

THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF G. K. CHESTERTON

ROBERT JAMES REILLY

UNIVERSITY *of* DETROIT

EXCERPT from the GRADUATE BULLETIN, 1935 - 1937

Page Nine



Use of Theses and Thesis Materials. The University of Detroit always encourages, and even urges, the use of theses, thesis materials, and term papers submitted to instructors or departments of the University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for credit or degrees. Such use may be oral (before meetings or conventions) or through publication (periodicals, monographs, or books.) However, as such theses, thesis materials, and term papers become the property of the University once they are submitted, --- it is expected that the permission of the University be secured for such oral or printed use, and a suitable credit line arranged. This permission, and arrangement of credit line, should also be observed in the case of the publication of materials which the student intends to use later in partial fulfillment of the requirements for credit or degrees. Failure to observe such courtesy may be followed by the withdrawal of the credit or degree.

Application for the use of materials and arrangements mentioned must be made with the Graduate Office of the University of Detroit.

THE UNIVERSITY OF DETROIT

THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF

G. K. CHESTERTON

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY

ROBERT JAMES REILLY

TEN
R273

118785

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

MAY, 1951

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Chapter

- I. INTRODUCTION
- II. THE HISTORY OF THE
- III. CRITICISM AND CRITICIAN
- IV. THE HISTORY OF THE
- V. THE HISTORY OF THE
- VI. THE HISTORY OF THE
- VII. THE HISTORY OF THE
- VIII. CONCLUSION

The writer wishes to express his gratitude to the Rev. Burke J. O'Neill, S. J., director of this thesis, and to the Rev. J. B. Dwyer, S. J., both of the English Department of the University of Detroit, for their patience and helpful criticism which have done much to aid the completion of this thesis. The writer also wishes to thank Dr. C. Carroll Hollis, from whom the initial impulse to write this thesis came.

11
11
29
50
59
66
73
80
86

Chapter I
INTRODUCTION

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENT	ii
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. THE CHESTERTONIAN OUTLOOK	4
III. CHESTERTON'S THEORIES OF LITERATURE AND CRITICISM	29
IV. THE THEORY AT WORK IN <u>CHARLES DICKENS</u>	50
V. THE THEORY AT WORK IN <u>ROBERT BROWNING</u>	59
VI. THE THEORY AT WORK IN <u>CHAUCER</u>	66
VII. THE THEORY AT WORK IN <u>ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON</u> . . .	73
VIII. CONCLUSION	80
BIBLIOGRAPHY	86

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to show that Chesterton's literary criticism is not a thing distinct from his thought as a whole, but is rather a by-product, a necessary extension of his philosophical concepts. In order to do this, Chesterton's philosophy as a whole will have to be examined, though it be only roughly. This will be dealt with in the following chapter. The contention will be made in that chapter that the Chestertonian philosophy hinges on three very basic notions: the notion of wonder at the universe; that of gratitude for existence, both personal and general; and that of appreciation of things as things.

In Chapter III, Chesterton's literary criticism itself will be examined with the purpose in mind of demonstrating that this criticism is in no way different from the philosophy examined in Chapter II--except through application. It will be shown that the three key notions--wonder, thanks, and appreciation--are also key notions, indeed the same notions, in his literary criticism.

The next four chapters, Chapters IV through VII, will be devoted to showing Chesterton's theory of criticism at work. Each chapter will deal with one of his more ambitious works of criticism: those on Chaucer, Browning, Dickens, and Stevenson. Chapter VIII will sum up what has been attempted and what, it is hoped, has been demonstrated.

This writer feels that it is fairly general knowledge that Chesterton's early work differs hardly at all from his middle and later work--this in spite of the fact that he was converted to Roman Catholicism quite late in life. It is true that his later years produced books of sound Catholic theology, but it is also true that his early work, such as Orthodoxy, is also sound, if rather boisterous, theology. It may be that he grew more profound in later years; it may be that he became more lucid; but the message is essentially the same. This really curious consistency is either explicitly mentioned by his commentators, or tacitly admitted by an ignoring of it amounting to an assumption of it. It has even been a criticism that he kept saying the same thing over and over; this, it will be pointed out, is quite true. Says Kenner:

There is a penultimate stage of disillusion in the study of Chesterton wherein he seems merely to be saying the same thing over and over again; the ultimate stage is to realize that he says it so often because it can never really be said; in fact, because there is nothing else to say.¹

And Chesterton himself, reviewing his intellectual life in his autobiography, says:

. . . I recognize a sort of symbol in all that I happen to like in imagery and ideas. All my life I have loved edges; and the boundary-line that brings one thing sharply against another. All my life I have loved frames and limits; and I will maintain that the largest wilderness looks larger seen through a window. To the grief of all grave dramatic critics, I will still assert that the perfect drama must strive to rise to the higher ecstasy of the peep-show. I have also

1. Hugh Kenner, Paradox in Chesterton, p. 9.

a pretty taste in abysses and bottomless chasms and everything else that emphasises a fine shade of distinction between one thing and another; and the warm affection I have always felt for bridges is connected with the fact that the dark and dizzy arch accentuates the chasm even more than the chasm itself. . . . And I believe that in feeling these things from the first, I was feeling the fragmentary suggestions of a philosophy I have since found to be the truth.²

The writer mentions this consistency because he thinks that without the existence of it certain objections might be raised against the procedure of this paper. For example, it might be objected that the present writer recklessly quotes the early works in one breath and the later works in the next--and that this is unwise in the case of a free-thinker turned Catholic. The same objection may be raised against nearly all of Chesterton's critics; but the very real consistency invalidates it. The doubting reader may consult the early chapters of Maisie Ward's biography, Belloc's small but penetrating book on Chesterton's place in English letters, or Chesterton's autobiography. Or he may make the longer and perhaps more interesting experiment of perusing Chesterton's hundred odd volumes.

2. G. K. Chesterton, Autobiography, pp. 25-26.

Chapter II

THE CHESTERTONIAN OUTLOOK

The purpose of this chapter is to examine Chesterton's thought, what is ordinarily known as his philosophy. If the assumption of the previous chapter be granted--that is, if Chesterton's thought is really consistent, if his thought was basically the same all his life, it is possible to draw two conclusions: either he really set up a complex philosophical system after the fashion of St. Thomas Aquinas, or he was consistent simply because he was utilizing a very few basic principles. The evidence would seem to be all on the side of simplicity. +It has even been a general criticism of Chesterton that he seemed to be saying the same thing over and over for a period of some forty years.⁺ He has been accused of being an inveterate romantic (something which he never denied), a lover of all that was medieval, a poseur standing on his head to attract attention by praising the ordinary or what was considered to be beneath praise. First and foremost, of course, was the accusation that he was a maker of paradoxes, a verbalist, a player with words, a rhetorician. Much of this sort of criticism has been answered in very scholarly fashion by Mr. Kenner in his previously mentioned book, Paradox in Chesterton; he points out that, at least on one level (and that the highest, the metaphysical), Chesterton was not making, not contriving, his paradoxes, but rather perceiving them as he contemplated reality. Valuable rebuttals to this

criticism may also be found in both Maisie Ward's biography and Belloc's On the Place of Gilbert Chesterton in English Letters. The criticism, perhaps, is justified or not, according to the degree to which the individual reader can appreciate truth in the form of verbal acrobatics. In any case, this chapter will endeavor to show that, aside from criticism of the form in which his ideas are expressed, most criticism, both adverse and kindly, tends to center on a few very basic notions which Chesterton continually expounds. The chapter will exclude criticisms of his Catholicism as such, since that sort of criticism is not peculiar to Chesterton. To the extent, though, that his ideas are inseparable from his religion (especially in the later phases of his thought), his Catholicism will have to be mentioned. The chapter will not try to cover his thought completely, since that is both beyond the scope of the paper itself and not strictly necessary for its purpose. But it will deal with those aspects of his thought which have seemed most fundamental to his commentators. Moreover, in order to justify the views of the commentators mentioned, the chapter will supplement their views, so far as possible, with specific quotations from Chesterton himself.

These supplementary selections the writer will attempt to make as explicit as possible, although in some cases this will be impossible. As Chesterton himself would be quick to point out, the things that a man does not say are sometimes more important than those he does say; for it frequently happens that what a man does not say he assumes to be too obvious.

to say. Also, since it is common knowledge that Chesterton, with complete disregard for literary conventions, scattered his ideas and theories about in whatever medium he happened to be using, the chapter will not limit itself to his books of theology or controversy, but will introduce as it thinks necessary parts of his fiction and poetry. †

The first of these notions considered to be basic in Chesterton's thought is that of the necessity of wonder. It would appear that this sense of wonder was not greatly appreciated by at least some of his contemporaries, who regarded it as a pose and a position philosophically indefensible. Maisie Ward has quoted Oliver Herford's following lines as an example of one of the ways in which Chesterton was accepted or not accepted by some of the literary world. It is, of course, quite obviously not a serious poem or a serious criticism; but it is sufficient to illustrate that Chesterton had a reputation for wondering at ordinary things.

When plain folks such as you and I
 See the sun sinking in the sky,
 We think it is the setting sun:
 But Mr. Gilbert Chesterton
 Is not so easily misled.
 He calmly stands upon his head,
 And upside down obtains a new
 And Chestertonian point of view.
 Observing thus how from his nose
 The sun creeps closer to his toes
 He cries in wonder and delight
 How fine the sunrise is tonight!¹

Although the poem indicates that Chesterton's attitude of wonder was considered something of a pose, or a conceit, the poem

1. Oliver Herford, as quoted by Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 586.

itself is not one of ridicule. Rather it implies that Chesterton was accepted as a kind of genial humorist, one concerned with constructing a certain pose or reputation but not being obnoxious about it.

Others, however, have taken this attitude of Chesterton's more seriously. F. A. Lea, for example, thinks that this sense of wonder might indicate that Chesterton was nearer to a kind of pantheism than most people, especially Christians, would care to admit. But whatever he thinks is the cause, or the ultimate outcome of the wonder, he readily admits that it is there:

Whether we call it "awe" or "wonder," the recognition of whose importance he called the "chief idea" of his life, he himself certainly possessed it; and it is upon his manifestation of it, and the unique quality of that manifestation, that his claim to greatness reposes.²

Kenner not only admits this sense of wonder in Chesterton-- he holds that it is an integral part of his thought. Kenner's thesis is roughly that Chesterton had, with St. Thomas, a direct intuition of being in the Thomistic sense. "His especial gift was his metaphysical intuition of being; his especial triumph was his exploitation of paradox to embody that intuition."³ From his earliest years, says Mr. Kenner, he enjoyed the power of a kind of vision far beyond the grasp of ordinary men. It is because of this sixth sense of reality that Chesterton

2. F. A. Lea, "G. K. Chesterton," Modern Christian Revolutionaries, edited by Donald Attwater, p. 103.

3. Hugh Kenner, Paradox in Chesterton, p. 1.

is literally driven to paradox: there is no other way to express what he perceives:

The beginning of the metaphysical vision, then, is to see things: to see, and to see things, and accept them with their inherent mystery: which process may roughly be called seeing them with surprise His real concern is with a metaphysical art of wonder which he calls "the life of men and the beginning of the praise of God." That is the beginning, and the refusal of humankind to be surprised--that is, to be aware--is the primary problem for him who would communicate his vision.⁴

It will be noted that, although all three views here quoted agree as to the existence of this wonder, none of them assign a common cause to it. There was apparently no general agreement in his own lifetime, and it would appear that there is none now. Was he a poseur, or a pantheist, or a specially gifted Thomist? There is one more viewpoint, one which by all odds was and is most common. Shuster may be considered typical of this last viewpoint; he testifies to the existence of the fact, making no attempt to explain it, merely describing it:

To begin with, Chesterton's success may be attributed to his amazing discovery of the ordinary. While the intellectuals were talking over their books of progress, efficiency, the Inner Light, and the higher this or that, the "man in the street" was talking about life. He remembered the forgotten and invaluable truth that two and two are four; he was gay with the obvious and joyful things, like wine and prayer, while his cultivated neighbour was sitting with great seriousness in a melancholy library. . . . The earth turned out to be a palace of awful beauty wherein a man should go down on his knees before a blade of grass Chesterton, afire with the reality of this forgotten world, puzzled the educated alike with his jollity and his worship. . . .⁵

4. Kenner, op. cit., pp. 67-68

5. G. N. Shuster, The Catholic Spirit in Modern English Literature, p. 239.

This sense of wonder at things, then, is a peculiar part of Chesterton's thought; this world where a man should go down on his knees before a blade of grass is a mark of the Chestertonian outlook--at least, in the opinion of some of his commentators. It is only fair that Chesterton be given a chance to speak for himself in this connection, if only to see if he assigned as much value to this awe as those writing about him do. If he speaks of it frequently, if he seems to regard it seriously and not simply as a whim or a device, then it may safely be assumed that it is a major tenet of his philosophy.

Chesterton's novels are generally regarded as somewhat peculiar, even as novels go. They make no pretense to be an examination of human emotions; they never attempt to localize a particular era; they never try to analyze character or motive; in short, they never try to do anything that even the worst ordinary novel does. They are allegories, extended arguments in the form of dialogue. They can really only be called novels at all because the term is a very loose one. His novels do not have characters so much as they have embodied ideas.

