

GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON

THE death of Gilbert Keith Chesterton—or “G.K.,” as we called him—allows us to see his life as a complete and unique whole.

Looked at merely as a thing of art, the three score and two crowded years between birth in London and burial in Beaconsfield seem to make a full circle or indeed cycle of doings and happenings. Later on his autobiography will let us listen to the man who made the story telling the story or history he has made. But though every line of it will speak the master-craftsman of words, it will be a masterpiece in the humility of self-effacement. We have no hopes that it will deliberately help us to see his life’s pilgrimage from London to Beaconsfield—from Canterbury to Rome—almost as an Arthurian epic.

For one thing we shall be grateful to the artist’s portrait of himself. It will be a *vera effigies*. It will leave out nothing that would be a loss to truth. And though it cannot speak of how the artist’s life ended in death, it will leave its readers convinced that death came to Gilbert Chesterton in a certain fulness of time and fulness of intelligence.

For us who are left there is deep consolation in the way he left us. We saw no slackening of his handiwork; nor any lessening of its power. He did not set slowly like our northern sun. He was as a ploughman turning his best and last furrow when the master said, “Call the workers; and give them their wage.” Then at a call he went home to the peace which God in His courteousness calls a wage and the worker in his humility calls a reward.

The dramatic unity of this life may one day give us a theme as nobly framed and wrought as his own great epic of the *White Horse*. But as only a reborn Shakespeare could dramatize the writer of *Hamlet*, we must wait till a second Gilbert Chesterton comes before the writer of the *White Horse* can be given dramatic justice.

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But Gilbert Chesterton’s life was not merely a rounded

and complete whole; in more ways than one it was a unique whole. The list of great sons whom England has birthed since Shakespeare died has many who resembled Gilbert Chesterton, but it has few who equal him. Perhaps this conviction of ours may become the conviction of our readers if we change the manner of stating it. Instead of saying that in after-Shakespeare England many have resembled without equalling Gilbert Chesterton, we will say that Gilbert Chesterton has resembled many even when this resemblance was not in a craft shared equally by both.

His resemblance to Samuel Johnson was obvious in things mental and literary, and was almost ludicrous in the corporal sphere. Yet it was a greater than Johnson who never wrote a *Letter to Lord Chesterfield*; but once for ever followed up the good things he said about the Church by humbly asking to share the good things of the Church.

The writer of the *Outline of Sanity* is perhaps nearer to Swift than to Johnson. Yet the layman sets an example to the cleric in the complete banishment of the coarseness and worse than coarseness which foul Swifts attempt at social reform.

An obvious and detected resemblance exists between Chesterton and Cobbett. Chesterton would have called it courteously the resemblance between himself a pupil and his master. Two things, however, make the master less than his pupil—too much self-assertion even in the assertion of fundamental truths, and too little self-assertion in not giving his *History of the Protestant Reformation* the needed imprimatur of his reception into the Catholic Church. That Cobbett never became a Catholic is an unwritten epilogue which almost discounts his *History*. But even Chesterton's strongest opponents felt that his reception into the Church was the one act needed to give unity to his thought and life.

These contrasts are not set down after the manner of Plutarch's, merely for the artistic aim of enforcing one colour by placing it side by side with an alternative. We have suggested that Gilbert Chesterton resembled many of his after-Shakespeare predecessors by possessing one or other of their qualities in a greater or equal degree. But he is con-

trusted with them in that he possessed within his mind and life the qualities of them all. Gilbert Chesterton was not just one thing, and that in its highest degree; he was many things, and that in a high degree. He was a born philosopher, a born poet, a born knight, and, I will make bold to say, a re-born saint.

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Few men of his age had more of the born philosopher in their thinking than the author of *The Everlasting Man* and *The Innocence of Father Brown*. It was perhaps well for him, and consequently well for us, that mere school-philosophy had no part in his schooling. His philosophy was that gradually deepening and unifying thing: "What Gilbert Chesterton thought about the Universe." It was not what Gilbert Chesterton thought that Bergson, or Darwin, or Hume, or Descartes, or Bacon, or Aquinas thought about the Universe. But more and more it became what the Maker of the Universe thought about the Universe he had made. *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man* are sounder philosophical workmanship than Berkeley's *Dialogues* or Hume's *Essay on Miracles*. But they are as sound sterling English workmanship as *Lincoln Minster* or Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Chesterton's temporary connection with an English section of the Christian body, and indeed with a small subsection of that section, might have narrowed his outlook till it became parochial. Even the essentially philosophical mind of Newman did not avoid this danger. We may see the shadow of this narrowness in the *Apologia*, which, except for a few pages of profound thinking and many pages of flawless literature, might almost be labelled "Much ado about—Newman." But Newman's *Development of Doctrine* like Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* was the philosophy and the drama of truth asserting and uttering itself scientifically in battle with a thousand scientific heresies. And Newman's *Grammar of Assent* like Chesterton's *Everlasting Man* was an onslaught on the irrational intellectualism which despises the thought-ways of the average man in the street, or woman in the home.

