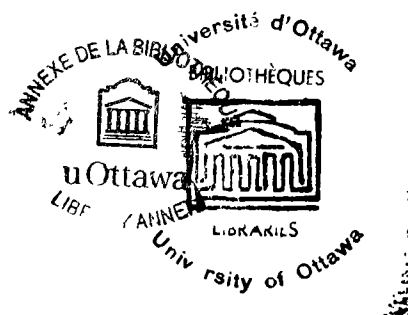


GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON'S
APPROACHES TO CRITICISM

by Harold M. Petitpas

Thesis presented to the Faculty of Arts
of the University of Ottawa through the
Department of English as partial fulfill-
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of Doctor of Philosophy.



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CURRICULUM STUDIORUM

Harold Mederic Petitpas was born in St. John, New Brunswick on February 16, 1924.

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INTRODUCTION

A negative disadvantage attaches to almost any man who has a positive character or, what commonly goes with it and is even more important, positive convictions. A literary man, for instance, who has strong likes or dislikes, in the style of Dr. Johnson or Cobbett or Coventry Patmore, becomes so much of a proverb or a joke that nobody can believe there is anything new to be learned about him. Anything new that he does say is coloured, or rather discoloured, either by what people know he has said or by what people think he would say.¹

At the very outset of his research, a thesis writer on G.K. Chesterton feels constrained to answer an objection which he suspects his readers may entertain: Is not your work one of supererogation, since the critics have already been most generous in the attention they have lavished on Chesterton's works? As the present dissertation on Chesterton develops, it is to be hoped that such an objection will lose whatever force it may seem to have.

Before stating the purpose of this research, it would be instructive to review what the critics have said to this date about the Chestertonian achievement. Undoubtedly, criticism has paid its recognition to the profundity of Chesterton's thought. The philosopher Gilson would even describe him as "one of the deepest thinkers who ever lived."² Another critic finds in Chesterton "that mystical insight which pierces through the outward shows of things to the heart

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Avowals and Denials, p. 94.

²

Quoted in M. Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 620.

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of reality."¹ Furthermore, it is the contention of Monsignor Knox that "all our generation has grown up under Chesterton's influence so completely that we do not even know when we are thinking Chesterton."²

The critics have also recognized the contribution that Chesterton made to the art of controversy. Mr. Maynard points out that Chesterton "had invented a new method of controversy that was too amusing to be left unread."³ Another critic extols his mastery of the artistry of argument.⁴ F. Lea would explain Chesterton's success as a controversialist on the basis of his sympathetic understanding of the position of his antagonists.⁵

As for Chesterton's style of writing, the critics were aware that "an entirely new style had come into English literature."⁶ H. Kenner discovers in Chesterton "an almost mystical veneration" for his artistic medium.⁷ Proceeding further, Mr. Kenner explains Chesterton's approach to language in terms of his philosophical conceptions. In the following

¹ H. Waring, "G.K.C.: Prince of Essayists," The Fortnightly, Volume 148, November, 1937, p. 590.

² Quoted in M. Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 524.

³ T. Maynard, "G.K.C.", The Catholic World, Volume 143, August, 1936, p. 522.

⁴ H. Waring, op. cit., p. 592.

⁵ Quoted in D. Atwater, ed., Modern Christian Revolutionaries, p. 98.

⁶ T. Maynard, op. cit., p. 524.

⁷ H. Kenner, Paradox in Chesterton, p. 53.

passage, Kenner views Chesterton's use of language in terms of his philosophical vision:

One who saw the world as a vast inter-reflecting organism saw language implicated in that reality along with every other ingredient. When Chesterton writes, in short, the very words he uses are part of the vision he exploits; his facility in word and image derives from a real analogical relation, of which he was keenly aware, between language and the other parts of reality. To tax him with verbalism is to deny the existence of analogy, to deny that anything is like any other thing, to deny therefore that connecting by thinking has any metaphysical meaning; all that. It is rank nominalism.¹

Needless to say, criticism has devoted its attention to Chesterton as a creative artist, whether it be as poet or novelist. As a poet, Chesterton has been praised for having a natural gift of rhythm,² for combining sincerity with rhetoric,³ and for having an alert imagination, responsive emotions, and vital convictions in his poetry.⁴ It is Kenner's view that Chesterton's analogical vision equipped him for philosophical work, not for poetry.⁵ West believes there is more impulse in Chesterton's poetry than finish.⁶

¹

H. Kenner, Paradox in Chesterton, p. 115.

²

J. West, G.K. Chesterton, A Critical Study, p. 106.

³

R. Roberts, op. cit., p. 88.

⁴

J. Reilly, "Chesterton as Poet" The Catholic World, Volume 142, December, 1935, p. 267.

⁵

H. Kenner, op. cit., p. 107.

⁶

J. West, op. cit., p. 106.

Commentators on Chesterton have recognized his distinctive contributions in the fictional genres. His Allegorical Romances have been described as "stories destitute of lovers, wherein ideas were so excitingly dramatized that we forgot or did not mind that the characters were puppets."¹ The original employment to which Chesterton put the detective story has been likewise acknowledged: "detection in which the mind of a man means more than his footprint or cigar ash, even to the detective."²

As literary critic, Chesterton's merits and demerits have been proclaimed. He has been praised for "enlarging our powers of vision",³ for having a "wonderful intuitive gift of feeling for the right metaphor, for the material object that best symbolizes an impression"⁴ and for his sense of historical perspective.⁵ On the other hand, his criticism has been censured for its doctrinal approach,⁶ for its concern with philosophizing rather than criticizing,⁷ and for its emphasis on

¹ P. Constable, "The Fairy Tales of Mr. Chesterton", The New Republic, Volume 25, January 26, 1921, p. 253.

² M. Ward, op. cit. p. 277.

³ Ibid., p. 55.

⁴ J. West, op. cit., p. 85.

⁵ R. Roberts, op. cit., p. 90.

⁶ M. Evans, G.K. Chesterton, p. ix.

⁷ G.K. Chesterton, A Criticism, p. 75.

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on truth rather than on beauty.¹

In such ways as these have the literary critics dealt with Chesterton's achievement. The way has now been prepared to justify the re-evaluation of Chesterton's thought that will be made in this dissertation. The present work will involve a study of the recurring principles which seem to have guided Chesterton in his approaches to art and literature. It will be shown that there are four such principles, which may be called those of correspondence, transcendence, limitation and perspective. Furthermore, it will be established that these principles have their origin in Chesterton's general philosophical outlook. In short, this dissertation will be in what may be called the area of philosophical rather than practical criticism. In other words, the primary interest will be in Chesterton's views on the theoretical support, justification and implications of art and literature.

Whenever possible, throughout this study, Chesterton will be allowed to speak in propria persona. In fact, in no other way could full justice be done to his views. As to the bibliography, it is selective rather than exhaustive.

1

O. Firkins, "G.K. Chesterton", The Forum, Volume 48, November, 1912, p. 600.

CHAPTER I

APPROACHES TO REALITY

Personally, I am all for propaganda; and a great deal of what I write is deliberately propagandist. But even when it is not the least propagandist it will probably be full of the implications of my own religion; because that is what is meant by having a religion.¹

1. A philosophical prelude

Historians are generally agreed that the Renaissance and the Protestant Revolution, with their challenge to the hierarchical unity of medieval thought, ushered in what is known as the "Modern World". In the post-Renaissance centuries, as a result of the disruption of this medieval synthesis, the academic categories, have, in their turn, sought divorce from any religious or philosophical relationships. In nineteenth-century England, one of the end-products of the disintegration of medieval thought is witnessed in the romantic "Art for Art's Sake" movement. Among the adherents of this view, by a strange inversion, life was subordinated to art, and was to be judged solely by its artistic excellence.

The best introduction to G.K. Chesterton's philosophy of art is to state that he was, through principle, opposed to

¹

G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 119.

the nineteenth century's "Art for Art's Sake" claims.

I am one of those people who believe that you've got to be dominated by your moral slant. I'm no art for art's sake man. I am quite incapable of talking or writing about Dutch gardens or the game of chess, but if I did, I have no doubt that what I would say or write about them would be colored by my view of the cosmos.¹

As contrasted with the "Art for Art's Sake" view, it may be admitted that Chesterton's conception of the Fine Arts had a medieval emphasis in that he saw them in intimate relationships with man's nature and the ultimate nature of things. Chesterton viewed art thus, not because he was blind to the fact the imagination² and the beautiful³ obeyed laws of their own inscrutable character, but because he was invariably seeing all created beings and their operations in terms of their relative positions in the order of reality.

To do justice to Chesterton's critical insights, it is absolutely essential to understand that his reflections on problems artistic draw their life sustenance from his cosmic philosophy. By a certain connaturality, G.K.C. saw everything implicated in the truths of ultimate Nature as

¹

G.K. Chesterton, quoted in S. Kunitz and H. Haycraft, Twentieth Century Authors, p. 276.

²

G.K. Chesterton, The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton, p. 294.

³

G.K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 96.
See also G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 37.

revealed by philosophy and religion.

Philosophy is either eternal or it is not philosophy. "This is my opinion, but I may be wrong," is entirely irrational. If I say that it may be wrong I say that it is not my opinion. The modern habit of saying "Every man has a different philosophy; this is my philosophy and it suits me"--the habit of saying this is mere weak mindedness. A cosmic philosophy is not constructed to fit a man; a cosmic philosophy is constructed to fit a cosmos.¹

This indictment applies to romantic philosophies which make man the ultimate measure of all things. In praising Aquinas for his avid "acceptance of things",² Chesterton recognizes a mind essentially akin to his own: "All my mental doors open outwards into a world I have not made. My last door of liberty opens upon a world of sun and solid things."³ It was this stress on the objective rather than on the subjective world which led Chesterton to regard all extreme forms of Impressionism as heretical. And it is most significant to observe that Chesterton discovers a necessary connection between the existence of this objective world and artistic creation. "It is the sacred stubbornness of things, their mystery and their suggestive limits, their shape and special character, which makes all artistic thrift and thought."⁴ It pleases G.K.C.

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "The Book of Job", Putnam's Monthly, Volume 2, June, 1907, p. 354.

² G.K. Chesterton, St. Thomas Aquinas, p. 108.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Coloured Lands, p. 160.

⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

APPROACHES TO REALITY

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to know that religion also confirms this philosophic glorification of the objective world.

Christianity does appeal to a sole truth outside itself; to something which is in that sense external as well as eternal. It does declare that things are really there; or in other words that things are really things. In this Christianity is at one with common sense; but all religious history shows that this common sense perishes except where there is Christianity to preserve it.¹

This passage contains a theme which will recur in Chesterton's thought: that all academic disciplines, that all human pursuits are best nourished at the breasts of the Christian Religion: that the supernatural order is really the fulfilment of the natural.

With Chesterton, it must be repeated, philosophy is not an esoteric thing, ordained to dwell in ivory towers; rather it is the presiding chaperon in the human courtship with the ever elusive maiden Truth. "Philosophy is merely thought that has been thought out."² And the more complex the problem being discussed, the more necessary it is to begin with the "right first principle."³ In other words, in spite of the protestations of the practical critic, to discuss anything, whether it be the Fine Arts or Economics, means to

¹

G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 155.

²

G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 176.

³

G.K. Chesterton, The Well and the Shallows, p. 224.

philosophize; it means to oversee them.

This idea of going back to the beginning and considering the end, of thinking of the purpose of anything as a whole, seems to these people to be merely metaphysical and mystical, though it is obviously the only thing that is really material and practical.¹

Chesterton is not speaking enigmatically when he says "To leave out theoretical things is to be insanely impractical, even for a practical man"² and when he suggests that

The only right way of telling a story is to begin at the beginning--the beginning of the world. Therefore all books have to begin in the wrong way, for the sake of brevity.³

In the Chestertonian Universe, man is confronted with two choices.

Men have always one or two things: either a complete and conscious philosophy or the unconscious acceptance of the broken bits of some incomplete and shattered and often discredited philosophy.⁴

With Chesterton the truth was centripetal. It is not surprising, therefore, that for a life-time, he waged a relentless battle against all "eccentrics", whether they be fad-dists, cultists of the contemporary, or heretics.

An imbecile habit has arisen in modern controversy of saying such and such a creed can be held in one age but cannot be held in another. Some dogma, we are told,

1

G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 176.

2

G.K. Chesterton, Avowals and Denials, p. 21.

3

G.K. Chesterton, William Blake, pp. 1-2.

4

G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 173.

was credible in the twelfth century, but is not credible in the twentieth. You might as well say that a certain philosophy can be believed on Mondays, but cannot be believed on Tuesdays.¹

Further snatches of G.K.C.'s thought will serve to re-emphasize the primordial role he assigns to philosophy as an indispensable guide to the real world: for him, any topic from pork to pyrotechnics illustrates the truth of the only true philosophy;² the true thinker is concerned with what ought to be; permanence is the test of all greatness;⁴ and to criticize means to judge within a framework.⁵

At this juncture, it would appear propitious to ask: What else but a philosophy can explain the truly remarkable consistency of an author's thought, who was engaged in voluminous writings over a period of about thirty-seven years? Certainly, Kenner's solution to this problem has much to recommend it.

When later in life he came to grips with systematic philosophy, he was able to produce without apparent effort a profound study of St. Thomas Aquinas because St. Thomas

1

G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 135.

2

G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 76.

3

G.K. Chesterton, What's Wrong with the World, p. 40.

4

G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 148.

5

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 240.

expounded in an orderly and systematic fashion what Gilbert Chesterton had been seeing and saying all his life.¹

Near the end of his career, reminiscing on his literary output, Chesterton was gratified to detect such a consistency in his writings.

For some of them were written long ago, when some of my views, or at least the final deductions from my views, were not fully formulated, and they may contain elements, superficial in every sense, which would probably not be so presented now. On the whole, however, whenever I happen to come across one of these fortunately forgotten fragments from my stratified past, I may indeed shudder at their crudity of expression, but I am rather surprised to see how little my fundamental convictions have changed. For my final conviction, which was also a conversion, does not come to destroy but to fulfil.²

That Chesterton regarded philosophy as a necessary "overseer" in the conduct of any intellectual examination has been made emphatically clear. Now, it but remains to determine which of the philosophic principles that Chesterton used in his approaches to reality will best reveal the ways he most typically approached an artistic document. In making such a selection, it must be readily admitted that there is the omnipresent danger of subdividing into artificially rigid categories matter in an author's thought that is essentially

¹ H. Kenner, Paradox in Chesterton, pp. 5-6.

² G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p.vii

homogeneous. On the other hand, the marvellously integrated quality of Chesterton's thought which such a selection will reveal makes the risk an inviting one.

In his approaches to reality and to art, Chesterton employed, whether he was aware of them or not, four key principles which may be identified as follows: the principle of correspondence; the principle of transcendence; the principle of limitation; and the principle of perspective. In the remainder of the chapter, how Chesterton employed these principles will be considered.

2. The principle of correspondence

With the traditional "Medieval Mind", that saw the rich and manifold significance of the created world, Chesterton's outlook was sympathetically attuned. For him, life was essentially allegorical and the universe of created things inextricably bound together. Such was his thought that he immediately related everything upon which he reflected with ultimate reality as revealed by religion and philosophy. In the succeeding chapters, how he related art and literature to such ultimate considerations will be revealed. For the present, however, attention will be focussed on those aspects of G.K.C.'s religious and philosophical thought that are particularly pertinent to an understanding of how he regularly approached reality.

Needless to say, in this examination of Chesterton's religious views, his adroit defence of Orthodoxy will not be of immediate concern. Attention will be exclusively focussed on those aspects of religion that Chesterton would regard as theoretically justifying and practically enriching all creative human activity. To those who would regard religion as being of peripheral value in considering such creative activities of man, Chesterton's answer would be uncompromising: "Religion is the essence of ultimate reality, of whatever meaning a man finds in his own existence or the existence of anything else."¹ Religion by its very nature encourages creativity.

The organic thing called religion has in fact the organs that take hold of life. It can feed where the fastidious doubter finds no food; it can reproduce where the solitary sceptic boasts of being barren.²

In fact, Chesterton emphasizes that the modern world with its irreligion deprives mankind of the very qualities that make artistic activity psychologically more possible.³ In his test of a true religion, Chesterton, whether he was aware of it or not, allies religion with the function of art. Religion

...is always trying to make men feel truths as facts; always trying to make abstract things as plain and solid as concrete things; always trying to make men, not merely admit the truth, but see, smell, handle, hear, and devour the truth.⁴

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Come to Think of It, p. 72.

² G.K. Chesterton, The Well and the Shallows, p.82.

³ G.K. Chesterton, "Are the Artists Going Mad?", The Century, Volume 105, December, 1922, p. 278.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Alarms and Discursions, p. 59.

In his conception of the Christian sacramental system, G.K.C. again suggests an affinity between religion and art.

All unsophisticated human beings instinctively accept the sacramental principle that the particular thing is closest to the general, the tangible closest to the spiritual.¹

Of Aristotle who anticipated the sacramental system, Chesterton speaks words of praise.²

Chesterton was particularly conscious of the ways that the Christian Religion, as contrasted to the Pagan and others, affected human creative activities. Speaking of Virgil's world, Chesterton says: "His world might be sad; but it was the largest world one could live in before the coming of Christianity."³ This is a theme that recurs in Chesterton -- that a man's mind is broadened in his acceptance of the true religion. "Men will not believe because they will not broaden their minds. As a matter of individual belief, I should of course express it by saying that they are not sufficiently catholic to be Catholic."⁴ It is clear that with Chesterton what a man believes influences his artistic vision. But it is not only the artistic vision that Christianity, as contrasted to non-Christian religions, broadens; but also

1

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 69.

2

G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 142.

3

G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 164.

4

G.K. Chesterton, St. Francis of Assisi, p. 33.

it is in the Christian Faith that the very creative faculties upon which art depends derive their most formidable defence.

...the Faith gives a man back his body and his soul and his reason and his will and his very life. It would be far truer to say that the man who has received it receives all the old human functions which all the other philosophies are already taking away. It would be nearer to reality to say that he 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.¹

The primordial role which Chesterton assigns to religious beliefs is strikingly revealed in his censure of Macaulay and his age for having "never thought of a creed being the creative soul of a society, giving it an art and culture."²

What Theology says about the Divine Creator establishes another correspondence between religion and art. In his quarrel with all monistic and pantheistic thinkers, Chesterton was to maintain that the senses of wonder, of curiosity, of adventure, are nourished by the Christian belief in the transcendence of a Personal God.³ In fact, Chesterton would regard pantheism as utterly opposed to the assumption upon which all art thrives--the inexhaustible significance of the universe. The nature of human creative activity is

¹
G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 20.

²
G.K. Chesterton, Come to Think of It, p. 190.

³
G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 250.

understood only insofar as it is distinct from the Divine:
 "while the joy of God is unlimited creation, the special joy
 of man is limited creation, the combination of creation with
 limits."¹ In other words, man's creative activities confirm
 his finiteness.

Of course, it is not easy to point to anything that
 is entirely creative. In ultimate philosophy, as in ul-
 timate theology, men are not capable of creation, but
 only of combination.²

It may be added here that this statement on the limitations
 of human creative activity could serve as a revealing comment-
 ary on some of the pretentious claims of modern art.

It was not only on this problem of the creative act
 that Chesterton focussed his attention. His wonderment arose
 spontaneously, as it were, in considering per se any created
 object.

I cannot for the life of me see that a sea-serpent is
 any more mystical than a sea-snail. In one sense they
 are all mystical, since the mystery of the Creation is
 in all His works.³

Man will remove all mystery from created objects when he
 satisfactorily explicates the formula: To create out of noth-
 ing: "For God is by its nature a name of mystery, and nobody

1

G.K. Chesterton, What's Wrong with the World, p. 57.

2

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 91.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Avowals and Denials, p. 2.

See also: G.K. Chesterton "A Note on Rousseau" G.K.'s Weekly
 Volume 12, October 25, 1930, p. 103.

ever supposed that man could imagine how a world was created any more than he could create one."¹ With the poet, Chesterton would agree that there is, in this universe, more than is dreamed of in any philosophy.

Chesterton's thinking is literally saturated with this conception of the universe as something essentially mysterious.

No pure mystic ever loved mere mystery. The mystic does not bring doubts or riddles; the doubts and riddles exist already. We all feel the riddle of the earth without anyone to point it out. The mystery of life is the plainest part of it.... Whatever else we have grown accustomed to, we have grown accustomed to the unaccountable.²

The paradox which critics regard as so obstrusive in G.K.C.'s writing is but an artistic way of suggesting the very nature of things.

An element of paradox runs through the whole of existence itself. It begins in the realm of ultimate physics and metaphysics, in the two facts that we cannot imagine a space that is infinite, and that we cannot imagine a space that is finite.³

The sense of wonder in Chesterton has, it may be said, metaphysical justification.

It would be erroneous to infer from this mystical

¹

G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p.3.

²

G.K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 131.

³

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 46.

emphasis in Chesterton's outlook that he denied that the human intellectual faculties could extract meaning from the created world. That G.K.C. did not regard mysticism and rationalism as irreconcilable is implied in his evaluation of Blake's thought.¹ Furthermore, as Kenner points out, Chesterton's instinct for being had as an ultimate corollary that everything is meaningful because "being is organic and ultimately one."² In fact, his quarrel with materialism arose out of this conviction that the universe was a meaningful one.

It is obvious that a materialist is always a mystic. It is equally true that he is often a mystagogue. He is a mystic because he deals entirely in mysteries; in things that our reason cannot picture; such as mindless order or objective matter becoming subjective mind.³

With the medieval mind, which in its allegorical preoccupation saw the universe in its inexhaustible significance, Chesterton's mind was connaturally sympathetic. Thus, not art alone, but life itself is essentially allegorical.⁴ If it be accepted that all art is, in a sense, a striving after interrelationships, then, the relevance of this discussion on the meaningful nature of the universe will become more apparent.

Since Chesterton consistently discovers correspondences

¹ G.K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 83.

² Kenner, op. cit., p. 39.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 14.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, G. F. Watts, p. 47.

between an artistic work and human nature, an outline of his Philosophy of Man will now be given. In the light of his metaphysical vision, it is not surprising that Chesterton is in awe at the mysteriousness of man's being.

Man is something more awful than men; something more strange. The sense of the miracle of humanity itself should be always more vivid to us than any marvels of power, intellect, art, or civilization.¹

To those who would say that they are agnostic about God, G.K.C.'s answer is: would they were agnostic about men!²

To philosophize about human nature is to resort to paradox.

Man is a walking paradox, contingent and yet divine; his Fall by underlining his littleness contrasts with the Incarnation which underlines his greatness to make him more paradoxical still.³

The strangeness of man's being is best revealed in the following Chestertonian paradox: "Man cannot love mortal things. He can only love immortal things for an instant."⁴ Among the "Heretics" with whom Chesterton grappled were all those monists who would simplify man's nature. "We feel that a man cannot make himself simple merely by warring on complexity; we feel, indeed, in our saner moments, that a man cannot make himself simple at all."⁵ With Chesterton, there is literally

1

G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p.82.

2

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p.158.

3

G.K. Chesterton, quoted in Kenner, op. cit., p.93.

4

G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 109.

5

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 130.

a dream world all around us. Every moment of conscious life is miraculous.¹ And, as to the unconscious mind, which psychoanalysis so boldly claims as its own, it is more mysterious still than the conscious. "The moment a thing is outside the lighted circle of consciousness, we cannot be certain what allies it has in the darkness."² In harmony with such views Chesterton regarded all attempts at a science of things human as "not merely hopeless, but crazy."³ As to the scientific method, he insisted on its inapplicability to a study of man.

...the same frigid and detached spirit which leads to success in the study of astronomy or botany leads to disaster in the study of mythology or human origins.... The same suppression of sympathies, that same waving away of intuition or guess-work which make a man preternaturally clever in dealing with the stomach of a spider, will make him preternaturally stupid in dealing with the heart of man.⁴

In his meditation on human nature, Chesterton shows a constant awareness of the finiteness and contingency of man and his eternal need of transcending himself.

The whole conception of culture is bound up with that first fact about man; that he is not himself, until he has added to himself certain things which are, in a sense, outside himself. As he is more powerful than any other

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 63.

²

G.K. Chesterton, "The Game of Psychoanalysis", The Century, Volume 106, May, 1923, p. 41.

³

G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 146.

⁴

G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 143.

creature with those things, so he is more helpless than any other creature without those things.¹

From this human need of transcendence, the following Chestertonian principles flow: that man should not assert the self;² that man is happiest when the goal he is contemplating is outside himself;³ and, that man should use his mind rather than concentrate on it.⁴ On the basis of these principles, it is clear what Chesterton's view was of those romantics who strive to make a cosmos out of their own heads.⁵

Furthermore, man's finiteness and contingency force him to recognize the humbleness of his position: to be proud is to be un-philosophical, out of contact with the real world. The Classical Greek opposition to pride is thus re-echoed. Without humility, man's soul becomes deadened.

Humility is a grand, a stirring thing, the exalting paradox of Christianity, and the sad want of it in our own time is, we believe, what really makes us think life dull, like a cynic, instead of marvellous, like a child.⁶

1

G.K. Chesterton, All Is Grist, p.14.

2

G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p.55.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 26.

4

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 178.

5

G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 188

6

G.K. Chesterton, quoted in Ward, op. cit. p. 80. This passage is taken from Chesterton's unpublished notebooks.

It is through humility that man keeps alive the sense of wonder. "The only way to enjoy a weed is to feel unworthy of a weed."¹ Chesterton observes approvingly that Arnold stresses the importance of humility for the thinker and the artist: to see things clearly, says Arnold, you must "get yourself out of the way."²

Allied with this human need of transcendence is the incurably idealistic nature of man: his restless search for the impossible.

It is idle to inveigh against cynics and materialists --there are no cynics, there are no materialists. Every man is idealistic; only it so happens that he has the wrong ideal. Every man is incurably sentimental; but unfortunately, it is so often a false sentiment.³

Because he overlooks this elementary fact the realistic novelist is most unrealistic. The whole area of romance literature--whether it be a fairy tale or a myth-- is quite "realistic" after all.

It is in man's nature that Chesterton would discover the ultimate explanation as to the origin and effect of tragic and comic literature. "This is a spiritual certainty, that all men are tragic. And this, again, is an equally sublime

¹
G.K. Chesterton, The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton, p. 343.

²
Quoted in G.K.C. as M.C. p. 19.

³
G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 250.

spiritual certainty, that all men are comic."¹ Chesterton censures Holmes for his failure to understand the "dignity and danger of the human soul, the pride and peril of the *imago dei*."²

Needless to say, Chesterton gave no quarter to all those impersonalists who would make heredity or the sub-consciousness more important in man than the reason and will. For Chesterton, "What is sub-conscious is sub-human".³ Whether it sound obscurantist or not, the only sound view of human nature, according to Chesterton, is found in Christianity, and more specifically, in Catholicism.⁴

In his defence of liberty and free-will, Chesterton carried on a public debate against all forms of determinism. To deny liberty is to deny the whole "mysterious drama of the soul."⁵ In fact, if there be no liberty, heroic lives are but a mere illusion.⁶ Chesterton's answer to the determinists is categorical: "I do not believe in a fate that falls

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 175.

² G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 15.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 22.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p.xxi.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, St. Thomas Aquinas, p. 29.

⁶ G.K. Chesterton, quoted in Ward, op. cit., p.203.

on men however they act; but I do believe in a fate that falls on them unless they act."¹ During the writing of an essay on Fate and a Communist, G.K.C. speculates as to whether he is performing a free act.

It is quite certain that I feel as if I could leave off writing this essay whenever I like. Nobody can prove that feeling to be an illusion, except by a universal scepticism which might equally hold fate to be an illusion. ... the idea of choice is an absolute, and nobody can get behind it.²

Whether the determinist realizes it or not, his philosophy leads to a paralysis of all human activity.³ Chesterton's emphasis on choice explains his opposition to "futuristic" writings: "All futurism must be a sort of fatalism. It cannot foresee the free part of human action; it can only foresee the servile part."⁴ Applied to art, this philosophy of choice indicates that without freedom, artistic activity degenerates into merely automatic gestures. Without freedom, the suspense of literature flourishes in an atmosphere of illusion.

In his defence of the intellect, Chesterton was again combatting modern "heretics", bent on shrinking human nature. His own "mystical" tendency did not blind G.K.C. to the

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 137.

²

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 122.

³

G.K. Chesterton, The Well and the Shallows, p. 75.

⁴

G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 155.

pitfalls of an irrational mysticism of the D.H. Lawrence type.¹ His religious conversion to Catholicism but confirmed Chesterton's faith in the intellect.² Nevertheless, at the same time, Chesterton was acutely aware of the limitations of the human intellect. "Those who use the intellect never worship it; they know too much about it."³

In creative activity, man exemplifies the most distinctive characteristic of his rational nature. In creative activity, man reveals his affiliation with divinity.

We human beings have never worshipped Nature; and indeed, the reason is very simple. It is that all human beings are supernatural beings. We have printed our own image upon Nature, as God has printed His image upon us.⁴

In his meditation on the artistic activity of the primitive man in the cave, Chesterton concludes that: "All we can say of this notion of reproducing things in shadow or representative shape is that it exists nowhere in nature except in man."⁵ Art indeed is the signature of man.⁶

It would be erroneous to conclude from this stress

1

G.K. Chesterton, The Well and the Shallows, p.208.

2

G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 212.

3

Ibid., p. 54.

4

G.K. Chesterton, A Miscellany of Men, p. 118.

5

G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 18.

6

Ibid., p.16.

on the rational in Chesterton's Philosophy of Man that he did not recognize the naturalness of human sentiments. His dislike of Puritans sprang from his defence of the human body and its affections. His argument with logicians was also motivated by his defence of sentiment. "The logician, like every other man on earth, must have sentiment and romance in his existence; in every man's life, indeed which can be called a life at all, sentiment is the most solid thing."¹ In Chesterton's hierarchical scheme, sentiment becomes misdirected only when it challenges "something equally real, which also has its right."² Such a philosophy truly permits a catholicity in artistic taste.

If the elements that have been given thus far in Chesterton's Philosophy of Man suggest that he was an incurable optimist, then the time has arrived to puncture such a view. Scattered in Chesterton's writings are statements that can hardly be reconciled with an optimistic philosophy. In one place, he talks of a "morbid and diseased insanity of optimism."³ In another talking of the optimism of

¹ G.K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 94.

² G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 98.

³ G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 205.

Whitman, Chesterton remarks:

For man knows there is that within him that can never be valued too highly, as well as that within him which can never be hated too much; and only a philosophy which emphasizes both, violently and simultaneously, can restore the balance to the brain.¹

Of course, Chesterton was philosophically partial to Stevenson's belief in "the ultimate decency of things"² and to St. Thomas' dictum "Every existence, as such, is good."³ Man, accordingly, "is more himself, man is more manlike, when joy is the fundamental thing in him, and grief the superficial."⁴ With this philosophy, one of the primary functions of art is determined: to make men joyous at the fact of creation.

There remains one final and indispensable element of Chesterton's Philosophy of Man to be considered: his views on what original sin did to man. To discover the reality of original sin, man has but to reflect on his own nature. Commenting on Wells' claim that there would be no original sin in his utopia, Chesterton interjects: "If he had begun with the human soul--that is, if he had begun on himself--he would have found

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Sidelights on New London and Newer York, p. 201.

² G.K. Chesterton, The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton, p. 90.

³ Id.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 296.

original sin almost the first thing to be believed in."¹

The following passage will sound un-Chestertonian to those who have convinced themselves that Chesterton was incurably optimistic.

There is one little defect about Man, the image of God, the wonder of the world and the paragon of animals; that he is not to be trusted. If you identify him with some ideal, which you choose to think is in his inmost nature, or his only goal, the day will come when he will suddenly seem to you a traitor.²

As the following paradox will show Chesterton's depression over the Doctrine of the Fall was a tempered one-- this doctrine was really the "only cheerful view of human life."³

But there is one aspect of Chesterton's view of the Fall which is more particularly pertinent in an examination of his conception of the function of art; and, that is, how the Fall is related to man's tendency to undervalue everything that is really priceless.

There runs a strange law through the length of human history--that men are continually tending to undervalue their environment, to undervalue their happiness, to undervalue themselves. The greatest sin of mankind, the sin typified by the fall of Adam, is the tendency, not towards pride, but towards this weird and horrible humility.⁴

1

G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 79.

2

G.K. Chesterton, The Well and the Shallows, p. 34.

3

G.K. Chesterton, The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton, p. 178.

4

G.K. Chesterton, The Defendant, p. 3.

For Chesterton, getting used to happiness was "the mystic sin by which all Creation fell."¹ Art is, in a sense, a protest against the tendency of fallen man to regard familiarity with fatigue.² With Chesterton, as it will be demonstrated later, art has been theologically allied with religion.

3. The principle of transcendence

In discussing Chesterton's philosophy so far, stress has been placed on the mystical element in his thought. However this element plays such an important role in his views on art that it is worthy of separate consideration here. As it will be shown in later discussions, Chesterton regularly discovers an elusive quality, an indescribable one, in his reflections on things artistic and literary.

Chesterton's classic commentary on the Book of Job will serve as an introduction to his "reverent agnosticism."

God says, in effect, that if there is one fine thing about the world, as far as men are concerned, it is that it cannot be explained. He insists on the inexplicableness of everything.³

In Socrates, Chesterton finds agnosticism the weapon of the

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 149.

²

G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p.xxii.

³

G.K. Chesterton, "The Book of Job", Putnam's Monthly, Volume 2, June, 1907, p. 356.

the true mystic.¹ For such an agnosticism there are philosophical grounds.

Agnosticism (which has, I am sorry to say, almost entirely disappeared from the modern world) is always an admirable thing, so long as it admits that the thing which it does not understand may be much superior to the mind which does not understand it.²

In fact, Chesterton regards mysticism as necessary for sanity.

"Mysticism keeps men sane. As long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity."³

"The one thing every man knows about the unknowable is that it is indispensable."⁴ In his criticism of Tolstoy, G.K.C. summarizes his position: "the thing that has driven men mad was logic, from the beginning of time, whereas the thing that kept them sane was mysticism."⁵

As a consequence of this mystical philosophy it may truly be said that without a poetry of things there can be no literary poetry.

There are three things make me think things beyond all poetry--a yellow space or rift, in the evening sky; a chimney or pinnacle high in the air and a path over a hill.⁶

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "The Book of Job", Putnam's Monthly, Volume 2, June, 1907, p. 355.

² G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 163.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 48.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 254.

⁵ Quoted in J. West, G.K. Chesterton: A Critical Study, p. 147.

⁶ Quoted in M. Ward, op. cit., p. 248.

Nature literally teases men out of thought.

To the genuine and poetical sceptic the whole world is incredible, with its bulbous mountains and its fantastic trees. The whole order of things is as outrageous as any miracle which could presume to violate it.¹

I refuse to believe that a bird is only a bird, or that there is nothing more in such things than the material facts that we know about them. The thought is beginning of all theology.²

To see Nature as it is, men must recapture the vision of the child.

The false type of naturalness harps always on the distinction between the natural and the artificial. The higher kind of naturalism ignores that distinction. To the child the tree and the lamp-post are as natural and as artificial as each other; or rather, neither of them are natural but both supernatural. For both are splendid and unexplained.³

The transcendental aspect of Chesterton's thought is further revealed in his views on paradox. Paradox with him is stamped in the universe. As Chesterton says paradox may "not be rational, but that is because rationalism is wrong."⁴ Chesterton praises Christian Theology because "even its paradoxes corresponded to life."⁵ G.K.C.'s bone of contention

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 87.