As his brother says:

. . . his temperament leads him to think about ideas as romantically as romanticists think about persons. He wants to give every idea a feather and a sword, and a trumpet to blow and a good ringing voice to speak. From this eccentric wedding--of Idealism and Romance, is born the Chestertonian novel.⁶

6. Cecil Chesterton, G. K. Chesterton, A Criticism, p.199.

And, as all Wilde's characters talk like Wilde, so all Chesterton's "characters" argue as he does. The novel for Chesterton is a platform for discussing ideas. ✕

Chesterton's Manalive concerns itself with the activities of a man called Innocent Smith. Smith, through his eccentric behavior, is at first believed to be a madman. Later, all sorts of evidence is brought against him to show that he is a bigamist, a would-be murderer, a house-breaker. The fact is that because he has a vast and literal love of life he is none of these things. He has discovered the profound truth that familiarity breeds, not so much contempt, as forgetfulness. In order to keep his perceptions fresh and child-like, he frequently leaves his wife in some strange place, with the sole purpose in mind of returning there and courting her all over again. The fact that she changes names causes him to be known as a bigamist. He is an expert marksman, and when he shoots at a college professor he expects to miss him, as he does. The professor is fond of preaching the fashionable pessimism of the day and saying that life, theoretically, is not worth living. Smith, by pretending to put the professor's theory into practice, brings him back to an appreciation of life. Smith is fond of breaking into his own house in order to see it as someone else's. He walks around the world so that he may have the pleasure of coming home. He is, in short, as Chesterton was accused of doing, standing on his head in order to see things in a fresh light. Michael Moon, one of the few characters who ultimately understand Smith, says:

Yes, Innocent Smith has behaved here, as he has on hundreds of other occasions, upon a plain and perfectly blameless principle. It is odd and extravagant in the modern world, but not more than any other principle plainly applied in the modern world would be. His principle can be quite simply stated: he refuses to die while he is still alive. He seeks to remind himself by every electric shock to the intellect that he is still a man alive, walking on two legs about the world. For this reason he fires bullets at his best friends; for this reason he arranges ladders and collapsible chimneys to steal his own property; for this reason he goes plodding around a whole planet to get back to his own home. And for this reason he has been in the habit of taking the woman whom he loved with a permanent loyalty, and leaving her about (so to speak) at schools, boarding-houses, and places of business, so that he might recover her again with a raid and a romantic elopement. He seriously thought by a perpetual recapture of his bride to keep alive the sense of her perpetual value, and the perils that should be run for her sake.⁷

The lesson is plain here; everything must be looked at as for the first time. Repetition means staleness; staleness means loss of values. The professor in Manalive had looked at the world for so long that it had grown stale for him. Or, to be more precise, the world had not grown stale; his mind had grown stale. He needed the "electric shock" of a bullet being fired past his head to make him remember that life is good, is fresh, is to be wondered at. It is significant, too, that Smith is called "Innocent" because he is child-like. For Chesterton the child lived in a miraculous world; only children and such exceptions as Smith need not be reminded of the wonder of the world.

It should be noted that this sense of wonder has some

7. G. K. Chesterton, Manalive, pp. 298-9.

strong philosophical implications, ones which would tend to bear out Mr. Kenner's observations that Chesterton had been a Thomistic realist all his life. One of them is this: you cannot wonder at things unless they really are strange--or, in other words, unless they really are. No one can wonder, or be expected to wonder, at something that he himself has made. Man feels this wonder as a child; if, as he grows older, he forgets or grows indifferent, he is apt to fall into heresy by forgetting his childhood realism. This is pointed out by one of Chesterton's strangest characters, Gabriel Gale, who is something of a painter, something of a poet, and, like most Chesterton characters, more than a little of a metaphysician. He sees a man who has been so influenced by a series of fantastic coincidences that he has begun to believe he is God. Combining violent action with a metaphysical clue, Gale immediately pins him to a tree with a pitch-fork, and, like Innocent Smith, is accused of attempted murder. In explaining his actions, he takes up the subject of materialism:

Materialists are all right; they are at least near enough to heaven to accept the earth and not imagine they made it. The dreadful doubts are not the doubts of the materialist. The dreadful doubts, the deadly and damnable doubts, are the doubts of the idealist.⁸

He goes on to point out that the sense of wonder is in the nature of man, and that man ordinarily believes that what is outside himself has in truth had its origin outside himself:

8. G. K. Chesterton, The Poet and the Lunatics, p.124.

But believe me, the worst and most miserable sort of idiot is he who seems to create and contain all things. Man is a creature; all his happiness consists in being a creature; or, as the Great Voice commanded us, in becoming a child. All his fun is in having a gift or present; which the child, with profound understanding, values because it is a 'surprise'. But surprise implies that a thing came from outside of ourselves; and gratitude that it comes from someone other than ourselves. It is thrust through the letter-box; it is thrown in at the window; it is thrown over the wall. Those limits are the lines of the very plan of human pleasure.⁹

Wonder, then, implies a belief in things other than ourselves; wonder is a realization that these other things are not part of ourselves. Moreover, it implies that man is tremendously dependent, that it is in his nature to be thus dependent.

Now if this wonder is inherent in man's nature, why is it that Chesterton is accused of paradox when he propounds it? If man has an innate faculty, even a need for this sense of awe, why does repetition pall on him? Why does he find monotony in things forever repeating themselves? Why is he bored with leaves because they are always green and never black? These questions, says Chesterton, do not apply to the child, only to older minds. The child exults in repetition; it is not monotonous to him--each time a thing is repeated it is new. Because they are "fierce and free" they demand repetition; they want things "repeated and unchanged";

For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that

9. G. K. Chesterton, The Poet and the Lunatics, p. 124.

God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon It may be that God makes every daisy separately but has never got tired of making them. 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.¹⁰

It is sin, then, that wears down the mind, that dulls it and blunts it. Truly then, thinks Chesterton, we must become as little children again; for only the children can see.

It is perhaps not necessary to mention that this pre-occupation with the innocence of children is not at all like what it superficially resembles: the Romanticism of Rousseau or even of Wordsworth. Roughly speaking, Rousseau held that the child, if left in a natural state, would retain the innocence in which he came into the world; contact with human institutions would corrupt him. Chesterton would never agree to that for the simple reason that he considered the doctrine of the fall of man the only thing that made life intelligible. It was not human institutions as such that would corrupt him, for he was already corrupted--but not to the extent that adults were corrupted, because they were simply older, wearier, more disillusioned. Wordsworth held that the child is the father of the man simply because in the orders of time and matter the child was closer to his creator; thus he trailed clouds of glory as he came, but he lost them in the same general way that Rousseau's child did: he was affected by matters of the outer world. Chesterton's child is corrupted merely

10. G. K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, pp. 108-9.

by growing up; it is merely a psychological development.

One more instance of the importance which Chesterton assigns to this sense of wonder should suffice to show that it was for him a thing of some magnitude; it should also further illustrate Chesterton's distinction between the child and the man. He is in this case taking issue with Stevenson, who said that children live in a day-dream and are sometimes unable to distinguish reality from imagination:

Now children and adults are both fanciful at times; but that is not what, in my mind and memory, distinguishes adults from children. Mine is a memory of a sort of white light on everything, cutting things out very clearly, and rather emphasizing their solidity. The point is that the white light had a sort of wonder in it, as if the world were as new as myself; but not that the world was anything but a real world. I am much more disposed now to fancy that an apple-tree in the moonlight is some sort of ghost or grey nymph; or to see the furniture fantastically changing and crawling at twilight, as in some story of Poe or Hawthorne. But when I was a child I had a sort of confident astonishment in contemplating the apple-tree as an apple-tree. I was sure of it, and also sure of the surprise of it; as sure, to quote the perfect popular proverb, as sure as God made little apples. The apples might be as little as I was; but they were solid and so was I. There was something of an eternal morning about the mood; and I liked to see a fire lit more than to imagine faces in the firelight.¹¹

There are innumerable other examples concerning Chesterton's belief in the reality of this wonder; they are scattered throughout his works. They turn up like the proverbial bad penny, assuming the form of digressions in an essay on politics or economics or evolution. It is a commentary on the

11. G. K. Chesterton, Autobiography, pp. 42-43.

importance of the concept that they appear in such widely diversified works. There can, for example, be no reason for interpolating the following into a description of the English government a hundred years hence unless the notion be considered important:

Now, there is a law written in the darkest of the Books of Life, and it is this: If you look at a thing nine hundred and ninety-nine times, you are perfectly safe; if you look at it the thousandth time, you are in frightful danger of seeing it for the first time.¹²

Another notion generally attributed to Chesterton is one which is not easily disassociated from the first one discussed. It is the notion of praise, or gratitude for all the things which he can wonder at. In fact, the philosophical notion to be considered after this can no more be separated from the first two than can this from the preceding one. Whether it be admitted, with Kenner, that the three (and their extensions) are parts of a single vision, a direct intuition, or whether there is another explanation for their proximity, still they are inextricably bound up together. As has been noted, the wonder exists because things are outside the mind, because they are different from the beholder. And because they come from outside they are gifts. Because they are gifts they must be appreciated. The third step, and the third notion to be examined, is the love of these things for what they are, not for what they might have been. Or as Chesterton put it in an early letter, "Never look a gift universe in the mouth."¹³

12. G. K. Chesterton, The Napoleon of Notting Hill, p.17.

13. Ward, op. cit., p. 50.

Kenner speaks of Chesterton's faculty for perceiving by analogy; or, to be more precise, he says that Chesterton perceived that being itself is analogous. This, says Kenner, explains some of his metaphysical paradoxes: for example, you cannot say that a thing is without saying that it is not all that it could be. This is a paradox, but it is not contrived; it is perceived:

It is in this way that Chesterton sees paradox rooted in being, and the created world rooted in God; so that he could never see a lamp-post without the instinct to praise. . . . With the sense of strangeness came the sense of gratitude; not only because, amid so many potentialities, the object at hand might not have been, but also because in its limited being it participated in all Being: in God. He was thankful for a lamp-post because it was not a limpet, but he would have been equally thankful for a limpet.¹⁴

In speaking of Chesterton as a metaphysician, rather than as an artist, a critic, or an ordinary philosopher, Feeney says that Chesterton made what might almost be called a declaration of dependence. He had not given himself existence; thus he must be grateful to the One Who had. The gift of existence is so wonderful that even if he were in hell he would feel called upon to thank God. For as good is to be preferred to evil, so is existence to be preferred to non-existence.

Says Feeney:

Almost the very first utterance Chesterton the writer made to the world was the declaration of his own contingency, the confession of his own utter needlessness to anything or anybody. So unnecessary did he consider himself to the universe around him

14. Kenner, op. cit., p. 32.

that he immediately rejected Pantheism as a religious creed because it deprived him of a God to whom he could be grateful for his existence.¹⁵

Maisie Ward says that in his early youth Chesterton went through a period of tremendous temptation, and Chesterton himself supports this in his autobiography. The temptation was not the ordinary temptation of youth, though; it was more an incomprehensible urge to brood, to imagine all sorts of evil without having the slightest urge actually to do anything even mildly wrong. It would appear that all his temptations were to sins of the intellect, not to those of the senses; and this lack of sense temptation he sees in St. Thomas Aquinas in, for example, the famous episode in which St. Thomas drew the sign of the Cross on his prison door to ward off the attentions of an evil woman. Maisie Ward says that his extraordinary faculty to see things as good brought him out of this period. She mentions the J.D.C., the Junior Debating Club, to which he belonged at school as an example:

The second thought that saved him had largely grown out of the first. The J.D.C. meant friendship. Friendship meant the highest of all good things and all good things called for gratitude. As he gave thanks he drew near to God.¹⁶

Miss Ward has, of course, a tremendous advantage over most of the other commentators on Chesterton, since she has access to a great many of his personal letters; furthermore, she knows many of his family and friends personally. But one of the

15. Leonard Feeney, "The Metaphysics of Chesterton," Thought, XVII (March, 1942), pp. 34-35.

16. Ward, op. cit., p. 49.

most valuable things she has is an early notebook which he kept, from time to time, in his early years. In this he worked out the first crude outlines of his philosophy; and in this much of his early poetry is to be found. She speaks of the fact that Chesterton liked nearly everything and thus felt grateful for everything; and she quotes a few lines of his verse from the notebook:

G. K. liked everybody very much, and everything very much. He liked even the things most of us dislike. He liked to get wet. He liked to be tired. After that one short period of struggle he liked to call himself "always perfectly happy." And therefore he wanted to say, "Thank you."

You say grace before meals

All right.

But I say grace before the play and the opera,
And grace before the **concert** and pantomime,
And grace before I open a book,
And grace **before** sketching, painting,
Swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing,
dancing;
And grace before I dip the pen in ink. . . .

For, if he was to be grateful, to whom did he owe gratitude? Here is the chief question he asked and answered at this time. . . . Largely it was this need for gratitude for what seemed personal gifts that brought him to belief in a personal God. Life was personal, it was not a mere drift; it had will in it, it was more like a story.¹⁷

A few quotations from Chesterton himself should suffice to demonstrate the importance which he assigned to this doctrine of gratitude or thanks. He tells us in his autobiography that no matter what sorts of heresy or anarchy he was tempted toward, something fundamental in him made him sheer away from pessimism. During the period when he was struggling

17. Ward, op. cit., pp. 61-62.

to find a religion he had only one thing to console him and to drive him on: the idea that, no matter what, existence was good and required proper thanks to whoever had given it to him:

I hung on to the remains of religion by one thin thread of thanks. I thanked whatever Gods might be, not like Swinburne, because no life lived forever, but because any life lived at all; not, like Henley for my unconquerable soul . . . but for my own soul and my own body, even if they could be conquered.¹⁸

This way of looking at things with what he calls a "mystical minimum of gratitude" he admits was in some ways influenced by the optimistic writers he was familiar with: Whitman, Browning, and Stevenson. But he felt even then that his own view was somehow different--that they did not go far enough or deeply enough into the real notion of gratitude:

. . . I do not think it too much to say that I took it in a way of my own; even if it was a way I could not see clearly or make very clear. What I meant . . . was this; that no man knows how much he is an optimist, even when he calls himself a pessimist, because he has not really measured the depths of his debt to whatever created him and enabled him to call himself anything. At the back of our brains, so to speak, there was a forgotten blaze or burst of astonishment at our own existence. The object of the artistic and spritual life was to dig for this submerged sunrise of wonder; so that a man sitting in a chair might suddenly understand that he was actually alive, and be happy.¹⁹

In this same connection he mentions, in rather deprecating fashion, an early poem of his which tries to put into words

18. G. K. Chesterton, Autobiography, p. 90.

19. Ibid.

this feeling he had that existence was the most wonderful thing that could be thought of. He does not quote the poem, and perhaps it is not a very good poem, but it gives a rough idea of the depth of his feeling. He pictures the unborn babe as crying out for the great gift of existence, no matter what the cost; he will endure anything without complaint if only he is given the chance to be born. The babe unborn thinks to himself:

In dark I lie: dreaming that there
 Are great eyes cold or kind,
 And twisted streets and silent doors,
 And living men behind.

.

I think that if they gave me leave
 Within the world to stand,
 I would be good through all the day
 I spent in fairyland.

