# Our Curious Contemporary, G. K. Chesterton

Earlier in this century, G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) delighted readers with his fictional celebrations of English tradition and his whimsical essays on "What I Found in My Pockets" or "The Glory of Grey." But then, to the extent that a 300-pound man can disappear, Chesterton vanished, if not from view then at least from critical appreciation, dismissed as a relic of the past. Here Robert Royal evokes a quite different Chesterton, one whose double consciousness and ability to overturn accepted truths show a quite modern sensibility and make Chesterton, curiously, a man of our time.

*by Robert Royal*

Although G. K. Chesterton is one of the most quoted of early-20th-century English writers, he has yet to find his fair share of late-20th-century English readers. During his lifetime he was immensely popular, more popular even than his close literary friends George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, and Hilaire Belloc. His unique combination of wit and kindly manner made him a much sought-after journalist and speaker. But what was more, he was loved—no other word will do—by the British public. At his death in 1936 he had a passionate audience for the magazine he edited, *G.K.'s Weekly*, and a large following for his books and for his weekly column in the *Illustrated London News*; he was also one of the most popular of the regular commentators on the BBC. Chesterton had the knack of touching some deep common chord among his compatriots. He would have been gratified by the remark of an ordinary policeman who turned up at his funeral: "We'd all have been here if we could have got off duty. He was a grand man."

Since then, devoted Chestertonians have continued reading him furiously. Chesterton societies exist in cities throughout England, America, Australia, Japan, and Eastern Europe. This enthusiasm has kept far more of his titles in print than those of his three illustrious contemporaries. Yet for the general public in the past few decades, Chesterton's work has undergone the eclipse that often follows the death of a writer—though that neglect may be about to end. (Chesterton's *Collected Works* in 45 volumes is now being published.) In a variety of ways, our postmodern condition orients us toward a new and better appreciation of Chesterton.

Chesterton may be unique in modern

literature in that his very quotability and verbal pyrotechnics have, paradoxically, contributed to his neglect. Most readers who come across some common Chestertonian aphorism (e.g., "If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly") usually know nothing about Chesterton except that he seems to have been a consistently funny fellow. And they assume that he was a wit like Oscar Wilde who, for those of us too busy to be bothered with light reading, has nothing of substance to say.

Or if a reader is enticed into trying one of Chesterton's books, the mountain-goat leaps of logic, knotty verbal parallelisms, and prodigious use of paradox call for a patience and attention few other authors demand. Who else would have started a travel book—as Chesterton did his *What I Saw in America* (1922)—with this:

> I have never managed to lose my old conviction that travel narrows the mind. At least a man must make a double effort of moral humility and imaginative energy to prevent it from narrowing his mind. Indeed there is something touching and even tragic about the thought of the thoughtless tourist who might have stayed at home loving Laplanders, embracing Chinamen, and clasping Patagonians to his heart in Hampstead or Surbiton, but for his blind and suicidal impulse to go and see what they looked like. This is not meant for nonsense; still less is it meant for the silliest sort of nonsense, which is cynicism. The human bond that he feels at home is not an illusion.... But to travel is to leave the inside and draw dangerously near the outside.

*Chesterton's uniform—hat, cloak, cane, pince-nez—helped make the slovenly author a widely recognized London personage.*

For people who know the thrust of Chesterton's work, this apparently aimless nonsense makes perfect sense. What he means is that our imaginations often preserve more truth than do our contacts with reality. But for many readers, the willful topsy-turviness causes patience to give out before the larger pattern can emerge.

Yet the wit and paradox and parody characteristic of Chesterton are familiar to those of us living in postmodern societies. After we have read Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1989), with its lush fracturing of Muslim identity in Proper London, we cannot be entirely at sea reading Chesterton's rambunctious novel, *The Flying Inn* (1914), with its fracturing of English identity owing to imported Islamic elements. Umberto Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum* (1989) is a virtual *omnium gatherum* of postmodern agnosticism about language, meaning, society, and history. Chesterton's novel *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908), which many readers found

hard to understand when it was first published, chews over many of the same themes as Eco's book does, and with far more humor and sheer literary energy. Whatever other obstacles may keep a contemporary reader from appreciating Chesterton; difficulty or eccentricity can hardly still be among them.

