
G.K.
CHESTERTON



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ISBN 978 1 86082 506 4

Front cover image: *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (1874-1936), English novelist, poet and critic, 1927 © Photo Ann Ronan/HIP/Scala, Florence.

G. K. Chesterton

by
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Introduction

The reputation of G. K. Chesterton has not escaped the fate of most famous authors after their death – that of dwindling from a mass readership to the level of more spasmodic attention.

At the same time it is difficult to call a writer neglected who attracts notice as often as Chesterton, particularly in the form of quotations from his works, and whose books are regularly reprinted. The scintillation and depth of his thought, the freshness of his expression, the liveliness of his humour - all converge to explain the survival and permanent relevance of a man who, as Anthony Burgess has written, “knew what it was like to live on the level of eternity”.¹

It was the opinion of the English literary critic, Frank Swinnerton, that Chesterton’s gifts would not be fully realised and acknowledged until at least a century had passed.² So immersed was he in the controversies of his day that, in so far as they have abated and passed out of memory, he has become inaccessible - and, in some respects, perhaps dated. Yet there remains a vast proportion of his work which is uneroded by time, and in which his thought is as vibrant and timely as it was in his own day.

The Roots of Genius

Childhood and education

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was born in London on 29th May, 1874. His father was a prosperous London auctioneer, and the young Chesterton developed a love for the charm and glory of England's celebrated capital city, where he lived until the age of thirty-five.

From his earliest years he enjoyed fairy tales, and his childhood delight in these stories evolved into an intellectual appreciation of their value. In one of the many essays which he wrote on this subject, he contended that the idea which is the core of morality is also the core of the nursery tales - the idea that peace and happiness can only exist on some condition.

“Cinderella may have a dress woven on supernatural looms and blazing with unearthly brilliance; but she must be back when the clock strikes twelve. . . A girl is given a box on condition she does not open it; she opens it, and all the evils of this world rush out at her. A man and woman are put in a garden on condition that they do not eat one fruit: they eat it, and lose their joy in all the fruits of the earth.”³

In Chesterton's view, all ethics should be taught to this fairy tale tune: "that, if one does the thing forbidden, one imperils all the things provided."⁴ A whole chapter of the great work of his maturity, **Orthodoxy** (1908), is devoted to "The Ethics of Elfland", and explains how the truth about goodness and happiness came to him from nursery tales and formed the first basis of his philosophy.

In his **Autobiography** - his last book published several months after his death in June 1936 - Chesterton depicts his childhood with a sensibility and insight perhaps unsurpassed in modern literature. He recalls not only the incidents of this period, but also the thoughts and feelings which a child experiences. He displays a deep intuitive understanding of the way a child forms his picture of the world, and, as John Gross commented in a review of the **Autobiography** when it was reprinted in 1969, "his opening chapters are littered with sound observations and shrewd distinctions which are still worth pondering, notably in connection with the nature of play and the difference between imagination and illusion".⁵

A continuity of theme is as discernible in Chesterton's life as it is in his thought; a development as well, no doubt, but one which built upon the spiritual and emotional foundations of his childhood, deepening and not denying this early experience.

In 1887 he was enrolled at St. Paul's School in London. His five years there did not reveal him as a

distinguished pupil. He seemed, indeed, to be backward in some respects: he did not talk until the age of three nor read until he was eight. He was often vague and absent-minded, and his teachers commonly judged him dull. Only one of his masters discerned the intellectual power which was soon to ripen. "Six foot of genius," remarked the teacher to his mother. "Cherish him, Mrs. Chesterton, cherish him."⁶

In fact, his puzzlement and confusion at this time concealed a serious search for life's meaning. "We felt," said one of his friends, "that he was looking for God".⁷

In 1892 Chesterton went to study at the Slade School of Art. He had always displayed a facility for drawing, and his three years as an art student developed this talent as well as strengthening a power which manifested itself later in his writing - a depth of vision. His first published works comprised poetry and art criticism, two literary forms which especially require a gift of imaginative vision.

