

G. K. CHESTERTON



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THINKING BACKWARD,

LOOKING FORWARD

Stephen R. L. Clark



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## ~ Preface ~

**T**HIS VOLUME COMBINES three interests: science fiction, Chesterton, and philosophy. I have kept references to academic philosophy to a minimum, but still sought to identify and respond to his arguments, not just his images and epigrams. Chesterton himself, as I remark below, was an excellent philosopher of a nonacademic sort, and might even have ended as an academic. He was once offered the chair of English at the University of Birmingham, but preferred to continue as a journalist and freelance author.<sup>1</sup> His book on Aquinas, which remains the best straightforward introduction to that philosopher's ideas, was completed with the bare minimum of additional research. Notoriously, after dictating half the draft, he sent his secretary off to London to "get some books" on the subject, which he flipped through without taking any notes.<sup>2</sup> He was able to do this because he had already read, remembered, and understood a range of texts in several languages. Having a worse memory,<sup>3</sup> I have relied instead on many notes taken over many years, but also on the trains of thought sparked by my reading or re-reading of Chesterton. I have also sought to set his arguments in their historical context and to identify the contemporary references. Some of those references, to Wells or Wilde, for example, really need no gloss; but few now remember Walter Long, the Dogger Bank Incident, or even F. E. Smith.

Even at his most outrageous or offensive (and he was certainly able to outrage and offend), his arguments and insights or illusions deserve development. Even when he argues like an academic philosopher (and he certainly sometimes does), his incidental images and metaphors arouse the imagination. Science fiction has grown more "literary" over the years, and sometimes in ways that Chesterton would have regretted, but at its core still lies a love of adventure and the marvelous, conjoined with ardent questions about "life, the universe and everything" that he shared. Philosophy has grown more technical, but remains a quest to understand the world and what people have said of it. That he did not share, and would not share, the metaphysical and ethical

assumptions of some writers would no more prevent his enjoying the stories, or the arguments, than it stopped him from admiring Omar Khayyam.<sup>4</sup>

I have written of science fiction, Chesterton, and philosophy in earlier works. See especially “Orwell and the Anti-Realists” in *Philosophy* 67 (1992):141–54; *How to Live Forever: Science Fiction and Philosophy* (Routledge, 1995); “Alien Dreams—Kipling” in David Seed, ed., *Anticipations: Essays on Early Science Fiction and Its Precursors* (Liverpool University Press, 1995); “Tools, Machines and Marvels” in Roger Fellowes, ed., *Philosophy and Technology* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); “Substance: Chesterton’s Abyss of Light” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 95 (1995):1–14; “How Chesterton Read History” in *Inquiry* 39 (1996):343–58; “How and Why to Be Virtuous” in *Personalist Forum* 13 (1997):143–60; “Psychopathology and Alien Ethics” in Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn, eds., *The Parliament of Dreams: Conferring on Babylon* 5 (Reading: Science Fiction Foundation, 1998); “Conducta decente hacia los animales: un enfoque tradicional” in *Teorema* 18, no. 3 (1999):61–83; “The End of the Ages” in David Seed, ed., *Imagining Apocalypse: Studies in Cultural Crisis* (Macmillan/St. Martin’s Press, 2000); “From Biosphere to Technosphere” in *Ends and Means* 6 (2001):3–21; “Deep Time,” the Abbott Memorial Lecture for 2001, in George Ellis, ed., *The Far Future Universe* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2002); “Science, Chesterton and the Will of the Creator” in Martin Stone, ed., *Reason, Faith and History: Essays for Paul Helm* (Ashgate, 2006); and “Science Fiction and Religion” in David Seed, ed., *Blackwell Companion to Science Fiction* (Blackwell, 2005).

I completed this text in the intervals of working, thanks to a research fellowship awarded by the Leverhulme Trust, on the late antique philosopher Plotinus. Chesterton rarely mentions Plotinus—except in carping at W. R. Inge (1860–1954), dean of St. Paul’s, who frequently aroused his irritation<sup>5</sup> and had written extensively and intelligently on Plotinus. Their philosophies were nonetheless much closer than Chesterton acknowledged, and their manner of working likewise: neither bothered to read over and correct his work! My own efforts at self-correction have been aided, as always, by family, friends, and colleagues, including Stratford Caldecott, Simon Conway Morris, Andy Sawyer, Samuel Clark, Julia Stapleton, Panayiota Vasilopoulou, and especially Gillian Clark, my wife.

G. K. CHESTERTON

Give me miraculous eyes to see my eyes,  
Those rolling mirrors made alive in me,—  
Terrible crystal, more incredible  
Than all the things they see.