They should not hear a word from me
 Of selfishness or scorn,
 If only I could find the door,
 If only I were born?²⁰

And he says again, more prosaically, ". . . there is nothing I have come to count more normal, and nothing I desire more to restore to its normal place, than . . . the family and the theory of thanks."²¹

The third of the basic notions in Chesterton's philosophy, as has been noted, is almost inseparable from the first two. First is the sense of wonder at things. Second is the sense of gratitude that these things have been given. Third is the love of these things for what they are. It is, literally,

20. G. K. Chesterton, Collected Poems, p. 303.

21. G. K. Chesterton, Autobiography, pp. 70-71.

an appreciation; it amounts to loving a thing for what it is because it might have been something else, or, worse, because it might not have been at all.

Kenner, as might be expected, makes much of this third notion, which may roughly be called the seeing of the "whatness" of things, or, rather, the basis for the appreciation of things, other than that they have come from God. It is because a thing is what it is and cannot possibly be anything else that it should be valued. Thus there is in things, or about things, an air of mystery, because they are merely what they are, and there is no way to express what they are except to coin a word such as "quiddity" or by saying that each thing exists in a way consonant with the degree to which it participates in being. And this, of course, is at least the foster parent of the sense of wonder:

Too much cannot be made of the continual rapture with which the contemplation of things inspires him: trees and lamp-posts and hackney cabs and horses and all the other works of God. And the reason that they are wonderful is that they are: they participate in being.

Everything that is is wrapped in the mystery of its own incommunicable individuality, and hence all things are wonderfully different; but everything that is exercises the act of existence in common with everything else, and in that sense all things are alike. Both the wonder of differentiation and the wonderful fact of existence are explained and illuminated by the Thomistic ascription of difference to the individual essences of things, in proportion to which they exercise the act of existence. The grass exists grassily, the cloud cloudily; they both are, and they are both different, according to the way in which they are.²²

22. Kenner, op. cit., p. 30.

This Thomistic description of why things are and are different is quoted at some length because, as Kenner also points out, Chesterton has said in his autobiography that as a boy his philosophical gropings were in precisely the opposite direction from the statement by Voltaire that where there is nothing there is God also. For him, where there was anything there was God also. And he says of this: ". . . but I should have been amazed to know how near in some ways was my Anything to the Ens of St. Thomas Aquinas."²³

Feeny holds that the supreme triumph of Chesterton was not as poet, novelist, critic, essayist, or philosopher as such. His thesis is that Chesterton was one of the greatest metaphysicians that the world has known. He goes on to explain very carefully what he means by the word metaphysics: it "is the preoccupation of the mind with being as being, with thing as thing."²⁴ The logician and the poet, says Feeny, although both are in some way dealing with being, have, as the mystic has, only a third interest in being. Their interests are as follows: ". . . the logician in ens qua verum, the poet in ens qua pulchrum, the mystic in ens qua bonum."²⁵ It is only the metaphysician as such "who fishes for being qua being with every bait at his disposal."²⁶ Feeny says that

23. G. K. Chesterton, Autobiography, p. 150.

24. Feeny, op. cit., p. 32.

25. Ibid., p. 33.

26. Ibid.

in Chesterton the three interests worked together "at least far more strikingly than they do in most men."²⁷ Chesterton, he says, accepted things, not resignedly, but joyfully:

Chesterton was literally entranced with the thingness of things, with facts as facts, not deviously explained, but bravely accepted as they are. He wrote a whole book about things as things, and called it Tremendous Trifles. He believed that the very repetition of things was a delightful argument for design.²⁸

Now when Feeney says that he continually finds evidences of this metaphysical perception in Chesterton's work, he is speaking quite literally and quite correctly. What seems at first glance to be a sort of wild whimsicality in Chesterton, an affectation, often turns out to be Chesterton digressing about the "thingness of things." A casual reader may open the aforementioned Tremendous Trifles to the first essay, called "A Piece of Chalk," and find on the very second page:

I then tried to explain the rather delicate logical shade, that I not only liked brown paper, but liked the quality of brownness in paper, just as I liked the quality of brownness in October woods, or in beer, or in the peat streams of the North.²⁹

Things are to be valued for what they are, not for what we would like them to be:

Certain things are bad so far as they go, such as pain, and no one, not even a lunatic, calls a tooth-ache good in itself; but a knife which cuts clumsily and with difficulty is called a

27. Feeney, op. cit., p. 33.

28. Ibid.

29. G. K. Chesterton, "A Piece of Chalk," Tremendous Trifles, p. 2.

bad knife, which it certainly is not. It is only not so good as other knives to which men have grown accustomed The coarsest and bluntest knife which ever broke a pencil into pieces instead of sharpening it is a good thing in so far as it is a knife. . . . What we call a bad knife is a good knife not good enough for us.³⁰

Ugly things, says Chesterton, are not always bad things, but art has sometimes made them that. Art has, at times, been false to nature; art has been too selective and has thus given a distorted picture of reality. Art has, at least until quite recently, been guilty of "prettying up" nature.

The highest and most valuable quality in Nature is not her beauty, but her generous and defiant ugliness. . . . Has the poet, for whom Nature means only roses and lilies, ever heard a pig grunting? It is a noise that does a man good--a strong, snorting, imprisoned noise, breaking its way out of unfathomable dungeons through every possible outlet and organ. It might be the voice of the earth itself, snoring in its mighty sleep. This is the deepest, the oldest, the most wholesome and religious sense of the value of Nature--the value that comes from her immense babyishness. She is as top-heavy, as grotesque, as solemn and as happy as a child. The mood does come when we see all her shapes like shapes that a baby scrawls upon a slate--simple, rudimentary, a million years older and stronger than the whole disease that is called Art. The objects of earth and heaven seem to combine into a nursery tale, and our relation to things seems for a moment so simple that a dancing lunatic would be needed to do justice to its lucidity and levity.³¹

There is about things as such something that can only be expressed by the metaphor of eating. A poetic mind, says Chesterton, must sometimes have wished that trees and stones and clay were edible, for that is the only way that he can express

30. G. K. Chesterton, The Defendant, p. 5.

31. G. K. Chesterton, "A Defense of Skeletons," The Defendant, pp. 32-33.

his feelings about the goodness and desirability of these things:

When we look at a firm, fat, white cliff of chalk at Dover, I do not suggest that we should desire to eat it; that would be highly abnormal. But I really mean that we should think it good to eat; good for someone else to eat. For, indeed, someone else is eating it; the grass that grows upon its top is devouring it silently, but, doubtless, with an uproarious appetite.³²

And in an early essay on Sir Walter Scott he says:

One of the profound philosophical truths which are almost confined to infants is this love of things, not for their use or origin, but for their own inherent characteristics, the child's love of the toughness of wood, the wetness of water, the magnificent soapiness of soap.³³

It only remains now to sum up the three general notions which have been mentioned as being foundations in the Chestertonian outlook. It will be pointed out, in passing, that his other and perhaps equally famous pronouncements are really extensions of these basic ones. In the next chapter, then, his literary theories as such will be examined to see if they bear out the general thesis of this paper, namely, that such theories are a logical extension, or merely a part of, his outlook as a whole.

The world as Chesterton perceived it appears thus: man is distinct from his creator; literally everything that he has or sees, including especially his own existence, has come from outside himself. Everything, in other words, has come as a gift; man has of himself no right to anything. But a

32. G. K. Chesterton, "The Appetite of Earth," Alarms and Discursions, pp. 59-60.

33. G. K. Chesterton, "Sir Walter Scott," Varied Types, pp. 167-8.

gift implies the necessity of giving thanks, of being thankful. Moreover, it implies that because the gifts become a matter of course to man, he has a duty to stir up in himself a feeling of gratitude. And, finally, simply because the gifts are gifts, they must be appreciated for what they are. Thus it should be realized that the gifts come from the great outsider, that we must continue to marvel at them no matter how often we see them, and that we must value them for what they are.

There is no space in this paper to examine Chesterton's social theories to see if they might also fit into the picture of the universe as formed by the much-discussed basic notions. Anyone, though, with such a purpose in mind might well remember that the easiest way to learn to appreciate things is to use them and to depend on **them**: as, for example, a soldier comes to revere his rifle and a westerner his horse. Now it is obvious that the farther a man draws away from the land, from any sort of occupation which entails his using things, the less will he appreciate these things for what they are. It is not suggested that this idea is the basis, or even a very important part, of Chesterton's Distributism, but it is mentioned as a further indication that his thought, social, religious, and literary, is a harmonious whole--much like several small streams proceeding from a single source. Another general observation on Distributism is this: the farther away a man goes from his own small property, the more he becomes involved in the great complicated mass that is industrial

centralization. He becomes more and more dependent on the great abstraction called the state. But the peasant on the farm is dependent on himself; and, laboring for himself and family under these conditions, he may eventually realize his dependency on God.

Chapter III

CHESTERTON'S THEORIES OF LITERATURE AND CRITICISM

"The art at which Chesterton excelled was literary criticism," says Mr. Lea.¹ This writer would not attempt to argue with this statement; but he would point out that it is rather a difficult thing to find anywhere in Chesterton an explicit statement of what he believes criticism is or what it should do. This, of course, is not very surprising, since it is apparent to anyone reading Chesterton that what he thought important was not so much literature as such, but rather what was behind literature: philosophy or religion, or both. This is not meant to imply that he condescended to speak of literature or criticism; it means only that he set up a hierarchy of all the things of the world and that literature, naturally enough, was not in the highest place. In any case, the procedure of the chapter will be this: a theory of criticism will be set up from an examination of the fragments which may be found in Chesterton's various works. The theory will necessarily be much more explicit than Chesterton himself ever tried to make it, and, in some respects, it will inevitably be over-simplified; but that is one of the hazards of fitting a man's words into a system which he himself never tried to make clear. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to set up this theory and to point out that the theory is an

1. F. A. Lea, "G. K. Chesterton," in Modern Christian Revolutionaries, edited by Donald Attwater.

integral part of his previously examined thought.

The world is a wonderful thing because it is made up of things that are; and, because the things themselves are, they are themselves in turn wonderful. Now poetry is concerned with things; its object is to praise:

There is at the back of all our lives an abyss of light, more blinding and unfathomable than any abyss of darkness; and it is the abyss of actuality, of existence, of the fact that things truly are, and that we ourselves are incredibly and sometimes almost incredulously real. It is the fundamental fact of being, as against not being; it is unthinkable, yet we cannot unthink it, though we may sometimes be unthinking about it; unthinking and especially unthanking. For he who has realised this reality knows that it does outweigh, literally to infinity, all lesser regrets or arguments for negation, and that under all our grumblings there is a subconscious substance of gratitude. That light of the positive is the business of the poets, because they see all things in the light of it more than do other men. . . . Creation was the greatest of all Revolutions. It was for that, as the ancient poet said, that the morning stars sang together; and the most modern poets, like the medieval poets, may descend very far from that height of realisation and stray and stumble and seem distraught; but we shall know them for the Sons of God, when they are still shouting for joy. This is something much more mystical and absolute than any modern thing that is called optimism; for it is only rarely that we realise, like a vision of the heavens filled with a chorus of giants, the primeval duty of Praise.²

Poetry indeed is only praise on a higher level than the ordinary vague feelings of the average man. For the poet alone among men can say what he really thinks; and the fact that he can say what no other man can say does not so much separate

2. G. K. Chesterton, Chaucer, pp. 26-29.

him from his fellow men as it unites him with them. Poetry is democratic, as religion is democratic:

It is no valid accusation against a poet that the sentiment he expresses is commonplace. Poetry is always commonplace; it is vulgar in the noblest sense of that noble word. Unless a man can make the same kind of ringing appeal to absolute and admitted sentiments that is made by a popular orator, he has lost touch with emotional literature. Unless he is to some extent a demagogue, he cannot be a poet. A man who expresses in poetry new and strange and undiscovered emotions is not a poet; he is a brain specialist. Tennyson can never be discredited before any serious tribunal of criticism because the sentiments and thoughts to which he dedicates himself are those sentiments and thoughts which occur to anyone. These are the peculiar province of poetry; poetry, like religion, is always a democratic thing, even if it pretends the contrary.³

Poetry is analogous to religion as the poet is analogous to the saint. Neither man is essentially different from his brethren; he is simply more perceptive, more articulate.

The poet can separate himself from things in order to better see them for what they are; the average man cannot. Furthermore, the poet separates himself from his work, because he realizes that he is not the important part of his work; the things which he writes about are what count. Chesterton likens the artist to God; both create, but both are separate from what they create:

And the root phrase for all Christian theism was this, that God was a creator, as an artist is a creator. A poet is so separate from his poem that he himself speaks of it as a little thing that he has "thrown off." Even in giving it forth he has flung it away. . . . A woman

3. Chesterton, "Tennyson," Varied Types, pp. 250-1.

loses a child even in having a child. All creation is separation. Birth is as solemn a parting as death.⁴

And, like Aristotle, Chesterton says that a work of art must be of small enough proportions to be assimilated. Thus again in the analogy of God and the artist, he says that even the universe must be small in the sight of God; for the work of art must be small enough in the sight of the artist to allow him to see it as a whole, to assimilate it, and, finally, to appreciate what it pictures:

The fancy that the cosmos was not vast and void, but small and cozy, had a fulfilled significance now, for anything that is a work of art must be small in the sight of the artist⁵

Art for Chesterton means making things larger than life in order really to see them; but it also means limiting them, separating them from anything else so that they may be seen alone for what they are. Life displays things in an intermingled or even a confused state; not so with art: art is the concentration on one thing as distinct from anything else:

Exaggeration is the definition of Art.⁶

Art is limitation; the essence of every picture is the frame.⁷

Poetry is the separation of the soul from some object, whereby we can regard it with wonder.⁸

To appreciate anything we must always isolate it, even if the thing itself symbolize

4. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 142.

5. Ibid.

6. Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 14.

7. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 69.

8. Chesterton, Christendom in Dublin, p. 25.

something other than isolation.⁹

All art, poetry included, concerns itself with pointing out the strangeness of things--the similarity they possess in the sense that they all are, but the differences that exist because they are what they are. In other words, poetry is concerned with limits; poetry is indeed the art of limitation--the poet, so to speak, merely puts a frame around an object of nature in order that it may be better admired. He separates it from all other natural objects; poetry is isolation.

