

CHESTERTON, THE ARISTOTELIAN

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OST MORTALS get around to telling the world what young Frederick told his nurse in the *Pirates of Penzance*:

"You told me you were fair as gold. . . .
And now I see you're plain and old. . . ."

Should a volume of Chesterton fall into one such luckless mortal's hands at the time, life through Chestertonian spectacles will have appeal. Somehow he does the impossible, and tantalizingly lilts like Ben Jonson in Browning's *At the Mermaid*:

"I find earth not grey but rosy,
Heaven not grim but fair of hue."

This he does, not with offensive optimism, but with a magic touch that renders mere dandelions delightful for pages on end. Is it surprising that his philosophy should attract so much analysis?

People are perpetually engaged in tracking down happiness. The perfect answer must satisfy everybody. It must be independent of yachts and limousines, something a man can distill from his native air. The Chestertonian happiness has this requirement. It consists in "enjoying enjoyment," in distilling happiness from whatever *is*, primarily because it *is*. It only calls for existence, something even more common than air. But the "essence of Chesterton" still needs a little straining before becoming a standard everyday happiness. It is interwoven with a sense of humor and fairy tales, whereas Smith and Jones are liable to be the dull, unimaginative sort. A scientific mass production of Chesterton is needed, producing innumerable stock-model Chestertons to cheer up still more innumerable frozen pessimists.

The master would surely rebel at being multiplied like Mickey Mouse, but resistance is useless. The factory has been working for 2200 years. The "goodness" of Chesterton is a modern expression of the age-old "rational happiness" of Aristotle. His dazzling, explosive paragraphs are down in good, solid syllogisms in Aristotle's metaphysics.

Chesterton's sympathetic understanding of Aristotle's champion, St. Thomas, should corroborate the bold assertion. He did not connect

with Aristotle through books. He connected with him in the proper Aristotelian fashion, primarily through existence. "Life comes before philosophy." Chesterton the Aristotelian is more evident in the *Autobiography* than in *St. Thomas Aquinas*.

Before calling on Mr. Chesterton to testify, two rules should be laid down for the judges. To identify two philosophers, first an identity of principle must be established. Secondly, they must agree as to what the principle means. The principle is more than half the science. It is the *Cogito ergo sum* that explains all the folio volumes of the philosopher. The principle in turn narrows down to some object of which it is a judgment. This last is the lowest common denominator of the system, the hat out of which all the rabbits are to be pulled.

Chesterton and Aristotle swore by the same principle. They both, at least in practice, dubbed that most meager of truisms, the principle of contradiction, namely, "being is not not—being," the "dignity of dignities." Where others consider the bald statement that "the same thing cannot be affirmed and denied" as an insult to the intelligence, Chesterton and Aristotle consider it quite a mouthful. It is a mouthful of something real, something substantial, which is the common font of Chestertonian laughter and the Aristotelian logic. The fount is: . . . reality . . . *ens*.

When the brave and dauntless knight who speared so many mad philosophers on the point of his pen was young, he had drifted away from the certitude of childhood. He went to art school. "There," says he, "the principle was, that if all that could be seen of a cow was a white line and a purple shadow, we should only render the line and the shadow, in a sense we should only believe in the line and the shadow rather than in the cow." Philosophically, the budding artist, like a certain frog, was asked to duplicate a self-evident cow in a complacent *ego*. The cow was not needed. The frog did his best to reach the required inflation. But his humility got the best of this frog. It saved him from explosion at the eleventh hour. He grew weary of the impossible task of cocreating worlds. "This tended to contribute to a certain mood of unreality and sterile isolation that settled at this time upon me. . . . I had thought my way back to thought itself. . . . I was simply carrying the scepticism of my time as far as it would go."

The necessity of logical sequence brought Chesterton the sceptic to logical non-existence. Logically, the frog had exploded. When the smoke cleared away, the fog of ghoulish imagination had lifted under the heat of an honest mind. Behold the revelation: Chesterton, the

bare primordial *something*, the naked *ens*, had not evaporated. It went on existing unconcerned, in the teeth of all logical calamities. This *something* he had always taken for granted. It alone had gone down with him into the pit. Henceforth it appeared as it was, a gift to be perpetually happy about, the gift by which all good things had come. Chesterton had rediscovered existence, and laid the cornerstone of the Chestertonian optimism. This was what Chesterton called his "rudimentary and makeshift mystical theory, . . . the mystical minimum of gratitude" for existence. Henceforth Chesterton took up the song for the gift of existence, the perpetual song of creation, the incomparable song of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, which they sing materially and man must sing rationally.

Ens, the vaporous and ethereal, the Aladdin's lamp of the metaphysician, which Chesterton should have inhaled like a pinch of snuff, swallowed up the solid sage, broad-brimmed hat, Inverness cape and all. Now its realization had for Chesterton all the preciousness of that which one has "loved long since and lost awhile." This realization was the principle of contradiction, the realization that, if something is, it must not be denied. Only because of *Is*, can one say, *is true*, *is good*, *is beautiful*. The philosopher can deny what is, and rear up castles in the air. The man in the street who believes the philosopher may walk out the window instead of down the stairway. The "dignity of dignities" is the condition of all his dignity. Many of the contemporaries of Chesterton had abandoned the principle of contradiction, "taken away the number they first thought of," de-toured from sanity. To get them back from "that borderland of the brain where all the monsters are made," on to "the high road of experience and expansion" was the Wild Knight's mission.

