Concreteness in Chesterton

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CONCRETENESS IN CHESTERTON

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

February

1958
LIFE

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CHAPTER I

THE BACKGROUND OF CHESTERTON'S CONCRETENESS

The dialogues of Plato differ greatly from the philosophical writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. The difference does not lie in St. Thomas' being a philosopher and Plato's failing to make the grade, for Plato is certainly among the great original thinkers. One of the chief differences is rather in expression. Plato makes strong use of imagination and poetry in expressing himself. He frequently illustrates his philosophy with imaginative figures such as the famous cave. This imaginative approach has been employed by others who have come after Plato.

But certainly one can ask how apt is such an approach in spreading and sharing ideas. This thesis is an attempt to investigate that general question in a particular way. This thesis is concerned with studying the concrete element in the writings of G. K. Chesterton. The chief objective of the thesis will be to determine whether or not his concreteness served him as an apt tool in carrying out his objective.

This first chapter will attempt to investigate what might be called the antecedents of Chesterton's concreteness. It will attempt to show that Chesterton was a man of deep and varied insight; that this insight led to realization of the fundamental realities of life as well as a realization that most people were dead to these realities; that this realization drove Chesterton to share his insight with the masses; finally, that the concrete
element in his writing is a means to this end.

The second chapter will deal more specifically with examples of this concreteness, investigating the qualities which would contribute to its effectiveness. The third chapter will investigate the concrete element from the point of view of its defective characteristics. The final chapter will attempt a summary and conclusion in light of the previous considerations of the second and third chapters.

Now to the business of the first chapter. Friends and enemies of Chesterton can find abundant quotations to support their pet opinions of this controversial figure. Some laud him as a genius and one of the greatest intellects of the century. Others are less enthusiastic, almost indifferent to his contribution to literature. ¹ A third group almost pitied his childish banalities—writers such as the critic in the New York World who said: "The amazing thing is not that Chesterton is so absurdly childish but that people can be found to take him seriously as a great thinker. That he has a crackling and sometimes dazzling style (though it is wearing) may be admitted, but as a thinker he is a total failure." ²

However, there are many competent men who deal much more favorably with Chesterton. One finds references to him in the most unexpected places. Sud-


²New York World, March 9, 1930, p. 11.
denly a philosopher will introduce a reference to Chesterton in the midst of highly technical terms and concepts, as Etienne Gilson does in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*. Here Gilson uses Chesterton's detective, Fr. Brown, as an example of a man who knew the distinction between philosophy and theology. The direct reference is to Fr. Brown, but really Gilson is praising the insight of his creator, Chesterton.

But more explicitly Chesterton is placed among the first in many fields. Philosophy, literature, criticism, sociology, history—all of these were grist for Chesterton's mill. We find one of the most significant tributes to the genius of Chesterton and his insight coming from Gilson again. Speaking of Saint Thomas Aquinas, this author who has himself published many brilliant volumes on the Angelic Doctor says:

I consider it as being without possible comparison the best book ever written on St. Thomas. Nothing short of genius can account for such an achievement. Everybody will no doubt admit that it is a 'clever' book, but the few readers who have spent twenty or thirty years in studying St. Thomas Aquinas, and who, perhaps, have themselves published two or three volumes on the subject, cannot fail to perceive that the so-called 'wit' of Chesterton has put their scholarship to shame. He has guessed all that which we had tried to demonstrate, and he has said all that which they were more or less clumsily attempting to express in academic formulas. Chesterton was one of the deepest thinkers who ever existed; he was deep because he was right; and he could not help being right; but he could not either help being modest and charitable, so he left it to those who could understand him to know that he was right, and deep; to the others, he apologized for being right.4

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4Cyril Clemens, *Chesterton As Seen by His Contemporaries* (New York, 1939), pp. 150-151, no source given.
Another philosopher has also recognized and praised the insight of Chesterton in connection with the same book, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*. E. L. Mascall, writing on natural theology, refers the reader to Chesterton on several occasions. In the following quotation he points out a facet of Chesterton's insight which also prompted an essay by Fr. Feeney entitled "The Metaphysics of Chesterton".5

Very few people, I think, have had such a vivid apprehension of the reality and actuality of finite beings as the late G. K. Chesterton. It is seen in his discussion of the Thomist attitude to Being in his brilliant little book *Saint Thomas Aquinas* (ch. vi). It comes out in quite another form in the following extract from a letter to his fiancée, to which Dr. W. G. Peck has kindly drawn my attention:

'I am black but comely at this moment; because the cyclostyle has blacked me... I like the cyclostyle ink; it is so inky. 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.'6

But philosophy is not the only field in which Chesterton is recognized. His first book was in the field of literary criticism, a field which he continued to cultivate for the rest of his writing days. His brother Cecil speaking of his criticism in *Twelve Types* says:

'Twelve Types' gives pregnant hints of unused powers as a critic. Two of the essays—those on Charlotte Brontë and Scott—are real criticism, so far as they go, and extraordinarily illuminating and convincing, though they are

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rather sketches of their subjects taken from one particular angle than exhaustive studies of them. In some of the others there are phrases and sentences full of insight. The following description of the literary quality of Tolstoy's stories is almost perfect... There is the quick eye for essentials which is the first quality of a good critic.

And, indeed, when Mr. Chesterton allows himself to be a critic pure and simple he is always good.7

Julius West, another contemporary of Chesterton's, is not always sympathetic towards his work, but on the question of literary criticism he agrees with Cecil. Besides the insight which Cecil notes, West points to other qualities evident in Chesterton's criticism: "The journalistic touch, when it is good, means the preservation of a work. And Chesterton has that most essential part of a critic's mental equipment—what we call, in an inadequately descriptive manner, insight. He was no mean critic, whatever the tricks he played. . . . He has a wonderful intuitive gift of feeling for the right metaphor, for the material object that best symbolizes an impression."8

This gift for the right metaphor, the ability to select the proper material object, will take up the greater part of discussion in this thesis. It is sufficient now to note that Mr. West considers it an essential and praiseworthy aspect of Chesterton's style.

A great deal of Chesterton's journalistic writing and the editorship of two different papers were prompted by his vital interest in the sociological problems of his times. He and Belloc crusaded constantly for distributism. Msgr. Knox commented favorably several times on the Chester-Belloc presen-

7Cecil Chesterton, G. K. Chesterton: A Criticism (New York, 1919), pp. 77-78.
tation of this doctrine and Maisie Ward gives this evaluation of his sociological work: "To quote Msgr. Knox again, 'I call that man intellectually great who is an artist in thought . . . I call that man intellectually great who can work equally well in any medium.' The poet-philosopher worked suprisingly well in the medium of sociology." 9

Sociology can be closely allied with politics—and was in the England of Chesterton. Again we find G. K. C. acknowledged as a man with real acumen in this field. The note of ease and naturalness is again evident in Mr. Kenner's following comment on the political insight of Chesterton:

The April, 1946 issue of Politics, to take another example, contains some 10,000 anxious words of socialist self-searching under the general title, 'The Root is Man.' The author is a sincere man, and a responsible one. Yet to follow him in his valiant, hesitant, fumbling approach to the Chestertonian position . . . is to realise most forcibly, while applauding a new political hopefulness, the fact that Mr. Dwight Macdonald is merely groping after the most elementary principles of What's Wrong With the World, which Chesterton dashed off in 1912. 10

Chesterton was asked to do many books which he did not really care to write. One of these was The Short History of England, which he was forced to write because of a legal technicality: he had signed with the publishers to write one book which failed to materialize; they then demanded that he fulfill his contract by writing this history. As usual Chesterton hurried it through. Here is the verdict on the book by an English professor of history:

"You can find no dates in this history and a minimum of facts, but you can

find vision. The History professor at London University said to Lawrence Solomon that it was full of inaccuracies, yet 'He's got something we hadn't got.'

Hilaire Belloc said something similar about the vision of Chesterton concerning the Catholic Church. Belloc sets up a strange criterion for judging whether or not the rising generation of Englishmen are thinking or not. The criterion is simply whether or not they read The Thing. Belloc says of this book: "I am curious and even meditative upon its probable fate. If it is read by the generation now rising, that will mean that England is beginning to think. If it is forgotten, that will mean that thought is failing; for nowhere has there been more thorough thinking and clearer exposition in our time."

From what has just been said it seems evident that Chesterton did possess a varied and deep power of insight. Now insight is merely one side of the coin, for within the genius the insight causes a deep appreciation and often the desire to communicate the vision to others. This was true of Chesterton.

He saw clearly that the vast majority of people around him were as completely unaware of the realities of daily life as he was aware of them. He frequently speaks of "fuzzy audiences" who have ceased thinking and are long since dead to most of life's wonders. This prompted him—even drove him—

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12 Hilaire Belloc, On the Place of Gilbert Chesterton in English Letters (New York, 1940), p. 67.
to want to share with the masses his own wonder and realization. He says in his *Autobiography*:

This was the primary problem for me, certainly in order of time and largely in order of logic. It was the problem of how men could be made to realize the wonder and splendor of being alive, in environments which their daily criticism treated as dead-alive, and which their imagination had left for dead. It is normal for a man to boast when he can, or even when he can't, that he is a citizen of no mean city. But these men had really resigned themselves to being citizens of mean cities; and on every side of us the mean cities stretched far away beyond the horizon; mean in their architecture, mean in costume, mean even in manners; but, what was the only thing that really mattered, mean in the imaginative conception of their own inhabitants. . . . This, I say by way of preliminary guide or direction, was what originally led me into certain groups or movements and away from others.13

Chesterton often speaks of the need for a new way of popularizing our whole philosophy of life. He says, there "is a need for the restatement of religious truth. . . . There is a very urgent need for a verbal paraphrase of many of the fundamental doctrines; simply because people have ceased to understand them as they are traditionally stated. It does not follow from this that the traditional statement is not the true statement. It only means that the traditional statement now needs to be translated."14

Hugh Kenner in *Paradox in Chesterton* considers this entire aspect of Chesterton at great length. He maintains that the special rhetorical purpose of Chesterton is to overcome the mental inertia of his audience which causes

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them to see without ever realizing. He says about Chesterton:

He strove above all else to show men what he saw, on the principle that a thing once seen is its own proof. 'False religion . . . is always trying to express concrete facts as abstract; it calls sex affinity; it calls wine alcohol; it calls brute starvation the economic problem. The test of true religion is that its energy drives exactly the other way; it 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.'

So we see the concrete element taking its place in the mental outlook of Chesterton. This is not to say that he merely picked it up and used it as a carpenter would a hammer—because this is the tool needed to drive the nails home. The concrete presentation grows from Chesterton's realization which involves a strong pictorial imagination and artist's nature. Thus it is at once a natural expression and an effective mode of performing his task.

While Chesterton himself never speaks explicitly about his own concreteness he does state his case rather fully on a parallel aspect, his humor. By a brief consideration of his attitude on this the place of his concreteness will also become clearer.

Chesterton admits that some elements of his writing make it second rate. He is the first to proclaim that he is a journalist and nothing more. When T. S. Eliot accuses him of using too much alliteration, he simply admits that he does use too much alliteration. He does not defend his style against all accusations, but he does defend his style on one count—that it is prompted by a definite motive.