Early writings

In 1900 he produced **Greybeards at Play** and **The Wild Knight and other Poems**, two volumes of verse which established his reputation as an author of unmistakable promise. His literary gifts had led him in 1895 to leave the art school and join a publisher's office, from where he soon ventured into freelance journalism. Throughout his life Chesterton regarded himself, first and foremost, as a

journalist. He was, indeed, more a man of letters than a journalist in the currently received sense of the word. He lived to see journalism reduced from a profession to a trade, and a journalist become, as Chesterton himself put it, “a man who writes things on the back of advertisements”.⁸

Chesterton, on the other hand, wrote what he liked on an endless array of topics, professing no expertise beyond that of the ordinary educated man. His first major prose work, **The Defendant** (1901), was a series of casual essays on certain ideas or attitudes commonly regarded as indefensible. “I have conceived,” he wrote, “that a defendant is chiefly required when worldlings despise the world - that a counsel for the defence would not have been out of place in that terrible day when the sun was darkened over Calvary and Man was rejected of men”.⁹ Thus, Chesterton produced a plea for “patriotism”, “humility”, “baby-worship”, and “detective stories”. It was the beginning of a long and noble struggle for ideas and values which are now often derided; and it was the first of numerous books of essays which, under the guise of flippancy, explored profound truths about life. **Tremendous Trifles** (1909), **A Shilling for My Thoughts** (1916), **The Uses of Diversity** (1920), **Generally Speaking** (1928), **Come to Think of It** (1930) - these are some of the works which reveal Chesterton’s great gifts as an essayist - a fertile imagination, a vivid style, an unquenchable interest in the world - as well as

his vast capacity for perceiving the meaning of objects and attitudes now veiled by familiarity.

Had Chesterton lived to witness man's exploration of outer space, I fancy he might have observed that the chief reason for travelling to the moon should be to discover the earth. The remark would have been typically Chestertonian, for it was one of the cardinal principles of his thought that the best way to appreciate anything familiar in life is to discover it again; that one can grow so inured to something that its essential worth is lost to view, and that only by an immense jolt of the imagination can one again see it as it really is.

Chesterton had, as Ronald Knox noted in the panegyric at his Requiem Mass, "the artist's eye which could suddenly see in some quite familiar object a new value; he had the poet's intuition which could suddenly detect, in the tritest of phrases, a wealth of new meanings and of possibilities".¹⁰ The wonders of the world had unaccountably been numbered at seven: Chesterton reckoned them unlimited.

"Nearly all the best and most precious things in the universe you can get for a halfpenny. I make an exception, of course, of the sun, the moon, the earth, people, stars, thunderstorms, and such trifles. You can get them for nothing."¹¹

When Samuel Johnson remarked that men more frequently require to be reminded than informed, he enunciated a truth which, over two centuries later, Chesterton was to demonstrate constantly. The most salient quality of his writing is this gift for renewing our vision of the realities and values which familiarity has betrayed us into neglecting.

In **The Napoleon of Notting Hill** (1904), the first of eleven novels and books of short stories - such as **The Man Who Was Thursday** (1908), **The Flying Inn** (1914), and **The Return of Don Quixote** (1927) - Chesterton describes how, in a burst of imaginative vision, one of his characters saw two friends, whom he found habitually dull, in a new and exciting light. There is a law, comments Chesterton, 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.

Chesterton's Worldview

The Nature of wonder

In Chesterton's experience, the world abounded in surprises. "A man," he averred, "may very well be exasperated with London, as he may be with the universe; but in both cases he has no business to be bored with it."¹²

Miracles surround us - the miracle of sequence, as the novelist Bruce Marshall once observed, being even more marvellous than the miracle of the interruption of the same sequence.¹³ "From the beginning," Chesterton once told a reporter, "I think I was staggered by the stupendous marvel of existence - by the miracle of sunlight coming through a window, by the miracle of people walking on legs through the streets, by the miracle of people talking to each other."¹⁴

The impression of monotony in life is a false impression - as destructive of the natural as of the supernatural order.