Other obstacles, however, do exist. A paradox of Chesterton's work is that the framework for what we might call its "postmodern" elements are some very traditional beliefs. From his early years he was vigorously Catholic in his intellectual orientation, although he did not formally enter the church until he was over 50. Catholicism for Chesterton meant a way of life that has persisted through time as the central moral and spiritual sanity of Europe: "It is a mind surviving a hundred moods." The Catholic vision, he thought, was not merely a narrow system of dogma intended to fit us for another world. Rather, its theology and anthropology were the only realistic basis for human joy and exuberance in this world.

Chesterton was decidedly a defender of the old pleasures and sanities of Merrie England. Neither his Catholicism nor his Englishness are now in much favor in literary, scholarly, or even journalistic circles. For the average reader and writer today, a person committed to Catholicism and traditional social life can only be a reactionary. Chesterton's mature social vision, however, never called for a simple return to the past, but for what he termed Distributism. Contemporary conservatives who like to quote Chesterton, such as George Will, sometimes give the impression that "GKC" would have found himself at home among American conservatives today. Though Chesterton was certainly no modern liberal, he would never have felt comfortable with today's conservative preoccupation with economic enterprise and industrial growth. He preferred an almost Jeffersonian vision of the widespread distribution of property and the personal independence that comes with it:

> I shall be completely misunderstood if I am supposed to be calling for a return ticket to Athens or Eden, because I do not want to go on by the cheap train to utopia. I want to go where I like. I want to stop where I like. I want to know the width as well as the length of the world; and to wander off the railway track into the ancient plains of liberty.

He said himself that "a reactionary is one in whom weariness itself has become a form of energy." What he meant is that the reactionary is inert and allows the world to set an agenda that stings him into action. Chesterton's own mind was far too vigorous and original for that. He is one of those traditional Catholic writers such as Cardinal Newman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Evelyn Waugh, and Graham Greene, whose work has its own intellectual or aesthetic value over and above its apologetic value.

In Chesterton, the strong and good pleasures of the world can remain strong and good only if they are in a two-way relationship with a proper metaphysics and anthropology. Religion is crucial to human happiness because it provides a true reason for joy even when we are engaged in doing nothing in particular. It is no accident that Witold Rybczynski spends several pages at the beginning of his study of modern leisure, *Waiting for the Weekend* (1991), comparing Chesterton's view of unoccupied time as giving us "the freedom to do nothing" with current beliefs that leisure is to be filled up with the latest fad in exercise, educational activities, or the right kinds of fun. For Chesterton, any of these activities could lead to authentic joy if pursued with appreciation for it as a gift rather than as a utilitarian good. But he found that calculation was beginning to choke off human exuberance, not least among the very people who advocated a return to the simple life. He contended, against the Tolstoyans and their fussy simplicity: "There is more simplicity in the man who eats caviar on impulse than in the man who eats grape nuts

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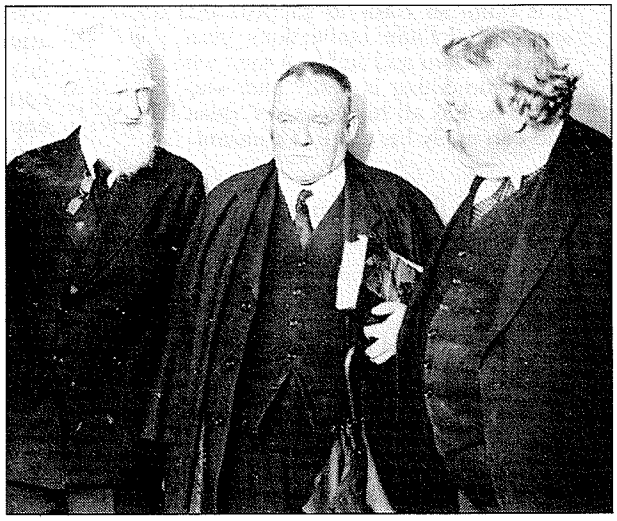
on principle."