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Whether he is humorous, concrete, paradoxical, or brilliant, he is such because he feels there is no other way of achieving his goal. He replies to his critics:

I only ask in all seriousness, that they should understand the necessities of our sort of self-assertion as well as recognizing the existence of their own. And I do ask them to believe that when we try to make our sermons and speeches more or less amusing, it is for the very simple and even modest reason that we do not see why the audience should listen unless it is more or less amused. Our mode of speech is conditioned by the fact that it really is what some have fancifully supposed the function of speech to be; something addressed by somebody to somebody else. It has of necessity all the vices and vulgarities attaching to a speech that really is a speech and not a soliloquy.16

Chesterton wanted to reach the people with his message. To do this, one had to make contact with them. He was willing to maintain this contact by means of flippancy, because he had to be a "popular" writer in order to achieve his end.

To make what is now called a popular speech it is indeed necessary to make it only too like what is called an after-dinner speech; to keep our connection with the normal life only by a thin thread of flippancy. But at least the connection is kept; and something remains of what is really the archetypal relation implied in the very existence of the arts. It is not altogether our fault if a chasm has opened in the community of beliefs and social traditions, which can only be spanned by the far hallow of the buffoon.17

One should carefully note the point Chesterton is making here. Flippancy is something to be used if it helps and avoided if it hinders. G. K. Chesterton-

17 Ibid., p. 22.
ton is not another Oscar Wilde, coining paradoxes and epigrams for the honor they bring their maker. To sum up his stand on the question, it will help to quote a passage from Heretics which has parallels in several of his other works.

Mr. McCabe thinks that I am not serious but only funny, because Mr. McCabe thinks that funny is the opposite of serious. Funny is the opposite of not funny and of nothing else. The question of whether a man expresses himself in a grotesque or a laughable phraseology, is . . . a question of instinctive language and self-expression. Whether a man chooses to tell the truth in long sentences or short jokes is a problem analogous to whether he chooses to tell the truth in French or German. Whether a man preaches his gospel grotesquely or gravely is merely like the question of whether he preaches it in prose or verse. . . . The truth is, as I have said, that in this sense the two qualities of fun and seriousness have nothing whatever to do with each other, they are no more comparable than black and triangular.

Chesterton is saying in effect: One thing is necessary—to communicate the tremendous realities which make up life. How this is done does not matter, it is the doing that makes the difference.

An attempt has been made to show in this chapter that G. K. Chesterton possessed deep insight, that his insight prompted him to share it with those who lacked such vision, finally that concrete expression followed from this insight and served him as a tool in the communication of it.

The following chapters will investigate the concreteness more in detail and attempt to evaluate it. In these chapters the advantages of this concrete expression as well as its disadvantages will be discussed.

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CHAPTER II

THE GOOD POINTS OF CHESTERTON'S CONCRETENESS

The last chapter discussed what might be called the subjective aspect of sharing insight. It will be well before beginning a more detailed investigation, to consider the objective aspect. By this is meant: just what elements are involved in transmitting an insight from one person to another? In each of Chesterton's successful attempts to convey his intuition he must be fulfilling certain basic requirements. What are these? How does the author make the reader see what he has seen so clearly?

This problem seems best answered by analyzing what is meant when a person says, "I see, I understand, I realize." St. Ignatius Loyola in his Spiritual Exercises gives a clue to this by the construction of his points in various meditations. In one, for instance, he wants the exercitant to see, to realize, how little and worthless he really is. So he says: "I will consider who I am, and by means of examples humble myself; 1. What am I compared with all men? 2. What are all men compared with the angels and saints of paradise? 3. Consider what all creation is in comparison with God. Then I alone, what can I be? 4. I will consider all the corruption and loathsomeness of my body. 5. I will consider myself as a source of corruption and contagion from which has issued countless sins and the most offensive poison."¹

St. Ignatius would have the exercitant take a certain set of data, some actual facts and consider them in a new way. There is a God. I have sinned. My body is corrupt. Men are not much compared to God. My sins are like poison exuding from my body. Taken in random order these truths do not carry much of an impact compared to the effect attained by Ignatius as he builds these elements to a climax. Ignatius has so arranged the elements that new relations and meanings become evident, thus making the same elements capable of producing an insight in the reader. From five or six separate elements a new unity arises, which, like the human body is more than a collection of arms and legs—it is something alive and capable of producing life like its own.

Another example of how one comes to "see and realize" is the proof in Geometry that the three angles of a triangle equal a straight angle, 180°. Just staring at a triangle and a straight line is usually futile for the average student, and yet these are the materials our of which the proof will ultimately come. But the fact is only evident after someone has juggled the elements of the data in such a way that the student can see something new in the matter.
Once it has been shown that the angles equal three other angles lying on a straight line, the proof is immediately seen. The matter is now seen into, an insight has been shared.

Now Chesterton is in an analogous situation. He wants others to see as he does. But he is dealing with absolutes, logical consistency, metaphysics, and like matters. Most of his audience are not used to handling these concepts. He implies that they are prepared for little more than bread and circuses when he speaks of "the cloudy condition of the mind of the ordinary audiences."2

So Chesterton's job will be to so juggle his matter that new realities become apparent. He will have to be like St. Ignatius arranging religious truths in a way that packs a punch. But even this will not be sufficient. For, the very elements which he must juggle are not intelligible to his audience as they stand, in their abstract nakedness. Hence Chesterton's introduction of the concretes of simile, metaphor, parallelism. These now bridge the gap that lies between the mind of the reader and the reality of the concepts.

For example, Chesterton was aware and amazed by the reality of such an every-day commodity as existence. Now this word has no practical meaning for most people, it is almost devoid of significance. How does Chesterton present this for the consumption of his audience? In a way which is geared to have meaning as well as impact. He speaks of the wonder of existing for seven days, the ordinary week. "What has really happened during the last seven days and

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nights? Seven times we have been dissolved into darkness as we shall be dissolved into dust; our very selves, so far as we know, have been wiped out of the world of living things; and seven times we have been raised alive like Lazarus, and found all our limbs and senses unaltered, with the coming of the day."

This chapter will now consider Chesterton's concreteness and the good points which it had. First the simile and metaphor will be considered; they will be treated as one figure of speech for the purposes of this thesis. Next the parallelism, a distinctive characteristic of Chesterton's prose, as well as his use of symbolism, will be considered. And finally his use of concrete examples and stories to introduce his essays and books will be studied. This latter form of concreteness will be referred to as the concrete-stimulus.

One need read only a small bit of Chesterton to see that the metaphor and simile were constantly his tools. This constant use of such figures fits perfectly with the view of Chesterton as a man who possesses a genius, who has insight. As long ago as Aristotle, this was a recognized fact. "It is also a mark of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars."4

But even more to the point of this thesis, the metaphor is an apt tool

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3Ward, p. 643.

for the communication of insight. Herbert Read supports this assertion. 

"[A] metaphor is the swift illumination of an equivalence. Two images, or an idea and an image, stand equal and opposite; clash together and respond significantly, surprising the reader with a sudden light." This sudden light sounds like the very element Chesterton wants to awaken in his public.

As Chesterton himself says, "it does sometimes happen that the metaphor is many-sided, like the diamond." This is true of Chesterton's metaphor. F. L. Lucas suggests at least six sides to the gem of metaphor. He says: "Metaphor, above all, can give strength, clarity, and speed; it can add ... humour, individuality, poetry." These elements seem to be found in the figures of speech of Chesterton. Examples will now be studied to establish this.

The first characteristic is that of strength and energy. He manifests this quality when he concludes a discussion on the value of the syllogism with a strong metaphor. His argument has proceeded with logical clarity and he caps off the series of paragraphs with these sentences. "What is really meant, and what is much more reasonable, is that the old syllogists sometimes set out the syllogism at length; and certainly that is not always necessary. A man can run down three steps much more quickly than that; but a man cannot run down three steps if they are not there. If he does, he will break his neck, as if he walked out of a fourth-story window."

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In this figure the reality of mere logical error is brought home with all the force and clamor of a body physically tumbling down stairs, head over heels. Chesterton helps the reader realize that intellectual error is quite as real, if not as evidently disastrous, as physical mishap. The force of the argument does not depend on whether or not a three-step fall would snap a man's neck; but the force of all of Chesterton's previous argument grows alive and much more significant in this figure. The vitality and reality which Chesterton perceived in the order of ideas finds expression for others to share. How much stronger the expression is here than if he merely said, "The syllogism is a necessary means of arguing correctly. A man will logically err if he violates the syllogism."

In another figure one finds this strength of expression well balanced by two other qualities which are characteristic of G. K. Chesterton's prose— alliteration and a striking use of color. In The Everlasting Man he is striving to emphasize the desire of man to represent somehow the power of the gods, or God. Chesterton again sums up a series of expository sentences in this way. "A South American idol was made as ugly as possible, as a Greek image was made as beautiful as possible. They were seeking the secret power, by working backwards against their own nature and the nature of things. There was always a sort of yearning to carve at last, in gold or granite or the dark red timber of the forests, a face at which the sky itself would break like a cracked mirror."

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The phrase "a face that would stop a clock" is common enough. The meaning is immediately clear and strong. Here the idea is heightened and strengthened in a three-fold way. The sound of the words "gold," "granite," "dark red timber of the forests," have a heavy and solemn sound even when pronounced mentally. The onomatopoeia of "the sky itself would break like a cracked mirror" is an obvious advantage. Finally the idea of ugliness so great that its force could reach to the heavens and shatter it as if with a heavy hammer, proves its worth by being short, crisp, and yet clear; while it loses all of this when one tries to paraphrase it and spell out all the implications.

The second characteristic which the metaphor gives Chesterton's work is clarity. While all of these characteristics overlap somewhat there are some figures which manifest a certain one more strongly than another. The following figures seem best classified as figures leading to clarity.

In **Saint Thomas Aquinas** Chesterton is trying to make a point clear to the reader. It is not a very important point, but the example helps show the facet of clarity:

Needless to say, I am not so silly as to suggest that all the writings of St. Thomas are simple and straightforward; in the sense of being easy to understand. There are passages I do not in the least understand myself; there are passages that puzzle much more learned and logical philosophers than I am; there are passages about which the greatest Thomists still differ and dispute. But that is a question of a thing being hard to read or understand: not hard to accept when understood. That is a mere matter of "The Cat sat on the Mat" being written in Chinese characters; or "Mary had a Little Lamb" in Egyptian hieroglyphics. The only point I am stressing here is that Aquinas is almost always on the side of simplicity, and supports the ordinary man's acceptance of ordinary truisms.9

9Chesterton, **Saint Thomas Aquinas**, p. 225.
Regardless of what a man might think about this statement on St. Thomas, one thing is obvious—what Chesterton means is clear. By illustrating with this simple example, the idea becomes more familiar and immediately clear. Anyone sees the difference between "Mary had a Little Lamb" written in Egyptian hieroglyphics and the theory of relativity written in English. The one is simple but perhaps per accidens difficult to get to. The other is complex and difficult regardless of language.

Anyone who has studied scholastic philosophy will appreciate the ease and clarity with which Chesterton exposes the idea of potency. The concept itself is common enough and Chesterton keeps it clear by using simile even though he is dealing in a philosophic realm. While he is not directly explaining the concept of potency, his indirect exposition is clear and effective. "They are potential and not actual; they are unfulfilled, like packets of seeds or boxes of fireworks. They have in them to be more real than they are. And there is an upper world of what the Schoolmen called Fruition, or Fulfillment, in which all this relative relativity becomes actuality; in which the trees burst into flower or the rockets into flame."