"Of one thing I am certain," Chesterton wrote early in his journalistic career, "that the age needs, first and foremost, to be startled; to be taught the nature of wonder."¹⁵ It is almost a statement of his life's work. When he went to America in 1919 on the first of his two visits, he looked upon the lights of Broadway flashing out their message that man does indeed live by bread alone. "What a

glorious garden of wonders this would be,” he mused, “to any one who was lucky enough to be unable to read.”¹⁶

This capacity to see what is too plain to be seen, to grasp the wonder of life despite the numbing influence of everyday experience, characterized Chesterton’s whole mental outlook and inspired much of his writing.

Love of ordinary people

In the first place, it gave him an affinity with everyday life and the world of ordinary people. He did not see the common man as leading a life of irredeemable boredom and futility. On the contrary, he thought he had an indispensable part to play and a huge responsibility to bear, both in the family and in the society at large, and that the extravagant recognition accorded the expert in our time - in particular in fields beyond the expert’s competence - threatened the stability and happiness of human society.

In **The Twelve Men**, a famous essay on his experience as a juror, Chesterton applauded the wisdom of asking ordinary people to pass judgment on their fellow human beings.

“Our civilization has decided, and very justly decided, that determining the guilt or innocence of men is a thing too important to be trusted to trained men. It wishes for light upon that awful

matter, it asks men who know no more law than I know, but who can feel the things that I felt in the jury box. When it wants a library catalogued, or the solar system discovered, or any trifle of that kind, it uses up its specialists. But when it wishes anything done which is really serious, it collects twelve of the ordinary men standing round. The same thing was done, if I remember right, by the Founder of Christianity.”¹⁷

No one understood the common man better than Chesterton; no one had a deeper appreciation of his loves and hungers. All his life he fought, through his writings, for the freedom and dignity, the normal loyalties and elementary rights of the ordinary person. Unlike many revolutionaries and reformers, Chesterton understood the people about whom he talked and for whom he professed to speak; his popular sympathies, as he wrote of his brother, Cecil, could really survive any intimacy with the populace.¹⁸

When Maisie Ward, founder with her Australian husband, Frank Sheed, of the publishing house of Sheed and Ward, produced a sequel to her biography of Chesterton,¹⁹ it was filled with memories of the man, cherished not only by the great but also by the ordinary people who had been his friends - the secretaries who had worked for him, the barbers who had shaved him,

the taximen who had transported him. In one essay he defined poets as “those who rise above the people by understanding them”.²⁰ Only in this way could true leadership develop; only on this basis could genuine hope flourish.

Cherishing man, not superman

Many prophets in Chesterton’s day based their social solutions upon despair of man - a tendency which has persisted to our own time, when proposals for population control and environmental conservation tend to betray an anti-human mentality, reflecting a loss of hope in man and in man’s capacity to co-operate with God in handling life’s problems.²¹

Chesterton, however, did not despair of man, and this was the fundamental ground of his disagreement with his lifelong friend and antagonist, George Bernard Shaw. Shaw’s philosophy, in Chesterton’s view, was that of a man utterly detached from human proceedings, unable to enter into the feelings and motives of ordinary people in spite of a genuine concern and zeal for their welfare. Shaw seemed to criticize human nature as if he himself did not possess it. His hope for an exceptional being who would never be cruel or nasty or narrow-minded, who would not give rise to disillusionment, was itself based on despair. “Hope for the superman,” Chesterton declared, “is another name for despair of man”.²²

In contrast, Chesterton was impelled by a buoyant sense of hope. At first, this was a natural rather than a supernatural hope; a feeling of cosmic optimism, not an outlook rooted in divine faith and expressed in charity. At this stage Chesterton harboured a profound love of creation, a fundamental loyalty to life. Love and loyalty in turn excited gratitude, and to Chesterton the test of all happiness was gratitude.