BLACKFRIARS

Again, Chesterton's mind, so essentially philosophical, recognized that if a being is related to the Absolute, that relation is its absolute relation. It was not just the poet in him, it was first of all the philosopher in him that, when he walked the fields, saw in the daisy the eye of God, and when he sauntered abstractedly down the Strand saw a ladder stretching from heaven to Charing Cross.

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If any of my readers, after reading what Gilbert Chesterton wrote in verse, think that he is not one of our English poets—perhaps the greatest and most English of English ballad poets—I cannot hope that any words of mine would be of avail. When his own words fail, mine could have no hope of success.

I can only say what I see, and see no less in Gilbert Chesterton's prose than in his verse. There is hardly a line of his writings that does not say to me with emphasis: "This man is a philosopher." But there are few if any lines that do not say with equal emphasis: "This philosopher is a poet."

The philosopher within him gives him the sense of line; especially of the outline which is the accurate guardian of totality and unity. But he has the colour sense as well of words as of things. He recognizes in words not merely their meaning but their music. He sees the sun and moon not merely as round but as shining.

Call it rhetoric if you will, but this wizard of words is a fellow of the great captains when, almost against our will, he calls up from our souls' deeps what emotions he chooses to call.

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The philosopher and poet within Gilbert Chesterton were but parts—and lesser parts—of a greater thing often lacking in philosophers and poets. Gilbert Chesterton was one of Nature's Knights whose philosophy could say wise things for the scholar mind and whose poetry could offer sweet songs for the lips, but whose courage and courteousness could defend all weak, defenceless things except himself.

Had some Kingsley attacked him as his fellow Londoner Newman was attacked, his reply would not have been an elaborate *Apologia pro vita sua*, but a great London laugh in which Kingsley, if only for humour sake, would have joined.

Yet this man who was a child at self-defence was a dragon-slayer in defence of others. There is hardly a line he wrote, in prose or verse—for laughter or for anger or for tears—that is not Samson pulling down some embattled sanctuary of injustice or untruth. Many then who heard his challenging bugle-calls turned a deaf ear to what they thought his despairing going back from the modern to the mediæval. But they did not know that what Chesterton prized in past times was the eternal element of truth and justice which cannot pass. Moreover, it should have struck them that this

laudator temporis acti

was, at least in literature, so modern and so unlike past masters of literary style as to be a style in himself.

Like Shakespeare of the anti-Elizabethan, Essex group, he toiled with the pen in crusading against the enslavement of his contemporaries. Part of his unique character is that the crusading field had widened since the days when a Cecil-led aristocracy held a Sovereign and a people in bondage. Chesterton could not be contemporary of Marx, the Great War, the Russian Experiment, without seeing the social question to be, what Leo XIII stated it to be, "the Pressing Question of the hour."¹ He was one of the few who accepted the Pope's invitation "to strive to secure the good of the people, and to bring to the struggle the full energy of his mind."

It is this combination in one life of Philosopher, Poet and Social Knight that made Gilbert Chesterton's life and life's work in many ways unique. In his *Return of Don Quixote* and in his *Essay on Dickens* he has suggested a view of his life's work which is true though not complete. Dickens had doubtless in mind Don Quixote and Sancho Panza when he wrote his immortal *Pickwick Papers*. At any rate Mr. Pick-

¹ Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*.

BLACKFRIARS

wick and Sam Weller are a Cockney Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

Yet there was little of Don Quixote in Cervantes; still less of Mr. Pickwick in Dickens. But we can hardly express the bulk and quality of Gilbert Chesterton's work without saying that he was Cervantes, and Dickens, and Don Quixote, and Sancho Panza, and Mr. Pickwick, and Sam Weller—and Johnson, and Swift, and Cobbett—in one!

Moreover, the man in him was greater than the thinking man, or the singing man, or the crusading man. He himself was so much better than anything he wrote or did that his words and deeds were but symbols of the inner source of all he said or did. In this he differs from a crowd of writers, and statesmen, whose achievements in word or deed are only admirable by us, whilst we shut out from our thoughts the memory of the men they were.

It was this visible oneness of the worker and his work that made this London-born philosopher, poet, knight, England's *de facto* if not *de jure* ambassador to the world. His death was felt as a blow and fitly mourned not merely at Beaconsfield where he died, and at Westminster near to where he was born, but wherever letters and culture and courtesy were found.

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With this thought we have come to the most delicate and therefore deliberate thing we have to say about the man Gilbert Chesterton. Whilst not using the word sanctity as synonymous with that verifiable heroic virtue which receives official authentication, we cannot complete what we feel should be said about him without using the word sanctity or holiness. Holiness, at least in the English form, denotes a certain *wholeness* which the rounded and complete life of Chesterton suggests to our thought. A saint or holy man is in part a philosopher who, in even the least of beings related to God, sees the One Absolute, and in that One sees all. A saint is in part a poet who sees and feels such beauty of line and colour in God's handiworks that he worships God in them with the rhythm and imagery, the line and colour, of

his verse. A saint is in part a knight so enamoured of the First Good that every evil thing challenges him to combat under his Sovereign's eye. Now for Gilbert Chesterton this Sovereign under whose eye and for whose glory he fought was the First Truth, the Most Fair, the Highest Good—Lord of lords and King of kings.