The basic notion of potency is quite readily understood when the author uses such examples as seeds and firecrackers. Also such use emphasizes the fact that the concept of potency is taken from the real world of flowers and flames and not imposed upon it by some flowering imagination or flaming intellect.

A final example of a metaphor which manifests clarity is found in Ortho-

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10 Chesterton, Saint Thomas Aquinas, p. 225.
doxy. Here Chesterton is describing the mental state of a madman. In nineteen words he captures and expresses this state almost perfectly. He uses two quick figures, both emphasizing an aspect of such a state. "He is in the clean and well-lit prison of one idea; he is sharpened to one painful point." 11

Much of the clarity and effect is achieved by the exact and brief description. Each word has its function. Each word joins with the others in denotation and connotation to present a clean, clear picture.

The next facet which Mr. Lucas mentions is that of speed. This he defines as "the power of metaphor to crowd the maximum of ideas into every minute." 12

A striking example of this packing a short group of words with great potential—like that of seeds or sky-rockets—appears in Saint Thomas Aquinas. In speaking of the borrowing of non-Christian philosophy to construct the framework of his eminently Christian doctrine, Chesterton points out that for Thomas this was not a mere borrowing: "It was not a compromise with the world, or a surrender to heathens or heretics, or even a mere borrowing of external aids, even when it did borrow them. In so far as it did reach out to the light of common day, it was like the action of a plant which by its own force thrusts out its leaves into the sun; not like the action of one who merely lets daylight into a prison." 13

11 Gilbert Keith Chesterton, Orthodoxy (New York, 1940), p. 38.
12 Lucas, p. 205.
13 Chesterton, Saint Thomas Aquinas, p. 12.
An investigation of these two sentences will show that there is a deeper and fuller meaning here than appears at first glance. Chesterton wants to point up a contrast and thus make his point. St. Thomas did not merely borrow from the non-Christian sources, rather he assimilated them into his own system as a living organism makes other things a part of itself. The sun in this figure stands for truth; and just as the sun is God's gift to all, giving light to the sinner and saint, so is truth meant for all men. So he implies that truth is the goal of Thomas, even when he had to get this truth from a seemingly untruthful source—or at least a source which possessed only partial truth.

But the real burden of the figure rests in the contrast of the immanence of the plant's activity and the mere passivity of a dark prison cell. The plant has power, life, unity which make it a living thing. This means that it can grow, can nourish itself, can produce similar life, and finally can repair damage to an injured part. These are the "big four" by which the psychologist distinguishes living from non-living matter. The plant seeks to assimilate the sun's rays in order to add to its own independent life. The existence of a living thing depends on assimilating its proper object; it must incorporate others to itself or perish.

Notice that Chesterton does not mention letting sun into a prison as an evil. It is merely different. Here we have a cell of stone and iron being lit by the sun. The action is that of the sun on a passive recipient. There is not assimilation because there is no life. Here there is merely the addition of one more element, that of light, to the other elements of stone and iron. The former object lives, the latter simply lies.
Working with such figures Chesterton allows himself to use the hidden and powerful tool of connotation. The emotional element which his prose gains by this makes it a much stronger instrument in setting up the conditions in the reader necessary for the sharing of insight. In the combination here of the flower and the prison cell we find much of the force of the figure coming from the connotation of the objects used as examples. To one who has studied the philosophies with which Chesterton deals here, the aptness of the symbols is evident. The philosophy of Aristotle and the Arabs, who followed him closely, are not nearly as dark and forbidding as the Stoic doctrine or some others; but compared to the new element which Christianity has brought to philosophy they do not unjustly bear the title, prison. For in Aristotle and the Arabs God is in a kind of prison of necessity. Whereas in the Christian concept which brought with it the notion of a free creation we suddenly find the liberty and beauty which is aptly summed up and symbolized by a field of sunlit flowers.

Another figure in which deep meaning lies under the surface is found in The Thing. Chesterton is speaking of the evils of modern science and organization: "Modern science and organization are in a sense only too natural. They herd us like the beasts along lines of heredity or tribal doom; they attach man to the earth like a plant instead of liberating him, even like a bird, let alone an angel."14

The figure appears quite simple at first sight. If the reader were told

that this figure is very philosophical, he would probably be surprised. Yet
the statement has a philosophical basis and expresses a fundamental philo-
sophical fact. The philosophers even as far back as Aristotle have spoken of
man as a *spiritus incarnatus*. This shifts the emphasis to the spiritual side
of man, whereas the usual scholastic definition, *animal rationale*, seems to
emphasize the animal side of man. At any rate, this emphasis on the spiritual
side of man which calls him an incarnate spirit is the point that Chesterton
is trying to make.

He sets up a concrete *a fortiori* argument here. Modern science turns
man into a plant that can only wave in the wind. The plant cannot even move
from place to place as a bird can. And much less can a plant make invasions
into the realm of the spiritual world of ideas and concepts. These elements
are present in this short sentence, although it must be admitted that not
every reader would be as apt to discover them as a student of philosophy.

Finally there is a group of figures which might fall under the category,
*speed*. In this group Chesterton uses an image to sum up a literary figure or
his style. In *Heresies* he uses this device in passing, but the effect is good.
"Charity is a fashionable virtue in our time; it is lit up by the gigantic
firelight of Dickens. Hope is a fashionable virtue to-day; our attention has
been arrested for it by the sudden and silver trumpet of Stevenson." 15

In this quick and passing figure Chesterton does catch more than he would
have if he had merely referred to the names of Dickens and Stevenson. The

reader is reminded of the voluminous vastness of Dickens with its exuberance.
Chesterton reminds his audience of the startling and bright style of Stevenson by using this figure of the trumpet. It is interesting to note that Chesterton uses a variety not only of image but also of the sense to which the image refers. The fire appeals to the visual imagination while the sharp stab of trumpets strikes the ear. This variety has a pleasant effect on the reader as well as indicating the versatility of Chesterton's image-making power.

Chesterton had the ability to use examples from other arts to get across a certain aspect of a man's style. Two of the best examples of this appear in Robert Louis Stevenson and Chaucer. Of Stevenson he says: "I shall have occasion to remark elsewhere that there is one strictly technical sense in which Stevenson's treatment can be called a thin or flat treatment. It is a sense in which we might say that a certain style in decorative ironwork is light and slender, in which we might say that Whistler's way of laying on monochrome washes was merely flat. . . . But it is essential that this criticism should not be confused with the suggestion I have just answered; the suggestion that the spiritual significance of the pattern or the picture is shallow and not deep."16

The example from Chaucer is similar to this, but the variation shows that each of the figures is an individual impression describing an individual thing.

To watch the unfolding of the genius of Chaucer is to watch a pattern changing into a picture; or into a series of pictures. It is something like the illusion of a sick or sleepy child, staring at a wall-paper, for whom the flat

plants seem to branch and blossom, or figures to begin to move among the formal trees. His work begins with the purely rhythmic decorative style that possessed medieval prose and verse, even more than medieval painting and carving. It ends with something more than the realism of Renaissance pictures; with something suggestive of the realism of modern novels.17

This type of figure does more than merely compress a set of abstract data into an imaginative bundle. Here Chesterton gets at elements which defy description. Whole pages of stuffy prose analysis attempt to tell the reader these very same facts about Stevenson or Chaucer. These passages can be found in many books on these authors. But it would be difficult for the reader to find the essence better summed up or more clearly expressed.

Again in Chaucer we find another example of the use of the art of architecture to describe the Canterbury Tales.

But the Canterbury Tales, the last unfinished work of Chaucer, is in quite another sense unfinished and finished. It is not only a new scheme, but a new style. It is not only a new style, but potentially a new school. It is as if he had been an architect, who through a long and successful life had planned out the round arches of the Romanesque and the squat pillars of the Norman churches, and then, almost on his death-bed, had dreamed of and designed the first Gothic cathedral. For indeed the Canterbury Tales do remain rather like a huge, hollow, unfinished Gothic cathedral with some of the niches empty and some filled with statues, and some part of the large plan traced only in lines upon the ground.18

At other times we find Chesterton describing the style of an author like Dickens or Thackeray in a quick figure: "For this purpose Thackeray was equipped with a singularly easy and sympathetic style, carved in slow soft

18 Ibid.
curves where Dickens hacked out his images with a hatchet."

In the same book, *The Victorian Age in Literature*, Chesterton summarizes the mental attitude of Meredith and Hardy. He explains that both of them escaped from the city of Victorianism: "But to escape from a city is one thing: to choose a road is another. The free-thinker who found himself outside the Victorian city, found himself also in the fork of two very different naturalistic paths. One of them went upwards through a tangled but living forest to lonely but healthy hills; the other went down to a swamp. Hardy went down to botanise in the swamp, while Meredith climbed towards the sun. Meredith became, at his best, a sort of daintily dressed Walt Whitman: Hardy became a sort of village atheist brooding and blaspheming over the village idiot."

Or again he uses other figures to show us another aspect of these two men: "Hardy was a well, covered with the weeds of a stagnant period of scepticism, in my view; but with truth at the bottom of it; or anyhow with truthfulness at the bottom of it. But Meredith was a fountain. He had exactly the shock and shining radiation of a fountain in his own garden where he entertained us."  

Now it is certainly conceivable that one would disagree with the conclusions which Chesterton draws about these men, but also one must admit that

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20 Ibid., p. 143.

he has taken a whole man and his cast of mind and presented it to his audience in a nutshell. In so far as this is a generalization it is open to qualification and refinement, as are all generalizations. However, one can easily see that as a generalization and summary it has an effect beyond the ordinary as a result of the concrete mode of expression.

The next aspect to be considered is that of humor. The first chapter gave Chesterton's stand on the question of humor. That it is a characteristic element of Chesterton's prose is admitted by all of his critics. In fact it often serves the critic a club with which he proceeds to belabor Chesterton about the ears. Here the discussion of humor will be limited to that achieved in Chesterton's use of images, similes, and metaphors.

A noted Jesuit speaker is supposed to have defined an after-dinner speech as one in which you tell a few stories to get the audience to laugh; and while they have their mouths open you throw in a few ideas for them to chew on. This describes well the use which Chesterton often makes of humor. People laugh with him and suddenly realize that they are laughing because they see something in a new way. Myles Connolly compares Chesterton's humor to that of Charlie Chaplin. He says: "When Max Eastman asked Charlie Chaplin what it is he does to people to make them laugh, that good artist very sensibly replied: 'I make them conscious of life. "You think this is it, don't you?" I say. "Well, it isn't, but this is, see?" And then they laugh.' It is thus that Chesterton entertains: he makes people conscious of life. . . . He startles the man who has accepted it as commonplace into wonderment. He jolts the sub-
jectivist out of himself."²²

In Heretics Chesterton uses a definitely humorous example to emphasize a definitely serious and true fact—that the man who is always talking about health and strength is growing weak; that the country which is growing weak and ineffective begins to talk about efficiency.