The earthly pleasures are important both for their own sakes and because they keep our ideals from degenerating into a cranky, false spirituality, as in Tolstoy. English beef and beer, viewed through this lens, become almost sacramental. In Chesterton's own time, this was misunderstood. The vegetarian and teetotaler G. B. Shaw, for instance, once complained of the beef-and-beer side of Chesterton's work: "Have I survived the cry of Art for Art's sake and of War for War's sake, for which Mr. Chesterton rebukes Whistler and Mr. Rudyard Kipling, to fall a victim to this maddest of all cries: the cry of Beer for Beer's sake?" But for Chesterton the defense of beer was one with the defense of the English poor and of the sane social pleasures within their reach against the elite puritanism of Shaw and a host of social planners.



*The socialist George Bernard Shaw (left) and the reactionary Hilaire Belloc (center) were political opponents, yet both could be friends with the easygoing Chesterton.*

This vision of private and public goods emerged early and changed little. Chesterton opposed English imperialism as manifested in the Boer War with the same vehemence that he opposed German imperialism in the 1930s. His type of patriotism was incompatible with riding roughshod over the patriotism shown by others. Small, embattled nations such as the Boers attracted his sympathy because he thought of them as local and authentic rather than expansive and avaricious.

Beyond his labors as essayist, novelist, poet, and writer of detective stories, Chesterton was a journalist, but one who never confined himself to what George Steiner has called journalistic "spurious temporality." (Chesterton simply called himself a "jolly journalist.") His early book *Heretics* (1907), for example, deals with religion, but it is also a series of analyses of contemporary figures and popular movements. Friends like H. G. Wells or George Bernard Shaw become occasions for measuring what's wrong with the modern world, as do social currents such as Tolstoyism, imperialism, and theories of racial superiority. Take, for example, his remark about Rudyard Kipling. He sees beyond the accepted picture of Kipling the militarist:

> Kipling's subject is not that valour which properly belongs to war, but that interdependency and efficiency which belongs as much to engineers, or sailors, or mules, or railway engines. And thus it is that when he writes of engineers, or sailors, or mules, or steam engines, he writes at his best. The real poetry, the "true romance" which Mr. Kipling has taught, is the romance of the division of labor and the discipline of all the trades. He sings the arts of peace much more accurately than the arts of war.

This is not only fine contemporary comment and original literary criticism, it points the way to a further observation. Some critics have accused Kipling of imperialism—something Chesterton always abhorred, believing as he did in smaller, democratic human communities. But Chesterton shows that because of his love for efficient organization, Kipling's problem is not, strictly speaking, imperialism but a preference for large-scale activities instead of loyalty to a place like England.

Writing of George Bernard Shaw, Chesterton denies that his friend, any more than he himself, is a mere buffoon saying witty things for public applause. Shaw, like Chesterton, is a refutation of the cliché that beliefs fetter the mind:

> It is quite an error to suppose that absence of definite convictions gives the mind freedom and agility. A man who believes something is ready and witty, because he has all his weapons about him and can apply his test in an instant.

Shaw shows, then, a consistency that most people do not understand because they expect intellectuals to fall into predictable patterns:

> If he laughs at the authority of priests, he laughs louder at the pomposity of men of science. If he condemns the irresponsibility of faith he condemns with a sane consistency the equal irresponsibility of art. He has pleased all the bohemians by saying that women are equal to men; but he has infuriated them by suggesting that men are equal to women.

Chesterton quarrels with Shaw not because Shaw is frivolous but because he has become mistakenly serious in embracing Nietzsche's Superman. As a profound democrat, Chesterton could not accept some supposed aristocracy of strength and intellect that would rise superior to the common people. Or as he put it in a famous passage:

> Mr. Shaw cannot understand that the thing which is valuable and lovable in our eyes is man—the old beer-drinking, creed-making, fighting, failing, sensual, respectable man. And the things that have been founded on this creature immortally remain; the things that have been founded on the fancy of the Superman have died with the dying civilizations which alone have given them birth.

This was in 1907. When Chesterton saw the growing menace of Nazism in the 1930s, he knew that the evil seeds of the Superman were bearing fruit.