That strangeness of things, which is the light in all poetry, and indeed in all art, is really connected with their otherness; or what is called their objectivity. What is subjective must be stale; it is exactly what is objective that is in this imaginative manner strange. In this the great contemplative is the complete contrary of that false contemplative, the mystic who looks only into his own soul, the selfish artist who shrinks from the world and lives only in his own mind. According to St. Thomas, the mind acts freely of itself, but its freedom exactly consists in finding a way out to liberty and the light of day; to reality and the land of the living. In the subjectivist, the pressure of the world forces the imagination inwards. In the Thomist, the energy of the mind forces the imagination outwards, but because the images it seeks are real things. All their romance and glamour, so to speak, lies in the fact that they are real things; things not to be found by staring inwards at the mind. The flower is a vision because it is not 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.¹⁰

9. Chesterton, "The Advantages of Having One Leg," Tremendous Trifles, p. 33.

10. Chesterton, St. Thomas Aquinas, pp. 228-9.

Now all of these remarks about art, though introduced for the first time here, have a familiar ring. Even the phrasing sounds familiar; it has all been said before, and much of it has been said before in this very paper. It will be remembered that Chesterton was quoted in the opening chapter as saying:

All my life I have loved edges; and the boundary-line that brings one thing sharply against another. All my life I have loved frames and limits; and I will maintain that the largest wilderness looks larger seen through a window.

Art is exaggeration, because you exaggerate a thing by putting a frame around it. You limit it, you separate it, in order to wonder at it. You wonder at it because it exists outside yourself. Because it is outside yourself it is a gift. Because it is a gift you must be grateful for it. Because it is a gift you must value it for what it is. Is art, then, ultimately moral? Obviously it is; art praises God by praising His creation. Art has no meaning if it is not connected with God.

The ultimate function of the poet is the same as the function of the ordinary man, the common man. He contemplates, he wonders, he thanks. He merely does these things better; that is to say, he does them more articulately:

For I am one of those who think that the poet stands separate and supreme among men, in that simple fact that the poet can say exactly what he means, and that most men cannot. I think, in other words, that the other name of Poet is Pontifex; or the Builder of the Bridge. And if there is not a real bridge between his brain and ours, it is useless to argue about whether it has broken down at our end or his. He has not got the communication. . . . Poetry . . . is

a clear and direct image which does convey perfectly what is meant. . . .¹¹

The whole end of the poet is to make the common man say, with a profound depth of feeling, "I wish I had said that." The poet is the man with the child's eyes; the poet, like the child, sees everything as wonderful, and he tries to make his fellow men feel the same way.

Now as to literary criticism as such, Chesterton seems not to have assigned a great deal of importance to it. That is, he would not, as some modern critics have done, suggest that criticism is as important as literature itself. Criticism, as he points out in reply to Mencken,¹² is not what Mencken says it is: a function performed for the same purpose as that of a hen laying an egg. The function of the critic is to interpret the artist, to point out what the artist meant and why he did or did not succeed in saying what he meant:

Criticism does not exist to say about authors the things that they knew themselves. It exists to say the things about them which they did not know themselves. If the critic says that the Iliad has a pagan rather than a Christian pity, or that it is full of pictures made by one epithet, of course he does not mean that Homer could have said that. If Homer could have said that the critic would leave Homer to say it. The function of criticism, if it has a legitimate function at all, can only be one function--that of dealing with the subconscious part of the author's mind which only the critic can express, and not with the conscious part of the author's mind, which the author himself can express. Either criticism is no good at all (a very defensible position) or

11. Chesterton, "On Blake and His Critics," Avowals and Denials, pp. 141-3.

12. See Chesterton, "The Skeptic as Critic," Forum, LXXXI (February, 1929), 65-69.

else criticism means saying about an author the very things that would have made him jump out of his boots.¹³

Criticism, then, often enough involves two levels. First, what has the artist said, and how has he said it? Second, what are the things that he has not said, and how important are they--that is, have assumptions which he himself may not be aware of influenced what he has said? The first level is largely aesthetic and appreciative; the second is inevitably philosophical. And, of course, in Chesterton's scheme of values, the second level is more important. What a man says is more important than how he says it. For Chesterton the most important thing about a man is his view of the universe. That these two levels may be separated is not impossible, though Chesterton himself never separated them. But this writer is already attempting something which Chesterton himself would have found rather difficult, if he thought it worth doing at all; the writer does not wish to set up for himself a further task.

An example of Chesterton's criticism operating on these two levels is an early criticism of Tolstoy. The excerpt might well serve also to support the previous assertion that art is moral:

The narrow notion that an artist may not teach is pretty well exploded by now. But the truth of the matter is, that an artist teaches far more by his mere background and properties, his

13. Chesterton, Criticisms and Appreciations of the Works of Charles Dickens, quoted in Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 178.

landscape, his costume, his idiom and technique-- all the parts of his work, in short, of which he is probably entirely unconscious, than by the elaborate and pompous moral dicta which he fondly imagines to be his opinions. The real distinction between the ethics of high art and the ethics of manufactured and didactic art lies in the simple fact that the bad fable has a moral, while the good fable is a moral.¹⁴

You cannot separate a man's art from his thought, says Chesterton, whether the thought be conscious, unconscious, or subconscious. The thought makes the man and the man makes the art. To say that the two are separate is to say that the artist creates in a vacuum. Art for art's sake, except in a very narrow and specific Scholastic sense, is nonsense. "And poetry without philosophy has only inspiration, or, in vulgar language, only wind."¹⁵ The good critic must know the artist's mind; he must know the man as well as he knows his own best friend:

It is quite needless here to go into the old 'art for art's sake' business, or explain at length why individual artists cannot be reviewed without reference to their traditions and creeds. It is enough to say that with other creeds they would have been, for literary purposes, other individuals. Their views do not, of course, make the brains in their heads any more than the ink in their pens. But it is equally evident that mere brain power, without attributes or aims, a wheel revolving in the void, would be a subject about as entertaining as ink. The moment we differentiate the minds, we must differentiate by doctrines and moral sentiments. A mere sympathy for democratic merry-making and mourning will not make a man a writer like Dickens. But without that sympathy Dickens would not be a writer like Dickens; and probably not a writer at all. A mere

14. Chesterton, "Tolstoy," Varied Types, p. 131.

15. Chesterton, St. Thomas Aquinas, p. 187.

conviction that Catholic thought is the clearest, as well as the best disciplined, will not make a man a writer like Newman. But without that conviction Newman would not be a writer like Newman; and probably not a writer at all. It is useless for the aesthete (or any other anarchist) to urge the isolated individuality of the artist, apart from his attitude to his age. His attitude to his age is his individuality: men are never individual when alone.¹⁶

Great art is moral, though not necessarily Christian.

Furthermore, great art is philosophical, in the sense that it has always realized that it has been symbolizing life much more than it has been imitating it:

There must always be a rich moral soil for any great aesthetic growth. The principle of art for art's sake is a very good principle if it means that there is a vital distinction between the earth and the tree that has its roots in the earth; but it is a very bad principle if it means that the tree could grow just as well with its roots in the air. Every great literature has always been allegorical--allegorical of some view of the whole universe. The 'Iliad' is only great because all life is a battle, the 'Odyssey' because all life is a journey,¹⁷ the Book of Job because all life is a riddle.

There is, says Chesterton, one enormous exception to this general rule that all great art is religious art. This exception is Milton. Milton alone of all the great poets of the world might be either accused or credited with having actually created a work of art for art's sake, in defiance of, or refusal of, the whole religious and moral tradition to which he was heir:

It does really seem to me that Milton was an

16. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, pp. 7-8.

17. Chesterton, "A Defense of Nonsense," The Defendant, p. 47.

artist, and nothing but an artist; and yet so great an artist as to sustain by his own strength the idea that art can exist alone. He seems to me an almost solitary example of a man of magnificent genius whose greatness does not depend at all upon moral earnestness, or upon anything connected with morality. His greatness is in a style, and a style that seems to me rather unusually separate from its substance.¹⁸

Most art, then, is great because it is religious; or, at least, religiousness and greatness are not ordinarily separate. But Milton's Paradise Lost is not essentially Christian at all. His Christ in the war in Heaven is like Apollo making war on the Titans. Chesterton notes as the one great exception to the rule that

the great religious epic strikes us with a sense of disproportion; the sense of how little it is religious considering how manifestly it is great. It seems almost strange that a man should have written so much and so well without stumbling on Christian tradition.¹⁹

Thus for Chesterton the artist is nothing without his philosophy. It follows logically then that, all other things being equal, the truer the philosophy the better the artist: that is, better in the ultimate critical judgment, which must be moral. Obviously this does not mean that Chesterton, logically if cavalierly, tossed aside the pagan writers, any more than he tossed aside Milton. As a literary critic, he was first of all an appreciator; he was grateful that any sort of literature at all had been written. But the critic, he says, is like God: easy to please and hard to satisfy.

18. Chesterton, "Milton and Merry England," Fancies versus Fads, p. 256.

19. Ibid., p. 261.

Much of Chesterton's criticism, as will be seen later, is concerned with the child-like quality of great literature; for, again, it is the child who really sees, though he cannot say what he sees. It is the common man who sees only vaguely and thus cannot express his wonder at things. It is the poet who both sees and speaks. The essay entitled "The Romance of Rhyme" is at once a good example of his perception of childishness in poetry and a further explication of his critical theories as such. Thus it bears examination in some detail. It will hardly be necessary to point out the similarity between the critical thought here presented and the basic notions put forth in the preceding chapter. If the quotations from Chesterton seem lengthy, it is because the writer of this paper feels that, in many cases, to paraphrase Chesterton is to slip over the thin line that divides paradox from nonsense, the thin line that divides acrobatic truth from clever half-truth.

Chesterton begins the essay by taking the line "Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle," and mentioning that in a satire it had been changed to "Hey diddle diddle will rank as an idyll." From these two examples he traces the history of rhyme:

The whole history of the thing called rhyme can be found between those two things: the simple pleasure of rhyming "diddle" to "fiddle," and the more sophisticated pleasure of rhyming "diddle" to "idyll." Now the fatal mistake about poetry . . . consists in forgetting that we should have the first kind of pleasure as well as the second. It might

be said that we should have the first pleasure as the basis of the second; or yet more truly, the first pleasure inside the second. The fatal metaphor of progress, which means leaving things behind us, has utterly obscured the real idea of growth, which means leaving things inside us. The heart of the tree remains the same, however many rings are added to it; and a man cannot leave his heart behind by running hard with his legs. In the core of all culture are the things that may be said, in every sense, to be learned by heart. In the innermost part of all poetry is the nursery rhyme, the nonsense that is too happy even to care about being nonsensical But the true enjoyment of poetry is always in having the simple pleasure as well as the subtle pleasure. . . . What is the matter with the modern world is that it is trying to get simplicity in everything except the soul. Where the soul really has simplicity it can be grateful for anything--even complexity The last Futurist draughtsman, for example, has the aim of drawing a tree as it might be drawn by a child of ten I am willing to admit . . . that there is a truth of philosophy and psychology in this attempt to attain the clarity even through the crudity of childhood. In this sense I can see what a man is driving at when he draws a tree merely as a stick with smaller sticks standing out of it. He may be trying to trace in black and white or grey a primeval and almost pre-natal illumination; that it is very remarkable that a stick should exist, and still more remarkable that a stick should stick up or stick out. He may be similarly enchanted with his own stick of charcoal or grey chalk; he may be enraptured, as a child is, with the mere fact that it makes a mark on the paper--a highly poetic fact in itself. But the child does not despise the real tree for being different from his drawing of the tree Because he has a single eye he can enjoy a double pleasure.²⁰

The critic, thinks Chesterton, should have the single eye of the child, the child who wonders at what he sees. The critic should not progress away from childhood and into the stage of being a critic. He should simply grow up retaining this vision

20. Chesterton, "The Romance of Rhyme," Fancies versus Fads, pp. 3-5.

so often relegated to children. The critic should not despise a poem because it is a bad poem; he should wonder that it was written at all. In the same way, the critic, or anyone else, should not despise a toad because it is ugly; he should be pleased that it exists, in all its toadiness. The truly simple man (and the critic should be a truly simple man) does not dislike complexities; he does not dislike "gilding and spangles," and that is what rhyme is. He should like these things as a child likes ornaments and bright clothes:

And in poetical criticism and creation there has also appeared the prig who insists that any new poem must avoid the sort of melody that makes the beauty of any old song. Poets must put away childish things, including the child's pleasure in the mere sing-song of irrational rhyme. It may be hinted that when poets put away childish things they will put away poetry.²¹

But there is more to rhyme than this. There is in rhyme a deeper spiritual significance, one that is very difficult to put into words. There is in rhyme a sense of returning to the same place which is not found in free verse. Rhyme, if only for a moment, gives a man a sort of ghostly glimpse of that which is lost to him. It gives him a cloudy feeling of ever going back, of always returning. And this is simply because man is spiritually home-sick. Poetry, by the exaggeration of natural objects, gives man emotions which he feels to be good and proper: emotions of praise, wonder, and occasional sadness that these feelings should have to be generated in him by an outside force. Thus rhyme is in one sense almost a

21. "The Romance of Rhyme," p. 6.

religious symbol, as the poet is in one sense a priest: "The dignity of the artist lies in his duty of keeping awake the sense of wonder in the world."²² The singular popularity and power of rhyme lie in "this deeper significance of return."

But something much deeper is involved in the love of rhyme as distinct from other poetic forms, something which is perhaps too deep and subtle to be described. The nearest approximation to the truth I can think of is something like this: that while all forms of genuine verse recur, there is in rhyme a sense of return to exactly the same place. All modes of song go forward and backward like the tides of the sea; but in the great sea of Homeric or Virgilian hexametres, the sea that carried the labouring ships of Ulysses and Aeneas, the thunder of the breakers is rhythmic, but the margin of the foam is necessarily irregular and vague. In rhyme there is rather a sense of water poured safely into one familiar well The armies of Homer and Virgil advance and retreat over a vast country, and suggest vast and very profound sentiments about it, about whether it is their own country or only a strange country. But when the old nameless ballad boldly rhymes "the bonny ivy tree" to "my ain countree" the vision at once dwindles and sharpens to a very vivid image of a single soldier passing under the ivy that darkens his own door. Rhythm deals with similarity, but rhyme with identity.²³

Rhyme is a good thing because it is in some ways a childish thing, and because it is a democratic thing. For "anybody can do it, but nobody can do it without taking the trouble to do it; and only a few can do it very well."²⁴ And the few who can do it very well are the poets, who speak for and to the common man. They praise because the man in the street

22. Chesterton, "Maltreating Words," Generally Speaking, p. 164.

23. "The Romance of Rhyme," pp. 9-10.