So it is that when a man's body is a wreck he begins, for the first time, to talk about health. Vigorous organisms talk not about their processes, but about their aims. . . . There can be no stronger sign of a coarse material health than the tendency to run after high and wild ideals. . . . Hildebrand would have said that he was working not for efficiency, but for the Catholic Church. Danton would have said that he was working not for efficiency, but for liberty, equality, and fraternity. Even if the ideal of such men were simply the ideal of kicking a man downstairs, they thought of the end like men, not of the process like paralytics. They did not say, 'Efficiently elevating my right leg, using, you will notice, the muscles of the thigh and calf, which are in excellent order, I—.' Their feeling was quite different. They were so filled with the beautiful vision of the man lying flat at the foot of the staircase that in that ecstasy the rest followed in a flash.²³

Since humor is either effective at first sight or not at all, no attempt will be made to spell out the humor of this passage. It will be noted, however, that the example does service, and that with a smile.

The next two examples of the humor of Chesterton are interesting because they are both used to communicate philosophic truth. The first example appears merely amusing at first glance. But the reader may be surprised to learn that this bit of humor contains the proof for the superiority of the human soul over the souls of animals. While the proof from Rational Psycho-

²³Chesterton, Heretics, pp. 17-18.
logy might look more professional it contains little more content than Chesterton's reflections and a great deal less interest.

That man and brute are like, is in a sense, a truism; but that being so like they should then be so insanely unlike, that is the shock and the enigma. That an ape has hands is far less interesting to the philosopher than the fact that having hands he does next to nothing with them; does not play knuckle-bones or the violin; does not carve marble or carve mutton. People talk of barbaric architecture and debased art. But elephants do not build colossal temples of ivory even in a rococo style; camels do not paint even bad pictures, though equipped with the material of many camel's-hair brushes. Certain modern dreamers say that ants and bees have a society superior to ours. They have, indeed, a civilization; but that very truth only reminds us that it is an inferior civilization. Who ever found an ant-hill decorated with the statues of celebrated ants? Who has seen a bee-hive carved with the images of gorgeous queens of old? 24

In fact the humor is so obvious in this passage that even Chesterton realises that his readers might mistake his purpose here. Just how much this danger might influence the effectiveness of his work will be discussed in the later chapters. But it may be helpful to note here that he anticipated his critics who accuse him of humor without serious content:

If you say that two sheep added to two sheep make four sheep, your audience will accept it patiently—like sheep. But if you say it of two monkeys, or two kangaroos, or two sea-green griffins, people will refuse to believe that two and two make four. They seem to imagine that you have made up the arithmetical, just as you have made up the illustration of the arithmetical. And though they would actually know that what you say is sense, if they thought about it sensibly, they cannot believe that any-

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24 Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, pp. 266-267.
thing decorated by an incidental joke can be sensible.25

The final example of the humorous aspect of Chesterton's concreteness again expresses philosophic fact. Chesterton is trying to show that among the pagan philosophers there was a definite difference between their philosophic idea of the Absolute and the gods of their mythology or religion, while this is not true in the Christian concept of things.

Aristotle, with his colossal commonsense, was perhaps the greatest of all philosophers; certainly the most practical of all philosophers. But Aristotle would no more have set up the Absolute side by side with the Apollo of Delphi, as a similar or rival religion, than Archimedes would have thought of setting up the Lever as a sort of idol or fetish to be substituted for the Palladium of the city. Or we might as well imagine Euclid building an altar to an isosceles triangle, or offering sacrifices to the square of the hypotenuse. The one man meditated on metaphysics as the other man did on mathematics; for the love of truth or for curiosity or for the fun of the thing. But that sort of fun never seems to have interfered very much with the other sort of fun; the fun of dancing or singing to celebrate some pascally romance about Zeus becoming a bull or a swan.26

Again Chesterton presents the truth in a way that is easy to embrace. Thus he uses this tool effectively to win a hearing from his audience.

A book has been written on the imagery of Shakespeare, in which the author psychoanalyses the poet by studying the images found in his plays.27 This

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26 Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 141.
27 Caroline Spurgeon, Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1952).
may be carrying a good thing too far but it does suggest that an author’s figures can tell one much about the author’s inner self. This is also true in the case of Chesterton; his similes and metaphors do lend the note of individuality to his prose.

Two examples will suffice to illustrate this fact. It is generally conceded that Chesterton was a medievalist. He did definitely love the same things that characterized the middle ages, especially chivalry and knighthood. A person can discover this fact from reading the straightforward sentences of Chesterton in which he openly proclaims the fact, or he can see it in the very images which Chesterton uses. For instance some of the landmarks of Chesterton’s youth are described in medieval imagery. He speaks of

The little church of my baptism and the waterworks, the bare, blind, dizzy tower of brick that seemed, to my first upward stareings, to take hold upon the stars. Perhaps there was something in the confused and chaotic notion of a tower of water; as if the sea itself could stand on one end like a water-spout. Certainly later, though I hardly know how late, there came into my mind some fancy of a colossal watersnake that might be the Great Sea Serpent, and had something of the nightmare nearness of a dragon in a dream. And, over against it, the small church rose in a spire like a spear; and I have always been pleased to remember that it was dedicated to St. George.28

The second figure which gives the reader insight into the character and thought patterns of Chesterton is that of Robinson Crusoe. This figure appears at least twice in two different works of Chesterton. Each time the figure stands for the same thing, it has the same message to carry. The message is that of wonder at the cosmos and gratitude to God for all the wonder-

28 Chesterton, Autobiography, p. 23.
ful items he has allowed man to salvage.

In Orthodoxy Chesterton says: "The fancy that the cosmos was not vast and void, but small and cozy, had a fulfilled significance now, for anything that is a work of art must be small in the sight of the artist; to God the stars might be only small and dear, like diamonds. And my haunting instinct that somehow good was not merely a tool to be used, but a relic to be guarded, like the goods from Crusoe’s ship."29

Again in his Autobiography he uses this figure in pointing out that limitation does not make life more unpleasant, but rather it adds interest and excitement to the things of every-day life. "The charm of Robinson Crusoe is not in the fact that he could find his way to a remote island; but in the fact that he could not find any way of getting away from it. It is that fact which gives an intensive interest and excitement to all the things that he had with him on the island; the axe and the parrot and the guns and the little hoard of grain."30

The last element which Lucas enumerates is that of poetry. He says that poetry must never contain prose but that the converse is far from true. A cry of lamentation rises from his lips at those who make their writing dull and drab by never including the element of poetry in their prose. "And one of the things that reduce me to annual rage and despair in correcting examination papers is the spectacle of two or three hundred young men and women who have

29 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 146.
soaked in poetry for two or three years, yet seem, with rare exceptions, not to have absorbed one particle of it into their systems; so that even those who have acquired some knowledge yet think, too often, like pedants, and write like grocers. "31

Now whatever accusations critics might want to make against Chesterton, none will accuse him of writing like a grocer. The poetic element could be pointed out in most of the figures thus far quoted in this thesis. Elements such as sound, rhythm, intuitive expression, condensation, and color have already been pointed out. But one element seems worth considering here. The following observation by Maurice Evans is very interesting and enlightening. Speaking of a particular passage he says: "One is perpetually carried forward, yet reminded of what is behind; and the sudden transition to an emphatic use of a different alliterative letter is softened by the echo of its previous occurrence. This method brings to mind Coleridge's analysis of the function of metre in poetry, which is to emphasize the particular beat and yet lead naturally on to the next."32

Mr. Evans actually scans a passage of prose showing that the alliterative syllables occur in interlocking clusters, forming a basic pattern of a a b a b b c b c c d c. It will be worthwhile to reproduce the passage and Evans' scan-sion of it here.

31 Lucas, p. 214.
"And we know not what shock of revelation or revulsion all but unhorsed that strong rider as on the road to Damascus; something indescribable, overwhelming a plain man in a passion of subtleties that had no outlet but a rush of flight: and far away down the darkling English lanes, the throb and thunder of the flying hooves. For that unholy cross the heathen saw stood up still ugly and unsanctified; black against the daybreak of the world, the shape of shame; and saving such a strange flash of reversion, the cross no Christian will ever see." 33

Mr. Evans scans only the first half of the passage. From where he stops to the end, the passage does not lend itself so well to his pattern. In fact the basic pattern which he sets up is never really fulfilled, and even though he should scan it this way, it is evident that almost any pattern could be verified by skipping the syllables that will not fit. But in spite of this, his observation that one word and sound does lead the reader on to the next and echo the preceding, is still true. And this is a characteristic of poetry—one which lends power and movement to the words and emotions.

Thus far this chapter has attempted to show that the similes and metaphors of Chesterton manifest the advantageous characteristics of strength and vitality, clarity, speed, humor, individuality, and poetry. Now that the simile and

33 Evans, pp. 140-142. The passage quoted by Evans is from Chesterton's Cobbett, but the page, etc. is not given.
metaphor have been considered in general, it will be well to consider a more specific type of metaphor which Chesterton utilizes and which has its own good qualities; this type is the branching metaphor. Herbert Read describes this type of metaphor as one "followed out in all its implications, extending and branching out and at each stage bringing fresh light to illuminate the idea."34

Maurice Evans calls attention to an example of this in Chesterton's Gob- bett.35 Another and even more interesting example of it appears in The Thing. Chesterton finishes an essay on humanism and religion with the following branching metaphor.

Humanism, in Mr. Foerster's sense, has one very wise and worthy character. It is really trying to pick up the pieces; that is, to pick up all the pieces. All that was done before was first blind destruction and then random and scrappy selection; as if boys had broken up a stained-glass window and then made a few scraps into colored spectacles, the rose-colored spectacles of the republican or the green or yellow spectacles of the pessimist and the decadent. But Humanism as here professed will stoop to gather all it can. . . . But before we call either Culture or Humanism a substitute for religion, there is a very plain question that can be asked in the form of a very homely metaphor. Humanism may try to pick up the pieces; but can it stick them together? Where is the cement which made religion corporate and popular, which can prevent it falling to pieces in a debris of individualistic tastes and degrees? What is to prevent one Humanist wanting chastity without humility, and another humility without chastity, and another truth or beauty without either? The problem of an enduring ethic and culture consists in finding an arrangement of the pieces by which they remain related, as do the stones arranged in an arch. And I know

34 Read, p. 29.
35 Evans, pp. 142-143.
only one scheme that has thus proved its solidity, bestriding lands and ages with its gigantic arches, and carrying everywhere the high river of baptism upon an aqueduct of Rome. 36

A brief examination of this branching metaphor will show what it really contains. Chesterton begins with a common enough figure of speech, "picking up the pieces." But he turns this phrase to his own purpose by contrasting humanism with the others because it picks up all the pieces. The others were like a group of scamps smashing up things and just picking up some of the scraps. Here he both characterizes the attitude, immaturity, and incompleteness of the others—decadents, pessimists, etc.—and introduces another element into the picture which will lead to more development.

They are lads breaking up stained-glass windows. Here by inference and suggestion he notes the attacks against the Church by the "iconoclastic" philosophers about whom he is speaking. But with the windows he had opened the door to color and he turns it neatly to describing in a picturesque way the philosophers' view of the universe: yellow, green, rose-colored. There is nothing greatly original about any of the individual elements here such as characterizing a philosopher as "looking through green or rose-colored glasses." But the way that one figure grows naturally and smoothly from the preceding one and carries on the sense of the passage does add much to the development thus far.

