

GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON

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A paradox is not a couple of mallards but a statement seemingly, but only seemingly, in conflict with itself. The paradox is the note of Chesterton's style as well as the subject of Hugh Kenner's book on the English author. Almost any page of Chesterton will yield examples:

The mad man has not lost his reason; he has lost everything but his reason.

He is the man of whom men say that he means well; by which they mean that he means nothing.

Women were not kept at home to keep them narrow; on the contrary, they were kept at home to keep them broad.

And of course it was Chesterton who noted of the claim that no one can turn the clock back that of course anyone can, and with one finger.

This feature of Chesterton's prose endears him to many and puts off others, but it would be wrong to see it simply as a matter of style.

Chesterton was the great *naif*, for whom the everyday was shot through with mystery and romance. His best stories evoke the wonder and surprise of the ordinary. Thus he will write of a Napoleon of Notting Hill and a Man who was Thursday. He himself was a man who was thirsty, and celebrated the Christian blessing of drink with something of the exuberance of his friend Hilaire Belloc, and the occasional immoderation of a son of Adam.

The paradox of Chesterton is that of a man who spent his life pouring out evanescent writing, aimed at dailies and weeklies, showing little or no concern for any future reputation, yet whose swift journalism now reads like the studied essays of others. He was a master of the personal essay which often functioned as little more than a journalistic filler and yet, when collected, these have an undeniable permanency. Essays were usually On something, but like Belloc Chesterton could dash off an essay on little or nothing, yet in the course of it, some gemlike truth would emerge, show this overlooked facet or that, and prevent the piece from simply going the way of old newsprint.

Ignatius Press is bringing out Chesterton's Collected Works, and this is a genuine initiative, there never having been such a thing before. Quite rightly the editors have devoted whole volumes to Chesterton's journalism. There is a hurried helter-skelter aspect to the things Chesterton composed as books. *Orthodoxy*, one of his most intellectually exciting books, was more or less dashed off, as was his remarkable book on Thomas Aquinas. If we can trust the accounts of the composition of this latter work, Chesterton sounds like an utterly irresponsible writer. He had read little of St. Thomas and he dictated half the book before he asked his secretary to get him some books on the saint. He leafed through these, and dictated the rest of the book. The result is a grasp of the central effort of Thomas's intellectual life expressed in a way that has excited the envy of

such scholars as Etienne Gilson.

In his literary appreciations, quoting from memory, like a medieval, Chesterton often remembers lines that his author never wrote, or gets them slightly wrong -- and thereby gets them right in a way that surpasses mere accuracy. Writing on Chaucer or Dickens or the Victorian Age in *Literature*, Chesterton writes of authors he has read and loved for readers he assumes have done the same. He addresses the *aficionado*, not the expert.. The point of his literary criticism is to enhance our future re-reading, to take us back to the author, not to produce something that could exist apart from what it is about.

Whatever the word `great' means, Dickens was what it means. Even the fastidious and unhappy who cannot read his books without a continuous critical exasperation, would use the word of him without stopping to think. They feel that Dickens is a great writer even if he is not a good writer.... `Great' is the first adjective which even the most supercilious modern critic would apply to Dickens. And `great' is the last adjective the most supercilious critic would apply to himself. We do not dare to be great men, even when

we claim to be superior to them.

A book that starts like that is going to be read, and it was read and it is read. And its point is to get us to read Dickens.

Chesterton's poetry has the unassuming character of an effusion from a multi-talented man who could not not write. It is uneven -- his output generally is uneven -- but it has moments of exquisite beauty. Perhaps all poets are fated to be remembered for a few lines, a few poems, their *oeuvre* sinking out of sight. Chesterton's "Lepanto" and his "Ballad of St. Barbara" will surely last.

It is altogether fitting that Chesterton is most known to most today through his Father Brown stories. They have never gone out of print, they have been translated into films and into a television series. They belong to a genre and yet are *sui generis*. It may not be true that Charlie Chaplin once entered a Charlie Chaplin look-alike contest, and came in third. But it is certainly true that any tyro could write a technically tighter detective story than any of the Father Brown stories.

What characterizes them is their sense of the mystery and unpredictability of human freedom as well as an awareness of a nature wounded by sin. Father Brown never meets a criminal he could not himself be, and it is that which enables him to see what others overlook. There is a great contrast between Sherlock Holmes and Father Brown -- indeed, Chesterton's priest seems devised to show the unreality of a rationalist

deductive approach to human doings. In "The Man With Two Beards," Chesterton contrasted a rational, and false, interpretation of what happened, with a fantastic and true one.

What Doyle and Chesterton had in common, perhaps, was a loss of interest in their own character. Doyle notoriously tried to do away with Sherlock so that he could devote himself more to his wholly forgotten other literary efforts. The Father Brown stories seem to fade as we move away from the first collection, though each of the four collection contains gems. These stories were merely one of the many things Chesterton wrote.

Along with *Orthodoxy*, *The Everlasting Man* seems certain to be read for pleasure and profit by generations to come. Biographies of Chesterton appear regularly now. As a man he was a puzzler. He wrote about his conversion years before coming into the Church. He shared with Belloc views nowadays considered politically incorrect. But he knew the English were wrong in Ireland and wrong in South Africa and that the 'liberation' of women would enslave them. He dreamt of an economic system -- Distributism -- between Socialism and Capitalism. He wrote English like an angel.