² G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 86-7.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 139.

⁴ Ibid. p. 232.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton p. 178.

with Shaw and Wells was over their refusal to admit the contradictory quality of life. Shaw did not understand "that ultimate paradox that the very things that we cannot comprehend are the things that we have to take for granted."¹ As to Wells, he did not "realize the first and simplest of the paradoxes that sit by the springs of truth. He must surely see that the fact of two things being different implies that they are similar."² It follows that Chesterton was an opponent of all extreme forms of rationalism. The trouble with rationalism is that it is not rational.³

In this consideration of the element of transcendence in Chesterton's thought, it but remains to sketch his views on romance and realism as ways of looking at life. First of all, let it be stated that Chesterton was aware that both romance and realism distort life: the romancer by emphasizing the beautiful triumphs in life; the realist by emphasizing the ugly defeats.⁴ But if men are to err, let it be on the side of romance, for it is "the deepest thing in life; romance is deeper than reality."⁵ Chesterton would further associate

1

G.K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 185.

2

G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 82.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Avowals and Denials, p. 163.

4

G.K. Chesterton, The Glass Walking Stick and Other Essays, pp. 55-56.

5

G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 192.

romance with the spirit of religion.

Romance is perhaps the highest point of human expression, except religion, to which it is closely allied. Romance resembles religion especially in this, that it is not only a simplification but a shortening of existence. Both romance and religion see everything as it were foreshortened; they see everything in an abrupt and fantastic perspective, coming to an apex.¹

Romance is a psychological state of the soul elicited by certain aspects of life.

We must remember that it is, like tragedy or farce, a state of the soul, and that, for some dark and elemental reason which we can never understand, this state of the soul is evoked in us by the sight of certain places or the contemplation of certain human crises, by a stream rushing under a heavy and covered human bridge, or by a man plunging a knife or sword into tough timber.²

As in the child, romance is a love of things "not for their use or origin, but for their own inherent characteristics."³

This spirit of romance, this spirit of wonder, accounts for the poetry of things.

A great many people talk as if this claim of ours, that all things are poetical, were a mere literary ingenuity, or play on words. Precisely the contrary is true. It is the idea that some things are not poetical which is literary, which is the mere product of words.⁴

The poetry of things is also related to their contingency:

"Until we realize that things might not be, we cannot realize

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p.26.

² G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 163.

³ Ibid., p. 168.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 41.

that things are."¹

Chesterton's romantic conception of life is well revealed in his predilection for Fairy Tales. In fact, he regards such unsophisticated literature as "the only sound guide books to life."² In Fairy-land, G.K.C. discovered a world that corresponded to his transcendental vision.

The things that I believed most then, the things I believe most now are the things called fairy tales. They seem to me to be the entirely reasonable things. They are not fantasies; compared with them other things are fantastic. Compared with them religion and rationalism are both abnormal, though religion is abnormally right and rationalism abnormally wrong. Fairyland is nothing but the sunny country of common sense. It is not earth that judges heaven, but heaven that judges earth; so for me at least it was not earth that criticised elfland, but elfland that criticised earth.³

4. The principle of limitation

On first inspection, it might appear that this awareness of limitation in Chesterton's thought ran counter to the stress he places on the transcendental character of things. Even if this be true, Chesterton would undoubtedly point to the very nature of things as a model for justifying his acceptance of these two principles. In his praise of the qualities that he finds in peasants, G.K.C. gives a hint as to

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 65.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Alarms and Discursions, p. 199.

³

G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p.87.

how the dilemma may be resolved.

I mean chiefly the things that most of us absorb in childhood; especially the sense of the supernatural and the sense of the natural; the love of the sky with its infinity of vision, and the love of the soil with its strict hedges and solid shapes of ownership.¹

Accordingly, with Chesterton, men are more at home in the universe when they give to things a "local habitation and a name". To justify this position philosophically, Chesterton notes that "In proportion as a thing rises in the scale of things, it tends to localise and even narrow its natural functions."² Furthermore, religion also invites artists to view reality in such a way.

For the highest dogma of the spiritual is to affirm the material. By plain outline and positive colour those pious artists strove chiefly to assert that a cat was truly in the eyes of God a cat and that a dog was permanently dogish.³

In fact, this principle of limitation is a root difference in the ways Western and Eastern religions view life.

Just as in broad fact the mystery of dissolution is emphasized and typified in the East, so in practice the mystery of concentration and identity is manifest in the historic churches of Christendom.⁴

¹ G.K.Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 36.

² G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 219.

³ G.K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 135.

⁴ Ibid., p. 204.

In the Word that was made flesh Chesterton has a theological justification for thoughts accepting definition and limitation within language.¹ To think means to define, to limit.

For in truth I believe that the only way to say anything definite is to define it, and all definition is by limitation and exclusion; and that the only way to say something distinct is to say something distinguishable; and distinguishable from everything else.²

Accordingly, Chesterton reprimands all those who "are seeking under shape and form a world where there are no limitations-- that is, a world where there are not outlines.... There is nothing baser than that infinity."³

Perhaps the most revealing of Chesterton's statements on the necessity of limitation is found in his reflections on the Toy Theatre in his Autobiography.

I am no psychologist, thank God; but if psychologists are still saying what ordinary sane people have always said--that early impressions count considerably in life--I recognise a sort of symbol of all that I happen to like in imagery and ideas. All my life I have loved edges; and the boundary-line that brings one 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.⁴

1

G.K. Chesterton, The Well and the Shallows, p. 174.

2

G.K. Chesterton, As I Was Saying, p. 18.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 195.

4

G.K. Chesterton, The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton, pp. 25-6.

In this early Chestertonian predilection for limits, Wordsworth's contention that "The Child is father of the Man" is truly exemplified.

5. The principle of perspective

The habit of viewing things sub specie aeternitatis prompted Chesterton to suspect the cult of Modernism. The trouble with the modern mind is that it sees "something sacred in the mode or mood of the moment."¹ In truth, excellence is independent of temporal considerations.

We are superiors by that silliest and most snobbish of all superiorities, the mere aristocracy of time. All works must become old and insipid which have ever tried to be "modern", which have consented to smell of time rather than eternity.²

The merits of a Wordsworth, or a Tennyson are independent of "accidental nervous fatigue".³ This same habit of seeing things in their eternal relations led Chesterton to make the following somewhat enigmatic, but profoundly true, statement: "the historic fact that the artificial is, if anything, older than the natural".⁴ It further gave him an insight into the medieval use of anachronism.⁵

¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Glass Walking Stick and Other Essays, p. 164.

² G.K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 129.

³ Id.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 137.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, A Miscellany of Men, p. 205.

Symptomatic of modern provincialism is the refusal to acknowledge cultural debts to past ages. In Chesterton's view real development will be fostered by drawing life from our cultural roots. His faith in popular traditions again attests to both the democratic and catholic quality of his thought. It is clear then why Chesterton regarded Shaw's vision as a myopic one.

The great defect of that fine intelligence is a failure to grasp and enjoy the things commonly called convention and tradition; which are food upon which all human creatures must feed frequently if they are to live.¹

In other words, Chesterton is reprimanding Shaw for his failure to recognize the necessity of an organic and orderly development of things. Chesterton would even go so far as to claim that art flourishes best when a civilization is conscious of its origins.

I do know this, that when the great flowers break forth again, the new epics and the new arts, they will break out on the ancient and living tree. They cannot break out upon the shrubs that you are always pulling up by the roots to see if they are growing.²

With Yeats, Chesterton agrees that nothing really new can be used in poetry.³ The artistic advantages of tradition is that one can see the new "sharply against a background".⁴

¹ G.K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 177.

² Quoted in Ward, op. cit., p. 196.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 113.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, All Is Grist, p. 47.

Certain aspects of Chesterton's Philosophy of History are particularly pertinent to an understanding of his views on literary development. As an outgrowth of his belief in original sin, Chesterton discovers a retrograde tendency in human history.

All human institutions, slide downwards like a landslide, unless they are perpetually forced upwards by criticism and reform. It is vain indeed to speak of conservatism in this world....Unless we are always changing things for the better, they are always changing themselves for the worse.¹

Chesterton's attitude towards Conservatives and Progressives thus becomes more comprehensible.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century there appeared its two incredible figures; they were the pure Conservative and the Pure Progressive; two figures which would have been overwhelmed with laughter by any other intellectual commonwealth of history. There was hardly a generation which could not have seen the folly of merely going forward or merely standing still; of mere progressing or mere conserving.²

A Philosophy of History, of the cultural development of a people must be reconcilable with the eternal facts of human nature. No wonder then that Chesterton thought it would have been enlightening to write the History of English Literature that might have been. With such a conception, man is truly always at the "cross-roads."³

¹ G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., pp. 57-58.

² G.K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 59.

³ G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 125.

Consistent with his theory of human nature, G.K.C. regarded scientific history as full of "ingenuity, self-consciousness, hypocritical impartiality."¹ A psychological history is what is needed.

We need a new thing; which may be called psychological history. I mean the consideration of what things meant in the mind of a man, especially an ordinary man; as distinct from what is defined or deduced merely from official forms or political pronouncements.²

It can be at least surmised here what he would have thought of Taine's claims in literary history.

It is in fable and legend that are to be found the deepest truths about men. "Fable is more historical than fact, because fact tells us about one man and fable tells us about a million men."³ As to legends, they present a more accurate picture of men than do the rationalistic historians; they "go deeper than the reason into the very roots of the world, but contain the springs that refresh the reason and keep it active for ever".⁴ Chesterton's sympathy with popular traditions once again indicates the essential catholicity of his tastes.

1

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 22.

2

G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 161.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 201.

4

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 159.

English history must be seen in terms of its classical legacy. "I want specially to insist that the classical tradition, the Latin and Greek tradition in English history was the popular thing, the common thing; even the vulgar thing."¹ In England, the "classical past has penetrated into every cranny of the common life, into the conversational speech and the very texture of society".² The constant awareness of this legacy is manifest in Chesterton's opposition to the discontinuity in European culture thesis of Spengler's The Decline of the West. "There was never a generation in which philosophers did not refer to Aristotle, if only to contradict him. The thread of our cultural continuity never has been broken."³ But even this classical legacy is narrow and provincial in contrast to the vision offered by Catholicism. "Aquinas could understand the most logical parts of Aristotle; it is doubtful if Aristotle could have understood the most mystical parts of Aquinas."⁴ The trouble with English-men like Arnold is that they could not see that "the Catholic Church was (at the least) an immense and enduring Latin civilization

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "English Literature and the Latin Tradition", The Fortnightly, Volume 144, August, 1935, p.182.

² Ibid., p. 190.

³ G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 165.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 213.

linking us to the lost civilizations of the Mediterranean".¹

Chesterton's views on art and literature are linked with his thought on the Protestant Revolution and its disintegration of the medieval synthesis.

There is no end to the dissolution of ideas, the destruction of all tests of truth, that has become possible since man abandoned the attempt to keep a central and civilized truth, to contain all truths and trace out and refute all errors.²

The prejudice against the Pre-Renaissance world invalidates most modern histories of England.

Most modern history, especially in England, suffers from the same imperfection as journalism. At best it only tells half of the history of Christendom; and that the second half without the first half. Men for whom reason begins with the Revival of Learning, men for whom religion begins with the Reformation, can never give a complete account of anything, for they have to start with institutions whose origin they cannot explain, or generally even imagine.³

In fact, the "roots of real England are in the early Middle Ages; and no Englishman will ever understand his own language (or even his own conscience) till he understands this".⁴

With Belloc, Chesterton agrees that the Reformation was the "shipwreck of christendom".⁵ Protestantism means a fight

1

G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 20.

2

G.K. Chesterton, "Why I Am a Catholic", The Forum Volume 75, January, 1926, p. 36.

3

G.K. Chesterton, St. Francis of Assisi, p. 27.

4

G.K. Chesterton, A Miscellany of Men, p. 295.

5

G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 230.

against what in the old Faith is "most normal and sympathetic to human nature".¹

Besides this historical awareness, another aspect of Chesterton's use of the principle of perspective is seen in his assigning hierarchical values to the facts of reality. Truly, it was his habit to see things as did St. Thomas, that is, in terms of their "subordinate sovereignties or autonomies".² In Chesterton's hierarchical scale, the natural is subordinate to the supernatural;³ the temporal, to the eternal;⁴ philosophy to religion;⁵ what is peculiar to few men, to what is common to all;⁶ the emotions, to the intellect;⁷ and, art, to life.⁸ In criticising art, whether it be in the vision it exploits or in the technique it uses, Chesterton relies, consciously or not, on such a hierarchical value scheme.

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- ¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Well and the Shallows, p. 26.
 - ² G.K. Chesterton, St. Thomas Aquinas, p. 29.
 - ³ G.K. Chesterton, The Glass Walking Stick, p. 108.
 - ⁴ G.K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 167.
 - ⁵ G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 215.
 - ⁶ G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 82.
 - ⁷ G.K. Chesterton, William Blake, pp. 167-168.
 - ⁸ G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 82.

In this chapter it has been shown that for Chesterton religion and philosophy give ultimate significance to everything. For him, Christianity best supports and justifies all human activity. It may be said that there are four key principles that recur in Chesterton's thinking: the principles of correspondence, of transcendence, of limitation, and of perspective. By the principle of correspondence, Chesterton established interrelationships between all things and the nature of the created universe as revealed by religion and philosophy. By the principle of transcendence, he stressed the underlying mystery in all created things. By the principle of limitation, he drew attention to the finite quality of all created things. And, finally, by the principle of perspective, he viewed human activities in terms of both the eternal and the traditional, and in terms of a hierarchical value scheme.

CHAPTER II

APPROACHES TO ART

Nothing sublimely artistic has ever arisen out of mere art, any more than anything essentially reasonable has ever arisen out of the pure reason. There must 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.¹

In the discussion that follows, it will be revealed in which ways Chesterton habitually approaches the problems related to art. The underlying aim of this discussion will be to establish that Chesterton's statements on matters artistic are inextricably dependent upon his philosophy of the universe and of man.

1. The principle of correspondence

Perhaps the most revealing introduction to Chesterton's views on art may be had by considering his approach to such a problem as artistic creation, and more particularly to that of artistic inspiration. In censuring certain critics who contended that Blake was inspired only when possessed by spirits, Chesterton states that the origin of such inspiration is to be found within the artist's person.

We are supposed to rejoice unreservedly in the idea that a spirit has inspired what would otherwise be only

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G.K. Chesterton, The Defendant, p. 47.

a man. But it is really a blasphemy to talk about a man being only a man.... And it seems nearer to the true Christian tradition to hold that man creates in his capacity as the image of God; and that he is in nothing so much the image of God as in creating images.¹

To emphasize his opposition to such "supra" theories of inspiration, Chesterton restates his position.

Much has been said about inspiration, especially in works of imagination, by authorities whom I profoundly respect and with whom I violently disagree. For one thing, it is commonly regarded as a religious or spiritual view of art to suppose that it does not come from the artist. It is implied that only a cynical, or at least a mundane view of it, would suggest such a propensity as that it comes from the artist. And this to begin with seems to me based on bad religion and philosophy.²

It should be noted that for such a refutation Chesterton invokes the aid of religion and philosophy. Let it be admitted, however, that with the perspective given to him by tradition, Chesterton felt somewhat hesitant in thus challenging the time-honoured notion of inspiration by the Muses.³ Nevertheless, in spite of his reverential attitude towards tradition, it may be prudently assumed that Chesterton's belief was that the causal explanation for artistic inspiration is to be found within, not without human nature. That Chesterton returns to such a position in his criticism of Stevenson would

¹

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 78.

²

Id.

³

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 80.

tend to confirm that he held this view of inspiration.

He had not the smallest natural sympathy with all those hazy pagan and pantheistic notions often covered by the name of inspiration. He might not have expressed it in the phrase that man is an image of the Creator; but he did very definitely regard man as a maker of images.¹

To thus Christianize the traditional Greek concept of the artist as a "maker" was indeed characteristically Chestertonian.

It would be erroneous to assume that Chesterton's conception of the artist as a maker of images led him to undervalue the role of the conceptual faculty in the creative process. This was certainly not the case. Even though Chesterton recognized that the imagination had "its own laws and therefore its own triumphs"², nevertheless he was aware that the things it created were not "contrary to reason".³ In fact, it may be claimed that Chesterton discovered intellect, and its external evidence meaning, in all the relationships that may be established in viewing the creative process: whether it be in the artist, who must conceive something before he can create it,⁴ and who must have "the intellect and all its instruments on the spot and ready to go to the

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 158.

²

G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 122.

³

G.K. Chesterton, The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton, p. 46.

⁴

G.K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 204.

point"¹; whether it be in the artifact, for "beautiful things ought to mean beautiful things"²; and, finally, whether it be in the art critic, who must know "what the artist is driving at."³ Viewing the same problem analogically, according to this Chestertonian approach, it may be said: that as the meaningfulness of the created universe manifests the rationality of the Divine Creator, so, too, the meaningfulness of the artifact manifests the rationality of its human creator.⁴

Since Chesterton thus considered human creation as analagous to that of the Divine, he was able to see that a work of art in its separateness from its creator enjoyed an autonomous existence.

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 he has "thrown off". Even in giving it forth he has flung it away. This principle that all creation and procreation is a breaking off is at least as consistent through the cosmos as the evolutionary principle that all growth is a branching out.... All creation is separation.⁵

However, it should be pointed out that it would be erroneous to conclude from this that the artifact possesses such absolute autonomy that it in no way reflects the creator who

¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 38.

² G.K. Chesterton, "The Artistic Side" in G.K.'s Weekly, Volume 12, November 29, 1930, p. 183.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Resurrection of Rome, p. 72.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 117. ⁵ Ibid., p. 142.

gave it birth.

In creative art the essence of a book exists before the book or before even the details or main features of the book; the author enjoys it and lives in it with a kind of prophetic rapture. He wishes to write a comic story before he has thought of a single comic incident.¹

For Chesterton, the existence of such a relationship between the literary artist and his work is the strongest argument for art and style.²

It was within the Christian synthesis that Chesterton discovered an answer to the aesthetic problems raised by imitation. It was within this same synthesis that he found theoretical support for his hostility to realism in art: for, it may be asked, does not the Christian view of man's freedom truly liberate the artist from the trivial tyranny of a mere mimicry of nature? Such a conception of the artist's liberty

...is consonant with the original and heroic doctrine of Christianity, which distinguishes the son from the slave, and salutes in free will the highest crest and signal of his divine origin. God created a creature, and indeed many creatures; but here, we insist, he created a creative creature.³

Since it is in harmony with the above view of the artist, Chesterton comments approvingly on Gill's conception of

¹
G.K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. 14.

²
Ibid., p. 15.

³
G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 185.

imitation in the creative process.

The artist is not so much to copy the works of God as to copy the work of God, in the sense of the working of God: or the way in which God works. There will be in his art the same, or some approximations to the same, spirit and tendency of line and motion and balance; because there is only one creation and no inspiration from outside it. But the work will rather be that of the child of God working his own world than the servant of God copying the details of the larger one.¹

This interpretation avoids the pitfalls, on the one hand, of making the artist a mere mimic; on the other hand, of ascribing to him divine creative powers. It truly accepts the paradoxical nature of the "creative creature". Moreover, it should be noted that the epistemological position implied in this interpretation is Aristotelian: that there is nothing in man's intellect unless it come through the senses, or still more accurately unless it come from the created world. The ultimate origin of artistic creation has been found.²

Related to this question of imitation in art is Chesterton's interest in the claims of realism and romanticism in the problem of artistic reproduction. It would be pertinent here to outline Chesterton's major arguments against realistic art. According to G.K.C., the first insurmountable obstacle faced by the realists is the fact that if art is to reproduce life, it must be presupposed that the nature of life is known.

1

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 184.

2 G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 92. In this passage, Chesterton describes Art as a "receptiveness or approachability by the facts outside us."

It is said that art should represent life. So indeed it should, but it labours under the primary disadvantage that no man has seen life at any time.... Life dwells alone in our very heart of hearts, life is one and virgin and unconquered, and sometimes in the watches of the night speaks in its own terrible harmony.¹

Holding this conception of life, Chesterton was unperturbed by the seemingly realistic emphasis of the famous Shakespearean statement that art is a mirror put to nature.

Art is a mirror not because it is the same as the object, but because it is different. A mirror selects as much as art selects; it gives the light of flames, but not their heat; the colour of flowers, but not their fragrance.... A mirror is a vision of things, not a working model of them.²

The realists find Chesterton turning this much quoted Shakespearean phrase on art against their interpretation.

Continuing the argument against the realists, Chesterton notes their failure to understand the elementary fact that an artist reshapes things according to his own spiritual nature.

Are not the sea and birds you really look at, when you recall them artistically, things already soaked in your own mystical nature, reshaped and simplified by your own instinct for symbol and design; so that being true to that truth is not merely photographic, but something which quacks call psychological, and sensible men call spiritual.³

Because of this interplay between subject and object, Chesterton recognized that the artistic truth has its own

1

G.K. Chesterton, The Coloured Lands, p. 83.

2

G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 154.

3

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 187.

distinctive character as contrasted to the truths of science and history.

As the only real lion is the lion that a child can dream of, so the only convincing Tarquin is the Tarquin who had been a nightmare to numberless dramatists and dreamers. This concerns artistic truth, of course, as distinct from scientific and historical truths; which have their own objective object. But if we are talking of the effect of symbols on the soul, it is broadly true that they are best when they are most symbolic. For in man also is something divine; and the things that enter his world pass through a second creation.¹

Furthermore, the difference between art and science is seen not only in the truths they convey, but also in the methods they employ.

The one supreme difference between the scientific method and the artistic method is, roughly speaking, simply this--that a scientific statement means the same thing wherever and whenever it is uttered, and that an artistic statement means something entirely different, according to the relation in which it stands to its surroundings.²

In other words, the very method of expression used in art is an argument against realism.

As has been pointed out, Chesterton noted the transformation of the object effected by the subject as an argument against realism. Chesterton adds that it is by means of selection, omission, and exaggeration that the artist reveals that the object has been molded by his spirit.

It is perfectly true, as the modern artists say more excitedly, but all artists say more or less

1

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 19.

2

G.K. Chesterton, "Are the Artists Going Mad?", The Century, Vol. 105, December, 1922, p. 276.

moderately, that in order to waken this spirit of wonder, the copy must never be a correct copy. There must always be something in it to show that it has passed through the wandering spirit of man; that man has deliberately set it in a new light; sometimes by selection and omission, sometimes by the wildest exaggeration.¹

As a further answer to the realists, it would be pertinent to mention other passages in which Chesterton returns to this exaggerative characteristic of art. In one passage, he talks of a "rise into exaggeration" which is the "transition from life to art".² In still another passage, commenting on Dickens' achievement, he states that "Exaggeration is the definition of art".³ Finally, in a third passage, he even points out the psychological necessity served by this exaggerative characteristic of art.

The perfection and pointedness of art are a sort of substitute for the pungency of actuality. Without this selection and completion our life seems a tangle of unfinished tales, a heap of novels, all volume one.⁴

On first inspection, it might appear that this exaggerative stress is incompatible with another Chestertonian view that "Art is forced to look probable."⁵ However, if it be recalled that Chesterton also held the view that "there is only one creation and no inspiration from outside it", it will then be understood that these seemingly conflicting ideas

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "Are the Artists Going Mad?", The Century, Vol. 105, December, 1922, p. 276.

² G.K. Chesterton, A Miscellany of Men, p. 75.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 14.

⁴ Ibid. p. 140.

⁵ Ibid., p. 88.

may be reconciled.

To those realists who complained about the artificiality of some artistic works, Chesterton gave a philosophical answer. His defence of the artificial was as basic as this: that without this very artificiality all the arts would perish.¹ Such critics ignore two further facts: first, that "the artificial is, if anything, older than the natural;"² and, secondly, that it is but natural to be artificial.³ According to this Chestertonian position, it is not for nothing that the words art, artisan, and artificial are linguistically related.

Before ending this discussion upon Chesterton's opposition to the realists, it may be added that he saw three further limitations in the outlook of such critics. First, these realists fail to understand that art is essentially a thing of "glimpses"⁴. Secondly, they ignore the fact that art is but an imperfect "method of calling up certain visions and adumbrating certain atmospheres".⁵ Finally, they do not understand that for art to be entirely realistic "it would be entirely romantic."⁶

¹G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 241.

²G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 137.

³G.K. Chesterton, Sidelights on New London and Newer York, p. 39.

⁴G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 140.

⁵G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 280.

⁶G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 141.

Allied to Chesterton's opposition to realism in art was his espousal of the romantic. And he was delighted to discover that Christianity gave support to his preference. As contrasted to the Grecian approach to art and beauty, Christianity made allowance for the "wildness" in man.¹ Something in Christianity "breaks the outline of perfect and conventional beauty, something that dots with anger the blind eyes of Apollo and lashes to a cavalry charge the horses of the Elgin Marbles."² Greek art, on the other hand, lacks this energy of the Christian Gothic and Baroque. "The Venus of Milo does not struggle; and it is the very power of her presence that she hardly seems to breathe."³ Generalizing about this quality of Grecian art, Chesterton concludes:

There runs through all Hellas, even in its most humanistic moment, a certain stern simplification, and a calm like waking sleep, which may have been affected by lying so close under the shadow of the erect and rigid gods of Egypt and the East.⁴

A particular aspect of Chesterton's romanticism is his defence of the grotesque in art. Commenting on the inclusion of owls and kangaroos in the Gothic, Chesterton

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Tremendous Trifles, p. 137.

²

Ibid., p. 183.

³

G.K. Chesterton, The Resurrection of Rome, p. 35.

⁴

Id.

observes that

...this was Gothic, this was romantic, this was Christian art; this was the whole advance of Shakespeare upon Sophocles. And that symbol which was to crown it all, the ape upside down, was really Christian; for man is the ape upside down.¹

Chesterton's defence of the grotesque in art is but an element in his justification of ugliness for artistic treatment. "Ugliness of a kind may be a legitimate element in art."² He would further have this principle recognized that "until we love a thing in all its ugliness we cannot make it beautiful."³ Praising Stevenson for the "terrible beauty that is made out of harmony of ugly things", Chesterton adds and "that is surely not very far off from the primary purpose of art."⁴ In the light of this discussion on the grotesque and the ugly in art, Chesterton's admiration of Browning becomes understandable.

Every religious writer echoed the conception that all created things praise the Lord; but Browning was the first to take it literally as applying even to the grotesque and the unrepresentable; he was the first to realize practically that hogs and monkeys praise the Lord.⁵

1

G. K. Chesterton, Alarms and Discursions, p. 12.

2

G.K. Chesterton, Sidelights on New London and Newer York, p. 153.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 23.

4

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 12.

5

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 92.

For Chesterton, the beauty of a work of art presented an interesting contrast to the beauty found in nature.

Such a lover of beauty was Tennyson, a lover of beauty most especially where it is most to be found, in the works of man. He loved beauty in its completeness, as we find it in art, not in its more glorious incompleteness as we find it in Nature. There is, perhaps, more loveliness in Nature than in art but there are not so many lovely things. The loveliness is broken to pieces and scattered; the almond tree in blossom will have a mob of nameless insects at its root and the most perfect dell in the forest-house is likely enough to smell like a sewer.¹

The time has not arrived to consider Chesterton's views on the "Art for Art's Sake" Movement. As his observation on the Victorian painter Watts will indicate Chesterton appreciated what truth there was in the "Art for Art's Sake" claims.

If the principle of "art for art's sake" means simply that there is a solely technical view of painting, and that it must be supreme on its own ground, it appears a piece of pure madness to suppose it other than true.²

In other words, the artist's duty to perfect his method is hardly to be questioned. But if this "Art for Art's Sake" dictum is taken to mean that the work of art has no moral implications, then, clearly it is short-sighted. "The old aesthetes used to explain that Art is unmoral, rather than moral. It would be truer to say that Art can be immoral, but cannot be unmoral."³ And Chesterton continues the

¹

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, pp. 96-97.

²

G.K. Chesterton, G.F. Watts, p. 56.

³

G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 207.

argument by pointing out that he became convinced that such an interpretation of "Art for Art's Sake" was fallacious.

The more I thought of it the more certain I grew that the whole thing was a fallacy; that art could not exist apart from, still less in opposition to life; especially the life of the soul, which is salvation; and that great art never has been so much detached from conscience and common sense.¹

Any one who sees life as a whole could not fall into thinking that art thrives in a vacuum.

The salient and essential characteristic of Watts and men of his school was that they regarded life as a whole. They had in their heads, as it were, a synthetic philosophy which put everything into a certain relation with God and the wheel of things. Thus, psychologically speaking, they were incapable not merely of holding such an opinion, but actually of thinking such a thought as that of art for art's sake.²

That Chesterton thus saw art in its relation with life may be further gathered from his criticism of certain anarchical modern art experiments.

There are some who seem to hold that any artistic experiment, however anarchical or abnormal, or manifestly insane, had a mysterious right of its own to override any social custom or convenience, any common-sense or ordinary civic duty. The artistic experiment had this right because it was an artistic experiment; not even because the art was artistic; still less because the experiment was successful.³

In a rather lengthy passage (but well worth quoting in its entirety), Chesterton arrives at a brilliant reconciliation of the elements of technique and content in considering

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "Milton and Merry England", The London Mercury, Vol. 5, December, 1921, p. 135.

² G.K. Chesterton, G.F. Watts, p. 16.

³ G. K. Chesterton, As I Was Saying, p. 31.

the merits of the "Art for Art's Sake" formula.

Since we find, therefore, that ethics is like art, a mystic and intuitional affair, the only question that remains is, have they any kinship? If they have not, a man is not a man, but two and probably more: if they have, there is, to say the least of it, at any rate, a reasonable possibility that a note in moral feeling might have affinity with a note in art, that a curve in law, so to speak, may repeat a curve in draughtsmanship, that there may be genuine and not artificial correspondences between a state of morals and an effect in painting. This would, I should tentatively suggest, appear to be a most reasonable hypothesis. It is not so much the fact that there is no such thing as an allegorical art, but rather the fact that there is no art that is not allegorical.... Now if we adopt this general theory of the existence of genuine correspondences between art and moral beauty, of the existence, that is to say, of genuine allegories, it is perfectly clear wherein the test of genuineness must consist. If the technique, considered as technique, is calculated to evoke in us a certain kind of pleasure, and there is an analogous pleasure in the meaning considered as meaning, then there is a true wedding of the arts. But if the pleasure in the technique be of a kind quite dissimilar in its own sphere, then it is a mechanical and unlawful union, and this philosophy, at any rate, forbids the bans.¹

It should be observed how organic and unitary this conception of art is.

This problem of "Art for Art's Sake" may be considered not only from the viewpoints of content and technique. It may be further considered from the viewpoint of the moral characteristics necessary in the artist to produce art. Chesterton was fully aware that insight and selection will not suffice for the artist.² G.K.C. stresses in particular the

¹

G.K. Chesterton, G.F. Watts, pp.57-58.

²

G.K. Chesterton, "Are the Artists Going Mad?", The Century, Vol. 105, December, 1922, p. 278.

courage that the artist must have to face risks, for "All great art involves the element of risk".¹ And he continues saying that in "spite of the tiresome half-truth that art is un-moral, the arts require a certain considerable number of moral qualities and more especially all the arts require courage."² Using this principle, he praises Blake for his paintings: "No coward could have drawn such pictures".³ On the other hand, he blames Morris for lacking the "supreme courage to face the ugliness of things."⁴ Not only does Chesterton stress the importance of courage for the artist; he underlines the necessity of humility. Pride kills the very energy that brings art into being.⁵ With Arnold, he agrees that to see things clearly you must "get yourself out of the way."⁶ In short, whether it be in the content of the artifact, or in the technique employed, or in the artist's personality,-- art does not escape morality.

In this discussion on Chesterton's use of the

1

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 263.

2

Id.

3

G.K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 22.

4

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 24.

5

G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 130. See also p. 165.

6

G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 19.

the principle of correspondence, one final question remains to be answered: what, according to Chesterton, is the ultimate purpose of art? Since he believed that "Religion is the essence of ultimate reality, of whatever meaning a man finds in his own existence or the existence of anything else",¹ it is to be expected that Chesterton's conception of the final purpose of art will be derived from its relationship to religion.

The Arts exist, as we should put it in our primeval fashion, to show forth the glory of God; or, to translate the same thing in terms of our psychology, to awaken and keep alive the sense of wonder in man. The success of any work of art is achieved when we say of any subject, a tree or a cloud, or a human character "I have seen that a thousand times and I never saw it before."²

The purpose of art is to make men remember that they forgot.³ Any technique that may make men realize the wonder of it all is legitimate. "To present a matter in a grotesque manner does certainly tend to touch the nerve of surprise and thus to draw attention to the intrinsically miraculous character of the object itself."⁴ In harmony with this conception of the function of art is Chesterton's view on the role of

1

G.K. Chesterton, Come to Think of It, p. 72.

2

G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 56.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 97.

4

G.K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 151.

the imagination.

In spite of all revolutionaries it must be said that the function of imagination is not to make strange things settled, so much as to make settled things strange; not, so much to make wonders facts as to make facts wonders.¹

To achieve this sense of wonder, Chesterton is willing to admit that there is some value in modern attempts to recapture the spirit of primitivism.² In harmony with this view, Chesterton quotes approvingly Cezanne's statement: "I am trying to recover the direct vision of a child".³

Chesterton's religious conception of art and its function is further emphasized when it is considered what original sin did to man. The Fall gave to man a "weird sense of humility" by which he tends to undervalue everything, including himself.⁴ Accordingly, the function of art is to oppose this universal defect in human nature. And, let it be added that even in the very methods that the artist employs the effects of the Fall are manifest.

All artists are dedicated to an eternal struggle against the downward tendency of their own method and medium. For this reason they must sometimes be fresh: but there is no reason why they should not also be modest The dignity of the artist lies in his duty of keeping awake the sense of wonder in the world. In this long

1

G.K. Chesterton, The Defendant, p. 60.

2

G.K. Chesterton, "The Romance of Rhyme", The Living Age, Volume 304, March 13, 1920, p. 657.

3

G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 114.

4

G.K. Chesterton, The Defendant, p. 3.

vigil he often has to vary his methods of stimulation; but in this long vigil he is also himself striving against a continual tendency to sleep.¹

In summary, the artist faces a triple problem in achieving his primary function, that of arousing the sense of wonder within men: first, that men tend to undervalue everything; secondly, that the artist himself tends to nod over his work; and, thirdly, the medium in which he works is subject to a downward tendency.

2. The principle of transcendence

Needless to say, as contrasted with the principle of correspondence, the principle of transcendence and the other principles to be considered, occupy a subordinate position in Chesterton's Approaches to Art. In a sense, these principles are but derivatives of the primary principle of correspondence.

As used in the discussion that follows the term "transcendence" will have these meanings: first, the necessity that everything finite has of rising above itself; secondly, the hidden, spiritual, transcendental world that lies beyond the physical order; and, thirdly, the "mysterious", elusive, and wonderful characteristic of things.

According to Chesterton, man, in all his activities, discovers the necessity of self-transcendence.

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 164.