Chesterton abhorred theories of racial superiority of any stripe. In his *Short History of England* (1917) he demolished the then-popular theory of the Teutonic origins of English liberty as both scientific and historical nonsense. In the early 1930s, he denounced the anti-Semitism that was the mirror image of the Nazi theory of an Aryan master race. Hilaire Belloc and Chesterton's brother Cecil are often considered anti-Semites for their public stridency about Jewish financial interests. Chesterton is sometimes placed with them, mostly because in a few passages he uses anti-Jewish expressions common to his time. But this grouping is a mistake for two reasons. First, the profound humaneness of his whole character made it impossible for him to be consistently unfair to an entire group of people, as Cecil Chesterton and Belloc could be. More important, Chesterton believed on the deepest religious grounds that there could be no superior races, only morally better and worse individuals.

His fictional works are not always successful precisely because they are a species of *roman à these*, attempts to embody thoughts on religion and morality in not entirely realistic characters. Yet these are not mere ideological fictions. Kingsley Amis has estimated that of Chesterton's 18 works of fiction, at least seven or eight have such enormous life in them that they cannot help but take their proper places in literary history.

Similar judgments come from odd quarters. Franz Kafka, for example, was bowled over by Chesterton's book of Christian apologetics, *Orthodoxy* (1908), and by his Kafkaesque detective novel, *The Man Who Was Thursday*. He pressed them on a friend, saying that they simply had to be read because the author seemed as happy and energetic as a man who had actually found God. Kafka's reading penetrated to a crucial point: Perhaps the most salient feature of Chesterton's work is its sheer exuberance and joy in existence. How he came by that enormous imaginative energy is one of the great human mysteries.

> Bowing down in blind credulity, as is my custom, before mere authority and the tradition of the elders, superstitiously swallowing a story I could not test at the time by experiment of private judgment, I am firmly of the opinion that I was born on the 29th of May, 1874, on Campden Hill, Kensington; and baptised according to the formularies of the Church of England in the little church of St. George opposite the large Waterworks Tower that dominated that ridge. I do not allege any significance in the relation of the two buildings; and I indignantly deny that the

church was chosen because it needed the whole water-power of West London to turn me into a Christian.

Thus begins Chesterton's *Autobiography* (1936). From it, we learn that the author passed his early life entirely in Kensington, the pleasant area of West London, in a happy, middle-class Victorian family. His father was an eccentric who was successful enough to retire early from the family real-estate business to pursue artistic hobbies. His mother, one of 20 siblings, gave the three Chesterton children support for their imaginative activities. Playing at toy theaters, drawing and writing in the quiet of his own home, seemed to Chesterton as close to paradise as existed on Earth (visits to pubs excepted). He showed literary talent but otherwise no great brilliance at St. Paul's School in London. So his father decided to send him to the Slade Art School instead of a university. In his *Autobiography* he describes his astonishment at what he found there: "An art school is a place where about three people work with feverish energy and everybody else idles to a degree I should have thought unattainable by human nature."

Chesterton's friends from St. Paul's, most of them literary types such as E. C. Bentley, had gone on to Oxford. Chesterton was always eccentric, but never bohemian, and could only have felt lonely among the arty students at Slade. The loneliness had one good effect, however: It drove him away from art into book publishing and journalism. His quirky genius and vivid visual imagination quickly made him a favorite with readers and magazine editors, and before he was 30 he had a large London following among readers of the *Daily Mail* and the *Illustrated London News*.

Chesterton's success was enhanced by the figure he cut: He was always of large proportions (nearly six feet, six inches tall and, at his heaviest, close to 320 pounds). At the same time, there was a kindly giant's gentility to his manner, even in the most heated disputes. H. G. Wells once remarked with some exasperation that it was impossible to quarrel with Chesterton—a fact confirmed by a record of nearly 40 years of polemics in which Chesterton appears to have made not a single enemy. Chesterton was one of the great English talkers, and many of his contemporaries imagined him as something like Dr. Johnson or one of the larger-than-life characters out of Dickens.