24. Ibid., p. 17.

cannot praise; the man in the street reads them because he feels the need to praise.

Now the critic who has lost, or never had, this power of the child or the common man is a bad critic; for the critic is, like all other men, first and foremost an appreciator:

A good critic should be like God in the great saying of a Scottish mystic. George MacDonald said that God was easy to please and hard to satisfy. That paradox is the poise of all good artistic appreciation. Without the first part of the paradox appreciation perishes, because it loses the power to appreciate. Good criticism, I repeat, combines the subtle pleasure in a thing being done well with the simple pleasure in it being done at all. It combines the pleasure of the scientific engineer in seeing how the wheels work together to a logical end with the pleasure of the baby in seeing the wheels go round. . . . And in the same fashion it combines the critic's pleasure in a poem with the child's pleasure in a rhyme. . . . When poetry loses its link with all these people who are easily pleased it loses all its power of giving pleasure. When a poet looks down on a rhyme it is . . . rather as if he looked down on a lark because he had been up in a balloon. It is cutting away the very roots of poetry; it is revolting against nature because it is natural, against sunshine because it is bright, or mountains because they are high, or moonrise because it is mysterious.²⁵

Art, says Chesterton, is democratic and religious. If poetry has reached a point where it is for the few, for the aesthetes, then it is no longer poetry. Nine-tenths of the "new" blank verse is no more a new meter than sleeping in a ditch is a new school of architecture. The new artist is proud of being misunderstood; but the whole function of the traditional artist was to be very plainly understood, because he had some-

25. "The Romance of Rhyme," pp.20-21.

thing to say. The inference is clear: the new poet is an anarchist, because he does not speak for the people; he does not speak for anyone but himself. But the people do have something to say, even though they cannot say it. They have a kind of pent-up store of wonder and praise that must come out; and it needs a Homer or a Shakespeare to say it for them. The Imagist will never do it; the Imagist may found a fad and a school, but these things pass away.

If art is praise, if art is an expression of wonder, if art must be ultimately religious, what happens to the so-called great artists who did not think art anything of the sort? There never was any such person, says Chesterton. And that is the reason that he sets up the two levels of criticism. The great artist cannot help praising and wondering, even if he consciously teaches a doctrine of moral suicide. He may be totally unaware that he is accepting the universe in a religious sense, but he nonetheless is, and that is why he is an artist. Tolstoy, for example, consciously preached a kind of confused and complicated simplicity, but that is not why he is great, and that is not why the common man can and does read him. The common man reads him because he sees that Tolstoy wonders at things much as he himself does:

And the real moral of Tolstoi comes out constantly in his stories, the great moral which lies at the heart of all his work, of which he is probably unconscious, and of which it is quite likely that he would vehemently disapprove. The curious cold white light of morning that shines over all the tales, the folklore simplicity with which "a man or a woman" are spoken of without further identification, the love--one might almost say the lust--for the qualities of brute materials,

the hardness of wood, and the softness of mud, the ingrained belief in a certain ancient kindliness sitting beside the very cradle of the race of man--these influences are very truly moral.²⁶

Thus Tolstoy has, perhaps on a subconscious level, two of the marks of the Chestertonian artist: he wonders, and he loves things for what they are.

To sum up, then, it may roughly be said that poetry is praise and criticism is appreciation. Praise is simply a function of a certain moral view of the universe. Therefore all great art has a moral basis; all great art has a philosophical and religious basis. Furthermore, art does not set the artist apart from the ordinary man except in the very minor sense that he can say what the ordinary man cannot; he cannot feel what the ordinary man cannot feel. He is simply an articulate ordinary man. He is the inspired common man.

Art does not exist for and of itself. It exists as the expression of ideas. The great artist is the man of many ideas who has the ability to express them:

For Henry James must be considered as a great man of letters; and the greatness itself is something which existed in geniuses utterly unlike him. It might seem startling and even comic to compare him to Dickens or even to Shakespeare; but what makes him great is what makes them great, and what alone can make a literary man in the ultimate sense great. It is ideas; the power of generating and making vivid an incessant output of ideas. It is untrue to say that what matters is quality and not quantity. Most men have made one good joke in their lives; but to make jokes as Dickens made

26. Chesterton, "Tales from Tolstoi," The Common Man, pp. 162-3.

them is to be a great man.²⁷

(The great artist is the man who finds everything interesting. The great artist is the man who finds everything amazing because it is.) There are artists, it is true, who try consciously to do something other than praise. But that is not the part of them that matters. What is important about them, what indeed makes them artists at all, is the unconscious need to praise; they are good artists in spite of themselves. They are more human than they would wish; they cannot stop praising creation even when they wish to.

What ultimately matters is not art but things and ideas about things. The critic must be consciously aware of this, even though the artist is only unconsciously aware of it. The function of the critic is to point out why the artist is great; and unless he understands this sense of wonder he is apt to praise the artist for the wrong things. Every great artist, whether he knows it or not, is possessed of this sensitivity, this awareness of things: in short, every great artist has to some degree the three basic notions in the Chestertonian philosophy. Thus no critic who lacks the ability to appreciate these notions can understand either the artist or the art.

It is, of course, obvious from all this that what has been called the Chestertonian outlook is remarkably consistent. As in his thought as a whole the salient features are wonder, thanks, and awareness of things as they are, so in his

27. Chesterton, "Henry James," The Common Man, p. 144.

criticism these things simply take on a literary form. But those are the things that are really important, not the literary form. That is primarily what this paper is concerned with pointing out: that Chesterton's criticism is simply an extension of his basic philosophy. In support of this, the present writer thinks it wise to examine some of his important works of criticism to see if his theories bear up in practice, and really also to see if he actually utilized his own theories. With this the rest of the paper will be concerned.

It is a revealing fact that when one turns to the books of Chesterton's criticism he finds that, without exception, the people about whom the books were written are people who bear one of the Chestertonian marks of greatness. That is, they are all voluminous. Scott, Dickens, Whitman, Stevenson, Browning, and Chaucer all wrote volumes or planned to write volumes. They were interested in everything; they wrote about everything. One would be tempted to guess, and he would be perfectly correct, that Chesterton thought them great because they had something of the same view of life as he did--which is only another way of saying that he thought his critical theories were valid. As his brother points out, when he deals with authors opposed to his own views he is forced to digress in order to argue with them. He has to stop to point out the unconscious way that they agree with him in order to be artists at all. But with the men mentioned he is completely at home because they, in varying degrees, share his own view of life:

And, indeed, when Mr. Chesterton allows himself to be a critic pure and simple, he is always good. . . . He is always at his best when he is analyzing a writer with whose root point of view he is sympathetic.²⁸

The purpose of the next four chapters is partly to show the Chestertonian theory of literature and criticism in operation; but it is also to further explain and examine the theory itself, which has been set forth in very rough and over-simplified fashion by the paper. In short, the purpose of the next four chapters is to let Chesterton speak for himself.

28. Cecil Chesterton, G. K. Chesterton, A Criticism, pp. 78-79.

Chapter IV

THE THEORY AT WORK IN CHARLES DICKENS

Much has been said in the previous chapter about the function of the poet. It has been noted that his whole function is to be intelligible, for the reason that he is doing by means of his superior talent what the average man cannot do but would like to do. He is writing to and for, not the few, not the aesthetes, but the man in the street. The poet is merely the common man made articulate by the grace of God. Thus the poet has in him something of the demagogue, something of the popular orator; he is always speaking to the masses; he is telling them, not what they do not know, but what they cannot say.

Now Dickens, of all the Chestertonian favorites, is pre-eminently the writer of the people. He is the great common man; he is the great democrat. This, Chesterton thinks, is partly because of the era in which he was born: the era of the great influence of the French Revolution. At the time that men begin to think that they are all equal, they produce great men. Great men rose in the Middle Ages, for example, because men had a religious basis for equality:

For religion all men are equal, as all pennies are equal, because the only value in any of them is that they bear the image of the King. This fact has been quite insufficiently observed in the study of religious heroes.¹

1. G. K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 9. Hereafter this book will be noted as Dickens.

The French Revolution gave men a political basis for equality, and because of this it produced great men. This is perhaps a paradox somewhat similar to that which points out that the low, flat lands of Belgium produce great, towering Gothic cathedrals. Out of equality, out of flatness, comes height or greatness:

One of the actual and certain consequences of the idea that all men are equal is immediately to produce very great men. . . . There is a great man who makes every man feel small. But the real great man is the man who makes every man feel great.²

The real great man in this case is Dickens.

Dickens not only fulfills the Chestertonian notion of the artist as the great democrat; he also has in abundance that vastness, that sense of wonder at life, which characterizes the true artist. Moreover, he has it not only on the second, or subconscious, level. He has an inexhaustible vitality which only the man who finds everything interesting can have. He exaggerates, it is true, but that is merely the function of the artist: to exaggerate, to isolate, to limit. It is also true that his works are not like life in the sense that realistic novels are like life. But his work is like life in a much larger sense than that. He is at least like life in the negative sense that, like life, he imitates nothing:

For Dickens is "like life" in the truer sense, in the sense that he is akin to the living principle in us and in the universe; he is like

2. Dickens, p. 8.

life, at least in this detail, that he is alive. His art is like life, because, like life, it cares for nothing outside itself, and goes on in its way rejoicing. Both produce monsters with a kind of carelessness, like enormous by-products; life producing the rhinoceros, and art Mr. Bunsby. Art indeed copies life in not copying life, for life copies nothing. Dickens's art is like life because, like life, it is irresponsible, because, like life, it is incredible.³

But, though Dickens's work is incredible, it is by no means unintelligible; just the reverse is true. He is supremely intelligible, as the great artist must be. And he meets the other requirements for artistry that Chesterton has set up; in fact, he is very nearly the embodiment of those qualities needed. He has the vitality, the wonder, the simplicity of the child; and he has the talent of the artist. He is uproarious because he perceives that life itself is uproarious, that life is filled with absurd shapes which can only seem not absurd through repetition and dull habit. He is showing the people what they have forgotten: that the world is a strange and wonderful place. He is standing on his head to see things for the first time; and he is taking the common man with him. Furthermore, he does not stoop to taking the common man with him; he takes him joyously, takes him as a comrade, takes him, if a pun be permitted, for granted. And that, as has been shown in the previous chapter, is precisely what the artist is supposed to do. The true artist does not speak snobbishly for the people; he is the people speaking.

3. Dickens, p. 14.

Dickens is in this way more of the people than perhaps any other artist who ever lived; and thus he is in this way perhaps the greatest artist of them all:

Dickens stands first as a defiant monument of what happens when a great literary genius has a literary taste akin to that of the community. For this kinship was deep and spiritual. . . . Dickens did not write what the people wanted. Dickens wanted what the people wanted. . . . But Dickens never talked down to the people. He talked up to the people. He approached the people like a deity and poured out his riches and his blood. This is what makes the immortal bond between him and the masses of men. He had not merely produced something they could understand, but he took it seriously, and toiled and agonized to produce it. . . . He climbed toward the lower classes. He panted upwards on weary wings to reach the heaven of the poor.⁴

It may be objected that the whole notion of the artist's merely being the articulate common man is fallacious--or worse, that it is merely a play on words. It may be said that the artist is very obviously not the common man, but the uncommon man--that merely by virtue of his articulateness he becomes uncommon. But this, says Chesterton, is a very narrow view of what commonness really means. Commonness does not mean uniformity; it may and usually does contain great diversity. (The sin of this snobbishness "consists in thinking of the small things wherein we differ when we ought to be confounded and intoxicated by the terrible and joyous matters in which we are at one."⁵ | The terrible and joyous things are death and birth and the life between--not to say the life after. By

4. Dickens, p. 78.

5. Ibid., p. 207.

comparison with these, all the differences of strength or ability or intelligence matter not at all:

Commonness and the common mind are now generally spoken of as meaning in some manner inferiority and the inferior mind; the mind of the mere mob. But the common mind means the mind of all the artists and heroes; or else it would not be common. Plato had the common mind; Dante had the common mind; or that mind was not common. Commonness means the quality common to the saint and the sinner, to the philosopher and the fool; and it was this that Dickens grasped and developed. In everybody there is a certain thing that loves babies, that fears death, that likes sunlight: that thing enjoys Dickens. And everybody does not mean uneducated crowds; everybody means everybody. . . . And when I say that everybody understands Dickens I do not mean that he is suited to the untaught intelligence. I mean that he is so plain that even scholars can understand him.⁶

Though Dickens is understood, he is not always criticized fairly; for the modern critics are mostly analytic and descriptive. And "His bad work is below that criticism. His good work is above it."⁷ Dickens, like the universe, is to be accepted and appreciated.

The artist, as has been said many times in this paper, is the man who finds everything interesting. He may, and often does, go to the ends of the earth to find romance, because it is human nature to fancy the other side of the hill greener. But he is always intensely aware of the road that leads him there and of the scenery along the way. He wants intellectual romance because he has grown up; but he likes things because he is in some ways still a child. Dickens, says

6. Dickens, p. 79.

7. Ibid., p. 85

Chesterton, was above all the romancer of the ordinary. He accepted the ordinary as everyone must; but he did more: he appreciated it. And this is only another way of saying that he was great, that he had many ideas. He was the one man to whom all things are important; he was the artist:)

Dickens . . . had common sense and uncommon sensibility. That is to say, the proportion of interests in him was about the same as that of an ordinary man, but he felt all of them more excitedly. . . . Dickens liked ordinary things; he merely made an extraordinary fuss about them. His excitement was sometimes like an epileptic fit; but it must not be confused with the fury of the man of one idea or one line of ideas. He had the excess of the eccentric, but not the defects, the narrowness. Even when he raved like a maniac he did not rave like a monomaniac.⁸

It has been noted that the artist is analogous to God in that both are creators. In the same way, criticism of the universe is comparable to criticism of creative literature. It is true, of course, that God creates ex nihilo, while the artist creates only in the sense of exaggerating the things created by God. But the problem of criticism is roughly the same for both. As a man accepts the universe and is grateful for it, so the critic accepts literature and is grateful for what it is. He is, again, a combination of the child and the engineer watching the wheels go round. He is happy that literature exists, but he is even happier when the literature is great literature. But when he is faced with great literature, he is like the man who is faced with the world; he cannot

8. Dickens, p. 93.

really criticize it--he can only be grateful for it:

Real primary creation (such as the sun or the birth of a child) calls forth not criticism, not appreciation, but a kind of incoherent gratitude. This is why most hymns about God are bad; and this is why most eulogies on Dickens are bad. The eulogists of the divine and the human creator are alike inclined to appear sentimentalists because they are talking about something so very real. In the same way love-letters always sound florid and artificial because they are about something real.⁹

Dickens is the artist par excellence, according to the Chestertonian concept of artistry. He is the great common man; he is the ordinary man who has been granted the power to speak. He is the man who praises the universe when none of his brethren can do it. He is the creator, which, on the highest human level, means an exaggerator. He exaggerates the things of God, and his fellow men remember their primary duties: to wonder and to praise. He has fulfilled the one real purpose of the artist; he has reminded his fellows who they are and what kind of a world they live in. He has done more: he has reminded them that they are alive.