A self-contained and self-centred humanity would chill us in the same way as a self-contained and self-centred human being.... The proof of this is not peculiar to theology or even to religion; it is equally apparent to poetry and all imaginative arts.¹

Chesterton associates the artist with the natural mystic who is searching for the hidden meanings of life. Art is a "symbol that expresses very real spiritualities under the surface of life."² And the artist in his search becomes aware that he is touching transcendental truths.

Every true artist does feel, consciously or unconsciously, that he is touching transcendental truths; that his images are shadows of things seen through the veil. In other words, the natural mystic does know that there is something there; something behind the clouds or within the trees; but he believes that the pursuit of beauty is the way to find it; that imagination is a sort of incantation that can call it up.³

The beautiful images that the artist evokes are "the shadows of the one real beauty, and can be, in a sense, shifted or interchanged for its service."⁴ The beautiful images give men a glimpse of the Beautiful One.

The love of the Beautiful has a halo of mystery surrounding it. The human thirst for beauty is most mysterious.⁵ In fact, there is something inexhaustible about a thing of

1

G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 158.

2

G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 117.

3

Ibid., pp. 113-114.

4

G.K. Chesterton, All Is Grist, p. 105.

5

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 161.

beauty, about everything. "Anything beautiful means more than it says, possibly means more than it means to say".¹ Accordingly, "A thing of beauty is an inspiration for ever-- a matter of meditation for ever."² It was because scientific writers were trying to exhaust the meaning of beauty that Chesterton quarrelled with them.

Those writers sometimes say they are agnostic about God. Would to God they would consent to be agnostics about Man. Would they would leave the love of beauty or mystery as mysterious as they really are.³

The "agnostic", mystical bent of Chesterton's mind is well revealed in the above passage. It should be noted how he relates beauty with the mysterious.

But this transcendental quality is witnessed not only in the world that the artist's vision seeks to penetrate. It is seen in the operation of the artist's imagination. Speaking about his attitude towards the imagination in his childhood, Chesterton remarks: "Not verbally, but quite vividly, I knew them, exactly as I know now, that there is something mysterious and perhaps more than mortal about the power and call of the imagination."⁴ The peaks of Coleridge's

1

G.K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, pp. 156-7.

2

G.K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. 111.

3

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 58.

4

G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 56.

imagination are above criticism, for the "mysterious life of imagination" is here encountered.¹ Carrying this idea still further, Chesterton remarks on the power of Blake's imagination to give "to an object a sort of ecstatic separation and sanctity; a greater reality than that of what we call the real world."² In short, what Chesterton is once again stressing is the fact the artist in his creative activity touches transcendental truths.

In the effect of a work of art on the perceiver, Chesterton points out this same transcendental aspect.

An artistic effect is something that is slightly impossible; though grammarians and logicians may both think this an impossible phrase. It is something that is mildly mad or faintly absurd. It is something that is just over the precipice of this prosaic world; but not far out in the void of vanity and emptiness.³

In fact, the problem of how an artifact achieves its special effects is interrelated with the still greater problems of what man is and what art means.

Why one art can do without shapes and another without words, and another without movements, and another without massiveness, and why each of these is necessary to one or other of them separately--all this we shall know when we know what art means.⁴

The problem of explaining the perceiver's reaction to a work

¹ G.K. Chesterton, As I Was Saying, pp. 87-88.

² G.K. Chesterton, Avowals and Denials, p. 143.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, pp. 66-67.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 126.

of art is as basic as the following: that it is not known why artifacts evoke the responses they do "simply because we do not know what we ourselves mean when we are moved by them."¹ In the following passage, Chesterton illustrates this point.

Suppose somebody in a story says, "Pluck this flower and a princess will die in a castle beyond the sea", we do not know why something stirs in the subconsciousness, or why what is impossible seems almost inevitable. Suppose we read "And in the hour when the king extinguished the candle his ships were wrecked far away on the coast of Hebrides". We do not know why the imagination has accepted the image before the reason can reject it; or why such correspondences seem really to correspond to something in the soul. Very deep things in nature, some dim sense of the dependence of great things upon small, some dark suggestion that the things nearest to us stretch far beyond our power, some sacramental feeling of the magic in material substances, and many more emotions past finding out, are in an idea like that of the external soul. The power even in the myths of savages is like the power in the metaphors of poets. The soul of such a metaphor is often very emphatically an external soul. The best critics have remarked that in the best poets the simile is often a picture that seems separate from the text. It is as irrelevant as the remote castle to the flower or the Hebridean coast to the candle.²

Critics in discussing a work of art are confronted by this same transcendental quality. One of the most important and significant things about a work of art, its atmosphere, is one of the very elements that critics find is inexpressible. How, for example, can the Chaucerian atmosphere be

¹

G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p.114.

²

Ibid, pp. 114-115.

described verbally?

In other words, the thing which is supremely Chaucerian is the Chaucerian atmosphere, an atmosphere which penetrates all particular persons and problems; a sort of diffused light which lies on everything, whether tragic or comic, and prevents the tragedy from being hopeless or the comedy from being cruel. No art critic, however artistic, has ever succeeded in describing an atmosphere.¹

In addition, the art critic cannot say of any artistic creation that such an element was conscious, such another element unconscious.² And the fact that when an artist is inspired, he may tell more truth than he consciously knows further complicates the critic's role.³ Thus, it may be said that there is something about an artifact that is so elusive, so personal, so transcendental, that it escapes final critical analysis.

3. The principle of limitation

Paradoxical as it may seem, the principle of limitation is as recurrent in Chesterton's thought as is the principle of transcendence. To talk about Divinity is to talk about the infinite; to talk about man is to talk about the finite. Accordingly, to discuss creativity in man is to be aware of its analogous but limited nature.

¹

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 213.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 200.

³

G.K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 120.

It is not easy to point to anything that is entirely creative. In ultimate philosophy, as in ultimate theology, men are not capable of creation, but only of combination.¹

In the following comment on the wit of Rostand, Chesterton reveals his hostility to the indefinite and the vague in artistic creation.

For that matter, merely to make one of the better puns of Punch or Hood's Annual would be enough to stump most of the sceptics who have been taught in the Teutonic schools to think a thing creative because it is chaotic, and vast because it is vague.²

On the basis of this principle of limitation, Chesterton commends Morris for being "all the more creative because he felt the hard limits of creation."³

In the creative process itself, Chesterton stresses this same approach of limits. The imagination, accordingly, is in love with limits.

The imagination is supposed to work towards the infinite; though in that sense the infinite is the opposite of the imagination. For the imagination deals with an image. And an image is in its nature a thing that has an outline and therefore a limit.⁴

In fact, the image has the power both of "opening and concentrating the imagination."⁵ The image gives to airy nothing

¹ G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 91.

² G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, pp. 109-110.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 198.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton, p. 104.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 58.

a local habitation and a name. Moreover, this principle of limitation is seen not only in the image, but also in the symbol, which is "the best expression of something that cannot otherwise be expressed."¹

In his statements on the artistic activity, Chesterton once again emphasizes the necessity of limits. G.K.C. extracts the following significance from his childhood experiences with Toy Theatres.

Meanwhile the philosophy of toy theatres is worth any one's consideration. All the essential morals which modern men need to learn could be deduced from this toy. Artistically considered, it reminds us of the main principle of art, the principle which is in most danger of being forgotten in our time. I mean the fact that art consists of limitation; the fact that art is limitation. Art does not consist in expanding things. Art consists of cutting things down, as I cut down with a pair of scissors my very ugly figures of St. George and the Dragon.²

In fact, artistic activity is really a "fruitful strife with limitations".³ Chesterton agrees with Patmore that the infinite is "generally alien to art".⁴ As the following passage will indicate, to care for limits is to care for laws.

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Fancies Versus Fads, pp. 25-26.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Tremendous Trifles, p. 182.

³

G.K. Chesterton, quoted in M. Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 301.

⁴

G.K. Chesterton, Fancies Versus Fads, p. 113.

Anarchism adjures us to be bold creative artists, and care for not laws or limits. But it is impossible to be an artist and not care for laws and limits. Art is limitation; the essence of every picture is the frame. If you draw a giraffe, you must draw him with a long neck.¹

Those who favour anarchism in the arts forget that "a law of diminishing returns certainly does affect all imaginative innovation."² It may be said that in the arts innovation without definition produces a "featureless fog".³

Judging by Chesterton's views on limitation, it is not unexpected that he sees form as being the very essence of an artifact.

Every artist knows that the form is not superficial but fundamental; that the form is the foundation. Every sculptor knows that the form is not the outside of the statue, but rather the inside of the statue; even in the sense of the inside of the sculptor. Every poet knows that the sonnet-form is not only the form of the poem; but the poem.⁴

Thus, it is form that imposes the fruitful limits of art.

Chesterton's philosophy of limits is further revealed in his acceptance of the social aspect of art and of the necessity of conventions. In other words, artistic communication imposes limits on the artist.

1

G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 71.

2

G.K. Chesterton, The Coloured Lands, pp. 12-13.

3

Ibid., p. 14.

4

G.K. Chesterton, St. Thomas Aquinas, p. 127.

Convention means only a coming together, an agreement; and as every poet must base his work upon an emotional agreement among men, so every poet must base his work upon a convention. Every art, is, of course, based upon a convention, an agreement between the speaker and the listener that certain objections shall not be raised. The most realistic art in the world is open to realistic objection.... Unless he is describing an emotion which others share with him, his labors will be utterly in vain. If a poet really had an original emotion; if, for example, a poet suddenly fell in love with the buffers of a railway train, it would take him considerably more time than his allotted three-score years and ten to communicate his feelings.¹

According to such an interpretation, art is not mere self-expression; rather it is communication.

It might be objected that Chesterton's love of the exaggerative element in art seems irreconcilable with this predilection for limits. Before answering such an objection, it is significant to note that even in his reflections on the grotesque in art, Chesterton is aware of the necessity of limits.

Caricature depends on proportion as much as classic design. Even much more frivolous forms of the grotesque illustrate this truth. The Mock Turtle may be a mixture of different animals; but not a mixture of any animals or all animals... There must be a shape, a design, and a relation in fantastic form.²

In other words, the exaggerative element in all forms of art is

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 98.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 198.

itself subject to a law of diminishing returns. Returning to the problem whether this approach of limits is reconcilable with Chesterton's conception of art as exaggeration, it may be said: that insofar as limitation implies exaggeration, the two notions are reconcilable. In fact, the two notions stem from the truism that art is not life.

How, it may be asked, is Chesterton's identification of art with limitation to be related with his general philosophical position? Of course, such an identification may be an immediate outgrowth of Chesterton's awareness of the finiteness of man. Yet, again, it may be a result of his realization that there is but one created universe, and no inspiration from without it. Or, finally, it may be an offshoot of his predilection for dogma.

Moreover, it is not surprising, in the light of Chesterton's views on limits, that he reaches the conclusion that art is essentially a thing of "glimpses",¹ that art is an approximate attempt to symbolize a vision.² It was also in harmony with this conception that Chesterton should find modern art delinquent in failing to submit to the

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 34.

²

G.K. Chesterton, The Resurrection of Rome, p. 143.

principle of limitation.¹

4. The principle of perspective

Since the development of art is related to history, and since its ultimate significance is related to a scheme of values, it will be shown in the discussion that follows how Chesterton, by means of these two perspectives, approached a work of art.

As has been pointed out, Chesterton habitually saw things sub specie aeternitatis. Such a vision, no doubt, prompted him to say that "Art is born when the temporary touches the eternal".² To illustrate this point Chesterton remarks that a hero, making a vow of love, that nobody took seriously, is really a bore. In fact, a story based on this is impossible artistically, yet alone morally.³ Indeed, it may be said that art presupposes absolutes. It is because of these absolutes that "Art is long, but science is fleeting".⁴ Because modern art has glorified the temporal, and deemphasized the eternal, it is parochial. Speaking of

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Tremendous Trifles, p. 182.

² G.K. Chesterton, Fancies Versus Fads, p. 122.

³ Id.

⁴ Ibid., p. 33.

modern artists, Chesterton makes the complaint that --

They are narrow--they are progressive; that is, they deal in terms of time and not of eternity. It is odd to notice how the very titles given to the new schools often referred only to the sequence of time.¹

Insofar as art does not relate the temporal to the eternal, it fails.

Let us realise to start with, therefore, that in so far as the Spirit of the Age is only the Spirit of the Age, and is not the Spirit of the Ages, and all that is before and after the Ages, it is a spirit that very quickly evaporates, and perhaps most quickly where it has seemed particularly pungent and strong.²

In telescoping the times together religious art was obeying a sound principle, for "Anachronism is only the pedantic word for eternity".³ Let all artists remember the following: that the value of art "must be in some intrinsic qualities apart from order or sequence."⁴

Needless to say, Chesterton was fully aware of the necessity and value of tradition for the artist. It is interesting to notice that his love of tradition is allied to his reverence for the populace.

The traditional art is the truly creative art. That is why it is truly more creative than the negative abstractions which tend, of their nature, not merely to

¹
G.K. Chesterton, "Are the Artists Going Mad?", The Century, Vol. 105, Dec., 1922, p. 273.

²
G.K. Chesterton, Sidelights on New London and Newer York, p. 192.

³
G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 195.

⁴
"Are the Artists Going Mad?", see foot-note I, p.273.

anarchy, but to nothingness. And that is why a glimpse of these things encouraged me in my lifelong belief in particularisms and the tales and traditions of a people. Where there are traditions there are tests; where there are traditions there are tasks and practical problems; but they are always stimulants to the spirit and cunning and imagination of men. They are always more fruitful, in the long run, than the work of those who strike outwards to draw a design of nothing on the dark canvas of night.¹

Guided by the perspective of tradition, Chesterton observes that the "only way of judging the schools that call themselves new is to imagine what we should think of them if they were old."² And, again, "The only sense in which any art has any business to be new is that in which the most ancient, even the most antiquated art is new."³ In this Chesteronian reverence for traditions can be found an argument for imitation in the arts.

Scattered through Chesterton's works are observations about the major historical periods in the development of Western Art. Strange as it may appear, Chesterton contends that the Greeks by worshipping one aesthetic type only, and by forbidding a wild wedding of ideas, bequeathed to later generations an idea of a certain definite kind of beauty which ignored the variety of life.⁴ Chesterton's objection

¹

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 30.

²

G.K. Chesterton, "Are the Artist Going Mad?" The Century, Vol. 105, Dec., 1922, p.274.

³

Ibid., p. 276.

⁴

G.K. Chesterton, The Defendant, pp. 83-84.

to this Grecian conception of beauty was prompted, undoubtedly, by his conviction that the grotesque is a real element in the created universe and that there is something in man that responds to it. Despite this criticism of Greek Aesthetics, Chesterton still believed that modern artists would have been wiser "if they had developed sympathetically some of the Aristotelian aesthetics, as medieval philosophers developed sympathetically the Aristotelian logic and ethics."¹

In the previous discussion, enough was said about Chesterton's predilection for the Gothic and Baroque in Art. As was pointed out, he would even identify Gothic Art with the Spirit of Christianity. Even though it is possible that Chesterton's temperament may have influenced his preference, nevertheless it cannot be ignored that he supplies reasons consistent with his philosophy to buttress his claim.

In a passage suggestive of Chesterton's historical perspective, he contrasts the Greek, Medieval and Modern views towards Beauty and Realism.

The old Greeks summoned godlike things to worship their god. The medieval Christian summoned all things to worship theirs, dwarfs, pelicans, monkeys and madmen. The modern realists summon all these million creatures to worship their god; and then have no god for them to worship. Paganism was in art a pure beauty; that is the dawn. Christianity was a beauty created by controlling a million monsters of ugliness; and that in my belief

1

G.K. Chesterton, Fancies Versus Fads, p. 115.

was the zenith and the noon. Modern art and science practically mean having the million monsters and being unable to control them; and I will venture to call that the disruption and the decay.¹

As to the difference between medieval and modern art, Chesterton locates it in the philosophy that nourishes the works.

And I fancy that any fair critic will be forced to find the distinction in the difference between the spiritual philosophy and atmosphere of the two epochs. The medieval man had solidity in his creed as well as his craft; he had simplicity in his soul as well as his style.²

Another defect of modern art, according to G.K.C., is that it forgets to employ the psychological fact of contrast.³

Besides this historical vision, the principle of perspective led Chesterton to see art and works of art in terms of a hierarchical scheme of values. And let it be said immediately that Chesterton suspected any attempt to deify art. In fact, such a glorification of art may lead an artist to be confused about more important matters.

Speaking of Ruskin, Chesterton remarks that

It is true that the things about which he was serious were very often exactly the things about which man ought not to be serious--taste, ornament, art, criticism.... It was partly because he did make too much of understanding a light subject like art that he could not (apparently)

1

G.K. Chesterton, Alarms and Discursions, pp. 13-14.

2

G.K. Chesterton, "The Fastidious Futurist or the Search for Originality", The Living Age, Vol. 105, April 24, 1920, p. 232.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 69.

understand at all an important subject like liberty.¹
In their criticism of Shakespeare, the Germans forget that art is an art not an attribute of divinity.

The Germans cannot be really deep because they will not consent to be superficial. They are bewitched by art, and stare at it, and cannot see round it. They will not believe that art is a light and slight thing--a feather, even if it be from an angelic wing.²

When art is divorced from life, that is, when art is considered merely in the technical sense of arrangement, it becomes devitalized. Strange as it may seem, Chesterton sees Milton as illustrating this point.

He is the Seventeenth century individualist. He is the perfect Calvinist; the man alone with his God. He is also the perfect artist; the man alone with his art. No man, perhaps, has ever had such power over his art since the arts of humanity were made. And yet there is something that makes one turn to the firesides of the Pickwick Papers and even to the fires of the Purgatorio.³

Another illustration of this glorification of art is Whistler.

He had no god-like carelessness; he never forgot himself; his whole life was, to use his own expression, an arrangement. He went in for "the art of living"--a miserable trick. In a word, he was a great artist, but emphatically not a great man.⁴

Undoubtedly, these Chestertonian strictures stemmed from his belief in the necessity of man's transcending himself.

¹ G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 153.

² G.K. Chesterton, The Crimes of England, p. 98.

³ G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 77.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 238.

Again, it is not unexpected that Chesterton finds modern artists particularly culpable in such a glorification of art.

In the future, the fastidious artists who refuse to be anything but artists will go down to history as the embodiment of all the vulgarities and banalities of their time.¹

As was previously remarked art is born when the temporal touches the eternal--and any artist who ignores this truth will find posterity confirming it.

On the other hand, Chesterton eulogizes those artists who understood this relative value of art in the scheme of things. Commenting on Chaucer's Chanticleer, G.K. C. notes in it that

...quality by which a very great artist sometimes allows his art to become semi-transparent, and a light to shine through the shadow pantomime which makes it confess itself a shadowy thing.²

Shaw is praised for caring more "for politics than for anything else; more than for art or for philosophy."³ Examining some of the great artistic masterpieces of the world, Chesterton finds his view confirmed that great art is more than merely technically correct art.

Nothing is more remarkable in some of the great artistic masterpieces of the world than their startling deficiency in much of that sense of grace and proportion

¹

G.K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 63.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 23.

³

G.K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 78.

which goes nowadays by the name of art. If art were really what some contemporary critics represent it, a matter of faultless arrangement of harmonies and transitions, Shakespeare would certainly not be anything like so great an artist as the last poetaster in Fleet Street who published a series of seven sonnets on seven varieties of sunset. Shakespeare often suffers from too much inventiveness; that which clogs us and trips us in his masterpieces is not so much inferior work as irrelevant brilliancy; not so much failures as fragments of other masterpieces.¹

This passage again reminds one of Chesterton's hostility to the too rigidly austere Grecian view of aesthetics.

But Chesterton does not only employ this hierarchical approach to art, but he further sees the relative value of works of art in the light of such a consideration. If it be remembered that Chesterton stressed the artist's role in arousing the sense of wonder in men, then his comparative judgment in the following passage will be better appreciated. Commenting on modern painters, he remarks that

Behind their ambition there is an artistic theory, though I think an insufficient one; and it is not always the silly notion of novelty, but sometimes the noble idea of renewal. There are two senses in which an artist may work to awaken wonder. One is the highest and vulgarest kind of art; the other is the highest and holiest kind of art. The former is meant to make us wonder at the artist; the latter is meant to make us wonder at the world.²

With the help of the above guiding principle, artists may be assigned a position in an hierarchical scale of values.

1

G.K. Chesterton, The Coloured Lands, p.81.

2

G.K. Chesterton, "The Fastidious Futurist, Or the Search for Originality", The Living Age, Vol. 305, April, 24, 1920, p. 302.

As a second guiding principle to rank artists, Chesterton regards the creative artist as being superior to the ultra-technical artist, that is, the one obsessed with mere arrangement. In outlining the literary development of Dickens, Chesterton notes that he improved in the narrower sense of art as arrangement, if not as a creator.¹ In short, the greatness of the artist is seen in even the glimpses and fragments of his creative vision.

As a third guiding principle, it may be said that the best test of an artist's creativity is in his imagery. In fact, Chesterton suggests as a workable definition of creation the following: "Some image evoked by the individual imagination which might never have been evoked by any other imagination and adds something to the imagery of the world." As an example of such an image, Chesterton presents Shakespeare's "multitudinous seas incarnadine."² As a test for the successful image, Chesterton comments on a critic who said that he could imagine a man shuddering at a hatpeg: but this "is only saying that one individual can imagine the imagination. It is not completely communicating the imagination by means of the image."³ The importance that

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 163.

² G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 91.

³ Ibid., p. 112.

Chesterton attaches to the role of the imagination is well brought out in the following passage.

The original quality in any man of imagination is imagery. It is a thing like the landscape of his dreams; the sort of world he would wish to make or in which he would wish to wander; the strange flora and fauna of his own secret planet; the sort of thing he likes to think about.¹

As a fourth guiding principle, the great artist communicates. Art is not merely expression. Rather the artist is under the necessity of expressing his vision in something "common and comprehensible."² In other words, the "artist does ultimately exhibit himself as being intelligent by being intelligible."³ And to be intelligible is to be "triumphantly individual."⁴ This intelligibility of the artist contrasts with the "mass of men whose feelings remain relatively incomprehensible even to themselves."⁵ In summary, "the good artist is he who can be understood; it is the bad artist who is always "misunderstood". In short, the great man is a man; it is always the third-rate man who is a Superman"⁶

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 27.

² G.K. Chesterton, The Glass Walking Stick and Other Essays, p. 184.

³ Ibid., p. 183.

⁴ Ibid., p. 184.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, The Well and the Shallows, p. 20.

⁶ G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 175.

This stress on communication as a sign of the successful artist led Chesterton to suspect the role played by the "middleman" interpreter in modern art.

The very virtues of the interpreter make him tolerant of a broken or stammering speech to be interpreted. He is naturally a little proud of understanding what nobody else can understand, and therefore he does not really encourage the original speaker to make himself understood.¹

Chesterton concludes that the artist would work harder if he knew these prigs did not exist.²

And let it be said that the larger the audience that the artist succeeds in communicating to the more successful the art, for the supreme and sacred duty of all creative expression is

...that of being sufficiently pointed to pierce at last even the mind of the dull. For, whatever be the nature of creation, it is certainly of the nature of translation; it is translating something from the dumb alphabet and dim infantile secret language in our own souls into the totally different public language that we talk with our tongues.³

This leads Chesterton to claim that "Popularity is much more important than art. The literature of democracy is the main matter for the modern world, not the literature of this or that section of the educated."⁴ On the basis of this principle of popularity, Chesterton contrasts Michelangelo and

¹
G.K. Chesterton, Sidelights on New London and Newer York, p. 204.

²
Ibid., p. 207.

³
G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 109.

⁴G.K. Chesterton, "Contemporary Fiction", The Reader Vol. 9, Dec., 1906, p. 81.

Whistler.

Michelangelo and Whistler were both fine artists; but one is obviously private, or rather, not obvious at all. Michelangelo's frescoes are doubtless finer than the popular judgment, but they are plainly meant to strike the popular judgment. Whistler's pictures seem often meant to escape the popular judgment; they even seem meant to escape the popular admiration.¹

This failure to "strike the popular judgment" is particularly characteristic of modern art.

A relative and reasonable degree of sympathy between the world and its art is more and more rapidly disappearing today. The distance is increased with every advance of what are called the advance schools of art.²

As a fifth guiding principle by which to rank works of art, Chesterton points out the necessity of unity and harmony in the composition. According to G.K.C., Yeats failed in so far as he did not relate "the mood to other realities that is creation".³ On the other hand, Browning is praised because "the net effect of the work of a great artist is like the net effect of the world of Nature--it is conflict everywhere, and yet harmony above all."⁴ Again, Dumas is praised for his "large scheme of orderly and successive adventures.... He had the power of making us

1

G.K. Chesterton, All Things Considered, p. 238.

2

G.K. Chesterton, Sidelights on New London, p. 202.

3

G.K. Chesterton, The Coloured Lands, p. 11.

4

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, pp. 92-93.

feel that his heroes were moving parts of a great scheme of adventures."¹ And, finally, on the basis of this principle of unity and harmony in great art, Chesterton praises Shakespeare for his "structural dignity".² As a concluding comment, Chesterton observes that the "object of art is to subordinate the detail that is incidental to the tendency which is general".³

As a sixth guiding principle, Chesterton carries still further his viewpoints that art must communicate, that it must reach a large popular audience, and that it must possess unity and harmony in its composition. Great art must not only communicate--it should also communicate a great idea. In his observations on Watts' "Mammon" Chesterton notes that he

...is not a man copying literature or philosophy, but rather a man copying the great spiritual and central realities which literature and philosophy also set out to copy. It may be admitted that Mammon is obviously an attempt to portray, not a twopenny phrase, but a great idea.⁴

Great art promises something of the "destiny of the spirit".⁵ And Chesterton adds that when "for the moment, the most

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "Alexandre Dumas", The Bookman, Vol. 15, July, 1902, p. 450.

² G.K. Chesterton, "English Literature and the Latin Tradition", The Fortnightly, Vol. 144, Ag., 1935, p. 187.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Coloured Lands, p. 80.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, G.F. Watts, p. 54.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 153.

intelligent art, is the most flippant art, it will mean a certain abdication of the old claims of the artist".¹

Finally, as a seventh guiding principle. Chesterton holds that great art is not explicitly didactic; rather it teaches because of the fact that it is.

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 more by his mere background, and properties, his landscape, his costume, his idiom and technique--all the part 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.²

Chesterton's distinction between the ethics of high art and the ethics of didactic art arises from the superiority he assigns to symbolism over allegory.

Symbolism is superior to allegory, in so far that the symbol exactly fits; and there is therefore no superfluous explanation that needs to pass through ordinary language, or need be, or indeed can be, translated into other words.³

In symbolism, "the meaning fits the symbol and the symbol the meaning and we cannot separate them from each other, as we can in the analysis of allegory."⁴

¹

G.K. Chesterton, All Is Grist, p. 137.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 131.

³

G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 209.

⁴

Id.

Summarizing this chapter, it may be said that Chesterton's belief in the dignity of man led him to suspect all artistic theories that would introduce external agencies to explain an artist's inspiration. For Chesterton, it is in human nature that the explanation of artistic inspiration is to be found. The ultimate explanation of artistic activity is to be found in the fact that man is made to the image and likeness of God.

In all the relationships that exist between the artifact and the artist Chesterton stressed the conceptual aspect. It is because the artist stamped his rationality on the artifact that the perceiver can extract meaning from it. This stress did not blind Chesterton to the fact that the artifact enjoyed an existence after its own right.

As to the problem of imitation, Chesterton saw the artist as copying not the works of God, but the work of God, in the sense, of the way God works. His arguments against the realists may be thus summarized: first, for art to reproduce life, it must be presupposed that life is fully known; secondly, the realists forget that in the artistic process the object emerges transformed by the vitalizing influence of the artist; thirdly, the realists forget that art is essentially exaggerative; and, fourthly, the realists forget that art is a thing of glimpses.

As to the romantic in art, Chesterton opposed the Greek aesthetic approach as not allowing room for the wildness in man. Chesterton's natural love of the Gothic

confirmed him in his belief that Christianity best nourishes the arts.

The artist must remember that nothing human is entirely creative. Art is by its nature a thing of limits. In fact, artistic creation is a fruitful strife against limits. In all his experimentation, let the artist remember that there is a law of diminishing returns, a psychological fact of nervous fatigue.

A work of art is such a personal thing that there is something transcendental about it. In the mysterious activities of the imagination, the artist feels that he touches transcendental truths. As to the beautiful artifact, it partakes of the mysteriousness of all beauty. As to the perceiver of art, his reactions and responses to an artifact will be more meaningful when it is known what man and art are.

Any one who sees life as a whole will recognize the fallacy of the "Art for Art's Sake" formula. Whether it be in the content of a work of art, or in its technique, or even in the personal qualities needed by the artist to produce art, the myopic nature of the "Art for Art's Sake" theory may be seen.

It is in religion that Chesterton finds the ultimate explanation of the arts. They exist to show forth the glory of God. In striving to do this, the artist is combatting the natural tendency to undervalue things that original sin bequeathed to man.

CHAPTER 111

APPROACHES TO LITERATURE (1)

A mere conviction that the 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.¹

1. The principle of correspondence

Since Chesterton regularly regarded everything in relationship with ultimate reality, it is to be expected that he would view literature in terms of religious and philosophical considerations. Because twentieth-century literature has severed such relationships, Chesterton quarrels with it.

Now, in our time, philosophy or religion, our theory, that is, about ultimate things, has been driven out, more or less simultaneously, from two fields which it used to occupy. General ideals used to dominate literature. They have been driven out by the cry of "art for art's sake". General ideals used to dominate politics. They have been driven out by the cry of "efficiency" which may roughly be translated as "politic's for politic's sake".²

On similar grounds, Chesterton censures the modern novelist.

The novelist can utter universal opinions and then say afterward that they are not his opinions. The novelist can satirize particular people and then say afterward that they are not particular people. The writer of a previous time was called upon to show

¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 9.

² G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 16.

more intellectual courage. If he made a cosmic generalization, it had to be what we now call a dogma.¹

In order to demonstrate the relevance of dogma to literary matters, Chesterton contrasts the literature written by pre-Christian and Christian authors. The Christian Chaucer's transformation of the pagan Troilus and Criseyde story serves to illustrate such a contrasting difference.

A Christian story entirely about Pagans; it is full of that particular moral sensitiveness and sense of spiritual freedom which alone makes possible certain sorts of criticism; and especially of self-criticism. Criseyde is a Christian Minx; and a Minx is a product of the culture of Christendom.²

Pursuing this contrast further, Chesterton observes that:

The charity of Chaucer towards Cressida is one of the most beautiful things in human literature; but its particular blend belongs entirely to Christian literature. Pagans had felt the agony and anomaly of true love given to the false lover; but the mixture was never a blend like this.³

Attempting to explain the dissimilarity, Chesterton concludes that Christian literature, as contrasted with that of the pagans, was more concerned with the problem of the "weak and wavering human will."⁴ In other words, what Chesterton is really claiming is this: that Christian dogma is the ultimate explanation for the superiority of Chaucer over the pagan writer in certain literary effects.

In order to show further the relevance of dogma to literature, Chesterton explains why the novel is a Christian

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "Contemporary Fiction", The Reader, Volume 9, December, 1906, p. 79.

² G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 134.

³ Ibid., p. 136. ⁴ Idem.

rather than a pagan product. He points out that for the Pagans:

A good man was a good man; a bad man was a bad man. For this reason they had no charity; for charity is a recurrent agnosticism towards the complexity of the soul. For this reason they had no such thing as the art of fiction, the novel; for the novel is a creation of the mystical idea of charity.¹

But it is not only with the Christian idea of charity that Chesterton associates the origin of the novel. He further associates it with the Christian doctrine of free will.

"Christendom has excelled in the narrative romance exactly because it has insisted on theological freedom."² And, again, "the same civilization, the chivalric European civilization which asserted free will in the thirteenth century, produced the thing called "fiction" in the eighteenth."³

In such a relationship between the Christian doctrine of free will and the art of story-telling, Chesterton was particularly interested. By its very nature a story presupposes the existence of freedom. "A story has proportions, variations, surprises, particular dispositions, which cannot be worked out by rule in the abstract, like a sum."⁴ Comparable to this description of a story is the Christian view of existence. To a "Christian existence is a story, which may end up in any way.

¹G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 161.

²G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 254.

³G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 193.

⁴G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 309.

In a thrilling novel (that purely Christian product) the hero is not eaten by cannibals; but it is essential to the existence of the thrill that he might be eaten by cannibals."¹

It has been shown how Chesterton used the dogmas of free will and charity to account for differences between pagan and Christian literatures. A third Christian teaching, the sacramental presence of God, Chesterton employs to explain the joy in Christian literature as contrasted to the sadness prevalent in pagan literature. Speaking of pagan poetry, he notes that

...in our special sacramental sense there is, of course, the absence of the presence of God. But there is in a very real sense the presence of the absence of God. We feel it in the unfathomable sadness of pagan poetry; for I doubt if there was ever in all the marvellous manhood of antiquity a man who was as happy as St. Francis was happy.²

In a rather lengthy passage, but worthy of complete quotation, Chesterton summarizes how he views the pagan philosophies in their relationship with literature.

From Buddha and his wheel to Akhen Aten and his disc, from Pythagoras with his abstraction of number to Confucius with his religion of routine, there is not one of them that does not in some way sin against the soul of a story. There is none of them that really grasps this human notion of the tale, the test, the adventure; the ordeal of the free man. Each of them starves the story-telling instinct, so to speak, and does something to spoil human life considered as a romance; either by fatalism (pessimist or optimist)

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G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 252.

²

G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 97.

and that destiny that is the death of adventure; or by indifference and that detachment which is the death of drama; or by a fundamental scepticism that dissolves the actors into atoms; or by a naturalistic limitation blocking the vista of moral consequences; or a mechanical recurrence making even moral tests monotonous; or a bottomless relativity making even practical tests obscure. There is such a thing as a human story; and there is such a thing as the divine story which is also a human story; but there is no such thing as a Hegelian story or a Monist story or a relativist story or a determinist story, for every story, yes, even a penny dreadful, or a cheap novelette, has something in it that belongs to our universe and not theirs.¹

Whether it be in writing literature or in responding to it, all men, knowingly or unknowingly, testify to the truths of Christianity.

In such ways as these did Chesterton contrast the pagan and Christian literatures. But his interest in the relevance of dogma to literature led him to ask a further question: Does the fact that a writer shares the philosophy of a Christian sect outside the central orthodox Christian position in any way affect his artistic vision? It is Chesterton's contention that insofar as a writer departs from Catholic Christianity and its teachings, his vision suffers and, accordingly, his work becomes less catholic, less human, in its implications and effects. To illustrate this contention, Chesterton contrasts the Catholic allegory of the medieval Piers the Plowman which deals "with the death or resurrection of a whole society, where men are members of

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G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 308.

each other" with the narrower Puritan allegory of The Pilgrim's Progress in which "schism has isolated the soul."¹

In a contrast between the work of Dante and Bunyan, the Italian poet benefits from sharing the truths of central Christianity.

In Dante the abstract theory still illuminates the poetry; the ideas enlighten even where the images are dark. In Bunyan it is the human facts and figures that are bright; while the spiritual background is not only dark in spirit, but blackened by time and change.²

Insofar as the Renaissance challenged the balance achieved by the philosophy of Catholic Christianity, the works of a Shakespeare suffered. As contrasted to the dark scepticism permeating the Shakespearean vision of a Criseyde, Chaucer treats false love in such a way that all love is not proven to be perfidious.³ In the light of these contrasts, it is not unexpected that Chesterton challenges Newman's contention that English literature is a Protestant literature.