After he married in 1901, his wife Frances gave up trying to keep him tidy and instead decked him out in a cape, large black sombrero hat, and sword stick so he would at least look presentable walking around London. All sorts of stories began circulating about him in Fleet Street, many of them true. The enormous Mr. Chesterton, for example, had been seen on a bus


*Chesterton might not have amused everyone, as his own self-mocking drawing suggests.*

rising to offer his seat—to three ladies. When, owing to his bulk, he had trouble getting out of a car, a woman advised him to turn sideways, eliciting the reply, "Madam, I have no sideways." He was known to sit writing his columns and chuckling to himself in Fleet Street pubs while a cab stood waiting to enable him at the last moment to make his newspaper deadlines.

These habits may appear to be those of a very irregular person and unprofessional writer, but Chesterton knew what he needed to stimulate his imagination. In ad-

dition to turning out on average several books a year, he wrote a weekly column for the *Illustrated London News* throughout his adult life along with another weekly newspaper column, first for the London *Daily News* and then, after a disagreement with the editors, for the *Daily Herald*. He was constantly in demand as a lecturer and reviewer. Part of the liveliness of his work stems from the genius he had for an immediate and profound response to events—a genius sharpened in his case by the pressure of a deadline.

Eventually his wife persuaded him to leave the distractions of London and the life of a "jolly journalist" for more relaxed surroundings in the suburb of Beaconsfield. There he became even more prodigiously productive. But the stories about him continued. He was being invited to lecture all over England, with predictable results for such an unworldly man. In one notorious incident, his wife received an urgent telegram: "Am in Market Harborough. Where ought I to be?—Gilbert."

Amidst all this eccentricity, a powerful literary and philosophical current began manifesting itself. During his art-school years, Chesterton had gone through a period of depression in which *fin de siècle* pessimism and skepticism had led him near madness.

> At this time, I did not very clearly distinguish between dreaming and waking; not only as a mood, but as a metaphysical doubt, I felt as if everything might be a dream. It was as if I had myself projected the universe from within, with all its trees and stars; and that is so near the notion of being God that it is manifestly even nearer to going mad.... I had reached that condition of moral anarchy within, in which a man says, in the words of Wilde, that "Atys with the blood-stained knife were better than the thing I am."

When he emerged from that gloom, he did so through a profound affirmation. Concerning this new turn, he quotes Robert Louis Stevenson's "belief in the ultimate decency of things." He came to an unshakable realization that we should be grateful for every detail in a world that, if the universe were ruled by pure logic, might not exist. We get a glimpse of this mature Chesterton in an early letter to his future wife: "I do not think there is anyone who takes quite such a fierce pleasure in things being themselves as I do. The startling wetness of water excites and intoxicates me: the fieriness of fire, the steeliness of steel, the unutterable muddiness of mud. It is the same with people.... When we call a man 'manly' or a woman 'womanly,' we touch the deepest philosophy."

Because of this radical experience, of all the Edwardian English writers, Chesterton has weathered subsequent literary developments quite well. Not only Kafka, but Jorge Luis Borges, who taught English literature for years in Argentina, read Chesterton and found a remarkable spirit there—one, perhaps not surprisingly, similar to his own. He remarks, "Chesterton restrained himself from being Edgar Allan Poe or Franz Kafka, but something in the makeup of his personality leaned towards the nightmarish, something secret, and blind and central." Though other critics regard this as a misreading, Borges is partly right. Whatever sanity and exuberance emerged from Chesterton's struggle with his *fin de siècle* malaise, he always knew that the good was fragile and particularly vulnerable to some very powerful forces in this century.

Even his popular series of Father Brown detective stories shows this awareness. Chesterton took from real life the idea for his simple priest who solves mysteries because he understands the mind of the sinner-criminal. While vacationing with his wife in Yorkshire in 1904, he met Father John O'Connor, who, as they discussed some proposed social legislation, surprised Chesterton with his knowledge of perversions relevant to the issue: "It was a curious experience to find that this quiet and pleasant celibate had plumbed those abysses far deeper than I. I had not imagined that the world could hold such horrors." Later the same day, Chesterton and the priest were at a house party with two Cambridge undergraduates. When O'Connor left the room, the young men began praising his cultivation but said they thought his vocation represented a fear of real life. Chesterton nearly burst out laughing: "For I knew perfectly well that, as regards all the solid Sa-

tanism which the priest knew and warred with all his life, these two Cambridge gentlemen (luckily for them) knew about as much of real evil as two babies in the same perambulator."