Although much imagination is evident here, still Chesterton is working with ideas and the thought is progressing. The argument thus far might be:

humanism is better than the others because they are too narrow and one sided. Humanism picks up all the pieces, but now the argument moves on to the question "but what will hold these pieces together?" Where is the cement? He puts this word in italics because this concrete substance stands for the key idea at this point.

The thought and image continue as he speaks of this amalgam falling "into a debris of individualistic tastes." Then he weaves in the ideas again and asks the questions about the extreme individualism of such a system. He then begins a sentence which promises to be straight logic: "The problem of an enduring ethic and culture..." but by the time he has come to the period of the sentence, the evolution to concrete expression has taken place—"as do the stones arranged in an arch."

This figure of the arch looks back to the arching stained-glass window with which the passage began and thus acts as a bond of unity. But it also does duty as an introduction to the next figure, that of an aqueduct. Here Chesterton sweeps into the most lyrical and imaginative part of the paragraph and brings the passage to a powerful and poetic close.

Here Chesterton reveals how he saw the doctrine, strength, balance, and life-giving characteristics of the Church in contrast to the pseudo-religious cults of his day. He is trying to put across some highly intellectual and deeply significant concepts and principles in terms of stained-glass windows and aqueducts. He does this much as the medievals translated the Gloria, Credo, and Ave Maria into the cathedrals and stained-glass windows which were eloquent in their silence. One look at such a masterpiece was worth many thousand words.
But Chesterton would be the first to agree that he never built cathedrals. Still this does not deny that he was working in the same guild. He says himself: "These monsters are meant for the gargoyles of a definite cathedral. I have to carve the gargoyles, because I can carve nothing else; I leave to others the angels and the arches and the spires. But I am very sure of the style of the architecture and of the consecration of the Church."37

Another favorite device of Chesterton is his use of a symbol to represent a whole philosophy or group of thinkers. He likes to take the symbol and then spell out the elements of it, showing the correspondence between the elements of the symbol and that of the system itself. One of the favorites of Chesterton is the cross of Christianity. Again and again Chesterton applies this symbol, drawing forth a truth of Christianity from its sign. In Orthodoxy he says: "Buddhism is centripetal, but Christianity is centrifugal: it breaks out. For the circle is perfect and infinite in its nature; but it is fixed for ever in size; it can never be larger or smaller. But the cross, though it has at its heart a collision and a contradiction, can extend its four arms for ever without altering its shape. Because it has a paradox in its centre it can grow without changing. The circle returns upon itself and is bound. The cross opens its arms to the four winds; it is a signpost for free travellers."38

Chesterton does not present this as an argument nor does he mistake this symbolism for a syllogism. He simply takes advantage of the similarities of

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38 Chesterton, Orthodoxy, p. 50.
the symbol and the thing symbolized and makes his observations in an interesting way. The truth of Christianity does not depend on the defensibility of this passage, but the transmission of the truth from one person to another might be greatly helped by the use of this device.

Another use of this symbolism is found in The Everlasting Man and it again concerns the Church; but this time the symbol is that of the key. In this passage Chesterton reminds the reader that Christ founded the Church on two figures of speech: the first phrase was about founding it on Peter as on a rock; the second was the symbol of the keys. He then continues:

The creed was like a key in three respects; which can be most conveniently summed up under this symbol. First, a key is above all things a thing with a shape. It is a thing that depends entirely upon keeping its shape. The Christian creed is above all things the philosophy of shapes and the enemy of shapelessness. . . . Second, the shape of a key is in itself a rather fantastic shape. A savage who did not know it was a key would have the greatest difficulty in guessing what it could possibly be. And it is fantastic because it is in a sense arbitrary. A key is not a matter of abstractions; in that sense a key is not a matter of argument. It either fits the lock or it does not. . . . It is senseless for a man to say he would like a simpler key; it would be far more sensible to do his best with a crowbar. And thirdly, as the key is necessarily a thing with a pattern, so this was one having in some ways a rather elaborate pattern. . . . If the faith had faced the world only with the platitudes about peace and simplicity some moralists would confine it to, it would not have had the faintest effect on that luxurious and labyrinthine lunatic asylum. What it did do we must now roughly describe; it is enough to say here that there was undoubtedly much about the key that seemed complex; indeed there was only one thing about it that was simple. It opened the door.39

39 Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, pp. 264–266.
Again an example of Chesterton using the symbol as a spring board for his exposition. He could have presented the same ideas without any reference to the key, but by making the connection to the words of Christ and His symbol, Chesterton adds a note of interest and speed to this passage.

The next form of concreteness to be considered in Chesterton's works is one which Mr. Belloc acclaims as the "weapon peculiar to Chesterton's genius"—the parallelism. "His unique, his capital, genius for illustration by parallel, by example, is his peculiar mark. The word 'peculiar' is here the operative word. Many have precision, though few have his degree of precision... No one whatsoever that I can recall in the whole course of English letters had his amazing—I would almost say superhuman—capacity for parallelism."40

Mr. Belloc defines parallelism thus: "Parallelism consists in the illustration of some unperceived truth by its exact consonance with the reflection of a truth already known and perceived."41 Both simile and metaphor would participate in this idea of parallelism, but the parallel here will be considered as a comparison which is longer than the usual simile or metaphor and usually of the parable type.

This type of illustration has two main uses by Chesterton which will be considered here: first, negatively, to show the weakness of another's statement or system; second, to illuminate a deep and unfamiliar truth.

40 Hilaire Belloc, On the Place of Gilbert Chesterton in English Letters (New York, 1940), pp. 36-37.

41 Ibid., p. 37.
For examples of the first use of the parallelism, that of showing the weakness of another's argument, Heretics would seem to offer the best hunting grounds since it is dedicated to showing up the weak points of the heretics. And it does, in fact, offer several good instances of this use of the parallelism.

For instance Chesterton criticizes Comteism for making a god of humanity. Now that humanity is a god might sound quite possible when explained by Comte, but when criticized by Chesterton the theory needs crutches. "As a philosophy it is unsatisfactory. It is evidently impossible to worship humanity, just as it is impossible to worship the Savile Club; both are excellent institutions to which we may happen to belong. But we perceive clearly that the Savile Club did not make the stars and does not fill the universe. And it is surely unreasonable to attack the doctrine of the Trinity as a piece of bewildering mysticism, and then to ask men to worship a being who is ninety million persons in one God, neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance." 42

Another example of this use of the parallelism appears in this same book when Chesterton wants to show that a certain passage of newspaper writing is utter nonsense. While the passage is rather long it seems worth quoting in full:

This is the sentence, and every one should read it carefully, and roll it on the tongue, till all the honey be tasted.

'A little sound common sense often goes further with an audience of American workingmen than much high-flown argument. A speaker who, as he brought forward his points,
hammered nails into a board, won hundreds of votes for his side at the last Presidential Election.'

I do not wish to soil this perfect thing with comment; the words of Mercury are harsh after the songs of Apollo. But just think for a moment of the mind, the strange inscrutable mind, of the man who wrote that, of the editor who approved it, of the people who are probably impressed by it, of the incredible American working-man, of whom, for all I know, it may be true. . . . There may be variations. We may read—

'A little common sense impresses American working-men more than high-flown argument. A speaker who, as he made his points, pulled buttons off his waistcoat, won thousands of votes for his side.' Or, 'Sound common sense tells better in America than high-flown argument. Thus Senator Budge, who threw his false teeth in the air every time he made an epigram, won the solid approval of American working-men.' Or again, 'The sound common sense of a gentleman from Earlswood, who stuck straws in his hair during the progress of his speech, assured the victory of Mr. Roosevelt.'

On close examination of these four passages—the one original and three Chesterton parallels—one finds that although his are absurd still the only difference between his paraphrases and the original is that Chesterton's statements are immediately absurd whereas the original can pass for a sensible statement of fact unless the reader investigate a bit closer. This closer investigation on the part of the reader and the discovery of the illogicality of the statement is precisely what Chesterton wants to provoke.

The second use which Chesterton makes of this device is to illuminate a subtle or deep truth by a kind of parable. Evidently Chesterton thought highly of this manner of teaching for he often made use of it. But he also tells us explicitly: "I doubt whether any truth can be told except in

43 Chesterton, Heretics, pp. 122-123.
Two parallelisms will illustrate this very well. The two are considerably different but they are both used to illuminate the same truth. Chesterton wants to show the Christian concept of asceticism to an audience who find it difficult to reconcile the ascetical element with the element of joy. He explains it this way in *Saint Thomas Aquinas*:

The trouble occurs because the Catholic mind moves upon two planes: that of the Creation and that of the Fall. The nearest parallel is, for instance, that of England invaded; there might be strict martial law in Kent because the enemy had landed in Kent, and relative liberty in Hereford; but this would not affect the affection of an English patriot for Hereford or Kent, and strategic caution in Kent would not affect the love of Kent. For the love of England would remain, both of the parts to be redeemed by discipline and the parts to be enjoyed in liberty. Any extreme of Catholic asceticism is a wise, or unwise, precaution against the evil of the Fall; it is *never* a doubt about the good of the Creation. And *that* is where it really does differ, not only from the rather excessive eccentricity of the gentleman who hangs himself on hooks, but from the whole cosmic theory which is the hook on which he hangs.45

That is one way of showing the consistency and even common sense of asceticism and joy walking hand in hand. But Chesterton has an entirely different parable which is equally ingenious in showing this same truth. He says in *The Thing*:

Suppose there appears on this earth a prodigy, a portent, or what is alleged to be a portent. In some way heaven has rent the veil or the gods have given some new marvel to mankind. Suppose, for instance, it is a fountain of

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45Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, p. 121.
magic water, said to be flowing at the top of a mountain. It blesses like holy water; it heals diseases; it inspires more than wine, or those who drink of it never thirst again. Well, this story may be true or false; but among those who spread it as true, it is perfectly obvious that the story will produce a number of other stories. It is equally obvious that those stories will be of two kinds. The first story will say: 'When the water was brought down to the valley there was dancing in all the villages; the young men and maidens rejoiced with music and laughter. A surly husband and wife were sprinkled with the holy water and reconciled, so that their house was full of happiness. A cripple was sprinkled and he went capering about gaily like an acrobat. The gardens were watered and became gay with flowers,' and so on. It is quite equally obvious that there will be another sort of story from exactly the same source, told with exactly the same motive. 'A man limped a hundred miles, till he was quite lame, to find the sacred fountain. Men lay broken and bleeding among the rocks on the mountainside in their efforts to climb after it. A man sold all his lands and the rivers running through them for one drop of the water. A man refused to turn back from it, when confronted with brigands, but was tortured and died calling for it,' and so on. There is nothing the least inconsistent between these two types of legend. They are exactly what would be naturally expected, given the original legend of the miraculous fountain.\(^7\)

Parody or imitation can also be considered a type of parallelism. Chesterton shocked the world of literary criticism when he introduced such a device into his Robert Browning. Again acting on the principle that showing is the surest way of sharing, he does show the reader the difference between Meredith and Browning by describing the same incident in the style of both men.