It is very difficult to find, at least after the doubtful case of Bunyan and the deadly case of Cowper anything that can be called a purely literary inspiration coming from the purely Protestant doctrines. There is plenty of inspiration coming more or less indirectly from Paganism, but after the first excitement, hardly any from Protestantism.⁴

¹

G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 152.

²

Ibid., p. 154.

³

G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 135.

⁴

G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 152.

Moreover, because so many authors since the sixteenth century have formulated philosophies that challenge the truths of orthodox Christianity, Chesterton affirms that the critic must learn to discover the heresy involved in such works.

I wish to mark it as the occasion of saying that these literary discussions will become more and more lucid as they become more and more religious.... We shall not get the tale of the modern and recent writers told intelligently until it is told as a study in heresy.¹

From such contrasts between literature inspired by pagan and Christian philosophy, and between heterodox and orthodox Christianity, it would appear that Chesterton would have the reader draw the following conclusion: that the more fully a writer shares the mind and spirit of the central Christian tradition, the more reliable, ultimately, his artistic vision and inspiration become.

Still further did Chesterton probe into the relationships between literature and dogma. It is his belief that insofar as religion insists on dogmas, on absolutes, it theoretically supports and justifies the artist in his work. In other words, Chesterton was aware that insofar as relativistic philosophies prevail, true literature vanishes, dissolving into mere illusion.

Literature must always revolve round loyalties; for a rudimentary psychological reason; which is simply the nature of narrative. You cannot tell a story without the idea of pursuing a purpose and sticking to a point. You cannot tell a story without the

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G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., pp. 477-478.

idea of the Quest, the idea of the vow; even if it be only the idea of the Wager.¹

To explain the kind of effects produced by a literary work, absolutes must be first postulated. A universal theme of literature, the love theme, illustrates the necessity of this presupposition of absolutes.

But there is neither triumph nor tragedy in the idea of avowedly transient love; and no literature will ever be made out of it; except the very lightest literature of satire. And even the satire must be a satire of fickleness, and therefore involve an indirect ideal of fidelity. But you cannot make any enduring literature out of love conscious that it will not endure.²

The Christian idea of freedom, and, accordingly, of sin, further illustrates how literature, in the effects it produces, is dependent upon dogma. In the light of this theory, Chesterton tests Shakespeare's Macbeth. About Lady Macbeth, Chesterton observes (in spite of psychoanalytical thinking) that her sleep-walking results not "because she has resisted the impulse to murder Duncan, but rather (by some curious trick of thought) because she has yielded to it."³ Reflecting further on this same Shakespearean play, and on the peculiar artistic effects achieved by its action, G.K.C. now realizes why he is opposed to a purely creative theory of art.

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Fancies Versus Fads, p. 121.

² Ibid., p. 120.

³ Ibid., p. 31.

And there is, as it seems to me, the whole theory of uncritical and uncriticized art breaks down. As a mere matter of fact, you cannot make any sense of Macbeth unless you not only recognize but share a decided horror of murder.¹

Moreover, on the basis of the Christian doctrine of sin, Chesterton issues a warning to modern writers.

And if modern writers are going to ignore the existence of crime, as so many of them already ignore the existence of sin the modern writing will get duller than ever.²

Because of these Christian doctrines of freedom and sin, it may be concluded that:

...any stories, however wild, which describe life as a crisis are much truer than any, however careful which describe it as a process or a state. Our best living novelists are always at their best when they are most romantic.³

In the chapter on Approaches to Art, it was shown how Chesterton related the Christian doctrine of original sin to the function performed by all artistic activity. Guided by this same doctrine, Chesterton suggests why the literary artist, in his employment of the linguistic medium, must exercise eternal vigilance.

In the matter of language, which is the main matter of literature, it is clear that words are perpetually falling below themselves. They are ceasing to say what they mean or mean what they say; they are always beginning to mean something that is not only

1

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 93.

2

G.K. Chesterton, As I Was Saying, pp. 200-201.

3

G.K. Chesterton, "Contemporary Fiction", The Reader, Volume 9, December, 1906, p. 81.

quite different, but much less definite and strong. And, in this fall of man's chosen symbols, there may well be a symbol of his own fall.¹

In fact, this Christian doctrine ultimately suggests why literary revivals are so imperative. On such revivals, Chesterton states his attitude.

Aesthetic and literary revivals have often been useful and often indispensable; but they have all this peculiarity that they do not really breathe life into the dead; it is quite enough of a miracle that they breathe life into the living. A Greek revival would not revive the Greeks; we may count ourselves lucky if it revives us.²

In short, this Chestertonian insistence on the relevance of dogma to the criticism of literature means that he has no sympathy with those critics who would regard the artist as a solitary craftsman, indifferent to the commonwealth and unconcerned about moral things.

It is quite needless here to go into the old "art for art's sake" business, or explain at any 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.³

In harmony with this approach, Chesterton praises Arnold for observing that the French, as contrasted to the English, admit the relevance of dogmas in literary matters.

1

G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 163.

2

G.K. Chesterton, "Contemporary Fiction", The Reader, Volume 9, December, 1906, p. 80.

3

G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, pp 8-9.

The French admit into intellectual problems the same principle of clearly stated and generally admitted dogmas which all of us in our daily lives admit into moral problems. The French, as he puts it in a good summarising phrase, have a conscience in literary matters. Upon the opposite English evil he poured perpetual satire.¹

No doubt, it was Chesterton's unitary vision, his realization of the oneness of things, that led him to thus reject any theories that severed art from religion and morality. Moreover, he realized that since man responded as a whole, with his entire being, to an artifact that it was necessary to transcend mere artistic methods and techniques to account for the peculiar effects produced by a literary work.

In his own criticism of particular authors, Chesterton demonstrates the relevance of dogma in explaining the nature of a writer's work. Ibsen's scepticism explains the particular character of his work.

My meaning is that Ibsen has throughout, and does not disguise, a certain vagueness and a changing attitude as well as a doubting attitude towards what is really wisdom and virtue in this life--a vagueness which contrasts very remarkably with the decisiveness with which he pounces on something which he perceives to be a root of evil, some convention, some deception, some ignorance.²

In the case of George Eliot, her increasing atheism "spoilt her own particular imaginative talent."³ In the case of

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Introduction to Matthew Arnold's Essays, (Everyman's Library), p.xii

² G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 31.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 108.

Emily Bronte, she was "narrowed by the broadness of her own religious views."¹

It has been suggested in which ways Chesterton discovered relationships between literature and religious considerations. In the relationships between literature and morality, Chesterton was particularly interested: an interest which may be explainable because of his hostility to the philosophy of "Art for Art's Sake". With the Horatian didactic conception of the man of letters, Chesterton agreed. As his commentary on Tolstoy will reveal, Chesterton was pleased to notice that among contemporary critics that the "narrow notion that an artist may not teach is pretty well exploded by now."² Without morality, literature becomes vapid.

It is an atrocious libel on Meredith to say that he was scientific or purely psychological or even purely aesthetic. It is a black slander to say that he did not preach or that his characters are not properly placarded as good and bad.... Books without morality in them are books that send one to sleep standing up.³

This emphasis on the moral quality in literature explains why Chesterton ridicules the psychoanalytical critics who give "Hamlet a complex to avoid giving him a conscience."⁴ Chesterton will not allow the moral problem in Hamlet to be

¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 113.

² G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 162.

³ G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, pp. 66-67.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Fancies Versus Fads, p. 36.

dissolved in the unmoral elements of consciousness and unconsciousness.

For Chesterton, morality touches literature in the honesty with which the writer reports what he discovers in the human soul. In his criticism of Tom Jones, Chesterton remarks that the "telling the truth about the terrible struggle of the human soul is surely a very elementary part of the ethics of honesty. If the characters are not wicked, the book is."¹ Morality touches literature, again, in the risks that it prompts the artist to brave. "All great literary art involves the element of risk, and the greatest literary artists have commonly been those who have run the greatest risk of talking nonsense."² Morality touches literature, furthermore, in that it tells the artist that it is in the spirit of humility that he will produce better. Because Arnold realized this on even intellectual grounds, Chesterton commends him.

The chief of his services may perhaps be stated thus, that he discovered (for the modern English) the purely intellectual importance of humility. He had none of that hot humility which is the fascination of saints and good men. But he had a cold humility which he had discovered to be a mere essential of the intelligence. To see things clearly, he said, you must "get yourself out of the way."³

1

G.K. Chesterton, All Things Considered, p. 266.

2

G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 186.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Introduction to Matthew Arnold's Essays, (Everyman's Library), p.ix.

How Chesterton established relationships between both religion and morality and literature has been suggested. But the analogical bent of Chesterton's mind did not incline him to limit the correspondences he discovered. It will now be shown how Chesterton saw correspondences between literature and what may be called philosophical considerations.

The best way of revealing the relationships Chesterton discovered between literature and philosophy would be to state what he lays down as a literary test in the choice of words: "The test is whether the words are well or ill chosen, not for the purpose of fitting our taste in words, but for the purpose of satisfying everybody's sense of the realities of things."¹ Guided by this principle, Chesterton justifies the literary value of an expression like "interposed finger" because it suggests what is meant.² Furthermore, carrying this principle to its ultimate conclusion, he reprimands the moderns because: "They have not reached that reality, that reason of things, or even that fully realized unreason of things for which they are obviously and indeed avowedly seeking."³ For Chesterton, literature is ultimately related to the fact that man lives in a created universe, an objective universe--hence one which permits the sharing of an

1

G.K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 115.

2

Ibid., pp. 114-115.

3

G.K. Chesterton, "The End of the Moderns", The Bookman, Volume 75, December, 1932, p. 808.

inspiration between the literary artist and his public. In his criticism of Dickens, Chesterton profits from such a theory by showing how the reader may discover truths in an author's work of which the writer is unaware.

How far can a writer thus indicate by accident a truth of which he is himself ignorant? If truth is a plan or pattern of things that really are, or in other words, if truth exists at all, it must be often possible for a writer to uncover a corner of it which he happens not to understand, but which his reader does happen to understand. The author sees only two lines; the reader sees where they meet and what is the angle.¹

In the discussion that follows it will be shown how Chesterton established relationships between philosophy and such literary realities as tragedy, comedy, wit, irony and satire.

Tragedy, for Chesterton, is the "highest expression of the infinite value of human life."² It is man's free will that ushers in tragic possibilities.³ Literary tragedy but parallels the tragedy of life. In the light of this, it follows that Chesterton would regard Macbeth as the Christian tragedy of free will.⁴ It also follows that Chesterton would

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. 60.

² G.K. Chesterton, Tremendous Trifles, p. 82.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 26.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Come to Think of It, p. 172.

regard the Greek tragedies as being "so great that I doubt whether they were so fatalistic as shallow fatalists suggest."¹ As a concluding statement, on tragedy the following Chestertonian insight merits meditation. "For great tragedy is only great when it describes loss so as to increase value, and not to decrease it."²

As to comedy, Chesterton discovers it in the very nature of things.

Whether we shall ever have in England a new tradition of poetic comedy it is difficult at present to say, but we shall assuredly never have it until we realise that comedy is built upon everlasting foundations in the nature of things, that it is not a thing too light to capture but too deep to plumb.³

In fact, Chesterton believes that man is being more fully human when he perfects the spirit of comedy over that of tragedy.

By the current modern conception, the hero has his place in a tragedy, and the one kind of strength which is systematically denied to him is the strength to succeed. That the power of a man's spirit might possibly go to the length of turning a tragedy into a comedy is not admitted; nevertheless, almost all the primitive legends of the world are comedies, not only in the sense that they are based upon a certain optimistic assumption that the hero is destined to be the destroyer of the monster. Singularly enough this modern idea of the essential disastrous character of life, when seriously considered connects itself with a hyper-aesthetic view of tragedy

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Come to Think of It, p. 63.

²

G.K. Chesterton, "Keeping Up With Mr. Shaw", The Living Age, Volume 338, July 15, 1930, p. 619.

³

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 81.

and comedy which is largely due to the influence of modern France.¹

Related to Chesterton's views on comedy is his philosophy of humour and wit. Humour presupposes a scheme of values, a solemnity in things.² It is allied with the seriousness of reality.

Man can only enjoy fundamental things. In order to enjoy the lightest and most flying joke a man must be rooted in some basic sense of the good of things; and the good of things means, of course, the seriousness of things.³

In his evaluation of Stevenson, Chesterton shows his awareness of such an approach to humour. "No man can be merry unless he is serious.... Stevenson's enormous capacity for joy flamed directly out of his profoundly religious temperament."⁴ Chesterton observes that those satirists who tried to burlesque Alice in Wonderland failed to understand that humour can only be made out of serious things. "Now that is a thing that nobody would dream of doing with anything he really thought funny. It is only serious things, and even solemn things, that can be made funny."⁵

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 74.

² G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 203.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 137.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 3.

⁵ Ibid., p. 115.

To see things in perspective is to see them humourously. To see in contrast the greatness and littleness of man, the celestial nature of the spirit and the terrestrial nature of the body, is to see omnipresent possibilities for humour. Because Carlyle understood that there was something eternal about a joke, Chesterton singles him out among English authors.

His supreme contribution both to philosophy and literature was his sense of the sarcasm of eternity. Other writers had seen the hope or terror of the heavens, he alone saw the humour of them. Other writers had seen that there could be something elemental and eternal in a song or statue, he alone saw that there could be something elemental and eternal in a joke.¹

For the same reason, Rostand is praised for his Cyrano de Bergerac.

Cyrano de Bergerac came to us as the new decoration of an old truth, that merriment was one of the world's flowers, and not one of its exotics. The gigantesque levity, the flamboyant eloquence, the Rabelaisian puns and digressions were seen to be once more what they had been in Rabelais, the mere outbursts of a human sympathy and bravado as old and solid as the stars.²

Another English writer W.W. Jacobs is lauded for "the fact that he re-establishes humour as something violent and involuntary and outside ourselves."³ Chesterton quarrels with

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, pp. 111-112.

²

Ibid., p. 76.

³

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 29.

Arnold because:

He did not realize a certain deep feeling in all mystics in the fact of the dual destiny. He did not realize their feeling (full both of fear and laughter) that the body is an animal and a very comic animal.¹

There is something comic about being a man. "There is something frantic in the notion that one's own father by walking a little way can be changed by a blast of magic to a pigmy."² The presence of humour is psychologically valuable for it makes man forget the self in the awareness of something greater.³ It is laughter, the sense of humour, that clearly differentiates man from the rest of nature. "Nature is inferior to man in many things, but most of all in respect of the human speciality of humour."⁴ Truly, laughter "has something in it common with the ancient wind of faith and inspiration."⁵

It is instructive to notice the use Chesterton makes of philosophy in the distinction he establishes between humour and wit.

Humour is akin to agnosticism, which is only the negative side of mysticism. But pure wit is akin to Puritanism; to the perfect and painful consciousness of the final fact in the universe. Very briefly,

¹ G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 22.

² G.K. Chesterton, Alarms and Discursions, p. 205.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 158.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, All Is Grist, p. 12.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 158.

the man who sees the consistency in things is a wit
--and a Calvinist. The man who sees the inconsistency
in things is a humorist--and a Catholic.¹

Pursuing the philosophical implications still further,
Chesterton observes that "wit is always connected with the
idea that truth is close and clear. Humour, on the other
hand, is always connected with the idea that truth is tricky
and mystical and easily mistaken."² Not only are wit and
humour produced by different tempers--they provoke different
responses within the reader.

A wit must have something of the same running, working
and staying power as a mathematician or a metaphysician.
Moreover, wit is a fighting thing and a working thing.
A man may enjoy humour all by himself; he may see a
joke when no one else sees it; he may see the point and
avoid it. But wit is a sword; it is meant to make
people feel the point as well as see it.³

Wit is akin to logic, demanding presence of mind.⁴ As a
form of creativity, it is less commendable than the imagina-
tion though less easy to simulate.

It may be easier really to have wit, than really,
in the boldest and most enduring sense, to have
imagination. But it is immeasurably easier to pre-
tend to have imagination than to pretend to have
wit.⁵

Clinching this thought, Chesterton notes that "You can

¹

G.K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p.46.

²

Ibid., p.46.

³

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 11.

⁴

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 171.

⁵

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 43.

pretend that you have made an atmosphere; you cannot pretend that you have made a pun."¹

Philosophically it is becoming clear, whether it be in his treatment of tragedy or comedy, humour or wit, that Chesterton sees contrast as a universal principle in life. In his meditation on the nature of irony this same principle of contrast recurs.

The eternal glory of Don Quixote in the literary world is that it holds perfectly even the two scales of the mysticism of the Knight and the rationalism of the Squire. Deep underneath all the superficial wit and palpable gaiety of the story there runs a far deeper kind of irony-- an irony that is older than the world. It is the irony that tells us that we live in a maddening and perplexing world, in which we are all right; and that the battle of existence has always been like King Arthur's last battle in the mist, one in which friend slew friend, not knowing whom he slew.²

In a typically Chestertonian way, The Book of Job is regarded as perfecting in its irony that found in pagan works.

And the philosophy really perfects the pagan tragic irony, precisely because it is more monotheistic and therefore more mystical. Indeed the Book of Job avowedly only answers mystery with mystery.³

Chesterton is re-asserting his claim that insofar as the artist shares a truthful tradition, his vision improves. It should also be noticed how invariably Chesterton detects a transcendental element in the things with which his mind grapples.

¹ G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 108.

² Ibid., p. 25.

³ G. K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 104.

In his treatment of satire, Chesterton employs this same principle of contrast. Is it not the very nature of satire, it may be asked, to juxtapose the actual order of things, with all the eccentricities and foibles found therein, with some ideal order, some fixed standard? As Chesterton says:

Satire may be mad and anarchic, but it presupposes an admitted superiority in certain things over others; it presupposes a standard.... And the curious disappearance of satire from our literature is an instance of the fierce things fading for want of any principle to be fierce about.¹

Returning to this thought, Chesterton remarks that "in a world where everything is ridiculous, nothing can be ridiculed.... You cannot turn a thing upside down, if there is no theory about when it is right way up."² Again, "Satire has grown weak precisely because belief has grown weak....How can I effectively hold up to ridicule some vice which a cleverer man may be holding up to adoration?"³ Finally, "Satire involves revolt; but revolt involves a fixed ideal."⁴ Applying such a theory to the contemporary scene, Chesterton observes: "Burlesque and parody are almost impossible in our time, because nothing that happens in fancy can be more

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 75.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p.207.

³

G.K. Chesterton, "The Paralysis of Satire", The Living Age, Volume 261, April 10, 1909, p. 115.

⁴

Idem.

fantastic than what happens in fact."¹ In short, "the modern world is madder than any satires on it."²

Not only was Chesterton interested in the beliefs and standards that satire presupposes but he was further interested in the mental and moral attributes requisite for the satirist. As to the mental attributes, Chesterton understands that:

The essence of satire is that it perceives some absurdity inherent in the logic of some position, and that it draws that absurdity out and isolates it, so that all men can see it.³

What the satirist really does is to carry the antagonist's principles as far as they will go. It is the very nature of satiric writing that the practitioner must achieve a combination of "extravagance with lucidity".⁴ Chesterton applies such a theory to the "telescope satire" of Mr. Bateman which is "at once logical and ludicrous, which shoots out to the end of any process, and even in exaggerating it, defines it."⁵

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Sidelights on New London, p. 106.

² G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 82.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. 92.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, "The Paralysis of Satire", The Living Age, Volume 261, April 10, 1909, p. 114.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 137.

It was characteristic of Chesterton to further seek for the moral attributes that satire presupposes. Among these moral attributes, none is more important for the satirist than magnanimity.

It may seem a singular observation to say that we are not generous enough to write great satire. This, however, is approximately a very accurate way of describing the case. To write great satire, to attack a man so that he feels the attack and half acknowledges its justice, it is necessary to have a certain intellectual magnanimity which realises the merits of the opponent as well as his defects.¹

Accordingly, "It is impossible to satirize a man without having a full account of his virtues."² Applying this principle to parody, Chesterton notes that "Mere derision, mere contempt, never produced or could produce parody."³

Similarly, invective fails to reach an opponent for he sees how it lies.⁴ In short, sanity if not morality is the very condition of satire.⁵

Chesterton was always so conscious of the human appeal of literature that he regularly discovered correspondences between literary works and man's nature. In

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 48.

² Ibid., p. 49.

³ Ibid., p. 184.

⁴ Ibid., p. 49.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, Fancies Versus Fads, p. viii.

fact, such a way of looking at literature was a predominant characteristic of his outlook.

Every form of literary art must be a symbol of some phase of the human spirit; but whereas the phase is, in human life, sufficiently convincing in itself, in art it must have a certain pungency and neatness of form to compensate for its lack of reality.¹

Guided by this philosophy, Chesterton justifies genres which the more sophisticated reader might regard as non-literary.

There are a large number of perfectly legitimate forms of art which are almost entirely neglected by good artists--the detective story, the farce, the book of boyish adventure, the melodrama, the music-hall song.²

How Chesterton vindicates such literary genres discloses how he characteristically approached a literary document. And, need it be added, it discloses the catholicity in taste that Chesterton's philosophy of literature allows and even encourages?

How Chesterton approaches the detective story is characteristically illuminating.

Detective stories, for instance, have simply ceased to exist, because the writers of them can not make their characters interesting enough even to be effectively charged with murder. Even a detective story depends upon human psychology. You must at least have realized a man as innocent before you can be astonished at his being guilty.³

Such is what may be called the psychology of the detective story. But even a detective story cannot escape morality.

¹G.K. Chesterton, The Defendant, pp. 91-92.

²G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 173.

³G.K. Chesterton, "Contemporary Fiction", The Reader, Volume 9, December, 1906, p. 81.

The artistic effects achieved by the detective story presuppose conscience and free will in man.

But art is never unmoral, though it is sometimes immoral; that is, moral with the wrong morality. The only thrill, even of a common thriller, is concerned somehow with the conscience and will; it involves finding out that men are worse or better than they seem, and that by their own choice.¹

Carrying this thought further, Chesterton reflects that:

A detective story might well be in a special sense a spiritual story, since it is a story in which the moral sympathies may be in doubt. A police romance is almost the only romance in which the hero may turn out a villain, or the villain a hero.²

In fact, Chesterton would further have the philosophical and religious implications of the detective story determine its method of presentation.

That is, as I have said, we cannot really get at the psychology and philosophy, the morals and the religion, of the thing until we have read the last chapter. Therefore, I think it is best of all when the first chapter is also the last. The length of a short story is about the legitimate length for this particular drama of the mere misunderstanding.³

It follows from such a theory of the detective story that Chesterton observes that not "only is a detective story a perfectly legitimate form of art, but it has certain definite and real advantages as an agent of the public weal."⁴ And

¹ G.K. Chesterton, As I Was Saying, p. 205.

² G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 126.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 6.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, The Defendant, p. 119.

that "Even the love of murder stories, like other moral and religious tendencies, will lead us back to home and the simple life."¹ Of all the forms of domestic and popular literature, the detective story is to be praised for having as its first essential value the "poetry of modern life".²

Not to point out that Chesterton was aware of the distinctive qualities of the detective story as an art form would be to do injustice to his thought. As a practitioner of the art, he surely appreciated the rules it imposed.

The rules of art are as much involved in this artistic form as in any other; and it is no objection to such a form that people can enjoy it who cannot criticize it. The same is true of any song or any sound romance.³

Chesterton shares with the reader some of his reflections on the detective story as an art form. He points out that since the detective story is "not of the highest order of creation, it may be criticized from a construction angle, that is, by its plot."⁴ As to the plot, "The whole point of a sensational story is that the secret should be simple. The whole story exists for the moment of surprise; and it should be a moment."⁵ And, finally,

¹ G.K. Chesterton, As I Was Saying, pp. 203-204.

² G.K. Chesterton, The Defendant, p. 119.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p.2.

⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

We might say that the great detective story deals with small things; while the small or silly detective story generally deals with great things. It deals with diabolical diplomatists darting about between Verona and Paris and Petrograd.¹

So much for the detective story. It was this same confidence in the popular mind, the common man, that inclined Chesterton to act as apologist for the literature of farce and of nonsense. How does Chesterton establish the literary dignity of farce? In the same way and by the same philosophy that he defends all literary genres. "The artistic justification, then, of farce and pantomime must consist in the emotions of life which correspond to them".² Furthermore, he would even have the reader appreciate the moral implications of farce. "And of all the varied forms of the literature of joy, the form most truly worthy of moral reverence and artistic ambition is the form called 'farce--or in its wilder shape pantomime'.³ Viewing the problem of farce historically, he concludes: "Some day, perhaps, when the present narrow phase of aesthetics has ceased to monopolize the name, the glory of a farcical art may become fashionable".⁴

¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, pp. 38-39.

² G.K. Chesterton, The Defendant, p. 92.

³ Ibid., p. 93.

⁴ Ibid., p. 94.

In his defence of nonsense literature, Chesterton again appeals to the principle of correspondence. Contrasting Dodgson with the "Art for Art's Sake" group, he remarks that the English master of nonsense was

...a much more original artist than they. He had realised that certain images and arguments could sustain themselves in the void by a sort of defiant folly; an incongruous congruity; the very aptitude of ineptitude. It was not only very new but very national. We may even say for some time it was a secret of the English.¹

Generalizing on the nonsense literature of the Victorians, Chesterton uncovers psychological reasons to explain its existence.

The pure nonsense they invented was a holiday of the mind. I have said it was an original thing, and it was; one of the few things, like Gothic architecture, that had really never been done before. It was something to invent a happy nightmare; it was something more to create a thing that was at once lawless and innocent. It was a sort of dream-life, lived by the nineteenth century Englishman parallel to his rather realistic real life.²

Chesterton believes that, with this form, the English had added a new note to literature.³

It has been shown that Chesterton unearthed correspondences between both farce and nonsense literature and man's nature. It may very well be that his defence of these

¹

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 112.

²

Ibid., p. 119.

³

G.K. Chesterton, Sidelights on New London, p. 30.

two popular literary genres is related to a more general artistic principle that he holds: that the function of art is to "uplift" the soul.¹ His defence may be further related to the more philosophical principle that man is more truly human when he is given to the spirit of joy. In fact, Chesterton is troubled by the fact that even the greatest creative geniuses rarely succeeded in depicting artistically this uplifting emotion.

The festive mood, the social spirit, when it really for a time achieves happiness, is a thing that has been very rarely presented in literature. There are all sorts of shades of melancholy, which have been most delicately dealt with by the artistic geniuses of all ages.²

As to contemporary literature, Chesterton sees the discrediting of humility as the explanation for its lack of the spirit of joy.³ Guided at least sub-consciously by the principle of correspondence, Chesterton concludes that "the modern world can only believe in unhappiness, and therefore refuses to take it seriously. But the result is a great loss of the purely lyrical quality and instinct." Even artistically, 'tis better for man to be joyful!

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G.K. Chesterton, All Things Considered, p. 79.

²

G.K. Chesterton, "Charles Dickens", The Living Age, Volume 312, February, 1925, p. 480.

³

G.K. Chesterton, The Defendant, p. 99.

⁴

G.K. Chesterton, Avowals and Denials, p. 104.

To justify the popular literary genre of melodrama Chesterton establishes relationships between it and human nature. Melodrama is a legitimate art form because it reflects the universal tendency in man to simplify the morally complex.

Melodrama is a form of art, legitimate like any other, as noble as farce, almost as noble as pantomime. The essence of melodrama is that it appeals to the moral sense in a highly simplified state, just as farce appeals to the sense of humour in a highly simplified state. Farce creates people who are so intellectually simple as to hide in packing-cases or pretend to be their own aunts. Melodrama creates people so morally simple as to kill their enemies in Oxford street, and repent on seeing their mother's photograph. The object of the simplification in farce and melodrama is the same, and quite artistically legitimate, the object of gaining a resounding rapidity of action which subtleties would obstruct.¹

In other words, melodrama, like all art, is but an approximation to life: its distinctive characteristic is to accentuate the simplification.

Continuing this defence of the literature of the common man, Chesterton justifies the philosophy of the fairy tale.

Exactly as a man in an adventure story has to pass various tests to save his life, so the man in this philosophy has to pass several tests to save his soul. In both there is an idea of free will operating under conditions of design.²

Carrying the moral implications of the fairy tale still

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 132.

² G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p.307.

further, Chesterton comments:

I think the poets have made a mistake; because the world of the fairy-tales is a brighter and more varied world than ours they have fancied it less moral; really it is brighter and more varied because it is more moral.¹

Employing this same principle, Chesterton vindicates the literature of chivalric romance, for life is a quest, a test, and an adventure.²

Even the role of the hero in popular literature satisfies a deep felt human need. "Humanity creates heroes because of the impossibility of carrying out the conception that all men in the real order are divine in origin".³ A hero is "a man of heroic stature, a demigod, a man on whom rests something of the mystery which is beyond man."⁴ The hero reminds men of their forgotten nobility.

Whether it be in his treatments of the detective story, farce, melodrama, or the fairy tale, Chesterton has consistently and insistently acted as an apologist for the popular element in literature. Such a defence presumably is an outgrowth of his philosophical conviction that what men have in common is more significant than what they have

¹

G.K. Chesterton, All Things Considered, pp. 254-255.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 148.

³

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 72.

⁴

Idem.

individually. Since Chesterton so regularly employs the popular test to arrive at a conception of the nature of literature, it would be illuminating to see how he further applies this test in his reflections on language, rhetoric, style, and the truths of literature.

As to language, Chesterton characteristically justifies the slang used by the English humourist W.W. Jacobs on the basis of what it corresponds to in the order of reality.

Slang is the reverse of a coarse thing. It is, if anything, an over-complex and over-civilized thing. It has some of that systematic indirectness which makes a darkness in the late medieval philosophy and poetry. This twisted luxuriance is perfectly represented in the admirable locutions of Mr. Jacob's angry sailors.¹

Accordingly, "slang and rude dialect can be relished by a really literary taste, but not by a merely bookish taste."² The closer that language, the closer that literature touches elemental things, the more effectively it will achieve literary effects. From a literary stand-point, Cobbett chose the better part in using colloquial language.

The combination of the object and subject is what makes writing into literature, and the Rural Rides are pure literature. Perhaps they are all the more literature because they might be counted loose and colloquial even for language.³

On the basis of the popular test, Chesterton defends

¹ G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 34.

² G.K. Chesterton, Alarms and Discursions, p. 239.

³ G.K. Chesterton, William Cobbett, p. 190.

rhetoric. In this defence, it would appear that he relied upon his philosophy that to be artificial is to be natural.

We cannot understand the eighteenth century so long as we suppose that rhetoric is artificial because it is artistic.... We are still haunted with a prejudice that verbal form and verbal effect must somehow be hypocritical when they are the link between things so living as a man and a mob.¹

Even the art of rhetoric corresponds to certain psychological realities.

In the application of the popular test to style, Chesterton rather explicitly reveals his conception of the function of the literary art.

A fine style is not a narrow or fastidious or aristocratic thing, as many think. On the contrary, style is the truly democratic thing, since it touches all common things with the same fairy wand. A man who loves all men enough to use them rightly is a democrat. A man who loves all words enough to use them rightly is a stylist. Style comes out, as the fraternal human sentiment comes out preeminently and most definitely is dealing with coarse or everyday things.²

The stylist is helped by a philosophy that puts a halo around so called ordinary things.

This same popular test may be used as a touchstone for the truth of a literary work. In fact, "All the most subtle truths of literature are to be found in legend. There is no better test of the truth of serious fiction than the

¹ G.K. Chesterton, A Short History of England, p. 195.

² G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 130.

simple truths to be found in a fairy tale or an old ballad."¹ Guided by the popular test, Chesterton praises Dickens for his "potential victory over time" which "comes from the same popular root of popularity".² Similarly, he defends the popular element in Rostand.

When the decadent critics sneered at Rostand's popularity they were simply sneering at his lucidity. They were protesting against his power of conveying what he meant in the most direct and telling fashion.³

On the other hand, for his failure to pass the popular test, Chesterton censures Milton.

I think a great part of the trouble which the ordinary mind has in appreciating Milton (or, rather Milton in pleasing the ordinary mind, for please remember that the popular mind is much more important than Milton) lies in the mistake of always describing him as a pure and classical writer. Really he was a highly complex and in some ways too modern writer. The perfectly classical can be understood by anybody.... It is the secondary and distorted art which really and suddenly loses the sympathies of the people.⁴

G.K.C. comments that Homer would have shrunk from the Miltonic inversions, the abrupt ellipses, the sentences that sometimes come tail foremost.⁵ Chesterton invites the reader to contrast the classical Homer with the modern writer Joyce.

Ulysses contains a number of very queer words; though perhaps none queerer than Ulysses. For the comparison

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Fancies Versus Fads, p. 119.

² G.K. Chesterton, Sidelights on New London, p. 226.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 107.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 76.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, "Milton and His Age", The Living Age, Volume 264, February, 1910, p. 558.

is curious in itself--seeing that throughout a prolonged pagan epic Homer manages to be very pure in very plain language, while Joyce manages to be very coarse in very esoteric language.¹

In short, the less esoteric the arts are the better. Ultimately, esoteric art is an outgrowth of the heresy called "Remotism" which "is the tendency to think first of things which, as a matter of fact, lie far away from the actual centre of human experience."² In closing, it might be further said that "superior literature is centripetal, while inferior literature is centrifugal."³ Such a literary test may be applied universally whether it be to Shakespeare or the latest "shocker".⁴

The correspondences that Chesterton found between literature and the popular mind have been sufficiently revealed. But G.K.C. was not only interested in the relationships that may be established between literary works and what they appeal to in human nature. He was further interested in the correspondences that might be discovered between the artist and his work. In other words, he was concerned with such matters as the consciousness of the artist and literary style. In laying down what he regards as the primary function of criticism, Chesterton reveals

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Sidelights on New London, p. 196.

² G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 211.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Fancies Versus Fads, p. 112.

⁴ Idem.

how he relates the consciousness of the artist with the literary work.

Criticism does not exist to say about authors the things that they know themselves. It exists to say the things about them which they did not know themselves. If a critic says that the Iliad has a pagan rather than a Christian pity, or that it is full of pictures made by one epithet, or course he does not mean that Homer would 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 sub-conscious 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 can express. Either criticism is no good at all (a very defensible position) or else criticism means saying about an author the very things that would have made him jump out of his boots.¹

It is because both artist and critic share experiences which are ultimately derived from the same created universe that, at times, the critic may be more articulate about the significance of an artistic work than the artist himself. Needless to say, Chesterton frowns upon the following impressionistic view of criticism as given by H.L. Mencken.

The critic is first and last simply trying to express himself: he is trying to achieve thereby for his own inner ego the grateful feeling of a function performed, a tension relieved, a katharsis attained, which Wagner achieved when he wrote Die Walkurie, and a hen achieves when every time she lays an egg.²

Such appreciation may, undoubtedly, have literary value, but it is not criticism: for true criticism allows that there

¹
G.K. Chesterton, quoted in M. Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 178.

²
G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 15.

is a common, objective standard to which the work may be submitted.¹

It is in style that the primary relationship between an artist and his work is discoverable. "The style is the man".² Moreover, style is ultimately related with what the writer has to say, with his philosophy.