—G. K. Chesterton, “The Sword of Surprise,”  
*Collected Poems*

## ~ Introduction ~

G. K. CHESTERTON (1874–1936) is remembered for his Father Brown stories, featuring a surprisingly well-informed Catholic priest as the amateur detective, for occasional verses satirizing the more pompous remarks of politicians, and perhaps also for his introductions to the thought of Aquinas, Blake, Chaucer, and Dickens. He may also be recalled as one half of that fabulous monster, the Chesterbelloc: a sly description by his friend and lifelong opponent, Bernard Shaw.<sup>1</sup> Not all that many years ago, lines from his poems of liberty, “Lepanto” and *The Ballad of the White Horse*, were quoted in the trenches and in London *Times* leaders. He was proud to be a journalist, a Catholic apologist, and a faithful husband. He is frequently misrepresented as an imperialist, a bigot, or a drunk. All three charges are absurd. By George Orwell’s strikingly offensive account, he was “a writer of considerable talent who chose to suppress both his sensibilities and his intellectual honesty in the cause of Roman Catholic propaganda.”<sup>2</sup> He was—more accurately—a serious and even excellent philosopher (as have been many other thinkers working outside the academy, or still neglected by the academy), a democrat, and a poet. Existing studies of Chesterton include Ian Boyd’s *The Novels of G. K. Chesterton* (1975); Margaret Canovan’s *G. K. Chesterton: Radical Populist* (1977); J. D. Coates’s *Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crisis* (1984); Michael Coren’s *Gilbert: The Man Who Was Chesterton* (1989); Ian Crowther’s *Thinkers of Our Time: G. K. Chesterton* (1991); Christopher Hollis’s *The Mind of Chesterton* (1970); Stanley Jaki’s *Chesterton: Seer of Science* (1986); Hugh Kenner’s *Paradox in Chesterton* (1947); Quentin Lauer’s *G. K. Chesterton: Philosopher without Portfolio* (1988); and Joseph Pearce’s *Wisdom and Innocence* (1996). Kenner, Lauer, Jaki, Canovan, and Boyd especially are conscious of Chesterton’s philosophical abilities and valuable insights. His own *Autobiography* (1936) and the biography by Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1944) are still the principal sources for his life.

He was also the author of many ingenious stories that contributed to the later growth of science fiction.<sup>3</sup> A recent collection of his essays and short stories compiled by Marie Smith under the title *Daylight and Nightmare* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1986) includes several fantasies (that is, fables without any pretense of scientific background), and the openings of *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and of *The Ball and the Cross* have often been cited as science fiction of a kind. None of the novels are strictly “science fictional” themselves, in that they do not turn on any clearly “scientific” discovery or speculation, but they frequently embody motifs now endemic in the genre. They are also the sort of book that science fiction writers (and readers) have often read.

His constant themes were, on the one hand, that things don’t have to be the way they are and that other ways of living are imaginable and, on the other, that common humanity was—with all its failings—admirable.

Things could have happened differently. He remarks that medieval speculation about what would have happened if Eve had refused the apple now seems “quaint,”<sup>4</sup> but at once points out that this was originally “full of the thrill of choice; and the feeling that she might have chosen otherwise.”<sup>5</sup> “For instance, the greatest of the Schoolmen devotes folios to the minute description of what the world would have been like if Adam had refused the apple; what kings, laws, babies, animals, planets would have been in an unfallen world. So intensely does he feel that Adam might have decided the other way that he sees a complete and complex vision of another world, a world that now can never be.”<sup>6</sup> Even the course of nature might be different. “A tree grows fruit because it is a *magic* tree. Water runs downhill because it is bewitched. The sun shines because it is bewitched.”<sup>6</sup> What now seems overwhelmingly real may vanish. What now seems tedious may be viewed more accurately as wonderful, if only we walk round the world to look at it afresh.<sup>7</sup>

Common humanity is admirable: in this, Chesterton was regularly at odds with a more familiar science-fictional tradition, seen in Wells and Stapledon, that common humanity was not yet fully or admirably human. Those who could feel at home in the imagined, technological future have, they thought, some trace of excellence, but the majority of contemporary humanity—and of their ancestors—are hardly more than animals. In Nietzsche’s words, present-day humanity was at best a bridge between the ape

and the superman.<sup>8</sup> Chesterton did not deny the possibility of improvement,<sup>9</sup> but insisted that it could only be improvement if our descendants were still human.