The Father Brown stories generally reflect this real-life insight. Brown is a shabby, bumbling, incompetent-looking curate who solves murders and mysteries not with the rapier reasoning of a Sherlock Holmes but through his profound understanding of human nature. The first volume of stories bears the ironic title, *The Innocence of Father Brown* (1911). That collection and four sequels were to bring Chesterton such large royalties that he could afford to write and lecture for little or nothing when adoring but poor clubs and societies extended invitations. All the Father Brown stories, collected into an oversize Penguin volume, remain popular, and one was made into a delightful film with Alec Guinness playing the priest.

In recent decades, several distinguished critics have tried to rehabilitate Chesterton on more or less high modernist grounds. Marshall McLuhan, Hugh Kenner, and Garry Wills each wrote extensively on Chesterton, sifting what they believed to be the wheat from the chaff in his immense oeuvre. McLuhan called him "a metaphysical moralist"; Kenner wrote a small book, *Paradox in Chesterton* (1949), aiming to show him as a master of "analogical perception"; Wills tried to excavate the recesses of an apparently simple figure in *Man and Mask* (1961). All three critics were Catholic intellectuals trying to recover something in Chesterton that they thought lay buried under an outmoded, almost embarrassing aesthetic. Yet with time, it has become clear that Chesterton remains far greater than these somewhat priggish attempts to save him.

McLuhan, Kenner, and Wills praise Chesterton for brilliant philosophical acumen but accuse him of an inability to create art—art in typical modern modes, of course. But if anything, this criticism raises the question of whether it was their idea of art that had narrowed, since there are things by Chesterton indisputably moving yet not easily fitted into the usual critical categories. For example, while Chesterton wrote unusual fiction, he wrote mostly traditional poetry. Most modern poets have written of war, but few have written anything like the battle songs common to the ancient or medieval world. Chesterton, however, had the old knack of touching some deep recesses in the national psyche. In 1915, soldiers in the trenches shouted passages from his poem "Lepanto" back and forth to one another. Thirty years later, at a particularly low point after the battle in Crete during World War II, the London *Times* reported on the disaster and invoked some of Chesterton's verses from *The Ballad of the White Horse*, written years earlier:

> I tell you naught for your comfort,
> Yea, naught for your desire,
> Save that the sky grows darker yet,
> And the sea rises higher.
>
> Night shall be thrice night over you,
> And heaven an iron cope.
> Do you have joy without a cause,
> Yea, faith without a hope?

Anyone who can stir the memory of his people in this manner at their most difficult moments has some rare, almost myth-making faculty—something even more powerful than art.

Those who read postmodern literature may also have a great deal more use for Chesterton's parody and playfulness than did the New Critics. Chesterton's poems, for instance, may not be Eliot's *Waste Land* or Pound's *Cantos*, but their value lies in their own lighthearted terms:

> Old Noah had an ostrich farm and fowls
> on the largest scale
> And he ate his egg with a ladle, from an
> egg-cup as big as a pail,
> And the soup he took was elephant soup,
> and the fish he took was whale,
> But they were all small to the cellar he
> took when he set out to sail.
> And Noah he often said to his wife when
> he sat down to dine,
> I don't care where the water goes, if it
> doesn't get into the wine.
> ("Wine and Water")

And so on for two more stanzas.

Humor in the face of doubt seems to be one of the strongest features of postmodern literature. Read now, Chesterton's work

*Chesterton's fans considered him the Dr. Johnson of his age. Attending a 1920s costume ball with his wife Frances, he dressed the part.*

seems to anticipate many such current developments to a remarkable degree. It may be useful to look briefly at some of the central postmodern questions to see how and why Chesterton engages them.

Although the term *postmodernism* appears in discussions ranging from religion to architecture, from politics to literature, its meaning is difficult to pin down. By its very nature, postmodernism displays nonunitary, even downright contradictory traits. If we are forced to make a brief inventory of some postmodern obsessions, however, we could group them in three large categories: fragmentation of meaning and language, dissolution of identity, and, in a reverse movement, the attempt to construct a humane society.