If Browning and George Meredith were each describing the same act, they might both be obscure, but their obscurities would be entirely different. Suppose, for

\(^7\)Chesterton, The Thing, pp. 133-134.
instance, they were describing even so prosaic and material an act as a man being knocked downstairs by another man to whom he had given the lie, Meredith's description would refer to something which an ordinary observer would not see, or at least could not describe. It might be a sudden sense of anarchy in the brain of the assailter, or a stupefaction and stunned serenity in that of the object of the assault. He might write, 'Wainwood's "Men vary in veracity," brought the baronet's arm up. He felt the doors of his brain burst, and Wainwood a swift rushing of himself through air accompanied with a clarity as of the annihilated.' But Browning might simply be describing the material incident of the man being knocked downstairs, and his description would run:—

'What then? "You lie" and doormat below stairs Takes bump from back.'

This is not subtlety, but merely a kind of insane swiftness. Browning is not like Meredith, anxious to pause and examine the sensations of the combatants, nor does he become obscure through his anxiety. He is only so anxious to get his man to the bottom of the stairs quickly that he leaves out about half the story.48

The fact that such a device as this is unusual in serious literary criticism does not alter the fact that it makes the point clear to a degree almost impossible by any other means. The ability to throw off a paragraph like this shows a thorough knowledge of the authors under consideration.

Mr. F. A. Lea finds in the parodies of Chesterton the manifestation of great critical ability. "It may be confidently asserted that only a great critic could have composed his parodies on Tennyson and Walt Whitman." Then after quoting one of Chesterton's parodies on Whitman he continues, "Chesterton never came nearer than that to direct revelation. That is Whitman, seen

with the understanding that is love, and the love that is laughter. The same insight characterizes his studies of Stevenson, Dickens, and Chaucer.\textsuperscript{49}

The final use of concretes that will be discussed in this thesis is the concrete stimulus. This simply refers to Chesterton's use of stories or parables to introduce his books, essays, or even parts of essays. One can hardly find one of Chesterton's books that does not make use of this concrete stimulus. The collection of essays, \textit{Tremendous Trifles} is nothing more than a series of reflections on concrete experiences. In this volume he uses such everyday objects as pieces of chalk, a pocketknife, and people he has met, as springboards for his philosophizing.

In \textit{Orthodoxy} for example, Chesterton begins his chapter "The Maniac," with the following concrete stimulus. "Once I remember walking with a prosperous publisher, who made a remark which I had often heard before; it is, indeed, almost a motto of the modern world. Yet I had heard it once too often, and I saw suddenly that there was nothing in it. The publisher said of somebody, 'That man will get on; he believes in himself.' And I remember that as I lifted my head to listen, my eye caught an omnibus on which was written 'Harrow.' I said to him, 'Shall I tell you where the men are who believe most in themselves? For I can tell you. I know of men who believe in themselves more colossally than Napoleon or Caesar... The men who really believe in themselves are all in lunatic asylums.'\textsuperscript{50} Chesterton then proceeds to expand this


\textsuperscript{50}Chesterton, \textit{Orthodoxy}, p. 22.
idea throughout the entire chapter. Many of the chapters of *The Everlasting Man* begin with a similar story leading the reader into the chapter's thesis by an interesting dialogue or descriptive passage.

Usually, though, the parable is in the nature of a parallelism which gives a condensed and concrete version of what is to follow. Or again it may be that the story is to make clear a certain attitude which Chesterton wants the reader to assume, or an attitude which he assumed in writing the book. He begins *Orthodoxy* with the story of a man who set out in a yacht to discover a new and undiscovered land and who actually returned to England without his knowing it. Thus this "discoverer" got the great joy of finding a new country and yet retaining his own native land. As Chesterton says, "What could be more delightful than to have in the same few minutes all the fascinating terrors of going abroad combined with all the human security of coming home again?" 51

Then Chesterton tells the reader that he is this man. That he did set out to be a discoverer of at least a new heretical philosophy. But after he had discovered what he thought was his own brand of heresy, he found much to his surprise, but also to his comfort, that he had only found the solid philosophy of Christianity for himself. Now Chesterton could certainly have said what he had to say without such parables and fairy-tales, but his prose would have been far weaker on one point if he had chosen to do so. The *readableness* which Chesterton has put into philosophy, literary criticism, and other allied

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and often arid fields, grows in great part directly from his use of such imaginative elements.

To sum up, this chapter has dealt with the various forms which Chesterton's concreteness took: the simile, metaphor, parallelism, symbol, and concrete stimulus. The examples were chosen deliberately from among the better figures of Chesterton and were intended to show the better qualities of his concreteness. The next chapter will deal with the other side of the coin. The devil's advocate must also be allowed to present his evidence.
CHAPTER III

SOME DEFECTS IN CHESTERTON'S CONCRETENESS

Chesterton's ability to be constantly battling and yet to make no enemies is an amazing characteristic. Again and again one reads of the others who became bitter in controversy and made enemies of the men as well as of their ideas; still Chesterton could wage war daily and yet have no personal enemies. This is not to say, however, that there were none to criticize him. In fact those closest to him are often the most severe with his faults; and whatever the good qualities about Chesterton's concreteness may be there are the bad points which deserve criticism.

Some of the criticism leveled against Chesterton is general and concerns the mass of his work. "For the rest, you have mainly G. K. Chesterton, who turned out in his books on Dickens some of the best work of which he was capable and who said some excellent things, but whose writing here as elsewhere is always melting away into that peculiar pseudo-poetic booziness which verbalizes with large conceptions and ignores the most obtrusive actualities."¹

Mr. B. Ifor Evans levels a similar charge against Chesterton. "Occasionally a writer such as G. K. Chesterton seems to be forcing prose into new effects, as if he were using his style as an advertisement for his thought. Chesterton seems like a poet corrupted by living in an age of advertisement, though something of the poet remains. It may be found that the less boisterous freshness of Mr. Hilaire Belloc will wear better."  

These criticisms are not without foundation; there are passages in Chesterton's work which support them beautifully. For instance, the reader does feel somewhat as if he is standing on shifting sand when he reads passages such as the following:

In this sense we are quite ready to admit that Chaucer was only a lucky and lonely elf, who found a sunbeam and danced in it. But sunbeams only come from the sun, and the sun was the centre of the solar system. If we are to understand it, we must go back to a very ancient sunrise; nay, to many repeated sunsets. It is not true that his daylight spirit belongs only to the day that had not yet dawned; the day of the Renaissance. If we want to trace that light we must trace it backward through the ages; and, by way of a beginning, as was here recorded at the start, we must go back to Boethius. . . . We must go back to that 'long evening by the Mediterranean', as it has been finely called, when all that was best in a Christian Empire, in the person of Boethius, remembered the Stoics and defied a tyrant and died.  

The concrete element is present here, but one finds it difficult to decipher the sign language. The play on sunrise, sun, sunset, day spirit, and dawn sheds little light on the thought contained in these sentences. There

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3 Chesterton, Chaucer, p. 275.
are too many elements which have little or no meaning for the average reader. The word "booziness" does not seem excessively strong to describe this passage.

Another example of this type of semi-poetic figure which lacks the clarity of prose and the emotional staying power of poetry is found in The Everlasting Man. In many respects this is one of Chesterton's finest books, but it is probably also the one most filled with this brand of expression. "This is what we really mean when we say that Asia is old or unprogressive or looking backwards. That is why we see her curved swords as arcs broken from that blinding wheel; why we see her serpentine ornament as returning everywhere, like a snake that is never slain. It has very little to do with the political varnish of progress; all Asiatics might have top-hats on their heads but if they had this spirit still in their hearts, they would only think the hats would vanish and come round again like the planets; not that running after a hat could lead them to heaven or even home."

This passage is not utter nonsense, but no one could say that some might not mistake it for such. Chesterton has simply been "trapped by his own mannerisms, by his terrifying facility," in the words of Mr. George Fraser. Images come thick and fast in the midst of writing and Chesterton does not take time to sort the good from the bad. The result is that his uncritical haste has produced passages such as these and the ones to follow.

F. A. Lea says: "He could not turn words into a medium like light which

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4 Chesterton, The Everlasting Man, p. 150.
5 Fraser, p. 297.
illuminates what it falls upon while remaining invisible itself: the spectrum of his own idiom was too diverting." In view of some of the figures considered in the preceding chapter, this statement cannot stand unqualified. However, it is true of some of Chesterton's concrete images.

Three particular instances of Chesterton's uncensored excesses might be considered here. First, confusion sometimes results, at other times bombast is the result, and sometimes we are simply more aware of the author than what he wants to say.

For examples of the figure that confuses, any one of the three cited thus far in this chapter will do. In such figures the concrete no longer serves the reader. He feels that he must first figure out the symbolism and then perhaps get to the meaning. The whole purpose of the concrete is frustrated when this happens.

Chesterton was also bombastic. This is not merely a case of sentimentality where the emotion outruns the thought. The thought can be of the deepest and yet the expression be bombastic. This is precisely what happens in The Everlasting Man. "But if we are describing, for the moment, the atmosphere of what is generous and popular and even picturesque, any knowledge of human nature will tell us that no sufferings of the sons of men, or even of the servants of God, strike the same note as the notion of the master suffering instead of his servants. And this is given by the theological and emphatically not by the scientific deity. No mysterious monarch, hidden in his starry

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⁶Lea, p. 35.
pavilion at the base of the cosmic campaign, is in the least like that celestial chivalry of the Captain who carries his five wounds in the front of battle."

Chesterton is deeply moved when he writes these words. There is no question about that. But in his effort to be strong and moving in his expression he does fall into an excess of exuberance. The pairs of alliterative words, for instance, are all too apparent and tend to cheapen the passage and detract from the effect.

The third fault that arises as a result of this uncritical haste is similar to bombast in that the reader is more aware of the figure and symbol than what it signifies. However, here the images and not merely the language draw attention to themselves. Mr. Lea gives several examples of this type of figure.

He often undertook to describe simple objects—a bird, a house, a chair—and very often he succeeded in describing them in such a way as to arouse our dormant imaginations: a bird he would define as a 'blossom broken loose from its chain of stalk'; a house as 'a gigantesque hat to cover a man from the sun'; a chair as 'an apparatus of four wooden legs for a cripple with only two'. In all these fantastic comparisons we can trace his effort to communicate his own renewed delight in everyday things. But it is precisely because we can trace his effort that Chesterton fails in his purpose. It is the author who startles us by his ingenuity not the object by its novelty.\(^7\)

These figures are scattered in the works of Chesterton. For instance

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\(^7\) Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, pp. 302-303.

\(^8\) Lea, p. 33.
we find this obtrusive figure in *The Everlasting Man*: "From the moment when the star goes up like a birthday rocket to the moment when the sun is extinguished like a funeral torch, the whole story moves on wings with the speed and direction of a drama, ending in an act beyond words." The power of the concrete is present, but it insists on having all the attention for itself, leaving none for the thought and distracting the reader.

While these figures draw attention to themselves and thus detract from the value of the work, still the figures themselves are often good. However, Chesterton does create some figures which considered either alone or in context are not good. Some of these figures are in poor taste while others bear that infamous name "mixed metaphors!"

Sometimes Chesterton's choice of image is somewhat unhappy with the result that the figure jars the reader. For instance he uses a dead dog for one illustration. "A dead dog can be lifted on the leaping water with all the swiftness of a leaping hound; but only a live dog can swim backwards." While the illustration is valid, the first two words carry a connotation which results in slight disgust.