One thing remains that the great artist must have, whether he knows it or not. It has been called a preoccupation with things, an intense interest in all things. Yet it is more than that. The great artist is not only interested in everything; he is almost literally hungry for more: more people, more ideas, more things. He is hungry for these things because they are forever new and strange, not to say wonderful. Every day

9. Dickens, p. 174.

is a birthday for the artist, and, like the child, he cannot wait to open his gifts. He has an utter and cock-sure confidence that nothing will disappoint him; consequently he runs after everything. He expects to be surprised. Has Dickens this requisite?

It is, perhaps, the strongest mark of the divinity of man that he talks of this world as "a strange world," though he has seen no other. We feel that all that is is eccentric, though we do not know what is the centre. This sentiment of the grotesqueness of the universe ran through Dickens's brain and body like the mad blood of the elves. He saw all his streets in fantastic perspectives, he saw all his cockney villas as top-heavy and wild, he saw every man's nose as twice as big as it was, and every man's eyes like saucers. And this was the basis of his gaiety. . . . This world is not to be justified as it is justified by the mechanical optimists; it is not to be justified as the best of all possible worlds. Its merit is not that it is orderly and explicable; its merit is that it is wild and utterly 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.¹⁰

It is quite apparent that what Chesterton finds in Dickens is a complete vindication of all his theories. He finds Dickens talking to the people, almost literally telling them to wonder--indeed, wondering with them. He finds in him a boisterous acceptance of the universe with all its diversity. He finds in him a vitality and unflagging interest in all things under the sun and a wish to talk about them. And he finds in him an admiration for coffee-houses because they are coffee-houses and brooches because they are brooches. In fine,

10. Dickens, p. 205.

he finds much more than a prefiguring of his own temperament; he finds his philosophy of life and, incidentally, the embodiment of his critical ideas. He finds more, it is true, but the other things are not within the scope of this paper. The paper must go on now to the man who was perhaps the greatest of the great poets of the nineteenth century: Robert Browning.

Chesterton seems the word. If he does not in any way approach this ideal, then he is not an artist. For, it may be said again, the artist is the voice of the man who cannot speak for himself.

But the artist's function of the artist is to be intelligible to his audience. He is the man who preaches, and preaches to men who are not his fellows. He is the man who is to enjoy all things visible and invisible, a priest of the highest order. If, however, he sets himself up as an artist, and deliberately offers his message obscure, he is something more than a poet. Browning is often accused of obscurity for one of two reasons. He is thought obscure because he is profound; or he is thought obscure because he is fearless. Neither of these accusations, says Chesterton, is true. He is essentially profound, not only occasionally. And he is never fearless; he cared more for food than perhaps any other poet in the language.²

His early obscurity came from a sort of unending hostility.

1. G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning*, p. 100. Hereafter this book will be noted as *Browning*.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 106 ff.

Chapter V

THE THEORY AT WORK IN ROBERT BROWNING

Browning, unlike Dickens, cannot be shown to be the great democrat, which is only another way of saying that Dickens is the perfect Chestertonian artist and Browning is not. Yet Browning approaches to democracy in the large sense that Chesterton means the word. If he does not in any way approach this ideal, then he is not an artist. For, it may be said again, the artist is the voice of the man who cannot speak for himself.

Now the whole function of the artist is to be intelligible, to be understood. He is the man who praises, and praises in such a way as to make glad the hearts of his fellow men. He is "a man made to enjoy all things visible and invisible, a priest of the higher passions."¹ Obviously, if a man sets himself up as an artist, yet deliberately makes his message obscure, he is something much less than a poet. Browning is often accused of obscurity for one of two reasons. He is thought obscure because he is profound; or he is thought obscure because he is formless. Neither of these accusations, says Chesterton, is true. He is occasionally profound, but only occasionally. And he is never formless; he cared more for form than perhaps any other poet in the language.²

His early obscurity came from a sort of amazing humility.

1. G. K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 16. Hereafter this book will be noted as Browning.

2. Ibid., p. 156 ff.

He thought that what were commonplace thoughts to him must also be commonplace thoughts to everyone else; because he was not proud he was democratic:

But a young man of genius who has a genuine humility in his heart does not elaborately explain his discoveries, because he does not think that they are discoveries. He thinks that the whole street is humming with his ideas, and that the postman and the tailor are poets like himself. Browning's impenetrable poetry was the natural expression of this beautiful optimism. Sordello was the most glorious compliment that has ever been paid to the average man.³

His later obscurity, it is true, bars him from the highest place of glory in the hierarchy of poets. Yet, for all that, his aims were sound; he is, as Dickens is, the romancer of the ordinary. His trouble was that he was forever seeking new forms in which to express himself. He was in love with novelty. Added to this was a temperamental impatience, a wish to get things said or done as quickly as possible. These things, along with his love for the grotesque (which will be mentioned in a moment) caused in him a certain amount of obscurity, a certain amount of meaning jammed together with other meaning, and this, of course, makes for difficult reading. But the afore-mentioned aims are democratic in the sense of being universal; they are true subject for poetry:

But the great part of Browning's actual sentiments, and almost all the finest and most literary of them, are perfectly plain and popular and eternal sentiments. . . . Browning is simply a great demagogue, with an impediment in his speech. Or rather, to speak more strictly, Browning is a man whose excitement for the glory of the obvious

3. Browning, p. 38.

is so great that his speech becomes disjointed and precipitate: he becomes eccentric through his advocacy of the ordinary, and goes mad for the love of sanity.⁴

(Poetry, as has been noted, is democratic; it talks about the old tried-and-true emotions: love, death, birth, parting.) And these are the subjects of Browning's poetry. True, he has "an impediment in his speech," but the urge to praise is there; it is merely that the urge is too overwhelming to be always coherent.

Furthermore, some of this so-called obscurity stems from Browning's use of the grotesque. Chesterton sees in this love of strangeness the primal feeling of the poet to see things as always fresh, always new and different. As Chesterton himself was accused of standing on his head, and as he lauds Dickens for doing the same thing, so he sees in Browning this wish to see things as strange by seeking a new point of view. For the ordinary viewpoint has grown old and stale; it no longer supplies the viewer with the wonder he should feel. Browning knew this; he knew that the perpetual slight novelty of Aristotle could best be supplied, by him at least, through this use of the grotesque. For, after all, the grotesque is in no sense subterfuge, in no sense a literary lie; it is a new and different way of perceiving the truth, or, rather, of expressing truth. It is a wild and humble attempt to make an old truth new and fresh. It is similar to standing on one's head to see St. Paul's Cathedral in something like its pristine glory.

4. Browning, p. 156.

And almost any method is justified, thinks Chesterton, if its aim is to arouse this long dormant sense of wonder:

Now it is the supreme function of the philosopher of the grotesque to make the world stand on its head that people may look at it. If we say "a man is a man" we awaken no sense of the fantastic, however much we ought to, but if we say, in the language of the old satirist, "that man is a two-legged bird, without feathers," the phrase does, for a moment, make us look at man from the outside and give us a thrill in his presence.⁵

And the Book of Job's author, says Chesterton, is doing precisely this when he refers to the "apparently unmeaning magnificence"⁶ of the hippopotamus.

Browning himself, of course, needed no artificial grotesques to please him. To him most things were by their nature grotesque; they were strange simply because they existed. But when he wished to pass on this notion to others he found it necessary to twist and warp his language, to make his poetry correspond to the strange reality he was confronted with. His verse is like nature; it is sprawling as the trees are sprawling, dancing as the dust is dancing, ragged as the thunder cloud is ragged.⁷

Browning, says Chesterton, was very obviously interested in things as such; and this interest, of course, is of prime importance to the poet. The poet, after all, is the man who sees value in everything; he is the man who is wonderfully easy to please. Things fascinate him, not because they could

5. Browning, p. 151.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., p. 149.

be so much better or so much different, but because they are what they are. They are real and solid and objective; they have a certain importance all to themselves. It is in no way an unfortunate thing, for example, that a dandelion is not a redwood tree; the wonderful thing is that it is a dandelion. Browning was grateful for everything, and thus small things find their way into all of his poetry. Window-sashes and weeds are treated tenderly and with care, for they are no less strange than mountains and rivers. They exist; that is enough to make them very important:

And if any of us or all of us are truly optimists, and believe as Browning did, that existence has a value wholly inexpressible, we are most truly compelled to that sentiment not by any argument or triumphant justification of the cosmos, but by a few of these momentary and immortal sights and sounds, a gesture, an old song, a portrait, a piano, an old door.⁸

It was this "turbulent democracy of things" that Browning tried to express. There was nothing to be ignored, nothing too small to talk about. Like all great poets, he found inanimate objects as fascinating as people. And it was not only that dead things could symbolize all sorts of vast and living emotions. It was the dead things themselves, of themselves, that seemed to leap out at him and proclaim their importance. It is for this reason that he deals so frequently with paint as paint; paint is an interesting thing. On a different, though not a higher, level, he deals similarly with ideas; even a bad idea is a good thing:

8. Browning, pp. 50-51.

Any room that he was sitting in glared at him with innumerable eyes and mouths gaping with a story. There was sometimes no background and no middle distance in his mind. A human face and the pattern on the wall behind it came forward with equally aggressive clearness. It may be repeated, that if ever he who had the strongest head in the world had gone mad, it would have been through this turbulent democracy of things.⁹

That is the mark of the poet, it will be remembered, that he turns his eyes on everything with an intensity that approaches to disproportion--or what would be disproportion in any matter less important than that of existence. He contemplates everything with an unprejudiced eye. He accepts, and joyfully accepts:

Now the supreme value of Browning as an optimist lies in this that we have been examining, that beyond all his conclusions, and deeper than all his arguments, he was passionately interested in and in love with existence. If the heavens had fallen, and all the waters of the earth run with blood, he would still have been interested in existence, if possible a little more so. He is a great poet of human joy for precisely the reason . . . that his happiness is primal, and beyond the reach of philosophy.¹⁰

Browning is a great poet because he fulfills the Chertonian requirements for a poet--with one exception. And even this exception, his occasional obscurity, stems from the best of motives. As for the others, he is pleased with everything, as the child is pleased with everything. He is thankful for all things, especially for existence--not only for his own, but for that of everyone and everything else. He has that sense of wonder which all men save the poets have lost. And he spent his life, as all great poets do, in trying to awaken

9. Browning, p. 166.

10. Ibid., pp. 185-6.

the sleeping sensibilities of his fellow men. That he did this last in a grotesque way is only to say that he did it in a way that is closer to real nature than, say, the heroic couplet. That he spoke in a wild and frantic way is only to say that he perceived that existence is a wild and frantic thing. It is only to say that, like all poets, he was struck, not dumb, but eloquent by the magnificence of being.

Browning, then, unlike Dickens, has a flaw in his speech, but that is his only defect, so far as Chesterton is concerned. And it may be that Browning cannot, without argument, be called the greatest English poet of the nineteenth century. But there can be no argument if the next figure discussed in this paper be called the greatest English poet of the fourteenth century. For the figure is Geoffrey Chaucer.

Chapter VI

THE THEORY AT WORK IN CHAUCER

There is, as has been noted, what Chesterton calls an "abyss of light" at the back of the minds of all men. It is the blinding, supremely positive fact of existence. That ultimately is what men think about; it is really all they ever think about. And the poet differs from other men only in degree. Chaucer, of all the Chestertonian artists, was more articulately aware of this than perhaps any other great artist, with the exception of Dante. For Chaucer was well grounded in the great tradition of Aristotelian or Thomistic realism; that is, he was quite consciously aware of the whole great notion of being as such. Stevenson, Browning, and Dickens were only subconsciously aware of this; they only felt and very roughly expressed what Chaucer could analyze with copious quotations from both Aristotle and the Scholastics.

This, of course, was a great advantage to Chaucer. A man writing in a solid philosophical tradition feels more sure of himself than the man who is picking up his view of life as he goes along. He has a sense of surety, a sense of being able to face and accept all things, because all things fit into his philosophy. Thus Chaucer had, to a degree not attained by the other three, this thing that can only be called bigness or vastness--universality. He had a solid and rational basis for all his artistic instincts; he was what all artists must try to be: at once a realist and a humble, religious man. Chaucer knew better than nearly any other artist what the function of

the artist is; he knew quite well why he was wondering, praising, thanking. The others only guessed at it.