“Children are grateful when Santa Claus puts in their stockings gifts of toys or sweets. Could I not be grateful to Santa Claus when he put in my stockings the gift of two miraculous legs? We thank people for birthday presents of cigars and slippers. Can I thank no one for the birthday present of birth?”²³

Only a man of deeply religious instincts could conceivably profess such an attitude. Chesterton was unquestionably such a man, but the faith which develops and fulfils those instincts had almost deserted him in adolescence. “I was a pagan,” he confessed, “at the age of twelve, and a complete agnostic by the age of sixteen.”²⁴ Even during this period, however, it was his sense of wonder, and his consequent sense of loyalty and gratitude, which sustained him. “I hung on to religion,” he recalled, “by one thin thread of thanks.”²⁵

At the same time, Chesterton was conscious that this outlook could easily produce a false optimism. The

optimism of the world, he came to realise, is false, because it is always trying to prove that we fit into the world. Christian optimism, on the other hand, is based on the fact that we do *not* fit into the world; that our ultimate destiny lies elsewhere; and that we can feel homesick - even when we are at home. As C. S. Lewis, who was vitally influenced by Chesterton, once observed: "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."²⁶

Orthodoxy and the excitement of truth

Thus for Chesterton, the central challenge was to evolve a view of life which combined this sense of strangeness in the world with a sense of loyalty to it. The trap of judging and valuing the world in its own terms and by its own standards had to be avoided, for Chesterton knew that such a course would imprison him in a self-contained universe amid a self-centred humanity, and this - the essential character of a secularized culture closed to spiritual influence - could never satisfy the yearnings of the human spirit. One must, he realised, somehow find a way of loving the world without trusting it; loving the world without becoming worldly. It was in Christianity that he found the solution, and in 1908 he outlined his intellectual and spiritual odyssey in what is indisputably one of his greatest books, **Orthodoxy**.

It is remarkable that even Chesterton should have been able to produce such a work at the age of thirty-five; but it is supremely characteristic of his other-worldliness that he sold the rights of the book for £100 - an action so recklessly unbusinesslike that it shocked, not for the last time, the astute commercial instincts of Bernard Shaw.

A century has now passed since **Orthodoxy** first appeared, yet it remains an extraordinarily striking work. For several decades after its publication, it registered a profound impact, and it is astonishing how many Catholics have acknowledged its influence on their conversion. In the 1960s, the distinguished British diplomat, Sir Alec Randall, recalled that the book proved with him, “as I know it did with many others,” an important stage in his progress to the Catholic Church.²⁷ More recently, the young American writer Dawn Eden attributes her conversion to reading **The Man Who Was Thursday** and **Orthodoxy**, and finding in Chesterton a way out of the crevasse of sexual permissiveness into which the culture of the 1960s had plunged her.²⁸

Orthodoxy presented a new and excitingly adventurous outline of Christian truth. No longer was it credible for the sceptic to presume, as he had done for so long, that the historic Faith was humdrum and debilitating. Chesterton had shown it to be a “thrilling romance”, and in one chapter, “The Paradoxes of

Christianity”, he provided a rousing depiction of its progress through history.

“The orthodox Church never took the tame course or accepted the conventions; the orthodox Church was never respectable. It would have been easier to have accepted the earthly power of the Arians. It would have been easy, in the Calvinistic seventeenth century, to fall into the bottomless pit of predestination. It is easy to be a madman: it is easy to be a heretic. It is always easy to let the age have its head; the difficult thing is to keep one’s own. It is always easy to be a modernist; as it is easy to be a snob. To have fallen into any of those open traps of error and exaggeration which fashion after fashion and sect after sect set along the historic path of Christendom – that would indeed have been simple. It is always simple to fall; there are an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands. To have fallen into any one of the fads from Gnosticism to Christian Science would indeed have been obvious and tame. But to have avoided them all has been one whirling adventure; and in my vision the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect.”²⁹

The man who at one time trained to be an artist had manifestly found his forte: he was an artist in words.

Heresy and the distortion of truth

Orthodoxy appeared three years after a book to which it was a counterpart - **Heretics** (1905). In that work Chesterton examined, and found wanting, the philosophies of certain notable contemporaries, such as Rudyard Kipling, H. G. Wells and Bernard Shaw. He regarded them all as aspiring prophets who had lapsed into heresy - by emphasizing one aspect of truth and ignoring others. Indeed, this is how, in Chesterton's judgment, such men came to be regarded as prophets. It was thought that each had discovered a new and breathtaking idea: whereas, in fact, what was new was not the idea, but only the *isolation* of the idea. It had been dragged from its context and magnified, made to appear the whole truth, but with the catastrophic result that the balance and unity of truth were disturbed, and the elements of truth were steadily and successively denied, leading to a distortion of truth itself. Thus, an exclusive concentration on the mercy of God can lead to a neglect of His justice; or the denial of man as an image of God, of a human nature which is fixed and inherited from God, leads inexorably to the denial of human life itself - in the forms of abortion, sterilization, euthanasia, and other evils.

