

GILBERT K. CHESTERTON, MASTER PARADOXIST

BY HAROLD BERMAN

AMONG contemporary English men of letters the name of Gilbert Keith Chesterton stands out pre-eminently in the front rank. Whether you like him or not, whether you agree with his analysis of human society, his paradoxical dialects as well as the topsy-turvey remedies that he prescribes for the cure of its many ills, he nevertheless challenges your attention by the sheer brilliance of his diction, the scintillant glitter of his phrasing and the nimbleness of his wit; though upon a more leisurely analysis of his argument and the weighing of the same in the scale of cool, dispassionate reason you invariably find that it is specious, a counterfeit coin that bears a gold glitter over a dull body of common brass.

Chesterton has mastered amazingly well the sleight-o'-hand trick. He is a conjurer who will actually cause you to believe—if only for a while—that live rabbits can issue out of his plug hat though he has put only a linen pocket handkerchief into it. He is a master casuist and sophist who juggles at will with logic, balances an axiom on the tip of his little finger and can stand a pyramid on its needle-pointed apex. The marvel is that the inverted pyramid does indeed seem to stand up, that the rabbit, born of the pocket-handkerchief, seems to be alive, to breathe and eat and frisk; while truth's axiom, of which we have been so sure a while ago, begins to assume the distance and the unreality of a myth, or, perhaps, and vice versa it is the myth that is real and not the fact. For, after all is said and done, it is only apparently so; and when you stop to examine the premises, you generally do find that a master-magician has busied himself for a while with your amusement, busied himself with the production of things of whose speciousness he himself is thoroughly aware in his inner consciousness. And moreover, that even you as the spectator of this show are not actually expected to believe it as authentic and genuine, but rather to admire the rare skill with which they are produced for the beguilement of your occasional idle moments.

Chesterton delights in playing the part of the Devil's Advocate. He finds great delight in taking up his lance for the outcasts among modern ideas and outlawed institutions. He takes singular delight in the mere fact of being the Knight Errant on behalf of outlawed ideas; a Knight who roams the land far and wide in search of an adventure when there is none close at hand in sore need of his chivalrous attention. We delight in following him about when he is bent on one of these quixotic expeditions though we somewhat doubt, now and again and ever so often, if our valiant Knight is "all there" in the colloquial sense, or we ask: is he not really shamming in his seemingly-sincere and mock-heroic effort to demolish a verbal windmill; to put up a jerry-built shanty in the place where now we have a palace rearing its proud head? For, there is in all of us, hidden somewhere within or under the phlegmatic mask that civilization has imposed upon us, an impish instinct that delights in perversity and spitefulness, aside from the insistent and irrepressible call of the native and the indigenous.

It should be understood that Chesterton seeks to nullify with his dialectical skill and paradoxical verbiage the hypothetical mischief wrought to the cause of our beliefs and habits of thought by the modern sciences and philosophies. And there is where his strength paradoxically lies. There is a nostalgia in all of us, a native and unsatisfied longing for the beliefs of our childhood and the seemingly-so-simple conceptions of the universe and the social polity early imparted to us by our standardized economic and theologic teachings. We would like to believe them true even after we have learnt their falsehood; learned to know that the veil of secrecy must, in the interest of truth, be pierced and torn asunder, and that the scales of tradition are doomed sooner or later to fall from our eyes. And we also admire mental agility and nimbleness, and therefore gaze with wonder at a mental position that is fraught with danger for the occupant, even as we gaze open-mouthed at the physical tight-rope walker as he balances himself on an airy nothing forty feet from solid ground.

But we are also aware all the time that even in the act of trapeze walking or the balancing of one's self on a horizontal pole the laws of gravitation are nevertheless being obeyed, even as they are obeyed in an ordinary walk upon terra firma. And even so is it in Chesterton's case. His wildest paradox always has an infinitesimal underpinning of truth to keep it upright, while his sophistry has just enough of the cement of reason to hold together his windy bricks,

else they would tumble into a heap before your very eyes. Suppose you were to ask your little boy why they don't forge an oven out of lumps of ice cream and he would answer you in all solemnity that, if that were done little boys would be tempted to bite pieces out of it and thereby impair its usefulness. Both, the question as well as the answer, would appear superficially sound and fitting well into one another's scheme. Yet a little reflection will soon show you that neither the question nor the answer has any relevance to it. Furthermore, that the question is so posed that the absurdity is evident right on the very face of it, while there is no need at all for the still-more-absurd answer.

And yet, and to perpetrate still another paradox, these mental gymnastics have their legitimate place in human dialectics, if only they are not taken too seriously, but are assigned a place as the walnuts-and-wine of a frivolous after-dinner moment. And therein lies the rub. It soon becomes evident to the careful reader of Chesterton's works that he is not a mere mental gymnast, that he doesn't do those things for the mere fun or pleasure he thinks he or someone else may get out of the process, but that he is actuated by an ideal, a desire to teach us something, to disseminate among us certain thoughts and viewpoints. And now and again, we find that the sob of a wounded heart rises above the frivolous laugh of the harlequin and occasionally even silences the merry jingle of his cap-and-bells. Chesterton has a philosophy of life; a philosophy built on a nostalgic hankering after the vanished beauties of a bygone age, a simplicity and wholeness—largely imagined, it is true—that were present in the pre-mechanical, pre-American and pre-Protestant ages. In brief, he is one of the many dreamy Romanticists that strutted so dreamily upon the stage of the German literature of the early nineteenth century seeking the "Blue Flower" of a vanished happiness.