I am one of those humble characters for whom the main matter of style is concerned with making a statement; and generally, in the sense of Stevenson, with telling a story. Style takes its own most living and therefore most fitting form from within.... The sentence takes its shape from motion; and takes its motion from motive. And the motive (for us outcasts) is what the man has to say.³

Literature becomes great when meaning and style are identical. Because he achieved this ideal, Ruskin is a literary master.

Now in this respect Ruskin can claim the highest element of greatness, the fact that the meaning and the style are identical. We in the modern very ignorant world have to use short and explosive sentences, like the volleys of the dead hailstones. But Ruskin's long rolling sentences, with their triumphant rise and fall, were themselves expressions of his belief in continuity, and the sublime curves of history.⁴

By the same principle, Browning's grotesque style is justifiable since it "was very suitable for the expression of

¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 15.

² G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 167.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 111.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 150.

of his peculiar moral and metaphysical view."¹ Browning's style is further justifiable because:

These metres and manners were not accidental; they really do suit the sort of spiritual experiment Browning was making in each case. Browning, then, was not chaotic; he was deliberately grotesque.²

In attempting to explain the particular literary effects achieved by Stevenson's style, Chesterton again resorts to the fundamental principle of correspondence.

I have had cause to remark again and again, in the course of this sketch, on a certain almost avid decision in the strokes of Stevenson's style. I believe that it was due in no small degree to that inheritance of definition, that goes with an inheritance of dogma.³

On the other hand, Chesterton records Tennyson's failure to achieve a correspondence between content and style.

He had a great deal to say; but he had much more power of expression than was wanted for anything he had to express. He could not think up to the height of his own towering style.⁴

Because the aesthetes revered manner to the detriment of matter, they are also censurable.

Mere finicking aesthetes have neither the courage to do unfamiliar things nor the humility to try to do them well. One who merely worships manner apart

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 140.

²

G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 172.

³

G.K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 101.

⁴

G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 165.

from matter will certainly adhere to the manner that he happens to understand and to find successful.¹

From this discussion on style, two principles become clear: first, that style has philosophical implications; and, secondly, that style becomes more effective insofar as the correspondence between matter and manner becomes identical.

One final example of Chesterton's use of the principle of correspondence remains to be considered: how he established relationships between literature and life--in other words, what Chesterton had to say on the traditional problems of artistic imitation and verisimilitude. As a guiding principle for this discussion, the following Chestertonian axiom may be laid down: that life is "much more real than literature."² In other words, Chesterton will not countenance that eccentric inversion that would subordinate life to art. Because art ultimately derives its significance from life, from the created universe, the artist must "see life steadily and see it whole".³ Accordingly, it is incumbent upon the literary artist to give a picture resembling real life.⁴

¹ G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 8.

² G.K. Chesterton, As I Was Saying, p. 137.

³ G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 60.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 16.

That Chesterton would have the artist present a picture resembling real life has been pointed out. But what is "real life"? Needless to say, Chesterton would not espouse the claims of the naturalistic realists who would have the literary arts merely reproduce photographically the "outer" aspects of life. In his defence of Dickens against the realists, Chesterton advocates a doctrine of imitation that is "inner" focussed.

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 life, at least in this detail, that he is alive. His art is like life, like life, it cares for nothing outside itself, and goes on its way rejoicing.... 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.¹

Because literature considers things from the "inside", it is distinguishable from science which considers things from the "outside".² In fact, the dignity, and even necessity of literature, arises from this fact that it sees things from the "inside".

Nothing is important except the fate of the soul; and literature is only redeemed from an utter triviality, surpassing that of noughts and crosses, by the fact that it describes not the world around us or the things on the retina of the eye or the enormous irrelevancy of encyclopedias, but some condition to which the human

1

G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 14.

2

G.K. Chesterton, The Glass Walking Stick and Other Essays, p. 179.

spirit can come. All good writers express the state of their souls, even (as occurs in some very good writers) if it is a state of damnation.¹

Furthermore, because literature thus sees things from the "inside", it may be asserted that the "full literary function" is to translate "living thoughts into literature".²

Though it must be admitted that an artist must see life steadily and see it whole, and that he must present a picture resembling real life, nevertheless, in practice, selection and elimination are of the very essence of his art.

Life is too large for us as it is: we have all too many things to attend to. All true romance is an attempt to simplify it, to cut it down to plainer and more pictorial proportions.³

But this artistic selection does not exempt the artist from submitting to the higher necessity of resembling "real life". The artistic defect in Stevenson was

...that he simplified so much that he lost some of the comfortable complexity of real life. He treated everything with an economy of detail and a suppression of irrelevance which had at least something about it stark and unnatural.⁴

In short, the work of art cannot escape the law of probability. In that sense, art differs from life.

¹
G.K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. 50.

²
G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 110.

³
G.K. Chesterton, The Glass Walking Stick, p. 140.

⁴
G.K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 150.

The things that are quite certain about Nelson are all the improbable things; that he died in the very hour of triumph; that he died in a vessel that bore the name victory; that he was shot through wearing the flaming stars with which he had just offered to die in honour--all the coincidences that would be called crude and far-fetched in a story.¹

In relationship with reality, what, then, is the major function of literature? Is it the function of literature merely to mirror reality? Or should literature rather transform reality in such a way as to make mankind see the eternal freshness "deep down things"? It is clear that for Chesterton such questions would be merely rhetorical. It is clear that for him "the only excuse of literature is to make things new".² In short, the function of literature, as of all the arts, is to make men "remember that they forgot".³

It has been sufficiently demonstrated how Chesterton establishes correspondences between literature and the nature of things. Before concluding this discussion, however, in order that his conception of the literary arts be not misrepresented, it would appear necessary to stress that Chesterton was fully aware that it was neither theology nor philosophy that made a work artistic. He was aware,

1

G.K. Chesterton, The Glass Walking Stick, p. 43.

2

G.K. Chesterton, Irish Impressions, p. 22.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 97.

in other words, that an artifact establishes its identity by submitting to laws peculiar to its own mode of being. In an illuminating passage, Chesterton reveals his outlook on the relationship between art and morality, and on the distinction between superior and inferior art.

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 landscape, his costume, his idiom and technique--the part of his work, in short, of which he is probably entirely unconscious than by the elaborate and pompous moral dicta 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.¹

In literature, the matter and the manner are one. Needless to say, such a statement does not mean that a work of art may not express a particular philosophy. On the contrary, it means that the particular effects achieved by a work are inseparable from its ideological content. In his criticism of Vanity Fair, Chesterton employs such a theory.

A good novelist always has a philosophy; but a good novel is never a book of philosophy. The moral philosophy of Thackeray unites him rather with the old moralists than with the modern pessimists. He says, as his favourite authors, Solomon and Horace, would say, that life is in a sense vanity. He would never admit, in the sense of modern authors like Zola and Dreiser, that life is all vileness.²

1

G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 162.

2

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 61.

Contrasting the works of William James and Henry James, G.K.C. shows how aware he was of the distinctive nature of the novel.

It seems to me where William James failed was exactly where Henry James succeeded; in making a whole scheme out of fine shades and doubtful cases. Now that can be done with a novel: for it only claims to be exceptional. It cannot be done with philosophy: for it must claim to be universal.¹

For Chesterton, a proper criticism of literature must always focus attention on the work, not on the artist.

In a commentary on Don Quixote, Chesterton remarks that it

...may be read by a child without preface or explanation; it tells its own story; and if there is much more in the story than most of us have ever found, that dark treasure is to be sought in the story and not in the notes.²

Because Chesterton recognized the autonomy of the artifact and its right to be judged by artistic standards, he is willing to concede that it is conceivable, by exclusively literary criteria, that a work may be "better literature, but worse philosophy."³ To illustrate such a possibility, Chesterton chooses Fitzgerald's philosophically heterodox poem Omar Khayyam which in the "technical sense of literature" is a remarkable achievement: the poet in his mastery of the verbal sense achieved a "combination of something haunting and harmonious."⁴ As an artist, Fitzgerald triumphed. As any

1

G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 32.

2

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 24.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 199.

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G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 192.

man of letters, Fitzgerald has a right to a "fair critical comprehension of any particular effect which he obviously aims at and achieves."¹ In short, the critic must submit himself to the work and to its manifest intention.

A difficulty has arisen. Does not this Chestertonian acceptance of the autonomous nature of an artifact appear incompatible with the approaches he took towards literature in terms of correspondences between the literary art and the nature of the created universe? Would it not appear that his position is paradoxical? Further reflection, however, would establish that these approaches to literature are reconcilable. He might be thus vindicated: A work (despite its philosophy) may be regarded as an example of "pure" literature solely on the basis of the particular artistic effects it achieves through adroit verbal arrangement. But, even such a work of "pure" literature does not exist in a vacuum: for, does not even such a work of "pure" literature suggest correspondences between itself and the human agent and his artistic vision that gave it birth?--between itself and the medium in which it is incarnate?-- between itself and the order of reality it resembles?-- between itself and the effects it achieves within its perceivers? In approaching a work, Chesterton was unwilling to ignore such correspondences.

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "Milton and Merry England", The London Mercury, Volume 5, December, 1921, p. 141.

2. The principle of transcendence

The most effective manner to illustrate how Chesterton employed the principle of transcendence in his approach to literature would be by considering his treatment of such literary matters as language, style, and criticism. From such considerations, it will become apparent that he discovered what may be termed an elusive element, something miraculous, something mysterious, in the achievements called literary.

As to language, the medium in which the literary artist works, Chesterton was cognizant that it is essentially weak and imperfect for the performance of its task. That this is so is not surprising: for, the whole business of literature is really an attempt to describe the indescribable.¹ In an undated letter to his wife Frances, Chesterton refers to this imperfect nature of language: "Forgive the verbosity of one whose trade is to express the inexpressible."² And, perhaps it should be added that he believes the things that are inexpressible are not those that are too subtle, for words, but those that are too simple.³

¹ G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 112.

² G.K. Chesterton, quoted in Ward, op. cit., p. 113.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. 50.

It follows, therefore, that when the literary artist succeeds in his use of the linguistic medium that he is to be praised for that "magic and almost non-human power of saying what he meant, the power of language."¹ No wonder, then, that the literary artist is to be looked upon with awe, for, whether his achievement be in prose or poetry, his work is a testimony to "the miracle of language".² In fact, "Literature is but language; it is only a rare and amazing miracle by which a man really says what he means."³

But not only is the literary work a testimony to the artist's triumph in saying what he really meant. It is a witness to the fact that great literature means immeasurably more than it could possibly say. "Every classical phrase means much more than it says; in contrast with the too vivid and violent modern phrase, which says more than it means".⁴ Illustrating this principle, Chesterton quotes the following line from Malory in which Joseph of Arimathea speaks to the Knight: "But you shall see it unveiled in the

¹

G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 14.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 60.

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G.K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 115.

⁴

G.K. Chesterton, "English Literature and the Latin Tradition" The Fortnightly, Volume 144, August, 1935, p. 186.

city of Sarras, in the spiritual place."¹ For Chesterton, such a line exemplifies the "mysteriousness of words", the "power which a certain verbal combination has over the emotions and even over the soul."² The miracle of literary works will be explained when it is known "what we ourselves mean when we are moved by them."³

Turning from language to a consideration of style, it will again be observed how recurring the principle of transcendence is in Chesterton's approach to the literary arts. In fact, it is a test of the successful literary style that it resists definition. Of such a nature was Newman's style. "The quality of his literary style is so successful that it succeeds in escaping definition."⁴ Moreover, because of this inimitable character, literary style cannot be copied. "That is why style is untranslatable; because it is possible to render the meaning, but not the double meaning".⁵ And, strange to say, style is such an indefinable element that it may contradict the theme embodied in a work. The classics had some "elusive lyrical quality"

¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 216.

² Idem.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 114.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p.48.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, Irish Impressions, p. 185.

to show that they really did not believe in "Vanitas vanitatum".¹ In short, style is of such a nature that when successful it eludes analysis.

In his views on literary criticism, Chesterton's guidance by the principle of transcendence is clearly manifest. He suggests why he was so guided: "All criticism tends too much to become criticism of criticism; and the reason is very evident. It is that criticism of creation is so very staggering a thing."² It is difficult to judge of "the very creative element in human literature".³ Thus, criticism, at its best, can but suggest the inexhaustible quality of a work.

It may perhaps be wondered whether one could possibly say a worse thing of anybody than that he had said 'the last word' on a subject. A man who says the last word on a subject ought to be killed. He is a murderer; he has slain a topic. The best kind of criticism draws attention not to the finality of a thing, but to its infinity. Instead of closing a question, he opens a hundred.⁴

In quizzing students on the appropriateness of beautiful lines of poetry, educationalists forget this transcendental quality of all truly imaginative literature.

But the vital objection to this question about the suitability of certain poetic phrases does not lie in

¹ G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 81.

² G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 173.

³ Idem.

⁴ Quoted in M. Ward, Return to Chesterton, p. ix.

the fact that no children could answer it, it lies in the fact that nobody in the world can answer it. Pleasure in the beautiful is a sacred thing.... The act of insisting upon his analysing the holy thing, I think, without the smallest doubt or the smallest desire to exaggerate, is as insolent as asking him to dissect his favourite kitten or account for his preference for his mother.¹

For Chesterton, before the beautiful in art, there is such a thing as a healthy inarticulateness.

But anybody who understands poetry knows when poetry has fulfilled those laws; as certainly as a mathematician knows when a mathematical calculation is correct. Only, the mathematician can explain, more or less, why the answer is exactly right; and the lover of poetry can never explain why the word or image is exactly right.²

It follows that there is real merit in the modern substitution of the word "appreciation" for "criticism".

In one sense, indeed artistic effects of the Byronic sort are not things to be criticized at all. In this case there is real meaning in the modern substitution of the word "appreciation" for the word "criticism". These are not things that we criticize, but things which we appreciate--or do not appreciate.³

The good critic should be like God in the great saying of the Scottish mystic: "Easy to please--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

¹ G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 84.

² G.K. Chesterton, As I Was Saying, p. 88.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 272.

the subtle pleasure in a thing done well with the simple pleasure in it being done at all.¹

In other words, "This is the beginning of all sane art criticism: wonder combined with the complete serenity of the conscience in the acceptance of such wonders."²

In his reflections on the novel as a literary genre, Chesterton is again guided by this approach of transcendence. If asked what the novelist could learn from the primitive fable, Chesterton might answer something to this effect: that he could learn that "Man, in his simpler state, always felt that he himself was something too mysterious to be drawn".³ From folk-lore, the novelist could learn that man is happier when the mystery he contemplates is outside himself.

Folk-lore means that the soul is sane, but that the universe is wild and full of marvels. Realism means that the world is dull and full of routine, but the soul is sick and screaming. The problem of the fairy tale is--what will a healthy man do with a fantastic world? The problem of the modern novel is--what will a madman do with a dull world? In the fairy tale the cosmos goes mad; but the hero does not go mad. In the modern novels the hero is mad before the book begins, and suffers from the harsh steadiness and cruel sanity of the cosmos.⁴

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "The Romance of Rhyme," The Living Age, Volume 304, March 13, 1920, p.664.

² G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 57.

³ G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 89.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Tremendous Trifles, p. 125.

From Dickens, the modern novelist could learn that a simple character can generate interest.

Modern novelists try to make long novels out of subtle characters. But a subtle character soon comes to an end, because it works in and in to its own centre and dies there. But a simple character goes on forever in a fresh interest and energy, because it works out and out into the infinite universe.¹

Moreover, simplicity frequently explains the triumph of a fictitious character.

The triumph of giving us the impression of having a great deal more in him than appears between the two boards of the story. Smaller characters give us the impression the author has told the whole truth about them, greater characters give the impression that the author has given of them, not the truth, but merely a few hints and samples.²

The defect in Stevenson's characters is that:

There is no halo of hearsay or indirect impressions. Stevenson was relentlessly relevant; he limited himself to words so perfect and so few that his figures were really too clear to be convincing.³

What the realistic novelist forgets is that romance is not a sugar-coating of reality: rather, it is reality.

Every new realistic novel serves to show that realism, when entirely emptied of romance, becomes utterly unreal. For romance was only the name given to a love of life which was something much larger than a life of love, in the Byronic sense.⁴

Defending the romantic element in Stevenson, Chesterton points

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, pp. 146-147.

² G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, pp. 190-191.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 283.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 226.

out that:

It is to be noted that this sort of romanticism, as compared with realism, is not more superficial, but on the contrary more fundamental. It is an appeal from what is experienced to what is felt.¹

Because romanticism is true, the Dickens' novel was popular.

"The Dickens novel was popular, not because it was an unreal world, but because it was a real world; a world in which the soul could live."²

In reconsidering this indictment against realism, in the light of the principle of correspondence, Chesterton was willing to concede that even the realistic novel may be justified. First, he contrasts the romantic fiction of a Masfield with that of the realists.

Mr. Masfield tells a story that is in itself strange, or splendid, or even supernatural, but tells it in the common graphic language of life. The realist tells a story which is commonplace and trivial, but tells it in the vocabulary of a lunatic asylum.³

But, then, Chesterton adds:

Probably they are both right, and both express needs of the soul which we must never underrate or forget. Perhaps the old simple fearlessness and plainness in the presence of the prodigious is rightly to be balanced with our mystery and excitement in the presence of the small.⁴

In other words, art is justifiable insofar as it serves the demands of human nature.

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G.K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 76.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 74.

³

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 182.

⁴

Idem.

In the literary genre called biography, Chesterton discovers this same transcendental element. In a sense, biography is not even possible.

The only biography that is really possible is autobiography. To recount the actions of another is not biography, it is zoology, the noting down of the habits of a new and outlandish animal. It is most valuable and interesting, but it does not deal with the spring and spirit of a man's existence.¹

Furthermore, to write the biography of a man it would be necessary to begin at the beginning of the world.

William Blake would have been the first to understand that the biography of anybody ought really to begin with the words "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." If we were telling the story of Mr. Jones of Kentish town, we should need all the centuries to explain it.²

In writing his life of Shaw, Chesterton admits that about some aspects of Shaw's life and character he is "a reverent agnostic; it is well to have some dark continent in the character of a man of whom one writes. It preserves two very important things--modesty in the biographer and mystery in the biography."³

Finally, Chesterton's use of the principle of transcendence is revealed in his reflections on literary history. It is not only the individual that is indefinable. The national soul of a people is equally so.

¹ G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 1.

² G.K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 1.

³ G.K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, p. 97.

The ancient English literature was like all the several literatures of Christendom, alike in its likeness, alike in its very unlikeness. Like all European cultures, it was European; like all European cultures, it was something more than European. A most marked and unmanageable national temperament is plain in Chaucer and the ballads of Robin Hood.¹

On the basis of the principle of transcendence, Chesterton tested each of the great literary periods. Though the eighteenth century is to be praised for its return to reason, for its Latin logic and French clarity, for its great oratory,² nevertheless it is too rationalistic, not sufficiently mystical to suit Chesterton's taste: there is not enough of the element of fairy tale present.³ In short, this period sees everything in terms of black and white--it lacks a "positive pleasure or positive passion about mystical things."⁴

By the same principle, Chesterton tested the Victorian period. First, in typical Chestertonian fashion, he admits that this whole business of attempting to define ages is somewhat presumptuous.

Like all great epochs, like all great things, it is not easy to define. We can see it, touch it, smell it, eat it; but we cannot state it. It was a time when faith was firm without being definite. It was a time when we saw the necessity of reform without once seeing the possibility of revolution.⁵

¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 13.

² G.K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 108.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Glass Walking Stick, p. 117.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 200.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 44.

The Victorian period is praise-worthy in the richness and humanity of its unconscious tradition,¹ in the revival of the romantic love life as in Morris,² in its willingness to satirize itself.³ On the other hand, as in the Victorian artist Watts, it is to be censured for its Puritanism, its glorification of the intellect, its lack of mysticism.

He is, as I say, a stoic; therefore to some extent, at least, a pagan; he has no special sympathy with celtic intensity, with Catholic mysticism, with Romanticism, with all the things that deal with the cells of the soul, with agonies and dreams.⁴

The trouble with Puritanism is that it "was a refusal to contemplate God or goodness with anything lighter or milder than the most fierce concentration of the intellect."⁵ From this incubus, the Victorian Age found it difficult to free itself.

In the literature of the early twentieth century, in that of Barrie and de la Mare, Chesterton detects two movements towards the fanciful, the mystical, and away from the merely rational and realistic.

In short, we may say that the early twentieth century presented two movements towards the fanciful or fantastical, and away from the merely rational or material;

¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 31.

² G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 143.

³ G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 189.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, G.F. Watts, p. 60.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw, pp. 42-43.

a centripetal movement and a centrifugal movement. The one spiritual spiral worked inwards, towards the secret subjective dreams of man; the other worked outwards towards the spiritual powers or truths that seemed beyond the reach of man. The new world made by the first was the great, glowing, iridescent bubble of the Barrie daydream; the world revealed by the second was the world of strange skies, at the ends of the earth and the corners of the sea, that appears in the far-off flashes of the de la Mare imagination.¹

Needless to say, if asked which of these worlds of fantasy he preferred, Chesterton would choose the one of de la Mare.² Leaving this world of fantasy, and viewing the tendencies in the whole of contemporary literature, G.K.C. detects symptoms of the modern quarrel with rationalism and realism, and a movement towards the elemental, the primitive, the supra-rational.

And all the great writers of our time represent in one form or another this attempt to reestablish communication with the elemental, or, as it is sometimes more roughly or fallaciously expressed, to return to nature.²

To summarize, it has been shown in this chapter how Chesterton employed the principles of correspondence and transcendence in his approaches to literature. It has been shown that Chesterton believes that the literary artist's vision is bettered insofar as he shares the truths of the central Christian tradition; that Christianity offers the best theoretical support for literary activity; that a writer's work suffers insofar as his philosophy is heterodox;

¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 212.

² G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 127.

that morality and literature are inextricably interrelated; and, that correspondences can be established between the literary genres and the nature of man and the created universe. For Chesterton, every form of the literary art must be a symbol of some phase of the human spirit. On the basis of this principle, he justifies such popular literary genres as melodrama and farce. One of the highest functions of art is to "uplift" the human spirit. The literary artist is wise to establish contact with the popular mind, with elemental things. It is the distinguishing mark of literature that it considers things from the "inside".

As to the principle of transcendence, Chesterton discovers an elusive element in such literary matters as language, style, and criticism. It is the function of the literary artist to express the "inexpressible". Great literature means more than it says. The miracle of literary works will be explained when men know what they mean when they respond to art. A successful literary style resists analysis. The critic should realize that there is such a thing as a healthy inarticulateness before the fact of artistic creation.

CHAPTER IV

APPROACHES TO LITERATURE (11)

Consequently, in attempting to decide whether an author will, as it is cantly expressed, live, it is necessary to have firm convictions about what part, if any part, of man is unchangeable. And it is very hard to have this if you have not a religion; or, at least, a dogmatic philosophy.¹

1. The principle of limitation

In the discussion that follows Chesterton's use of the principle of limitation will be revealed in his approaches to: first, to language and style; and, secondly, to literature and criticism.

In order that Chesterton's philosophy of literature be seen in proper perspective, it is vitally important to understand his philosophy of language. In an incidental way, while commenting upon the paintings of the Victorian artist Watts, Chesterton reveals one of his fundamental approaches to language--that of its radical imperfection.

There is one definite current conception on which this idea that Watts' allegorical art is merely literary is eventually based. It is based upon the idea that lies at the root of rationalism, at the root of useless logomachies, at the root, in no small degrees, of the whole modern evil. It is based on the assumption of the perfection of language.²

Developing further this conception of language, Chesterton

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 206.

² G.K. Chesterton, G.F. Watts, p. 43.

asks how the literary artist can possibly translate into words all his internal moods and meanings?¹ Further reflection leads G.K.C. to the conclusion that, in truth, an author "cannot create words."² The linguistic medium indeed reflects man's finiteness.

Human nature being such, and language being such, it is not surprising that modern and civilized language consists largely of "dead words. Half of our speech consists of similes that remind us of no similarity; of pictorial phrases that call up no picture; of historical allusions the origin of which we have forgotten."³ With such a medium the literary artist attempts to capture his vision. And to further complicate things, the artist must remember that

...the very shape and sound of words do make a difference, even in the baldish prose, as they do in the most beautiful poetry. We cannot quite prevent the imagination from remembering irrelevant associations, even in the abstract sciences like mathematics.⁴

Language being such, it is not surprising that a literary artist like Stevenson quarrels with the linguistic medium.

It seems to me that he was always seeking in words for a combination that should also be a compression; for two words that should instantly give birth to the third thing that he really wanted to say. It may

1

G.K. Chesterton, G.F. Watts, p. 44.

2

G.K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 94.

3

G.K. Chesterton, All Things Considered, p. 215.

4

G.K. Chesterton, St. Thomas Aquinas, p. 121.

be questioned, of him as of any other artist, whether he ever really succeeded in saying it.¹

Chesterton concludes that "for the artist the external result is always a fizzle."²

Viewing the problem of style at one of its lowest levels, that of alliteration, Chesterton explains why an English writer naturally employs it.

If any English writer does not avoid it, he is perpetually dragged into it when speaking rapidly or writing a great deal, by the whole trend and current of the English speech; perhaps that is why the Anglo-Saxon poetry even down to *Piers Plowman* (which I enjoy highly) was all alliteration.³

In praising the billingsgate of Cobbett, Chesterton justifies it by again resorting to the distinctive character of the English language.

I pointed out that English excels in certain angular consonants and abrupt terminations that make it extraordinarily effective for the expression of the fighting spirit and a fierce contempt.⁴

A writer must resign himself to the peculiarities of his national tongue.

Considering the problem of style on a more strictly literary level, Chesterton attributes the success of Stevenson's style to his acceptance of limits.

¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 144.

² Ibid., p. 15.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Well and the Shallows, p. 5.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, William Cobbett, p. 7.

Whatever else Stevenson stands for, he certainly stands for the idea that literature is no 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 assisting the rights of the soul of man, as against various formless forces which some regard as the souls of nature; the anima mundi of the pantheists.¹

In other words, Stevenson's style with its acceptance of limits and restraint, contrasts with the formless, illimitable character of a style that would be theoretically supported by another philosophy. Even the grotesque style of a Browning obeys this principle of limitation.

Those who speak, for example, of Robert Browning's neglect of form utter a wholly senseless criticism. Perhaps no English poet had as keen an instinct for form as Browning had. But form can be grotesque as well as dignified, ugly in the conventional sense as well as beautiful.... Even in the search after the fantastic there is a sense of form; even in artistic lawlessness there is a law.²

Yes, the artist is free--free to obey the form that his vision suggests, nay, even compels.

In his conception of literary originality, Chesterton characteristically employs this approach of limits. In fact, he makes an observation that may be prophetic about contemporary literature.

It may be, after all that literature is dying of originality and starving from lack of plagiarism. It

1

G.K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 164.

2

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 92.

may be that if we wish to build high we must build more in concert.¹

Developing this point further, Chesterton vindicates the plagiarism of a Dumas.

But, he would, in fact, borrow from anybody if he were driven to it, even from history or from Shakespeare. This indifference to indebtedness, this disdain of originality, cannot but appear contemptible to the current artistic spirit. But, paradoxical as it may appear, there is a great deal about it that is not at all contemptible, that is great, that is even classic, in a classic tradition.²

In this classical tradition, Samuel Johnson was original enough "not to be afraid of imitation".³ Moreover, the attitude a writer adopts towards "borrowed" material reflects not only himself but his age.⁴

In his comments on the literary genres, whether it be the novel, the drama, or the essay, Chesterton points out how a principle of restriction operates in the literary arts. Discussing the significance of ideas in the novel, he remarks:

One reason is that I think there is in all literature a sort of purpose; quite different from the mere moralizing that is generally meant by a novel of purpose. There is something in the plan of the idea that is straight like backbone and pointing like an arrow. It is meant to go somewhere, or at least to

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "Alexandre Dumas", The Bookman, Volume 15, July, 1902, p. 447.

² Idem.

³ G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 199.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 30.

to point somewhere: to end, not only in the modern sense of an ending, but in the medieval sense of a fruition.¹

By restriction and direction, the novelist's creative idea curbs and aids his artistic expression.

In his conception of the drama, Chesterton again reveals his acceptance of the classical law of limits. He associates this law with the workings of the imagination.

It is exactly in the artistic atmosphere, where rules and reasons are so hard to define, that this unification would be most easy to defend. This limitation to a few scenes and actors really has something in it that pleases the imagination and not the reason.²

According to this principle, Shakespeare would have been more judiciously inspired if he had chosen to keep Hamlet in Denmark, avoiding the English adventure.³ Furthermore, carrying this principle to its logical conclusion, it may be said that the dramatist achieves greater artistic success insofar as he obeys the demands of his own craft. When he thus submitted, Ibsen triumphed artistically.

The moment he is content to be a craftsman, and express himself through the images of his craft, he expresses living truths too great to be defined by the craftsman, let alone critic.

Paradoxical as it may seem, limits suggest the illimitable.

¹

G.K. Chesterton, All Is Grist, p. 83.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Fancies Versus Fads, p. 111.

³

Idem.

⁴

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 136.

As to the essay as a literary genre, Chesterton admits that he fears its indefiniteness in form;¹ that he fears its tendency to debate theoretical matters without the responsibility of being theoretical.² Considering this genre further, and guided by the principle of limitation, he concedes that this indefiniteness may be the distinctive characteristic of the essay, justifying it as a separate literary genre.

Of all forms of literature they are perhaps the least to be fitted into the old standards of judgment, by which it was in some sense possible to legislate for the drama or the ode.³

In his views on literary criticism and literary history, this same principle of limitation recurs. In fact, it is the sign of the great critic that he appreciates the "limitations of language".⁴ Moreover, because the good critic appreciates the existence of limits, he can appreciate the literary virtues of a Swift, or a Blake, or a Wordsworth.⁵ In his commendation of literary virtues, the good critic will realize the "poverty and clumsiness of the language of praise."⁶

¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Glass Walking Stick, p. 187.

² Idem.

³ G.K. Chesterton, All Is Grist, p. 202.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 206.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, pp. 86-87.

⁶ G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 206.

In his criticism of twentieth-century literature, Chesterton employs the principle of limitation. In general, the primary defect of modern literature is that it either forgets or ignores the law of limits.

They are always hunting for a humour that shall be completely original. But if a thing were completely original it would be completely unintelligible. If a man made an entirely new language it would not be a language at all.¹

Too much striving for originality deprives literature of its universal appeal.

It is more likely than not, in eighty years, the little tricks and mannerisms of the new Noel Coward sort of comedy will seem utterly false and farcical. A new school of humour will produce a burlesque of the Noel Coward comedy, and every action will seem affectation.²

Viewing the development of literary history, Chesterton comments on such literary experiments.

In short, the real moral of all these things is the astonishing rapidity with which moods and standards change and change again; often changing back from the third condition to the first. There is nothing so mystifying as the rapidity with which new literary methods harden, except the brittleness with which they break.³

Guided by this theory, and donning his prophetic robes, Chesterton predicts that contemporary literature will give up its notion of experiment and return to the classical type.⁴

¹

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 31.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Avowals and Denials, pp. 155-156.

³

G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, pp. 42-43.

⁴

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 67.

2. The principle of perspective

From the historical viewpoint, Chesterton regularly approached literature from three principal perspectives: first, the perspective of the timeless; secondly, the perspective of tradition; and, thirdly, the perspective of the Zeitgeist. These approaches will now be considered.

Since it was Chesterton's way to see the temporal in the perspective of the timeless, it is to be expected that in his conception of literature its universal character would be stressed. Such an approach immediately becomes apparent when he says of great men of letters that they cannot "avoid being humane and universal".¹ Don Quixote exemplifies the supra-temporal value of all great literature.

Literature celebrates the eternal youth of humanity; in literature all men are equal, in century as well as station. The feelings with which it deals are always fresh; in its wild empire an Englishman may fall in love with an Ancient Egyptian princess.²

Great literature, like Everyman and Samson Agonistes "will not be behind the times, but rather beyond time."³ In short,

The highest use of the great masters of literature is not literary; it is apart from their superb style and even from their emotional inspiration. The first use of good literature is that it prevents a man from

1

G.K. Chesterton, The Defendant, p. 130.

2

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 24.

3

G.K. Chesterton, "Keeping Up With Mr. Shaw", The Living Age, Volume 338, July 15, 1930, p.617.

being merely modern. To be merely modern is to condemn oneself to an ultimate narrowness.¹

Moreover, the timeless value of all great literature is this: that it corrects the partial vision of each historical period.

Literature, classic and enduring literature, does its best work in reminding us perpetually of the whole round of truth and balancing other and older ideas against the ideas to which we might for a moment be prone.²

No wonder, then, that Chesterton can sincerely say that

For my part, I do not care whether I am Victorian or old-fashioned or a survival of the Aesthetes of the 'eighties; for all this chronological conflict seems to me extraordinarily unimportant. But I do find it amusing to watch the continual rise of new fashions which is invariably the return of old fashions.³

Because of his respect for the timeless, Chesterton was further enamoured of the traditional. And tradition in English literature (despite the Teutonic myth) means going back to the origin of European civilization and culture.

The truth is that all the old English traditions, scholarly and legendary, chivalric and vulgar, were at one in referring back to Roman culture, until we come to a new crop of very crude pedants in the nineteenth century.⁴

It is to be remembered that England, "like all Christian countries", drank "its longest literary draughts from the classic fountains of the Ancients; nor was this (as is often

1

G.K. Chesterton, *The Common Man*, p. 22.

2

Idem.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p.210.

4

G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 94.

(loosely thought) a matter of the mere "Renaissance".¹

As to the English language, the same indebtedness to classical sources is seen.

The English tongue and talent of speech did not merely flower into the gargantuan polysyllables of the great Elizabethans; it had always been full of the popular Latin of the Middle Ages.²

In the European languages, abstract and philosophical words are the same "for the simple reason that they all come from the things that were the roots of our common civilization. From Christianity, from the Roman Empire, from the medieval Church, or the French Revolution".³ In his treatment of the English language, Chaucer "saw that he could Frenchify it enough to make it English.... Chaucer Europeanized English; he brought it into the current of culture, by setting it to foreign tunes and mixing it with foreign terms."⁴

Nourished by this classical tradition were the great English writers, like Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton. A writer like Chaucer "was exceedingly English, and therefore partly French."⁵ Shakespeare was literally bursting with the classical spirit.⁶ As contrasted to Shakespeare, Milton

1

G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, pp. 13-4.

2

Ibid., p. 14.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Tremendous Trifles, p. 188.

4

G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 77.

5

G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 94.

6

G.K. Chesterton, "English Literature and the Latin Tradition," The Fortnightly, Volume 144, Ag., 1935, p. 185.

tried

...to do consistently and consciously what Shakespeare had only done incidentally and unconsciously, to bring English literature into the full inheritance of Latin literature and the classical culture of the Continent.¹

Moreover, Chesterton saw tradition in wider, more catholic terms than this merely pagan classical culture. He knew what Christianity had done to transform the Graeco-Roman tradition. He knew that the roots of Protestant England were in the Catholic Middle Ages. A writer like Chaucer proves that English poetry was English long before it was Protestant.² In his cosmic vision, Shakespeare was a Catholic--he saw everything the way a Catholic sees, even in his agnostic passages.³ Even a writer like Bunyan was suspected by his fellow Puritans for holding views too close to the central Christian position.⁴ Accordingly, Chesterton does not accept Newman's thesis that English literature is a Protestant one.

