon became a national joke, appreciated by everybody and most uproariously by himself, he was quite incapable at all times of his life of anything in the nature of an athletic feat. He quite frankly loathed

physical exercise. He could not indeed manage what to lesser mortals are the normal achievements of daily life—such as dressing or shaving himself—others had to do these things for him. He was similarly incompetent in the simplest business affairs. He could not manage his income or his income-tax. Such things he left entirely to his wife, the devoted companion of all his adult life, and his secretary. He could not even be trusted to effect the simplest purchase in a shop and bring back the right change. He could not make a journey. There is a well-known anecdote of one of the few occasions on which he went on a lecture-tour by himself. A few days after his departure his wife received an agonized telegram : ' Am in Liverpool. Where should I be ? ' I remember once standing with him on the landing on the first floor of an hotel. There was the lift, or there were the stairs, by either of which we could descend to the ground floor. I said to him, ' Shall we take the lift or shall we go down by the stairs ? ' He answered at once, ' My wife will come and she will decide '. It never for an instant occurred to him that he could decide even so small a practical matter as that for himself.

When the war of 1914 came, Chesterton's physical condition was, as has been said, such that there could have been no question of his joining the army, but even apart from physical disability he would certainly have made a soldier of a monumental incompetence. I doubt if he ever used a spade in his life and certainly could not have used it to effect. Yet his writings are filled with praise of the soldier and the peasant, whom he greatly preferred to most of the literary men who shared his way of life. Himself born a Londoner, and living his life in the small town of Beaconsfield, which was rapidly becoming a suburb of London, he gave his life to denouncing urbanization and to a glorification of rural life. There was nothing insincere in this. He never pretended to be other than he was. But he was an intensely humble man, and equally never pretended that the accidents

and qualities of his life were the only accidents and qualities needed for the survival of civilization.

But there was a yet deeper compensation in Chesterton's art. The fashion of the day among advanced thinkers was to profess extreme democratic theories, but at the same time to profess equally extreme contempt for the opinions and prejudices of the ordinary man. The clearest example of this was, of course, that of Bernard Shaw, who denounced almost every one of the ordinary habits and pastimes of the Englishman of his time—who would neither allow him to work or play, to eat or drink, to spell or to speak as he was accustomed. Chesterton in reaction from this presented himself as the champion of the ordinary man, prepared to accept him, not asking to reform him.

> Who will write us a riding song, or a hunting song, or a drinking song ?

he asks. The championship was certainly perfectly genuine. But, of course, though his tastes may have been those of the ordinary man, his method of expression was by no means that of the ordinary man. He expressed himself almost invariably in the famous Chestertonian paradox, the formula of which was to take a common saying and invert it, standing it on itself. Thus in his *Napoleon of Notting Hill*, which he addresses to ' The Human Race to which so many of my readers belong ', in an imaginary history of the future he takes tendencies which he finds in the early twentieth century around him and fantastically exaggerates them :

> But the way the prophets of the twentieth century went to work was this. They took something or other that was certainly going on in their time, and then said that it would go on more and more until something extraordinary happened. And very often they added that in some odd place that extraordinary thing had happened, and that it showed signs of the times.
>
> Thus, for instance, there were Mr. H. G. Wells and others,

who thought that science would take charge of the future ; and just as the motor-car was quicker than the coach, so some lovely thing would be quicker than the motor-car ; and so on for ever. And there arose from their ashes Dr. Quilp, who said that a man could be sent on his machine so fast round the world that he could keep up a long, chatty conversation in some old-world village by saying a word of a sentence each time he came round. And it was said that the experiment had been tried on an apoplectic old major, who was sent round the world so fast that there seemed to be (to the inhabitants of some other star) a continuous band round the earth of white whiskers, red complexion and tweeds—a thing like the ring of Saturn.

Then there was the opposite school. There was Mr. Edward Carpenter, who thought we should in a very short time return to Nature, and live simply and slowly as the animals do. And Edward Carpenter was followed by James Pickie, D.D. (of Pocohontas College), who said that men were immensely improved by grazing, or taking their food slowly and continuously, after the manner of cows. And he said that he had, with the most encouraging results, turned city men out on all fours in a field covered with veal cutlets. Then Tolstoy and the Humanitarians said that the world was growing more merciful, and therefore no one would ever desire to kill. And Mr. Mick not only became a vegetarian, but at length declared vegetarianism doomed (' shedding ', as he called it finely, ' the green blood of the silent animals'), and predicted that men in a better age would live on nothing but salt. And then came the pamphlet from Oregon (where the thing was tried), and the pamphlet called ' Why should Salt suffer ? ' and there was more trouble.

This formula was intensely annoying to those who were annoyed by Chesterton. Dean Inge, with whom his differences of opinion were deep, once described him petulantly as ' that obese mountebank, who crucifies Truth head downwards '. To most people, the manner was less irritating than this, though many, I think, would have confessed that they sometimes found the relentless, unceasing rain of paradoxes a little wearying. Sometimes, it was often said, Chesterton's formula made the most brilliant and

illuminating new sense. Sometimes it was merely a paradoxical way of saying what everybody else would say straightforwardly. Sometimes he blundered into downright nonsense. His very fecundity prevented him from being a sure critic of his own epigrams. Undoubtedly an effect of his style was to make many readers take him less seriously than he would have wished. For it is not everyone who can distinguish between the solemn and the serious.

But, of course, though form may be a matter of taste, those critics did Chesterton very much less than justice who thought that he indulged in tricks of words through perversity or a desire to show off. He wrote thus because he thought thus. He wrote thus because he could not write otherwise. He wrote in paradoxes because he thought that the ultimate nature of truth lay in paradoxes, and above all in the supreme Christian paradox by which the Creator of the Universe was a little baby, lying in a manger, the child of a human mother. 'Credo quia impossibile.'

To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller tower 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.

G. K. CHESTERTON

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