He bemoans the disappearance from our life of the simple Mediæval faith; the disappearance of the democracy of the Catholic Anschauung and the Catholic institutions; the benevolence inherent in the monastic orders, as well as the sturdy independence of the small peasant-proprietor and the artisan working in his own shop and with himself as master. In seeking thus diligently for the great virtues of the vanished past, and while examining them with the poetic spectacles of the Romanticist, he will no doubt discover some few, imaginary or real, beauties and attribute to them qualities they did not at all possess; while, again, because he is the incor-

rigible Romanticist, he will shut his eyes to their many patent evils and corruptions that caused their passing and final overthrow, the while he resolutely buries his head in the sand so as not to see any trace of goodness in the present order of things. Being a Romanticist, with the Romanticist's inherent incapacity for analysis and the separation of the wheat from the chaff, he does neither find the canker that has eaten away the heart of the obsolete institutions nor is he capable of placing the blame for the many evils that no doubt are inherent in the new order where it really is due, but will seek and find a scarecrow instead. Or, like the child, rage at the cat-o'-nine tails and not at the hand that wielded as well as directed it.

And so it happens that, according to this method, the trouble with the modern state is not that it has deprived man of his tools and his self-sufficiency in production and of his proper place in the social life, but rather that it has deprived the Priest of his meddling function in the affairs of that state. People in the slums are stunted and undernourished not because of competition with other races who work for less money and for longer hours, but because there are some few in their midst who advocate vegetarianism as a diet in the city of Birmingham or Manchester; while nations make war upon each other and bring ruin and misery upon themselves and others for the sole reason that Germans eat a sausage made of the liver of a cow, and underground trains in London run behind their schedule because a few millions of Jews riding on them remain unconverted to Christianity!

The sophisticated mind can indeed find some analogy between these incongruities. As, for instance, that the temporal rule of the Priesthood held up an ideal of saintliness before the human race, promised it treasure in heaven instead of here below, and that the Apostles stoutly spoke out in favor of Peace on earth and good will to men. But we also know that in the Middle Ages, when the rule of the clergy was most complete and regulated every walk of life, there was even more—a great deal more—of cynical brutality and oppression; less of happiness and sunshine and more of a pathetic ignorance in the people's lives than there is today, all the evils of Industrialism notwithstanding. As Chesterton himself remarks in one of his essays ("The use of Diversity," page 179) the fact that a Duke is addressed as "His Grace" does not prove that he possesses a graceful figure, nor the fact that the King of France subscribed himself as His Most Christian Majesty—and he might have added

the English King's claim to being the Defender of the Faith—prevented some of them from being actual heathens in practice.

Even so did it happen that there was solemn and constant repetition of the Biblical injunctions and the practicing of the very contrary things in actual daily dealing with the peoples. Even so can you prove, by the same feat of mental gymnastics, that the fact of the Jews remaining unconverted in the midst of an overwhelming mass of Christians who outnumber them thirty to one, proves the presence of Original Sin in the human race, and, hence, the perennial desire for war. But all this merely represents the threshing of wind, the wasted and pathetic effort of a distressed mind to free itself from its thralling loads.

That Chesterton *is* distressed with present-day conditions there can be no doubt. He has been called a conservative and, by some, even a reactionary; but it is evident to the attentive reader of his many books and essays that he is neither. For the conservative is he who is thoroughly satisfied with things as they are; he who sees no flaw in the arrangement of things in his day, and Chesterton is anything but satisfied with the present-day order of things, and indeed discovers them full of flaws from beginning to end. Nor is he a reactionary, for the reactionary is he who would build on the present foundation only he would go back to the institutions of yesterday and the day before while Chesterton would hark back not to yesterday but to yester-year. That is; to the distant day ere the foundations of the present order of society were laid, and would entirely uproot these foundations if he but could.

And therein lies the paradox, the greatest jest at the expense of the jester himself, as well as the utter futility of all his efforts. Chesterton and Shaw are the embodiment of the two extremes of English thought of the day. They both stand at the opposite poles of the modern Anschauung, the system of the one being the exact antithesis of the other and their remedies as far apart. But they are as one in their inveterate and uncompromising hatred of the present, collective, machine system, the trading oligarchy, and the ubiquity, as well as the impersonality of International Capital. But, while Chesterton is like a baby crying for the moon or like Werther sighing ineffectually for what is unattainable and finally ends it all by putting a metaphorical bullet into his brain, Shaw accepts the present-day order—mass production, the inter-locking of capital, big enterprises and all—and only wishes to see their evils removed

from them, so that we may all get the full and equal, as well as the greatest, benefit out of the creations of man's ingenuity.

Chesterton is indeed—in more senses than one—a pathetic figure among us. He would fain be taken for a Jeremiah sitting on the ruins of the Temple intoning his elegy. But who can imagine a Jeremiah dressed in motley, with a fool's cap-and-bells jingling merrily in scintillating paradox?

It is not thus that we visualize a Prophet bewailing the ruin of his Elysium. And furthermore, we know that he is flapping his wings in vain; that the conditions, the loss of which he bemoans, cannot be brought back. And were an enchanter, by the waving of his magic wand, to bring them back, Chesterton would be among the first to seek an escape from them and would give half of his life for a single day under modern conditions, rather than enjoy a cycle of years in the Cathay of the coarse, unenlightened and hampered living of the twelfth century for which he so dreamily hankers.

Chesterton is a sheep that has strayed from the fold and, strangely enough, is become thoroughly infatuated with its anomalous position as a lost wanderer. He would not, if he could, find his way back to the fold, and yet he is aware all the time that he may perish—spiritually, at least—if he keeps straying on and on and further away from the sheltered nook and the care of the shepherd. But he is fortunate in that he strays only in spirit, or imagination, from it, while physically he dwells very much within the fold and gets all the needed fodder as well as the tender care of the shepherd that he so heartily despises.