It is very difficult to find, at least after the doubtful case of Bunyan and the deadly case of Cowper anything that can be called a purely literary inspiration coming from the purely Protestant doctrines. There is plenty of inspiration coming more or less indirectly

¹
G.K. Chesterton, "English Literature and the Latin Tradition", The Fortnightly, Volume 144, p. 187.

²
G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 236.

³
Ibid., p. 237.

⁴
Ibid., p. 238.

from Paganism, but after the first excitement, hardly any from Protestantism.¹

And, Chesterton concludes that "England could have produced a great English literature, as France produced a great French literature without any change in the ancient European religion."²

Besides the classical and Christian traditions, Chesterton further recognized that the national temper and tradition of the English people must be considered in studying its literature. As his comment on Sir Walter Scott will reveal, he was aware that, in a great writer, the national temper permeating a work did not diminish its universal appeal. "There is doubtless a truth in this tradition for every writer who is really universal is also national."³

It will not be possible here, in great detail, to describe the English national temper as seen by G.K.C. However, it would appear pertinent to point out some of the more salient and characteristic qualities he discovers in the English temper. He believes that the English have an intense insular self-consciousness,⁴ that patriotism is their religion,⁵ and that they have an "extremely subtle blend of liberty and aristocracy and a universal belief in courtesy,

¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p.241.

² Ibid., p. 239.

³ G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 263.

^{4&5} G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 80.

with a sort of by-product of snobbishness".¹ He further believes that the English are pre-eminently simple and well-meaning,² possessed by a spirit of casualness, a fine absence of mind.³ In this last national trait, perhaps, there is a suggestion why Chesterton discovers in England a tradition of comedy, of farce, of nonsense, from the medieval Chaucer to the twentieth century W.W. Jacobs. With this great national heritage of humour, Chesterton relates the triumph of Chaucer: "a sort of creation that is called the fantastic or the topsy-turvy."⁴ This national blend of humour is not really satiric; it gets near "farce".⁵

In terms of the particular Zeitgeist of each period and of tradition, Chesterton criticises each of the great literary ages. Needless to say, space does not permit a detailed description of how Chesterton views each of these literary eras.

As has been previously mentioned, Chesterton would discover the origins of English literature in the classical tradition, in the Christian Middle Ages, and in the national temper. Since he regularly criticises other eras on the basis of what he considers praise-worthy in medieval thought,

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Sidelights on New London, p. 126.

² G.K. Chesterton, "Thackeray", The Bookman, Volume 17, April, 1903, p. 150.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 21.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 199. ⁵ Ibid., p. 198.

it would be instructive to present what he favours in the medieval outlook. He is primarily pleased with this era because it is a religious age based on doctrine:¹ that is, an age in which the supernatural is more "beautiful" than the natural.² He is pleased with the age because it possesses a well-balanced philosophy,³ full "of the idea that one thing must balance another, that each stood on one side or the other of something that was in the middle, and something that remained in the middle."⁴-- an age concerned with ideas as ideas, and not as medieval ones.⁵ He is pleased with the age because of its symbolism and its allegory: an age that crowded all possible significance into things.⁶ About allegories and abstractions, the medieval jongleurs "could feel almost like lovers."⁷ And, finally, he is pleased with the age because of its sense of human solidarity,⁸ its attempt to bridge the sense of beauty and the sentiment of humanity.⁹

¹ G.K. Chesterton, What's Wrong With the World, p.21.

² G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 251.

³ Ibid., p. 55.

⁴ Ibid., p. 149.

⁵ Ibid., p. 64.

⁶ G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 196.

⁷ G.K. Chesterton, Alarms and Discursions, p. 99.

⁸ G.K. Chesterton, "Contemporary Fiction", The Reader, Volume 9, December, 1906, p. 78.

⁹ G.K. Chesterton, "Are the Artists Going Mad?", The Century, Volume 105, December, 1922, p. 277.

As an age of human solidarity, the "medieval period was rather especially the period of communal or corporate thinking, and in some matters it was really rather larger than the individualistic modern thinking."¹ In a sense, it may be said that Chesterton measures each succeeding age by a medieval yard-stick.

Of the Renaissance, Chesterton states what he considers to be its particular genius. "The Renaissance genius was never so much intellectually inspired as when he seemed to be intellectually intoxicated."² As contrasted to the Middle Ages, the Renaissance suggests why Voltaire called Shakespeare an "inspired barbarian". It was an age that dared to challenge limits.

Let it be agreed, on the one hand, that the Renaissance poets had in one sense a wider as well as wilder range. But though they juggled with worlds, they had less real sense of how to balance a world.³

The Renaissance meant a "plunging into those dark problems of scepticism with which the world is wrestling still."⁴ And, yet, in contrast with the Renaissance, the Middle Ages could in some aspects be "more rational, or even more rationalistic."⁵

¹ G.K. Chesterton, St. Thomas Aquinas, p. 43.

² G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 231.

³ Ibid., p. 224.

⁴ Ibid., p. 229.

⁵ Ibid., p. 231.

On the other hand, in many ways, the Renaissance but continued the medieval tradition. It is in the Middle Ages that the Shakespearean origin is to be found.¹ As in the Middle Ages, Shakespeare saw nothing incongruous in intermingling tragedy with farce.² As in the Middle Ages, Shakespeare was an omnivorous plagiarist.³ As in the Middle Ages, Shakespeare believed in a moral struggle between duty and morality as in a Hamlet.⁴ As in the Middle Ages, Shakespeare believed in placing an abnormal idea (such as the Nietzschean morality of a Richard III) in its proper context.⁵ In truth, as any one would conclude from watching a medieval drama like King Herod, the Elizabethan Age was really the fulfilment of the medieval period.

Nobody could see the medieval play without realizing that the Elizabethan was rather the end than the beginning of a tradition; the crown and not the cradle of the drama.⁶

As has been observed, Chesterton was interested in what Protestantism has done to English literature. His theory of the cause of the religious upheaval is instructive.

...the sixteenth-century schism was really a belated revolt of the thirteenth-century pessimists. It was

¹

G.K. Chesterton, The Glass Walking Stick, p. 170.

²G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 147.

³G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 30.

⁴G.K. Chesterton, Fancies Versus Fads, p. 36.

⁵G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 24.

⁶G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 147.

a backwash of the old Augustinian Puritanism against the Aristotelian liberality.¹

It is to be noticed that Chesterton identifies Protestantism with Puritanism.

As to seventeenth century literature, Chesterton sees it in terms of the struggle between Puritanism and tradition. And he sides with the Cavaliers in their quarrel with the contemporary Augustinians.

All the popular tradition there is, as in songs, toasts, rhymes, or proverbs, is all Royalist. About the Puritans we can find no great legend. We must put up as best we can with great literature.²

Even in religious poetry the Puritans were not superior to their contemporaries. The most genuine religious poetry is found in writers like Vaughan, Traherne, Crashaw, Herbert, and even Herrick.³ These seventeenth century poets were superior to Milton and the Puritans in "magnanimity, in chivalry, in the joy of life, in the balance of sanity and subtlety."⁴

On what grounds is Chesterton so severe with Puritanism? He opposes it on three major grounds. First, he is averse to the Puritan claim to spiritual aristocracy.

Milton's revolt against rhyme must be read in the light of history. Milton is the Renaissance

1

G.K. Chesterton, St. Thomas Aquinas, p.x.

2

G.K. Chesterton, A Short History of England, p.165.

3

G.K. Chesterton, "Milton and Merry England", The London Mercury, Volume 5, December, 1921, p. 138.

4

Idem.

frozen into a Puritan form; the beginning of a period which was in a sense classic, but was in a still more definite sense aristocratic because the Calvinist was the spiritual aristocrat.¹

Belonging to this aristocracy, Milton was guilty of "that weird and wicked ambition of the modern artist; he wanted "to think for himself".² In short, Milton is

...the seventeenth-century individualist. He is the perfect Calvinist; the man alone with his God. He is also the perfect artist; the man alone with his art. No man, perhaps, has ever had such power over his art since the arts of humanity were made. And yet there is something that makes one turn to the firesides of the Pickwick Papers, and even to the fires of the Purgatorio.³

In the second place, it follows that Chesterton is opposed to the Puritans because they showed no respect for the popular traditions.⁴ And, finally, Chesterton opposes the Puritans because as Milton they challenged by their stoicism the English tradition of emotionalism.

But when we have passed that great and desolate man, which may really be counted an exception, we find that the tradition of English emotionalism immediately resumed and unbrokenly continuous.⁵

That the Puritans lost their battle against tradition becomes clear in the next great period of English

¹
G.K. Chesterton, "The Romance of Rhyme", The Living Age, Volume 304, March 13, 1920, p. 661.

²
G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 77.

³
Idem.

⁴
The Living Age, Volume 304, p. 661.

⁵
G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 211.

literature, the Augustan Age. Chesterton is pleased to observe that the anti-Puritan tradition survived in the Neo-classical writers like Collier, Swift, and Johnson.¹ Moreover, Johnson's works are characterized as bearing "the marks of an age that still believed in final and fixed art forms of art, in lucidity of expression, and continuity of aim."² In a global view of English literature from Cowley to the Romantic Coleridge, Chesterton sees this quality of lucidity as being characteristic of Neo-classical poetry.

Progress means persistence in the direction of one object maintained for a considerable period; reaction means some upheaval of disgust or contradiction, which overthrows the recent persistence and appeals back, perhaps, to its opposite. Thus we might truly say that English poetry from Cowley to Akenside progressed towards clearness and metrical accuracy. And we might truly say that Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* was a reaction against this progress, the writing of a mere bad ballad in order to show how much more life there was in the old barbaric mysticism than in the recent easy-going rationality.³

In his praise of the Augustan Age, Chesterton further describes Pope as "the last great poet of civilisation".⁴ To those critics who thought Pope's translation of Homer misleading and unfaithful, Chesterton responds that:

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "Milton and Merry England", The London Century, Volume 5, December, 1921, p. 139.

² G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 199.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Introduction to Carlyle's Past and Present, Selected Modern English Essays, Oxford University Press, pp. 292-293.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 47.

Pope is not very like Homer; but he is so far like Homer that he talks like a sane man; and the great Elizabethans did not always do so; neither indeed the great Romantics.¹

Besides praising the Augustans for their lucidity in expression and their civilized sanity, Chesterton further praises them for their employment of satire as a public corrective.²

Of Alexander Pope, Chesterton remarks that:

And in all the forms of art which peculiarly belong to civilisation, he was supreme. In one especially he was supreme--the great and civilised art of satire. And in this we have fallen away utterly.³

In the eighteenth century, the public spirit is again seen in the Augustan cultivation of the artificial.

In modern speech one uses artificiality as meaning indefinitely a sort of deceit; and the eighteenth century was far too artificial to deceive. It cultivated the completest art that does not conceal art. Its fashions and costumes positively revealed nature by avowing artifice.⁴

Finally, the eighteenth century is to be praised for its public-spirited oratory and rhetoric. Such an Augustan use of eloquence is illustrated in Samuel Johnson.

It required collision and provocation to sting him into some of those superb exaggerations, things that were the best he ever said, but things that he never would have written. It was that eighteenth-century idea of a responsible and final justice in the arts. Our own time has run away from it as it has run away from all the really virile and constructive parts of

1

G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 219.

2

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 47.

3

Idem.

4

G.K. Chesterton, What's Wrong With the World, p.181.

Rationalism, retaining only a few figments of its verbalism and its historical ignorance.¹

The eighteenth century was not Chesterton's conception of Utopia. Its rationalistic deism would hardly find favour with him. In his eyes, this man-made "religion" was intent on eliminating the supernatural. "The rationalist was not really so much concerned to urge the rational against the irrational; but rather specially to urge the natural against the supernatural."² Humanitarianism with its "tear of sensibility" was the best that deism could offer to mankind.³ This rationalistic century lacked a "positive pleasure or positive passion about mystical things."⁴ In short, it was an age that ignored or failed to understand that romance is existence. No doubt, Chesterton would group the eighteenth century with the twentieth in their failure to understand the romance in a Walter Scott.

He will never be understood until Romance is understood, and that will only be when time, Man, and eternity are understood. To say that Scott had more than any other man that ever lived a sense of the romantic seems, in these days, a slight and superficial tribute. The whole modern theory arises from one fundamental mistake--the theory that romance is in some way a plaything with life, a figment, a conventionality, a thing upon the outside. No genuine criticism of romance will ever arise until we have grasped the fact that romance lies not upon the

1

G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 71.

2

G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 220.

3

G.K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 114.

4

G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 200.

outside of life, but absolutely in the centre of it.
The centre of every man's existence is a dream.¹

As a preliminary statement on Chesterton's views on nineteenth century Romanticism, it should be immediately pointed out that he does not identify romance with Romanticism: for, "Romance, in its healthiest sense, is as old as the world".² He believes that the Romanticism of the nineteenth century may be associated with the German "infinite."³ As exemplified in a Carlyle, he relates this Romanticism with irrationalism. "The supreme value of Carlyle to English literature was that he was the founder of modern irrationalism; a movement fully as important as modern rationalism."⁴ He praises the Romantics for developing the possibilities in the love and liberty themes, but observes that these noble notions were "simply fragments of Christian theology, torn out of their proper place."⁵ In a Burns, he sees the romantic protest against a repressive Puritanism. "It is that which gives the indescribable and violence to the cry of Burns; and irrationality that was perhaps the beginning of

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- ¹ G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 162.
 - ² G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 198.
 - ³ G.K. Chesterton, As I Was Saying p. 91.
 - ⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 112.
 - ⁵ G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 200.

Romanticism."¹ In a Byron, he sees the Romantic enthusiasm for life, and its trust in the heart.

And anybody, who can feel the fine shades, in fiction or philosophy, will agree that the old school called Romantic, or even Byronic, which we feel still volcanic in the Brontes, had really about it a curious confidence in life, an unbroken hope in the heart.²

In a Blake, he sees the Romantic love of "the irrevocable".³

On the other hand, there are things that Chesterton distrusts in Romanticism. In a Romantic like Blake, he censures his extreme individuality, his failure to share a tradition, preferring some "symbolic or cabalistic system of his own."⁴ In a romantic like Shelley, Chesterton is disturbed that the angel beats "his luminous wings" in "the void".

But Shelley's works are not concerned, I do not say with material ideas, but scarcely even with material symbols or incidents. The whole of his work amounts to a great epic about an inspiring example of nothing in particular that was done nowhere in particular at no particular time. It was entirely consistent with this characteristic that he considered the Universe as the most exquisite master-piece constructed by nobody.⁵

In his criticism of the twentieth-century School of Peter Pan may be found G.K.C.'s major grounds for opposing a Shelley.

They are the dreams of somebody taking refuge from real life in an inner life of the imagination; but

1

G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 271.

2

G.K. Chesterton, All Is Grist, p. 93.

3

G.K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 21.

4

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 79.⁷

5 Ibid., p. 84.

not necessarily of somebody believing that there is also a larger universal life corresponding to that imagination.¹

In conclusion, three additional comments of Chesterton upon Romanticism should be mentioned. First, he believes that the contemporary difficulty in appreciating Romanticism spring from the fact that it has become a "truism".² Secondly, the contemporary critics do not seem to understand that what they call Romanticism is, in reality, the only form of realism, the only form of rationalism.³ And, thirdly, it is interesting to observe about England that it is "the only nation in the world whose absolutely first-class literature is rather romantic than classical."⁴

Speaking from personal experience, Chesterton gives an estimate of the Victorian Age in which he points out his quarrel with the traditional picture given of this era.

There was much in Victorian ideas that I dislike and much that I respect; but there was nothing whatever about Victorian ideas corresponding to what is now called Victorian. I am actually old enough to remember the Victorian Age; and it was almost a complete contrast to all that is now connoted by the word. It had all the vices that are now called virtues; religious doubt, intellectual unrest, a hungry credulity about new things, a complete lack of equilibrium. It also had all the virtues that are now called vices; a rich sense of romance, a passionate desire to make the love

1

G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 208.

2

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 37.

3

G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 59.

4

G. K. Chesterton, The Glass Walking Stick, p. 65.

of man and woman once more what it was in Eden, a strong sense of the absolute necessity of some significance in human life.¹

In the attitude and philosophy they adopted towards this Zeitgeist, Chesterton tests and ranks each of the Victorian authors.

The Victorian literary artists who did not see the Zeitgeist in true perspective are censured. The defect in Thackeray was that he "did not know the way things were going; he was too Victorian to understand the Victorian epoch."² As to Tennyson, "His weakness was not being old-fashioned, but being fashionable. His feet were set on things transitory and untenable, compromises and compacts of silences."³ Tennyson "might have been a greater poet if he had been less a man of his dubious and rambling age."⁴ On the other hand, Thompson is praised for not accepting the Victorian biases: "He knew too much."⁵ As contrasted to the typically Victorian Macaulay, Dickens saw through the idea of inevitable progress.

Dickens, whom so many considered to be at the best a vulgar enthusiast, saw the coming change in our society much more soberly and scientifically than

¹
G.K. Chesterton, The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton, p. 142.

²
G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 128.

³
G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 33.

⁴
G.K. Chesterton, "Tennyson", The Bookman, Volume 16, December, 1902, p. 350.

⁵
G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 150.

did his better and more pretentious contemporaries.¹
 In other words, Dickens was conscious that progress can change its direction. As to Browning, he was saved by more or less ignoring the Zeitgeist; by looking at life the way they did in the Renaissance. "He was like the Elizabethans in their belief in the normal man, in their gorgeous and overloaded language, above all in their feeling for learning as an enjoyment and almost a frivolity."²

In pointing out what Chesterton finds reprehensible about the twentieth century some form of abbreviation becomes imperative. In outline, these are the reasons G.K.C. looks on the twentieth century with a jaundiced eye. First, in this century men fail, because of the absence of religion, to see life's significance.³ Because reason has been neglected, modern thinkers care little whether they are philosophically right. "The modern idea is that cosmic truth is so unimportant that it cannot matter what any one says."⁴ Because of a lack of philosophy, the twentieth century lacks a sense of equilibrium.

The modern world seems to have no notion of preserving different things side by side, of allowing its

¹
 G.K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. ix.

²
 G.K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 154.

³
 G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 196.

⁴
 G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 14.

proper and proportionate place to each, of saving the whole varied heritage of culture.¹

In its abandonment of reason, the twentieth century has adopted the cult of self-analysis, of psychology--with the presumption that other ages were ignorant of such knowledge.

Our fathers did not talk about psychology; they talked about a knowledge of human nature; but they had it; and we have not. They knew by instinct all that we ignore by the help of information.²

In short, the modern age is The Psychological Age, which means the study of the mind has priority over its use.³ As to tradition, the twentieth century does not seem to comprehend its importance, not being familiar with the arguments for it.⁴

The diseased condition of the Zeitgeist is reflected in twentieth century literature. Because of the lack of religion, of humility, there is a lack of joy in modern literature.⁵ As contrasted to the atheists of Victorian times, modern atheists are pessimists.

...in the Victorian time even the atheists could be optimists. In the present Georgian time, the atheists are resolved to be pessimists. A man of genius like George Meredith could essentially, if not avowedly, pit Nature against God. A man of genius like

1

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p.225.

2

G.K. Chesterton, Sidelights on New London, p.60.

3

G.K. Chesterton, All Is Grist, p. 74.

4

G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 112.

5

G.K. Chesterton, The Defendant, p. 99.

Mr. Aldous Huxley is much more annoyed with Nature than he is with God.¹

Moreover, because the modern age has not revered reason, its literature is noted for the expression of "confused ideas."² A writer like James Joyce coins "new words" by a confusion of the old: "this literary style is offered to us, with unimpeachable solemnity, as a rebirth of language."³ Because the modern age has been antipathetic towards reason, its literature, as all of its art, is fragmentary. In the twentieth century there is

...music cut up into notes, pictures cut into cubes, prose cut into isolated images. There went with this a love, not only of vivid or violent colour, but of very jagged outline or pattern; as if to emphasize the fact of something broken off sharply from everything else. In the case of literature, the thing so broken off was the individual mind, or even a subdivision of the individual mind. It has been said that Protestantism isolated the soul; however, this may be, it is true that this kind of modernism isolates not only the mind but the mood.⁴

In modern literature, there is found the "detached image, with or without the elucidation of its indwelling idea."⁵

Because modern times fail to appreciate the arguments for tradition, writers like Shaw and Wells "grew up in narrow circumstances"; for they were "cheated of their

1

G.K. Chesterton, Avowals and Denials, p. 169.

2

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 63.

3

Idem.

4

G.K. Chesterton, Sidelights on New London, p. 188.

5

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, pp. 189-190.

full heritage of a great civilization."¹ Because the modern age has ignored tradition, it is intoxicated by an experimentation obsession.

The modern writers who have been hailed alternatively as dynamic or demoniac are, for good or evil, but the forerunners of others yet more dynamic or more demoniac. Both sides are heartily agreed about this: and I have the misfortune to disagree with both of them.²

In other words, futuristic writing has "no future."³

From the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, it has been shown in which ways Chesterton criticized literature in terms of the Zeitgeist. It might be well to pause here to consider how G.K.C. justifies such an historical approach to literary criticism.

In answering the contention of the aesthetes that the writer should be considered independently of his age, Chesterton answers that:

It is useless for the aesthetes (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.⁴

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "George Bernard Shaw", Fortnightly Review, Volume 136, August, 1931, p. 151.

² G.K. Chesterton, "The End of the Moderns", The Bookman, Volume 75, December, 1932, p. 807.

³ Idem.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, pp. 9-10.

In his philosophy of literary history, Chesterton was guided by certain recurring principles. As a first essential principle, he contends that it is erroneous to regard literary history deterministically. Such a deterministic approach presents an improper perspective: it ignores what may truly be described as the English literature that could have been.¹ Guided by this principle, G.K.C. criticises the proposition that the history of the English novel is one of continuous progress. "The history of the great English novelists would alone be enough to show that the story was never a pure story of progress; but of rebellions and reactions; revolutions and counter-revolutions."² In other words, Chesterton opposes the notion that "the evolution of literature branches out into new experiments, and always follows the line of those experiments."³

As a second guiding principle in his approach to literary history, Chesterton detects a tendency to revert to the simple in literary movements. In assigning Stevenson a place in English literature, Chesterton sees his distinctive contribution as being a sharp return to simplicity, and adds in explanation: "Nor is there the smallest reason to

¹ G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 237.

² G.K. Chesterton, As I Was Saying, p. 167.

³ G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 66.

suppose that the literary history of the future will in this respect be any different from the literary history of the past."¹ In short, "all true revolutions are reversions to the natural and the normal."² Contemporary literature exemplifies such a contention.

And all the great writers of our time represent in one form or another this attempt to reestablish communication with the elemental, or, as it is sometimes more roughly or fallaciously expressed, to return to nature.³

Carrying this principle further, it is Chesterton's belief that new literary movements copy the stylistic characteristics of the last century but one.

New movements in literature are those which copy the last century but one. If they copy the last century, they are old-fashioned; but if it is quite clear that they are much older than a hundred years old, they are entirely fresh and original.⁴

Finally, as a third guiding principle, Chesterton maintains that a literary document must be studied sympathetically in terms of the customs, conventions, and peculiarities of the age. Because some critics fail to do this, the masterpieces of the great eighteenth century Tory writers are misrepresented as "much more crabbed or cranky or inconsequent than they really were because their objective is not seen

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 208.

² G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 188.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 127.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, As I Was Saying, p. 92.

objectively."¹ Applying this same principle to Byron and his age, Chesterton observes that "when a thing is unfamiliar to us, when it is remote and the product of some other age or spirit, we think it not savage or terrible, but merely artificial."² In the following comment on Dickens, Chesterton establishes why this third principle must be followed in artistic criticism. "We must recreate the faith of our fathers, if only as an artistic atmosphere."³ In other words, to fail to make such a recreation may be to fail to respond sympathetically to a literary work.

Before examining how Chesterton employed the principle of perspective to determine the greatness of a literary work, it would appear imperative to point out that Chesterton subordinated literature to more important realities in his hierarchical scheme of values. For Chesterton, Dumas is to be praised for not taking literature too seriously. In this French writer, there was

...an atmosphere which would be perfectly impossible to the modern man of letters, who thinks literature the most important thing in the world. The greatest literary works that English history has seen were produced by people who, in their poverty, and exuberance, and will to love, may be said to have despised literature.⁴

¹
G.K. Chesterton, "Milton and Merry England", The London Mercury, Volume 5, December, 1921, p. 140.

²
G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 30.

³
G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 18.

⁴
G.K. Chesterton, "Alexandre Dumas", The Bookman, Volume 15, July, 1902, p. 448.

Returning to this contention, Chesterton, in the following passage, subordinates beauty to interest.

The cultivated people go in for what is beautiful; but the uncultivated for what is interesting. For example, the more refined people concern themselves with literature--that is, with beautiful statements. But simple people concern themselves with scandal--that is, with interesting statements. Interest often exists apart from beauty; and interest is immeasurably better and more important than beauty.¹

In his criticism of the literature of self-revelation, Chesterton explains why he thinks this literary art exhibits the strange inversion perpetrated by those who take literature too seriously. Of the literature of self-revelation, he remarks:

...this seems to me to mean a lack of appreciation, not only of private life, but of life itself. Literary expression is a very valuable part of human experience; but this is making human experience merely a part of literary experience.²

As to style, Chesterton observes that, "I cannot think these questions of style are quite so important as these pure stylists suppose."³ Because criticism has over-valued style, it has failed to do full justice to Cobbett.

He has only been admired in the way in which he would have specially hated to be admired. He who was so full of his subject has been valued for only his style.⁴

1

G.K. Chesterton, The Glass Walking Stick, p. 3.

2

G.K. Chesterton, As I Was Saying, p. 136.

3

G.K. Chesterton, The Well and the Shallows, p. 4.

4

G.K. Chesterton, William Cobbett, p. 4.

In determining the greatness of a literary work, Chesterton regularly employed what may be called two tests: first, the universality test; and, secondly, the uniqueness test. How he used these touchstones to literary greatness will be considered in the remaining part of this chapter.

Employing the universality test, Chesterton accounts for the greatness of Cervantes. Commenting upon the Spaniard's literary pre-eminence, G.K.C. remarks that:

He does not in any pre-eminent degree owe that place to his diction or his style. He owes it to the fact that this impartiality of his is the very soul of great literature, for literature should know all men and judge none. It is the dead who are judged and the creatures of literature should never die.¹

It is to be observed, in this estimate of literary greatness, that Chesterton characteristically minimizes the purely literary, the purely technical in accounting for the superiority of a literary work.

Fundamentally, however, it is the literary artist's "ideas" that Chesterton regards primarily as the proof of universality. In contrasting Henry James to Shakespeare and Dickens, Chesterton concludes that:

...what makes him great is what made 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.²

1

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 26.

2

G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 144.

In his conception of literary greatness, it is to be remarked, that Chesterton underlines the importance of quantity as well the quality of "ideas." Stevenson exemplifies this theory for his "real greatness" arises not only from the quality of his "ideas", but also from the quantity.

We should not learn his real greatness from his quality. We can only learn his real greatness from his quantity. For this exuberance and variety of work, this readiness of the man to turn his hand to anything, this vitality in so many violent experiments, all this is exactly the kind of thing that mere finicking aesthetes never do exhibit.¹

As to the "ideas" that account for a writer's literary greatness, Chesterton undoubtedly means, judging by other passages in his work, insights and thought-provoking images. In a commentary on the works of Henry James, Chesterton points out that no "perfections of prose" will explain his greatness. Rather James' greatness is to be found in the insights literally teeming in his work.² In a commentary on the works of Charles Dickens, Chesterton employs the word "ideas" more extensively. "It is partly a tribute to the strength of Dickens that his mind was teeming with images that he never needed to borrow mere ideas."³

With Chesterton this universal test for the greatness of a literary work is frequently equated with what

¹

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 8.

²

G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, pp. 145ff.

³

Ibid., p. 66.

may be called the popular test. Because Homer and Milton succeeded better in communicating with more minds, they are greater than Browning.¹ Because Ruskin and Carlyle undervalued the popular mind, they failed.

Where they both failed was not in belief in God or in belief in themselves; they failed in belief in other people. It is not enough for a prophet to believe in his message; he must believe in its acceptability.²

In the perspective of the popular test there is even something to be said for "bad" literature over "good" literature. "In one sense, at any rate, it is more valuable to read bad literature than good literature. Good literature may tell us the mind of one man; but bad literature may tell us the mind of many men."³ Perhaps the best way of concluding the discussion on Chesterton's use of the universal test would be to quote again his notion of superior literature. "We might say that superior literature is centripetal; while inferior literature is centrifugal."⁴

No doubt, Chesterton would agree that it is the uniqueness test which ultimately makes literature what it is. "The only excuse of literature is to make things new"⁵ affirms

1 1

G.K. Chesterton, All Things Considered, p. 176.

2

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 110.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 196.

4

G.K. Chesterton, Fancies Versus Fads, p. 112.

5

G.K. Chesterton, Irish Impressions, p. 22.

G.K.C. To this quality of newness is related the fact that literature is interesting. In his praise of George Eliot's Silas Marner, Chesterton accounts for the novel's success in terms of the interest it generates.

If literature means anything more than a cold calculation of chances, if there is in it, as I believe, any deeper idea of detaching the spirit of life from the dull obstacles of life, of permitting human nature really to reveal itself as human, if (to put it shortly) literature has anything on earth to do with being interesting--I think we would rather have a few more Marners than that rich maturity that gave us the analysed dust-heaps of Daniel Deronda.¹

Literature, in other words, becomes greater insofar as its uniqueness confirms the actualities, that is, the potentialities of human nature.

To be unique is to be original. In his praise of literary artists, Chesterton recurrently employs such a standard. Blake is so original that a brother artist of his said of him, "with beautiful simplicity" that:

..."he is a good man to steal from." The remark is as philosophical as it is practical. Blake had the great mark of real intellectual wealth; anything that fell from him might be worth picking up.²

Dickens had the two talents that are the "whole of literature": first, he could make a thing happen over again; and, secondly, he could make it happen better.³ Dickens had that "power in letters which literally cannot be imitated, the primary

¹G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p.107.

²G.K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 45.

³G.K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p.xxvii.

inexhaustible creative energy, the enormous prodigality of genius which no one but another genius could parody."¹ A novel like David Copperfield is so original that the characters dominate the human imagination.

He has created, especially in this book of David Copperfield, he has created, creatures who cling to us and tyrannize over us, creatures whom we would not forget if we could, creatures whom we could not forget if we would, creatures who are more actual than the man who made them.²

No wonder, then, that Chesterton concludes that "there is nothing so authentically creative as the divine act of making another man out of the very substance of oneself."³ It follows, therefore, that, "A fictitious character ought not to a person who exists; he ought to be an entirely new combination, an addition to the creatures existing on the earth."⁴ It may even be further said of the fictional character, that, as in life, the person behaves in ways that seemingly lack probability. The Old Curiosity Shop exemplifies this contention.

In strict art there is something quite lame and lumbering about the way in which the benevolent old story-teller starts to tell many stories and then drops away altogether, while one of his stories takes place. but in large art, his collision with Little Nell and

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 58.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. 138.

³

G.K. Chesterton, "Wilfrid Ward" The Living Age, Volume 290, September 9, 1916, p. 665.

⁴

G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens, p. 180.

his complete eclipse by her personality and narrative have a real significance. They suggest the random richness of such meetings and their uncalculated results.¹

In resembling the "spirit" of life, literature becomes great.

It is not only in creating characters that the literary artist shows originality. The creation of an atmosphere is a genuine test of originality. Commenting on Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, Chesterton observes that:

The creation of a brooding sentiment like this, a sentiment not merely independent of but actually opposed to the events, is a much greater triumph of art than the creation of the character of Othello.²

Pursuing this idea further, Chesterton concludes that "A Midsummer Night's Dream is a psychological study, not of a solitary man, but of a spirit that unites mankind."³ And, Chesterton adds that "Twopenny sceptics write of the egoism of primal human nature; it is reserved for great men like Shakespeare and Meredith to detect and make vivid this rude and sub-conscious unselfishness which is older than self."⁴

In her inability to create such an atmosphere lies the limitation of George Eliot; she sees "people clearly, but not through an atmosphere. And she can conjure up storms in the

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Charles Dickens, p. 53.

² G. K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 15.

³ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

conscious, but not in the subconscious mind."¹ By some circuitous route, this discussion on atmosphere in the literary arts had led the reader back to a reconsideration of the principle of transcendence and the popular test.

To demonstrate how recurrently the uniqueness test appears in Chesterton's thinking, it will now be shown how he employs it in such miscellaneous literary matters as: the role of details in the narrative art; the portraiture in a biography; and, general literary questions, such as the allegorical method and style.

The master novelist is not only great in creating characters and atmospheres. A great novelist like Hugo is superior in details--the parts that are usually skipped when reading an ordinary novel.

Now the greatest and boldest tribute that can be paid to Hugo, the greatest and boldest, perhaps, that can be paid to any novelists, may be stated in the form that is not safe to skip those passages in a novel by Victor Hugo. In other novelists all these details are dead; in Hugo they are all alive.... Those parts of a novel, scenery, minutiae, explanations which in most novelists are the most tedious, are almost the most fascinating.²

Everything in a Hugo novel is so packed with significance, with symbolism, because the artist is so conscious in the execution of his craft.

1

G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 108.

2

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 39.

In attempting to account for the artistic success of a biography, Chesterton concludes that it must be due to the biographer's insight and power of portraiture. Boswell so succeeded that his classic work appears more real than life itself. "The thing is so artistic that it appears to be lifted out of the democracy of the real into the aristocracy of the fictitious."¹

The successful use of the alleogorical method is the proof of an original mind. "There is nothing that really indicates a subtle and in the true sense superior mind so much as this power of comparing a lower thing with a higher and yet higher with a higher still; of thinking on three planes at once."² In the same way, style is a touchstone for originality.

Anybody who know anything of literature knows when a style lifts itself to its loftiest efforts; and in these cases it is always to say strongly what we still endeavour to say, however weakly, but which nobody else ever endeavours to say at all.³

Because Chesterton thus stressed the uniqueness of a work as a test for its literary superiority, it follows that he believes that the supreme function of the critic of literature is to extract this original element in an author's work. "The supreme business of criticism is to discover that part of a man's work, which is his and to ignore that part

¹

G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 7.

²

G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 245.

³

G.K. Chesterton, The Well and the Shallows, p. 48.

which belongs to others."¹ And, Chesterton re-states this conception of the critic's role.

And the only real and honourable object of criticism is to discover in any great man, or, for the matter of that, in any ordinary man, precisely this unique feature, this one marvel which is without parallel in the world. Unless we have discovered this about a man our most powerful criticism is less than nothing and vanity.²

It has been shown that Chesterton employed two tests to determine the greatness of a literary work: the universality test, and the uniqueness test. Of course, these two tests are not mutually exclusive. In fact, when a work of art is truly successful the two tests become one. What Chesterton says about Thackeray's The Book of Snobs applies to all great literature: "It has the paradox of all things perfectly done in letters; it is unique and yet is universal."

To summarize, it has been shown in this chapter how Chesterton employed the principles of limitation and perspective in his approaches to literature. Whether it be in language or style, Chesterton discovers a principle of limitation operating. For Chesterton, the modern misunderstanding of the literary arts arises out of the fact that the radical imperfection of language is not appreciated. As to style, Chesterton stresses that the form which the

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "The Romance of Rhyme", The Living Age, Volume 304, March 13, 1920, p. 664.