Chaucer was the man above all others who was in love with existence, not only emotionally, as was Dickens, but intellectually as well. He had the fresh perceptiveness of the child; and he had the vitality, the vast enthusiasm, which follows naturally upon this vision of existence:

It is gusto; it is zest; it is a certain appetite for things as they actually are; for a stone because it is a stone, or a story because it is a story That is, if we would appreciate him or his age, we must go back to something that stirred in us when we first found that the door of a doll's-house would open; or when we first found that the end of a story could be the point of a story¹

Chaucer, like both Browning and Stevenson, had a kind of philosophical bent; he was interested in ideas, whether they were new or old. If they were good ideas, in the sense of being true, he was always happy to discuss them, to pass on to others what he conceived to be something of some importance. If they were bad ideas--false ideas--he could still take a wholesome pleasure in dissecting them, in showing how and in what way they were fallacious. But, because he was a poet, whose main concern is with things, his poetry is largely concerned with these things. And this is as it should be:

Before the time of Shakespeare, men had grown used to the Ptolemaic astronomy, and since the time of Shakespeare men have grown used to the Copernican astronomy. But poets have never grown used to stars; and it is their business to prevent

1. G. K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 167. Hereafter this book will be noted as Chaucer.

anybody else ever growing used to them. And any man who reads for the first time the words, 'Night's candles are burnt out,' catches his breath and almost curses himself for having neglected to look rightly or sufficiently frequently, at the grand and mysterious revolutions of night and day. Theories soon grow stale; but things continue to be fresh. And, according to the ancient conception of his function, the poet was concerned with things; with the tears of things, as in the great lament of Virgil; with the delight in the number of things, as in the light-hearted rhyme of Stevenson; with thanks for things, as in the Franciscan Canticle of the Sun or the Benedicite Omnia Opera.²

And Chaucer falls into the third of these categories; he is the poet of gratitude. Further, he exemplifies a necessary quality of the critic. He is grateful to God, but he is also grateful to Gower, because Gower has created--he has done something which requires gratitude. And, naturally, an appreciation of things implies a realization of what is behind all things: the great ideas which are connected with God. Poetry deals with things as outward manifestations of realities too great to fit into words. Poetry hints at these things; that is all it can ever do. Chaucer's hints were great hints.³

Out of the great scope of Chaucer's religion and philosophy come his vast sympathy and affection for his fellow men. Dickens and Browning drew their democracy from the last, lingering glow of the French Revolution. But Chaucer's ^{distinct} democracy is at once a deeper and more universal thing, because it deals not so much with man's life as it does with his death

2. Chaucer, pp. 28-29.

3. Ibid., p. 33.

and what comes after it. It is the democracy which is concerned with ends. For the religious democrat, it is not so important that a man be happy as it is that he save his soul. Free will is ultimately more important than free speech. And that, again, is what Chesterton means when he says that all art must have a moral basis. That is the sense in which all great poets are democratic: it is a realization that all men are in the same boat and that the boat does not last forever. Chaucer is great, as Homer and Virgil are great, because they all perceive this fact. But Chaucer is also something more, as indeed every Christian poet is something more. Chaucer is not only democratic in this large sense--what might almost be called a great pagan sense. He is also tender; he is charitable; he is, in a word, romantic. And romance, says Chesterton, is a purely Christian thing.⁴ The great pagan poets wrote out of a large and coherent philosophy, and so did Chaucer. But Chaucer had a religion added to his philosophy, or, rather, a religion giving point and emphasis and personality to his philosophy. The pagan poets realized the imperfections of mankind; but only the Christian poets know what the imperfections stem from. That is what Chesterton means when he says that the fall of man is good news. Sin and weakness are no longer to be attributed to blind, impersonal forces working out some blind, impersonal destiny; fate is no longer in the hands of capricious gods. The doctrine of personal responsibility

4. Chaucer, pp. 27-28.

has freed man from the slavery of being a puppet:

There is indeed one character, which Chaucer shares with all the great ancient poets. . . . The greatest poets of the world have a certain serenity, because they have not bothered to invent a small philosophy, but have rather inherited a large philosophy. It is, nine times out of ten, a philosophy which very great men share with very ordinary men . . . the great poet only professes to express the thought that everybody has always had. . . . The greatness of Homer consists in the fact that he could make men feel, what they were already quite willing to think, that life is a strange mystery in which a hero may err and another hero may fail. The poet makes men realise how great are the great emotions which they, in a smaller way, have already experienced The great poet is alone strong enough to measure that broken strength we call the weakness of man.²

Chesterton finds in Chaucer something more than this feeling of democracy and gratitude, something seemingly quite different from these feelings of reverence and yet in truth quite the same thing. It is Chaucer's sense of humor, a gigantic sense of humor that is as large as that of Dickens but different from it. Dickens's humor is boisterous and exaggerative; Chaucer's is of an elvish sort. It is great, says Chesterton, in spite of criticisms such as that of Matthew Arnold, who said that Chaucer lacked what Arnold called "high seriousness." Humor is in no way inferior to "seriousness"; it is simply different from it. Further, humor is an elemental and spiritual thing; high spirits are spiritual. Chaucer is great because his humor is vast and all-embracing; it is a way of looking at life; it is a philosophy. Chesterton examines the frequently overlooked joke of Chaucer's, the

5. Chaucer, pp. 27-28.

joke of Chaucer's telling his own story in prose in The Canterbury Tales. He thinks that is a very good joke; but he also thinks that it is something more. It is fine irony that the author of all the authors in the book says that he knows no poetry,

But the irony is wider and even deeper than that. There is in it some hint of those huge and abysmal ideas of which the poets are half-conscious when they write; the primal and elemental ideas connected with the very nature of creation and reality. It has in it something of the philosophy of a phenomenal world, and all that was meant by those sages, by no means pessimists, who have said that we are in a world of shadows. Chaucer has made a world of his own shadows, and, when he is on a certain plane, finds himself equally shadowy. It has in it all the mystery of the relation of the maker with things made. There falls on it from afar even some dark ray of the irony of God, who was mocked when He entered His own world, and killed when He came among His creatures.⁶

That is the supreme greatness of Chaucer and of all great poets: they perceive the dim outlines of great things. Poetry is a collection of fragments of ideas too great for the human mind, but ideas for which the average human mind feels a vague and pressing need.

Chesterton's discussion of Chaucer's religion and Chaucer's world are deserving of mention if only because Chesterton himself thinks them so important, but such discussion is, unfortunately, outside the scope of this paper. It may roughly be said that what Chesterton finds in Chaucer is the fulfillment of his critical ideas of wonder, praise, and thanks

6. Chaucer, pp. 19-20.

and the addition of something else. That addition is Chester-
 ton's own religion. The largesse and magnanimity of Chaucer
 are not peculiarly his own; they belong in part to the re-
 ligious of largesse and magnanimity. Chaucer is the perfect
 artist with the perfect religion, or, perhaps, the perfect
 artist because of the perfect religion. In any case, he had
 in his religion the comfort, the solace, the sense of being
 afloat on a vast sea in a stout ship, that the next man to
 be mentioned never found. That man is Robert Louis Stevenson.

THE THEORY AT WORK IN ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

It has been noted that Chesterton's literary criticism is ultimately philosophical--that he does not regard literature as unimportant, but rather regards philosophy as more important. It may be argued, and rightly so, that literature is only the expression of ideas. And that is precisely Chesterton's aim in all of his criticism: to get through the man's way of expressing himself and examine the ideas he has to express. It is true that on the highest levels of literature the form and the content are inseparable; in this Chesterton agrees with Newman that the style is the man--that a man has a great style because he has great ideas to express--that it is almost impossible to express great ideas in anything other than great language. It follows from this, then, that an analysis of a man's style is impossible unless it be agreed that the analysis is at the same time concerned with his ideas. The critic may point out certain characteristic traits belonging to a certain author; he may point out that the author is fond of certain words. But that is not style; that is only the froth on top of the great wave of style. As he says, it is pointless to talk of the form of the sonnet; the form is the sonnet. Thus it is that Chesterton is only rarely concerned with individual words or lines as such, and then only on a very elementary level. That is, he will quote a line and say

dogmatically, "That is a very bad line." And it is; it needs no critic to see it--the badness stems from some outlandish metaphor or from some hopelessly awkward construction. And thus it is that when, in Robert Louis Stevenson, he sets out to examine Stevenson's style, he is setting out to examine his ideas; he is examining the man:

. . . I propose on the present occasion to be so perverse as to interest myself in literature when dealing with a literary man; and to be especially interested not only in the literature left by the man but in the philosophy inhering in the literature. And I am especially interested in a certain story, which was indeed the story of his life, but not exactly the story in his biography. It was an internal and spiritual story; and the stages of it are to be found rather in his stories than in his external acts.¹

This "internal and spiritual story" is the story of an escape, an escape much more dramatic than any to be found in Stevenson's stories. It is the story of Stevenson's escape from the pessimism and hopelessness of the decadents; it is the story of a philosophical and psychological rebellion. It is the story of a man who saw that existence was good of itself, though it was to him a desperate struggle because of disease. This man found himself surrounded by people who seriously believed that life was a sham and a fraud, something inherently cruel and meaningless. The man in love with existence fled from these other men, and he fled to the only place where he had ever found hope. (He fled to the romance and bravado of his boyhood.

As a boy, Stevenson, like Chesterton himself, was the

1. G. K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 18. Hereafter this will be noted as Stevenson.

owner of a toy theater. It was in this theater that he found his whole philosophy of life and, consequently, his whole philosophy of literature. It was here that he first fulfilled his desire for brilliant color and eloquent gesture; for the drama of pantomime is nothing but color and gesture. It was here that he developed his affection for hard, angular outlines; for cardboard figures are always hard and angular. It was here that he could indulge his fondness for things, for carving white wood, because white wood is a thing good of itself. This wild wish to make things and gestures speak louder and more eloquently than words themselves is, says Chesterton, one of the marks of the true artist. And indeed, as has been seen, it is an integral part of his whole philosophy) and thus of his literary criticism:

The first fact about the imagery of Stevenson is that all his images stand out in very sharp outline; and are, as it were, all edges. It is something in him that afterwards attracted him to the abrupt and angular black and white of woodcuts. It is to be seen from the first, in the way in which his eighteenth-century figures stand up against the skyline, with their cutlasses and cocked hats. The very words carry the sound and significance. It is as if they were cut out with cutlasses²

That was what Stevenson really wanted to do: he wanted vaguely to sketch things in hard, sharp outlines in order better to see how good these things were. This was what his age would not let him do. His age did not love anything sufficiently to wish to isolate it.

2. Stevenson, p. 29.

Stevenson wished to see and to write with vividness and precision; he wanted to paint pictures with short, swift strokes. And it came to him in the form of an avenue of escape that he could do it by becoming a child again. Indeed, in the sense that he never lost the capacity to see things with freshness and clarity, he had never ceased to be a child:

In other words, he appealed to his own childhood. A tale is told of it: that when someone chaffed him about a toy sword he replied solemnly, "The hilt is of gold and the scabbard of silver and the child is well content." It was to that moment that he suddenly returned. Groping for something that would satisfy, he found nothing so solid as that fancy.³

He wanted to stand up and shout that life is good, but his age had no ears for that sort of thing. He wanted to tell people that bright colors were good things, that dramatic gestures were high spiritual actions; but no one would listen. And so he put these things into the mouths of a group of boyish pirates. For at least the pirates were alive; at least the pirates could sing. The pirates could sing "Yo ho ho," and that was better than nothing at all. That was why he went from the land of pessimism to the land of piracy:

But he alone escaped, as from a city of the dead; he cut the painter as Jim Hawkins stole the boat, and went on his own voyage, following the sun For "Yo ho ho" was precisely what Stevenson, with his exact choice of words, particularly desired to say just then. It was for the present his most articulate message to mankind.⁴

3. Stevenson, p. 81.

4. Ibid., pp. 86-87.

Stevenson's passion for telling only the essentials of a scene or story, which is the result of this love of quickness and precision, at once separates him from the great Victorian novelists and makes him the apostle of a creed of which he was entirely ignorant. His habit of having always precisely the right word for any object or action results in giving the reader the impression that he has seen a conjuring trick. Thackeray, Trollope, and Dickens give the reader reams of facts, details upon details, in the most leisurely manner imaginable. Through sheer numbers of details, they give the reader the impression that he knows the character as well as it is possible to know anyone. But Stevenson, the master craftsman, cuts away all extraneous matter. The reader of Stevenson knows all that he has to know in order that the story be coherent and interesting. But he does not know the thousand and one things that he knows about, say, Pendennis or Dobbin. He never feels as comfortable with a character of Stevenson's as he does with those of the other great Victorians. Thus we have the paradox that the better craftsman is less believable than the shoddy one.

But there is also in this style of Stevenson's something of which he was not consciously aware. It is the ancient and Christian and Chestertonian notion that creation is not a helter-skelter thing, a mere piling up of stones or words. Creation is a purposeful thing, a thing to be done with care and affection, as perhaps God created the world with care and affection. It is the idea that things are so important that they

must each be carefully outlined--that no thing, once it is mentioned, can be glossed over. Thus the three-volume Victorians talked lengthily and at random about a great many things; but Stevenson has not space for so many. An inn sign or a cutlass or an apple barrel occupies him for too long. For, it must be remembered, literature is exaggeration, isolation, limitation:

Whatever else Stevenson stands for, he certainly stands for the idea that literature is not mere sensation or mere self-expression or mere record; but is sensation appealing to certain senses, self-expression in a certain material and record in a certain style. And in this he was certainly asserting the rights of the soul of man, as against various formless forces which some regarded as the soul of nature; the anima mundi of the pantheists. In this way Stevenson represented the same deep, ancient, hieratic and traditional truth that was taught to that generation by William Morris; and neither of them had the least idea what it was.⁵

Stevenson is the prime and most dramatic example of the fact that the artist must see through the eyes of the child. He is the colorful example of the fact that the artist always sees existence as good; for Stevenson's existence was much more painful than most--it is to his everlasting credit that even through a haze of illness and pain he saw that life is good. Life was sweet for Stevenson because, unlike most men, he had to fight for it; it was to him a desperate thing. His edges and angles are the result of his wish to carry out one of the first functions of the artist: to isolate. The gleam of a cutlass against the background of a black night

5. Stevenson, pp. 163-4.

was a good thing; thus it should be set off and admired. The bravery of a boy among pirates was uncommonly fine; it had to be sketched out in sharp, unmistakable strokes. Evil was a thing to be marvelled at no less than good; therefore it assumed a character--and was destroyed. What Chaucer and Browning and Dickens saw as wonderful and desirable, Stevenson saw as desperate. What they accepted, he fought to keep. What Chesterton finds in Stevenson is not only the wonder, the thanks, the admiration that he must find in any artist. He also finds a kind of gay courage, and he wonders at it.

The writer has simply taken what these various criticisms have all recognized. He has taken as the keynote of Chesterton's philosophy three large notions: the idea of mystery at the universe, the possibility of things far individual existence and far existence in general, and the metaphysical appreciation of things as things. He has bolstered the conviction that these really are key ideas in Chesterton through a necessarily rough examination of the Chestertonian voluminousness. He has not tried to show that these three notions are the only important ones in Chesterton's philosophy. He has not even set up a hierarchy governing these three. It is only that if the three be accepted as basic ideas in Chesterton's view of life.

Assuming the validity of these three notions, the paper

Chapter VIII

CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to show that Chesterton's literary criticism is not something distinct from his philosophy as a whole, but rather a part of it--or a necessary extension of it. (It has tried to show that Chesterton had a certain vision of existence into which all things fitted.) The writer does not necessarily agree with the new critics (exemplified by Kenner) that Chesterton had, in Scholastic terminology, a direct intuition of being; nor does he necessarily agree that he was what he has so often been called--a mystic, even a practical mystic.