In the application, surely he would make Aristotle beam. Aristotle says there is no way of demonstrating the principle of contradiction. It is so evident. The only merciful thing to do is to show the afflicted one that he is fooling himself. This procedure is the *reductio ad absurdum*. Consequently, readers of Chesterton repeatedly find themselves in the shoes of the pessimist whose bluff was called by the kind friend who offered to blow his brains out. Such paradoxes were enjoyed. Chesterton disclaimed the honor of being paradoxical. What were called paradoxes he had found ready made in the contradictions which had been winked into respectable conventions. The sophisticated Parisian audiences had laughed at Count Alma Viva in the *Barber of Seville* on the eve of the Revolution. They failed to laugh at themselves portrayed in Alma Viva. They would have awakened sadder and wiser men. Set against fantastic

backgrounds, the absurd consequences of false principles stand out in unmistakable relief in the Chestertonian characters. Yet they are sufficiently like ourselves to oblige us to first step off the stage back to reality before we can laugh. Knowing that the good and the true are one, Chesterton preserved for his pessimistic foes withal the benevolent joy of the man whose hardest truth is the prelude to the best of good news. *Castigare ridendo mores.*

Having unearthed the paradoxes of orthodoxy, Chesterton could by the same process unearth the mystery of the common-place. Thus we find him stepping with ease into the gumshoes of Sherlock in the *Father Brown* stories. They were among the first fruits of the secret of *ens*, which had lurked so long among such "neglected and unpopular things" as orthodox philosophy books. Chesterton wrote them a dozen years before he entered the Church. His hero, "the stumpy little curé of Essex, . . . who could paraphrase a page of Aquinas" has already the common sense of the "Doctor Communis." Like the principle of contradiction he personifies, he is drab and simple, even imbecilic in appearance. By his firm union with reality, he is an ever-fertile fountain of solutions to the most bewildering strokes of mis-applied genius.

Father Brown is a super-sleuth. The post-Reformation world about him has neutralized good and evil to a sullen restless orthodoxy. He is alive to the paradox. The *Dos and Don'ts* that are a blurred and misty grey to others are black and white to him. His contemporaries have grown numb. The paradox of simultaneously affirming and denying the same thing does not arouse them. Such is the paradox of the indifferent statesman, entrusted with the destinies of nations, who would sooner smoke his cigar than hear an atheist and a theist argue out that very essence of destiny, the existence of God. Consequently, the atheist kills the theist under his very nose. Such is the paradox of a society which affirms the innate superiority of one class over another, yet in whose banquets masters and servants differ only in pose, so that Flambeau, the jewel thief, can, by a change of pace, masquerade as either. Having denied the principle of contradiction by subordinating eternity to cigars, and humanity to etiquette, mystery was inevitable.

Father Brown unravels these mysteries designed for the bourgeois mind by a revolution of right reason. Flambeaux, disguised as a priest, raves of infinite, unruled spaces. Father Brown still encompasses him: "Reason and justice grip the remotest star." He has seen through Flambeaux all along. Why? "You attacked reason," says Father Brown, "it's a bad theology. . . . On plains of opal,

under cliffs cut out of pearl, you will still find a sign: Thou shalt not steal."

Father Brown discloses his method: "A crime," says Father Brown slowly, "is like any other work of art, divine or diabolic. It has one indispensable mark,—I mean that the center of it is simple,—some one quite simple fact,—some fact that is not itself mysterious." As Aristotle would say: some concrete, indivisible fact. From this solid base, there are no limits to the sublimity of conclusions. Chesterton says as much of Valentin, his French detective: "All his wonderful successes, that looked like conjuring, had been gained by plodding logic, by clear and commonplace thought. He did not electrify the world by starting any paradox, but by carrying out a truism."

Father Brown's successes depended on his ability to wonder at things others took for granted. Existence is taken for granted. The success of the Aristotelian depends on his ability to seek out the mystery of this supreme gift, this *ens ab alio*. Chesterton discovered the mystery story that lies hidden in a page of Aristotle. He unrolled it into seventy volumes and had hardly begun. His was the art of "taking a very little good with a great deal of gratitude." As a fitting *tour de force*, a guarantee of the happiness that flows from existence, Chesterton devotes the last pages of his last book, the *Autobiography*, to displaying the beauty of dandelions *ut sic* and all the truths they imply, to the gentleman who says: "You can get much better dandelions at Selfridge's" or "You can get much cheaper dandelions at Woolworth's." What was "to others the door of heaven," was to Chesterton "also the door of earth": the humble, eager, truthful reception of reality. This same reality is the sworn science of the Aristotelian, whose badge is *posse docere*.