² G.K. Chesterton, "Matthew Arnold", The Bookman, Volume 16, October, 1902, p. 118.

³ G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 81.

artist's vision dictates necessarily imposes limits. This same principle of limitation is exemplified in each of the literary genres. It is a sign of the good critic that he appreciates the limits of language.

Guided by the principle of perspective, Chesterton tests each of the great literary periods in terms of the timeless and the traditional. It is one of the supreme functions of great literature that it makes men aware of the Spirit of the Ages. Tradition reminds the artist of his debt to the classical legacy. History instructs the artist as to the divisive character of the Protestant Revolution.

Again, guided by the principle of perspective, Chesterton recognizes that truly great literature may be determined by two tests: that of universality; and, that of uniqueness. In the literary master-piece, these qualities of universality and of uniqueness are paradoxically reconciled.

CHAPTER V

APPROACHES TO POETRY

There have been many pantheist poems suggesting wonder, but no really successful ones. The pantheist cannot wonder, for he cannot praise God or praise anything as really distinct from himself.¹

1. The principle of correspondence

In the previous chapters, it was shown how Chesterton interrelated art and literature with religious and philosophic considerations. In his approach to poetry, Chesterton establishes similar interrelationships. In the following characteristic passage, Chesterton discovers the ultimate origin of poetic emotion in the fact that the created world is, as it were, rooted in God, in mystery.

I believe about the universal cosmos, or for that matter about every weed and pebble in the cosmos, that men will never rightly realize that it is beautiful, until they realize that it is strange.... Poetry is the separation of the soul from some object, whereby we can regard it with wonder.²

Chesterton understood, as pantheists do not, that poetry means "the separation of the soul from some object." He understood that the poet must be different from the objects that move him to make poetry. In short, he understood that poetry implies the otherness of things.

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 247.

² G.K. Chesterton, Christendom in Dublin, p.33.

This otherness of things, this strangeness of things, therein is found the sustenance of all art and poetry.

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 in his own soul, the selfish artist who shrinks from the world and lives only in his own mind.... 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.¹

If the imagination and understanding are to be bridged, it is because the imagination is thus "outward" directed, feeding on the created universe of things. In fact, the poetic mind thrives on this otherness of things. "I think any poetic mind that has loved solidity, the thickness of trees, the squareness of stones, the firmness of clay, must have sometimes wished they were things to eat."² Moreover, for the poetic mind, because things are other, are strange, there are no such things as commonplace things. "The mere fact

¹

G.K. Chesterton, St. Thomas Aquinas, p. 147.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Alarms and Discursions, p. 55.

that we have seen a lamp-post very often, and that it generally looked very much the same as before, would not of itself prevent us from appreciating its elfin fire, any more than it prevents the child."¹ The poetry of literature thus but parallels, but echoes faintly the poetry that is life. "It is easy to talk of superstitiously attaching importance to sticks and stones, but the whole poetry of life consists of attaching importance to sticks and stones."² As in religion, poetry always insists "upon the proximity, the almost menacing closeness of things" that it considers.³

Because in this life men undervalue things including themselves, because they forget the miracle that is existence, it therefore becomes the ultimate function of all art to remind men that they have forgotten, to remind them why gratitude is the beginning of wisdom.

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 no 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 realized this reality knows that it does outweigh, literally to infinity, all lesser regrets or arguments for

1

G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 14.

2

G.K. Chesterton, The New Jerusalem, p. 138.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Tremendous Trifles, p. 278.

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.¹

Furthermore, the poet in his thankfulness ultimately relies upon theological support.

For the first thing the casual critic will say is "What nonsense all this is; do you mean that a poet cannot be thankful for grass and wild flowers without connecting it with theology; let alone your theology?" To which I answer, "Yes, I mean he cannot do it without connecting it with theology, unless he can manage to be thankful when there is nobody to be thankful to, and no good intentions to be thankful for, then he is simply taking refuge in being thoughtless in order to avoid being thankless."²

And, in his thankfulness, the poet, as did St. Francis, might contemplate the primary reason for gratitude--the passing from nothingness to being.

When we say a poet praises the whole creation, we commonly mean only that he praises the whole cosmos. But this sort of poet does really praise creation, in the sense of the act of creation. He praises the passage or transition from nonentity to entity; there falls here also the shadow of that archetypal image of the bridge, which has given to the priest his archaic and mysterious name.³

In a certain sense, in their endeavours, both priest and artist have similar objectives and encounter similar difficulties.

In stressing the positive, in praising the fact of existence, in reminding men that they have forgotten, the

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 33.

²

G.K. Chesterton, The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton, p. 348.

³

G.K. Chesterton, St. Francis of Assisi, pp. 112-113.

poet is thereby performing one of the primary functions of art: to uplift the human spirit. Because Catullus and Dante performed such an artistic function--because they, in their poetry, praise, exalt, establish and defend,--Chesterton eulogizes them.¹ In accordance with this conception of poetry, Chesterton would have the poet place men "in a position to view the world in a certain way; and that life looked at from this mental standpoint is more inspiring or intelligible."²

In such ways as these did Chesterton establish correspondences between poetry and the nature of things. As another recurring element in Chesterton's approach to poetry are the correspondences he discovers between it and human nature. As a preliminary fact, it may be pointed out that a great deal of poetic pleasure comes from the "disdainful indifference of actual things."³ The otherness of things literally teases the imagination. The poet likes corn fields and is baffled by them because they grow in spite of him.⁴

From the psychological viewpoint, poetry, as religion, operates to make men more at home in the universe. "The human soul finds itself alone in a terrible world,

¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Glass Walking Stick, p. 177.

² G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, pp. 146-147.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 114.

⁴ Idem.

afraid of the grass. It has brought forth poetry and religion in order to explain matters."¹ And, how does poetry thus "explain matters"?--it does this by accepting the supra-rational.

Poetry is sane because it floats easily in an infinite sea; reason seeks to cross the infinite sea, and so make it finite.... To accept everything is an exercise, to understand everything a strain. The poet only desires exaltation and expansion, a world to stretch in.²

A world to stretch in: A world that tells men that there is more than is dreamed of in any philosophy. No wonder, that poetry is "so much nearer to reality than all other human occupations."³

No, poetry is not primarily rational. Rather it presents life as it reveals itself to the human emotions.

Poetry deals entirely with those great eternal and mainly forgotten wishes which are the ultimate despots of existence. Poetry presents things as they are to our emotions, not as they are to any theory, however plausible, or any argument, however conclusive. If love is in truth a glorious vision, poetry will say that it is a glorious vision and no philosophers will persuade poetry to say that it is the exaggeration of the instinct of sex.⁴

With all true poets emotion precedes artistic expression.

"With Browning, as with all true poets, passion came first and made intellectual expression, the hunger for beauty making

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 214.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 29.

³

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 240.

⁴

G.K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 184.

literature as the hunger for bread made a plough."¹ Because poetry is emotional, it may be further said that a particular poem becomes original insofar as "the emotions have their origin in the poet":² insofar as the emotions are genuine and not manufactured. Because poetry is emotional, in criticising it, it should be remembered that:

...a poet, or a symbolical romancer, will generally tend to describe not so much the mental attitudes which he seriously thinks right, as those which are so temperamentally tied on to him, that he knows he can describe them well.³

Furthermore, poetry is emphatically not "artificial." In truth, poetry is but one aspect of the more generic human activity of song. This human instinct of song "takes refuge in the lesser thing called poetry, or even prose."⁴ Indeed, the poet is a singer. As with Chaucer, the poet sings because "he opens his lungs and liberates his soul by a resounding and rhythmic utterance, the expression of love or admiration or passionate amazement."⁵

Whether it be in its diction, in its rhythm, or in its rhyme, poetry is not artificial. By its magic amalgam, poetry can make even dialect a fitting raiment for its

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 19.

² G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 113.

³ G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 70.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 247.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 114.

expression.

I cannot feel myself that art has any dignity higher than the indwelling and divine dignity of human nature. Great poets like Burns were far more undignified when they clothed their thoughts in what Mr. Morton Luce calls "the seemly raiment of cultured speech" than when they clothed them in the headlong and flexible patois in which they thought and prayed and made love.¹

Whether it be dialect or rugged speech, they are both poetically justifiable on the basis of the human response they evoke. Vindicating the ruggedness in Browning's poems, Chesterton remarks that:

The whole issue depends upon whether we realise the simple and essential fact that ruggedness is a mode of art like gloominess or extravagance. Some poems ought to be rugged, just as some poems ought to be smooth.... Ruggedness being an essential quality in the universe, there is that in man which responds to it as the striking of any chord of the eternal harmonies.²

In fact, "To present a matter in a grotesque manner does certainly tend to touch the nerve of surprise and thus to draw attention to the intrinsically miraculous character of the object itself."³

Nor are rhythm and rhyme artificial. Both strike chords of the eternal harmonies.

Rhythm deals with similarity, but rhyme with identity. Now in the word identity are involved perhaps the deepest and certainly the dearest human things.... Songs, especially the most poignant of them, generally

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 256.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, pp. 144-145.

³

Ibid., p. 151.

refer to some absolute, to some place or person for whom no similarity is a substitute.¹

Rather than being artificial rhythm is truly elemental.

"Meter is more natural than free verse; because it has more of the movement of nature, and the curves of wind and wave."²

As to rhyme, to misunderstand it is to misunderstand man's nature.

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, and more than half of the fatal mistake about humanity, 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.³

The true enjoyment of all poetry comes from combining the simple with the subtler pleasure of rhyme.

In the innermost part of all poetry is the nursery rhyme, the nonsense that is too happy even to care about being nonsensical. It may lead on to the more elaborate nonsense of the Gilbertian line, or even far less poetic nonsense of some of the Browningsesque rhymes. But the true enjoyment of poetry is always in having the simple pleasure as well as the subtle pleasure. Indeed it is on this primary point that so many of our artistic and other reforms seem to go wrong.⁴

Rhyme has a popular quality: "It is a song. Rhyme corresponds

¹
G.K. Chesterton, "The Romance of Rhyme", The Living Age, Volume 304, March 13, 1920, p. 660.

²
G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 215.

³
G.K. Chesterton, "The Romance of Rhyme", p. 657.

⁴
Idem.

to a melody so simple that it goes straight like an arrow to the heart."¹

Nor does the fact that poetry is imaginative mean that it is artificial. In fact, the test of the great poet, as with Chaucer, is that he imagines "what he saw."² His imagination nourishes itself upon a world that it did not make. On the basis of this principle, Chesterton comments upon the possibility that Blake was obsessed with the image: "hired a villain to bereave my life":-- "I should smell insanity if in turning over Blake's books I found this one pictorial image obsesses him apart from its spiritual meaning."³ In other words, Chesterton opposes the triumph of an image over its own intellectual meaning. On principle, Chesterton laments "the break-down of the bridge between imagination and understanding."⁴

In conclusion, poetry instead of being artificial is really highly personal. To Browning's boast that he never put himself into his work, Chesterton replies "a thing which no poet, good or bad, who ever lived could possibly avoid doing."⁵ Indeed, it is in poetry that a man really betrays

¹G.K. Chesterton, "The Romance of Rhyme", The Living Age, Volume 304, March 13, 1920, p. 663.

²G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 59.

³G.K. Chesterton, William Blake, p. 87.

⁴G.K. Chesterton, Sidelights on New London and Newer York, p. 211.

⁵G.K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 110.

himself.

One of the best tests in the world of what a poet really means is his meter. He may be a hypocrite in his metaphysics, but he cannot be a hypocrite in his prosody. And all the time that Byron's language is of horror and emptiness, his meter is a bounding pas de quatre.¹

Moreover, the conditions under which poetic creation best takes place encourage this revelation of the true self, the unconscious mind.

For the purposes of poetic creation there is required rather a certain atmosphere of quiet, unconsciousness and carelessness; exactly that sort of soundless confusion which can be found, for instance, in a forest.²

Lest it be concluded from the correspondences that Chesterton established between poetry and the nature of the created universe that he ignored its autonomous claims, it will be now shown that he was fully aware that poetry had an identity of its own. To those critics who call Browning a "religious teacher" and who thus dichotomize the poetic work, Chesterton replies:

Robert Browning has been called a religious teacher, to which objection can be raised for, generally speaking a poet cannot be properly appreciated if we separate one of his functions from the rest. Poets represent to a greater degree than any other men the conception of the unity of things.³

Because the poet thus represents "the unity of things", his

1

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 37.

2

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 190.

3

Ibid., p. 91.

poem should be criticized organically.

It is one of the curses of the criticism of poetry that it tends to detach the ideas of a poet from the forms by which he expresses them, which is like detaching the abstract idea of vegetation from all conceivable forms of vegetation. It is entirely useless to attempt to discuss the philosophy of Robert Browning apart from his poetry.¹

On the basis of this principle, Chesterton comments on those critics who attempt to detach the metaphysics from the poem "In Memoriam".

But this is struggling with a hopeless task which would be quite simple if poetry were what it has been in most ages of classical criticism been conceived to be, a decoration or beautification of thought by simile and example. But herein has lain the great error that has much falsified criticism in this matter. Poetry is not a selection of images which will express a particular thought; it is rather an analysis of the thoughts which are evoked by a certain image. The metaphor, the symbol, the picture, has appeared to most critics to be a mere ornament, a piece of moulding above the gateway; but it is actually the keystone of the arch. Take away the particular image employed and the whole fabric of thought falls with a crash. It is not the thought that is the deep or central thing; one might say it is the phrase.²

It seems that it is the destiny of the "metaphysician-critic" to misread poetry. He misreads it because:

He tries to convey the substance of a passage by stripping away the ornaments and the verbiage, and he finds he has nothing left but the shadow....For poetry is not an ornamental and indirect way of stating philosophy but a perfectly simple and direct way of stating something that is outside philosophy. There are fleeting and haphazard sights of nature that are

1

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 91.

2

Ibid., p. 103.

words of an unknown dictionary; every sunset might have founded a separate creed.¹

2. The principle of transcendence

In his approaches to poetry, Chesterton so repeatedly stresses its transcendental element that it may be stated that he therein finds the essence of poetry. In truth, poetry "explains" the universe in such ways that mystify the pure rationalist. But, remarkable as it may be, poetry justifies the ways it "explains" the universe by the corresponding responses it evokes in human nature. It proves itself by its practicality.

The practical value of poetry is that it is realistic upon a point which nothing else can be realistic, the point of the actual desires of man. Ethics is the science of actions, but poetry is the science of motives. Some actions are ugly, and therefore some parts of ethics are ugly. But all motives are beautiful, or present themselves for the moment as beautiful, and therefore all poetry is beautiful.... Only poetry can realize motives, because motives are all pictures of happiness. And the supreme and most practical value of poetry is this, that in poetry, as in music, a note is struck which expresses beyond all power of rational statement a condition of mind.²

In some mysterious way, poetry expresses the deep secrets of human nature.

Poetry is so true (and rationalism is so false) because it points to transcendental truths: it re-echoes the secondary meanings in existence, those that don't meet the

¹ G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 105.

² G.K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 195.

external eye.

It is true that the true poet is ultimately dedicated to Beauty, in a world where it is cleansed of beastliness, and it is not either a new scheme or theory on the one hand, nor a narrow taste or technique on the other. It is concerned with ideas; but with ideas that are never new in the sense of neat, as they are never old in the sense of exhausted. They lie a little too deep to find expression in any age; and great poets can give hints of them in any.¹

Poetry suggests and points to a world beyond.

But Blake did believe that certain tremendous truths, only to be shown under the types of golden lions, were really true; and, what is most important of all, were not only within him but beyond him.²

The mind of a poet like Alice Meynell fed upon "transcendental truths that throng the firmament like a beatific tempest; and great thoughts that meet in thunder."³ On the other hand, when the Hebrew poet sings that "He hath made the clouds his chariot" it must not be forgotten "that he was full of indescribable emotions aroused by indescribable sights."⁴ Truly, poetry "points to a paradise even if it be called elf-land."⁵

But this transcendental element is discoverable not only in the truths to which poetry points. It is discoverable

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 33.

²

G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 208.

³

G.K. Chesterton, "Alice Meynell", The Dublin Review, Volume 172, January, 1923, p. 12.

⁴

G.K. Chesterton, The New Jerusalem, p. 116.

⁵

G.K. Chesterton, G.K.C. as M.C., p. 161.

in the effects, whether they be physiological or psychological, that poetry evokes in the reader.

I do not think we have got to anything like the bottom of the psychology--we might even say the physiology--of poetical effects; and that the old conventions of verse rested upon instincts which are perhaps indestructible, but which at least cannot be easily destroyed.¹

Indeed, poetry is such that its effects are not fully explicable.

But anybody who understands poetry knows when poetry has fulfilled those laws; as certainly as a mathematician knows when a mathematical calculation is correct. Only, the mathematician can explain, more or less, why the answer is right; and the lover of poetry can never explain why the word or image is exactly right.²

It follows that poetry cannot be proven to be such to those who are deaf and dumb.

Now, although the old Christian poets combined many things that sound profane or preposterous to a smug piety, they always combined them with the instinct of sound poetry. There is no proof of this to those who have no sense of what is meant by sound poetry. It will never be demonstrated to people who do not know what poetry is, and it will never need to be demonstrated to people who do know what it is.³

Dare anyone tell G.K.C. that Tennyson's "Tears from the depth of some divine despair" is not poetry?⁴ How futile it would be to try to prove that it is!

1

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 105.

2

G.K. Chesterton, As I Was Saying, p. 88.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 199.

4

G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 26.

The more perfect a poem is, the more such transcendental effects are evoked. In great poetry, there are "meanings and echoes of meanings."¹ How is one to paraphrase the verses in which an Othello laments over the dead Desdemona?

I know not where is the Promehean heat
That can thy light relume.²

What is one to reply to those critics who complain that Browning's poems end in transcendental conclusions? With G.K.C. must it not be replied that "the conclusions of a poem, if they are not transcendental, must be inept."³

Moreover, it is this transcendental element in poetry that dooms translation to failure. For, surely, "We cannot translate anything that is beyond reason."⁴ Translation, in the sense of finding "a precise equivalent to poetic language" is, by its very nature, an impossibility.⁵ Because poetic translation is thus impossible, England suffers in the international community.

Holland has been described by her painters, and England by her poets. This has made the island state of expression yet more insular. The one mode of expression is necessarily more cosmopolitan than the other. Pictures

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "English Literature and the Latin Tradition", The Fortnightly, Volume 144, August, 1935, p.186.

² Idem.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 134.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 208.

⁵ Ibid., p. 111.

need not be translated. Poems cannot be translated. "The moan of doves in immemorial elms, the murmur of innumerable bees" is perfectly inaudible to anybody who does not know English.¹

3. The principle of limitation

In his approach to poetry, Chesterton recurrently employs the principle of limitation. In what it achieves poetry is by its very nature limited.

Browning was too passionate to be poetical. Passion makes every detail important; there is no realism like the insatiable realism of love. Poetry is only the algebra of life; passion is its arithmetic. If we recall to ourselves any deep sentiment; if we think of a dead friend or a primitive attachment, it is a hundred to one that we shall not think of any poetic images, stars, or thrones, or angels, but of something utterly trivial and ugly--a railing, a door-knocker, a lost umbrella. Men talk foolishly of these things not rising into poetry; on the contrary, it is poetry that falters feebly behind and does not rise to the graphic passion of these things.²

Poetry is but a shadow of the poetry that is life.

And, yet, the poet is happy with limitation.

There remains an indestructible instinct, in the poet as represented by the pagan, that he is not entirely wrong in localising his God. It is something in the soul of poetry if not of piety. And the great poet, when he defined the poet, did not say that he gave us the universe or the absolute or the infinite, but, in his own larger language, a local habitation and a name. No poet is merely a pantheist; those who are counted most pantheistic, like Shelley, start with some local particular image as the pagans did.³

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 133.

²

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 94.

³

G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 125.

The poet should be happy with limitation because it is the nature of all fine things to be "finished."

All fine things are in this sense finished, even when they are eternal. Poetry is committed to this concentration fully as much as religion; for fairy-land has always been as local, one might say as parochial, as heaven.¹

In themes that he employs the poet, again, wisely accepts the principle of limits. "It is only the smaller poet who sees the poetry of revolt, of isolation, of disagreement; the larger poet sees the poetry of those great agreements which constitute the romantic achievement of civilization."² In its "experimentation" obsession, contemporary literature forgets this primary truth. "There is not a clearer sign of the absence of originality among modern poets than their disposition to find new themes. Really original poets write poems about the spring."³ It is only the sophisticated who dismiss a poet merely because he was brave enough and human enough to eulogize a skylark.⁴

But the fact that the great poets write on universal themes, that they even borrow from one another, should not blind the critic to the pitfalls of literary parallels. To those critics who would find a parallel in Keats'

¹

G.K. Chesterton, The Common Man, p. 220.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 99.

³

G.K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. 10.

⁴

Ibid., p. 11.

"hungry generations" of Horace's "devouring time", Chesterton points out that there are certain remarks that are "obvious poetical comments on any deep or mystifying experience" and that accordingly, it is as likely as not that Keats' idea "was more original even if it is really identical" with that of Horace.¹

It is particularly in his treatment of rhythm and rhyme that Chesterton employed this principle of limitation. The first thing to understand, psychologically, about rhythm and rhyme is that men are pleased by the limits that they impose. "I have always had the fancy that if a man were really free, he would talk in rhythm and even in rhyme."² Indeed, life is rhythmical--there is not a mere progress in things; rather there is a "rise and fall".³

In his use of meter, in his acceptance of limits, the poet really enhances the meaning of his poem.

The only thing that I am sure about is that the sense depends on the sound and the sound depends on the sense. It actually would not sound the same, if another meaning were expressed by the same sound. It actually would not mean as much if other words expressed the same meaning.⁴

The rigid limitations that the eighteenth-century poet accepted in using the heroic couplet did not mar the poetic

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Come to Think of It, pp. 20ff.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Fancies Versus Fads, p. 89.

³

G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 150.

⁴

G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 102.

quality. Rather, "Things were written in that restrained meter that have a real epic sublimity."¹

What about free verse? What about those poets who try to escape the rigid restrictions that meter imposes upon them? It is to be noted in justifying the use of free verse that Chesterton relies upon his ultimate critical principle--that of correspondence.

The primary case for free verse was always fair enough, so far as it went. There certainly are verbal rhythms which are not exactly those of any classical meter, but which do produce an effect which is not merely that of prose but rather of a sort of chant or incantation.²

But free verse, as the moderns use it, is not a real revolution in literary form.

But verse libre, or nine tenths of it, is not a new meter any more than sleeping in a ditch is a new school of architecture.... It is not even original, because it is not creative; the artist does not invent anything, but only abolishes something.³

If free verse is to really justify itself, it must be on the grounds of the particular effects that it achieves: "With this or that particular metrical form, or unmetrical formlessness, I might be content or not as it achieves some particular effect or not."⁴ Using this as a principle,

¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Glass Walking Stick, p. 173.

² G.K. Chesterton, Avowals and Denials, p. 208.

³ G.K. Chesterton, "The Romance of Rhyme", The Living Age, Volume 304, March 13, 1920, p. 664.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Fancies Versus Fads, p. 88.

Chesterton tests the free verse of T.S. Eliot and of D.H. Lawrence. As to that of Eliot, it is Chesterton's contention that he "could have expressed better in classic verse or classic prose."¹ As to that of Lawrence, Chesterton doubts that he has produced

...any purely poetical effect that is freer or wilder or more elemental, magical, or hitherto uncaptured than Shelley or Swinburne or any good poet has produced in formal poetry. It is more conversational; it is not more primeval or even more barbaric. It is more like talk; but not more like tempests loosened or passions made alive.²

The approach that Chesterton takes to rhyme is truly characteristic. First of all, he associates rhyme with reason "since the aim of both is to bring a thing to an end."³ Secondly, he associates rhyme with the idea of identity.

It will generally be found that where this call for the identical has been uttered most ringingly and unmistakably in literature, it has been uttered in rhyme. Another purpose for which this pointed and definite form is very much fitted is the expression of dogma, as distinct from doubt or even opinion.⁴

Consistent as Chesterton invariably is, he associates the history and origin of rhyme with Christianity.⁵ In the third place, he associates rhyme with the idea of return.

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Avowals and Denials, p. 206.

² Ibid., p. 208.

³ G.K. Chesterton, The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 26.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, "The Romance of Rhyme", The Living Age, Volume 304, March 13, 1920, p. 660.

⁵ Ibid. p. 661.

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.¹

Yes, "it is in this deeper significance of return that we must seek for the peculiar power in the recurrence we call rhyme."² In the fourth place, it is most characteristic of Chesterton to associate rhyme with the "popular" test.

I think the modern poets who try to escape from the rhyming pleasure, in pursuit of a freer poetic pleasure, are making the same fundamental fallacious attempt to combine simplicity with superiority.... 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.³

In leaving the subject of rhyme, Chesterton issues a warning to the sophisticated.

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, I will not say, as if he looked down on a daisy (which might seem possible to the more literal-minded) but 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.⁴

¹ G.K. Chesterton, "The Romance of Rhyme", p. 659.

² Idem.

³ Ibid., p. 658.

⁴ Ibid., p. 664.

4. The principle of perspective

In his attempts to discover the historical origins of poetry, Chesterton, with his sense of time-perspective, was led to a consideration of its possible relationships with ritual and mythology. In a sense, ritual may be regarded as a precursor of all poetic activity. "To scatter flowers on a grave is simply a way in which an ordinary person can express in gesture that only a very great poet could express in words."¹ In thus establishing contact with the elemental by means of gesture, ritual is in its way a prototype of poetic activity.

In his meditations on the origins of poetry, G.K.C. was further led to a consideration of mythology. And, what he says about mythology is particularly pertinent when it be recalled that modern literary criticism has also focussed its attention on the relationships between poetry and mythology. In his attempt to arrive at the essence of mythology, Chesterton saw that it should be associated with religion and theology.

It is perfectly true that there are in many pagan myths the first foreshadowings of the Christian mysteries; though even in saying so we admit that the foreshadowings were shadows. But, when all imaginative kinship has been explored or allowed for it is not true that mythology ever rose to the heights of theology.²

1

G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 121.

2

G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 215.

Since this pagan mythology was essentially a search, since it was an anticipation of the Promised One, it may be said that no genuine mythology has been made since the arrival of Christ.¹ Perhaps the twentieth-century myth enthusiasts overlook this.

It is, furthermore, Chesterton's view that myth belongs to the "poetical part of man's nature."² It has at least an imaginative outline of truth.³ It is a human response to "the tempting and tantalising hints of something half-human in nature."⁴ It is really an attempt to "reach divine reality by imagination alone."⁴ Each one of these Chestertonian views on myth invite twentieth-century meditation.

In the perspective given to him by literary tradition, Chesterton approached some of the problems that contemporary poetry inevitably raises. From this historical perspective, Chesterton notes that "The arts and crafts of man, from the beginning, have been arts and crafts of combination."⁵ As contrasted to this traditional view of combination, modern culture lays particular stress on the merits of separation.⁶

¹ G.K. Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 209.

² Ibid., p. 108.

³ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴ Ibid., p. 121.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, Come to Think of It, p. 41.

Accordingly, in twentieth-century poetry, a heresy has arisen by which it is deemed infelicitious that a poet should please the ear.¹ This heresy really challenges the revered poetic tradition that the poet is more fully a poet insofar as he successfully weds sound and sense.² Because modern critics have this prejudice, they fail to appreciate the sweetness and music of a poet like de la Mare.³ Because modern critics have this prejudice, they fail to assign Tennyson his merited position in English literature.⁴

Challenging again the traditional views on poetry, the twentieth century has stressed the isolated nature of the poetic image. "One of the new theories about poetry is that the poet must seek to isolate an image, and even a word. He must, to use the military phrase, cut all its connections, and lease it in the air."⁵ It is Chesterton's contention that, if only these modern revolutionaries knew, it is well nigh impossible that a word, let alone a poem, can escape from traditional associations.⁶ No matter how new the poetic technique may be, it will not destroy the value of words, nor will it free the poem from dependence on tradition.⁷

¹G.K. Chesterton, Come to Think of It, pp. 42ff.

²G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 106.

³G.K. Chesterton, Come to Think of It, p. 39.

⁴G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 27.

⁵G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 86.

^{6& 7}Ibid., pp. 88ff.

Illustrating this contention, Chesterton takes a modern poem "The Argonauts" by D.H. Lawrence in which the poet, at his own risk, ignores the traditional associations of words and things.

The only thing phrase that claims to be original looks oddly artificial. It is not merely that the literal logical point: that the sun is seldom observed to lick its paws. It is that the image does not really suit the lion any more than the sun; certainly not the lion taken as a noble symbol of the sun. It has no imaginative fitness; licking the paws could only remind us that the lion is like the pussy-cat on the hearth-rug; the last thing we want to think when he represents the archaic energy of the Sun God.¹

What is the moral of all this? How can contemporary poetry recover a proper perspective? It would appear that what Chesterton advocates is a reconsideration of the role of experimentation and revolt in contemporary poetry and a reconsideration of the abiding significance of traditions and conventions.

Besides this time-perspective, Chesterton also approaches poetry in terms of a value-perspective. Consistent with his approaches to art and literature, Chesterton does not apotheosize poetry. As contrasted to song and love (that is, life values) poetry ranks inferior. It is in awakening "in a wider human company the ancient instinct of song" that poets perform their function.² No doubt, the

¹ G.K. Chesterton, Avowals and Denials, p. 209.

² G.K. Chesterton, Sidelights on New London, p. 211.

world's lovers will agree with Chesterton that "Falling in love is more poetical than dropping into poetry."¹ In fact, as contrasted to passion, poetry is but a tame substitute.² The relative importance of poetry is again seen in the fact that "the vast majority of great poets have written an enormous amount of very bad poetry."³ In truth, it would be no disrespect to include the "great poets" in an anthology of inferior poetry.⁴ On the other hand, when poetry is successful, it represents perfected human expression.

To vary Browning's phrase, we find in prose the broken arcs, in poetry the perfect round. Prose is not the freedom of poetry; rather prose is the fragments of poetry. Prose, at least in the prosaic sense, is poetry interrupted, held up and cut off from its course; the chariot of Phoebus stopped by a block in the Strand.⁵

Before pointing out the criteria Chesterton employed to determine the greatness of poetry, it should be first stressed that he recognized that an artist may be accepted as a poet on purely technical considerations, despite the fact that his poetry is philosophically heterodox. Guided by this principle, Chesterton admits that an atheist may be a good

¹G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 83.

²G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 94.

³G.K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 141.

⁴G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 74.

⁵G.K. Chesterton, Fancies Versus Fads, p. 91.

poet.¹ In determining the greatness of poetry, Chesterton employed regularly two principal tests: first, the ideological test; and secondly, the communication test. How he used these tests will be considered in the remaining part of this chapter.

As to the ideological test, the following statement excellently summarizes Chesterton's position: "I certainly think that the highest kind of poetry is that which is in unision with spiritual veracity."² Carrying this principle further, Chesterton maintains that "Most of the best poetry in the world was and is still religious poetry."³ Not only religion, but also philosophy inspires great poetry. St. Thomas "very specially possessed the philosophy that inspires poetry; as he did so largely inspire Dante's poetry. And poetry without philosophy has only inspiration, or, in vulgar language, only wind."⁴ The greatness of a Chaucer is associated with the philosophy that nourished his poetry. "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."⁵ On the other hand, because he lacked a solid philosophy, the poetry of

¹ G.K. Chesterton, in Ward, Return to Chesterton, p.285.

² Idem.

³ G.K. Chesterton, Generally Speaking, p. 194.

⁴ G.K. Chesterton, Heretics, p. 123.

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 26.

Tennyson suffered.

Tennyson's position has grown shaky because it rested not on any clear dogmas old or new, but on two or three temporary, we might say desperate compromises of his own day. He grasped at Evolution, not because it was definite, but because it was indefinite; not because it was daring, but because it was safe.¹

Also suffering from a lack of philosophy was Swinburne.

And on the poetry which, as poetry, was as straight as a singing arrow; but, considered as philosophy, has always puzzled me very much. In other words, if we consider the target of the arrow, we find that there is nothing to consider; it is not even so clear a concentric scheme as a labyrinth; it is rather a labyrinth without a centre.

But what kind of ideas does great poetry contain?

"Poetry deals with primal and conventional things--the hunger for bread, the love of woman, the love of children, the desire for immortal life. If men really had new sentiments, poetry could not deal with them."³ The great poet treats of the commonplace.

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 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.⁴

1

G.K. Chesterton, The Uses of Diversity, p. 31.

2

G.K. Chesterton, All Is Grist, p. 203.

3

G.K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, p. 99.

4

G.K. Chesterton, Varied Types, p. 250.

By neglecting the "popular" element, the poet really alienates himself from the majority of his potential reading public.

As a second test in determining the greatness of poetry, Chesterton employed what may be called "the communication test". The great poet

...meant exactly what he said; and he said exactly what he meant; and there is here perhaps a difference of literary test. 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.¹

By thus communicating, the poet is like the priest.

The poet, like the priest, should bear the ancient title of the builder of the bridge. His claim is exactly that he can really cross the chasm between the world of unspoken and seemingly unspeakable truths to the world of spoken words. His triumph is when the bridge is completed and the word is spoken; above all, when it is heard.²

Moreover, in thus establishing communication with his audience, the poet would be well guided to speak in the language of the people.

The ideal condition is that the poet should put his meaning more and more into the language of the people, and that the people should enjoy more and more of the meaning of the poet.³

From this, it follows that "in so far as a poet is too big to be taken in, he is all the less a poet, for the poet

¹

G.K. Chesterton, Avowals and Denials, p. 142.

²

G.K. Chesterton, Sidelights on New London, p. 209.

³G.K. Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 111.

means the man who can express himself; the poet means the man who can make himself understood."¹

Even poetic imagery is not exempt from this "communication test". Commenting upon the following lines of Blake

Mock on, Mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau,
Mock on, Mock on; 'tis all in vain:
You throw the sand against the wind
And the wind blows it back again.

Chesterton, guided by the "communication test" remarks:

That is poetry; that is a clear and direct image which does convey perfectly what is meant; the futility of the fight of what is dull and heavy against what is full of light and living energy. It is, in fact, a full and even final example of the Image; and, therefore of the function of Imagination.²

Again, guided by this test, Chesterton evaluates the imagery of Dante.

The images of Dante are not to be worshipped, any more than any other images. But there is an idea behind all images; and it is before that, in the last lines of the *Paradiso* that the spirit of the poet seems first to soar like an eagle and then to fall like a stone.³

Whether it be in the "ideological test" or the "communication test" to determine the greatness of poetry, it was truly characteristic of Chesterton to thus "bridge" the imagination and understanding. In viewing poetry thus, he again reveals the Thomistic bent of his mind.

1

G.K. Chesterton, A Handful of Authors, p. 147.

2

G.K. Chesterton, Avowals and Denials, p. 143.

3

G.K. Chesterton, The Thing, p. 155.