We cannot be expected to have any regard for a great creature if he does not in any manner conform to our standards. For unless he passes our standard of greatness we cannot even call him great. . . . If the Superman is more manly than men are, of course they will ultimately deify him, even if they happen to kill him first. But if he is simply more supermanly, they may be quite indifferent to him as they would be to another seemingly aimless monstrosity. . . . Supermen, if not good men, are vermin.<sup>10</sup>

His own account of history, by rejecting the notion of inevitable, progressive transformation, allowed him instead to see the merits of the past. “The whole object of history is to make us realize that humanity can be great and glorious, under conditions quite different and even contrary to our own.”<sup>11</sup>

Cecil Chesterton, writing in 1909, sometimes made his brother seem more reactionary than he was, but he was right to identify the “new religion” that Gilbert opposed:

All the great writers of [the 19th] century are full of the idea of Progress—the idea that the world is inevitably getting better and better. Men of opinion and temperaments as diverse as Shelley and Macaulay accepted it without question. It received an additional impetus from the current misinterpretations of Darwin’s doctrine of Evolution; that biological speculation, which in its inventor’s mind involved nothing more than a hypothesis concerning the causes which led organisms to approximate to their environment, was interpreted by poets and rhetoricians as a promise of the ultimate triumph of good over evil—‘good’ and ‘evil’ being just the two words that no true man of science ever uses. Thus Tennyson held that man would ‘Move upwards, working out the brute, / And let the ape and tiger die’, until, in the slow processes of time, all mankind became gradually more and more like the Prince Consort! In a word, Progressive Evolutionism became a new religion. It is as a conspicuous rebel against

the dogmas of this religion that Mr. Chesterton is most notable in his generation.<sup>12</sup>

Most of his essays and stories were rapidly produced (to help pay his bills, and the expenses of the journal that he inherited from his brother). In an essay in “praise of ephemera,” he wrote:

I cannot understand the people who take literature seriously; but I can love them, and I do. Out of my love I warn them to keep clear of this book. It is a collection of crude and shapeless papers upon current or rather flying subjects; and they must be published pretty much as they stand. They were written, as a rule, at the last moment; they were handed in the moment before it was too late, and I do not think the commonwealth would have been shaken to its foundations if they had been handed in the moment after. They must go out now, with all their imperfections on their head, or rather on mine; for their vices are too vital to be improved with a blue pencil, or with anything I can think of, except dynamite. . . . In these essays (as I read them over) I feel frightfully annoyed with myself for not getting to the point more quickly; but I had not enough leisure to be quick. There are several maddening cases in which I took two or three pages in attempting to describe an attitude of which the essence could be expressed in an epigram; only there was no time for epigrams.<sup>13</sup>

But even the “ephemera” of so lively and wide-ranging a mind will contain important matters. He returned again and again to the same questions and claims, approaching each from different angles.

The novels most relevant to my theme are *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904), *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908), *The Ball and the Cross* (1910), *The Flying Inn* (1914), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1922), *Tales of the Long Bow* (1925), and *The Return of Don Quixote* (1927). *The Ballad of the White Horse*, his longest verse narrative, and a few other poems are also relevant. I shall also be mentioning *Manalive* (1912), particular short stories (including those of *Daylight and Nightmare*), as well as the philosophical speculation in *Heretics*, *Orthodoxy*, *The Everlasting Man*, *A Short History of England*, *What's Wrong with the World?*, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, *The Outline of Sanity*, and various

short essays (especially those in *A Miscellany of Men* and *Fancies versus Fads*). Ignatius Press is busily reprinting the *Complete Works of Chesterton*, but in the meantime, we can all be grateful both to the American Chesterton Society ([http:// www.chesterton.org/](http://www.chesterton.org/)) and to Martin Ward (<http://www.dur.ac.uk/martin.ward/gkc/books/>), whose Web sites give access to online texts of Chesterton otherwise difficult to locate. I have also been greatly assisted by the online marketplace <http://dogbert.abebooks.com/>. I have sometimes still had to rely on citations, and I am therefore conscious that I may have taken some of Chesterton's dicta out of their original context. On the other hand, those floating quotations, rarely if ever checked against his text, may be the chief proof of his abiding influence. They have begun to join the company of proverbs, owed chiefly to the common sense of humankind.

Jorge Luis Borges, Karel Capek, John Crowley, Neil Gaiman, Mary Gentle, R. A. Lafferty, C. S. Lewis, Jerry Pournelle, Tim Powers, Terry Pratchett, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, Gene Wolfe and John C. Wright have all acknowledged his influence<sup>14</sup> and his quite frequent insights. Internal evidence suggests that Poul Anderson, Alfred Bester, James Blish, Gregory Benford, C. J. Cherryh, Avram Davidson, Philip K. Dick, Gordon Dickson, William Gibson, Walter M. Miller, Michael Scott Rohan, Robert Sheckley, Cordwainer Smith, L. Neil Smith, and many others can be added to the list. But my chief objective here is not to trace those influences, still less to discuss those authors in any detail, but to offer a reading of Chesterton as something like a science fiction writer, one who combined a popular appeal with serious speculation about the world and about humanity. And the first question to address is whether this suggestion is absurd. Would Chesterton himself have wished to be so regarded? If he so disapproved of Wells's utopian imaginings (while certainly enjoying them), must it not be wrong to think him a sort of Wells?