The starting point for most of this kind of contemporary literature has been described by the French literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984). According to Lyotard, we now know that all the attempts at a unifying story—be they Christian, Marxist, humanist, or other—are "totalizing" approaches, grand-master narratives, that smack of "totalitarianism." Our knowledge is and can only be piecemeal, limited, and local. *Petits récits* are valid and liberating; anything more is false and dangerous.

Obviously tied up with these specific questions is the larger issue of what many postmodernists call the Enlightenment Project, the possibility of a rational human life. Poststructuralists and postmodernists of various conflicting stripes all at least seem to agree that any hope for a true and liberating master narrative leading to human happiness is dead. With the collapse of large explanatory models, absolutes of any kind are no longer available. Strong or effective performance of tasks replaces the acquisition of truth as an end. Schools become more occupied with teaching skills rather than ideals. All art becomes, in a sense, performance art; morals becomes voluntarist and emotivist; politics is no longer a search for justice but a space for competition among special interests for power.

How does Chesterton, defender of old values, anticipate the tactics of the deconstructors? His main avenue is the use of paradox. A typical postmodern paradox is the employment of traditional categories to deny traditional categories. A sign that appeared during the 1968 student demonstrations in Paris, for example, announced: "It is forbidden to forbid." Chesterton recognized early on where this type of incoherence masquerading as daring thought was headed. In the earliest of his books, *Heretics*, he notes that Shaw in embracing Ibsen and Nietzsche had embraced an inhuman contradiction:

> When Mr. Shaw forbids men to have strict moral ideals, he is acting like one who should forbid them to have children. The saying that "the golden rule is that there is no golden rule," can, indeed, be simply answered by being turned around. That there is no golden rule is itself a golden rule, or rather it is much worse than a golden rule. It is an iron rule; a fetter on the first movement of a man.

This is no mere empty gesture. For Chesterton, a creature without moral con-

siderations is not a human being. The American philosopher Philippa Foot has recently criticized Nietzsche's disdain for the masses and their morals. She contrasts it to Chesterton's comments on Dickens:

> He did not dislike this or that argument for oppression: he disliked oppression. He disliked a certain look on the face of a man when he looks down on another man. And the look on that face is the only thing in the world that we really have to fight between here and the fires of hell.
> (Introduction to *Oliver Twist*)

Foot allows that Nietzscheans will say that Nietzsche's disdain is noble compared to Chesterton's crude picture. But Chesterton anticipates poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida who worry about the ease with which the Nazis were able to use that Nietzschean disdain to advance their own purposes.

Nietzsche is so pervasive a presence in postmodern thought that it is useful to see what Chesterton says directly about him. What he immediately noticed in the philosopher was a typical modern assumption that his advanced ideas were breaking bold new ground. The "slave morality" of the old Judeo-Christian heritage, for example, often came in for criticism by Nietzsche, who prided himself on his penetrating psychological insight into motivation. But Chesterton debunks both Nietzsche's psychology and his supposed originality:

> It is calmly and persistently supposed that the great writers of the past, say Shakespeare for instance, did not hold this view because they had never imagined it; because it had never come into their heads. Turn up the last act of Shakespeare's *Richard III*.... Richard Crookback says to his nobles:
>
> Conscience is but a word the cowards use,
> Devised at first to keep the strong in awe.

"It was not that Shakespeare did not see the Nietzschean idea," says Chesterton, "he saw it; and he saw through it."

In postmodern literature, black humor suggests human value in the face of an empty infinity. Chesterton had seen that abyss but used the very tools of contradiction and humor against emptiness:

> Truths turn into dogmas the instant they are disputed. Thus every man who utters a doubt defines a religion. And the skepticism of our time does not really destroy the beliefs, rather it creates them; gives them their limits and their plain and defiant shape. We who are Liberals once held Liberalism lightly as a truism. Now it has been disputed, and we hold it fiercely as a faith. We who believe in patriotism once thought patriotism to be reasonable, and thought little more about it. Now we know it to be unreasonable, and know it to be right. We who are Christians never knew the great philosophic common sense which inheres in that mystery until the anti-Christian writers pointed it out to us. The great march of mental destruction will go on. Everything will be denied. Everything will become a creed.... Fires will be kindled to testify that two and two make four. Swords will be drawn to prove that leaves are green in summer. We shall be left defending, not only the incredible virtues and sanities of human life, but something more incredible still, this huge impossible universe which stares us in the face. We shall fight for visible prodigies as if they were invisible. We shall look on the impossible grass and the skies with a strange courage. We shall be of those who have seen and yet have believed.