To summarize, it has been shown in this chapter how Chesterton applied his four key critical principles to poetry. By the principle of correspondence, Chesterton established in which ways poetry is dependent upon a theory of the nature of reality. He showed how poetry is related to the strangeness of the world. Furthermore, he pointed out that the poetic imagination thrives on the otherness of things. By the principle of transcendence, Chesterton established the supra-rational quality of poetry. In some mysterious way, poetry expresses the deepest secrets of human nature. Poetry points to transcendental truths. By the principle of limitation, Chesterton showed how the true poet is happy with limitations. Whether it be in the themes he employs or the emotions he evokes or the form in which he translates his vision, the poet is subject to limits. Finally, by the principle of perspective, Chesterton established a relationship between poetry and ritual, myth and song. In determining the greatness of poetry, Chesterton employed two tests: that of ideology and that of communication.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Of course, it is not easy to point to anything that is entirely creative. In ultimate philosophy, as in ultimate theology, men are not capable of creation, but only of combination.¹

Throughout this study, it has been emphasized that Chesterton's views on art and literature are inextricably related to his religious and philosophical outlook. For Chesterton, such interrelationships are unavoidable for the elementary reason that it is for him religion that gives ultimate significance to everything. For him, religion is not some kind of luxury that men can choose to take or leave: it is not something peripheral to their lives. Rather, religion arises out of the very essence of human nature: man is connaturally religious. Ultimately, therefore, all really human problems, whether they be social or artistic, become theological problems. For G.K.C., religion explicates everything human.

But, why must men philosophize? Simply because their minds are so made that meaning is their nourishment; because the universe is one vast interrelating organism made by a Divine Mind; and, because philosophy simply means thinking things out. Thus, to think connectedly about art and literature means to philosophize--it means to establish first principles and to develop interrelationships.

¹ G.K.Chesterton, All I Survey, p. 91.

In this study, it has been shown that Chesterton regularly employed, wittingly or unwittingly, what may be called four key principles in his approaches to reality, art, and literature. Of these four recurring principles, that of correspondence is primary; and those of transcendence, of limitation, and of perspective, are derivative. Because the continuity and coherence of Chesterton's thought will be thus more strikingly revealed, in the summary that follows each one of these four principles will be considered as distinct and autonomous units of his general philosophy.

1. The principle of correspondence

With Tertullian, Chesterton would undoubtedly agree that the human soul is naturally Christian--perhaps he might even go further and say that it is naturally Catholic. With Gilson, Chesterton would undoubtedly agree that there is such a thing as Christian Philosophy. As contrasted to the philosophy of Catholic Christianity, all pagan religions and philosophies in some way misread human nature. Moreover, insofar as the different Protestant denominations have deviated from the central Christian tradition, they also do injustice to human nature. In short, whether he realizes it or not, the artist receives complete theoretical support for his artistic activity from the central Christian tradition. Christianity is beneficent to art.

In revealing to mankind the fact of Divine Creation, the Christian Philosophy sheds light on all human "creation". In telling mankind that God is truly personal because He is so infinitely intelligent, Christian Philosophy suggests an ideal for all artists. In telling mankind that there is thus only one created universe, Christian Philosophy suggests to the artist that he can be but a creator analogously, that he should allow his mind to feed on this one created universe, that strictly speaking an artist's best efforts, as contrasted to Divine Creativity, are merely a form of "combination". In telling mankind that the Maker created the universe out of nothing, and that He is both immanent and transcendent to the created world, Christian Philosophy suggests to the artist why he feels that he is touching transcendental truths and beauties. Because the universe is one and yet many, Christian Philosophy suggests to the artist why analogy, allegory, and paradox are so bound up with the artistic vision and method.

But what does Christian Philosophy tell the artist about human nature? It tells him that man is made to the image of his Maker, that his nature is divine-like. It tells him that rather than worship Nature, he should imprint his image upon it: that things when they pass through his nature really go through a second creation. On the other hand, Christian Philosophy reminds the artist that though man is so great, he is also (as Pascal was so painfully aware)

so little, so contingent. Because original sin has disordered human nature, Christian Philosophy reminds the artist that in all things human there is the possibility of a Fall.

About the human faculties, Christian Philosophy suggests to the artist that in free will lies the explanation for his activity. In the act of making, the artist testifies to the glorious gift of rationality. Christian Philosophy reminds the artist that communication is a manifestation of this rationality. And the artist is never more rational than when he is most conscious: for, art is not a product of the sub-consciousness, of the sub-human.

Relying upon his connatural acceptance of the Thomistic Philosophy, Chesterton could continue this schooling of the artist. Because man is made to the Image of His Maker, Chesterton could tell the artist that art is almost a definition of man: that it is the signature of man. In a sense, man must create art. Again, in a sense, the artificial is really older than the natural. Because the imagination and the intellect are complementary, Chesterton could tell the artist that insofar as it is meaningful, the image is more perfect. Because man has emotions, Chesterton could tell the artist that in stirring these emotions (despite the protests of all Puritans and anti-sentimentalists) he reaches the "whole man". Because man is so painfully in need of transcendence and is so incurably idealistic, Chesterton could tell the artist that romanticism is

realism. Because man perfects his nature by practice of the virtues, Chesterton could tell the artist how intimately related to his artistic activity are the virtues of humility, courage, charity, and optimism. Because he himself was so convinced that men are more joyful (and, accordingly, more truly human) when their contemplation is "outer" directed, Chesterton could tell the artist that "uplifting" the human spirit is one of his primary functions and, furthermore, that "internalism" can become heretical: for, it can make the mood superior to the mind. And, finally, because what men have in common is infinitely more important than what they possess through individual acquirement, Chesterton could warn the artist that his work ultimately suffers inasmuch as he ignores universal themes: inasmuch as he refuses to make his work "popular".

And, what does Christian Philosophy tell the artist about things? It draws his attention to the need of viewing them sacramentally. It reminds him that both religion and art see the abstract in the concrete. Furthermore, Christian Philosophy reminds the artist of the arbitrariness of things, their otherness, their contingency, their paradoxical nature, their participation in mystery. It reminds the artist that both extreme Idealism and extreme Materialism challenge his artistic activity. It reminds him that Christian Realism theoretically supports his work.

Employing his religious and philosophical theory, Chesterton reflects on the traditional artistic problems of inspiration and imitation. Because man is divine-like in his nature, it appeared to Chesterton that all extrinsic theories to explain "creation" are philosophically fallacious: it is in his capacity as Image of God that man makes. Because man is divine-like in his nature, artistic "creation" should not be a mere mimicry slavishly executed of the Divine Creation. Rather the artist should imitate the act of creation. However, because man is not capable of ultimate creation, the artist is never more an artist than when he is a craftsman: than when he is viewing life steadily and whole: than when his work resembles life: than when his art is receptive to facts outside himself. In short, art is forced to look probable.

But what about "Art for Art's Sake"? Viewed from a purely technical viewpoint, from the viewpoint of arrangement, it cannot be denied that there is some validity in the claims of "Art for Art's Sake". But viewed as a theory that art can be completely divorced from life, that no indissoluble correspondences can be established between it and reality, it then is a gross misrepresentation of fact.

Finally, employing the principle of correspondence in an historical approach to art, Chesterton observes that Christianity, as contrasted to the conventional beauty found in the Greek conception of art, sanctified the grotesque,

the Gothic, the Baroque in art. In a word, the Christian Philosophy recognizes the "wildness" in man.

In his approaches to literature, Chesterton employs the principle of correspondence. In contrasts that he establishes between pre-Christian and Christian literatures, and between Catholic and Protestant literatures, Chesterton stresses that the artist's vision is bettered insofar as he shares the truths of the central Christian tradition. Furthermore, by illustrations, Chesterton points out the interrelationships between literature and both morality and philosophy.

In his approaches to the literary genres, G.K.C. vindicates them on the basis of what they correspond to in the nature of things. Because the detective story, the fable, the music-hall song, (genres that the more sophisticated might frown upon) appeal to something in human nature, Chesterton acts as their apologist. Whether it be in tragic or comic drama, whether it be in melodrama or farce, whether it be in irony or satire, Chesterton justifies them and explains their peculiar characteristics on the basis of what they correspond to in the nature of things, and on the kinds of human responses they evoke.

Finally, in his discussions on such literary matters as language, style, rhetoric and criticism, Chesterton again views them in terms of wider relationships. As to language, it must be subordinate to reality and point to it. As to

style, it must be subordinate to motive, to meaning. As to rhetoric, it appeals to the grandiloquent element in man. As to criticism, the critic may see more in an artist's work than the artist himself: for both share the same created universe and the same human nature.

Employing the principle of correspondence in his reflections on poetry, Chesterton shows that Pantheism means the death of poetry, the death of wonder. He further stresses that poetry thrives on the "strangeness" of things, on their otherness, on their mystery. Because men live in a mysterious universe, they create poetry. In a sense, poetry is more rational than Rationalism. Nothing about poetry is artificial. Whether it be its imagery, its meter, or its rhyme, all appeal to something in human nature.

2. The principle of transcendence

There is mystery in anything that man reflects upon. There is mystery in God, in man, and in things. The root-paradox of all is the God-Man Who died. Accordingly, the artist does not make paradoxes: he sees them. Accordingly, the reverent agnosticism that the Book of Job suggests makes sense. It is Mysticism, not Rationalism, that keeps men sane. Accordingly, Romance is a philosophical way of looking at things. It suggests that there is more than is dreamed of in any philosophy, than is met by any eye.

Because the universe of things is so paradoxical, art which mirrors this world partakes of the paradox. Accordingly, the scientific method (with its impersonal detachment) has severe limitations when it is applied to art. In everything about art, whether it be in its historical origins, or in its human "creation", or in its peculiar effects, there is an element of transcendence. Historically, the roots of the arts are shrouded in mystery. In the actual creative process, there is encountered the mysterious life of the imagination, giving a greater reality to things than they have in the so-called "real" order. In its effects, man will know what art means when he knows what he means when he responds to it. Furthermore, every artist in his making feels that he reaches transcendental truths and beauties. No wonder, then, that a thing of beauty is a joy for ever, an inspiration for ever. Beautiful images reflect and symbolize the Beautiful One.

In his approaches to literature and poetry, Chesterton again stresses this transcendental element. To begin with, there is the "miracle of language". There is the fact of words meaning more than what they say. There is the fact that the really successful literary style is indefinable. There is the fact that translation of the literary arts is impossible. There is the fact that metaphysical criticism of a poem succeeds in capturing but a shadow of its meaning.

3. The principle of limitation

God alone is infinite. Everything about man is stamped with limitation. His every act of will is an act of limitation. To think means to accept limits: it means to define, it means to verbalize. To use the imagination means to accept the limits of the image: the imagination is the opposite of the indefinite. Moreover, as things rise in the hierarchy of being they tend to become localised. The poet was right in giving to "airy nothing, a local habitation and a name." Truly, this a world of outlines, of limits.

As applied to the arts, this principle reminds men that the best they can really do is to combine. It tells them that creation means rejection and selection. It tells the artist that as a craftsman he must cut things down. It tells the artist that art is an approximate attempt to symbolize a vision. It tells the artist that conventions are not artificial. It tells the artist that "form" controls his expression. It warns the artist of the psychological law of fatigue.

As applied to literature and poetry, this principle of limitation reminds the artist that language is essentially imperfect as a medium to capture reality. It tells him that plagiarism is not as detestable as experimentalists would have him believe. It tells the artist that limitation is essential for success in any of the literary genres. It tells the poet that the restrictions of his art serve to produce a thing of beauty.

4. The principle of perspective

To see things in proper perspective, to see things sub specie aeternitatis, means to see the timeless in the temporal: the spirit of the ages in the spirit of the age. To see things in proper perspective means to recognize the value of tradition: to recognize the danger of Modernism. For a man of the West, to see things in proper perspective means to see them in terms of the Graeco-Roman legacy; in terms of the Christian legacy. It means not to be hoodwinked by the Teutonic myth. To see things in perspective means to see the disruptive character of the so-called Protestant Reformation. To see things in perspective means to appreciate the history that could have been: it means to reject any linear theory of inevitable progression. To see things in perspective means to see values in a hierarchical scheme in which the spiritual is more important than the material, life is more important than art, consciousness is more important than sub-consciousness, what men have in common (the popular) is more important than what they possess individually (the aristocratic).

As applied to art, this principle of perspective points out to the artist that art is born when the temporary touches the eternal. It tells him that art is long; that science is fleeting. It tells him that the value of art arises from intrinsic qualities, apart from order or sequence.

It tells the artist that traditional art is truly creative art. It tells the artist that to be truly creative means to search for origins.

By the value-perspective, the artist is told that life is more important than art: that the artistic temperament is a disease of amateurs. It tells the artist that great art is more than merely technically proficient art: that all great art is allegorical art, allegorical of some view of the universe. It tells him that the great artist makes men wonder at the universe, not at the artist. It tells the artist that he is great when he is intelligible, when he communicates, when he says what he means. It tells him that cliques prove that he failed to communicate, to build the bridge. It tells the artist that great art promises something of the destiny of the human spirit. In short, it tells the artist that he is as a priest.

As applied to literature and poetry, the principle of perspective points out that great literature deals with the eternal youth of mankind, that is, is "beyond the times". It tells the artist that all the new ideas are in the old books in the right contexts. Historically, it tells the artist how indebted English literature is to the Graeco-Roman and Christian traditions. It tells the artist that sympathy is needed to understand the Zeitgeist of another literary period. Moreover, it also tells him that the Zeitgeist reflects the religious and philosophic outlook of the

time. It tells the artist that literary revivals are necessary. On the other hand, it warns the artist that nothing is more narrowing than novelty for novelty's sake. As to the poet, it tells him that his art is a descendant from ritual and mythology.

By the value-perspective, the literary artist is told that great literature is centripetal: that it is both universal and unique; that it is both national and personal. It tells him that it is ideology that makes for universality; that it is style and imagery that make for uniqueness. It tells the critic of literature that his supreme function is to discover that part of an artist's work which is truly his.

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1. Books by Chesterton

Chesterton, G.K., A Handful of Authors, edited by Dorothy Collins, New York, Sheed & Ward, 1953, 214 pp. This book is one of the most valuable sources by which Chesterton's artistic and literary theory may be established. Found throughout this book are Chestertonian views on art, beauty, inspiration, language and criticism.

-----, A Miscellany of Men, New York, Dodd & Mead, 1912, 314pp. Philosophically, Chesterton stresses that Western thought associates separation from an object as a pre-condition for surprise in the beholder. He points out that the Middle Ages are the historical root of England. Creative activity is related to man's liberty.

-----, A Short History of England, London, Chatto and Windus, 1920, 241pp. The religious background of English history is emphasized. Puritanism is hostile to the popular English traditions. Eighteenth-century rhetoric is justified.

-----, Alarms and Discursions, New York, Dodd & Mead, 1911, 301pp. Gothic art is really an advancement on that of the Greek Classic. Imaginative literature reveals a contrast between the weird curves of nature and the straightness of the soul. The true poet is of the people, expressing their popular sentiments.

-----, All I Survey, New York, Dodd & Mead, 1933, 280pp. An artist is never entirely creative. Traditional art is truly "creative". Ugliness can be turned into terrible beauty. Chesterton opposes the detached image in modern literature. He also frowns upon the modern unintelligibility cult.

-----, All Is Grist, London, Methuen & Co., 1931, 216pp. Art is of the very essence of human nature. Art must submit to the laws of proportion and contrast. Beautiful images reflect the Beautiful One. Imagination must submit to the law of limits. Great literature suggests that life is teleological.

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Great art communicates, striking the popular judgment. All truly great literature is comprehensible. A primary function of art is to uplift the soul.

-----, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, London, Dent, 1911, 243pp.

Romance and religion are related. Literature is saved from triviality by describing some condition of the human soul. A writer can discover truths of which he is not fully aware.

-----, Avowals and Denials, New York, Dodd & Mead, 1935, 237pp.

The mystery of the Creator is in all His works. Imagination gives to an object a reality greater than it has in the real world. The perfect image conveys what is meant.

-----, Charles Dickens, the Last of the Great Men, New York, The Press of the Readers' Club, 1942, 236pp.

In the narrow sense, art is arrangement. Exaggeration is almost a definition of art. Art is forced to look probable. Creation is a power that cannot be imitated. To determine whether art will live a philosophy is needed.

-----, Chaucer, New York, Pellegrini & Co., n.d., 286pp.

Art is a semi-transparent, shadowy thing. Insofar as a writer shares the truth of the central Christian tradition, his vision is bettered. Poetry is allied with song.

-----, Christendom in Dublin, London, Sheed & Ward, 1933, 99pp.

Beauty is related with the strangeness of things. The Pantheist cannot consistently wonder at things.

-----, Come to Think of It, New York, Dodd & Mead, 1931, 272pp.

Art is combination. Poetry should be judged by first principles. The artist must remember the psychological law of fatigue. Literary parallels are questionable.

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The history of England must be viewed in terms of the European tradition. The infinite is generally alien to art. Superior literature is centripetal. Literature must revolve around certain loyalties.
- , G.F. Watts, Chicago, Rand, McNally, n.d., 76pp.
It is through technique that there are correspondences between art and moral beauty. Great art is allegorical of a view of the universe. To judge art it is necessary to discover the artist's intention.
- , G.K.C. as M.C., J. Foneska ed., London, Methuen, 1939, 273pp.
Art points to transcendental truths. Great literature is both universal and unique. Originality and imitation are not irreconcilable. Humour is related to man's dual destiny.
- , Generally Speaking, New York, Dodd & Mead, 1929, 291pp.
Art is a method of calling up a vision. The artificial is justified. The artistic media reveal a downward movement paralleling man's Fall.
- , George Bernard Shaw, New York, John Lane, 1909, 249pp.
Art is not as important as religion. Paradox is of the texture of reality. The dramatic unites are based on an aesthetic instinct. Humour is more Catholic than wit.
- , Heretics, New York, Dodd & Mead, 1923, 305pp.
Life is full of paradoxes. The development of the novel is related to the religious idea of charity. In English literary history there is a tradition of emotionalism. The scientific method is not applicable to art.
- , Orthodoxy, New York, Dodd & Mead, 1945, 299pp.
Artists must care for limitations. Art makes man aware for a moment of who he is. Imagination is related with sanity. The novel is a Christian product. Satire presupposes a standard.

Chesterton, G.K., Robert Browning, New York, The MacMillan Co., 1903, 207pp.

All art is based upon certain conventions. Great literature is concrete, not abstract. Poetry presents things as they are to our emotions. The full significance of poetry cannot be rationally stated.

-----, Robert Louis Stevenson, New York, Dodd & Mead, 1928, 211pp.

A beautiful thing means more than it says. Literary history discloses a law of return to the simple. Literature is the miracle of man saying what he means. Style comes from within.

-----, Sidelights on New London and Newer York, London, Sheed & Ward, 1933, 235pp.

There is a moral basis for fantasy. The artificial is really natural. The true poet bridges the world of the unspoken. Because modern literature does not communicate, a middle-man has arisen between the artist and his public.

-----, St. Francis of Assisi, New York, George H. Doran Co., 1924, 234pp.

Allegory is characteristic of medieval thought. The poet praises the act of creation--the transition from nonentity to entity.

-----, St. Thomas Aquinas, London, Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1943, 159pp.

Form is fundamental in art. Poetry without philosophy is mere inspiration, mere wind. Poetry results from the objectivity of things, their strangeness.

-----, The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton, New York, Sheed & Ward, 1936, 360pp.

A primary function of art is to dig for the submerged sense of wonder. For a poet to be thankful, he must connect poetry with theology. Even to enjoy a weed, an artist must feel unworthy of it. The imagination is not contrary to reason.

-----, The Coloured Lands, New York, Sheed & Ward, 1938, 238pp.

Creation is the relation of mood to other realities. That art represent life presupposes that life be known. There is a law of diminishing returns in imaginative innovations.

Chesterton, G.K., The Common Man, New York, Sheed & Ward, 1950, 279pp.

History is needed to understand literature. The arts require moral qualities. Even nonsense literature establishes contact with reality. Such poetic elements as meter are really elemental.

-----, The Defendant, London, J.M. Dent, 1914, 131pp.

The greatness of art comes from outside art. The artist opposes the human tendency to undervalue everything. All art may be justified insofar as it is a symbol of the human spirit.

-----, The Everlasting Man, New York, Dodd & Mead, 1944, 344pp.

The artist aches to find meaning. He is aware that there is something behind the veil. Theoretically, art is best supported by Christian Philosophy. The imagination has its own laws. Art is the very signature of man.

-----, The Glass Walking Stick and Other Essays, ed. D. Collins, London, Methuen, 1955, 190pp.

Art is not expression; it is communication. Both Realism and Romance distort truth. As contrasted to science, literature considers things from the inside.

-----, The New Jerusalem, New York, George H. Doran, 1921, 307pp.

Despite the Teutonic claims, the Latin civilization is at the origins of English history. It is of the nature of spiritual essences to strive for local habitation and a name. The poet is full of indescribable emotions.

-----, The Poet and the Lunatics, New York, Dodd & Mead, 1929, 269pp.

The artist must learn to see things upside down. It is doubtful whether any truth can be told except in allegory.

-----, The Resurrection of Rome, New York, Dodd & Mead, 1930, 294pp.

Art is an approximation. As contrasted to other views, Christian Philosophy allows for many angles and tempers. Classic Greek tends towards simplification of life.

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One of the primary functions of art is to arouse the sense of wonder in men. The sense of loss in great poetry reflects man's Fall. Newman's thesis that English literature is a Protestant one is challenged.

-----, The Uses of Diversity, New York, Dodd & Mead, 1921, 289pp.

The historical origins of the arts are clouded in mystery. Art is as a mirror only symbolically. Poetry means a love of elemental things.

-----, The Victorian Age in Literature, New York, Henry Holt, 1913, 256pp.

Creation means to accept limitations. Tradition widens the perspective of a critic. Literature is the detachment of the spirit of life from its dull obstacles. An inspired poet is not the highest kind of poet.

-----, The Well and the Shallows, New York, Sheed & Ward, 1935, 277pp.

Thomism is Chesterton's philosophy. Catholicism means a broadening of the mind. All literary movements tend to wear themselves out. Style is to say strongly what others say weakly.

-----, Tremendous Trifles, New York, Dodd & Mead, 1909, 325pp.

Art consists in cutting things down. Christian art reflects the "wildness" in man. Both religion and poetry insist on the menacing proximity of things.

-----, Varied Types, New York, Dodd & Mead, 1903, 269pp.

The arts require moral qualities. It is the supreme function of criticism to discover the uniqueness of a work. Romance is a fundamental attitude towards life. Comedy is built on everlasting foundations.

-----, William Blake, London, Duckworth, n.d., 210pp.

Originality means to go back to origins. In poetry, the intellectual meaning is more important than the palpable image. Words come to us coloured by their history.

Chesterton, G.K., William Cobbett, London, Hodder and Stoughton, n.d., 277pp.

The combination of the subject and the object is what makes writing literature. Style is inseparable from content. The English language excels in certain angular consonants and abrupt terminations.

2. Periodical articles by Chesterton

Chesterton, G.K., "Alexandre Dumas", The Bookman, Volume 15, July, 1902, pp. 446-450.

Design and structure are of primary importance in art. Modern literature is dying from a fear of plagiarism.

-----, "Alice Meynell", The Dublin Review, Volume 172, January, 1923, pp. 1-12.

Contrast is a key principle of art. Both religion and poetry feed upon mystery. Great poetry dares to treat so-called commonplace themes and objects.

-----, "Are the Artists Going Mad?", The Century, Volume 105, December, 1922, pp. 271-278.

It is a primary function of art to awaken the sense of wonder in man. Art is idealistic, not realistic. For the artist, humility and thanksgiving are just as much needed as insight and selection.

-----, "Charles Dickens", The Living Age, Volume 312, February 25, 1922, pp. 480-485.

It is the artist's duty to please as well as create. The literature of joy is to be praised. A reaction against satire is a subconscious attempt to deny its truth.

-----, "Contemporary Fiction", The Reader, Volume 9, December, 1906, pp. 78-82.

The contemporary thinking is saturated with the "impersonality heresy". Artistic revivals are always imperfect. The novel stresses the ways in which men are different from one another.

-----, "Critics and Heretics", America, Volume 42, February 22, 1930, pp. 477-478.

Literary discussions will become more lucid as they become more religious. One of the functions of the critic is to draw attention to the heresy in a writer's work.

Chesterton, G.K., "English Literature and the Latin Tradition", The Fortnightly, Volume 144, August, 1935, pp. 182-193.

The Latin tradition is the source of the popular element in English literature. It is characteristic of a classical phrase that it means more than it says. In great poetry, there are echoes in the verse.

-----, "George Bernard Shaw", Fortnightly Review, Volume 136, August, 1931, pp. 150-159.
Because of their hostility to tradition, modern writers are cheated of their full heritage. The greatness of drama is dependent upon the "inner life"--upon religion.

-----, "Matthew Arnold", The Bookman, Volume 16, October, 1902, pp. 116-120.
Criticism should be subordinate to the admiration that the work has been produced. The supreme function of criticism is to discover the uniqueness of the writer.

-----, "Milton and His Age", The Living Age, Volume 264, February 26, 1910, pp. 556-562.
The Puritan tradition is fundamentally anti-popular. The seventeenth-century is a complex period. Its art is "crooked".

-----, "Milton and Merry England", The London Mercury, Volume 5, December, 1921, pp. 134-143.
Art cannot exist apart from or in opposition to life. It is the critic's duty to consider the intention of the artist. The Cavalier religious poetry of the seventeenth-century surpasses that of the Puritans.

-----, "The Artistic Side", G.K.'s Weekly, Volume 12, November 29, 1930, p. 183.
Creation stresses separateness of things. Beauty and art should be meaningful.

-----, "The Book of Job", Putnam's Monthly, Volume 2, June, 1907, pp. 351-357.
God teaches man that there is a legitimate kind of agnosticism. In primitive literature there is a subtle element.

Chesterton, G.K., "The End of the Moderns", The Bookman, Volume 75, December, 1932, pp. 807-811.

Man must transcend mere rationalism. Literature and philosophy are interrelated. The naturalistic novel in its treatment of sex leads into a logical contradiction: it tries to make something trivial crucial.

-----, "The Fastidious Futurist, Or The Search for Originality", The Living Age, Volume 305, April 24, 1920, pp. 230-232.

Mere novelty in art is really narrowing. A distinction must be made between the artist who makes us wonder at him and the artist who makes us wonder at the world.

-----, "The Game of Psychoanalysis", The Century, Volume 106, May, 1923, pp. 34-43.

Psychoanalysis exemplifies the modern need of a mythology. It can become a monomania with its insane simplifications. Psychoanalytical criticism of Hamlet is fit material for satire.

-----, "The Romance of Rhyme", The Living Age, Volume 304, March 13, 1920, pp. 656-665.

Rhyme is to be associated with romance, and ultimately with religion. In rhyme there are both simple and subtle pleasures. The seventeenth-century revolt against rhyme was led by Milton.

-----, "The Paralysis of Satire", The Living Age, Volume 261, April 10, 1909, pp. 113-116.

Art presupposes morality. To work effectively the satirist needs an audience that accepts some fixed standard.

-----, "The Peril of the Impersonal", G.K.'s Weekly, Volume 10, November 9, 1929, p. 135.

The truly human in man is the personal, not heredity of sub-consciousness. The will is more important than circumstances.

-----, "Tennyson", The Bookman, Volume 16, December, 1902, pp. 349-351.

Beauty is more complete and perfect in art than in nature. One aspect of the individuality of an author is how he reacted to his Age.

3. Books about Chesterton

English Belloc, H., On the Place of Gilbert Chesterton in Letters, New York, Sheed & Ward, 1940, 84pp.

In Chesterton's works there is a constant awareness of both history and of literature. Because of his historical awareness, Chesterton had a sense of perspective. His literary criticism was of the first quality.

Bogaerts, A., Chesterton and the Victorian Age, Hilversum, Rozenbeek, 1940, 191pp.

In this published thesis it is claimed that Chesterton's aesthetic criticism is at its best when his attention is not diverted by the social problems of the time. His finest quality as a critic is a respect for the creator in the artist.

Bullett, G., The Innocence of G.K. Chesterton, New York, Henry Holt, 1924, 233pp.

Chesterton's criticism has a brilliance that truly illuminates a work. However, he is unable to do justice critically to a literary work that disagrees with his philosophy.

Evans, M., G.K. Chesterton, Cambridge at University Press, 1939, 157pp.

Chesterton criticizes from a doctrinal viewpoint. On the basis of the immediate reality of the external world, Chesterton challenges impressionism.

Kenner, H., Paradox in Chesterton, New York, Sheed & Ward, 1947, xxii, 156pp.

This study contains a brilliant defence of paradox in both philosophy and art. It is further shown that analogy is rooted in the philosophical concept of the one and the many. Chesterton is described as being connaturally a Thomist.

Lea, F., The Wild Knight of Battersea, London, James Clarke & Co., 1945, v, 94pp.

Chesterton's conversion coordinated his previous intuitions. He retained the romantic receptivity of the child. His striking aesthetic insight is that "until we love a thing in all its ugliness we cannot make it beautiful."

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Ryan, J., G.K. Chesterton as Literary Critic, (Doctoral Dissertation), Boston University, 1950, ix, 174pp. The heresies that Chesterton attacked in literary works--Determinism, Naturalism, Pessimism, and Shavianism--are examined. Ryan further shows how Chesterton criticized certain leading authors, such as Chaucer and Browning.

Ward, M., Gilbert Keith Chesterton, New York, Sheed & Ward, 1943, 685pp. This is the definitive biography of Chesterton. It was valuable for this thesis, containing unpublished material from Chesterton's Notebooks.

Ward, M., Return to Chesterton, New York, Sheed & Ward, 1952, 336pp. This is a sequel to Miss Ward's first study. It is noted how fundamentally consistent Chesterton was in his thinking. It was his wisdom to know that a good critic does not say the last word.

West, J., G.K. Chesterton, a Critical Study, New York, Dodd & Mead, 1916, 191pp. Because Chesterton liked the literature of the past so exclusively, he failed to appreciate modern literature. As a critic, he undoubtedly had the gift of insight.

Yackshaw, R., An Analysis of the Literary Criticism of Gilbert Keith Chesterton, (Doctoral Dissertation), State University of Iowa, 1954, iv, 311pp. Yackshaw is primarily interested in Chesterton as a practising critic. It is noted that Chesterton holds that the critic must attend to the expressed intention of the artist. Chesterton opposes Impressionism because of its undue emphasis on the subjective. He claims that poetry should be written about primal and elemental things.

4. Periodical articles about Chesterton

Feeney, L., "The Metaphysics of Chesterton", Thought, Volume 17, March, 1942, pp. 22-36. Chesterton had a philosophical mind of the first rank. His mind fed on being. His humour was the fruit of thought--he may truly be called the laughing metaphysician.

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Hardie, W., "The Philosophy of G.K. Chesterton", The Hibbert Journal, Volume 29, April, 1931, pp. 449-464pp. Christianity is more gay than paganism. The real is arbitrary. Chesterton's adherence to the ultra-democratic principle is inconsistent with his love of first principles.

Maynard, T., "The Chesterbelloc", The Catholic World, Volume 110, December, 1919, pp. 319-330. Innocence is the key to Chesterton's thought. Through his use of paradox, he brings truth to a point. Although his criticism is argumentative, it does cast light.

Sewell, E., "G.K. Chesterton: The Giant Upside-Down", Thought, Volume 30, Winter, 1955-56, pp. 555-576. An attempt to account psychologically for Chesterton's predilection for controversy. Chesterton is the first critic to comment upon nonsense literature as a new genre.

Veale, J., "Chesterton's Literary Criticism", The Irish Monthly, Volume 71, November, 1943, pp. 443-453. The high quality of Chesterton's criticism is the fruit of his sympathy, his charity and his humour; and his perpetual childlike wonder. His criticism makes the reader want to examine the work.

AN ABSTRACT

Since, for Chesterton, religion and philosophy give ultimate significance to everything, he connaturally saw all human activities in terms of such fundamental considerations. It may be said that he employed, wittingly or unwittingly, four guiding principles in his approaches to reality: the principles of correspondence; of transcendence; of limitation; and, of perspective. Of these four principles, that of correspondence is primary; the remaining three are derivative.

Guided by the principle of correspondence, Chesterton establishes interrelationships between artistic activity and the nature of the created universe and human nature. Indeed, Chesterton insists that art is inseparably linked to religion, morality, and philosophy. Insofar as the artist shares the truths of the central Christian tradition, his artistic vision is bettered. Moreover, religion is intimately related to such literary phenomena as romance and the novel. Viewed from the standpoint of creation, art presupposes certain moral qualities, such as humility and honesty, on the part of the artist. Insofar as an artist's philosophy is distorted, his work suffers. Guided by this same principle of correspondence, Chesterton suspects all theories of artistic inspiration that deny that the artist himself is the efficient cause of his own inspiration. He further stresses that the artist should not slavishly copy the

the Divine creation. Rather, confirming that he is made to the Image of his Maker, the artist should imitate the act of Divine creation. In this sense, the human artist really does "create" another cosmos. However, in the strict sense, the human artist, as contrasted to the Divine Artist, does not create: he does but "combine." This being so, the artist's vision and product can be shared by other beholders: in fact, can even sometimes be better understood by others. Analogously with the Divine creation, the human artist confirms his rationality insofar as his work is meaningful. Furthermore, the artist thus assures communication and communion with his public: he thus builds the bridge. Since art is one of the highest expressions of personality, it involves primarily the faculties of free will and intellect. Art is the product of consciousness, not of the sub-human. Moreover, all artistic and literary genres are justifiable on the basis of what they correspond to in human nature. This same principle of correspondence applies to such literary categories as the drama, the novel, and poetry. It also applies to such literary phenomena as tragedy and comedy, melodrama and farce, irony and satire.

Guided by the principle of transcendence, Chesterton detected a mysterious element in everything upon which his contemplation fell. God is a name of mystery. Divine creation baffles the human intellect. Furthermore, the mystery of the Creator is reflected in all His works.

The universe is full of paradoxes, of riddles. And, the supreme example of such paradoxes is man himself. Characteristically, Chesterton discovers mystery in the operations of the artistic imagination. For him, the beauty that the literary artist makes means more than it says. Furthermore, the effects produced by a work of art are similarly mysterious. Chesterton describes the true artist as one who feels that he is touching transcendental truths.

Guided by the principle of limitation, Chesterton was fully conscious of the finite nature of everything, suspended in existence by a continuous act of Divine Mercy. In fact, it is almost a definition of art to say that it is a thing of limits. The artist gives to "airy nothing a local habitation and a name." Infinity is diametrically opposed to art. This principle of limitation is revealed in such literary considerations as the dramatic unities, the plot of a novel, the rhyme and meter of poetry. The true artistic critic is above all else aware of the limitations of language.

Guided by the principle of perspective, Chesterton sees artistic works in terms of time and value perspectives. In a sense, art is born when the temporal touches the eternal. The history of art must be seen in terms of the Graeco-Roman and Christian traditions. To understand English literary history, the disruptive effect of the Protestant

Revolution must be understood. In terms of a well thought-out philosophy, Chesterton then evaluates the characteristic thought of each of the great literary periods. Because the contemporary period has ignored the value of tradition, because it has made experimentation an end in itself, because its art makes the beholder wonder at the artist rather than at the created universe, because its fiction is naturalistic, because its poetry thrives on the detached image, Chesterton is unsympathetic to twentieth-century literary art.

Guided by a value-perspective, Chesterton stresses that art and literature are of subordinate significance to life. He further stresses that truly great art is more than merely technically accomplished art--more than merely successful arrangement. Truly great art promises something of the destiny of the human spirit; it reminds man (who, because of Original Sin undervalues everything) of the wonder of existence; it translates the indescribable so that it becomes meaningful. In short, it communicates. Moreover, truly great art is centripetal. Paradoxically, great art is both universal and unique.

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