Chesterton admitted that he, on his part, had been tempted to be a popular kind of prophet. "I did try," he declared, "to found a heresy of my own; and when I had put the last touches to it, I discovered that it was orthodoxy."³⁰ The same unnerving discovery was made by Chesterton's contemporary and friend, the artist, Eric Gill (1882-1940), who devised his own religion and then found that the Catholic Church was the exact embodiment of it. In later life, Chesterton realised that, "in becoming more and more solidly certain of such a thing as a truth, one loses the temptation to exaggerate it as a challenge".³¹ He realised, further, that the heretic is not, as is commonly thought, a man who loves truth too much; no man can love truth too much. The heretic is a man who loves his truth more than truth itself. He prefers the half-truth that he has found to the whole truth which humanity has found.³² In consequence, a heresy always impressed Chesterton as a restriction, not a liberation; a lopping off of a part of the truth - and therefore, ultimately, a loss of liberty. For it is only the truth which can make us free.

Christian Hope

The fall of man and Christian hope

Among the truths which Christianity taught and had transmitted, the doctrine of the Fall of Man was strongly appealing to Chesterton's mind. Although unfashionable in contemporary culture, the notion that the human race is, in Newman's words, "implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity," which renders it "out of joint with the purposes of its Creator,"³³ is, as Chesterton saw it, the only encouraging view of life. "It holds," as he maintained in perhaps his greatest book of apologetic essays, **The Thing** (1929), ". . . that we have misused a good world, and not merely been entrapped into a bad one. It refers evil back to the wrong use of the will, and thus declares that it can eventually be righted by the right use of the will. Every other creed except that one is some form of surrender to fate."³⁴

Chesterton dwelt frequently upon the Fall of Man, for he saw the doctrine as being indispensable to a true grasp of human experience, and central to an understanding of Christian hope. Nowhere was his brilliance as a Christian apologist more singularly evident than in his unfolding of the concept of original sin. We speak, he once noted, of a manly man, but not of a whaley whale.

“If you wanted to dissuade a man from drinking his tenth whisky, you would slap him on the back and say, ‘Be a man.’ No one who wished to dissuade a crocodile from eating his tenth explorer would slap it on the back and say, ‘Be a crocodile.’ For we have no notion of a perfect crocodile; no allegory of a whale expelled from his whaley Eden.”³⁵

Thus, Chesterton perceived that God’s gift of life was good, but that man had violated the conditions of the gift. The salient lesson of the fairy tales, which Chesterton imbibed as a child, had become a central feature of his intellectual outlook as an adult.

“God had written, not so much a poem, but rather a play; a play he had planned as perfect, but which had necessarily been left to human actors and stage-managers, who had since made a great mess of it.”³⁶

Many years later, Chesterton was to write a play on this very theme. **The Surprise**, written around 1930 but not published until 1952, presented a dramatic action in which, at the outset, the author’s plot was exactly followed by the characters, who were played first by puppets, so that his intention was perfectly fulfilled. In the Second Act, however, the characters are played by living men and women who, tempted to depart from the plot, consequently make havoc of the play.

The author is goaded beyond endurance. “What do you think you are doing with my play?” he cries out from the wings. “Drop it! Stop! I am coming down.”³⁷ Here was Chesterton’s depiction of the central Christian paradox - the author invading the stage, the creator visiting his people to reveal his purposes. Here was an imaginative unfolding of the central message of **Orthodoxy**.