Again one finds the following figure used in *Chaucer* to illustrate the fact that the medievals liked a story because it had a point. "It was really prized, unlike many other precious things. It was prized because it had a point and people were normal enough in their nervous system to start at the prick of the point; instead of having their dead minds punctured all over with

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10Ibid., p. 321.
old pricks, like the diseased arm of a drug fiend.\textsuperscript{11}

Chesterton is back on the old theme of his contemporaries' minds being dull. He feels strongly about the subject and so allows himself to use some rather strong imagery to convey his feelings. But he lets his feelings get the better of him and even the sympathetic reader of Chesterton would admit that the image loses some of its effect by slightly repelling. It is simply inappropriate here and detracts from the work.

A final example of the inappropriate figure is also one which is not entirely clear in its illustration besides lacking good taste. Chesterton is contrasting the oriental idea of God with the Christian concept. "The oriental deity is like a giant who should have lost his leg or hand and be always seeking to find it; but the Christian power is like some giant who in a strange generosity should cut off his right hand, so that it might of its own accord shake hands with him."\textsuperscript{12}

Nor is Chesterton above the mixed metaphor. They are not excessively common—however, no one said that when Homer nodded, it was a point in his favor. Chesterton too nods and the critic must call the strikes when they occur.

\textit{The Everlasting Man} again supplies an example of the mixed metaphor. Chesterton is illustrating how the Christian doctrine waxed and waned through history. "It was all the more unexpected and therefore all the more unmis-

\textsuperscript{11} Chesterton, \textit{Chaucer}, p. 57.

\textsuperscript{12} Chesterton, \textit{Orthodoxy}, p. 245.
takable, that the seven-branched candle-stick suddenly towered to heaven like a miraculous tree and flamed until the sun turned pale. But other ages have seen the day conquer the candle-light and then the candle-light conquer the day. Again and again, before our time, men have grown content with a diluted doctrine. And again and again there has followed on that dilution, coming as out of the darkness in a crimson cataract, the strength of the red original wine.  

Chesterton introduces his first mixture when he has the candle-stick grow like a tree and flame. But even less fitting is the sudden change to the wine image. He has let himself be trapped by the reference to dilution; at first he refers to the dilution of light but then suddenly without any warning or reason he turns to the wine.

In *Orthodoxy* Chesterton introduces another figure which, besides being mixed, is not particularly original. He says:

> I had found this hole in the world; the fact that one must somehow find a way of loving the world without trusting it; somehow one must love the world without being worldly. I found this projecting feature of Christian theology, like a sort of hard spike, the dogmatic insistence that God was personal, and had made a world separate from Himself. The spike of dogma fitted exactly into the hole in the world—it had evidently been meant to go there—and then the strange thing began to happen. When once these two parts of the two machines had come together, one after another, all the other parts fitted and fell in with an eerie exactitude. I could hear bolt after bolt all over the machinery falling into its place with a kind of click of relief. Having got one part right, all the

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other parts were repeating that rectitude, as clock after clock strikes noon.\textsuperscript{14}

Chesterton's change from the "spike" and the "hole" in the world to the image of a machine is somewhat confusing. His "bolt after bolt falling into place" is not particularly apt nor illuminating.

George Fraser points out another area of difficulty in Chesterton. He admits that Chesterton's fanciful felicity does help illustrate abstractions: "Yet even that felicity leads, in the long run, to a rather wearying effect. Every sentence, as in Emerson or Wilde, has to tell; and a writer who composes with the individual sentence as his unit will never write very concise or coherent paragraphs. Chesterton, in fact, tends to repeat himself with variations; the surprises become monotonous, the reader feels a drastic desire to compress."\textsuperscript{15}

Chesterton's repetitions are wearying. All of his figures do not suffer from this fault by any means, but when Chesterton does fall into this unhappy practice, the reader chafes under the repetitions.

Sometimes Chesterton will use a series of similar examples to illustrate one point; these can be effectively used, but now and then the examples are too similar to warrant more than one. This is true of a series that occurs in \textit{Heretics}:

\begin{quote}
It is perfectly reasonable that men should seek for
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{14} Chesterton, \textit{Orthodoxy}, p. 144.

\textsuperscript{15} Fraser, p. 297.
some particular variety of the human type, so long as
they are seeking for that variety of the human type, and
not for mere human variety. It is quite proper that a
British diplomatist should seek the society of Japanese
generals, if what he wants is Japanese generals. But if
what he wants is people different from himself, he had
much better stop at home and discuss religion with the
housemaid. It is quite reasonable that the village
genius should come up to conquer London if what he
wants is to conquer London. But if he wants to conquer
something fundamentally and symbolically hostile and also
very strong, he had much better remain where he is and
have a row with the rector. The man in the suburban
street is quite right if he goes to Ramsgate for the
sake of Ramsgate—a difficult thing to imagine. But if,
as he expresses it, he goes to Ramsgate 'for a change,'
then he would have a much more romantic and even mele-
dramatic change if he jumped over the wall into his
neighbor's garden. The consequences would be bracing
in a sense far beyond the possibilities of Ramsgate
hygiene.16

At another time Chesterton uses the same figure three different times,
but he does so within the cramped space of four pages. Although the figure
changes slightly the change is not enough to cover over the threefold reper-
tition in so short a space. On page 281 of his Autobiography a certain Mr.
Birrell "rose like a white-maned lion."17 On the next page a Mr. Russell "rose
like some vast fish."18 Within a few pages "there arose slowly in the middle
of the room, like some vast leviathan arising from the ocean, a huge healthy
simple-faced man, of the plastering profession."19 These might be fine in

16 Chesterton, Heretics, p. 187.
17 Chesterton, Autobiography, p. 280.
18 Ibid., p. 281.
19 Ibid., p. 284.
small doses—but enough is enough.

At other times Chesterton takes one idea which is fine and then proceeds to give the reader so much of it in various ways that the reader soon loses his appetite. Maurice Evans says this about such a habit: "He uses reiteration to produce a thunderous insistence and points his arguments with a pungent antithesis. But as with everything else, he has a fatal tendency to overdo things... Moreover, he has an extremely irritating trick of playing with an idea, chasing it through various forms till it is completely stale." 20

Here is an example of the frightened idea fleeing from Chesterton.

Against all this the philosophy of St. Thomas stands founded on the universal common conviction that eggs are eggs. The Hegelian may say that an egg is really a hen, because it is a part of an endless process of Becoming; the Berkeleyan may hold that poached eggs only exist as a dream exists; since it is quite as easy to call the dream the cause of the eggs as the eggs the cause of the dream; the Pragmatist may believe that we get the best out of scrambled eggs by forgetting that they ever were eggs, and only remembering the scramble. But no pupil of St. Thomas needs to addle his brains in order adequately to addle his eggs; to put his head at any peculiar angle in looking at eggs, or squinting at eggs, or winking the other eye in order to see a new simplification of eggs. The Thomist stands in the broad daylight of the brotherhood of men, in their common consciousness that eggs are not hens or dreams or mere practical assumptions; but things attested by the Authority of the Senses, which is from God. 21

In another of his essays in The Well and the Shallows, the technique is the same although the eggs make way for apples. In this essay Chesterton goes on for some nine pages waving the apples before the reader's nose. The

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20 Evans, p. 138.
apples are the "forbidden fruit," "the effort to consume them fruitless."
There is "the apple of Adam" and "the apple of Newton." The overall effect
of all this is similar to eating too much apple pie—the reader sickens of the
constant repetition. A good thing can grow nauseating when taken in large
quantities.

Another bad habit which Chesterton acquired can be traced to his journal-
istic work. This flaw, which is found in his works of criticism prompts valid
objection. He had the habit of illustrating his theses by references to
phenomena of life and literature which could have meaning only for his news-
paper-reading public. In his Browning we find him illustrating the obscurity
of the poet by reference to Miss Marie Corelli. In Dickens the popularity of
the novelist is contrasted with that of a certain Mr. William Le Queux.

If these books were merely articles for the Daily News or some other
paper the references would certainly be defensible because such articles are
intended to be ephemeral, and the readers can be presumed to be familiar with
the persons mentioned. But a serious study of someone like Dickens or Browning
should aim at permanence. Such studies should be written with an eye to those
much later readers of Dickens and Browning who will certainly know nothing of
a Miss Marie Corelli or a Mr. William Le Queux. Any American reader of today
who finds such references in Chesterton's writings realizes the price Chesterton
has paid for such antics. The cost is considerable to his lasting value
and universality, especially when these flaws could have been so easily

22G. K. Chesterton, The Well and the Shallows, "Reflections on a Rotten
avoided.23

This chapter has presented some of the flaws of Chesterton's concrete style. There are some points here on which the critic can very righteously level his guns of disapproval. Chesterton failed very often; perhaps he failed as often as he succeeded, perhaps oftener. The fact that the chapter on his faults is far shorter than the one on his good points only indicates that he failed in fewer ways; but it does not deny that he failed often in these weak points of his.

The results of these faults as well as the misunderstanding of many of his good points will be discussed in the concluding chapter.

23Cecil Chesterton, p. 71.
CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The first thing that must be done in making the conclusions from the foregoing facts, is to reject two extreme positions. It is evident that Chesterton has no claim to literary infallibility, nor does he deserve the pity reserved for the buffoon. Too often enthusiastic Catholics refuse to see any faults in the work of Chesterton. For instance Monsignor John Cavanagh makes the following statement: "Though he seemed to let his imagination range freely, it was always in control of his practical reason. Some of his great works, like Orthodoxy and The Everlasting Man, can pile joke on joke and laugh on laugh, but all the while in magisterial fashion he is laying bare the fallacies and pointing out the dangerous implications of some specious great error which his contemporaries have naively embraced."

This might be loyalty to Chesterton, but it is blind and mistaken loyalty. The objective facts, when considered fully, simply cannot lead to such a conclusion. Chesterton did exceed the limits of good taste and common sense at times. Perhaps a reader is willing to overlook these errors in his own reading, but when he acts as an objective critic, he must either recognize them or fail in his task. Belloc, Hollis, and other friends of Chesterton never fail to see the clear distinction between friendship and an unbiased critical attitude.

\footnote{Monsignor John Cavanagh, "Chesterton the Great—And Only," Our Sunday Visitor. (Date and other information unavailable.)}
To recognize these faults where they occur is not to condemn the entire work of a man; it is simply to prescind from the good points. Everything cannot be said at one time, but one must be careful to say everything that pertains to the subject—the whitewash should be left for the fence in the back yard.

On the other hand it would be foolish to condemn all of Chesterton's prose because he falls into some errors of judgment. In the light of the second chapter of this thesis as well as of the opinion of so many outstanding literary men, a summary condemnation would be even more foolish than an unqualified stamp of approval. The task is to try to see both aspects at the same time and in the light of both to make a balanced judgment.

Chesterton did enjoy a great deal of popularity during his lifetime. A journalist is either popular or he ceases to be a journalist; for his profession demands that he be accepted by his public. Many books of appreciation have been written on him and some two hundred periodical articles are ready at hand for the interested Chestertonian. This popularity will serve as a valuable gauge in drawing the conclusions of this last chapter.

Chesterton was popular with his reading audience—the common man of England. He was also in the favor and esteem of the intellectuals with whom he did battle—Wells, Shaw, and company—as well as those with whom he joined forces—Belloc, Hollis, Baring. But one thing must be noted and investigated: the reason why these people liked him.