For Chesterton this struggle to assert simple truths has complex consequences. It led him to make an important contribution to what we think of as the typically postmodern debate over the relationship of personal identity to society. We have been misled, he says, into thinking liberty means a breaking of all bonds—to polities, families, even to past selves—when in fact liberty can only be the power to forge bonds, and therefore selves, of the right kinds. Postmodern social ethics, however, are almost entirely consumed in trying to ward off the tyranny of "totalizing views." But the greatest modern tyranny is the tyranny of emptiness, Chesterton warned. In emptiness there are no restraints, but there is no connection either.

One of the characteristic forms of postmodern literature that demonstrates this predicament is a well-known modern genre in France, the "antidetective story."

Unlike the traditional detective story, the antidetective story does not solve a mystery and therefore restore human community. Typically, it begins with the traditional trappings of the detective story, with an investigation of a sort. But then funny things start to happen. The investigator grows more and more puzzled by the incoherent facts and events he comes upon. He starts to lose a sense of his own identity or what he is pursuing. To make the situation even more problematic, the real-life author of the story often turns up, by name, as one of the characters and becomes part of the same spreading abyss of mysteries. (A good American example of this genre is Paul Auster's *City of Glass*.) Everything seems unknown and frightening. It is as if Kafka had been called in to do a rewrite of Raymond Chandler.

Chesterton, of course, was a successful detective writer with his Father Brown series. But he also wrote something roughly comparable to the antidetective story with *The Man Who Was Thursday*. There, as readers have discovered to their astonishment, a group of anarchists come to find out that they are all really police agents working for a high police official, named Sunday, who is both the director and the object of the investigation. In the closing pages, Sunday metamorphoses into several mysterious forms that seem to invoke contradictory images, including everything from not-so-Motherly Nature to Christ himself. Chesterton was aware of the kind of infinitely self-reflexive, infinitely self-undermining consciousness that makes an appearance in varying degrees of radicalness in postmodern novels.

But he subtitled *The Man Who Was Thursday* "A Nightmare," and unlike the conclusion of the antidetective novel, in which everything and everyone slide into an anxious nullity, Chesterton concludes his story with a significant return to sanity. Gabriel Syme, the protagonist, is described as having come to his senses to find himself walking "by instinct along one white road, on which early birds hopped and sang, and found himself outside a fenced garden. There he saw the sister of Gregory, the girl with the gold-red hair, cutting lilacs before breakfast, with the great unconscious gravity of a girl." The sanity that persists after postmodernism has done its best and worst is for us now perhaps the living core of Chesterton. The French are already producing a "new new novel." Perhaps, if he undergoes a revival, Chesterton will be dubbed the first post-postmodernist.

When all these arguments have been made, it is still possible to imagine a certain type of critic who says, yes, there is some remarkable writing and insight in Chesterton. But when all is said and done his art is wanting. He always remained a journalist who wrote too much, and too fast. There are simply too many blemishes in every one of his books—essays, fiction, verse—for us to consider him part of the canon of the greatest English writers. The very standards he himself invokes deny him entry.

This is partly true. And yet, when all is really said and done, Chesterton seems to rise above it. He writes badly often enough, but to write with the large motions and import with which he did is rare, even among very good writers. There is probably no piece of work by him that does not contain something that redeems its failures. He wrote of criticisms of Dickens:

> The kind of man who had the courage to write so badly in one case is the kind of man who would have the courage to write so well in the other.... And herein is shown the frigid and feeble imagination of our modern wits. They make violent efforts, they make heroic and almost pathetic efforts, but they cannot really write badly. There are moments when we think they are almost achieving the effect, but our hope shrivels to nothing the moment we compare their little failure with the enormous imbecilities of Byron or of Shakespeare.

Or of Chesterton.