Orthodoxy had been written to show what the modern prophets were heretics from. In an essay published only a year before he died, Chesterton explained his use of the word. He defined orthodoxy as “that primary principle, or right reason in things, by which they can be judged independently of new fads or of old prejudices”.³⁸ The orthodox truth may be new or it may be old, but it is not true for either of these reasons. The Christian, continued Chesterton, “is not intrinsically intolerant of things that are new and revolutionary, being well aware that he was once new and revolutionary himself”. Yet on the other hand, “even when there is a truth in tradition, we must still distinguish between the tradition and the truth”.³⁹

Objective truth

The philosophy which Chesterton embraced was the traditional Christian faith; but he did not embrace it because it was traditional, he embraced it because it was true.

For our time, perhaps the most pertinent quality of **Orthodoxy** is its unswervingly objective approach to truth. Though Chesterton undoubtedly responded to his own deeply felt need for an explanation of life, he did not conduct his search along those lines. He did not derive his philosophy from his own inner experience, as if this were an infallible response to objective reality; above all did he avoid being guided uncritically by what Sir Arnold Lunn called an “fif”, a “funny internal feeling”, which Lunn criticised as the most common basis for contemporary thought and behaviour.⁴⁰ Chesterton grounded his thought in experience outside himself, relating it to circumstances and standards that are universally recognizable. Hence, his philosophy was not a personal philosophy in the sense that it was unique to him and incommunicable. “God and humanity made it,” he said, “and it made me”.⁴¹

Few writers in the past century have argued more persuasively for an objective approach to philosophic truth. Pride he once defined as “the falsification of fact by the introduction of self.” In order to learn, he claimed, a man must “subtract *himself* from the study of any solid and objective thing”.⁴² Chesterton remained perpetually alive to the dangers of subjectivism. “A cosmic philosophy,” he pointed out, “is not constructed to fit a man; a cosmic philosophy is constructed to fit a cosmos. A man can no more possess a private religion than he can possess a private sun and moon.”⁴³

In answer to those who were prone to obscure the objective difference between right and wrong, Chesterton asked:

“Supposing there is no difference between good and bad, or between false and true, what is the difference between up and down?”⁴⁴

Conversion to Catholicism

It is a fact sufficiently remarkable that Chesterton did not enter the Catholic Church until 1922. The explanation for the delay, in so far as the mystery of faith is open to human understanding, seems to have been more personal than intellectual. Scarcely any mental obstacles remained in his path to Rome; even the matter of spiritual authority, and the Church as the earthly repository of that authority - an issue over which many potential converts have agonized - did not present difficulties. To Chesterton it was perfectly reasonable that the Church which Christ had founded should speak with the same authority as Christ Himself did when on earth.

Yet in the final analysis, conversion is a matter of grace rather than reason, a conclusion of the will and not merely a conclusion of the mind; and Chesterton, whose mind was so unimaginably swift, was fairly slow to act. Moreover, in this momentous decision, he was inhibited further by the fact that his beloved wife, Frances, could

not accompany him. Married in 1901, the Chestertons were intensely devoted to each other, and it was Frances, a dedicated Anglican, who helped to revive Chesterton's interest in religion; just as it was Our Lady who helped him in his subsequent conversion to Catholicism. Frances herself was received into the Catholic Church in 1926, four years after her husband.

To Chesterton, conversion was truly a rebirth, and the beautiful sonnet which he wrote on the occasion expressed this reality:

“The sages have a hundred maps to give
That trace their crawling cosmos like a tree,
They rattle reason out through many a sieve
That stores the sand and lets the gold go free:
And all these things are less than dust to me
Because my name is Lazarus and I live.”⁴⁵

Four years were to elapse before Chesterton published an account of his conversion. **The Catholic Church and Conversion** is a persuasive piece of apologetics, in which the author insists that he could justify the whole of Catholic theology, provided that he is allowed to use the two ideas which the Church is popularly presumed to forbid: reason and liberty. In the face of the fundamental doubts of our time, Chesterton affirmed that the Catholic “alone will have freedom, that he alone will have will, because he alone will believe in free will; that he alone

will have reason, since ultimate doubt denies reason as well as authority; that he alone will truly act, because action is performed to an end”.⁴⁶ Increasingly did Chesterton recognize that “there is one Church exactly as there is one universe; and no wise man will wander about looking for another.”⁴⁷

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