The writer has simply taken what these various criticisms have all recognized. He has taken as the keynotes of the Chestertonian philosophy three large notions: the idea of wonder at the universe, the necessity of thanks for individual existence and for existence in general, and the metaphysical appreciation of things as things.) He has bolstered the contention that these really are key ideas in Chesterton through a necessarily rough examination of the Chestertonian voluminousness. He has not tried to show that these three notions are the only important ones in Chesterton's philosophy. He has not even set up a hierarchy governing these three. He is content if the three be accepted as (basic ideas in Chesterton's view of life.)

Assuming the validity of these three notions, the paper

has gone on to what must be admitted is a crude systematization of Chesterton's theories of literature. It has attempted to point out that the artist, for Chesterton, is analogous to God in that they are both creators. And the critic is like God at least in that he is easy to please and hard to satisfy. In other words, the artist is absolutely distinct from his work, for all creation is separation. The function of the artist is not to be unique, not to be "original" in the modern superficial sense; he may only be original in the truer sense that he is dealing with origins. His aim is not to say what has never been said or felt before; conversely, his aim is to say what everyone has in some way said or felt before. The common emotions and sentiments of mankind are the proper subject matter of literature.

(The ultimate aim of the artist is to rouse in his audience the nearly forgotten sense of wonder at the strangeness and magnificence of the universe. To do this he must set forth the old things in a fresh light, even if it means standing on his head to do it, even if it means using the grotesque or over-dramatic to do it.) Thus the poet is ultimately a religious figure; he is pointing out to his sleeping brethren "the primeval duty of praise." Now there must be some sort of democracy as a basis of art or there can be no meeting of minds--no connection between the mind of the artist and the minds of his auditors, who are the common men of the world. For the artist is only saying what any common man would say if he were articulate. The artist is speaking for him, or through him.

These two things, the sense of wonder and the consequent gratitude for the things causing wonder, are marks of the artist. The third mark is a metaphysical preoccupation with things as things. The artist is interested in things nearly as much as he is in people; indeed, things are in some ways more important than people. It is not only that they are symbolic; the main thing is that they are real--they exist and thus have a value wholly of themselves.)

As the artist has these qualities, so the critic must be able to appreciate these qualities. He is, again, easy to please but hard to satisfy. As the artist creates because he sees with the unspoiled vision of the child, so the critic must appreciate first as the child appreciates--simply because something has been done. Then, and only then, may he criticize if what has been done has not been done well. He must see that every artist has the above-mentioned qualities, whether the artist himself is aware of them or not. Thus it is sometimes his duty to point out what the artist has really said, as distinct from what the artist meant to say. For the artist, as in the case of Tolstoy, may consciously be preaching some quite narrow or quite stupid doctrine; but on a deeper level, if he is really an artist, he will be found to be saying these three things: the world is a strange place, life is a mysterious thing, things have a transcendental importance. And he will ordinarily be implying at least that existence is good of itself.

The paper, after setting up this system, went on to

examine four of Chesterton's major works of criticism: his books on Browning, Chaucer, Dickens, and Stevenson. The purpose of this was to illustrate the fact that Chesterton's theory of criticism did not exist in a vacuum, that he applied this three-way test to literature and obtained certain specific results. It may be objected, indeed it has been so objected, that these four artists bear a remarkably strong resemblance to Chesterton himself; that is, the five of them had basically the same sort of temperament and personality. This is, of course, quite true. But that itself would not seem to impugn the validity of the theory as a theory. No matter what his critical position, nearly anyone would admit that, other things being equal, the best criticism comes from the man who, so to speak, can get inside the artist's mind, can see things, for a moment, as the artist saw them. It is like the hackneyed method so dear to detective story writers: the master detective puts himself in the place of the criminal and does what the criminal would do. The critic, ideally, is this master detective; and it is difficult to see how this can be done unless there be some affinity between the critic and the artist. Imagination is not enough; what is wanted is something approaching identity. One can see the difficulty involved in a modern materialist critic's trying to get inside the mind of, say, St. John of the Cross; indeed, we have seen the difficulty of Matthew Arnold's trying to understand Chaucer. And that is the last and best justification of impressionistic criticism. That a man criticizes the people who best illustrate his theory

does not mean that the theory is false. Most men will take a vast amount of time and trouble to write about things they like; hardly anyone expends his efforts in literary criticism of an author whom he thoroughly dislikes--if only because of the danger of prejudice. Criticism, for Chesterton, ordinarily means pointing out positive good qualities in an author's work; he sees no point in dwelling on his faults.

It has also been noted that Chesterton's criticism of literature is very rarely criticism of literature as such. (Literature for Chesterton is simply the expression of ideas; and it is mainly with the ideas, their rightness or wrongness, that he is concerned. Thus, for example, in Heretics, he is not concerned with Shaw and Kipling and the rest as "vigorous artists"; he is concerned with them as heretics--that is, as men whose views of life have the hardihood to differ from his own.¹ Furthermore, because he is so concerned with ideas, he regards the possession of many ideas as a mark of greatness; as the great artist is interested in all things, so he is interested in all ideas, if only to refute them. So it is that most great artists, including Chesterton's favorites, are prolific writers. Volume is one of the marks of superiority.

The writer has made no attempt to evaluate Chesterton's criticism; indeed the writer has been perhaps unduly presumptuous in trying to put order where Chesterton himself apparently considered no order necessary, or perhaps even

1. G. K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 15.

possible. It may be noted in passing, however, that if literature is connected with life at all (and it is ordinarily so connected by critics), then it would not seem illogical that criticism of literature should also be connected with life. In any ultimate scheme of things, as Chesterton would say, it is life that matters, not literature. And by the same standard, though one step removed, it is not criticism of literature that matters, but literature itself.

Charles Dickens: A Critical Study. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1929.

Chapters. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Incorporated, 1931.

Christendom in Turmoil. London: Sheel and Ward, 1931.

The Club of Lovers. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1933.

The Collected Essays of G. K. Chesterton. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1934.

The Coloured Lands. New York: Sheel & Ward, 1934.

The Common Man. New York: Sheel & Ward, 1936.

The Defendant. London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1937.

"English Literature and the Latin Tradition," *Expository Series*, CVII (August, 1937), 182-93.

And Everlasting Men. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1925.

Angels Versus Gods. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1923.

Apparently Speaking. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1939.

Archie. New York: Devin-Adair, 1930.

"The American & the English," *Expository*, LIII (May, 1931), 17-21.

"Night and Fantasy in Fiction," *Expository*, LXXI (Nov., 1931), 27-30.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Text

- ✓ Chesterton, Gilbert Keith. Alarms and Discursions. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1911.
- ✓ Autobiography. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1936.
- ✓ Avowals and Denials. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1935.
- ✓ The Ball and the Cross. London: Wells Gardner, Darton & Co., 1928.
- ✓ Charles Dickens; A Critical Study. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1929.
- ✓ Chaucer. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Incorporated, 1932.
- ✓ Christendom in Dublin. London: Sheed and Ward, 1932.
- ✓ The Club of Queer Trades. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1905.
- ✓ The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1944.
- ✓ The Coloured Lands. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1938.
- ✓ The Common Man. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1950.
- ✓ The Defendant. London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1901.
- "English Literature and the Latin Tradition," Fortnightly Review, CVIL (August, 1935), 182-93.
- ✓ The Everlasting Man. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1925.
- ✓ Fancies Versus Fads. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1923. ✕
- ✓ Generally Speaking. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1929.
- ✓ Heretics. New York: Devin-Adair, 1950.
- ✓ "Is Humanism A Religion?", Bookman, LXIX (May, 1929), 236-41.
- ✓ "Magic and Fantasy in Fiction," Bookman, LXXI (March, 1930), 27-30.

Manalive. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1924.

The Napoleon of Notting Hill. New York: Devin-Adair, 1950.

✓ Orthodoxy. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1950.

The Poet and the Lunatics. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1929.

The Return of Don Quixote. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1927.

do this one ✓ Robert Browning, (English Men of Letters.) London: Mac-Millan and Co., Limited, 1925.

✓ Robert Louis Stevenson. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1928.

✓ St. Francis of Assisi. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1924.

✓ St. Thomas Aquinas. New York: Sheed & Ward, Inc., 1933.

"The Skeptic as Critic," Forum, LXXXI (February, 1929), 65-69.

"The Spirit of the Age in Literature," Fortnightly Review, CXXXIV (September, 1930), 289-98.

Tremendous Trifles. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1910.

Varied Types. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1903.

The Victorian Age in Literature. London: Oxford University Press, 1946.

The Well and the Shallows. London: Sheed and Ward, 1935.

William Blake. (Popular Library of Art.) London: Duckworth & Co., 1910.

Biographical and Critical Works

Alexander, Calvert. The Catholic Literary Revival. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1935.

Attwater, Donald, editor. Modern Christian Revolutionaries. New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1947.

Belloc, Hilaire. "Gilbert Keith Chesterton," Saturday Review of Literature, XIV (July 4, 1936), 3-4.

- ✓ Belloc, Hilaire. On the Place of Gilbert Chesterton in English Letters. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1940.
- Bentley, E. C. "G. K. C.," Spectator, CLVI (June 19, 1936), 125-6.
- Bishop, J. "G. K. Chesterton: Man of Letters and Defender of the Faith," London Quarterly and Holborn Review, CLXXIII (April, 1948), 149-55.
- Braybrooke, Patrick. Gilbert Keith Chesterton. London: The Chelsea Publishing Company, 1922.
- Braybrooke, Patrick. Peeps at the Mighty. London: Henry J. Drane, 1927.
- Bryant, A. "Wise and Good Man," Illustrated London News, CCXVII (October 28, 1950), 682.
- Bullett, Gerald. The Innocence of G. K. Chesterton. London: Cecil Palmer, 1923.
- Cammaerts, Emile. The Laughing Prophet; the Seven Virtues and G. K. Chesterton. London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1937.
- Chesterton, Cecil. G. K. Chesterton, A Criticism. New York: John Lane Company, 1909.
- Claude, H. "Chesterton as Philosopher," Journal of Arts and Letters, II (Winter, 1951), 303-12.
- Clemens, Cyril. Chesterton As Seen By His Contemporaries. Webster Grove, Mo., International Mark Twain Society, 1939.
- Ervine, St. John. "Some Impressions of My Elders," North American, CCXIV (October, 1921), 527-37.
- ✓ Evans, Maurice. G. K. Chesterton. Cambridge: The University Press, 1939.
- Feeney, Leonard. "The Metaphysics of Chesterton," Thought, XVII (March, 1942), 22-36.
- Hind, C. Lewis. Authors and I. New York: John Lane Company, 1921.
- Hoffman, Gretel. Gilbert Keith Chesterton als Propagandist. Dresden: Verlag M. Dittert & Co., 1937.
- Jones, W. S. H. "G. K. Chesterton and the Discovery of Christianity," London Quarterly and Holborn Review, CLXXIII (October, 1948), 324-32.

- Kenner, Hugh. Paradox in Chesterton. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1947.
- Knox, R. A. "Chesterton in His Early Romances," Dublin Review, CIXC (October, 1936), 351-65.
- Knox, R. A. "G. K. Chesterton," Living Age, CCCLX (August, 1941), 588-92.
- Lacon. Lectures to Living Authors. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925.
- Las Vergnas, Raymond. Chesterton, Belloc, Baring. Translated by C. C. Martindale. London: Sheed & Ward, 1938.
- Lea, F. A. "G. K. Chesterton," Modern Christian Revolutionaries. Edited by Donald Attwater. New York: The Devin-Adair Company, 1947.
- Lowther, F. H. "G. K. Chesterton: the Man and his Work," London Quarterly and Holborn Review, CLXVII (October, 1943), 335-41.
- Lunn, Arnold. Roman Converts. London: Chapman and Hall, Limited, 1924.
- Lynd, Robert. Old and New Masters. London: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., 1919.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. "Analogy in Metaphysics," The Downside Review, LXIX (Winter, 1950-51), 45-61.
- Mais, S. P. B. Some Modern Authors. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1923.
- Marcu, Valeriu. Men and Forces of Our Time. Translated by Eden and Cedar Paul. New York: The Viking Press, 1931.
- Maurois, Andre. Prophets and Poets. Translated by Hamish Miles. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1935.
- McLuhan, Marshall. "G. K. Chesterton: A Practical Mystic," The Dalhousie Review, XV (January, 1936), 455-64.
- Morley, Christopher. Powder of Sympathy. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1923.
- O'Connor, John. Father Brown on Chesterton. London: F. Muller, Ltd., 1937.
- Pfleger, Karl. Wrestlers With Christ. Translated by E. I. Watkin. London: Sheed & Ward, 1936.

- Semper, I. J. "Quintessence of Chesterton: Magic," Catholic World, CLVI (October, 1942), 40-45.
- Sheed, F. J. Sidelights on the Catholic Revival. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1940.
- Sherman, Stuart P. The Emotional Discovery of America and Other Essays. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Incorporated, 1932.
- Shuster, G. N. The Catholic Spirit in Modern English Literature. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1922.
- Shuster, G. N. "G. K. Chesterton," Commonweal, XXIV (July 24, 1936), 319-20.
- Slosson, E. E. Six Major Prophets. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1917.
- Smith, M. C. "The Rightness of G. K. C.," Catholic World, CXIII (May, 1921), 163-8.
- Tunmore, H. P. "Chesterton and the Essay," Commonweal, XXVII (November, 1937), 588-95.
- Ward, Maisie. Gilbert Keith Chesterton. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1943.
- Ward, Wilfrid. Men and Matters. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914.
- Waring, H. "G. K. C.: Prince of Essayists," Fortnightly Review, CIIL (November, 1937), 588-95.
- Waugh, Evelyn, "The Jesuit Who Was Thursday," Commonweal, VI (March 21, 1947), 558-61.
- Wolfe, A. F. "G. K.," Saturday Review of Literature, XXVI (October 2, 1943), 10-11.
- Wright, C. "Chesterton on Chaucer," Nation, CXXXV (October 5, 1932), 315.

University of Detroit Mercy



3 1723 00735144 8

27 1 1/2 1/2

TEN

118785

R273

Reilly, Robert J.

The literary criticism of
E. K. Chesterton

LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF DETROIT

A library loan is made under conditions for
the fulfilment of which the borrower is under-
stood to assume full responsibility.