This subtle quality of *whole-ness* in his mind's aim and soul's desire can be fitly expressed only by such a phrase as St. Paul wrote "to the saints" at Philippi: "Our citizenship (*πολίτευμα*) is in heaven." Gilbert Chesterton, like the little world-wandering Jew of Tarsus, dwelt primarily in heaven, even as a lad in Kensington, or amidst fellow-journalists in Fleet Street, or as chairman of a Distributist meeting, or in a debate with an agnostic, or at his own hearth at Beaconsfield.

This constant abiding with what was highest in human thought and desire gave him that indescribable but unmistakable character of humility. Gilbert Chesterton, whom the present writer reckons one of the greatest sons born to England for three hundred years, was a humble man. Indeed only a man of tried humility could have written:

The firm feet of humility
That grip the ground like trees.

He had the first effect or endowment of humility expressed by his Master: "*Learn* of Me for I am . . . humble of heart." He could learn. He could learn as quickly as a child because by an achievement of genius and sanctity he had a child's simplicity of thought. From the countless expressions of this achieved simplicity I pick one at random.

"Don't you think," asked Muriel, "that modern things are too complicated to be dealt with in such a simple way."

"I think," replied Hearne, "that modern things are too complicated to be dealt with except in a simple way." (*The Return of Don Quixote.*)

So essentially was he a learner that everyone, even his opponents (for enemy he had none), had something to teach him. He was thus not only the *servus servorum*, making all he met his masters whom in love he served, but making

BLACKFRIARS

them all his teaching-masters from whom in gratitude he learned.

Another high activity of this humble soul was its gentle, winsome self-apology. He never shirked unambiguous assertion of the truth; yet the many volumes he has written will have to be screened fine to yield one phrase of self-assertion. We can imagine that on coming to full consciousness of the earth and sun he apologized to the earth for taking up so much room, and asked pardon of the sun for casting so wide and deep a shadow. He even seemed to make amends for the burial trouble he gave us by making his burial day one of sunshine in a summer of clouds and rain.

So knit were his mind and soul with God that his very laughter—so frequent and so infectious—had a quality almost liturgical. It seemed in its own human way a ritual worship of the Truth. He could have called himself what the writer of Utopia called himself: "God's giglot." But he had ". . . Wisdom for motley; truth for loving jest."

Another master-activity of this humble soul was his unruffled patience. One incident may suffice. At the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin he sat beside a priest whilst a Bishop gave an hour's address in Gaelic. At the end of the hour, during which he had been almost motionless, he heaved a smile and said, with a characteristic chuckle: "The finer points of that discourse escaped me." That smile and whimsicality were the fine, patient craftsmanship of humility.

A quality at once felt but not at once analyzable in the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas is to be found in the works of Gilbert Chesterton. With both men thought becomes consecration: their intellectual activities have a dominantly moral character. The finest quality about their mental work is not its truth, but its moral worth, its goodness—indeed its holiness. Their common mental sanity is an intellectual flowering of their deeper sanctity of soul. Compared with St. Thomas, Gilbert Chesterton is as David, dancing before the Ark, compared to one of the steady-moving levites on whose shoulders the Ark was borne. But levite by his up-bearing shoulders, and king by his dancing feet, equally worshipped God.

This was the reason why it was hard to speak with Gilbert Chesterton and not to think—*and think of God*. Even the atheist who spoke with him, and who would have despised the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, felt he would like to know about the God of Gilbert Chesterton—this God whom the very laughter of Gilbert Chesterton seemed to prove was such a lovably human, though transcendent, a being that doubt had a crucifixion denied to faith.

Some few days after we had buried him fitly amidst “sunshine and English meadow-flowers” I heard the word I longed, and God meant me, to hear. Someone who knew him well came to speak to me of spiritual difficulties. I had felt that the death of Gilbert Chesterton would be accompanied by some quiet sign of God’s “Well done” to His tireless apostle. The name that was in both our minds at last was spoken, and I heard what I had a dim premonition I should hear: “You know, Father, I often wanted to make my Confession to him. He would have understood.”²

If, then, the world everywhere is speaking of his genius and we are speaking confidently of his humility, we are confidently giving him a unique place in the history of his birth-town or, indeed, his birth-land. Since the death of his fellow Londoner Thomas More the Catholics of England, and therefore England, has been given no great man-child whose life bore the quartering of philosophy, poetry, chivalry and holiness. But St. Thomas More came to life again when Chesterton was born. Thus the Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away, then the Lord giveth again to reassure us, lest in mourning our heroes and saints who are dead we forget that God is not dead; nor has He lost His power “from the stones to raise up children to Abraham.”

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² I think I once delighted him by telling him a kindred incident about an old Mr. Morris whom, after his most holy life and death, I buried at Leicester. He was one of Nature’s most finished gentlemen, who had changed wealth for poverty with a dignity befitting the first of the beatitudes. Before he finally left his native Ireland an old charwoman said of him: “If ever there was a saint, ’tis the master. Sure he could bless your beads!”