The intellectuals accepted Chesterton on their own grounds; he was a thinker who dealt with them on the plane of ideas, expressed in his own peculiar manner. But these men to some extent or other shared his own keen vision; they were like him at least in one respect, they were intellectually
alive.

Mr. F. A. Lea goes so far as to maintain that the reader must already share the vision of Chesterton or he will fail to understand him fully. "If we wish to share the vision, therefore, we must follow the arguments; but we shall in all probability be unable to follow the arguments unless we share the vision, in some measure, already. 'To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away, even that which he hath.'"\(^2\)

Belloc echoes the same thought when he says that the permanence of Chesterton depends on whether the English people turn to the Catholic Church or not. If they already share the vision which he saw so clearly, then and only then will they find in him his full value.\(^3\)

From an analysis of reactions to Chesterton this does seem to be true. Somehow a reader must share the vision of Chesterton to see the real meaning which his concreteness illuminates. Some shared the vision, recognized the real and deeper meaning, but still rejected it. Such was the reaction of people such as Shaw and Wells. They never mistook his writings for entertainment. No serious thinker spends a good deal of time trying to refute the local comedian.

Others were deep enough to see the meaning and, although hostile to it at first, to be eventually converted by it. Such was the case of C. S. Lewis:

It was here that I first read a volume of Chesterton's

\(^2\)Lea, p. 37.

\(^3\)Belloc, pp. 35-36.
essays. I had never heard of him and had no idea of what he stood for; nor can I quite understand why he made such an immediate conquest of me. It might have been expected that my pessimism, my atheism, and my hatred of sentiment would have made him to me the least congenial of all authors. It would almost seem that Providence, or some 'second' cause of a very obscure kind, quite overrules our previous tastes when it decides to bring two minds together. Liking an author may be as involuntary and improbable as falling in love. I was by now a sufficiently experienced reader to distinguish liking from agreement. I did not need to accept what Chesterton said in order to enjoy it. His humor was of the kind which I like best—not 'jokes' imbedded in the page like currents in a cake, still less (what I cannot endure), a general tone of flippancy and jocularity, but the humor which is not in any way separable from the argument but is rather (as Aristotle would say) the bloom on dialectic itself. The sword glitters not because the swordsman set out to make it glitter, but because he is fighting for his life and therefore moving it very quickly. For the critics who think Chesterton frivolous or 'paradoxical' I have to work hard to feel even pity; sympathy is out of the question. . . . In reading Chesterton, as in reading MacDonald, I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading.

Another example of a person who saw through to the depth of Chesterton's light manner is Miss Dorothy Salmon. After attending a Shaw-Chesterton debate, which she attended as a Fabian and supporter of Shaw, "she said in a surprised tone, 'But G. K. was right!'" After that she never looked back. She died two years ago, Mother Mary Raphael, Abbess of the Poor Clare community at Workington.

Another group to whom Chesterton has always appealed and probably always

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will are his fellow religionists who find in him a wealth of help in understand-
standing and appreciating their Faith. This will be discussed more at length
at the conclusion of this chapter.

But the common man of England—the ordinary protestant, newspaper-reading
Englishman of Chesterton’s time—seemed to follow the essays of Chesterton
for a different reason. Almost everyone who really understood Chesterton
mentions one thing in writing of him: that he was misunderstood. He did win
a hearing from his audiences, and applause after he had finished. But was the
applause for the right reason? Several statements lead one to believe that it
was not. This group of readers did not like Chesterton for the same reasons
that the intellectuals did.

Mr. Frank Swinnerton who traveled in the literary circles of Chesterton’s
day seems to think that Chesterton’s audiences missed the real point of his
lectures. While he speaks here of the spoken word, the difference is negli-
gible since the writings and lectures of Chesterton were so alike. "[H]e
began to speak from public platforms, where he was encouraged by Bernard Shaw
and misunderstood by his audiences." 6

Another man who understood Chesterton far better because of the common
beliefs they shared was Emile Cammaerts. He says:

For the reasons noted above, Chesterton could not have
made himself heard unless he had adopted a frivolous tone,
and no doubt some naive readers were misled into believing

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6 Frank Swinnerton, Background with Chorus: A Footnote to Changes in
that he only meant to entertain them by his banter. But the conflict between the laughing prophet and his public went deeper than that. Had he expressed himself openly he would have been stoned or silenced—which would have been the same to him. Having assumed motley, he was allowed to speak. King Public could not show his anger without making a fool of himself. Being unwilling to hear, he laughed, but he laughed with vengeance, for he ignored the deep meaning of the words and pointed to the jangling bells.

He felt the humiliation of being applauded as an entertainer and ignored as a thinker.7

Alan Handsacre is one of the men who does applaud Chesterton as a mere entertainer, thus slapping his face as a thinker. There is a good deal of spite in his sentence which reads: "For most of us it does not in the least matter what Mr. Chesterton means, for we are all entertained beyond measure by what he says."8

Chesterton had to tell Mr. McCabe that funny was not the opposite of serious. And Mr. McCabe's attitude was also that of so many of Chesterton's audience. The great host of his readers were also under the delusion; they thought that Chesterton was funny. And if he was funny, then he could no more be really serious than he could be sitting and standing at the same time. They allowed him to make them laugh, but drew the line when he wanted them to think.

Now just how is the concreteness of Chesterton concerned with this pro-


blem of misunderstanding? It is evident that the concrete is Chesterton's constant tool. Much of the readableness of G. K. is due to the life, color, and humor of this element. But by considering an example here it will be obvious that there is a definite danger also involved in its use.

In chapter two of this thesis a passage was cited from Heretics. Chesterton hoped to illustrate by this example the fact that England was growing sick. He wanted to show that a healthy man thinks about the end to be attained and not the process by which he hopes to attain the end. The healthy man simply kicks the man downstairs, he does not sit around thinking about the physical process. Now Chesterton is extremely serious in his thought here. Few men loved England with a deeper and more meaningful love than Chesterton's. He wanted to wake the people up to the fact that his and their country was sick, as a husband might want to awaken his family if their home was burning to the ground. But the danger is that his readers will miss the point; instead of awakening to the fact of sickness they may merely laugh at the fancy of sailing through the air.

Chesterton's writing is filled with such strongly imaginative and fanciful concretes. Consequently the whole atmosphere of his work is filled with a lightness and humor that comes from this strong use of imagination, and there is little wonder that the average reader would mistake his intention. Chesterton can tell the reader that he is not merely trying to coin praise by coining clever phrases and epigrams, but the reader is liable to be too aware

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8 Cf. p. 28.
of the superficial levity to take heed of his words.

Just as it takes a superior mind to see the similarity in dissimilars and thus create a simile or parallelism, so it takes some insight to be able to see the deeper meaning in such figures. Popular readers have failed to do this for as long as men have popularized profound doctrine. Plato can be read by certain audiences without suspicion that he is a serious philosopher. The difficulty is not that he contains no real philosophic matter, but that the matter can be mistaken for mere imagination and poetry and not seen as a poetic conception of philosophy.

The most sympathetic and appreciative of Chesterton's friends point out this characteristic of superficial verbalism and levity. They also note the danger concomitant with it. In a passage cited earlier Mr. Gilson remarked: "He left it to those who could understand him to know that he was right, and deep; to the others, he apologized for being right, and he made up for being deep by being witty. That is all they can see of him." ⁹

Belloe also remarks on this point: "It was, I think, this in him, the intellectual dynamic action, which made it so difficult for his sluggish and superficial contemporaries to understand him. It would have been better perhaps had he never fallen into verbalism (wherein he tended to exceed.) For fools were led thereby to think that he was merely a verbalist whereas he was in reality a thinker so profound and so direct that he had no equal. Anyhow, verbalist he was. It was his superficial defect." ¹⁰

⁹Cf. p. 3. Author's italics.
¹⁰Belloe, p. 71.
Christopher Hollis makes this definite judgment on the matter. "Undoubtedly an effect of his style was to make many readers take him less seriously than he would have wished. For it is not everyone who can distinguish between the solemn and the serious."\textsuperscript{11} Maisie Ward also admits that at first glance much of Chesterton is misleading. "A superficial glance sees only the errors; a deeper gaze discovers the truth."\textsuperscript{12}

Joseph Conrad also remarks that Chesterton's style at times hides the real value of the thought. "Chesterton has expressed better than anyone my opinion about Dickens. That delightful little book he wrote on Dickens, you know, is more remarkable than it appears, because the paradoxical texture of phrase hides the exact and real profundity of that study."\textsuperscript{13}

Now the people with whom Chesterton wanted to share his insight were precisely the superficial and sluggish contemporaries who could not see beneath the surface. The difficulty is that their blindness also made it impossible for them to see beneath the surface of Chesterton. Chesterton seems to be condemned of failing to reach his audience by the statements of his fellow literary men. All the foregoing statements lead to this conclusion.

The common people like him chiefly for his wit and illustration. That his excess and humorous aspect lead many astray should surprise no one. And


\textsuperscript{12} Ward, p. 307.

although it might be argued that it is impossible to move the masses of common people with ideas, no matter how one presents them, still some of Chesterton's failure must be attributed to his concreteness. Too many of his readers found this element an end and not a means.

However, this does not cancel all that has been said in the second chapter about the good elements of his concreteness. The conclusion of this thesis is somewhat of a paradox. For, Chesterton says that he wrote ephemeral material for the reader of the Daily News. Yet it has just been shown that he often failed to reach the reader of the News. And much of Chesterton's "ephemeral" work will live forever because Truth will live forever, and he has often illumined this in a brilliant and unique manner. It may take a student of metaphysics to appreciate some of Chesterton's writing on the unbelievableness of existence, but in Chesterton such a student finds a brilliant friend who will show him realities in a light never before seen. Chesterton can share with such a man, not mere logical exposition, but experiential knowledge. His concrete exposition and illustration often make a theory grow flesh and blood for the reader.

The same thing is true for the Christian or Catholic. Chesterton's illustrations often leave the reader without the definition of gratitude, but they can fill him with the incomparable gift which is the affection itself. Again and again this is done by simile, metaphor, parallelism or parable. The mere idea becomes a new reality capable of giving new life to the reader's knowledge and love of God. Monsignor Guardini has said: "As for theological analysis, however true in itself and fundamentally important to Christian thought, it is necessarily abstract. Hence, in order to advance at all in our
faith, we are bound to call some concrete train of thought to our assistance." This Chesterton does again and again.

It is true that the reader must share with Chesterton at least the fundamental belief in some kind of ultimates—even if these be merely the principles of logic. Even on this level he will find much worth and sound matter in Chesterton. As the common ground between Chesterton and his reader grows, so will the profit gained in reading him. The more a man can see by himself, the more Chesterton will be able to show him. This has certainly been the case with the author of this thesis and seems also to be borne out in the experience of others. Those brilliant Catholic intellectuals with whom Chesterton shared most were also the loudest in his praises. Hollis, Baring, Belloc, Gilson—men closest to Chesterton in his genius also find the most meaning and insight in him.

The paradox of Chesterton's concreteness might be summed up thus: "To him that hath shall be given, and from that hath not shall be taken away."

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The thesis submitted by John William Glaser, S. J., has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

March 15, 1958  
Date  

Signature of Adviser